



*"A hysterically depraved take on everything you  
know and may hold dear." - Brian Fatah Steele*  
author of *In Blood Country*

**JACK X. MCCALLUM**

Made In The  
U.S.A.

10th ANNIVERSARY EDITION



*Made in the U.S.A.*

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The 10th Anniversary Edition

by

Jack X McCallum

Original Edition

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10th Anniversary Edition

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ISBN #: 978-0-9840406-0-5

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This book was printed in the United States of America.

## **DEDICATION**

As promised a long time ago,  
this one is for Peter Donaldson.

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## A Page from the Past

*Highway 78 outside Bexar, Alabama, January 8, 1935*

The sides of the old panel truck were covered by the fading illustration of a genial elderly man tipping his hat and the legend *Stern's Frozen Meats*. As the truck had rumbled northeast out of Louisiana and across Tennessee, it passed people on city streets and along country lanes, none of whom would ever suspect that the meats in question were babies. Frozen babies.

Gerald Bloom always heard echoes. He spoke English, and tried to think in that language as well, but in his mind he always heard a German echo following every word. Saying something as simple as his Americanized name, Gerry Bloom, made the words *Gerhard Blum* echo in his mind. It was strange.

He was sitting behind the wheel of the big Ford truck. He looked to his right. Sleeping in the passenger seat was Al Hobbs. *Alois Haub* echoed in his mind when he looked at his partner.

Bloom had pulled the rig off the road into an abandoned pasture half-hidden by trees and a sway-backed rotting wooden fence. He looked at his watch. It was after midnight. He rolled down his window. A frosty chill was in the night air and he found each breath refreshing. The area was deserted. The motor was running. The motor was always running, to

provide power. He switched off the lights and rested his eyes in darkness that was nearly complete save for a sliver of the moon glowing high in the sky.

Most of the truck's storage area held squat metal cases bolted to the floor. In the spacious insulated compartment were ten small devices like safes mated with refrigerators, which Doctor Stern referred to as lockers. In the lockers were children. Cryogenically frozen children. Stern's *Schlafende Kinder*.

Bloom and Hobbs had a problem. One of the passengers in the back of the truck was dead.

The truck had an array of backup batteries that powered the cooling units for the lockers, batteries that were charged when the engine was running and were drained after a few hours when the engine was shut off. Earlier in the day the truck's fan belt had broken. The backup batteries kept most of the lockers cooled. What Bloom and Hobbs hadn't anticipated and discovered too late was a rusted metal hose that leaked the coolant circulating in one of the lockers.

Pulled over on the side of a road in northern Mississippi It had taken the men hours to make repairs. Bloom had done a detailed check of each cooler. Hobbs hitched a ride into the nearest town to buy a fan belt and had to walk back to the truck. It was while he was waiting for Hobbs to return that Bloom discovered the rusted hose and saw that one of the lockers had failed. He had checked the gauges. The passenger was beginning to thaw. Without the constant circulation of Stern's chemical coolant the passenger was dead. Thawing and rotting.

Bloom disposed of the tiny corpse quickly.

When Hobbs returned, Bloom had told him of the loss. They cursed the failed *tiefkühlschrank* and swore at each other, kicking stones across the road and

raising dust. Then they replaced the fan belt and started the engine.

By the time twilight was falling, they were on the road again. They had left a laboratory in New Orleans behind and were on their way to Washington DC, where Stern had established a new facility with funding from the American government.

Stern said he had the approval of the President of the United States, though Roosevelt knew only that Stern had worked as a geneticist and that his knowledge might be put to use in developing defenses and counter-measures against any newfangled weapons Hitler's Germany might create.

Many high-placed Yanks were afraid of the growing Nazi menace in Germany and felt that brilliant men like Stern, who had worked for the Third Reich, could put their experience to better use for their new homeland.

Bloom knew that Stern didn't care who he worked for. The Nazis could provide adequate facilities and cheap labor for Stern's gene-mapping project, but the pay was terrible and Stern was unmoved by visions of Adolf's glorious Reich and the desperate pleas for the preservation of perfect Aryan traits through genetic engineering.

No, if Stern had an allegiance, it was to the power of money and the facilities it could provide him in his quest for knowledge. American dollars, which were being offered to Stern in obscene amounts even in the midst of an economic depression, were the most powerful of all.

Now, after midnight, Bloom sat beside the sleeping Hobbs, letting the rumble of the engine calm him. He wished they could have just loaded everything onto a train, but if the public learned of Stern's hobby they would lynch him. A truck was discreet, easier to hide.

Bloom figured that if he had to face Stern's wrath over the loss of a passenger, so be it. At least the other coolers were okay. He reached over and nudged Hobbs to awaken him. The next eight hours would be Hobbs' time behind the wheel. They were expected in Washington in two days, and since they were ordered to use rural roads they would have to push the old truck day and night to get there on time.

Hobbs sat up, looked at his wristwatch, and nodded at Bloom. The men opened their doors, climbed out and stretched as they met in front of the truck. Bloom produced a pack of cigarettes and offered one to Hobbs. They stood and smoked, looking up at the moon. A coughing roar cut through the still air.

An old sedan was coming down the road, and its motion was erratic. Only one headlamp was lit and flickering fitfully. The sedan slued to a stop on the shoulder fifty feet from the truck. Bloom and Hobbs stood in the skeletal shadow of a leafless tree, peering at the car beyond the fence that hid the truck from view. They could hear a man shouting, a woman screaming, and a baby crying.

The driver's side door of the sedan burst open and a huge man in overalls stepped onto the road. "No!" he yelled. "I ain't havin' it! You must be crazy thinkin' I'm gonna let you do this!" He dashed around to the passenger door and pulled it open. "Give it to me!"

To Bloom and Hobbs the man sounded like an extra in a Wild West picture.

There was another scream from the woman and the baby wailed louder.

Bloom and Hobbs smoked and watched. This wasn't their business. They weren't going to get involved. So what if the guy got out of control, Bloom thought, trying his best to think like an American. Big

deal! If he slapped the broad around some, she probably had it coming.

“Give it to me!” the man shouted. He reached into the car.

The woman began talking fast, in a high hysterical voice. “No, please, we can keep it. Nobody’ll know. It was left for dead, my baby’s dead, who’s gonna know?”

The man was bent over, struggling with the woman. “I’m gonna know. I didn’t want you to have the kid in the first place. Being born dead is the best thing that ever coulda’ happened to him. And I’m sure as hell not gonna tend somebody else’s bastard! Give him over!”

There was another scream. The man backed out of the car, holding a naked squalling baby by one leg. It was tiny, surely a newborn.

For Bloom and Hobbs, things had become interesting.

The baby was crying loudly, dangling from the big man’s fist. The woman’s open arms reached out from inside the car. The man raised a foot and drove a heavy black shoe into her stomach. The man held the baby in front of his face, now gripping the tiny torso in one massive hand, studying it like it was a bug. “Noisy little white trash bastard. You’ll be better off dead too.”

He whirled and flung the squalling infant into the trees along the side of the road. The tiny cries stopped. The woman let out a weak, pitiful scream as the man slammed her door shut, ran back to the driver’s side, climbed behind the wheel, and drove away.

Bloom and Hobbs watched the car race past them. They dropped their cigarettes and ground them out, and then they went down the road. They crossed into the trees, rustling about and snapping twigs in the darkness. Then Hobbs said, “Got it.”

They stepped out onto the road, studying the child in the moonlight. Hobbs held the child steady while Bloom, who had been a medic in the Great War and who had learned a great deal from Doctor Stern, examined the child quickly.

“Amazing,” Bloom said. “Only a few scratches as far as I can tell, but he’ll have an ugly bruise on his head in a day or two ... if the bruise is allowed to develop.”

“Strange luck,” Hobbs replied. “Can we use him?”

Bloom thought a moment. “Do we have a choice? If Stern finds out we lost one of our charges he’ll be outraged. I helped him prepare three of the passengers. In the truck we have most of Stern’s equipment, including the frog enzymes for injection and the cooling baths. If you can replace the empty locker’s rusted hose, I can tend to the child. We can do this.”

“Good,” Hobbs said with a relieved smile. He didn’t want to lose his job now, not when jobs were so hard to find and Stern paid so well.

Always conscious of his attempts to think and talk like an American, Bloom looked down at the baby. “You got one break tonight kid, and one break is all you get. Tonight you’re gonna die.”

Hobbs smirked. “You don’t seem to have a great deal of faith in the good doctor’s work, Gerry.”

“No,” Bloom said quietly, looking down at the tiny upraised face, “I don’t.”

The men went to work. By dawn the new passenger was cooling in the repaired locker and the truck was moving down the road leading through Tennessee and on into Virginia.

Neither of the men nor the recently acquired passenger was aware of the slow bleeding inside the infant's brain, hemorrhaging caused by a blow to the head the child received when it struck a tree after being thrown through the night.

1

The Misfits

A black LTD pulled off Interstate 40 and crossed the gravel parking lot of the In the Shade diner, the engine misfiring and dripping fluids as the car moved behind the building and eased between two dumpsters. The rear window had been shattered and the windshield had starry holes in it. Bullet holes gaped in the hood like tiny mouths.

The driver got out and stretched. He looked at the car and knew it had run its last mile. He walked to the front of the diner. There were only a station wagon and a pickup truck parked in the front lot. Standing in the bright sunlight he couldn't see much on the other side of the diner's long picture window; just the blue seats of empty booths and the shape of a large man seated on a stool and looking back over one shoulder.

The driver of the LTD felt sweat running down his back and he found it hard to believe that tomorrow it would be January. As a kid back East he'd always frozen his ass off at this time of year.

He was wearing a checked shirt over a plain white T-shirt. He reached under the shirt and scratched beneath the strap of a leather holster holding a Springfield Armory .45 automatic. An eight round magazine was strapped above his left ankle, undetectable beneath the leg of his blue jeans unless he was frisked. Anyone who tried to frisk him would most likely end up dead. On his right leg was an ankle holster holding a small Smith & Wesson revolver. Under the bill of a worn Brooklyn Dodgers ball cap his blue eyes seemed screwed into a permanent squint against the brightness of the open Mojave Desert. His tousled brown hair had been bleached by the sun. The way he moved made him seem younger than his forty years.

He looked at the station wagon as he pulled a pack of Camels out of his shirt pocket. He tapped one cigarette out and lit up with a Zippo. The lighter was decorated with an insignia in chipped enamel, a black square with a white lowercase c inside it. There were a few road-worn cases in the back of the station wagon. Cheap business cards were strewn on the dashboard. What was a traveling salesman doing out here?

He felt a tingle on the inside of his left arm, just below the elbow. It felt like an ant walking across his skin. He scratched at it without thinking. He'd felt that itch for a few weeks now.

The diner was old, its stucco exterior painted a brilliant lemon color. Plaster chips had flaked off, revealing a multitude of previously applied colors. The smoking man figured that if you looked at the vibrant yellow walls too long under the hot sun you'd feel your eyeballs begin to boil. The diner lived up to its name with the help of a steel support as thick as a telephone pole that rose to a height of thirty feet and supported a broad expanse of aluminum scalloped to look like a

shell that blocked the sun during most of the day and created a cool pool of shade.

Dusty birds flocked on the roof of the diner, escaping the sun and sleeping away the heat of the day. A few of them had chirped in curiosity or anxiety when he had pulled up. When the sun went down and the cooling desert came alive, they would be off, looking for dinner. Bright white fans of bird shit spread down the walls from the roof. The smoking man smiled and flicked his cigarette butt away. It looked as if the owner just repainted with whatever color he could get his hands on when the shit got too thick.

“Speaking of which ...” the man said under his breath. He looked both ways down the deserted road, west toward distant Ludlow in one direction and Needles and the Arizona border in the other, and then entered the diner.

A bell over the door clanged as he passed through. It was cooler inside, ceiling fans moving the air around. There were five empty booths along a wide picture window.

Christmas decorations were taped to the walls. Above the counter was a banner which read: *Happy Holidays & Happy New Year.*

A muscular man of about fifty who was squeezed into a cheap, tight-fitting suit was sitting on a stool at the long counter reading USA Today. On the other side of the counter a pretty waitress in her late thirties looked up from filling the man’s coffee cup and gave the newcomer a smile. There was a wide serving window behind the counter. In the kitchen a young man wearing a cook’s paper hat was feeding pots and pans into a belt-driven dishwasher. A CD was playing and he was performing a duet of *Como la Flor* with Selena.

The man in the ball cap sat at the counter one seat over from the man in the cheap suit. Reminders of Christmas in desert climates always struck the man in the ball cap as weird, but then again the whole thing supposedly started in the desert so in a way it probably all made sense. The waitress appeared before him.

“Happy New Year,” she said, in a high, sweet voice. “What can I get for you?” Her voice gave away no accent or regional twang. It was West Coast generic.

The voice of the man in the ball cap was the same, devoid of any apparent origin. It had taken him years of hard work to achieve that anchorman’s authoritative blandness. He didn’t want an accent that would place him as the product of a certain locale or time.

“Hi, I’m Will,” the man in the ball cap said. He paused, wondering why he did that.

He recalled a voice from long ago. An old German man with a rasping accent saying, “Units of information, like bullets in a gun, can be deadly, William.” The old man had raised a finger underscoring the importance of his words. “From our darkest secrets to the enlightenment of scientific discovery, information is a weapon. The original weapon, you understand? As the first men began the ascent from primitives in animal skins to executives in tailored suits their first weapon was information. That rule holds to this day. Never forget that, young man.”

Will remembered a large rough hand tousling his hair. That hand had seemed as big and powerful as a bear’s paw when he was a kid, and that hand had been the only gentle touch he had ever known. Except for one other. He closed his eyes a moment, trying to grasp fragments of memory as fine as dust motes floating in a shaft of sunlight.

“Mister?” The waitress was waiting, eyebrows arched, big brown eyes watching him.

He forced a smile. “A tall glass of cold OJ and something sticky-sweet.” He gave the waitress whose name tag read JEANNIE the up-and-down body-and-face once-over that is as instinctive as breathing to every man meeting a pretty woman for the first time.

“Sticky-sweet?” she asked, cocking her head.

“Yeah, anything loaded with cream or drowning in icing. I could use a sugar boost.”

She nodded, and took a few paces to a big, glass-fronted refrigerator.

Will couldn't help noticing how attractive the waitress was and he could also see that she was working hard to avoid that. She had sparkling dark brown eyes and a cute, engaging smile. Her jet-black hair bounced with every step in a messy flip. She sort of had a Laura Petrie thing happening. She was wearing a retro waitress uniform, a one piece smock loosely cinched at the waist, and she didn't appear to be wearing makeup. She wasn't wearing any jewelry either, just a Swatch wristwatch with a wide white strap on her left wrist. It was as if she was trying to appear plain and avoid standing out, but when she reached up onto a shelf for his juice glass her figure strained against the material of her uniform and revealed itself to be a delight. She had nice legs, remarkably pale skin and a slight wiggle in her walk that threw his concentration out the window.

*Fuck her*, a harsh voice rasped in his mind. He winced, feeling a pulse of pain behind his eyes. *Drive it right up her fucking ass! She wants it! Make her swallow your cock! Come on! What are you waiting for?*

Shut up, ghosts, he thought. This isn't the time.

An image flitted through his mind; the waitress, completely naked, looking over one shoulder and laughing as she set her cute bottom into wet cement. He imagined her squealing because the gray goo was colder than she had expected it to be. He shook his head. He was used to the weird images and voices that flashed and thundered through his mind like storms, but he couldn't shake the feeling that this one had some relevance.

Jeannie set his orange juice down in front of him. "No pastries left, sorry. We do have a pecan pie that might work for you. Will that do?"

More harsh shouts echoed in the man's mind and his headache grew worse. The ghosts are having a hoedown, he thought. Squinting and trying to ignore the images in his head, Will saw Jeannie again, easing down into wet cement bare-assed and gasping when she touched the cold, slushy gray mixture. He realized she was waiting for an answer.

"Yeah, sure. Pie. I'll have that. Thanks."

Jeannie went through the swinging door behind her, thinking the new customer was cute and hoping he wasn't a pig. She figured from the way he was looking at her that he'd either flirt a little and leave a decent tip, or flirt a lot and leave her sick to her stomach. Still, his face was intriguing; tanned skin, gentle eyes, lips of a fullness that would seem effeminate on most men but suited him somehow, and a thin white scar that ran from his left eyelid to the corner of his mouth like the track of a tear. He was also wincing, like he had a migraine coming on.

The older man in the cheap suit had not looked at the new customer once and if Jeannie had noticed she would have found it odd. People always took a quick look when someone came through the door of the diner. The only time they didn't was when they were

fixated on something else, and the older man was staring at her, quickly looking away whenever she glanced in his direction.

Will turned and gave the older man a smile. “Hi there.” He cocked his head and looked at the paper. “New Year’s Eve Celebrations, Last of the Millennium, Will be Biggest Ever.’ Wow! That’s what I call hard news. No fluff in USA Today, huh?”

The older man gave Will an uneasy look.

As Jeannie came through the swinging door with a slice of pie, the man in the Dodger’s cap took a drink of orange juice and asked, “Ain’t she sweet?”

The older man had a grin on his face that might have been hiding fear.

Jeannie set the pie down in front of Will.

He picked up a fork and tasted the pie. “So sweet,” he said, almost crooning.

Jeannie frowned as Will spoke. This was a teeny bit creepy. She hoped she wouldn’t have to call for Carlos.

Will leaned over, close to the older man. “Her pie is sweet,” he whispered in a conspiratorial tone. He watched without expression as the waitress turned on a heel and disappeared through the swinging door, helpless to stop watching her ass as it swayed out of sight. He didn’t like pissing off someone who was just trying to get through another day but he had to have a few words with his neighbor in the cheap suit.

Carlos was rinsing a few utensils at the sink and thinking now that breakfast was done and lunch was slow he might slip out back for a smoke, when he saw Jeannie striding toward him with a full head of steam.

“*Mi Dios,*” he muttered, smiling when he realized he sounded exactly like his father, a man who had

never learned much English and considered taking the Lord's name in vain the harshest of all expletives.

Carlos was short and lean, his young face showing his Mexican father's and Navajo mother's blood. He was as American as apple pie, raised on *Leave It to Beaver* and Kool-Aid, little league baseball and Saturday matinees. Most people he met, including the owner of In the Shade, treated him like an illegal because of his looks and the slight accent he had picked up from his dad.

Jeannie was one of the few people Carlos knew who treated him like just another guy. She talked to him like a pal, complained to him, occasionally confided in him, and that made him feel good about her. He considered her his really pale, really hot older sister.

Jeannie leaned against the wall and crossed her arms. Her lips were pursed and her chest heaved with each breath. She swore softly and scratched at an itch on the inside of her left arm. She'd been doing that a few days now. Carlos kept telling her to put some Benzocaine on it.

"What's goin' on, chica?"

She glared at him a moment before she spoke. He'd seen that before. He had sisters. One of the customers must have pissed her off, and because Carlos was male at least some fraction of responsibility was his by default.

Carlos looked at the collage of postcards and photos he had tacked up over the sink. He liked to look at them while washing up, but now he was studying them to avoid eye contact with Jeannie.

"Guy out there," she said, nodding her head toward the counter. "Another pig. Talking about my ... He's an asshole."

Carlos' eyes flicked toward her and away again. She saw it. Now there was no way out. He was gonna get nipped, at the very least.

"Men are such assholes," she whispered again, looking toward the door.

You are smoking hot for a woman who's thirty-six, Carlos thought, and for a smoking hot babe who's thirty-six, you should be used to this shit by now. Of course he didn't say that. He had sisters, and had learned some lessons the hard way. "So why not just go tell him he's an asshole?" Carlos asked.

She looked at him and shook her head. "Don't you be an asshole too," she said, pushing away from the wall. She went back into the diner.

Outside the kitchen Will was studying the older man, who was staring straight ahead, beads of sweat standing out on his forehead like tiny balls of glass.

Jeannie pushed open the swinging door and flinched when the older man in the cheap suit said in a tired, angry voice, "What the fuck do you want?"

"Some answers," Will said quietly. "You're acting kind of funky, like you know who I am. And I've never seen you before."

"So?"

"So I got to thinking that maybe you do know who I am, and it's bugging you."

"You're a nut."

"A nut? If I'm a nut how come you've got answers for me?"

The older man looked confused. "Answers about what?" The man's voice had a southwestern twang.

"Doc Zane, for a start. What's your assignment?"

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Listen,” Will said, leaning close. “You looked like you were expecting me to kick your ass when you got a good look at my face. Either I’m a dead ringer for a guy whose wife you’ve been fucking, or you’ve seen my picture and heard things about me. Gotten a few words of warning. In a briefing. Any of this sound familiar?”

“Who the hell are you?” the older man asked, his voice weak.

“The name is Hill,” the man in the ball cap replied. “William Hill. Friends call me Will.”

The older man nodded as if the name fit the face he had recognized. He repeated the name and let out a soft laugh. “It is you. When I saw you standing outside I was sure I was seeing things. I have seen pictures of you in briefings, but that was a lot of years ago. I thought you were a joke, like the other guy, Godson.” He shook his head when the guy in the ball cap took the seat next to him and he saw an automatic pointing at his stomach below the counter. “I figured you’d get around to that sooner or later.”

Will was wondering who Godson was when he realized the waitress was coming back.

Standing in the kitchen doorway, Jeannie wondered what was going on. The way the two men were sitting close and facing each other, with the younger man reaching out to the older below the counter it almost looked like somebody was getting his dick pulled in broad daylight. It figured that they had to be the only two customers.

The Christmas to New Year holiday week was never this quiet. Usually there were people stopping by on their way in or out of state, a few truckers having a meal, or a family of tourists looking for a cold drink.

She decided she'd tell Carlos and have him kick them out, but first she'd make sure. She stepped close to the two men, but she couldn't see the younger man's right hand. "Everything okay here, gentlemen?" The one with the beautiful face looked at her, clearly annoyed.

"We're fine." Will said, in a dismissive tone.

Jeannie turned away and got busy brewing fresh pots of coffee, trying to ignore her anger. We're fine, now get lost, the pretty one might as well have said. She listened carefully, standing where a trick of acoustics allowed her to hear any conversations along the counter, some of them amusing, some disgusting, most of them the uninteresting bits and pieces of everyday lives.

Will waited until Jeannie turned away before he spoke again. "I'll let some air out of that spare tire you're carrying around if you don't start talking."

The older man reached into one pocket. Will tensed, and then relaxed a little when he saw a tiny plastic dispenser of Sweet 'N Low tablets in the man's hand. The older man tapped two tablets into his coffee. "Okay. Let's pretend that I'm afraid for my life." He sipped his coffee, a wistful smile on his face "You want to know about Zane? Well, you're right and wrong about him. He's been shit-scared ever since that walking hard-on Clinton came into power and began airing the dirty laundry. Zane had a breakdown. Mondani is the boss-man now and he's looking for someone he doesn't want wandering free, someone who has been hard to find."

Will nodded. "Sounds about right. I was living the good life until a few years ago. That's probably why I had a run-in with the goddamn Kens."

"The Kens?" the older man grimaced and grabbed his gut as if he had gas. Then he relaxed.

“Two clowns following me. They look like Ken dolls with guns.”

“Closers.” The older man slumped on the stool. “They sound like file closers to me. The Compound wants you dead, my friend.”

“Somebody’s wanted me dead for years now.”

The older man shrugged. “Zane was always the nervous type. He was climbing the walls, figuring that sooner or later the White House was going to ream him over runaway experiments.”

Will nodded. “The Zane I knew was wound so tight he probably had to pry his butt cheeks apart with a hydraulic spreader just to fart.” In a softer voice he said, “Eicher was worse, though.”

Jeannie made a face. What a disgusting thing to say. And then her eyes widened and she tried not to react when she realized Will had just said Eicher’s name. She had thought it was all finally over and done with. Maybe she was wrong.

“The stress of running the show ate Zane alive,” the older man said. “Old man Kraft canned him years ago. Now Mondani is in charge and he’s hoping to clear the slate.”

Will shook his head. “I can’t believe anyone is listening to Mondani, not when they have Tupper around. Tupper may look like Bunsen Honeydew but I hear he’s sharp. Hell, Mondani was a power-hungry sack of shit back when I—” Will stopped. He took a good look at the older man’s face. As he watched the man’s coloring began to darken, the skin turning purple, the lips blue, each breath sounding more harsh and labored.

“Damn it,” Will said, as the older man slid off the stool. He grabbed the man and eased him to the floor,

making the gun disappear into the holster under his arm as Jeannie came around the counter.

“What’s wrong with him?” she asked.

“Shut up,” Will said, kneeling beside the man, who was struggling to breathe.

“Don’t tell me to shut up,” she snapped. “I want to know if I should call 911.”

Will shuddered as his ghosts screamed *kill that fucking cunt! Nobody talks to you like that!* He wavered as pain shot through his skull. Jesus, he thought. One of these days my head’s gonna pop like a goddamn balloon. He said, “Don’t touch the phone. It’s too late anyway.” He turned back to the older man.

“Why did you take the pills?”

The older man tried to smile and the result was horrific. “I’ve heard about the things you do to get information out of people. I’m too old for that shit, son. If I have to step out, I’m doing it my way.”

Will looked into the dying man’s eyes. “Why are they still after me? I’m minding my own business. If they’re worried about me blowing the whistle they’re wasting their time.”

“Orders,” the man wheezed. “Kind of like being in a really bad episode of Mission Impossible, huh?” Each word was a terrible effort. “The Compound is afraid Clinton wants to clean shop. Hell, Kennedy tried the same thing years ago. Now the Compound is carrying out a preemptive strike, so to speak.”

“The *noli scribo* orders?” Will, asked. “The ones that got rid of Eicher’s work? I thought that was just paranoid bullshit.”

The man slowly shook his head. “I don’t think Kennedy or Clinton had you in mind when they gave the orders. I bet they thought the Compound just had

to rinse a few Petri dishes and clean out their cold storage, but loose ends have to be cut off before somebody trips on them.”

“How did you find me?” Will was genuinely confused. “I just finished shaking those other assholes, the Kens, and then I happen to stop here for few minutes and find you.”

The man winced and struggled to draw a final breath. His face and tongue were almost black. “I’m just a scout. Scouts and trackers have been assigned to the lesser threat. You’re the greater threat. That’s why the closers and the other guy are after you.”

Jeannie looked away.

Will saw how pale she was and figured she was going to be sick.

Eicher, Jeannie thought, holding back tears.

The older man gasped. “I didn’t come here to call in your position ...”

Will and the waitress watched the man, waiting for more.

The man’s dead eyes were fixed on Jeannie.

Will patted the man down, wondering who the other guy was, maybe that Godson character. He couldn’t help noticing the dead man had an erection, and wondered what the hell was up with that. He stood holding a crumpled wad of cash, a revolver and a cell phone. The man’s wallet contained nothing but a few twenty dollar bills and his driver’s license and registration, both of which were in the name of Kit Carson. Good name for a scout, Will thought.

“Is he ... dead?” she asked.

“Yeah. That wasn’t Sweet’ N Low he was using.”

Jeannie shook her head, her eyes wide with horror. “You mean he poisoned himself? He killed himself?”

Stuffing the revolver back into the man’s jacket, Will said, “You catch on fast.”

Jeannie glared at him, and for a moment he felt a chill ripple his flesh. The rage he saw in her eyes was there and gone in a flash, but it spooked him and he didn’t spook easily these days.

“How about phone calls?”

“I think so,” she replied. “A while ago.”

Will swore, flipped the phone open and pressed the redial button, sure that the guy would have cleared the last number. He hit redial and put the phone to his ear.

A woman spoke, her tone clear and commanding. “We’re on our way. Why are you calling?”

Will did his best to mimic the dead man. “Shit. Sorry. Gawd damn redial button on this thang.” He closed the phone and broke the connection.

“Go get the kid in the kitchen,” he said to Jeannie. “We’ve got to hide this body.”

Jeannie hesitated, still staring at the dead man’s blackened face.

“Go,” Will said.

She went through the swinging doors. Will stepped through the front door of the diner and walked to the edge of the highway. He looked east and saw a shimmering glare on the interstate, sunlight flashing on chrome. He went back into the diner and found the waitress and the wiry young guy in the paper hat looking at the body.

“Carlos, I feel sick,” she said.

“This guy is lookin’ *muy malo*,” Carlos observed.

“That’s ‘cause he’s dead,” Will replied. “You got a place where we can stash him?”

Jeannie nodded. “There’s a cot back in the storage room.”

Will looked from Carlos to Jeannie and back again. “So, *están usted y ella juntos?*”

Jeannie bristled. “No, he and I are not together! God! We use it to take naps if we get a break in a busy day.”

Carlos chuckled and prodded the body with one foot. “He eat anything?”

“No,” Jeannie said. “He just drank a lot of coffee.”

“That’s my ass out of the sling.” Carlos said, grabbing the man’s feet. “Let’s go.”

Will got a grip on the shoulders of the dead man’s suit and they carried him back to a storage room filled with boxes of dry goods. They set him on an old cot. Jeannie took a folded blanket off a shelf and covered the corpse with it.

“I’m sure he appreciates that,” Carlos said.

Jeannie shuddered. “I just didn’t like the way his dead eyes were staring at me. It was like they were following me, you know?”

Carlos nodded.

“Speaking of which,” Will said, “Just before he died, he said—”

The bell over the front door clanged.

“Aw, shit,” Will said.

“I guess we should’ve locked the front door,” Carlos said.

Jeannie was instantly fearful again, wondering who was coming into the diner this time. She looked at Will. "Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"Yeah. From the look on your face I wonder if I should ask you the same thing."

"I just covered a dead man's face with a blanket," she replied bitterly, letting one fear masquerade as another.

Carlos looked Will in the eye. "Mister," he asked solemnly, "are you a good guy, or a bad guy?"

Will thought for a moment and then shrugged. "All things considered ... a good guy. Although it's often been a question of perspective."

Carlos studied him a moment longer. He was pretty sure of his ability to sniff out bullshit. All that perspective crap aside, this guy seemed okay. He was wrapped up in some weird shit, but still okay.

"I'm Carlos Guerrero." He offered his hand.

"William Hill." He shook hands and then gestured at Carlos' white T-shirt, which bore a large American flag and the legend *Made in the USA*. "Nice shirt."

Carlos grinned. "It says it all, *vato*."

Will turned to Jeannie, seeing her close for the first time. He fought to keep his face stern. He wanted to stare and felt weak in the knees as if he were wilting before her beauty. He'd never seen a face like hers, but at the same time she seemed familiar. "And you are?"

"Jeannie Nelson."

"You stay back here a minute," Carlos said to Will as they all stepped into the kitchen. "Jeannie and I'll go see who's up front."

Will nodded. He watched through the service window as they went through the swinging door.

Carlos stayed behind the counter and Jeannie approached a couple seated in the booth closest to the door.

Jeannie tried not to appear nervous. The couple was in their late thirties, the man in a dark suit and the woman in a blazer and slacks. “Hi,” Jeannie said with a bright smile. “Welcome to In the Shade. What can I get you?”

The couple said nothing. They sat staring at Jeannie, curious and studious, as if she were the sole reason they were here.

## A Page from the Past

*The Compound (outside Vienna, Virginia), Christmas Eve, 1960*

Lionel Eicher stepped through the door of the retrofitted cottage onto a wide veranda. He patted down the pockets of his stained lab coat. He found a package of cigarettes, lit one, and inhaled deeply. He was not allowed to smoke in the laboratory and this break would get him away from the music playing on the hi-fi.

This time it was some jarring piece by Mendelssohn, the Jew who tried to hide the stain of his bloodline. Why not just be done with it and play the degenerate Jazz of the *Schwartzes*?

Lionel thought Stern was being absurd when the old man said that by playing music night and day, alternating complex pieces with simple melodies, one could stimulate the brain of a developing child, even if that child was not yet born. Stern loved to ramble on about the intricacies of music and its therapeutic uses.

Lionel chuckled and exhaled. His breath blew out in a thick white cloud, the warm smoke creating a dense cone in the frigid December air. He thought he must look like the big lizard in that monster movie he'd seen at the cinema a few years ago, Godzilla, a fancy creation of the Japanese. Germans made

sausages and wine and beer and wore leather shorts. The Japanese were shrinking cameras and radios and made terrible monster movies. There was a time, though, a time when Germany and Japan did more than pander to—

“Ah! Lionel!”

Lionel Eicher looked over his shoulder. His mentor, Doctor Edmund Stern, was grinning behind the wired glass in the door.

Lionel’s father had been a friend of Stern’s since before the war and had been instrumental in helping Stern relocate to America a decade ago. The elder Eicher was dead, but Stern was keeping an old promise that if he should reach America and prosper he would see that Lionel the boy got there too. Stern was thrilled to have Lionel the man under his wing.

Lionel hated the old man—his crazed eyes, his perpetual frowns, that wild mane of graying hair. Stern looked like a psychotic Beethoven. Lionel was half Stern’s age and was already losing his lustrous black hair, which made him hate Stern even more. Yet Lionel had learned so much in the last decade, things he could not learn in any school in the world. With a sigh Lionel forced a smile and opened the door.

“Herr Doctor Stern,” Lionel said with a polite nod, even though he had seen the man only moments before.

“Young Lionel,” Stern rasped in his thick Rhineland accent as he stepped into the brisk morning air. The music swelled and was muted as the door opened and closed. Edmund had been working all night, and needed a moment to clear his head. “You need not call me Herr Doctor, my boy. We need no formality here. This is America, where every man is created equal.” He chuckled. “Here we must speak English and you must call me Edmund.”

“As you wish,” Lionel replied in cultured tones which spoke of an education begun at the University of Hamburg and completed at Oxford. “Edmund.”

It was unseemly! To call one’s elder and employer by his Christian name as if they were common ditch diggers. Lionel had to force himself to spit out the name. Even though the old man was an odorous boor whom Lionel would have shunned in his own social circles at home, here he was Stern’s underling and had to suffer being called *boy* and *young man*.

At least for the time being.

He would have to do as the old man said. He had already done a great many things requested by the old man, some of which he found distasteful, most of which he enjoyed, but *Ach mein Gott*, the things he was learning! The things they were planning! What they had done last night—they had done the impossible! I am only thirty-five years old, Lionel thought. What might I achieve in another thirty years?

Stern moved a finger in the air. “Concerto No. 2 in D minor for Piano and Orchestra. *Allegro appassionato*. Wonderful!” He looked at the grounds before them, studying the bland Quonset huts and cottages with simple exteriors that made up the facilities of the Compound. He looked at the bare deciduous trees and the rich conifers outside the electrified fences. He thought of the millions invested in this deceptively simple place and grinned.

“Is it not amazing?” He asked. “Here we are doing work that is unethical and illegal, being funded in our efforts by the same government and by some of the same officials who tried so hard to exterminate us fifteen years ago.”

Stern smiled and jerked a thumb toward the rising sun. “Not twenty miles in that direction is the White House and the home of the bald and grinning gnome

who is the President of the United States. For governmental agencies, this is what the Americans would call ground zero. If I wanted to make my fortune all over again, Lionel, knowing what I know now, I would sell dark suits and sunglasses wholesale. We have the FBI at Quantico to the south, the CIA a few miles northeast at Langley, and within a twenty-minute drive in any direction you'll find the Group up in Belle View and the School over the river in Glen Echo. We also have much more discreetly tucked-away operations like the Outlet's collection of foreign academics, although the Outlet had to shut down operations after they, how do the Americans say it, dropped the ball, out in New Mexico. Washington D.C. is also the home of the Searchers, who are *verrückt* even by our standards, and the Office of Gross Removal and Restoration Exercises."

Lionel had heard this before. He knew the loss of the Outlet was their gain. The Compound had inherited the budget, goals and manpower of that agency. He nodded dutifully. Stern might be as aggravating as a festering boil on the buttock, but the knowledge they were sharing was fascinating, and Lionel was eager to return to his work.

"In the center of all is the Compound," Stern said. "Not the largest, not the smallest. We operate under budget always, and never report our profits. We are nearly invisible among so many clandestine agencies, yet our work may have implications beyond anything even we could imagine. We have made history today!"

Lionel had to agree. He dropped his cigarette and ground it under his heel, then held the door for Doctor Stern. They returned to the Warm Room, Eicher grateful that their work in the basement Cold Room was done for the time being. Sitting in a chair in one corner of the Warm Room that was furnished like a nursery was a young woman named Garvin. She was

nurse and wet nurse in one and she was holding a baby to her breast, gently rocking the baby to the madness of the Jew's Rondo Capriccioso.

In 1935 that baby had been cryogenically frozen. Edmund Stern often fancied that even the infant's dreams were held fast in ice, as clear and motionless as a picture in a big glossy American magazine. Every medical doctor of the time would have said the child was as good as dead. Freezing is easy, they would say. Thawing is the hard part. When freezing, the body changes. Cell walls expand, burst, and are irreparably damaged. It would take something special to get past that deadly circumstance. If you did freeze someone successfully and the frozen subject was thawed, how did you bring it back to life? People are not frogs. They cannot pass a long winter burrowed under the snow. Even a perfectly preserved subject would have some damage, most likely in the delicate and vital cells of the brain.

There had been some brain damage, yes, but x-rays of the brain revealed the child had suffered a trauma before it had been frozen. The brain had frantically been trying to recover from the injury at the time of freezing. After the thaw it had automatically continued that work despite the passage of time, now repairing pathways damaged during the freezing process as well.

This was the only child revived worth keeping alive. The others had come out of their long sleep with far greater degrees of freezing damage, large portions of their brains having turned to dead jelly upon resurrection. They had been euthanized without fuss, as was the plan for this child now that they were moving on to greater goals.

Stern was convinced the only reason this child survived was due to the earlier injury. With work and therapy, and music to stimulate the newborn brain to

heal itself by simply working to process the data received from its ears, the baby could grow into the living testament of Stern's skills. A quarter-century after freezing the baby was alive and hungry, thanks to Stern, whose single most fantastic bit of cryogenic work was the creation of his amphibian derived glycol solution.

As he liked to tell Lionel, life was not only an electrical phenomenon, it was also a chemical process almost as old as the Earth itself. Without the correct elements in the proper proportions one could not stimulate the life force with jolts of electricity, no matter how stirring the images of a Mary Shelley or a James Whale. No, life was electrochemical.

With one series of injections Stern and his assistants had prepared an infant for twenty-five years in limbo, suspended between life and death. With another series of injections they had freed the infant from the grip of the cold and then restarted its tiny heart with a jolt of electricity. Now Stern could freeze the young Queen of England and bring her back from that sleep, but it would be nothing compared to the triumph of that final night back in 1933 when he perfected his formula at the expense of thousands of frogs and toads.

Stern had smuggled that formula out of Germany along with his crude techniques for splicing genes and manipulating DNA, both of which Hitler had desperately wanted, just as *der Fuhrer* had wanted so many other things, from futuristic weapons to historic and religious relics, the things of science-fiction or ancient myth. Stern knew he had to keep his discoveries secret; the way he was able to cut and paste DNA as if he were a child playing with paper and scissors, and also the biologically preprogrammed buttons he had earmarked on his own map of the human genome that controlled everything from a

person's height to the color of their eyelashes. The world wasn't ready for that knowledge yet. And he wasn't ready to release a potentially dangerous or controversial technique to those who could use it for nefarious ends.

Thinking of the dark piece of wood sealed in a glass box and tucked away in a drawer in his office, Stern recalled hearing of Hitler's desperate searches for religious relics which might give him more power. If that crazy *scheissekerl* had been able to combine that ancient artifact with Stern's modern techniques ... Perhaps nothing would have come of it. Perhaps Armageddon. Stern shrugged. One of these days he'd have to burn that fragment of ancient history and the dark strands entwined in one splintered end.

Money alone had Stern's allegiance. No mere man could possibly match its allure and power. He knew the United States would give him all the money he needed for his work. To Stern, there had been little difference between the U.S. Government and the Nazi Party. On the surface, of course, they were not at all alike. Eisenhower and Hitler truly had different ideas and goals. Yet deep down, the men behind the men in power were essentially the same.

The men in power would do anything to achieve their ends, would pay any amount to those who could aid them. Stern knew his techniques could never really be used as a weapon, but they were probably the best insurance policy any nation or political movement could ever have. To freeze and then revive, he had shown he could do that. The President is mortally wounded, or has a fatal disease? Freeze him until a cure is found.

Now that he had mastered cryogenics it was time to move on to greater things; the creation of a human clone. He had been cloning amphibians, rodents, cats and dogs for at least ten years now. If a President was

sick or injured, parts of him could one day be instantly replaced with cloned organs or limbs. True, such a goal was a long way off and a clone would not be the original man, but what was any world leader these days other than a puppet controlled by the faceless, nameless men behind the scenes?

Stern watched the child suckling at Garvin's breast and smiled. The plan had been to euthanize the child once its mental faculties had been assessed. Two of the other six babies that survived physically but not mentally had been put down by Stern with painless injections. A simple task in theory but one that had filled him with horrified guilt in practice; he was certain he would have made a terribly inefficient Nazi. The other four infants were killed by Eicher.

Stern had let Eicher put the babies to rest, mistakenly assuming the young man would give the infants a painless injection. When Stern performed post-mortems on the small bodies to confirm his suspicions of extensive cell damage he noticed bruising around each delicate neck, and in their eyes were unmistakable blood-red flecks of petechiae indicating death by strangulation. Herr High and Mighty of the Oxford Education enjoyed strangling babies? To end an experiment was one thing. To actually make an effort to create unnecessary pain was quite another. Stern had decided he would keep a close eye on young Eicher.

Edmund Stern looked at the child again. He had been prepared to end this experiment too, but the child had changed that. Not only must the infant boy be a fighter to have overcome the odds up to now, but the little one had gotten to Stern, had become more than just a thing. When Stern was removing the gel that had been applied to the baby's skin to prevent damage from the cold, the child had reached up and given Stern's nose such a mighty squeeze that the

man's eyes had watered and he burst out laughing. Stern didn't think he could put the child down after that. He had been surprised to discover he still had a heart under his clinical hide, a heart the child had stolen at that moment. Edmund gave the baby a fond look. The child's care and maintenance could easily be hidden in Stern's annual budget, and he could personally see to the boy's education.

He would name the child William Hill. It had a good, solid American ring to it, and it spoke of the child's unfortunate hillbilly heritage. Stern was sure he could find some use for little Will around the Compound. If Eicher complained about the boy, Stern would be sure to let him know who was in charge.

Thinking of the gift of life, Stern reached out and gently touched the crown of the baby's head. His voice was warm with affection when he said, "Merry Christmas, William."

## 2 Bus Stop

Will crept down the corridor until he could see over Carlos' shoulder. He saw the couple studying Jeannie. He'd seen that look before, and wondered why they were so interested in her.

He remembered a girl he'd heard rumors about when he was growing up in the Compound back East, a girl who was being hunted then just as he was now, a girl who would be a woman now, a woman born in the Compound, a woman who was even more valuable than Will had been.

He moved back down the corridor until he came to two doors marked EXIT and GARBAGE. There were two people in the diner. There had to be more elsewhere. He went through the second door, easing it open and squinting against the sunlight.

\* \* \*

Jeannie was beginning to feel like a bug under a magnifying glass. "Is anything wrong?"

The man and woman in the booth shared a look. He shrugged. "I guess it could be her. What do you think, Betty?"

She looked Jeannie up and down. "Well, Duncan, I'd say that she's about five-five barefoot, and her weight is one-thirty or more."

"Jesus," Jeannie said, her curiosity momentarily overtaken by anger. One hundred and *thirty* pounds?

The woman named Betty ignored her. "From the way she blinks I'd say colored contacts are a given. Her hair color looks a little flat. It's been dyed, maybe the eyebrows too. You better be careful doing that, honey, because you can blind yourself with those chemicals. I can't judge the rest with her clothes on, but if she'd risk the eyebrows she'd probably risk it all. Am I right, Ms. Norman?"

"The name is Bellows, actually," Jeannie said in forced calm, hoping Carlos didn't overhear. "Jeannie Bellows."

Behind the counter Carlos whispered, "What the heck?"

The man named Duncan grinned and winked at Jeannie. "Well Betty, I wouldn't mind having a go at the rest," he said with a leer. "She looks like a classic thirty-six, twenty-four, thirty-six. An overflowing C-cup too, can't fool me with that baggy uniform darling—"

"Duncan," Betty said, sounding exasperated.

Carlos plucked the paper hat off his head, balled it up, and tossed it into a garbage can. He stepped through the swinging door and came out of the kitchen a moment later, holding a large cleaver.

“Say, sweets,” Duncan said enthusiastically, “why don’t you drop those panties? Then we can really see what’s what.”

“Duncan!” This time Betty’s tone was not shocked, but stern, threatening.

Jeannie was terrified. She couldn’t move. Who are these people? How can they possibly know about me?

Carlos came around the counter. “Okay guys. That’s it.”

Jeannie looked over her shoulder at him. She was as white as pastry dough, her whole body trembling.

Betty and Duncan looked at each other and burst into laughter.

\* \* \*

Will was in a fenced-in garbage area behind the diner. Stinking metal cans were surrounded by a board fence and chicken wire. The birds taking advantage of the shade under the big clamshell were restless again, the way they had been when he had driven into the lot and gotten out of his car. He quietly turned over an empty aluminum can and then stood on it, looking over the fence.

Below him and close enough to touch, a man with a brush cut and a sun-reddened face was slipping through the door marked EXIT. He was wearing the requisite conservative suit tailored to hide the gun under his left arm. Brushcut paused and nodded over his shoulder.

Will saw the nod returned by a blond woman standing beside a dark blue Pontiac. She was dressed like an executive, matching skirt and jacket, and her

hair was up in a tight bun. She slipped a hand into her sensible purse and settled back against the car to wait things out as Brushcut entered the diner. Will was pretty sure she wasn't reaching into her purse for a roll of Mentos.

Will climbed down and took off his shirt, holster and T-shirt. He put the holster back on, tucked his ball cap and T-shirt into each of his back pockets and slipped the shirt on. Then he lifted the lid of a garbage can and reached into a mess of rotting leftovers which seemed to be melting into one big multicolored stink in the desert heat. He brought up a handful of gleaming rot and smeared it across his shirt and chest.

\* \* \*

Carlos was pissed. The couple in the booth was laughing at his size. They must have thought he was an angry kid. He hefted the cleaver and the laughter stopped. There didn't seem to be any fear in their eyes, more a look of professional interest. This is way weird, Carlos thought.

"Alright you sick assholes," Carlos said smoothly, "it's time to move out. We don't want your business."

Betty gave Carlos an indulgent smile. Duncan grinned.

\* \* \*

The woman standing by the car behind the diner heard the gate to the garbage area open and watched a man stagger toward her covered in filth. She caught the odor wafting from him and gagged. Something

lumpy and fuzzy, mold maybe, was clinging to his shirt. One hand and arm were covered in a purplish glutinous mass that glistened and ran like soft wax. The other hand was inside his shirt scratching furiously at his chest. Flies buzzed around him, one landing on his lip. He touched it with his tongue and it flew off. "Yum," he said.

She stepped forward, her hand coming out of her purse with a gun in it. "I never thought a lack of personal hygiene would merit a bullet but in your case I'll make an exception. No closer."

Will ignored the Glock in her hand and gave her his goofiest grin. "Hey, lay-dee," he nearly sang. "You got any change? A doll-ur? I gotta get a buzz ticket. I gotta job innerview."

"Back off," she commanded. "Now!"

The man let out a petulant shout. "This is *my* buzz stop!" He lurched and belched and shambled away from her, veering toward the Pontiac where he began making a liquid hiccupping sound.

"Oh Jesus, not on the car!" She stuffed the gun into her purse and ran to the man, grabbing the arm not covered in crud and trying to steer him in the other direction before he started to puke. She made a dry retching sound and gasped. "God, you stink!"

The man snapped to attention. She only had a moment to realize she'd messed up.

Will clipped her on the chin as she was going for the gun and grabbed her before she hit the ground. He looked at her a moment as he listened to the voices in his head. *Hey dickhead! Turn on your titty-radar man! This babe is stacked!* Will thought about that, and smiled. "And now ladies and gentlemen," he said as he yanked off the woman's jacket and pulled her blouse open, "It's distraction time!"

\* \* \*

Jeannie and Carlos stood together. The couple in the booth was laughing uproariously. "Okay people, joke's over!" Carlos was getting steamed. Then he heard a laugh behind him.

"No it ain't!" a man said.

Carlos turned around. The speaker was another suited white dude, a tall guy with a brush cut. He had the reddest face Carlos had ever seen. Looks like a newborn baby screaming for a tit, he thought. The man was pointing a sleek black automatic at him.

"Good timing, Peter!" Betty said, sounding like a cheerleader during a pep rally.

Peter bowed to Betty. Then he gave Carlos a sorry shake of the head. "How old are you, Man-yew-el," he asked, as if talking to a child, "Sixteen?"

"Guess again, Pete," Carlos replied. His bowels were twisting into furious knots. "I'm old enough to kick ass when somebody's causing a disturbance in here."

Peter smirked and gestured with the gun. "Drop the blade, Jorge, or I'll spread your brains across the floor like spilled guacamole."

Carlos raised the cleaver. Jeannie whispered, "Do what he says, Carlos."

"Screw that," he whispered back. "I don't know what they want with you but it doesn't look good."

"C'mon, Cantinflas," Peter said, gesturing with the gun, the barrel pointing upward. "What are you going to do, cut the bullets in half before I—"

The gun was pointing away from him. Hoping all those years he had spent in little league as a kid had paid off, Carlos threw the cleaver. He was hoping to knock the gun out of the man's hand. The cleaver sank into Peter's right shoulder and nearly severed his arm.

"Shit!" Carlos yelled, horrified by he had just done.

Jeannie looked back and saw Duncan and Betty make handguns appear from nowhere.

Carlos watched blood spew out of Peter's shoulder in an obscene froth. He saw Peter's eyes roll up, saw the man's knees buckle, and saw the right index finger twitch on the gun's trigger. He grabbed Jeannie and pulled her down onto the floor.

The gun fired and the big plate glass window exploded. Betty and Duncan slipped under the table. The trigger was squeezed again as Carlos scrambled forward, the bullet blasting a chunk of plaster out of the wall by the door. Peter collapsed, and Carlos grabbed the gun.

He spun around. Duncan and Betty were pointing identical automatics at him. He kept his gun on Betty, having remembered reading that women were better shots than men because of finer motor control and quicker reflexes. Huddled on the floor between them was Jeannie.

\* \* \*

"No shit," Will said, checking the unconscious woman's purse and seeing that her driver's license identified her as Bonnie Hubbard from Los Angeles. He tore the woman's blouse into strips and then took off

her bra. Her breasts were firm and high, which suited his purpose. They'd be easier to see.

He placed the woman in the driver's seat of the Pontiac and used strips of cloth to bind her hands to the steering wheel. He clicked her seatbelt into place and then tied another strip of cloth around her neck and the thin metal rods that supported the headrest on her seat. With her head and hands in place he closed the door and stepped back. The effect was good enough. He pried a board out of the fence, went to the car, and started the engine. He took his time working the board into place on the gas pedal, humming a tune and wishing he didn't stink so much. Then he heard two shots from inside the diner.

\* \* \*

"Freeze, Pancho. Drop the gun." Duncan kept his own automatic on the cook, irritated by how unnerved the kid was. The cook seemed to be ignoring him for Betty. He and Betty got to their feet, and the cook did the same.

They all moved with exaggerated slowness. The waitress was between them, kneeling on the floor, every muscle taut, looking like a doe surrounded by wolves.

Duncan grinned when he realized he was getting a hard-on. He imagined the woman on her knees naked and surrounded by the ruined bodies of his fellow trackers, wondered where in the hell that mental image had come from, and realized that it was turning him on.

Carlos wiped sweat out of his eyes with his free hand. On the hottest days he had been able to work the grill, the deep-fat fryers and the ovens at a manic

pace without feeling the heat. Now he was pissing sweat out of every pore.

Duncan took a step forward. He felt good. Loose. In control. Horny as hell. Part of his mind played with a very possible scenario. Pancho shoots Betty. He shoots Pancho. The target they were tracking tries to run. He grabs the target, checks the roots of her hair, plucks out a contact, and pulls down her panties. The target is confirmed or denied. And either way he fucks the sweet and ever-loving shit out of her. Up the ass first. Definitely. With an ass like that it'd be like fucking a—

“Duncan?” Betty was looking at him, puzzled. They had been warned that the target might have biological and emotional impacts on men in the tracking parties, and no man could know what might happen until he was in the same room with her. Betty pointed at Duncan’s crotch and raised an eyebrow. “What the hell are you doing?”

Duncan glanced down and cursed. It looked like he had another pistol stuffed in his shorts. In a way I do, he thought, and this one’s loaded. He felt giddy with an overwhelming urge to sink his dick into something. He took a deep breath. “This has gone far enough. Drop the gun, you Mexican bastard.”

“I’m not a Mexican,” Carlos said, clearly annoyed. “I’m an American.”

Duncan made a face. “With an accent like that?”

“In the last forty years we’ve had more Presidents with accents than without. Are you saying they weren’t Americans?”

Duncan fidgeted while he mulled this over.

Jeannie shook her head. That guy has an erection, she thought. Story of my life. She looked at Carlos and

thought, be quiet or they'll kill you! And me! She wanted to say it out loud but couldn't.

Duncan composed himself. "Listen, you little fuck. I'm going to count to three. If you're still holding the gun, I'll put a bullet in your head and let some air into that sun-baked vacuum. Got it?"

"You shoot me, and I'll shoot your partner, fuckhead." Carlos said in a tone so casual it amazed even him.

"One." Duncan said.

Carlos laughed. "You're losing your boner, man."

Duncan flushed. It was true. He could feel his erection subsiding along with that wonderful, inexplicable feeling of elation. His face turned mottled red, rage choking him like a pair of invisible hands. "Two."

"Betty Boop over there is gonna be dead because of you," Carlos said, steadying his gun hand.

\* \* \*

Outside, Will reached in through the driver's window and put Bonnie Hubbard's car in gear. Hanging on to the doorframe, he steered the car around to the front of the diner, the board jammed over the gas pedal allowing the vehicle accelerate at a steady rate.

\* \* \*

"Three!" Duncan said, hoping that whoever was coming toward the diner just drove right on by.

\* \* \*

Will cranked the wheel, straightening the car's course, and then leaped away from it and out of sight just as it rolled by the big window and cruised across the parking lot toward the highway.

\* \* \*

Betty looked over her shoulder. She gasped and cried out. "Bonnie!"

Duncan wheeled quickly. "Holy shit!"

They stood together before the shattered window watching the Pontiac glide by. Bonnie was at the wheel, apparently naked. The car hit a rut and her breasts bounced up into view. Duncan gawked, eyes wide.

Betty cried out. "Bonnie, what are you doing?" To Duncan she said, "Cover them." She turned and took a careful step through the shattered window intending to run after the car that careened across the highway and slammed to a stop in a ditch.

Duncan watched Betty go. Cover them? Jesus! He turned quickly. Not quick enough.

Carlos shifted to one side to get Jeannie out of his line of fire and then shot at Duncan. His hands were shaking and his aim was lousy, but at least he hit something.

Duncan's left kneecap exploded like a rotten tomato. "*Christ!*" he cried, falling on his ass and dropping his pistol. "Oh my jeeezuz!"

Betty took three paces when an arm came from nowhere and slammed into her forehead like a tree limb. She hit the ground like a sack of laundry, her pistol clattering in the dust.

Duncan writhed and cursed, his hands hovering over the red and white pulp of his shattered knee, afraid to touch it but desperate to stop the pain.

“Bet that smarts, huh?” Carlos asked. He handed his gun to Jeannie, picked up Duncan’s automatic, and squatted beside the wounded man. “Looks real sore.” He poked the barrel of the pistol into the open wound, prodding tissue and fragmented bone and getting a shriek of remarkable vigor from Duncan, who rolled onto his side.

Will came through the broken window carrying Betty. “Hi gang,” he said. He dropped the unconscious woman onto the seat of the booth and opened her purse. “Get a load of this,” he said. “Driver’s license says she’s Betty Crocker.” He gestured to the car stalled across the highway. “That one is Bonnie Hubbard. You think they’re using fake ID?”

Carlos rolled Duncan onto his stomach, grabbed his wallet and flipped it open. “Holy crap,” he said. “Meet Duncan Heinz.”

“Fuck off,” Duncan said in a weak whisper.

Will crossed over to the dead guy with the cleaver jutting out of him, passing Jeannie who was holding a gun like it was a slug. He looked at the cleaver and the man’s nearly severed limb and glanced at Carlos. “I’ve heard of disarming a guy, but this is fucking ridiculous.”

“Man, you really stink,” Carlos said.

Will ignored him. He got the dead man’s wallet. “This guy is Peter Paul.”

Carlos laughed and shook his head. “And I’m Señor Felix,” he said to Will. “What have you gotten us mixed up in?”

Will nodded in Jeannie’s direction. “Better ask her that question.”

Carlos looked at Jeannie, seeing a woman who had been working here almost a year now, a woman who had become his friend. They both lived in East Barstow so they shared a ride in to work every day, and he dropped her off near her apartment every evening, at his insistence. Hitchhiking was too dangerous. She didn’t own a car, and if they split the cost of gas they both saved money. He thought he knew her from the casual conversations they’d had over the last year. She lived alone, not far from his family home. She had no college education, had moved from one menial job to the other and wasn’t seeing anyone. She didn’t make any waves, laughed at all his dumb jokes, never called in sick and during the first few months she worked at In the Shade never once got pissed when she’d caught him looking at her ass in wide-eyed wonder, a habit he’d finally broken.

“Jeannie? Were they after you?”

Jeannie settled onto a stool and put the gun down on the old Formica counter. She looked at the floor and said, “Maybe.”

Carlos looked stunned. “Why?”

Jeannie laughed. She looked like she wanted to cry.

Bonnie stepped through the shattered window and into the booth. She was topless, her hair hung in tangles, and there was a red welt on her chin. She was gripping Betty’s gun in both hands. “Everybody freeze.”

“Shit. I knew I should have picked that up,” Will said.

Carlos sucked in a breath, as wide-eyed as an owl.

“My tits will be the last things you ever see if you don’t drop the weapon.”

Carlos did as he was told. That was a serious pair of *tetas grandes*, but she looked really pissed off and more than ready to use the gun. It occurred to him that if she said ‘This is a bust,’ he’d lose it.

Bonnie gestured at Will. “Pretty-boy. If you’re packing, lose it now.” Will reached inside his shirt and slowly withdrew his gun.

“Those *are* nice tits,” Jeannie said, trying to control a rising tremor in her voice. Startled, the topless woman turned to see Jeannie pointing a gun in her direction. “I’d hate to mess them up. Drop it. Now.”

“Be careful with that, sweetie,” Bonnie said. “

“Don’t call me sweetie.” “Jeannie’s body was shaking with fear and she fought it down. “I may not like guns but I know how to use them. Point and shoot, right?” This remark surprised the others. Putting on a brave front, she didn’t look as meek as she had a moment before. “Drop your gun.”

Bonnie looked back at Will. Now he too had a gun on her. She set her pistol on the table and Carlos snapped it up. “What a fucking day,” she said, sitting down beside Betty. She pulled Betty’s blazer off and struggled into it. Exhaling, she buttoned it, the buttons straining when she tried to breathe. She cursed and unbuttoned the blazer again, taking a breath and adjusting it so it covered as much of her as possible. Carlos watched all of this. “Enjoy the show?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Carlos replied. “Who the hell are you people?”

Bonnie didn't say anything.

Betty sat up, holding her head. “Did we mess up?”  
Bonnie nodded.

Will prodded Duncan with a foot and saw that the man was unconscious. He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “The guy who's holding the cleaver for us is dead. This asshole on the floor is out like a light. That means I'm going to have to ask you ladies some questions.”

“Go pull on your dick,” Betty said.

Bonnie smiled.

“Look,” Will said in a hollow voice, approaching Bonnie and Betty, “I know why they send women out on these operations. There's always a time when a little femininity comes in handy. Most people will think twice before hurting a woman. It's instinct and societal conditioning.” He slipped his automatic into the holster and leaned close. “I'm not like that, and my way of doing things can get ugly.” He grabbed Betty's wrist, raising her right hand, and gripped her ring and pinky fingers. With a savage twist he bent the fingers backward until the clear lacquered nails touched the back of her hand.

Betty cried out. Jeannie turned away.

“If you have anything to say,” Will said, “Say it now, because I've got plenty of time and you ladies only have so many fingers.”

Betty shrieked, “Fuck you!” With her left hand she made a clumsy grab for a butter knife from the place setting on the table and raised the knife to strike.

Carlos watched Will defend himself. It made his nuts creep when he saw the guy draw the gun from the holster.

Will's hand moved so fast it was scary. He didn't take a deep breath, exhale, pause, or say anything. He didn't even blink as he fired the gun two feet from Betty's head. The bullet caved in her right eye and opened the back of her head like a door. Her brains slapped the vinyl seat behind her like cottage cheese.

Now it was Carlos' turn to look away.

Jeannie was staring at Will in horror. She expected him to turn and point the gun at her and say *You're the one I'm really after. You're the one I want. I'm taking you back. Back to Eicher's people.*

Will did nothing like that. He elbowed Betty's body out of the way and grabbed Bonnie's hair. He drew her close, pressing the barrel of the gun against her head, at the edge of her left eye. Then he whispered in her ear. Letting his ghosts speak through him and venting a little of their madness.

"I'm going to ask you some questions. Short questions that only need short answers."

Bonnie tried to shake her head. Will wrapped his fingers deeper in her hair and twisted, making her eyes water. He drew her head back so she could look into his eyes. His voice was gentle, but his eyes were dead.

"If you don't answer my questions I'm going to put a bullet through the front of your skull. The shot will make your eyes explode. Aside from some structural damage to your eye sockets, you'll live if you don't bleed out. And then we can play some more. Do you want me to do that?"

Bonnie shook her head even though it caused her pain.

“Good.” Will whispered, his mouth still inches from her ear.

Carlos went behind the counter and got a glass of water to settle his stomach. He looked at Jeannie huddled on the stool and asked, “What’s going on here?” She didn’t answer. But she looked guilty ... of something. This made him feel angry and confused.

“Why are you here?” Will breathed into Bonnie’s ear, holding the barrel of the pistol rock-steady against her eye. “Are you here for me?”

“No,” Bonnie said.

“Who, then?”

“The waitress.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Peter ... the dead one on the floor over there, said, ‘the doctor is interested in her.’ I don’t know what doctor and I don’t know why he wants her. We’re just trackers. We had pictures of her and physical stats but that’s it. We only need to know—”

“What you need to know,” Will said. “Yeah. I’ve heard it before.”

He was about to ask Bonnie another question when an electronic bleating came from within Peter Paul’s blood-soaked jacket. Another cell phone. Christ, he hated those things, never a moment’s peace. He looked Bonnie in the eye. “I take it the chances are slim that the caller is going to try to sell us a subscription to Time Magazine?” She blinked rapidly. “Just somebody checking in?” She nodded. “Any code words or passwords they want to hear?”

“I don’t know,” Bonnie said.

“My face could be the last thing you ever see,” Will said.

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” Bonnie whispered urgently. “Only Peter knew. You’re the guys who fucked things up by killing him.”

Will nodded to Carlos. “Answer it. Just say ‘yeah.’ See what happens.”

Carlos grimaced. Using only the tips of his fingers in an unintentionally prissy way Carlos opened the man’s jacket. It was wet and heavy with absorbed blood. He retrieved the phone. It was slick and warm. It rang again and Carlos nearly dropped it. He flipped it open, getting blood on his hands, and said, “Yeah?”

“What is your status?” a woman’s voice asked.

Carlos hit the mute button. “Some woman just asked what’s going on. What do I say?”

Will shrugged.

The connection was broken.

“Hang on to that,” Will said.

Carlos stood up and wiped the blood off the phone and his hands with a rag from behind the counter.

Will let Bonnie fall back against the seat.

“Either of you own that pickup out front?” he asked the waitress and the cook. Carlos nodded. “Let’s go,” Will said. “Now. Move. We’re already too late.”

Even though he was now completely unnerved, Carlos didn’t want to fuck around if there were more people with guns on the way. He grabbed Jeannie by the arm and led her to the door. Then he paused. “Hey man,” he said, gesturing to Bonnie and Duncan. “What about them?”

“Oh, yeah,” Will said. He turned and fired one bullet between Bonnie’s perfect breasts, the bullet entering an inch to the left of her breastbone. He

squatted and fired another shot into the unconscious Duncan's head. "Let's go."

Will stepped outside. Carlos had to lead Jeannie by the hand. She was staring at the people Will had killed, her eyes wide and frightened.

"Don't think about it," Carlos said. "We could be dead now."

Outside, they looked down the road. There was nothing coming from the east. To the west, sunlight glinted off of a windshield. "Could be tourists," Carlos offered.

Will shrugged. "You want to risk it?"

Carlos opened his door, got behind the wheel of the pickup and started the engine.

Will opened the passenger door, stripping off his shirt. He sniffed it and threw it away. "You first, nice and snug in the middle," he said to Jeannie, climbing in after her.

"I forgot my purse," Jeannie said. She had stuffed the pistol into one pocket of her uniform, and Will felt it pressing against his leg.

"Anything in it you really need?"

She thought of the fake ID, nineteen dollars in cash and change, and the key to a nearly empty apartment. "No, not really."

Carlos sat behind the wheel, staring at the diner. "Shit man. I killed a guy. With a cleaver. I guess I'm out of a job."

"Could have been worse," Will said. "You could have been out of a life."

"True that," Carlos said. He put the truck in gear and pulled out onto the road.

## A Page from the Past

*The Compound (outside Vienna, Virginia), October 27, 1961*

Lionel Eicher was ecstatic.

The two most joyous events of his life had just occurred within hours of each other.

First, at eight o'clock this morning, Herr Doctor Edmund Stern had suffered a crippling stroke. The old man might eventually be able to walk again, but his face was frozen in a horrible rictus which made his speech almost unintelligible and his hands were twisted into nearly useless claws. He was now as helpless as the little brat he had let live after its resurrection a year ago. Nurse Garvin would have her hands full, with two sets of diapers to change. All the wonder and terror which could have sprung from Stern's brain was likely trapped there forever. Now Eicher was in charge of their research and Stern would be retired, still living in the Compound in case his advice was needed.

Second, at noon Eicher had been invited to the White House for a brief but inspiring meeting with the President. Eicher had been awestruck. Here was a man he could understand! The charisma and power of

the man Kennedy had been impressive indeed, and Lionel had been thrilled when the President informed him that from now on he would be in charge of genetic research at the Compound.

Eicher had also met the student who would become his new assistant. James Madison Zane was an American biochemist not yet thirty years old. Eicher recognized much of himself in the intense young man.

Lionel would have been crushed if he had known Kennedy had deliberately allotted only a half-hour for the meeting because the President found Eicher to be an irritating toad with a distracting comb-over. Eicher may have been a brilliant scientist whose pioneering work on the human genome was like something out of an issue of *Amazing Stories* but Jack Kennedy knew a megalomaniac when he saw one and Lionel Eicher was one of the worst. After the meeting Kennedy made sure any future information coming from the Compound should come from Zane instead. He had enough to worry about without hearing how the Eicher planned to piss away hundreds of thousands in federal funding.

Lionel's only disappointment came when Kennedy had suggested their experiments might be ethically controversial. The use of information obtained from the Nazis was questionable and if the public ever found out it could hurt the administration. When Eicher pointed out that Stern had been pursuing his work before Hitler came to power and neither of them had any direct connection to the National Socialists, Kennedy simply shrugged.

This was not a good sign, Eicher had thought. The vote of the Jew and the Negro was of greater importance than the advancement of science?

*Made in the U.S.A.*

Eicher vowed to start work on a clone a good Catholic like Kennedy could not possibly ignore, one that would help the President appreciate the value and potential power of the project. He would use Stern's cut and paste DNA manipulation techniques, starting with three strands of human hair caught within a shard of splintered, age-blackened wood that had belonged to Stern and was supposedly part of the cross brace of a *crux immissa*.

### 3

## Some Like It Hot

“Where to?” Carlos asked. He could see a car behind them now, a dark speck on the road.

“East,” Will said. “Fast.” He adjusted the mirror on the doorframe so he had a clear view of the road behind them. “I know things got a little wild back there, but trust me on this, they are the bad guys. Don’t try pulling your guns on me.” He looked at Jeannie. “I’m on your side.”

“I know,” she said. She was still afraid of Will and this whole situation was tying her nerves in knots, but at the same time she was aware of Will’s naked torso, tanned and gleaming with sweat. She pulled the gun out of her uniform pocket and set it on the dashboard.

Will could feel her hip and thigh press against his. “They were carrying Glock twenty-sixes, ten-shot mags,” he said, trying to sound cool. An electric tingle raced across his skin, terminating in his fingers, toes, and testicles.

While Jeannie watched the road ahead Will studied her. She appeared to be wearing contacts. Almost hidden from sight near her right ear, the roots

of her jet-black hair showed a bit of blonde so pale it was almost white. He shook his head.

He leaned out the window and took a breath of fresh air, reaching back and pulling a ball of crushed cotton out of a rear pants pocket. He took off his holster, shook out his T-shirt and was about to slip it on when Carlos spoke up.

“I don’t want to be rude, man, but you smell, you know? I got some Handy Wipes. You can wipe some of that crud off.” He fumbled in a door pocket and came up with a plastic container. He handed it to Jeannie, who passed it to Will.

Their fingers touched. The tingle jolted both of them, and they dropped the Handy Wipes.

Jesus! What is it about her that’s tripping my alarms? Will bent over and grabbed the plastic container. He started wiping down his chest and arms, pausing to slip one hand into his pocket and touch a frayed length of ribbon hidden there. In his mind he saw a little girl. Her pale blonde hair was shining in the sun, and he heard himself as a boy saying *the world might as well end now ...* There was something else, but it was lost to him. Man, he thought, that’s a ride in the wayback machine.

Will cleaned up the best he could, using the entire container of wipes.

Jeannie sat beside him, hoping he wouldn’t touch her again. For the longest time, forever, actually, she had felt as if her insides were filled with ice. When their fingers had touched it was as if someone had applied a blowtorch to that ice, heating and liquefying at the same time. I should be scared, she thought. I am scared. But that’s not all I am. As she looked at the open spaces of the Mojave, butterflies fluttered in her stomach and then swarmed lower. She bit her

bottom lip, pressed her thighs together, and tried to think of anything but the man sitting beside her.

Carlos was pushing the pickup over seventy mph and hoping they didn't get pulled over by some irate CHP officer who had the misfortune to be cruising the highway in the heat of mid-day when he saw a black Pontiac coming up behind them. "Holy god," he whispered. He looked at the speedometer. Seventy-three. He looked in the rearview mirror. The Pontiac was coming up fast. Fast.

"Who the hell's driving that thing?" he asked, "John Glenn? It's a fuckin rocket!"

Will pulled on the holster and his T-shirt and checked the mirror. Carlos was right. The Pontiac, with a whole goddamn rodeo worth of horsepower under the hood, had to be doing at least a hundred and twenty, straight as an arrow.

"Think that's who called cleaverman?" Carlos asked.

Will gave him a quick nod, drawing his gun.

"Carlos, you still got that phone?"

Carlos pulled the phone from the pocket of his white cook's pants and handed it to Will. He pressed down on the gas pedal, watching the speedometer needle crawl past eighty. An intermittent knocking sounded deep in the engine every few seconds. He cursed and said, "That's as much as I can push it."

Will flipped open the phone and hit callback on the most recent received call.

A female voice said, "Speak."

"Hey," Will said, "What can I do for you?"

"Pull over. You are evading federal authorities. You've left the scene of a crime, you're breaking the

posted speed limit on this Interstate highway and you are in possession of a stolen phone. Pull over.”

“Federal authorities?” Will asked. “Like who? FBI? CIA?”

“You wouldn’t recognize the name of our agency. Our authority comes from the government of the United States.”

“With or without the President’s knowledge?”

“Pull over *now*.” Whoever this woman was, she sounded as hard as nails.

Will looked over his shoulder. The Pontiac was a hundred feet behind them. “You’re from the Compound, aren’t you?”

Carlos was either going to ask Will what the Compound was or ask Jeannie why she looked like she had just received some really bad news when a bullet punched a starry hole in the rear window and ricocheted off the roof support to his left in a spray of hot lead fragments. He cried out, feeling as if a dozen hot pins had been poked into his face. Will automatically reached by Jeannie and placed a steadying hand on the steering wheel as Carlos frantically wiped at his face and neck. Black specks that looked like pepper marked one shoulder of his shirt.

“Thanks man,” he said, regaining control of the pickup. “That fucking hurt.”

“Tit for tat time,” Will said. He put the Dodgers cap on, pulling the brim low. There was nothing worse than the sun in your eyes when you were trying to blow somebody’s head off. He climbed halfway out the passenger window, aimed over the roof of the cab and fired a single shot at the Pontiac. He figured any car with that much juice also had bulletproofing. He was right. A tiny white star appeared on the windshield of

the pursuing car, but the Pontiac didn't slow or swerve. Will dropped down inside the truck. Two more shots were fired at the pickup, both of which struck the frame of the cab.

A gaily-painted Winnebago rattled by in the opposite lane. An old couple behind the big windshield watched the exchange of gunplay in wide-eyed fascination.

"There's two in front and two in back," Will said. "It looks like they're all white, so I doubt we're being followed by Aunt Jemima or Uncle Ben."

There was the boom of a shotgun and buckshot rattled off the truck's body and inside the cab. Carlos looked at his left-hand mirror. "Fuck," he said, "That shot poked holes in the gas tank."

Will let out a bitter laugh. "How bad?"

"Well, we didn't blow up," Carlos said with a shrug. "But we aren't gonna get much farther down the road." His grip on the wheel tightened as he watched the needle on the gas gauge drop toward E.

Will popped out the window again, braced himself and emptied his clip into the front grill of the pursuing car. Windows and tires could be bulletproofed, but because armor plating acted like insulation the radiator was often left relatively exposed. All it would take was one lucky shot.

The pickup was slowing. They all noticed it. Will slipped back into his seat, pulled the extra clip from his ankle pouch and slapped it into the automatic.

Carlos laughed, "Holy shit. Look!"

Threads of smoke were coming from under the Pontiac's hood. The smoke thickened and turned black and the car dropped into the distance behind them.

Carlos cheered. He saw a shiny new Ford Taurus approaching from the east and wondered what they would make of the Pontiac.

Will watched the Ford draw closer. Carlos clapped him on the shoulder. Will grinned and said, "It was a piece of ...". He saw the faces of the two men in the Taurus. They were peering back intently, their eyes widening when they saw him. The car passed by, and then fell into a screeching bootleg turn. "Shit! The goddamned Kens!"

Will and the Kens had recognized each other at the same time.

Carlos stared at the rear-view mirror in disbelief. The Ford had taken up immediate pursuit just as the Pontiac had begun to dwindle in the distance. "What shit is this?"

The trackers they had left behind were one thing, a group Will could deal with if he had to. He'd had the same training they had and could anticipate many of their reactions. The Kens were a different story, red-blooded American boys and cold-blooded killers.

As Will tried to figure a way out of their situation without getting the cook and the waitress killed, Jeannie watched him. He was deep in thought, staring off into some middle distance. A thought occurred to him and he looked confident, dangerous, and amused, a flicker of expression that was gone in an instant.

Jeannie was reminded of a movie she had watched on TV not long ago. *King Creole*. In the film Elvis Presley played a punk with an attitude and talent. At one point he rescued a damsel in distress, looking confident, dangerous and amused as he broke a couple of beer bottles to fend off two goons. Jeannie shook her head and wondered why she was thinking about Elvis movies at a time like this.

The pickup began losing speed. Carlos looked at the mirror again. The spill of gasoline had created a long black fan that glistened on the dry surface of the highway. The Ford Taurus behind them seemed to be riding on it. The pickup engine cut out. The truck rolled a hundred yards and then coasted to a stop as Carlos turned onto the shoulder of the road, grit under the tires rasping and popping. They all looked back and saw the Ford come to a stop.

“Tell these clowns you don’t know me,” Will said. He looked Carlos in the eye. “You two were heading into town, saw me thumbing and picked me up.” He looked at Jeannie. In the relative dimness of the cab her skin was glowing like porcelain. “You didn’t want Carlos to stop for me. Both of you are angry at each other. That’s why you’re so tense.”

Doors opened on each side of the Taurus and two men got out. Carlos would have laughed if his guts hadn’t been in such a knot. Growing up with older sisters he’d seen a lot of dolls, lots of Barbies and lots of their accessories, and these guys looked like Ken dolls. They were tall and slim, wearing nearly identical suits, one blue and one gray. The suits would have been impressive if they weren’t so rumpled and dusty. Graysuit had blond hair. Bluesuit was a redhead, and under the mid-day sun it looked to Carlos like the guy’s head was on fire. They started walking toward the pickup, their right hands reaching under their jackets. Carlos didn’t think they were going for their wallets.

“Remember,” Will whispered. “You don’t know who I am. Some assholes shot the shit out of your truck a few minutes ago, but you don’t know why.” Will opened the door on his side.

“Do you know them?” Jeannie asked.

“Yeah. I met them earlier today and messed them around a little. I guess they’re pissed.”

“Hey man,” Carlos said urgently, “are they gonna kill you?” He was thrown when Will grinned.

“I bet they’ll try.”

Jeannie impulsively touched his arm. There was a little tingle felt by both of them. “Be careful.” He nodded and climbed out of the truck. When he slammed the door shut she noticed that he had left his big pistol lying on the seat.

\* \* \*

A shining white convertible seemed to float across the parking lot of In the Shade. The forty year-old Thunderbird had a blood-red interior. The driver was dressed in shades of white and cream. He sat behind the wheel a moment and let the dust settle around him.

He appeared to be in his late thirties and his Middle-Eastern heritage was clear in his dark eyes, shoulder-length shining black hair and coffee-and-cream complexion. His compelling face could have made him a fortune on TV or in the movies. He wore a stud in his left ear, a small sterling silver fish. Today his hair was in a ponytail, gleaming like polished jet.

Getting out of the car and straightening his suit, he adjusted his silk tie, shot the cuffs of his shirt, and walked toward the diner’s large window frame, shards of glass snapping and crunching under his white bucks.

He searched the inside of the diner quickly, and decided the woman who had been shot in the heart would serve him best. The one with the broken fingers

had taken a bullet through the brain and that would require more time and effort than he had to spare. The fact that one of the women was naked under her blazer certainly influenced his decision. A little T & A could brighten the darkest day. Her body was slumped sideways in the booth. He'd seen her dossier. She was working under the name Bonnie Hubbard.

He slid into the booth beside her, admiring her legs. Getting a grip on her hair he pulled her upright, enjoying the way her breasts bobbed. His left arm went around her back, holding her steady as he put his right hand between her breasts over the bullet wound. He closed his eyes. His eyes were closed on purpose. If he left them open he'd look at her perfect tits, and soon he'd want a handful of them. That was a waste of time he could do without. Fucking the dead had its high points, they didn't talk back, for one, but right now he was in a hurry. Look but don't touch, he thought.

The big clock over the serving counter ticked quietly. A bird on the roof ruffled its feathers. A fly buzzed by the man looking for a late lunch and settled beside a tacky drop of blood. "Yummy," the man in white said in a raw voice, tasting the blood as the fly tucked in to a free lunch.

The flesh beneath his hand was now warmer than room temperature. He began tapping his foot and humming. The body in his grasp was loosening, relaxing from the rigor of death. The heat under his hand grew stronger and the man in white smiled serenely when he felt a heartbeat.

Bonnie's eyes fluttered open.

"Welcome back, baby," the man in white said.

When he raised his hand the wound was gone.

\* \* \*

Carlos and Jeannie watched in the rear-view mirror as Will walked back to meet the redhead and the blond. The three men stopped halfway between the pickup and the car. They exchanged words as graysuit frisked Will and found an ankle holster holding a revolver, tearing it free with a *shhhrik* of Velcro. Bluesuit kicked at Will's feet and Will fell flat on his back. Bluesuit stood over Will and began talking to him as graysuit approached the truck.

Carlos opened his door and had one foot on the ground before graysuit said, "Nice and slow, beandog."

Graysuit gave Carlos a shove and made him lean over the side of the hood while he patted Carlos down. Graysuit gestured at Jeannie with his gun. "You too, babe. Out of the truck." He cocked his head at Will. "One of his holsters is empty, which means the weapon is here. You better step out with open hands, sweet thing."

Jeannie climbed out of the truck, leaving Will's gun on the seat.

Graysuit approached her and pushed her forward onto the other side of the hood in the same position as Carlos. "Could this be the notorious Jeannie Norman? Nice."

"That's Jeannie Nelson, tough guy," Carlos said. He was no longer sure if her name was Nelson or Bellows and wondered why the names sounded so familiar.

Graysuit looked confused.

Jeannie shook her head. "Actually, Carlos, my name really is Jeannie Norman."

Now Carlos looked confused.

Graysuit gave Jeannie a brief frisk with his free hand. His face registered a few changes. Surprise. Delight. He grinned, and his hand started caressing and squeezing.

Jeannie moved under his rough touch. “Stop that,” she said breathlessly.

Graysuit kept up his manual exploration, running his hot palm over an ass like a ripe fruit. “Your mouth says no,” he whispered, feeling her respond to him even as she shook her head. “But your ass says yes.”

“Hey man,” Carlos said, “leave—”

“Quiet, bean-dog,” graysuit whispered.

Jeannie closed her eyes as graysuit undid a button on her uniform and slid his hand inside, his fingers skittering across her brassiere like the legs of an insect and then burrowing into one of the cups. Graysuit whistled softly in her ear. She started breathing faster and graysuit said, “Oh yeah.” She made her legs tremble slightly and wondered if she’d ever cease to be amazed at the effect a single pair of balls can have on billions of brain cells.

Jeannie turned her head. Her eyes were half-closed, her mouth open as she let out a sound like a reluctant sigh. She placed her left hand over the cold claw that was clutching her breast. Looking into graysuit’s eyes, she brought her face close to his as if to kiss him, and then she bit into the end of his nose with her perfect white teeth.

Graysuit’s body lurched. His eyes opened wide. Jeannie grabbed his gun with her right hand and aimed the weapon away from her. Tears squirted from graysuit’s eyes. He screamed, sounding like a goose being flattened by a steamroller. “*Whonk!*”

Carlos leaped across the hood, using his forward motion to drive a fist into the side of graysuit's head. Graysuit was torn out of Jeannie's grip and blood gushed out of the end of his nose. Jeannie grimaced and spat a plug of meat out of her mouth. Graysuit's eyes rolled up and he hit the ground hard, raising a puff of dust.

Carlos scrambled down beside Jeannie, out of bluesuit's sight. He picked up graysuit's gun. They were startled when bluesuit bellowed, "Fucking Christ!"

\* \* \*

While graysuit was occupied with Carlos and Jeannie, Will had been chatting with bluesuit.

"Thanks for the skullfucking back at the rest stop," Bluesuit said.

"My pleasure," Will had replied, looking up at the man.

"Take your last breath, buddy, 'cause you're going to die." Bluesuit was ready to put a bullet in this fuckhead's heart, but the guy didn't seem concerned.

Will was still lying on his back. He got comfortable, resting on his elbows. "You're Richards, right?"

Richards smiled. "That's right. Not that it's going to matter to you a minute from now."

"They may not know you guys are closing files for the Compound, but the Bureau thinks you two are fags," Will said.

Richards stared and then blinked.

“They’ve come across your work and suspect you work for an agency, but they think you guys are losing it. Renegades, is how they described you, overstressed, and showing signs of explosively repressed homosexuality disguised as sociopathic homophobia.”

Color crept up out of Richards’ collar. His face was almost as red as his hair. “That’s a lie.”

“I read it in an FBI file. Come on, you knew the Feds were eyeballing you, and now you know what they think.”

That was pure bullshit. Will had broken into an office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in San Diego a month ago trying to confirm who the Kens were working for even though he was sure they were with the Compound. The Bureau was aware of the mystery duo, following in their wake and noting that Richards and Dicks had flashed IDs for the Bureau, the Secret Service, the CIA and the NSA. The Bureau didn’t have much, but all Will needed was a distraction. Just one.

Richards looked up and down the highway, and then glared down at Will. “The Feds don’t know shit. If I’m a fag, you’re Jesus Christ.”

“And then I will profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.”

“Very good. Matthew 7:23. You think I’m an asshole, huh?”

“Yeah,” Will replied, “I do, Richards. But it has nothing to do with the fact that you are gay.”

Gritting his teeth with rage, Richards looked like a red-faced lunatic. “You lousy fuck,” he said, “I’m no ass-bandit.”

Will gave him a sympathetic smile. "It's okay, man, you don't have to deny yourself any more. And if you aren't gay, why do you dress like that?"

Richards looked furious, and bewildered. "Are you saying I dress like a fairy?"

Will sniggered. "Jesus. Richards, look at your shoes."

Richards did. When the barrel of the gun strayed away from him Will kicked out at the man's ankles. As his feet were swept out from under him Richards cried, "Fucking Christ!"

Will leaped to his feet, grabbing Richards' wrist and giving it a twist. The Glock slipped out of Richards' hand and Will retrieved it.

"Hey Carlos," Will called toward the pickup, "You two okay?"

"Yeah," Carlos said. He stood up, holding graysuit's gun. Jeannie appeared beside him, wiping her mouth with a tissue. "This guy has a hell of a nosebleed though."

Will gestured with the gun. "Let's go over to the pickup," he said.

Richards was pissed. He stood and brushed himself off, and then smiled.

Coming down the road at a leisurely pace was a white and gold police car.

"Nuts," Will said under his breath.

## A Page from the Past

*Hall of Justice, Los Angeles, California, August 6, 1962*

Lionel Eicher was nervous. The night was warm and sweat was beaded on his nearly bald head. He was sitting behind the wheel of a car parked down the street from the Hall of Justice. In the bowels of that building was the coroner's office. He looked at his watch. Any moment now.

His most recent meeting with Kennedy's people did not go well. They wanted to see concrete results of his work and he had nothing so far. He could not show them William Hill, who was the result of an abandoned project and might yet turn out to have brain damage. He could not show them his most recent achievement, a living infant suspended in synthetic liquor amnii inside a plastic tank in a Compound laboratory. That child would be born soon, but Lionel did not want anyone examining the child until he knew exactly what he was dealing with. He got a bad feeling whenever he was near the child in the artificial womb. Perhaps it was just foolish superstition, but one never knew. No, he needed another child, a healthy, normal product of the clone program that he could show Kennedy.

And he knew where to start. With table scraps.

Under this building in the rooms of the L.A. County Coroners' Office a certain piggish harlot lay cooling on a slab, a slut who had been the object of a million masturbatory fantasies, a pseudo-blond cock-gobbling whore who was hailed as the world's greatest sex symbol.

Eicher was disgusted by the thought of women like her. True, she did have an innate beauty which if molded could have amounted to more than it ultimately did, but the empty-headed blonde had never done anything for Lionel and he had seen her stumble and mumble through at least three of her pictures.

Now, if someone with refined tastes, an exceptional education and superior breeding had been able to guide Marilyn Monroe as a young girl and fill her head with knowledge instead of the semen of old kike movie producers they could have brought to life a ravishing and refined creature.

Eicher cursed himself for letting his mind wander. While that zaftig grotesque lay dying cell by cell as the coroner opened her up, a man to whom Eicher had promised a great deal of money was spiriting away a few scraps of the woman, scraps which the man would record as prepared slides and frozen samples. Surely their disappearance would not be noticed, at least not for some time. The man would deliver these scraps to Lionel. Lionel in turn would use them in his next procedure, and when he showed President Kennedy the result of his labors, surely the President would be impressed.

After all, hadn't one of Kennedy's greatest thrills in life been sticking his cock into the bottle-blonde floozy's soiled orifices, festering holes which had already accompanied the assaults of many a rich, aging *Jude's* ceremonially flayed prick?

How would Kennedy feel when he learned that a part of his beloved whore lived on? In Eicher's creation there would be more than just the screen slut Kennedy lusted after. He could easily cut and paste the DNA of this new being with snippets of other genes using Stern's techniques, making in effect a new and improved Marilyn Monroe. He could also use Stern's deceptively simple process for lengthening the telomeres, the caps on the end of each strand of genetic matter that controlled the rate at which an organism would age. If the telomeres were not altered his newborn clone could theoretically have the same genetic age as her thirty-six year-old source, resulting in a far shorter life span. He could give her a straight nose without surgery. He could remove her weakness for drugs and alcohol. And he could give her flawless, white-blond hair, that gene being among the first Stern had isolated at Hitler's request.

Eicher lit a cigarette and waited.

Soon a young man in a white lab coat dashed to the car. He was holding a small plastic bag filled with crushed ice. Eicher accepted the bag with relief, and watched the young man lean against the car, one arm on the roof, as if having a chat with an old friend.

"They took pictures of her last night, man. Pictures!"

Eicher shrugged and removed a small glass vial from the bag. He held a penlight up to the vial and nodded. In the vial were scraps of meat, drops of blood and fragments of bone, the kind of detritus that was often caught in the teeth of a surgical saw. He had a small cooler on the seat beside him.

"Rolled her out, pulled down the sheet and snapped away. Damn!"

Eicher raised the lid of the cooler and dry ice fumes wafted out, filling the car with their peculiar

odor. He put the vial into the cooler and closed the lid. Then he took a thick manila envelope bearing the man's name from his jacket pocket, amused that he and the man in the white coat shared the same first name. He smiled and watched the *schwarzer Junge* fret.

"Somebody stole some of her stuff. Personal shit." He leaned forward, whispering. "And I swear to Christ, I think somebody's been fucking her!" The young black man shook his head. "Man, I gotta get out of this business."

"Well then, Lionel," Eicher said. "This may help." He handed the man the envelope containing the cash, put the car in gear, and drove away.

4

## The Prince and the Showgirl

Bonnie felt woozy. She tried to sit up and couldn't. The man holding her smiled patiently. Her vision was blurred and the contrast of the man's suit and skin made darks darker and lights lighter. Above the collar of his shirt all she could see was a soft-edged darkness split by a smile showing perfect teeth. One of his arms was behind her back as she slumped against the seat of the booth. His other hand was merely a black, shapeless thing flowing out of his shirtsleeve like smoke. She squinted, trying to clear her eyes. Now the sleeve and the smoky blackness were moving closer, the darkness spilling onto one of her breasts like oil. Her breasts were cold, and within the blackness was a man's large, strong hand stroking her.

"I want to ask you a question," the man in white said. He looked into her eyes. He had one firm tit in hand and wished he could grab the other one because they were lovely, but then he'd get aroused and his train of thought would be derailed. He concentrated on her eyes, letting his hand slip into her soft flesh. "I want to know where the hillbilly went."

Bonnie was having trouble breathing. The last thing she remembered was being shot, and now some clown was groping her and his touch was colder than anything she'd ever known. She shook her head, not understanding his question. Could she have survived the point-blank shot at her chest in some statistically impossible fluke? She looked down. The flesh between her breasts was unmarked.

The man in white sighed. Bonnie Hubbard was staring into empty space like a Beverly Hills princess trying to decide what to wear to the prom. Another imbecile. Not that he was surprised. She was a woman after all, and the only things they were really good for were fucking and cleaning and foot rubs. He tried to recall the last time he'd had his feet rubbed. Damn, but it had felt good, and he'd had some major wood rising up out of his robes while he eyed the dusky-hued babe who was anointing his toesies with scented oil ...

The man in white blinked rapidly. He was doing more and more of that lately, zoning out while there were important matters at hand, and seeing events which had gone before, and events yet to occur. He'd never worn robes. Why did he remember himself in a robe? He returned his attention to tittygirl.

“I want to know about our country cousin.”

“Who are you?” Bonnie asked. She had to get out of here and get to a phone. She could feel the weirdest sensations in her chest, little currents of icy water swirling inside her even as her breathing became easier. She looked down. The cuff of the man's shirt was flush against her left breast. Then he started withdrawing his hand.

“Who am I?” the man in white asked. “I'm the guy who just found a cancer in your tit.” He held up a red

and black lump for Bonnie's inspection. "I'm John Godson."

Bonnie gave him a dopey, uncertain smile. Why didn't the guy just say he was Paul Bunyan, or the devil? "Godson's a fairy-tale," she said. Then she looked closely at the bloody bit of black and red jelly the man was holding. It was pulsating, and growing.

Godson smiled. "Hey, lady," he said, "You don't want to help me, I'm not going to help you. Here, I'll put it back, with interest." He drove his hand at and into Bonnie's left breast. When he pulled back his hand was empty.

Bonnie doubled over with pain radiating from her breast, ripping down through her guts and up into her eyes. She wanted to scream, but she couldn't draw a breath.

Godson grabbed her hair to hold her up, watched with mild amusement as she twitched and jerked like a fish on the line, and then said, "Observe."

His dark hand disappeared into her breast again like smoke and withdrew the bloody blob. He flicked it away. It hit a chrome pole supporting one of the stools at the counter and stuck like a malignant booger.

The pain was gone. Bonnie took a deep breath, and looked at Godson. She remembered talking to Peter about Godson one time, asking him if Godson could be real. Peter had laughed.

"If Godson was real and able to do what the stories say he could do, he'd probably be running this country by now," Peter had said. "Or sending it straight to hell. If we were in a world where bogeymen could come to life I'd rather run into Frankenstein's monster, Freddy Krueger and the Terminator together than meet John Godson."

Bonnie looked the handsome face before her. “What do you want?”

“I want you to answer my question,” Godson said. He reached out casually, grazing her left nipple with one finger.

Bonnie jerked and grabbed at the table as an orgasm slammed through her, shaking her like an earthquake. Its intensity scared her more than the pain had a moment before. The pain she might have been able to deal with. If she came like that again, her heart would explode.

“Want another dose of happiness?” Godson wiggled his finger in her face.

“Do you know anything about the Compound?” Bonnie asked, covering her nakedness with her crossed arms.

Nodding, Godson took her wrists in his hands and raised her arms over her head. Her arms were now frozen where he had placed them. She looked terrified. “That’s better,” Godson said. “I like your tits.” He was getting a hard-on. Damn me, he thought. “I know the Compound very, very well. Now tell me what *you* know.”

“There was a guy who showed up,” Bonnie said in a distracted voice, struggling to lower her arms. “No hillbilly, though. He knew what he was doing. He knew about the Compound. He fucked us all up and tried to keep us away from the target.” The man in white raised his eyebrows. “He wasn’t the target,” Bonnie said. “Jeannie Norman was.”

“Really!” Godson was shocked. That didn’t happen often. He had assumed he was the one of the few who knew about Eicher’s pet project. “I was told she was long gone. When did they leave here?”

“Not long,” Bonnie said. “And that guy, he seemed to know a lot more than he should. We don’t know who he was.”

Godson smiled thinly. “Was he lean, light-brown hair, scarred like he’s cried a track into his cheek?”

Bonnie frowned. “Yeah. Who is he?”

“Can’t tell you,” Godson said. He pointed his finger at her. “I’d be wasting my time because you’re already dead.”

Before Bonnie could speak Godson said, “Bang,” and the wound reappeared in her chest. She slumped back onto the seat of the booth.

The hick and Eicher’s little girl were together. How about that? Godson was intrigued by the woman, but it was the man he really wanted to meet again. He wanted to test himself against somebody who would be a challenge to him, and after their last face-to-face encounter he knew Mr. Hill was indeed challenging. He was sure it was Hill he’d seen on the road earlier in the day, and when he ordered the man to stop Hill had just driven right on by. Godson had never had a request refused, and he was intrigued by Hill’s ability, demonstrated twice, no less, to ignore his commands.

The two file closers he had questioned at a rest stop earlier hadn’t been able to tell him much more than Bonnie. Godson had made Richards and Dicks forget that brief meeting and had moved on, leaving the interstate and following the road to Compound West when he got the inexplicable urge to turn right back around and head to this diner, an establishment he’d passed many times over the years.

Yes, another showdown with Hill would be interesting. His work was getting to be too much of a routine. He had needed a test, a challenge, for years now. He was looking forward to wrapping up this

latest assignment from the Compound and well aware of a growing inner darkness that was driving him to seek out and prove himself better than the defrosted hillbilly. He had to kill William Hill ... but before he killed Hill he wanted to *conquer* the man.

And Eicher's girl was supposed to be hot stuff. He wouldn't mind checking her out.

Thinking of women, Godson stared at Bonnie's corpse a moment. He glanced at his watch. He looked at her legs. Her skirt had ridden up her thighs when she had slumped backwards. With a figure like that, she could have been a showgirl in Vegas wearing glitter on her tits and dancing in feathers and sequins instead of dying in the desert like this. He rolled Bonnie unto her stomach. With one gentle hand he eased her skirt up to expose her buttocks.

"Wonderful."

\* \* \*

On Route 40 the closest town to the In the Shade diner was Needles, on the Arizona border. At noon a tall man stood in the sun outside the Needles City Sheriff's Office holding a microphone. He looked as if he were trying to be studious in the face of hilarity, wearing a permanent smirk which had lost him more than one audition as an anchor in L.A. and San Francisco. His hair and nails were perfect. He was always camera-ready.

Bailey Avenue was quiet. Bailey Avenue was always quiet. Needles was always quiet, unless you were near the interstate. As his father always said, Needles was a place to pass through. People only stopped here to sleep, shit, or suck up grub. Dear old dad was always crude, and always right.

The tall man loosened his tie and unbuttoned the dark jacket with a crest on the breast pocket. The crest showed an old-fashioned TV camera and the words *Action Team 3*.

The tall man was waiting for a Sheriff's Deputy to give him details on what could be a breaking story. He was desperate for something to happen. He loved his home town, but sometimes he wondered if he'd made the right choice in coming back here. It was the eve of a new year, a new century and a new millennium, and Needles was as quiet as ever.

The tall man waited, nearly dozing on his feet as he stood in the sun. It was hot, in the high nineties. He could easily endure one hundred-plus temperatures, preferring the dry desert heat to the brutal humidity back east where you felt like you were drowning in a pot of boiling water on hot days.

A Sheriff's Deputy came out of the building. He wore the tan shirt of the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department, the shirt stretched taut by the man's obscene gut. The Deputy glanced at a piece of paper and then bellowed in a voice like rolling thunder. "Mister Heinous! Is there a Brian Heinous here?"

The tall man cursed.

Brian's cameraman Ravishankar Jamalamadaka, whose preferred moniker was videographer Ravi J, was trying to hide a grin behind the video unit on his shoulder as he stood near a van parked at the curb.

"Are you Brian Heinous?" the Deputy rumbled. His fat white face made him look like an angry moon. Pinned above that incredible gut, the Deputy's plastic name tag read SWELLING. Brian had to force his eyes elsewhere.

Brian shook his head and said the words he'd said a million times. "Right guy, wrong name, Sheriff. It's pronounced *HA-nus*—"

"I don't give a shit how it's pronounced," the Deputy said. "I'm here to tell you there's no story."

Brian looked left and right as if making sure the man was still talking to him. He smiled at the deputy. "Yes, I know you might not think there's a story here, but my cameraman and I have been hearing curious transmissions on what we thought was a police band until we checked it out and discovered it's a frequency reserved for government agencies in emergency situations, and just a while ago we heard reports of shots fired not far from the In the Shade Diner out on highway—"

"Listen, Mister Heinous," the Deputy said. "Are you a police officer?"

Brian's shoulders slumped. Now he was going to get a lesson from this side of beef concerning the intricacies of law enforcement. "No."

The Deputy smiled, his face distorted by soft folds of flesh. Brian thought he now looked like a happy pig. The Deputy might have been handsome once, but now the muscle was turning to fat. He's beefy and boorish, Brian thought. He's *beerish*. Brian looked at the man's gut. Yeah, that fits.

"Well, Mr. Heinous, if you aren't a police officer you aren't qualified to make judgments on the status of radio broadcasts you shouldn't be monitoring in the first place."

"I understand that, Deputy, but what I heard on the scanner wasn't exactly open to interpretation. The unidentified individuals sounded quite distressed."

The Deputy showed Brian his freshly dead face. Glazed eyes, slack muscles, no expression. The pipeline had been capped.

Brian forced a cordial smile. “Thanks for your time, Deputy,” he said. He headed for the Action Team Mobile Studio, a cramped van with as yet unused audio-video satellite links.

Brian Hanus had been born in Needles and had gone to college at Berkeley. He spent a few years working for KRON 4 in San Francisco doing man in the street interviews that bored him terribly. In the early eighties he began doing stories on the rising tide of AIDS, stories that were essentially ignored. Near the end of the decade when the CDC issued recommendations that health care workers wear protection to avoid blood-borne pathogens, Brian invested most of his meager savings in a small American company that manufactured latex gloves. That company now had three plants in Thailand and two in Malaysia. Brian’s monthly income on his investments had grown enough for him to return home, build a studio, and buy the van and all the video equipment he needed to become the only TV station in the city of Needles.

Needles Channel Three covered everything from news, sports, and weather to local and regional events an hour before the network news from the big three. The staff consisted of Brian, Ravi, and a disabled vet named Alan Dank, who sat in a small booth cutting between two fixed cameras during the news, swapping tapes of their syndicated programs and commercials, and writing down indecipherable notes whenever he answered the phone.

SC3 showed old movies and endless reruns of *Leave It to Beaver* and *Star Trek*, and they were beginning to draw people in to their local news spots

and get some advertising dollars. So far Brian had been footing most of the bills, including salaries.

Brian dreamed about breaking a story big enough that the majors would turn to him for the inside dope. When he had first mentioned this to Ravi he actually used those words, *inside dope*, to which Ravi responded with a laugh. Brian wanted a story that would earn him a reputation at home and abroad, but how many breaking stories was he going to stumble across on the edge of the Mojave Desert?

Now it appeared that something might actually be happening out on those empty desert roads where nothing seemed to move but heat shimmer, and he was damned if some fat-assed deputy was going to put him off. He climbed into the van and got behind the steering wheel.

“Let’s go for a ride.”

Ravi shrugged as he climbed through the side door, rolling it shut. “Okay. Where?”

“Down the interstate,” Brian said, starting the engine. “I want to see what’s going on out there.”

Ravi nodded as he began stowing his camera gear. He’d been with Brian on the hunt for the big story before; racing down the road in the van to a miracle birth out in the sticks which proved to be an obese woman who hadn’t known she was pregnant and swore that God graced her with a child that very day, or waiting to hear a deathbed confession to the murder of John F. Kennedy from a very old man, a toothless old man, and when the old man’s false teeth were found and inserted they realized they were hearing a confession to the depression-era murder of a fellow rail-riding drifter the old man referred to as *John effing Kemby* whom he *might* have killed in a fist fight. Ravi settled into his seat and prepared for another wasted

day, making sure he rolled down his window, as Brian had apparently bathed in cologne again this morning.

With their scanner tuned in to the dispatcher for the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department, both men listened to routine transmissions as they drove west, eventually pulling over at the rest stop near Fenner because Ravi had to take a leak.

The rest stop was a concrete bunker with toilets inside and water faucets outside. The gaudy Action Team 3 van was eased between a Winnebago and a rust-eaten station wagon, the back of which was filled with scuba equipment. Ravi ran for the door marked MEN. Brian stretched his legs and paced under the hot sun.

Tourists lounged while waiting for their significant others or their kids to finish their business. People traveling with dogs let them out to sniff around and pee. A few Native American women were squatting against one wall of the rest stop. On a blanket at their feet were hand-made necklaces, earrings, bracelets, and rings. The sun sizzled on silver, illuminated amber and quartz, and made pieces of jade glow like kryptonite.

Brian was staring at a big silver and turquoise belt buckle and wondering if he knew anyone with the balls to wear something like that when Ravi joined him.

"Finished?" he asked.

"Bled dry," Ravi said, striding back to the truck.

Brian looked down at the jewelry again. The blanket was full of lovely pieces. It didn't look like they had sold anything so far today, yet there had to have been tourists stopping off in the last few hours. A ring caught his eye.

It was ludicrous. Chunky and heavy, the band was made of silver with a buttery sheen. The stone set in the ring was a bulging, egg-shaped turquoise. The way the stone was canted sideways and the thick metal of the setting made the ring look like a big eye with wrinkled silver lids. A left eye. A cat's left eye, Brian thought, noticing the jagged black flaw in the turquoise that looked like a slit pupil. Brian hunkered down for a closer look. The ring was garish, but at the same time ...

Two of the women wrapped in colorful shawls got a whiff of his Manly of Beverly Hills cologne and reared back. To the younger one it smelled like freshly turned earth and a lightly perfumed wet dog. The older woman showed a nearly toothless grin. The man kneeling before her in his expensive suit and touching her work with his soft hands reeked, bringing to mind the image of an unwashed scrotum doused with pine tar.

"Powerful," the older woman mumbled. The younger nodded quickly. "Strong," she gasped, hoping for a breeze, however slight.

Brian thought they were talking about the ring. He turned it over, feeling its warmth and weight. The bottom of the band was sculpted. It looked like two paws with long claws interlaced. Jeez, Brian wondered, is this some kind of Indian talisman?

The older woman started to laugh and choke. The image in her mind had changed. Now she was cleaning the unwashed scrotum which was attached to the man holding the ring. She was scrubbing his testicles with a stiff-bristled brush. He was yelping like a slapped puppy.

The younger woman wanted Brian to leave. She tried to slap the ring out of his hand but he tightened his grip. She felt her throat working and thought the

man's perfume was going to make her throw up. "You," she said, gagging on some of her words. "No, too strong. Go ... You can't ... Go ... go!"

I'm not stupid, lady, Brian thought. This ring is a talisman, a charm, a sacred device! They think it's too strong for me. Well, I'll show them. "How much?" he barked, slipping the ring onto what he thought of as the *eff you* finger of his right hand. It fit perfectly. Damn, it's heavy, he mused. And warm. Weirdly warm. Must be some kind of Shaman's magic.

The idea that the silver ring had been absorbing the heat of the sun all morning never crossed Brian's mind.

The older woman covered her face with her hands, shaking her head, as if horrified by Brian's gall. The younger one was frantically waving him off.

"How much?" Brian cried. "Twenty? Thirty?"

The younger woman was shaking her head, thinking, I can't throw up here!

"Forty? Fifty? Fifty bucks?" Brian pulled out his wallet and opened it.

Ravi was watching this exchange with interest. He knew that chunk of turquoise and silver Brian had slipped onto his finger would be worth over a hundred bucks in any city, but out here fifty would be overdoing it, since screwing over the American Indians had never gone out of style.

Both women were waving Brian away now. He started pulling twenties out of his wallet and slapping them down on the blanket, making the other jewelry on display jump and bounce. "One-fifty? Two hundred! Two hundred is my final offer!"

Ravi shook his head. Where the hell did you learn to haggle, Bri?

The older woman scooped up the cash and Brian stepped away, triumphant. He strutted to the van and slipped behind the wheel. "Bought a ring," he said, sounding smug.

As they pulled back onto the highway, Ravi watching the women fan each other with their shawls and take great gulps of fresh air.

The radio crackled, and they heard a different tone in the dispatcher's voice. One of the Sheriff's mobile units seemed to be missing.

\* \* \*

With a cigarette in one hand, John Godson leaned against the long counter in the diner and used a worn but clean linen napkin to wipe his mouth. On a plate was a small mound of meat strips that could have been lean bacon. He went around to the serving side of the counter and helped himself to a cup of coffee. He went back and sat on one of the stools.

He'd been rolling all night and hadn't stopped to eat or drink. Sometimes he wondered how it was that he could drive night and day for weeks on end without sleep, or how a single glass of water or a bite out of some babe's tit or ass could sustain him for days. He rolled the meat strips into a gummy ball and stuffed them into his mouth, chewing and slurping coffee.

"Mental note," Godson said, thinking of Bonnie. "Take a few more strips off of that perfectly toned butt for eating on the road. Dry it out. Butt Jerky."

He wiped his hands on the napkin again, finishing his coffee. Sometimes he wondered about his decidedly bizarre eating habits, but just when he seemed to be

on the verge of explaining his odd ways his mind seemed to skip ahead a few tracks all on its own.

The same thing happened when he tried to remember his childhood. His memories got all jumbled up and jumpy, like watching a movie shot and edited by a little kid. And it often seemed like he was remembering scenes from movies instead of his own life, because the uncertain images in his mind always depicted things that defied explanation.

Different families; black, white, Asian, speaking many languages.

Many childhoods, some of which were excruciatingly normal, others that were cruelly cut short by accident or design, like the one in which he was thrown into a net bag by screaming people in peaked hats who dragged him to a river and held him underwater until he drowned, or the one where he was carrying a heavy bucket through a bustling preindustrial marketplace until he slipped on a wet cobblestone and fell flat just as a slow-moving wagon wheel rolled over his skull and burst it like an over-ripe melon.

Yes, he remembered other eras, some of which had not happened. Not yet.

Sometimes he was attending school wearing Buster Browns and short pants, and sometimes he was wearing dirty robes and sandals, as in the marketplace.

Sometimes his head was shaved bald and he walked through a jungle completely naked.

Sometimes he was wandering underground through clean white plastic tunnels that reeked of antiseptic while wearing a skin tight suit that was actually alive and feeding on his sweat and shed dead skin cells. Sometimes he wandered the back roads of

America, a lost child taken in by kindly families whom he would kill in the dead of night.

Sometimes he was crying because he knew he'd never go home again, and he shivered in a cheap paper shirt and pants as he stared through a round window at a faraway Earth, feeling completely alone among a thousand other abandoned children in a big metal ball in orbit.

Sometimes he was simply a happy little girl with a nice family and a cozy home, feeling ever so pretty in his brand new dress as his momma tied ribbons in his hair, and wasn't that a fun one to ponder?

He could remember a lot of years with reasonable clarity, but nothing certain before reaching puberty. In his only reliable memories he was living and studying in or working for the Compound. When he tried to dredge up other memories, why he got the ridiculous *VA VA VOOM!* tattoo on his left arm for instance, or when he tried to work out the specifics of some of the truly strange things he had done, he lost the thought again.

How could he apparently bring Bonnie back from the dead and then kill her with his finger?

How did he muster an almost hypnotic power over people when he focused on getting them to do what he wanted? He remembered instances when he had healed people, like the arthritic old crone who had worked in the records area at the Compound. He'd wanted some information on a target and the woman had just been too damn slow calling it up on the computer screen, slowly pecking away with the twisted sticks of her fingers, so he'd impatiently grabbed her hands. She'd screamed and pulled back saying he had burned her, but when she looked at her hands they were fine. Still wrinkled and age-spotted, but also sleek and flexible, all traces of the arthritis gone.

He had annoyingly useless visions of the future as well, confusing snippets of sight and sound that unspooled against his will and showed him moments of time to come, events he would eventually hear about in the news. These prophetic insights rarely involved him, a fact that irritated him.

Then there were the weeping wounds that appeared on his hands and feet every spring. The Compound's medical staff hadn't been able to figure that one out at all, offering one variation or another on the theme of Easter and psychosomatic stigmata.

During a fight in March of '98 his prick had been ripped off like a branch torn from a tree. He remembered groggily picking up his detached member and holding it against the bleeding stump above his balls, watching in wonder as the wound disappeared and his cock rejoined his body painlessly and seamlessly.

And there was the time in London when he and a nasty citizen had been struggling on a deserted dock after midnight and both had fallen into the Thames. Godson couldn't swim worth a shit. The target sank like a stone after he garroted the man and Godson had then *crawled* across the surface of the water to the shore. That had been weird.

An analyst at the Compound once asked him, "Do you think you are Jesus Christ?"

Godson had laughed and asked the analyst if that was the best he could come up with. But lately, when he started to add it all together, it was pretty damned—

He cocked his head. He thought he heard a car coming. He whispered, "Po-leece."

As the sound of the vehicle grew louder, Godson slid off the stool and walked over to the shattered

window. Anyone driving by would see the trackers' car in the ditch, the broken glass, and bodies sprawled in the booth inside the diner.

Unless they were made not to see. Unless the scales descended upon their eyes. Godson smiled at that.

It was a patrol car. A County Sheriff's Crown Victoria, gold on white. A big black was cop behind the wheel. Godson closed his eyes and concentrated as the car rolled by. Then the car was gone, moving down the highway. The cop hadn't seen anything Godson didn't want him to see.

Godson opened his eyes. He dropped a quarter in the jukebox and called up a song, and went into the kitchen. Patsy Cline started singing about walking after midnight.

Earlier, he had thrown Little Miss Cute T&A over his shoulder and carried her into the kitchen. After setting her cooling body down on a big steel table and removing her clothes he'd let his hunger get the better of him, biting into her firm buttocks and tearing away strips of muscle with his fingers. She was still there, flat on her stomach, her pert little partially consumed dead ass sticking up in the air.

Patsy sang on as Godson selected a knife with a good edge. That's how I feel sometimes, he thought as he put the knife to her unspoiled left cheek. I feel like I've spent my whole life walking after midnight. The song ended. Whistling a jaunty tune to fill the silence and brighten his mood, Godson set to work.

When Godson left the diner he was holding a small, heavy Ziploc bag of meat strips. He got into his car and pulled out onto the road.

## A Page from the Past

*Airborne, en route to Dallas, Texas, November 21, 1963*

President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was looking out a window on Air Force One and wondering how much tougher this job could get. He had people screwing around in Vietnam, he had the Hometown situation hanging over his head like a goddamned Sword of Damocles, that particular secret being one he was sorely tempted to blow the lid off of—public opinion of him be damned, and now he had to deal with the intelligence community's problem child yet again, the Compound.

Jackie was nearby, chattering away about something or other. Every once in a while he gave her a noncommittal grunt to keep her happy. She was chain-smoking her damned Salems and making a hell of a stink. Now she was on a tear about the limousine's bubbletop.

She wanted the bubble on the limo when they drove through Dallas. We need the bubble. My hair will be a mess without the bubble. I'll give you a goddamn bubble, he thought, and then grinned when he realized that as tense as she was and as aggravating as she could be she was still so delicately

lovely that her beauty could strike him anew, as it did now.

His grin faded as he began thinking of the Compound again.

One of the rarest acts initiated by a President of the United States is the issuance of a *noli scribo* Executive Order, an official decree so explosive that even the smallest reference in the most obscure buried file could destroy a government, an order so sensitive, so dangerous that it could only be shared by the President, the Vice President, and those who carried out the order. It was a threat if discovered by the people the President served because a *noli scribo* was a directive to take action directly opposed to the basic tenets of the government.

When an outgoing President turned the Oval Office over to a new Chief Executive he shared the knowledge of past *noli scribo* orders with the newcomer as both a guideline and a warning to tread carefully in the most powerful office in the land.

Throughout history there have been rumors about *noli scribo* orders of the most outrageous sort. Despite that fact that Thomas Jefferson had put forth an order for the assassination of George Washington if the masses unsatisfied with the work of the Continental Congress should plead or demand that the Commander in Chief establish a monarchy, Jefferson was not President, so his order was not a *noli scribo*.

Roosevelt had issued the first confirmed *noli scribo* during the Second World War. Delicate politics necessitated that a boatload of German Jewish refugees off Philadelphia who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time had to be destroyed with literally not one trace of them remaining. Harry Truman was unable to avoid the sleepless nights and self-loathing when he issued orders to clean up the

Roswell mess. Eisenhower was the only President who issued two *noli scribo* orders. One to found Hometown, without a doubt the most unusual and least known community in America, and one in the final days of his administration, to make Hometown disappear. That order was quickly rescinded by Kennedy.

A few days earlier Kennedy had been in the Oval Office contemplating the issuance of his own *noli scribo* Executive Order. He was almost alone with this, not even confiding in Bobby, who usually knew everything his brother was doing. Jack knew Bobby would absolutely shit if he learned half the things Jack was keeping under wraps. It was unfortunate Kennedy had to let Lyndon in on it, but the only way a *noli scribo* could be enacted was with the approval of both the President and the Vice-President.

That odd bird from the Compound, Doctor Lionel Eicher, had called Kennedy earlier in the week and said, "That blonde bimbo you were fucking? The Hollywood slut? She isn't as dead as you think." The German said a file was on its way to Kennedy that would explain all.

After receiving the package, Jack had leafed through the file. That crazy kraut Eicher, he'd thought, what the hell has he done now? Stern had been a little weird, but the old man knew when to step back and when to sit down and shut up. Eicher was always a lone wolf, doing whatever he wanted, and now it looked like he'd gone completely bananas.

Kennedy had shaken his head and turned a page, seeing a diagram of a glass and rubber pipette syringe Eicher called the seeding unit. To Kennedy it looked like a fancy and most likely overpriced turkey baster. The next page was a glossy 8 X 10 of an infant. The baby was held in the arms of a young woman identified only as *Surrogate of item 6.4.63.A4*.

Kennedy had cursed. As much as he would have liked to shut down the entire operation, he realized the Compound had to remain in existence for two reasons. It did a lot of good work, and its Director had dirt on almost everyone who held power in DC.

Randall Kraft made J. Edgar Hoover look like an amateur.

It became tiresome after a while. Kennedy would mention he was thinking of cutting the Compound's budget because they weren't pulling their weight and then he would be face to face with the Compound's carrion-bird Executive Director, who would offer him an envelope containing photos of some random broad going down on him, biting his nipples, sticking a carrot up his ass, that kind of thing.

Although in one case it had been a short reel of eight millimeter film featuring the President giving it to a stewardess doggie-style while blissfully stoned on codeine and thus able to ignore the constant pain in his back for at least a little while, and he paid dearly for what Kraft swore was the only copy of that footage, not only because of potential threats to his marriage and his public image, but because he had gotten pretty damned hot and bothered watching the thing.

Normally Kraft would hum and haw and explain that they had been testing out a new telescopic-microscopic camera system or some such newfangled surveillance contraption and had accidentally captured these images while doing a routine sweep of whatever hotel suite Kennedy had been in during the time.

All in the name of ensuring the President's security, of course.

Then Kennedy would pay through the ass for the photos or film or reels of recorded audio tape and promise to leave the Compound's budget alone. Kraft

would slink away and not be seen for at least a few months, when they would play the game all over again.

Kennedy did have one thing in his favor. According to the founding policies of the Compound, if an avenue of inquiry could be proven to be too much of a risk to the organization itself and not necessarily the country, it could be shut down by the acting Executive Director, or by the President. All part of the give and take.

A lot of experiments had been shut down by Chief Executives over the years. Eisenhower had put a stop to the death ray and the laser gun. The death ray did work, creating an invisible particle beam that could slice a man in half, but the smallest working unit weighed fourteen tons and that was a bit much. The laser gun worked better than expected, putting out a ruby red beam of deadly light that bounced off any reflective glass or plastic surface and flashed around the room at the speed of, well, light, slicing through any light absorbing object in its path. During the laser's first and only demonstration it pierced and bisected five pieces of furniture, two physicists and a Chief of Staff.

Kennedy had already ordered Stern to abandon any cryogenics work, and while he knew there was value in the genetic prestidigitation worked by Stern and Eicher, cloning was just too damned slow and far too dangerous, an ethical nightmare better left to future generations. He thought it was better to put the funding into the Compound's android program.

Of course Kennedy had been swayed to make this decision when he was taken to the Compound and introduced to MIA 9, a mechanically independent automaton with a molded outer body shell of synthetic skin so real Kennedy had nearly popped off in his undershorts when he first saw it. It was a remote control unit, the actual brains located in another

room, each command broadcast by radio into the disturbingly real body.

To Kennedy it had been a naked redhead with bright green eyes, skin like milk, a lascivious smile and a body that gave the President of the United States an instant aching erection. *Go Irish!* When asked if he would like to see how real the mechanism was, Kennedy nodded, and the scientists left the room.

For a time Kennedy groped MIA 9, marveling over the realism of the red-gold tresses and pert nipples and cute dimples. Then he requested a blowjob.

The team of engineers controlling MIA 9 from the next room looked at the incident as a technical exercise. They demonstrated great skill in controlling the android jaws and ensuring the First Manhood was not chewed off by a machine built with tax dollars.

Following the Compound's secret practice of selling patents for their work to others who could in turn claim the work as their own, the scientists told JFK that they envisioned a day when microminiaturization would allow a small and powerful computer to function as the brain of a future MIA model so every man or woman could have a MIA or her male counterpart in their own home.

The whiz kids had also tried to explain that a fully functional mechanically autonomous cyborg would take a lot more work. The basic body was the same, sexless, but full-function MIA's twat was a heck of a lot easier to slap together than full-function MAC's robotic prick, and they had to make sure they were creating a tool of pleasure, not pain.

In the first few tests of an experimental mating between a MIA and a MAC, the funding for which most assuredly was not discussed in Congress, the malfunctioning MAC unit pounded away at the MIA, eventually shattering her titanium pelvis and bisecting

her from crotch to breastbone before he was shut down.

Kennedy didn't really give a damn about the MACs, what, was he a pansy? But he definitely wanted to see more of the MIA program.

"My kind of woman," a satisfied Kennedy had told the MIA team after the demonstration. "She doesn't speak unless spoken to, and she swallows every time."

The MIA and MAC programs gave Kennedy the perfect reason to put a stop to Eicher's pursuits. No more clones. Public reaction to them would be explosive, especially if they heard Eicher's suggestion that clones could be used as spare body parts for world leaders. Kennedy thought that was going too far. After all, clones could be perceived as people, but androids were just things.

He had issued the *noli scribo* Executive Order putting a stop to Stern and Eicher's cloning work. It was time to clean house. Everything must go.

It wasn't until now, on the campaign trail and in the air approaching Dallas, that he realized he had forgotten to specifically mention the child. If the baby—and he hoped to Christ that there was only one—was considered an experimental by-product it would have to be destroyed, and that made him a little queasy. It would be better to shuttle the kid off to an orphanage somewhere.

He made a mental note to correct that oversight as soon as possible and mention it to the Vice President this weekend, when he and Jackie would be guests at Lyndon's ranch.

Kennedy sat back in his seat, telling himself to relax and enjoy the trip, Texan rednecks aside. He'd be back in Washington in a few days and could take care of the problem then.

## The Asphalt Jungle

Al Johnson was cruising down Interstate 40 toward the unmarked turn-off for Daniel's Road, and home, with a bag of rocks on the passenger seat beside him. He felt like a hell of a guy. Nothing was going to screw up this day.

He was going to get back to town in time to pick up Mikey at school and chat and unwind and make dinner, and afterward as Mikey did his homework on the floor in front of the TV, Al planned to catch a snooze on the couch before his shift started. Then they could share a New Year's toast of hot chocolate before he went out on patrol. He knew he'd never be as good a parent to Mikey as the trinity he had been raised by; momma, grandma and until Al was ten, great-gran, and it looked like he'd never get free of the paperwork holding him at the foster-parent stage, but he was damned well going to do his best to be a dad.

San Bernardino County Sheriff's Deputy Al Johnson was one half of the entire police presence in

the little town of Sunday Morning and he had just carried out his most demanding and important duty in weeks. He had driven east, passing through Needles, and then north, and at a place where three states came together he collected a few rocks from California, Nevada and Arizona, all within a short distance of each other. Mikey needed the rocks for a school project, and Al had promised the kid he'd get them.

Until a few years ago Johnson's town had been a quiet, isolated cluster of buildings on a flat plain between Old Woman Mountains and Turtle Mountains. Al lived in town, even though his boss was the Sheriff in San Bernardino.

Like Needles, Sunday Morning contracted their law enforcement services from the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Office.

Most days there was nothing much to do except cruise the streets and highways. The radio could stay dormant for hours at a stretch. Al shared duty with a young guy named Burgess Sturgis. Burge was a stickler for detail, and sometimes a pain in the ass, but he was also a reliable kid. His lack of imagination and grim dedication to the law meant Al could relax during daylight hours. Al had the night shift. He was unmarried, fifty years old. He liked kids, and he was the legal guardian of a six-year-old boy named Mike Charbonneau.

Mikey had lived on the same block as Al. Al and the Charbonneau family shared a fence in their backyards and the kid was always climbing the fence and hanging around. Al had suspected Mikey's parents were tweakers, and his suspicions were proven correct when some product they were cooking in their basement blew them to pieces while their boy was at school. Since there did not appear to be any other relations and the town of Sunday Morning was the only home the kid had ever known, Al had

requested and been declared the kid's guardian until the county decided what should be done for the boy. Al figured it was better than sending the kid away to an orphanage or foster home in some other part of the state.

Mikey had been with Al two years now, which showed that for the county Mikey's case was a low priority. That suited Al fine because he loved the kid. The boy was still adjusting to things and Al tried to be as helpful and supportive as possible. When Al found out Mikey was working over the Christmas break on a school project on the desert regions of California, Nevada and Arizona and that Mikey needed rocks, Al agreed to get them.

A few odd burrs and boops were coming from his radio. He didn't think much of it. He was preoccupied with thoughts of all the new activity in town.

Last year a think tank from UCLA funded by a governmental agency Al had never heard of had purchased a few acres of land outside Sunday Morning, fenced it off and began construction on a facility. They started by digging one hell of a deep and wide hole.

Sunday Morning had been chosen by the think tank because its isolation and quaint appearance were deceiving. In the last few years of the dotcom boom the town had become a test community for Comcast Cable, wired up the ass for satellite, phone and fax communications with fiber-optics and high-speed internet, all to the benefit of a high percentage of telecommuters living there including paralegals, commercial artists, and technical writers.

The two professors and dozen grad students who worked for the UCLA think tank called Doorways Technologies had given the local economy a boost with the construction work and goods they needed. They

had nearly put the finishing touches on their crazy, upside-down building, which had two stories above ground and ten below, and were now hiring locals to work security and maintenance.

Al had a few casual chats with one of the professors who introduced himself by saying, "I'm Fred Callan. I'm a physicist." Al would learn later that would have been like Jimi Hendrix saying, "I play guitar."

When Al had asked Callan what Doorways Technologies was working on, as they both waited for cups of coffee to go from Eckard's Café, the man had asked if Al had ever watched any Star Trek as a kid. When Al said he had, Callan told him the group was working on something similar to the transporter on the Enterprise. "We're trying to find a faster way to get from here to there. Think about it. What if everything from casual travel to global shipping could be done in the blink of an eye without the use of hydrocarbons? The environmental impact would be incredible."

Since he had been a kid in Vietnam and was now a cop, Al's first thought was that some of the funding must come from the military. He could easily imagine the appeal of the ability to make American troops appear on foreign soil, ready to roll.

Unknown to Al, Callan had the same thoughts.

Al made it part of his routine to cruise by the laboratory every hour or so during the night, keeping one eye on the scientists and one open for intruders. Sunday Morning used to be a quiet little town, and he was hoping it stayed that way.

Now not far from home, Al hoped he'd be able to get that nap in after all. As he passed In the Shade he broke out in a wide, jaw-cracking yawn, a weird feeling of lethargy settling on him like a thick warm blanket. The sun on the big aluminum shade cast a shadow

over the front of the diner. Al didn't see any broken glass or signs of damage. He didn't see the bright white convertible parked in plain sight or the man standing inside the diner.

A few miles down the road he did see a black Pontiac pulled over on the shoulder. Two women were leaning back against the front of the car sipping bottled water. Their dress was business casual. One was a pallid blonde and the other was a mouth-watering dark-haired beauty. The blonde was wearing a skirt and the brunette was wearing slacks. Al momentarily wished it were the other way around. He bet the brunette had great legs.

When they saw the patrol car approaching the women squealed with loud laughter and got the attention of a man who was standing about fifty feet off the shoulder taking a leak on the dry earth. The man looked around, gawked, and began hurriedly shaking off and tucking in.

Al slowed the patrol car to a crawl and turned on his light bar so he'd be seen in case anyone not paying attention to the road was coming up from behind. "Everything okay here?"

The women nodded breathlessly, still laughing. The man shambled onto the shoulder with a look of horror on his face. He was wearing a rumpled suit and a big tag pinned to one breast pocket. *Hi! I'm Fred* the tag read.

"Sorry sir," Fred said, approaching the patrol car. "Freddie Speckle Junior, Regional Representative for West Valley Auto Accessories. I had to ... you know." He held out his right hand, waiting for Al to shake.

Al waved him off thinking, salesmen! Jesus, I'm not shaking your dick-hand.

“No harm done,” he replied, letting the patrol car roll by them. “Just make sure you keep it pointed away from the road.” He tipped his hat as the two women laughed again, and gave the car some gas.

He drove on for ten minutes, whistling a jaunty tune, and then noticed a car and truck pulled off the road. As he approached the Taurus he saw a guy in a ball cap and a guy in a suit, both of them looking like they’d rolled in the dust. His ebullience began draining out of him. Beyond the Taurus, standing by the rusted-out pickup were a waitress, a young short-order cook and another suit struggling to his feet behind them, his lips, chin and shirt covered in blood.

Al also noticed the guy in the baseball cap was holding a gun. He looked at the bag of rocks beside him, looked at his watch, and cursed. He hit his lights again, and got on the radio to the dispatch center in Victorville to give them a heads-up. A dispatcher who sounded new to the job told him to proceed with caution. Al racked the mike as he came around in a tight turn and parked on the shoulder thirty feet behind the Taurus.

\* \* \*

Will saw the patrol car swing around and pull up behind the Taurus. He didn’t like the way things were going. Putting a bullet in the head of one of these Compound pricks was nothing and he would have done it already if he hadn’t wanted a few questions answered. The last thing he wanted to do was kill a local cop. Most of the peace officers out here were hard working underpaid family men. They deserved more than getting caught up in something like this.

Jeannie breathed a sigh of relief when the sheriff's car stopped near them. She hoped things could get sorted out so she could just disappear. Working at In the Shade had been nice and Carlos was a good friend, but she'd run from the past before. She could do it again.

Carlos was shaking his head. He had nothing against cops, but he knew the more guns there were in one place, the greater the chance of one of them going off.

Al glanced at the shotgun locked in place between the driver and passenger seats, decided to leave it, and eased the door open. He climbed out of the car and faced the guy with the gun. The waitress and the cook were over to his right.

Will grinned and mumbled, "This guy's gonna be real big."

They saw the cop's face first. He looked like Harry Belafonte in his prime, a well-fed Harry Belafonte. At six-four and two hundred and thirty pounds, Al looked more solid than the patrol car.

"Afternoon," he said, nodding to Will, who held the only gun he'd seen so far. Johnson was born and bred in California, but he had a little Georgia lilt in his speech, which he'd acquired from the three generations of Johnson ladies who had raised him. The guy with the gun tipped his hat and grinned. "Mind setting down the weapon and stepping away from it?" If the guy had been alone Al would have let loose with a shouted command, but the guy wasn't alone and Al didn't want to spook him.

"Don't know if I can do that, officer," the gunman replied.

"I'm a federal agent!" Richards snapped. "This man is a fugitive and—"

“Bullshit,” the guy in the ball cap replied, “You’re a hired killer.”

Al tucked his thumbs into his gun belt, his left hand close to the big Smith & Wesson revolver. “I wouldn’t mind seeing some ID.” This wouldn’t be the first time Al had encountered some nut claiming to be with the CIA or FBI.

Richards slowly reached into a breast pocket and withdrew a slim leather case. He flipped it through the air and it landed at Johnson’s feet.

Al retrieved it, keeping his eyes on the man with the gun. He had taken a lot of courses on identity cards, how to spot fake passports, green cards, press passes and others. In most of the courses there was an update on the current Government Issue cards. The one he held now looked legit. It said that the bearer was agent Dick Richards of the Secret Service. The ID bore the proper stamp and seal, was issued in Washington on 6/31/98 and it had a less than flattering photo of Richards. Al thought a moment. Something was out of whack.

Al reached for the radio, keyed the mike and got the same dispatcher he had talked to earlier. He asked for a verification of the card, relaying badge and serial numbers. He could have called up that information on the patrol car’s mobile data terminal, but that would mean taking his eyes off the men on the side of the road.

“Hey, what the fuck?” Richards yelled. “Don’t trust your own government?”

Al was about to tell Richards to shut his mouth, he hadn’t put his trust in his own government since it had shipped him out to Vietnam, when the young guy made a move and kneed the blue-suited man in the balls.

Richards gasped, “Dirty bastard,” and sank to his knees.

Standing behind Carlos, Richard Dicks freed a small automatic from an ankle holster hidden under his gray trouser leg and jammed it into Carlos’ back. “Not a word, beandog,” Dicks whispered. Carlos froze. Dicks grinned, his nose still dripping blood. Jeannie saw him in the corner of her eye and gasped. “Don’t even twitch, you whore,” Dicks rasped. To Carlos he said, “Hand the Glock back to me nice and slow or I’ll blow this bitch’s head off.”

Feeling like an asswipe, Carlos let graysuit take the gun, the Taurus obscuring the cop’s view.

“How is it you two are here with our Dodgers fan?” Dicks asked Carlos softly.

Remembering Will’s story, Carlos said, “He was hitching. We picked him up. We just started to talk when some assholes appeared out of nowhere and shot at us. Then you guys showed up.”

“So you two are innocent?”

Carlos shrugged. “Shit, yeah.”

The dispatcher came back to Al with a confirmation of Richards’ ID. Al racked the mike again. “You working a case?” he asked the guy in the blue suit.

Richards nodded. He was on his knees, head bowed, eyes squeezed shut. If not for the fact that his hands were covering his testicles instead of clasped in front of him, he could have been praying.

Al loosened the safety strap on his revolver, realizing what had been wrong with the ID card despite the fact it was confirmed by his dispatcher. “Drop the gun, fella,” he said to Will. Then he

addressed Will and Richards, drawing his .44. “And I want both of you flat on the ground.”

Will gave the cop a speculative glance. He figured the big guy was close to fifty but still had a lot of ass kicking in him. Richards mumbled, “Motherfuck.”

Carlos winced when Dicks’ moist breath reached his ear. “Big dumb darkie just bought himself a bullet.”

“You’re fucking with the wrong people, Deputy,” Richards said.

“And you aren’t fucking with me?” Al asked.

Richards glared, his face twisted with rage and pain. “What the fuck are you—”

“Your identification card was issued in Washington?”

“Yeah,” Richards rasped.

“On six, thirty-one, ninety-eight?”

“Uh-huh,” Richards replied with a nod. Then he realized the error.

“How many days are in June, you dumb shit?” Al was watching the muscles and tendons in the young guy’s arm. They were relaxing. The gun was coming down.

Dicks took a backward step. “When I count to three,” he whispered to Jeannie and Carlos, “I want both of you to hit the ground on your knees. I can shoot through you or over you. Got it?”

Jeannie and Carlos nodded slowly.

“One,” Dicks breathed, “two ... three!”

Carlos hit the ground first, Jeannie a moment later. Her bare legs met the dusty dry earth, and her

left knee came down on a little projection of stone as white and sharp as a tooth. She let out a cry.

Al looked in the woman's direction, not wanting to take his eyes off the guy in the ball cap. He kept the gun on him though, until he saw the woman and the young Latino down on their knees. The gray-suited guy with the bloody face was aiming a weapon at Al, who started bringing the revolver around, but not fast enough, because the side of his head exploded and he collapsed.

Carlos nearly shit when greysuit shot the cop. There was a bang and a fine spray of blood droplets burst into the air from the cop's head. The big man fell. The butt of greysuit's gun knocked Carlos out cold.

Will thought Carlos had been keeping an eye on Dicks, and saw the kid hit the ground so hard he raised a small cartoon-like cloud of dust. Richards was still holding his balls and moaning, and Will kicked out at him for insurance, to get him out of the way. Will's foot caught the man full in the face, and Richards sprawled onto his back. Will turned, his finger squeezing the trigger, bringing his gun to bear on Dicks.

But Dicks was ahead of him. One of the gray-suited man's hands was in Jeannie's hair, holding her in place. The gun was pressed against her right temple.

"Come on, shithead!" Dicks yelled, wrenching Jeannie's hair. "Make a move! Give me an excuse to kill this piece of ass!"

Will froze. One on his crazy urges flashed through his mind, his ghosts whispering coldly. *Kill 'em all, dipstick. Make sure every fucker here is dead, even the babe. Then disappear. End of problem.* But another feeling swept over him. He blinked. His gun hand

shook. He was looking at Jeannie, and she was looking at him.

Tears were rolling down her cheeks and as Dicks tightened his grip in her hair more tears fell. She raised a hand and wiped at her face. Dust and tears were mingling in her eyes. She quickly plucked out her contacts and let them fall. Will stared. Now her eyes were a wonderful shifting shade of blue. Her tears looked like jewels, flashing like liquid diamonds as they moved across her white skin.

He watched her tears fall for only a moment, even though it seemed he stood watching the desert sun flash and shimmer in them for a long, long time. I've seen her before, he thought. I've seen tears fall from those beautiful blue eyes before. This new feeling took hold of him completely. In the past he had been able to fight foolish and violent impulses, though once in a while they saved his life. Not this time. He was helpless. He wasn't sure if what he was feeling was real or simply another disturbance in his mind caused by the lesion deep within his brain.

Will had visited a doctor years before, wanting to know what was causing him to get these strange urges, these sudden mad impulses.

As a kid he'd asked Stern that question and the old man had simply said, "That is the way God has made you." When he'd been old enough to ask more informed questions, Stern was dead and no one at the Compound was talking. They'd send him out on jobs and he'd come back to his room. No real contact with anyone. No friends. Just lessons and jobs and his room. That was why he'd eventually left the Compound.

When the GP referred him to a neurosurgeon, Will allowed x-rays to be taken, and the images had revealed dead areas. There was a long lesion in the

meat of his brain, appearing as a ghostly white streak through his frontal lobes.

The neurosurgeon said the injury appeared to have occurred a very long time ago, and he was terribly excited over the prospect of learning how this man had overcome such a tremendous handicap and learning why the injury had not been fatal. He'd wanted to perform CAT-scans, more x-rays, and a full-panel of physical and mental tests to determine Will's present condition. He'd picked up the phone to call a colleague and the moment his eyes left Will his patient had slipped out the door, taking the envelope of x-ray photographs with him.

Will had burned the x-rays, but he still remembered the sight of the lesion, a terrible scar that appeared white and pure.

As white and pure as the sun flashing in Jeannie's tears.

Kneeling in the dust, her hair tangled in Dicks' clenched fist and her eyes watering in pain, Jeannie was more beautiful than anything Will had ever seen, save one old memory of beauty. Take away the pain, the tears and give her cause to smile and laugh, and she would be more beautiful still. She reminded him of someone from long ago.

It came to Will a little at a time. Sand in his underwear. Feelings of rage. A little girl crying. She had touched him and his seven-year old self had spoken softly, saying, "Nothing was or ever will be as pretty as you."

He slipped his hand into the pocket of his jeans. The ribbon was still there, Jeannie was right here, and the one truly good feeling he had experienced so long ago was back. This was the woman, the girl, who so long ago had touched him like no one else since.

After all these years, after all the women Will had fucked and run out on and killed, he had finally found her, when he had nearly forgotten her. Something, possibly love, was swelling inside him, a feeling of such great strength and scope that it could never be ignored or evaded. A feeling of such purity that it would never die.

Dicks was losing it. “Drop the fucking gun!”

For the first time in his life Will had found someone whose death would hurt him more than his own. Never before would he have considered what he was doing now, lowering the gun, tossing it away, leaving himself defenseless before his enemies. He had a gentle smile on his face, and it appeared both shocking and wholly appropriate.

Jeannie saw Will toss his gun away. She could read people pretty well after a while, and he was the cold type. Ruthless. A man who could kill like a machine if he had to, and not be bothered by his conscience. Not the kind of man who would do what he just did. It didn't fit him at all. He smiled, and Jeannie watched him through her tears, feeling a growing sense of wonder.

Ignoring Dicks, looking down at Jeannie, Will said, “The world may as well end now. No one was or ever will be as pretty as you.”

Even though she was in pain Jeannie couldn't help realize she'd heard those words before.

Dicks saw the target smiling like he thought he was some peacenik saint or something. Fucking freak, Dicks thought. He pushed Jeannie out of his way and took a step toward Will. Even with the gun in his hand he felt a momentary chill when their eyes met. Dicks felt his scalp and scrotum crawl simultaneously and tried to shake off the feeling that the target just might be the most dangerous man he had ever encountered.

Richards had finally gotten to his feet, and he kidney-punched Will savagely. Will stumbled forward. With a rigid hand Richards chopped at the base of Will's skull. Richards watched the guy's ball cap fly off his head, watched the guy collapse. He danced around Will in a black rage, kicking at stomach, ribs, face and back. Then he caught his breath and looked over at the cop. The Deputy Sheriff was lying on the far side of the patrol car. Richards could see his unmoving legs and a shitload of blood.

Dicks joined Richards. Holding a bloodied handkerchief against his nose he pointed his automatic at Will's heart. Richards held out a hand.

"Hold off on that. This prick says he saw some shit about us in a Bureau file. Let's get out of here, take him someplace secure. We can find out what he knows."

Richards thought of how good it would feel to finally finish this job, and he was glad they wouldn't need the entire body as proof. Mondani wanted Hill's brain, so they'd keep Hill's head and ditch the rest. They had a hacksaw and a big cooler full on ice in the trunk.

They grabbed Will, handcuffed his hands behind his back and shoved him into the back seat of the Taurus.

Richards looked at Dicks. "What the fuck happened to your nose?"

Dicks probed his nose delicately and was glad to see the bleeding had finally stopped. "Bitch nearly bit it off. I oughta kill her."

Richards grinned. "Good thing you didn't ask her to suck your dick."

“What about them?” Dicks asked, ignoring Richards’ attempt at hilarity and pointing to Jeannie and Carlos. She was holding Carlos’ head in her lap.

Richards thought a moment. “Fuck the wetback. Chances are good that the tin star over there called for backup and the Compound may not have intercepted it. Leave your weapon near the beandog and with luck he’ll be blamed for plugging the jig. What about the twat?”

“That’s Jeannie Norman. Remember the pictures at the end of Hill’s file? We just scored big-time.” Dicks thought about how good the bitch’s hot little ass had felt under his hands. He was also thinking about how good it would feel to smash her face in with his fists. Mess up that pretty little mouth.

Richards looked at Jeannie. “I don’t know ... I don’t remember the face.”

“Who’s looking at her face?” Dicks asked. “Trust me, it’s her.”

Richards nodded and gestured with the gun. “Let’s go, girlie. In the car.”

Jeannie eased Carlos’ head to the ground. Then she stood and walked to the Taurus, feeling a twinge in her bloody knee. She was about to climb in beside Will when Dicks said, “No, darling, you’re riding shotgun.”

Richards went to the police patrol car, took the keys out of the ignition, and threw them as far as he could.

Jeannie settled herself in the passenger seat as Dicks slid behind the wheel. She looked over at Carlos, hoping he’d be okay, wishing he had never met her. He was a sweet kid who deserved better than this.

Richards got into the back seat beside the unconscious Will. “Kicked your ass, didn’t I?” To Dicks he said, “When this job is done I’m heading back to Washington.”

“What for?” Dicks asked.

“To cut the balls of the clerk who made up our ID cards. I know it was a rush job, but Christ almighty!”

Dicks laughed and winced when the laughter hurt his abbreviated nose. He put the car in gear and pulled out onto the highway.

## A Page from the Past

*The Compound (outside Vienna, Virginia), May 9, 1967*

Joe was in agony!

After his jeep had broken down in the desert he'd wandered across the searing dunes for days before becoming delirious. Climbing a steep hill he had been attacked by a giant eagle with talons like razors. In trying to escape the eagle he had fallen off a cliff into a swamp and quicksand. Just as Joe had managed to pull himself free of the sucking liquid a tiger had leaped on him and again he had to fight for his life. His .45 automatic was gone, lost in the quicksand probably, but he was still able to free his knife from the scabbard on his leg and cut the big cat's throat. Now he sprawled on the ground, exhausted. He was covered in blood, his orange coverall was torn and dirty, and he was in terrible pain. He looked beyond the dead tiger and saw a vision. She stood beyond the swamp on the edge of the dunes. Her blonde hair was glowing almost white-hot under the noonday sun. She had a nice tan, much of which was revealed by the skimpy top and extremely short skirt she was wearing. She had long, long legs and tiny feet squeezed into high heels that sunk into the sand. Her figure was unreal, she was really stacked, and Joe might have felt better about seeing her here if only she didn't keep

staring at him like that. And staring ... and staring, her wide blue eyes so blank it was as if the head behind them was full of air.

“Say something,” Joe said to the silent blonde. “C’mon, talk to me.”

The blonde just stared.

Joe was getting angry. What was this girl’s problem?

“Talk, dummy!” Joe stood, and approached the blonde. She looked scared. “Hey, you dork! Talk to me. You just gonna stand there?”

The blonde stared back.

“Okay, that’s it,” Joe said. He punched the pretty blonde in the head.

“Hey!” she cried, struggling to stand, but it was too late, Joe was completely out of control, gibbering, swearing, jumping up and down on the blonde, hammering her deeper and deeper into the sand with his U.S. Army issue combat boots—

“Stop it, you meanieeee!” the little girl screamed, a shrill note that ended in tears.

Will blinked and looked around, seeing the unused storage shed where Doc Stern often let him play. He was sitting beside his toy jeep, near a little sand ramp leading up to the wooden planks framing the sandbox. At the top of the ramp was a big plastic eagle. Below the wooden plank cliff was a hole that had been scooped in the sand, lined with a plastic bag and filled with water. Beside the hole were a worn stuffed tiger and a tiny rubber knife. Will held his orange-clad G.I. Joe in a fierce grip. Half buried in the sand was a Barbie in a midriff-baring blouse and miniskirt. The little girl who owned the Barbie was standing beside

Will, tears running down her pink cheeks, each drop of moisture sparkling white in the sun.

“Sorry,” Will whispered.

She’s pretty, he thought, looking at her white hair and big blue eyes. She had a ribbon in her hair and there was a pattern of flowers in the cloth that was the same color as her eyes. She was holding a stuffed rabbit by one floppy ear.

Will gave her a dark look. A voice whispered, *where’d she come from? What is she doing here?* His ghosts were talking to him, and Will was wondering the same thing. *This is my sandbox. It’s mine!* He felt a horrible rage building inside of him, as if the thunderclouds that filled the sky in the spring and churned gray and purple with power were now inside him swirling and rumbling, pushing him to do bad things.

The doctors who were studying Will, Doc Stern among them, had no idea what was driving the boy into fits of rage, what was causing long periods of near-catatonia or urging him to commit silly pranks with a compulsive need. It was clear that the boy was experiencing frequent seizures not unlike an epileptic’s grand mal. Yet where an epileptic seizure was a burst of electrical activity that interfered with control over voluntary action, Will’s seizures seemed to awaken the dead part of his brain, driving Will to commit extremely anti-social acts.

Stern liked to say Will’s ghosts were speaking to him when he was in the grip of these spells, referring to the damaged portions of his frontal lobes which occasionally flickered with life as his phantom brain came awake, tickling and twitching with awareness just as a man who had lost his legs might later report feeling his toes tingle with pins and needles after sitting still for a long period of time.

Will was hearing his ghosts now. *Smash her stupid crying face in! Kick her in the butt! Pull her stupid white hair until it bleeds!*

The little girl stared at the boy, watching him shake, hearing his teeth chatter, wondering why his eyelids were fluttering. He had a fading bruise on the side of his face, and a purple welt ran down the left side of his neck, disappearing under his dirty T-shirt. She saw the lingering remains of other bruises on his arms and hands and one high on his forehead. Seeing this made her sad. She knelt beside him and took one of his clenched fists in her small hands.

Will was struggling to keep calm, to stop from hurting the little girl. She was just a kid like me, he thought, why should I hurt her?

*Cause she's one of them! She'll hurt you and take things away from you and laugh at you and try to hide her hate behind smiles!*

Will's eyes opened wide and his ears popped. The voices were fading. He felt a little better, a little less angry. The calming feelings seemed to be coming out of the little girl's hands and he was soaking up that calm as if drinking from a garden hose on a hot day.

"Are you okay?" The girl was looking at him with concern.

Only the Doc had ever looked at him like that. Like she cared.

"Yeah. I'm sorry about your doll. Sometimes I get angry." She was still holding his hand, but he didn't feel stupid or gross even though she was a girl.

"You know what?"

She shook her head.

"The world might as well end now," he said. "Nothing was or ever will be as pretty as you."

The little girl made a face. She didn't like yucky kissy talk.

"Hey," he said, off on a completely different track. "You got a needle too, huh?"

The children had identical red marks on the insides of their left forearms.

"Yeah," the girl said. "I got a booster shot."

"Me too."

"I've never seen any other kids here," she said. "What's your name?"

Will was about to answer when he saw mean old Eicher stomping toward them.

"There you are!" Eicher hissed. "I've been looking everywhere for you!"

Eicher was furious that she had left her designated play area, but the model 333X2 tracking module that had recently been injected under her skin impressed him. The transmitter/receiver in the surveillance room had pinpointed both her and Stern's thawed-out little monster. That wasn't much range to make it a test worth bragging about, but it seemed to work fine. The miracles of miniaturization, he thought.

Eicher's mind turned to the letter received from the Oval Office this morning and he grew angry again. He had been demoted, his assistant Zane put in charge of the Compound on a temporary basis. Temporary, hah! Zane had already hired his own assistant, some boy fresh out of college, a sycophantic geneticist named Mark Mondani— just as Eicher had hired Zane when Stern had been temporarily retired due to his stroke.

There were rumors from the White House that Eicher's clone works might have to be destroyed as the

heartless Lyndon Johnson had finally found out about the girl.

If only I had hidden her as well as my first clone has been hidden by whoever whisked that child away, he thought. Well, this is one work they will not destroy, one work that will be molded to a state of perfection elsewhere. Then I will have something to show the world! Old Stern's child is safe only because of the boy's madness and violent outbursts. These fools think they can groom the boy and use that violence for their own purposes, but he will destroy them all. The boy is pure evil! Stern replaced the life in his frozen husk, but did he replace the soul?

Eicher considered the other child born out of the Compound cloning program not long ago, his first clone, and his skin crawled. No, he corrected himself. Stern's boy is not evil, he is an unstable explosive. Anything might set him off. The dark child however, it had been evil. I saw the evil in those eyes before it disappeared. I hope it does not still live within these walls. I hope it has been destroyed ...

Eicher's irrational line of thought fell apart and was replaced by pure rage again as he approached the children.

He grabbed the little girl by the arm and shook her violently. "What are you doing here?" Eicher shook the girl again and she started to cry. Her hand slipped out of Will's grip and the ribbon fell out of her hair.

"*Kleine Göre*" Eicher whispered. "Come with me!" He started to drag her away when a sharp pain in his right ankle stopped him.

*Stop him! Stop him! He's always hated you! He's crazy!* For once, Will had to agree with his ghosts. He kicked Eicher in the ankle again as hard as he could.

Eicher winced. He looked down at Will and grinned. "Little freak," he said, feeling his anger blossom into something beyond control. He kicked back at Will, his sturdy black Oxford catching the boy in the stomach.

Will fell to his knees near his silly American soldier doll, and a pack of cigarettes. Eicher's brand.

Still dragging Jeannie, Eicher loped behind Will and planted a foot between the boy's shoulder blades, driving Will face-first into the sand. "Little cigarette-stealing freak." Eicher shifted his foot up onto the back of Will's head and began bearing down.

The boy was struggling, the little girl was crying and Eicher was feeling that all was right in the world when the back of his head blew apart in a flash of light and pain. At least that's what Eicher thought as he collapsed on all fours into the sandbox, until he glanced over his shoulder and saw haggard old Stern standing over him like some horrible creature out of Grimm's Fairy Tales. For a moment Eicher was a little boy in Berlin again getting the *scheisse* scared out of him as his father read one of the old stories. Then Stern kicked Eicher in the ass and started swinging a gnarled mahogany cane and Eicher came to his senses, scuttling out of the sandbox like a crab.

Will shook his head free of sand and stood just in time to see Eicher hold out a hand to the little girl. She picked up her Barbie and the stuffed rabbit, looked at Will and said, "I have to go. Goodbye."

When she was within reach Eicher grabbed her wrist and cruelly jerked her to him. Then they walked away.

Will looked down and saw her hair ribbon lying on the sand. Without thinking he picked it up and put it in his pocket.

“Thanks, Doc,” he said, turning to Stern. Both Stern and Will knew *Doc* was as close as the boy could come to calling the old man dad.

Stern tousled the boy’s hair. “You must go and continue training now.”

Will nodded, but said, “I hate all that fighting, Doc. Sometimes the teachers really hurt me. I like it better when you and me read books together and study stuff.”

“You and I,” Stern corrected Will, trying to keep the sadness out of his voice. “I like it too, the quiet times.” He knew that as each day passed William was less and less his, and soon the boy would be taken from his guidance for good, to be molded into an untraceable super-assassin or some such nonsense. He knew the Compound would use the boy up and then discard him, and he also knew that the tougher the boy was the better his odds of survival were. The more Will learned about the Compound and its ways, the greater his chances would be of one day breaking free.

Stern looked down at the boy. Perhaps he was just getting old, but more and more often he found himself wishing he was just an office clerk somewhere, a shopkeeper, maybe even a farmer, a simple man doing a simple job, just him and William. He could look out for the boy and keep him safe. On weekends they could go fishing. He shook his head over his silly dreams. This was the real world, he told himself, and two things are certain. Stern knew that he would probably not live much longer. He was, after all, a doctor, and was able to diagnose himself with a minimum of self-delusion. He also knew that to survive, the boy would have to be completely independent. There were many more bruises and scars in store for the youngster, no matter how much Stern might wish otherwise.

“You must be strong, William. Strong and brave. One day you will be big enough that no one will be able to kick into your face some sand.”

“Not even stinky Eicher?”

“Not even him.” Stern’s bushy eyebrows, now snow-white, came together. “Eicher is stinky?”

“Yah, shtinky,” Will said, imitating Stern. Stern laughed. “Shtinky like he chust varted in hiss pants.”

The old man put one arm around the boy, shaking his walking stick in the air with the other. “I certainly kicked him in the pants, no?” Stern’s words were slurred by his partial paralysis. “Knocked off his block, just like Al Capone. Right out of the park.”

Will snorted laughter. “You mean Babe Ruth, Doc. Al Capone was a gangster. Babe Ruth was the ball player.”

Stern shrugged. “They both always looked alike to me. Although perhaps I could make a good gangster *mit* this deadly walking stick, no?” Will laughed again and Stern said, “It is nap time for me. Walk me back to my bed, *kleines Teufelchen?*”

They started back to Stern’s cottage at the far end of the Compound.

“I nearly forgot,” Stern said with a lopsided grin. “I have for you a gift.” He reached into one pocket of his tweed jacket and withdrew a tiny transistor radio. “This is for you. Now you can take with you your music and listen anywhere to those, the insects, I forget the name.”

“The Beatles!” Will enthused, grabbing the radio and switching it on. “This is groovy, Doc!”

Stern had no idea why a reference to grooves where there were none was indication of a positive or a pleasantry but he smiled just the same, trying not to

grimace when a jockey of discs announced that the next song was from a compilation entitled Rubber Soul, performed by William's beloved Beatles. A young man who sounded on the verge of losing his voice began screaming that it was the end, little girl.

Will bopped along to the music, letting the small radio swing madly from its plastic strap. He was thinking that Eicher might like this song since it was about some guy who didn't want his girl messing around with anyone. Maybe the pretty girl he had just met liked The Beatles. Sliding a hand into his pocket, he felt the ribbon he had picked up and looked back over his shoulder, wondering if she lived in the Compound like he did.

Before Will could ask, Stern said, "Forget about the girl, William."

Will knew that tone. He could ask all day and Stern wouldn't give away any secrets. But he did ask, "Why did she go with him, Doc? He was mean to her."

Stern looked up at the clouds. "She is to him as you are to me," he said.

Will wondered if that meant she was adopted, like he was. "But what about—"

"Forget about her, please," Stern said.

"All right," Will said reluctantly. They walked on together.

In time, Will forget almost everything about meeting the girl with no name, and it became one more brief and unpleasant moment in the life of a seven year-old boy. But he kept the hair ribbon and the hazy memory of the pretty blonde girl with the gentle touch long after he could recall the details of that day.

That length of ribbon would ultimately outlast everything; Stern, The Beatles, Eicher, and Will as well.

## 6 Monkey Business

Stella D'Oro was pissed off. Her dark Sicilian beauty was enhanced by anger and at the moment she was stunning in her rage. She sat behind the wheel waiting for Louis Rich and Oscar Meyer to finish screwing with the Pontiac's punctured radiator. The car was toast. Stella was hoping another ride was already on the way.

Randall Kraft had acted on Doctor Mondani's suggestion and resurrected President Kennedy's old *noli scribo* Executive Order to destroy any evidence of the genetic research of doctors Stern and Eicher. This was an attempt to clean up potential embarrassments from the Compound's past before President Clinton went ahead with proposed plans to open the government to public scrutiny.

It had seemed like the simplest job any of the Compound's trackers had been assigned in years. Retrieve Eicher's girl. Big deal Stella thought.

Jeannie Norman was unarmed, she had no special skills, she had no idea she was wanted by them, and she was crossing the state moving from one minimum wage job to another under unimaginative aliases. They could probably pin Eicher's murder on her, but that would open a can of worms that was better off sealed.

Let the LAPD worry about who had bashed in the skull of the old pervert with a 32oz can of Chef Boyardee Ravioli. Now that the Compound had managed to reactivate the tracking device planted on the target they were finding it easier than ever to close in on her.

Hit the road, grab Eicher's girl and bring her to Doctor Mondani at Compound West. Easy, right?

Stella fumed. Thinking about the mess they had seen as they swept through the diner made her nauseous. Not the deaths themselves, but the crude work of a misogynist. Not the splatters of blood, but the splash of testosterone. A man had done that damage. No woman's body should be violated by a man the way Bonnie's had been.

They had hit the road and found the target sandwiched between two men. One of those chromosomally mismatched mutations somehow had the sense to shoot at the Pontiac's one weak spot. Stella glared at the car's hood behind which Louis and Oscar worked. As men, they were tolerable only because they were cowed by her.

Now the target was gone, a County Sheriff was involved, and some mystery men had interfered, but they appeared to be seeking the man who shot out their radiator, not the target.

Stella turned down the volume on the radio scanner. The Sheriff's Deputy calling for back-up was probably the same one who had fallen for their little charade earlier, when Oscar had pretended to pee in the desert while Louis lay flat behind a rise in the earth, his pistol trained on the cop's head. Stella and Laura had been leaning against the car acting as if things were just fine, their legs and hips covering the bullet-riddled grille of the car.

She looked at Laura Scudder sitting in the passenger seat. Sometimes she wished she and Laura

could just disappear together and forget about the Compound. This job was getting weird, and dangerous. She imagined herself on a white beach, far from anything and anyone, and with her—

Stella blinked. In her mind she had not seen witty, funny Laura, but the target, a woman who had so little brainpower all she could do was serve eggs and toast and pour coffee. But Stella recalled the pictures she had studied while preparing for the job. She'd had to memorize everything about the face and body of the target so the woman couldn't hide from them behind wigs and hair dye and contacts and make-up, beneath padding, under restraining tapes or on high heels.

Stella had found a great deal of material to study. After all, the target was Eicher's creation, and Eicher had worked for the Compound. Indeed, the target had been born in the Compound and had lived there until Eicher had spirited her away.

After the target had presumably brained Eicher and disappeared, the Compound flexed federal muscle and acquired all of the old man's private research, which the LAPD tried in vain to retain as evidence in an open murder case. Over the years Eicher's research had degenerated from clinical scientific study to the full-blown perversion of a voyeur. In the home he had shared with Jeannie he had always been watching her, even in her most private moments. Watching and photographing and videotaping. As a result, there was no shortage of material to study; filed photos, unexposed film and stacks of videotapes. It was the detailed record of a peeping tom and it was now being catalogued and digitized at Compound West.

Stella knew every facet of the target's face and was familiar with every inch of that body. She knew how the target walked and talked and laughed and cried. And sometimes, when she should have been thinking of Laura, Stella was thinking of the target instead. She

had seen endless footage of the target made-up and scrubbed clean, fully clothed and completely naked, all of which had been taken without the target's knowledge.

With the help of Justice Department approval to override the LADP and confiscate the mountain of material collected from Eicher's home, the team assigned to sort through the man's records and personal effects found an astounding amount of video footage of Jeannie Norman bathing and showering and undressing. The team cleaning up after Eicher quickly became an all-female enterprise when the notes taken by men cataloging Eichers' videos and photos became erratic after a week or two. They had all heard about the appeal of Eicher's girl and it appeared that those stories were true. Only one man in ten was able to ignore her in the flesh, and she was so magnetic her appeal extended to still and moving images.

Some of the men tried to smuggle home videotape or stole printed stills and pinned them up in their workstations. Some were caught beating off over the images by co-workers, or worse, by wives and girlfriends, and many reacted with surprising violence when those pictures or tapes were taken away.

It was hoped that the experimental pairing of gay trackers would give the Compound an edge in the search for Jeannie Norman. That was why Louis and Oscar were here. What the Compound didn't know was that Stella and Laura were also gay, and that was something the women did not want to share, especially in an organization as racist and sexist as the Compound. Stella had to give grudging credit to Louis and Oscar for not hiding their orientation and using it to their advantage.

Even at the age of seventeen, when she had last been before Eicher's cameras, the target had a true woman's body, and during her search for the target

Stella couldn't help but think of the woman from time to time. Now Stella had new images of the woman. A tie clip worn by Duncan Heinz contained a miniature digital camera that had captured and transmitted images of the target, as well as the lean mystery man who had appeared to help her, to Compound West.

Aged twenty years from the photos Stella had studied earlier, the target still looked wonderful. Ms. Norman wasn't an aerobicized, electrolyzed, molded-for-men woman of the 90's. Jeannie had an hourglass figure with natural fullness and natural sags. Under her uniform her belly seemed gracefully rounded, not a flat wall of muscle. Her breasts weren't as high as they'd been when she was a teenager. There was an unmistakable wrinkle or two on her face and most likely a bit of cellulite on her ass. It wasn't just Jeannie's figure, but the way she moved and carried herself, an intangible, indescribable something that drew the eyes of others to her.

Jeannie Norman had a real woman's body, all the flaws of which were negated by the most beautifully pale skin Stella had ever seen, skin that was surely the softest thing in existence and if given the opportunity to press her body against that white, glowing flesh—

Oscar slammed the Pontiac's hood down and Stella was jolted back to reality. "Someone's coming," he said.

Two Lincoln Town Cars came down the road and stopped beside the Pontiac. A man got out of the first car. He walked to the Pontiac, gave Stella the keys, and then got into the second Town Car, which turned back the way it had come.

Stella, Laura, Louis and Oscar got into the remaining Town Car. She started the engine and continued their pursuit of the target.

\* \* \*

Carlos sat up and looked at his watch. He figured he'd been lying on the ground like a piece of meat for about fifteen minutes.

The Taurus was gone. Bluesuit and greysuit were gone. Will was gone. So was Jeannie.

Carlos was angry with himself. His truck wasn't going anywhere. A Lincoln went roaring by, two women in front, two men in back. They peered at him and then faced forward. Thanks for the help, Carlos thought when the car was out of sight. He heard a noise and stood too quickly, took a breath to steady himself, and then walked to the patrol car. The dead cop was sitting up, holding his head.

"Dios," Carlos said.

There was a bloody welt along the side of the cop's head and a piece of Al's left ear was gone. What remained was a pink and red mess that looked like a pit bull had been at it. The collar and shoulder of his shirt were spattered with blood. Al got to his knees and swayed. Carlos helped him to his feet.

"Got a first aid kit in the trunk," Al said, leaning against the patrol car and gritting his teeth against the pain as he picked up his revolver and slipped it into the holster. "Keys are in the ignition."

Carlos ducked and looked into the car. "No, they aren't. Maybe they tossed them."

Al shook his head. He moved to the front of the Crown Vic, popped the hood and retrieved a small metal box, a magnetic key holder. "Always losing my keys," he said, tossing the box to Carlos. "Got spares everywhere."

Carlos opened the trunk and pulled out a big plastic case with a red cross on it. Al had eased himself into the driver's seat, and Carlos squatted beside him, holding a bottle of alcohol. "Man, you look like you pissed off Mike Tyson. A big chunk of your ear is missing."

"Damn," Al said.

Carlos opened the bottle. "This is gonna hurt, Officer."

"Call me Al. Al Johnson. And it couldn't hurt as much as getting shot does, Mr—"

"Guerrera," he replied, as he soaked a gauze pad and slapped it against Al's ruined ear. "Carlos Guerrera."

"Turn your head, Carlos!" Al gasped.

Carlos looked away. Al let out a yell that made Carlos' ears ring.

Al dry swallowed a couple of Aspirin tablets, gripping the steering wheel and gritting his teeth as Carlos picked black flecks out of his ear with a cotton swab. Carlos bathed the ear in disinfectant, and wrapped a bandage around Al's head to secure a sterile pad against his ear.

"That should hold until you get to a hospital." Carlos said.

Al nodded. It hurt like a sonofabitch.

The cop picked up the mike and contacted the CHP dispatcher again, asking what had happened to his back up.

\* \* \*

The four in the Taurus drove in silence. In the back seat Richards kept an eye on Will. Seated beside Dicks, Jeannie stared out her side window. Dicks was driving.

Dicks tried to focus on the road but couldn't help notice Jeannie's legs, couldn't ignore the way her loose uniform had shifted up her thighs when she sat down. His eyes scanned the desert and the road and then flicked down and to the right. He checked the road again. Another peek at those legs. He reached over and put his hand on her knee, giving it a gentle squeeze. Christ! Her skin was like silk!

"Do you want to lose that too?" she asked, still looking away from him.

Having looked in the rear view mirror and seen Dicks' attention roaming, Richards grumbled in the back seat. "Keep your eyes on the road, Dicks. And keep your hands on the damn wheel."

Dicks had both hands on the steering wheel again.

They drove on in silence. It wasn't long before Jeannie felt Dicks' right hand sliding along her left thigh like a snake. Her fingernails sank into the back of his hand with furious strength, drawing five dark drops of blood.

"You slut!" Dicks hissed, pulling his hand back. The car swerved slightly.

"Stop fucking around up there!" Richards snapped. He knew Dicks liked to chase the skirts, but this was absurd. Dicks couldn't keep his hands off this twat. "Leave her alone or we'll swap places, you jackass. For the love of Christ!"

Dicks' eyes narrowed. Now he wanted to fuck her and kill her at the same time. He wanted to kill Richards and Hill too. Offing William Hill he could understand. But why was Richards getting up his ass

so much? They'd worked together for years and now all he wanted to do was throttle the bastard until his sarcastic tongue stuck out of his mouth like a hard-on. Jesus! Where was this shit coming from?

Jeannie was staring straight ahead, her breathing deep and slow. Stay calm, she thought. Don't panic. Don't hyperventilate. She could put up with a lot of things but she wasn't going to let anyone touch her. No one. After Eicher, she'd had enough touching to last a lifetime.

Will opened his eyes and winced, quite sure his head was going to split in two. His headache was intense. He felt like someone was reaming the back of his head with a jackhammer strap-on. His hands were cuffed behind him. He saw that he was seated behind the driver, with Richards on his left. He slowly moved his hands to a seam on the back of his jeans that hid a slender steel pick.

Not even five minutes passed before Dicks made his next move. His right arm lashed out, his hand thrusting up under Jeannie's uniform and into her panties. He grabbed a fistful of pubic hair and pulled on it. She squealed and it turned him on. Richards was bellowing in the back seat like an angry dad on a long road trip, but fuck it, he had to teach this bitch a lesson. He ripped his hand free and screamed, "There! How do you like that huh?" He shook his fist in the air between them. Then he paused and stared at his hand.

The hair in his hand was such a pale shade of blonde it looked white, and it gleamed in the sunlight like strands of spun platinum. Dicks gaped. His voice was small. "You gotta be kidding me," he said. Then the Taurus hit an object in the road.

It was a tortoise. Not a very big tortoise, but big enough. It was sunning itself in the westbound lane of

the empty highway. It sensed the car coming and it tucked its extremities into its shell.

In the car Richards was still yelling, Dicks was staring at his hand, Jeannie was crying and cursing Dicks and Will was using the pick to unlock his handcuffs.

The front left tire of the Taurus hit the shell of the tortoise at eighty miles an hour and rolled up over it like a speed bump. The shell should have exploded, should have been crushed, but it held fast and resisted the weight of the car in the same strange way an egg can resist breaking when placed in the center of one's palm and squeezed. The tire was jolted, and the steering wheel slid out of Dicks' grip.

The Taurus rocked and went into a skid, sluing around so Dicks' side of the car was facing the road ahead. The tortoise found its legs and began plodding off the highway, into the desert.

## **TO BE CONTINUED...**

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