

Night

1

She's sitting on the couch across the room from me reading a thick book with a colorful cover. The lobby is vacant, the elevator makes sounds going up. The desk clerk watches a TV turned low.

An old downtown hotel. The rug worn. The wood desk worn. The brass fixtures worn.

An air conditioner creaks in the background. The room is humid, smoke filled. A half dozen people sit in the lobby. News is on the radio. No one speaks. A fly buzzes at the window, between the blinds and the glass. I look at her. A street door opens, an old man peeks in. The door shuts. No one looks up. No one moves. It's early evening.

I look and wonder.

She looks up, scans the room, not at anyone in particular, and lowers her head. She rubs the back of her neck with her left hand, shifts slightly in her seat. A subtle movement. A siren in the distance comes near, flutters blocks away, fades again. A bus speeds by blowing the lobby door softly in. The room works in slow motion. No one moves.

A newspaper lies unfolded on my lap. I stare at the headline photo. A man holds another man in restraint while a third glares at both. Black and white and gray.

Hungry.

The street door swings open. A woman in fur walks in, passing me as she walks to the desk. The fur is coarse and glistens, even in the dim light. At the counter she coughs. The clerk gets up. They exchange words, she's handed keys and starts toward the elevator but turns back toward the clerk. She motions him to come with her. The elevator door opens and they enter. The door closes and the sound diminishes as they rise.

Fur is unusual here. It's deep black and long. Now that she's gone I can see her. The woman is in her thirties. Dark brown eyes glare as she moves to the desk. She reaches in her purse and gives the clerk a card. She speaks softly, whispering to him. He nods in agreement and hands her a key. Move. Stop. Turn. Motion.

I turn the page. Body found. A leg is partially seen in the brush, toes pointing up. A half dozen police are standing at the roadside.

The elevator door opens. The clerk is alone.

She closes her book and sits up. Her hands slight, fingers long, graceful. She shifts, stretches, settles. A yawn. She raises her head slowly. Asian? The hair settles farther from her eyes, which roll focused, pulsing, from side to side. Her head lowers to one side, stops and turns toward the opposite side of the room. I close my eyes and can't envision her features. She leaves no impression. I've never seen her before. The lobby door rushes open.

I watch as the cabby moves toward the desk. A slow deliberate walk. Tense. The end of his shift. His head bobs above the gray chair backs to the left. He lifts his cap and rubs back the perspiration. An old highway patrol cap, sweatband moist, top no longer white, rim cracked black and worn from being taken in hand to wipe his head.

Eyes glare. Sitting more stiffly, her book lowers, she stares. Blank, stiff, flat-out unforgiving stare. Eyes still. Cold. Suddenly cold, uncovered. I'm not sure how. Moist eyes blink. Black and white. Singled out, found out, I'm given away. I feel guilty at every move. Guilty. Her left hand forms a fist, releases. Guilty. She blinks. Guilty.

A rush of hot air. The street. The cars. A cab. I can't move. It all pulls away from me. Receding. I gather myself; enter the cab, nod to the driver. My newspaper is in hand. Let me sit a minute. Let me unravel the pieces. I need to eat.

She sits and stares. No one ever just sits and stares.

The street is the same as before. Nobody thinks of change. No one thinks.

The cabby lets me off. Up my steps. Four flights. Three locks. Two bedroom. One bath.
In bed, sleep overtakes my hunger. Why do I feel so righteous?

No dreams tonight.

Describe the land

Between the mountains

Describe the rumors

About the other side

The mountains sit in the distance

On the horizon, no haze in between

Still a storm coming

Walking by I am caught, slowed and stopped. He sits alone at a bench, in a crowd but off to one side. A plain man. I sit across the walkway. A young couple approaches, eyes on him as they pass. Thirty feet away they stop and turn. Turn and proceed. A child stands and stares. Those already there sit, mouths open.

The man leaves no impression, yet the crowd reflects awe. Brown coat. Frayed Khaki pants. Not dirty. I shutter. The man re-crosses his legs. His right arm hooks over the bench and thirty people sway to the left. I'm caught in mid-breath, seeing his chest shrink preparing to inhale. Nothing and no reason and I can't move. He gets up, stands motionless for a moment, then as he walks away he places his hand on my forehead, lowers it across my face, my eyes. I blink.

A fan spins, curtains part and close. The fan shakes, vibrates. Shifting over and over wearing the gears, the racket is so distracting the vision falls apart. A room appears. I awaken.

At the window, chill radiates against my face. The room creaks. At the table my books lie closed. Eyes bleary and slow I cross the room to set up my coffee. Silver ring on either hand. At the table the book stays closed. It's only the room now. Entertain me. A coffee maker finishes. Creak. This is my wooden room. The wood of my third grade desk. Light maple, heavily scarred. The chair, table, desk, counters and walls all the same. Relaxing, quiet but for the creaks.

My view is limited. I know the city but can't see it from my window. In the flatlands you only see to the closest wall or building. My world isn't only flat it's usually only a street wide.

A shadow at the window. No footsteps. Mornings go this way.

The book opens. I begin to plan my day. Tighten the loose ends and leave less chance for error. That's the theory. Lately I've begun to wonder. All this organization, planning and control aren't making me sleep any better. Creak. No shadow. I hear the morning bell and close my books. I've ten minutes to be at the office. I dress. At the mirror I rush to straighten my face, give up, pack up, leave the room. The door swings shut. The locks secure with simultaneous clicks. I walk down the hall as other doors close and click.

The stairwell is cold, metal steps and walls. Others follow me down as I follow others out. The building sways, complaining, the stairway moaning with our load. At street level I feel like I'm being launched down a cattle chute. I don't mind the push and shove behind me as much as the morning waiting ahead.

Years ago I begged my father to take me to work with him. He wouldn't. I'd no idea what he did. I asked my mother but she either didn't know or wouldn't say. I knew it was some kind of construction, everyone was in construction then, but I didn't understand. Months went by before I broke him down with my pleading.

Early one day he shook me awake. "You said you wanna go to work with me. Did you mean it? You wanna go with me today? Hey, wake up. You wanna go to work." I stir under the shaking.

"Jason. Wake up. Do you want to go to work with me? Jason." He spread out the words to get the message across without shouting. At the time I remember thinking he must think I'm brain damaged.

"Yeah, sure." I whine.

We dress and leave the room. Outside the stairwell a cold wave strikes me. We walk. I begin to sneeze and sniffle. Dad stares down at me, rushing forward. By the time we reach the bus stop I'm losing feeling in my extremities. We're going to work. At the stop no one speaks. There's a lot of nodding, posture shifting, scratching ears, that sort of thing. But, no talk.

A bus takes us to the perimeter. My dad is an architect. He and the other architects are building new shelters at the edge of the flats. The same as we live in. Four stories tall, windows on the front only, one door in the center of the ground floor and three steps down to the street.

They gather at the farthest structure, my father and the others, lifting their tools off the ground, beginning to build. They all begin at the left, move their way toward the right, out toward the border side. Each holds a piece of metal, in turn, welding it to the last. Good progress is made all day.

I can only watch, no one speaks to me. At lunch I get plenty of stares. My dad brings me a sandwich from the wagon but eats with the others. They've finished a whole room when the bell sounds. Tools are laid down and we all go to the waiting bus. I tell my mom about the buildings and welding. She nods in recognition.

We go out together twice more until the one house is completed. On that day, when we're getting ready to leave, my dad takes me to the front door, reaches in his pocket, and pulls out a set of keys. He hands me the keys, turns and walks away with the other men. I see him the next day building onto my new house. Months later the architects are still working their way down the street. Eventually I stop looking. They turn the corner.

I awake.

My office is three blocks in after the turn off at my grandfather's corner on 25th street. I control a security section of HiSec. We're under scrutiny for allowing holes in our screen. No evidence is ever shown that the holes are in use. Nevertheless, a hole is a hole and is considered a serious threat. Bigger Holes, Bigger Nets. That's my philosophy. Attention to detail is my method.

The board at my hand glows green but for an occasional red flicker. Usually a cat or squirrel lodged in the net, triggering an alarm. I'll need to rescue the creature. Leaving a live animal too long in the net ruins the restrainer tension. All the wiggling stretches the cord. Released animals bolt toward the flats, never looking back.

False alarms are common. The lights, siren and alarm still snap us to attention, a tribute to training, but we've no vision of an attack. No vision of insurgents cutting through the net, entering the channel. In truth the city sits comfortably secure. Lonely at the edge, perhaps, but stable.

I sit in a room that's the termination point for all the cities' sensors. A regulation room, all four walls filled with light and movement. My desk, Martin's console and The Observer's lounge chair the only furniture.

The Observer is coming. Observers are feared, not respected. They haven't the ability to direct. No sense of security. They lack all the first hand knowledge that comes from participation. Still, through the council, they wield sufficient power to complicate life. A single black mark means weeks of redoing system checks. And in the style of all great bureaucracies setting a coffee cup on the console is a significant breach of procedure, while shutting down a gateway might go unnoticed.

"This indicates a torn net?" The Observer observes, pointing at a blinking red light.

I try to explain that nets rip and are repaired daily. We have crews that do nothing but repair or replace them. Martin sits at the console, pushing buttons in response to dial readings. I stare at The Observer. We each hold system records open in our laps, line-item reviewing last week's incidents.

A red light blinks behind The Observer, an incident happening now. Martin's hand slides over to cancel the audio alert and as quickly queues a clean up. The Observer, oblivious, completes her page. I verify the report, sign off on it, giving a slight nod to Martin. The Observer turns the next page, closes her book, finished with us and leaves on her rounds. Routines designed to provide safety inevitably amplify any emergency by inducing complacency. We're practicing disaster.

The center stairs lead to ground level. I leave to check the net.

2

It's late afternoon. The sun streams through the cracks in the blinds. The office is more cramped than usual. My partner left his wife. Suitcases, cardboard boxes and numerous shopping bags line one wall. My secretary left early so I sit alone staring at the week's cases.

Not one problem was resolved this week. No cases closed. No cases opened. I collected no money. I paid no bills.

It's mid day, mid month and mid season. I need someone to kick me in the head. Nothing to look forward to. Nothing worth looking back on. A glint catches my eye, drawing me back to the room. Over my cluttered desk, beyond the limp Wandering Jew, a sparkle in the corner. Movement. Great.

As if staring at my partner's collection of shoes doesn't make me feel the evening is devoid enough of promise. Now this. What to do? Options? A door rattles. Through the opaque glass a black form waits. Rattles again. The form stands motionless. I hear keys.

The dark form bends forward, inserts a key, shakes the knob, twists. No clicks. The key withdraws.

I get up and go to the door. I can hear mumbled words. Through a scratch I see light. A woman. She bends forward with another key. Jiggles. Nothing.

I back along the wall, around Gil's bags, feeling my way backward to the storage door. Out of sight. She's after something he took. The latch clicks, there's a long pause.

I'm about to look out but wait. She wants papers, or jewelry, most likely. I'll let her get them, stay out of it. Sandra is the type to sneak around. She's in the room. My desk light goes on. My desk drawer is pulled open, papers shuffle, silence and the drawer closes. Files ruffle; open, pause, close.

I glance through the crack in the door. Sandra lifts her head, looking in my direction. Her lips part slightly as if in mid-word, glistening. Her eyes, in this light, show black. I catch my breath. She looks down at an opened file. No telling which one it is. Something out of the current casebook, by its looks. She brushes her hand back and forth caressing the dark fur covering her shoulder. Back and forth, again.

I shift weight to my right foot, exhaling. I'm losing control of my breathing. Sweat beads at my neckline. She sits, fingers the paper and reads. She hums. One page. Second page turns. A hallway sound. She looks up, her expression changes. Softens. Whatever she's reading pleases her. Black hair covers her shoulder. A streak of gray at her temple. She closes the file, stands up, switches off the light and walks toward the door. She's given me no reason to be so fearful. I shift to my left foot. I hear a crack, she stops, freezing in front of the storage door.

I'm a child in the wrong place, about to be discovered. A soldier stranded in the enemy's camp. For a long second there's stillness then she continues out the office door.

At 2:30 p.m. I arrive to meet Anna at the Bunker Building. It's an unusually damp Fall Saturday. The sky closed with darkening clouds. Chill wind blows. I wait, leaning against the corner of the building. She is due at 3:30.

I've stopped questioning motives. The face is all I can see. No depth. Nothing between the lines anymore.

It's 4:15 p.m. I won't ask for an excuse and won't listen to one given. Let 'em talk and anything is liable to come out.

My hands are numb in my coat pockets, rolling around balls of lint and gum wrappers. I stand my collar up. Clouds, gather behind the brick building across the street, no stranger to this town.

4:30 p.m. Dusk. The sky drops away. One of those motion picture zoom shots. Streetlights come up, foot traffic increases. Not types yet, still people. Anna brings me information and I pay her. It's worked the same for years. My only talent lies in convincing her I'm better than she deserves. An easy task. Anna gives everything and takes little in return. Her way to Heaven no doubt.

5:05 p.m. She turns the corner, walks halfway up the street and jaywalks to my side. She speeds up to jump the curb, stopping next to me. Leaning against the wall she looks rushed. She rests. Weary.

"Sorry I'm late. Things piled up again. Well you know how it is, sneaking out of the building. Some day I'll be shot in the head. I couldn't get the file; he keeps it in a locked drawer. I don't want to go back, okay? Okay Jason?"

"Yeah, sure. Was he sleeping?"

"No, on the phone, getting real tense, angry at some jerk-off up north."

"About?"

"I don't know. I left."

"So, you got nothing?" I stare at my feet.

"Sorry. Look maybe someone else could get it. I just can't get enough time alone in there."

I don't tell her about my encounter with Sandra or the empty feeling it leaves in my gut. Anna has distrusted Sandra for months. I think she's taking Gil's side, but she insists she isn't. I'll mention it later. Or not.

There are times when Anna works for competitors. We appropriated files occasionally to assist us with difficult cases. Actually, we appropriated often. Competitors return the favor. That's it – a friendly exchange of data.

Anna wants me to tell her again that she's alright. Actually, I think she's fine. But she won't accept being told she's fine. I have to go round and round in apparently deep and meaningful analyses of all the new data of her mental health. The less I understand about what

I'm saying the more positive I am she'll believe me. When I get lost she's found. A psychic scale achieves balance.

A cold gust and thunder. Deep rumblings in my gut. "Can I treat you to dinner? Let's go to Quong's."

During the years that I've known Anna, I never saw her move without being pushed. She changed, something switched on, or maybe, off in her. We turn, walking toward the corner and Quong's. She takes the street side. Wet sidewalk concrete reflects the lights. The background hiss of traffic rising and falling, in and out of the side streets anonymous cars turn, speed to the red light, stop and wait.

Once seated a short guy with "Rudy R." on the red tag pinned to his white shirt takes our order. We sit in a corner booth. I'm ready to work out alternate schemes to get our files back. The files are evidence in a custody case. Accumulating evidence in this case has fed me well for six months.

Anna sits across from me, her back to most of the restaurant. I see the whole narrow room, sitting relaxed. She slips out of her wet coat, draping it across the booth back. I order for us both. #32, soft noodles, extra rice for me, shrimp in lobster sauce for her. With elbows on the placemat, cradling her head on the knuckles of her closed hands, she stares at me.

"When I left Ethan he cried and followed me around for weeks. One night I saw him here. I was with some guy. Ethan walked up, stood like he was waiting for us to stop talking. We weren't talking. I felt like he'd do something desperate. You know pills or something. So, I asked my friend to excuse us. He left and Ethan sat down, his didn't look directly at me, like he was ashamed. I figured, '*great*, I'm being nice, he's getting worse.' I felt so bad."

Our dishes arrive. Anna tastes and continues. I eat and listen. Balance again. "Can I tell you something between us? Don't repeat it?"

I nod. My mouth too full to reply. She tells me about her time with him.

"In three years we switched personalities. He got weak and I became strong. We pulled each other apart, keeping the good parts, tossing the rest. In his case there was nothing much left. We fought all the time. Righteous and yelling. We hit each other a couple times."

She pauses to swallow, sips her water and continues. "You ever have someone completely wrapped around your little finger? He cried for me to come back. Right in the restaurant."

Priorities notwithstanding.
Landing in the middle of town
I'm given my choice
By who I'm not sure,
I dodge to the left, as if to resist
I swerve to the right, as if to disagree
At times there's quiet sitting
Where I don't notice so much traffic
And then watching the street at rush hour appeals to a rolling sensation in me
Where the cars flow and the traffic isn't threatening
I land, in any case, here for no real reason.

The knock goes unanswered. I push and the door swings open. Entering, I close the door silently behind me.

"Anna."

I don't like this. My radio is switched off. I pull my pistol out leaving it pointed toward the floor, no use in creating accidents. I approach the center of the room.

"Anna," softly.

The room is large and square, with a smaller room at its center. Windows at the perimeter. It's quiet. A soft electronic hum the only sound. In the past I'd come across the bodies of crime victims without warning. Now, I'm cautious. I have the opportunity to brace myself for the shock of being close.

My footsteps make no sound in the plush carpet. I catch myself holding my breath as I approach the corner of the center room wall. I turn the corner. Nothing. This side of the room is sparsely furnished. A black leather sofa sets five steps from me, beyond to the right, a matching chair. Stopping. I think I see a quick flicker of light to the extreme left of my field of vision. Eye level. Nothing. Just nerves.

Where is Anna?

Beyond the couch a computer monitor glows a light sky blue. Nothing on the screen. A phone rings, I hear a fax machine pull its paper in, beginning a transmission. I see the edge of the

transmission report appear to the right of the monitor. A three-inch sheet appears. The machine beeps three times. Wrong number? Subscription service on a rotary sequence?

A blinking of windows, the computer screen comes alive. I approach the monitor.

Windows opening, moving, minimizing and closing.

A dialog box asks for confirmation.

"OK"

"Resend last file. Decompression error."

I wait for a response. A fly buzzes against the window to my right, stops, buzzes, stops, buzzes again. I lean toward the screen, my hand touches warm, wet and red. A movement.

I move to the chair. I sit. A breath caresses my neck. Turning, there's nothing.

"Repeat, resend Sensor.exe. File decompression error."

When a sharp knife enters the body there's no immediate pain. A stinging begins, escalating to recognition. Recognition produces pain. There's another swift motion. The computer waits for an answer, recognition sets in.

"Please resend file. Decompression error. Are you there?"

I reach for my cell, feeling a warm fluid stream down my arm. Pain sets in. The room is blue then white. The fly's collisions stop.

To the far side of the room there's the double entrance door. Beyond that a stairwell. No decorations, no frills. This leads down three levels to the street and one more level to the garage. My powder blue '63 Plymouth Valiant takes up two spaces not fifteen feet from the stairwell entrance. I park like that out of habit to protect one of my few possessions from the scars of fat women parking fat cars. A Ford Crown Vic hits the first speed bump at the garage entrance. Wheels squeak slightly as it maneuvers into the half space next to the Valiant.

I'm dragged through the double doors unconscious, reaching the top of the stairs as the Ford driver's side door gouges my right passenger door in the garage below.

"Let me handle him. Make sure it's clear."

"Yeah, yeah, all right."

My Nikes make a thump thump, thump thump, thump thump, going down the steps as I feel increased pressure on my chest.

I'm bloody. My chest is in spasms. Hands grasp my shoulders, pulling me down multiple flights of a semi-lit stairwell. When I realize all this what are my first words? What do I say to my assailants?

"Elevator out?"

"Quiet, shithead"

We stop at the landing between the lobby and garage level. Resting or waiting? I can't tell. I hear a car leave the garage and a whispered, "OK." We proceed. I'm shifted, held like a drunk between two friends. They drag me through the last door, pull me to the Crown Vic, and dump me on the floorboard behind the front seat.

The car starts and, with a quick left turn, we roar out of the garage toward Western. I wince as the sunlight hits. My wounds must be worse than I think. They leave me unbound.

I've no clue of what might happen or who these guys are.

I fade out.

Of the many images that should rush my memory, none of the logical ones do. I only see an old black and white photo of my dad after he's taken ill. He's in the backyard sitting in a redwood chair holding Kahotek, the Doberman puppy we got for him. He wears a light sweater, no t-shirt. He's looking up, smiling for the camera. The stucco wall behind him needs paint. The dog's tongue hangs out in its own pose. He looks thin, sits stiffly erect. The sun spreads across him and casts a late afternoon shadow.

"Take care of business, I'll be here later, we can talk. Go. Go ahead. Don't let these assholes get to you."

The Crown Vic rattles on. We're far up Western, by the smell, near Santa Monica Boulevard. Hmmm, The Tropicana. Mud Wrestling. Street sounds increase then diminish slightly. We stop. We move to a slow roll then accelerate in a sharp right. Downhill. We're on the Hollywood heading north.

I can see the back of the driver's head. Big head, short cropped grayish hair, tanned large neck spilling out of a dirty white collar. The other guy must be shorter or leaning forward. There's no conversation. An oldies station plays '70 disco through blown speakers. Who would've thought, criminals with no taste? The front windows are half down. I hear cars

speeding past at regular intervals. There's cigarette smoke. The seat smells of oil and stale French fries.

Best I can tell, the bleeding stopped. Being wedged in a backseat has its advantages. I'm pretty sure my left arm is fucked. My chest is tight and burning. The blade skated across my rib cage, missed anything vital. My head is throbbing. I don't remember being hit in the head.

I've no idea how far we've gone. Maybe half way through the Valley. Another cigarette is being lit. I smell the match, see the smoke blast pass. The driver glances around and sees me staring up at him. I probably look like a drooling idiot. He indicates no concern, relaxing his right arm along the seat back.

Sensor.exe?

The .exe is an extension; an archaic method used in early computers to provide operating system definition to a PC execution file. Remote access is fairly common, has been, at least since the late '90s. But old style windows terminology like .exe, .doc or .mpg hasn't been seen in years. "Sensor" is the name we gave to an early data acquisition program we developed at Random. Whoever was there left shortly before I arrived, in a hurry. They left the screen blank but online. I've no idea if I'm the target. Maybe they think I'm a witness. Have they got Anna?

Anna left before I got there. They won't risk coming back. No, she's safe, or at least safe from these guys.

An overpass. Must be the 118.

Anna was, in the previous incarnation of our relationship, a friend of a friend. She's Korean. When I first meet her, she was a student at UCLA and recently separated from her Caucasian husband, her first and only true love, Ethan.

Ethan is a tall man, a real estate broker. He deals high-end residential or commercial properties only. I've the impression Anna was extremely shy during their marriage. She has a slight build and classic facial features; with hair to her waist, long, black and straight. She went through a period of being fashionably fucked-up. She also, somehow, became one of the three or four main coke suppliers I knew. These are the good old days when coke is powder snorted through \$100 bills. Anna was known for entering a party, dropping a baggy of powder on the coffee table, pulling out her special mirror and blade and laying out a dozen lines for anyone's

consumption. She was one scary bitch for a couple years. Then, she straightened out and we lost touch.

Ethan is dead. Car accident. Head-on collision. Drunk out on Highway 14. The car spun out over the edge near Vasquez Canyon Road. Anna seldom mentions Ethan, but the only photos she keeps are of them together; Sea World, Disneyland, Carlos & Charlie's. A couple. Always photographed by a passing stranger. Some blurry, others off angle, but always contented smiles. I've never seen her smile like that in real life. Never.

We both grew up. We've been close and not so close the past couple years. She keeps most of my data files and business records in her system. I have backups, of course, but she has access to everything instantly so I go to her first.

Anna's business now, is information. No, not the bullshit information of the "Information Age." Real information. This is the kind of information that can make you rich or get someone killed: personal histories, family skeletons, criminal backgrounds and psychological weaknesses.

She's possibly the coldest person I know.

3

I reach ground level as the insurgent pulls away down the dirt road leading to the flats. I scan both perimeters. No apparent damage. Flipping the sensor on, I walk west along the asphalt. I reach to my right, holding the pole across the ditch close to the wire fencing. A perimeter walk can take a full shift. Once you start you have to finish.

The amazing thing about insurgents is their precision. They're scum, living in mobile camps that more closely resemble trash dumps than livable housing. If you get close enough to them, the smell will make you ill. But their splices are sheer art. The *reason to be* for an insurgent is to tap the net, pull as much data loose as possible and skip out. They leave their taps set, like street kids mark walls. Always a signature. So proud.

I walk, studying my sensor, waiting for a needle move.

Insurgents can be shot, legally. No questions asked. No repercussions. They're hard to catch though, so I've never caught one. I surprised two a while back, wounding one in the arm. They got away out on the flats, leaving a small trail of blood. Despite their appearance, they never fight back.

Needle jump. I cross the ditch, climbing up to the wire, keying my mic.

"Operations. Operations."

"Operations here. What's up Jason?"

"Gotta splice. Can you pull section R38717 down, on my mark?"

"Yes, ready? On your mark."

I pull my tool pouch out, kneel down, rest it across my knee. To keep both hands free, I leave the mic open.

"Ready. On three... One. Two. Three."

I twist my wrists back and forth holding one hand steady, pulling at the wire with a quick snap.

"Got it. Give me one more..."

Back at Operations they hear shouts, wrestling, jarring cracks, then heavy breathing and the rustling of weeds.

I lie unconscious and bleeding at the edge of the road. My mic keyed open. There's no chance Operations will come out for me. They switch off my monitor and continue checking the net. Procedure.

Later.

The inescapable truth is the unity of the Universe. Every edge, every point, every side is related, dependent on every other. There's no question. Most religions give lip service to this concept. Some ritualize the unity. Some even depend on this unity as a core precept. Few religions allow you to look at a forest and see part of a sentient structure. Fewer still acknowledge nature as an intimate part of their soul. Few see humanity standing, rooted in the soil, moving in unison. The wave. The ebb and flow. To feel that energy and not acknowledge it in some form, to ignore it, is the sin. The only sin. Many of us will wait our entire lives for a sign, and will die, abandoned. Some find replacements. Replacements born of fear, paranoia, hate or pride. Some of us refuse to allow the visions to enter us. Never letting down our guard. Others can't decipher or distinguish visions from fantasy.

There was a time as a child, on nights our parents were away, when we played by walking through the house, holding small mirrors up to our noses, looking at the reflection of the

ceiling. Thing of it was that our minds worked with our vision. When we came to an obstruction visible on the ceiling we instinctively tried stepping over it, in some cases, tripping. Cheap fun.

I see everything upside down. I inhale deeply. My sunglasses inches from my reach. Morning sun reflects off them across my opened eye. Chill of the darkness is receding. Hard to believe I feel at peace. The world has a certain clarity when you're crumpled and tossed out by the side of the road.

The radio is long dead. Rules say I'm on my own. You get trapped outside, no one risks retrieving you. What's the point? There're ten bodies waiting for your job, twenty in line for your wife and your most valued material possessions are knick-knacks of no worth.

As I do my wound inventory the pain in my legs surges and fades again.

My father stands before a building, an old brick building, a small sign on it. ABRI. It's a circular sign, an arrow pointing to the right. He's dressed in army fatigues, jacket and old style cap. The smile and mustache familiar. An old image, taken during the war.

"I'm dressed. I'm proud. Here's a brick wall. Let's give the wife and kids an update," he seems to say.

My father is infantry, part of the demolition squad. Their responsibility is to precede the troops, sweep for mines and booby traps. There are four soldiers, usually, in a sweeping detail. On one particular day in the late spring of his second tour, the squad is called out. They're to run a routine sweep to break in a new guy. On they go through the forest. I can see this as if it's a film; I've heard the tale so often. Through the forest the four of them hike. Rookie and corporal lead the way. My father is fifteen feet behind, the private is bringing up the rear. Everything is light and casual. Scene slows down. My father looks to the left toward a close stand of bushes. A rabbit dashes away. An explosion. The concussion drives him off his feet. The corporal screams. There's blood at my father's temples. His friend and the rookie gone. Their blood mixes with shrapnel. Shrapnel, flesh, blood and bone strike him in the face. He scrambles for cover, not knowing what's happening. When he's secure behind a small berm, he realizes the extent of the damage. Exhausted, he spends several hours passed out, in the brush.

Rolling over in the bottom of the ditch, I start my climb. After some effort I reach the edge of the road. I look around. It's not my edge of the road. No entrance. No lower level. Actually no road.

"Shit." I've been moved. Flats are here but there's no net. No asphalt road. Just dirt and desert. Scrub brush, dirt and endless desert. I crawl toward what I think is home.

4

Blood is an aphrodisiac. The blood on my hands pulses partly from my own veins.

There's never a good time to make a bad decision and I am about to make an extremely bad decision. They have the upper hand; they're unhurt, bigger than me by twenty to thirty pounds each, armed, in control, and don't give a shit whether I live or die.

I assume they're going to shoot me, drop me in the Mojave Desert. Someone was paid to dispose of me. I hadn't walked in on anything, that's clear now. They followed me. Shit.

I need to make a run for it when the car slows. I can see the door lock is up. Busy freeway speeds, no less than 20mph. A slight curve. This will hurt. My passenger side captor gives a surprised flinch as I hit the door feet first, and tumble out. I'm rolling across grooved concrete to a curb. Up, over, struggling, sliding down the slope to the ravine below.

My knuckles are raw. Hands and knees bleeding.

Traffic speeds by above. It catches the Crown Vic safely in its flow, moving the Ford away.

No one sees me roll, except, of course, my idiot abductors. The bottom of the ravine is dusty, filled with trash. I pull myself up. Hunching over, I start moving toward a group of concrete buildings several hundred yards off the highway. Anywhere away from the freeway. Maybe a phone call. Sagebrush and yuccas dominate the landscape. In the distance the back end of the Angeles mountains faintly visible.

There's much I don't understand. I'm certain, as I make my way down the trail, I'll need to clean my wounds soon. I know I've landed in the desert area north of Palmdale, the highway behind me is I-14. I believe Anna is safe, probably not even involved. She missed our meeting at the apartment, but that can be anything. With her, bad timing has risen to the level of an art form. Being late for an appointment won't even register on her professional "don'ts" list. So, she's safe. If I'm lucky, maybe she'll be able to track me down. How I'm not sure, but she's a resourceful woman. It's her business after all.

My best hope is to find a phone, call Anna. If that doesn't work I'll double back to the highway and see if I can grab a lift south. Wind is beginning to swirl, picking up dust as the late afternoon shadows draw out toward my right. The buildings look new, a couple years old at most, windowless on the west side – the side I'm approaching. This seems like the backside of a shopping center, a mini desert shopping mall. There's one large building, a Robinsons-May or Macy's department store no doubt, surrounded by several other attached structures reducing in size as they move farther from the main store.

I'm a hundred feet from the smaller, northernmost, building when I stop. The structure has no entrance point on this side, no paving of any sort to accommodate trucks or deliveries. Curious. More cautious now, I continue to the end building. I come around the northern corner. The side of the complex, at least at this end, is the same as the rear – no openings, not even the blemish of a vent or utility panel.

My injuries are tolerable, except now I'm dehydrating, and growing less stable with the heat. The front of the building will be shaded, at least. I continue forward along a dirt path, holding as close as possible to the building. There's little sound, an occasional rustle in the brush, lizards surprised by my footsteps or clumps of dark gnarled sagebrush pushed along by the growing winds. With a couple more steps to the corner I glance back toward the 14. It's more crowded than it was a few minutes ago when I jumped, but moving much faster. Fluid. The Crown Vic is nowhere in sight. They've had plenty of time to get to the next off-ramp and head

back for me. They're pissed enough. I'm not sure why they *wouldn't* double back for me. They may think I'm dead or injured beyond help, and don't need to verify it by tracking down my body.

"Fall must have killed him."

"Yeah, let's get a beer, I'm dryer 'n shit."

Or. They hadn't intended to kill me, only teach me a lesson or get me out of the way for a while. Mission accomplished. I've pissed-off someone enough to go to all the trouble to dump me out here. Unfortunately, it could be any of a dozen of my professional acquaintances.

Anna sits up, shifts in her seat, opens another file. There are seventeen more files to read through, so far she's come up empty. Tedious work reading through the un-erased files stolen, or borrowed, from corporate America. The ratio is about 100:1. Every hundred documents yield a part of a financial picture that, when pieced together with other information, brings a company's soft belly into focus.

She finishes by pulling the data into a single file, compressing it and dropping it in her *Public* directory. She dials the agreed upon number, leaves her ID and transmission code, and sits back to wait for a line connection. It will take anywhere from ten minutes to an hour for Gil to respond. Once online, it will take a few seconds to download the file. When he doesn't connect immediately she stands up, stretches, and goes to the kitchen to warm-up her tea.

Gil is rather dull, completely orthodox, unassuming with mustache and badly fitting sport jacket, completely trustworthy. Reliable. Gil and Jason are partners, have been for years, since way before Anna got involved three years ago, Alliance, a new security service at the time, hired Random, Inc., Gil and Jason's consulting firm, to do a series of internal "verifications" to test Alliance's newly developed software. Random caught Anna rifling through the comptroller's PC at Alliance. Gil and Jason, impressed with her audacity, took her in on the spot.

She thinks they're a couple geniuses, especially for taking her in. It makes sense all around to combine talent. Their business mantra is, "All information has a true home, it's only a matter of finding the rightful owner to sell it to."

Anna sees the PC's program window expand into view and returns to her chair as a second window opens, letters running across the screen.

"Can you upload? I'm not in the office, this laptop isn't working."

This happens every few times with Gil. He can't seem to grasp the importance of learning the system, so is constantly running up against compatibility issues on new installations.

A dialog box asks for confirmation.

"OK," she types.

"Resend last file. Decompression error."

After several minutes of no reaction, no screen movement, Anna rises, paces the apartment from the balcony off the kitchen to the front double doors. She makes her circuit, checking the PC screen for changes every lap. Nothing. On her third or fourth lap, she sees a powder blue Valiant pull into the underground garage entrance below. Jason is expected later but this is fine, especially if the freakin' file uploads. She watches another car, an older Ford, pull to the curb moments after the Valiant enters the garage. Two large men exit the Ford, both walk toward the garage entrance. Obviously Jason has a tail. They hesitate a moment, then enter the garage disappearing from view below her, their car left parked at the curb. Anna jots down the license number for future reference and heads to intercept Jason at the front door. As she passes the PC desk, she sees the screen jumping with data. The file is uploading again. Moving in for a closer look, she leans forward.

After a brief moment of searing pain, she clutches her side, falling forward on the PC desk, then slides to the floor. She feels a strong arm reach around her neck and tighten, while a sweaty hand grasps her shirt collar. She begins losing consciousness as she's dragged from the main room to a small storage closet off the kitchen. Anna hears her name called as she slips from consciousness.

5

Back in the late 90s several companies worked on sleep enhancement technology. Since humans spend more time in sleep than any other single activity, researchers began to explore ways to enhance the unconscious experience to allow for productive activity to take place.

The concept is similar to that of using networked computers and their unused CPU cycles to render video or 3D images or break down the human genome. Initially exciting, the technology soon fizzled out, leaving a bad impression of sleep technology in many people's minds. And, as is typical with such science, sleep experimentation took off a few years later when the public eye was distracted with other trends; high-powered fuel efficient personal transportation, well written high-definition television and nutritious-tasteful fast food. For the better part of the first three decades of the 2000's, the western United States, specifically Los Angeles, controlled all the useful developments stemming from this science. As more was discovered about the uses of sleep science and dream technology, to enhance full consciousness,

various elements of the real world, social and political unrest and financial instability infringed on its orderly development.

The mandate switched from “science for the greater good” to “security for the party in power.”

“McCauley. Jason McCauley,” he says.

“Anna Harris. Well, Anna,” she replies.

This night is much like any other, humid and loud as downtown always is. He feels uncomfortable approaching a complete stranger based on not much more than the book she’s reading. On the cover is an illustration of a man and woman embracing in the front seat of a large automobile. A setting sun lights the scene as it glares through the windshield reflecting off their moist skin. It’s humid, sensual and with the reflections of the couple in the paint and chrome of the vehicle, disconcerting. Sexy. Odd.

“Great cover.”

She flips the book closed, with her index finger holding place, and glances at the cover. With a smile he sets the newspaper on the end table, settling back into the overstuffed armchair.

“Yeah, you read it?”

“No it looks intriguing.” It did, that’s the truth, also part of the reason he approached her. Her smile eases as she relaxes deeper into the sofa, opening the book to continue reading.

“Don’t mean to bother you, Anna.” He says, leaning forward, extending his hand. She simply nods, finishes her page, then turns it and reaches up to return the handshake.

“You here for a reason or just like hanging around lobbies?” she asks.

“I was told you could help me with a problem.”

“Yeah?” she replies.

“Is that true, you can help me? I need some information recovered. You do that?” He’s reasonably sure she’s the one who’s involved in data recovery. She’s Asian, her hair is long. Her eyes are cold, harsh, even with the smile. The book is the odd bit though. Where did the book fit?

“What kind of information you looking to recover?” She shifts, combing her long hair up behind her left ear, a graceful sweep of the hand.

Trusting her isn't going to be easy. Most of his story is whacked. No one in their right mind will believe it, or even hear him out, for that matter. His nights have been filled with restless sleep since he began working for Alliance, he's at a point where he has no more options. He tries to understand this. He has to get it out. He can't trust her, but what are the options? He's fucked either way.

The lobby door opens, a short dowdy woman enters, passes through the seating area, squeezes between the opposite side coffee table and sofa, turns up the hallway past the elevator, disappearing from sight. Through the front window he sees a yellow cab parked at the curb. The driver leans against the cab's right front fender wiping his forehead in the heat. A large transit bus passes by as the driver draws on his cigarette, flicking the ash in the gutter. He's waiting for the old lady to return, meter running. Jason turns to Anna and continues.

"I have a rather odd proposition for you. I need to trust you and, to be honest, I don't think I can."

She leans back, waiting.

"I suppose I have no choice, so here goes," he says after a long pause.

The old lady returns down the hall. The unmistakable sound of a wheeled overstuffed suitcase approaches. She turns the corner. Seeing the futility of negotiating the couches and coffee tables again, she pulls the wobbly suitcase behind them, past registration, hobbling out the door to her waiting cab.

6

Gil is looking at the PC. Staring, waiting for a response from Anna. The transfer goes well for three-quarters of the download, then the screen locks. He's in a coffee shop three blocks away from her, laptop and cappuccino perched on a small round wooden table. The coffee shop has a wireless network so he takes advantage of the easy access to do transfers.

“Where's the bitch?”

Three students a couple tables away glance toward him. He stares back. Dismissing him as a typical business geek the students return to their conversation.

Annoyed, he gazes at the counter display full of baked muffins and cookies.

“I shouldn't, but I'm getting hungry.” He mumbles to himself.

He walks to the display case. As he's deciding between classic coffee cake and a walnut zucchini muffin there's a squeal of tires. A lumbering old Ford rounds the corner, neatly avoiding a double-parked BMW. The car's owner is likely the lady next in line ahead of him at

the counter, the one with the cell to her ear. She misses the close call, jabbering on through her Frappuccino order.

Back at the table the PC shows no sign of change. No cause for concern yet. He's waited hours before when transfer glitches crop up. Usually it's a network issue. They're all at the mercy of local ISPs, notorious for equipment failures and extended timeouts. Still, Anna does this too often, or so it seems. It happens on transfers from her more than anyone else.

Jason lets her get away with shit. She always blames Gil, or his machines.

"Gil doesn't know what the fuck he's doing." He overheard her suggest to Jason at their last tech meeting. He assumes she was referring to his computer skills, not anything more personal.

Part way through the muffin the screen is freed up.

He types, "Please resend file. Decompression error. Are you there?"

Waiting. There's no response.

Anna and Jason knew each other in a previous life, losing touch when she moved into a new circle of friends. They were reacquainted a few years later when Gil and Jason caught her during a routine system check at Alliance. She was breaking into their Security One system. No one in their right mind attempted a break-in at Alliance. That caught their attention. They were intrigued by her plan, which would've worked except for the random security check that caught her hand in the old digital cookie jar. Gil and Jason initiated the security check to test Alliance's vulnerability codes, codes allowing access to the Security One system. They were changed randomly every 15 minutes. Gil and Jason charged a good deal to install, test and finally sign-off on the technology. This installation was their first crack at Security One and between partnering with Anna or acknowledging a security breach on a multimillion-dollar system, it was wiser to take her on.

Random had quite a growth spurt after Anna came on board. Nearly a tenfold increase in revenue the first six months, most of it attributed to her. They ran at every project with utter confidence in their ability to succeed. That's what Anna brought to the table. She and Jason grew close. Gil was jealous, he'd no call to be, but he couldn't help it. The four of them, whenever Sandra feels she can break away, spend a lot of time together outside of business. They fell into a comfortable routine of light sports, dinners, movies.

Finished with the muffin, he brushes the crumbs off the table and his pants. He hears a familiar open muffler roar. Out the window, between the herbal tea display case and the casual sweats covering a fairly fat ass, he sees the same Ford returning again, apparently having completed its mission. It speeds away, making a severe turn on Western, although left or right he cannot tell.

The Crown Vic is caught in traffic and that's just fine with Jimmy and Mel.

"See the look on his face when we pulled him down those stairs? What a geek. Think we scared him enough. He'll back off now. Little slice-n-dice always makes 'em think twice. Huh, you hear that? Slice-n-dice. You see the girl?" Mel asks as he stretches back.

They're a couple hundred yards past where Jason jumped. Mel sees no sign of their afternoon guest.

"No, the girl wasn't there, I checked."

"That's okay, didn't need her, not part of the deal."

The road is clogged, holiday traffic, worse than usual and usual is pretty bad. They can expect bumper-to-bumper until they reach the next off ramp.

"Jimmy, you ever see Tehachapi? Tehachapi mountains are something. Had a truck driver song way back about it. 'Tehachapi to Tonopah', is in it. Never been to Tonopah. No idea where it's at. Always wondered though, did the singer ever go there or just pick out the names on a map?"

"Dunno."

"Yeah, well it's not a question, just something I wondered. Anyway, cool place. Another 50 miles up I-58 if you ever wanna go. Went years ago to look at some land. Nice place, way out nowhere. No one fucks with you in a place that far away. I even dreamt I owned the place. It's about the dream, isn't it? It's out nowhere, a shack on it. I remember thinking, 'Who lived in that shack?'"

"If the girl was there and saw us we're fucked," Jimmy says, more to himself than Mel.

"What's that?"

"If the girl was hiding, maybe she saw us. That'll fuck us up," this time louder for Mel.

"No, don't matter. Jason saw us, he'll remember us. He's hooked up with her. Bingo man. But see it doesn't matter cuz we didn't kill him. Bingo, man, bingo."

“Yeah, what am I thinking? It don’t matter.” Jimmy signals a lane change by sliding the Crown Vic over, cutting through the slow lane and exiting at the Rosamond offramp. They turn left on W. Rosamond Boulevard. Head west under the I-14, take a long looping onramp back onto the highway and head south to Los Angeles.

7

I'm tied up
Can't be released.
I'm here daydreaming of being there
You know... Fear does this
Fear of losing you.
Being close does it to.
Trying to find something to hold.
Visions that stay the same
I can count on, go back to.
I pull up the old movies, watch how things used to be
Then I see her
Barely able to control my anger, fear again.
I pause, rubbing my neck

So the tightness at the sides of my skull will ease.
Work gets away from me
I don't care.
I give in more each day.
That's the way it's supposed to be.
Letting go each day
Until there's less and less to say.
Can't talk for fear of what I might say.

“I need you to track someone. Dig into his data files, medical history, family connections, credit profiles. Whatever information is out there, I want. I need to know everything that's happening with him. I want records on it all, any move he makes, day or night, especially night.” Jason wrings his hands as he lays out the job for Anna.

“Night?”

“Night's the most important. Can you handle night tagging?”

“Well, yeah, I can handle it. It's expensive. I've done it before, no big deal.”

“Tell me how it works.”

“Well it's mostly just hacking the appropriate database, pulling the information down...”

“No, not the wire stuff. How do you tag someone's sleep? What can you find out? What kind of record is made? Is it something I can see, something you can play back for me?”

Jason, sweat beading on forehead and lip, settles in the chair. He's trying to count himself down, lips move with each number, until he hits the chill point.

“Technology's simple enough, I can get you anything from a grid sequence of all the dream activities, in chronological order of course, be useless any other way, to a spatial remapping stream in real-time flow or anything in between. Depends on what it's worth to you.” Anna, in control, settles back to let him squirm.

Sounds of the lobby gradually come back into hearing range. The clerk at the registration desk is fiddling with the tuner, flipping from station to station in search of more news or sports, the switching clicks and the static is audible. The elevator lands with another soft slam to divulge the footsteps of several couples; high heels, loafers trudge by the seating area on their way out of the hotel's revolving door.

Traffic is at a near standstill, end of the week exit from old downtown. Buses, trucks, cars, and cabs jam the system to a solid stop trying to hit North Alameda all at once. Every few seconds horns and exhaust spread from the street and into the lobby as the door revolves with a slight thunking sound.

L.A. is always like this, people say it's part of the charm. There's Little Tokyo with the restaurants and artist's lofts, City Hall, the LAPD HQ around the corner and the Los Angeles Times building. The L.A. Times, cranking out the same stories for the last 500 years, or so it seems. Nothing changes, at least on the surface. The times they have a changed though. They have a changed to the relentless beat of technology playing in the background.

Anna has her finger on that pulse and is entertained by the apparent lack of connection Jason is showing with his questions.

Jason sits upright again, composing himself, he brushes at his pants a couple times saying:

“Oh, I can't pay you.”

8

Anna Harris was raised in Gardena, a small suburb outside of Los Angeles. She led an average Asian-American middle class life throughout grade school, high school and college, before leaving Southern California to study abroad during her junior year at UCLA. She spent several years in European and Japanese universities, where isolation from home and the alien culture, enabled her to excel in computer and engineering studies. She returned to the U.S. at the invitation of an east coast high-tech firm – a firm believed by many to be a cover for the NSA. Here, Anna dutifully disappeared for another couple years in the convoluted and bureaucratic hallways of National Security and leakage. Not having much of a patriotic heart, one day she decided to fly solo and, with a decent amount of electronic contraband and classified digital toys in hand, she set out for her old hometown, and the more entrepreneurial atmosphere of Southern California.

Quick and dirty and back in L.A. After a decade, everything is changed. L.A. is a goldmine for a freelance tech worker, especially one with her background. Two days in town,

Anna meets Martin Cane, a worker at HiSec. Martin and Anna have been running tech scams for a year. It only gets easier, more lucrative.

“These West Coast monkeys are unbelievably dimwitted,” she’d observed to Martin more than once.

Few of them can understand the technology, fewer still can troubleshoot or repair it, no one creates shit anymore.

“What’s the point? Pointless. Totally fuckin’ pointless.”

Martin and Anna do it all, especially when it comes to creating access points to secure data, retrieving sensitive information. Martin sets ‘em up, ties ‘em with a contract, works the initial data acquisition. Nice term that, ‘Data Acquisition’. Anna’s part is to go in after the setup, work through the first stages, size up possibilities, and make the best deal. Finally, Anna’s special talent is in always getting near perfect results, skating without a trace. Their clients are happy – happy clients pay well.

A long, narrow Exant swings through the clogged streets of Los Angeles. Low slung, rarely seen this side of the city, it slides effortlessly, through the clutter of crap cars that dominate downtown. Sleek black finish and smoke-mirrored windows reflect the dingy buildings and street people of old L.A. back on themselves. It’s a pathetic sight, not much changed in the last 75 years. Street vendor’s carts bearing every imaginable kind of food, drink, clothing or fashion accessory known to man. Their tactic, drawn from the squeegee men of old, is to approach a car at or near a corner, placing their cart to block the vehicle’s forward movement, then, with a wide smile, offer up a small taste of food or drink. In the case of jewelry and clothing, they extend their sample bedecked arm through the driver’s window for consideration. Exchange of some sort is expected, you buy something or you give the vendor a gratuity. Otherwise you’re no longer welcome on that particular street. Most drivers keep spare change handy to buy safe passage. There is a small toll fee on every block, the cost of doing business. You can buy a snack, sunglasses or even flowers for mom, and get through, but generally you just pay the toll. There are exceptions to the system; police, fire and military vehicles are never approached. Diplomatic limos are generally avoided and vehicles of a certain higher class. The Exant is such a car. High class. No cart vendor ever gives an Exant a second look. Off limits.

There are three kinds of Exants; fully automatic with no driver, semi-automatic with driver and passenger, and specially modified caravans, used by courier companies to deliver packages that absolutely have to arrive on time. This Exant is semi-automatic – requiring a driver. The passenger is well off, but hasn't yet reached a status level that warrants the autocar. She sits back comfortably, embraced by the soft leather interior, taking in the street scene as they glide past city hall, turning toward Grand Avenue. Sandra is content.

Stretching out until she touches the rear of the driver's compartment she flicks the voicebox to audible, words give meaning to the news images passing across her screen. This is her experience of the world, the people in it, the troubles they invariably get themselves into. She prefers it in small doses, low volume. News blends with her life like waking to the first cup of coffee. It needs to have a purpose, a place in her daily routine.

The Stillwell Hotel is half a block away; its vertical sign comes in view ahead amongst the perpetual clutter of street banners. It's a small hotel by L.A. standards, ten stories, a couple hundred rooms. Sandra has been staying there since her arrival in the city a few weeks ago. The lobby is richly authentic with its weathered Asian paintings, dark green carpet, constant layer of cigarette haze.

"We're here," the driver informs her through the open privacy screen.

"Thanks."

"You want me to wait?"

"No, I'll call you if I need you," she says exiting through the raised door. The Exant pulls away from the curb, sliding into traffic to disappear around the corner, at West 9th Street, into the heavy haze.

Sandra bundles her coat tight against the evening chill. A city bus roars past her as she steps under the green awning. The bus stirs up a sudden blast pushing her through the revolving door into the lobby.

9

There're all kinds of jobs in this world; the guy who inspects the threads holding Nikes together, the lady in charge of adjusting the volume of the muzak in the elevator, the man who sits at the roadside stand, counting the cars going by or stopping. There's someone who estimates the value of a berry stand out on Highway 126, so he can offer it for sale. Most people don't end up in the job they think they will, or that they've trained for. It's a law of nature that our years of study in a particular field will dull our interest in that field. It's surprising anyone makes it in a profession. That's why doctors and lawyers make the big money. They trade their deadening pain for a high wage and a sheltered life that at 40 is so empty and strangled that a person's left with no choices. They stay, turning their minds off with the busy-ness of home, business, clients, investments, family and civic participation — the easy way. Or, if they're honest, they invite the demons in for a frolic.

“You want a beer? Anything?” Mel asks Jimmy.

“Nah, I'm good.”

“Ever see Gil’s wife?”

“Huh, what’s that?” Jimmy reaches over, turning KRTH’s volume down a notch.

“You know Jason’s partner?”

“Yeah, Gil, so, what about him? They’re partners, so what?”

“No, no, I’m not talking about Gil. His wife, what’s her name? Anyway you ever see Gil’s wife? Good looking bitch, man.”

The radio buzzes between stations, Jimmy reaches over to press the next button along the dial. The Volvo ahead of them slows for traffic.

“Watch the road, I’ll get the radio,” Mel says as he pulls a 102 out of the six-pac cooler, pops the beer open and hands it to Jimmy.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Thanks,” Jimmy shifts behind the steering wheel, taking a long swig of his all-time favorite beer.

“Brew 102. So when did you meet her?” Jimmy asks.

“Who?”

“You wanna know something, you better stop fuckin’ with me or I’m gonna jam this can down your fuckin’ throat,” Jimmy smiles.

“Yeah,” Mel continues, “well when I was first trailing Jason I ended up at their office on Traction. I’m in the parking garage waiting for Jason to leave, the way he usually does around 5 p.m., when I hear voices. Through the space between the SUVs parked behind me I see a couple walking to their car, Jason and this woman. She’s a piece of work. They look pretty friendly. I find out later she’s Gil’s wife. Sure wasn’t the office secretary.”

“Fuckin’ Volvo drivers always driving with one foot tapping the brake lights.” Mel warns Jimmy.

10

The building is much farther away than Jason imagined. The road veers off to the left, a remnant of a public works project. He chooses a trail heading northeast toward the structure, away from the old road. Cool breeze. Autumn days aren't bad in the desert. Injured and without water, he wouldn't have a chance if this was summer. Summer in the Mojave is unforgiving. This – actually isn't too bad.

“Scenic even,” he thinks.

The whole sequence of events makes no sense to him. There's got to be more to it than first impressions. She lied to him, worked him like a fool.

“I'm an easy mark,” he mutters, walking with a slow deliberate gate, favoring his left leg.

A jack rabbit darts out of the brush and, with a quick nod to Jason, makes a sharp right, heading up the trail in front of him. He watches it disappear beyond a slight rise a hundred yards ahead. Most of the desert is sparsely vegetated, clumps of wild flowers and sagebrush scattered across the terrain, interrupted occasionally by random Yucca or a grouping of desert rocks.

Overall vision is an easy 360°. The wildlife is small and sparse, mostly rabbits and horned toads. Overhead a lone wandering hawk glides in search of a tasty meal.

He's a good mile from where he was dumped, and seemingly no closer to his destination. The weather is fine but he has no water and his only food is a b-bar he placed in his shirt pocket before leaving Operations. His wounds, although manageable now, need attention – and soon – to avoid infection. His greatest concern is his exposure to insurgents – the ones that beat and dumped him obviously weren't clean. Still, he feels oddly positive for someone in such deep shit.

“It's part of the job,” keeps bleeping to mind.

“You couldn't ask for a nicer day,” he says aloud, smile turning to sardonic grin.

Resting on a fat, flat desert boulder he scans the horizon. The Angeles Mountains are growing dark and hazy back in the direction he came from. The Tehachapi mountain range is northwest of him with the old roadway trailing off in that general direction. To the east is most of the Mohave Desert, leading to Las Vegas 250 miles away. He looks up, but in the late afternoon light he has no clue what stars are out. A brief shimmering out on the northwest horizon catches his eye. But after a moment, he dismisses it. He stands, ready to continue, moving along the path following the jack rabbit to the building ahead. He estimates the structure is a couple miles away, but it's hard to tell, it could be four, or five miles. The Mojave plays tricks with you on the best of days. Jason tosses a stone at the outstretched arms of a middle-aged yucca, continuing toward what he hopes will be a cool drink and a call to Operations for immediate evac.

Jason reviews options as he hikes toward the first rise. As he nears it, he finds himself looking forward to the down slope. The short uphill incline tired him. Some desert life scatters as he reaches the top of the rise, and again he has an unrestricted view of the desert. He scans the horizon to the structure ahead. It's at least another half-mile down the trail and larger than he thought. An old factory or farm equipment building? No way to tell if he'll find water, a phone or a way to clean his wounds.

He pauses now aware of his thirst, then begins the downgrade hike. A few yards along the trail he stops, motionless, looking toward the northwest. A blink. A slowly moving white and gray mass. Another blink of light. He refocuses his eyes and sees a dust cloud moving in – a pair of lights is blinking through the growing cloud. It's a vehicle, he's sure now. It's moving south along the old road at a pretty good clip, based on the size of the rooster tail being thrown out

behind it. Whatever it is, it's moving in fast, about as far away from Jason as from the building, only at a 60° arc to the northwest.

“Shit, this can't be good,” he murmurs, increasing his pace.

The truck reaches the building while Jason is a couple hundred yards away. Hidden behind a low out-cropping of rocks and sagebrush, he sees two of the truck's passengers leap out, run toward the building, and then disappear around its southwest corner. The driver throws the truck in reverse, backs up, screeches to a sliding halt, and drops the trans to low. Throwing a cloud of rocks and dust, the truck speeds along the west side of the building until it careens, out of sight, around the northwest end.

Jason forgets about thirst, hunger and pain as he follows a dry gulley toward the east side of the building. Quietly and as low as possible, he moves rapidly along the path until he has a better view of the structure. He peers through the brush and sees a group of people, eight or more, he can't get an exact count – some are standing in the shadow of the large concrete building. They move nervously, gesturing toward the direction of the truck. They're not insurgents, too clean. The group moves with a drifting motion to one side, revealing an Alliance logo emblazoned across the large metal door that appears to be the only access to the structure.