

Ransom X

I. B. Holder

Ransom X

Copyright 2009 I. B. Holder

All Rights Reserved

Thank you for downloading this free ebook. You are welcome to share it with your friends. This book may be reproduced, copied and distributed for noncommercial purposes, provided the book remains in its complete original form. If you enjoyed this book, please return to Smashwords.com to discover other works by this author. Thank you for your support.

Smashwords Edition 1. 2 June 2010

Special thanks to Jenna for her skills, time, and generosity.

Prologue

A group of men took their positions around a young woman. They wore colored costumes all shades of the rainbow. From afar with bright stage lights burning around them, this pinwheel effect made it look like the set of a children's show. Up close, however, it was pornography. Not the polite kind that connoisseurs of Playboy imagined the Hooters' girls engaging in on their off days. It was the kind that made them flinch, quickly look away, and then more often than not, look back again.

On the woman's face was a mask that looked like a boxer's training helmet. She was on all fours on top of a wooden crate, wrapped in a skimpy leatherette costume that suggested the sluttiest side of biker chic along with the sensibility of washable attire. This business was not the place for any natural materials or fibers.

A single wall-mounted speaker in the room crackled into life through a charge of static and feedback. The intercom cast out a voice with a sadistic quality, stripping words down into metallic fragments. If the voice had either warmth or breath when it left the lips of the person speaking into the microphone, it was long gone by the time it entered the room through the frayed mesh speaker cover. It sent chills down the girl's spine as she looked at the one-way glass separating her from the speaker in the control booth. She had come to think of the "Controller" as the local representative of Hell on earth.

"We're live in ten seconds." It didn't sound like a threat, but the men dressed in the costumes reacted as if it were.

They scurried into position around the girl, her eyes darting everywhere looking for a seam in reality where she might escape; it was impossible, like trying to focus on individual raindrops, never quite settling on one before the opportunity vanished. The men all wore vinyl coverings, painted onto their fat or slender, squat or tall bodies sinking into the folds or pulling over the muscles like a second skin. The purple one spoke to her in a growl.

"This is something in the business we call *sky diving*." They pulled her into a position where her legs and arms were spread out like a skydiver's, her stomach resting on the crate. "It's supposed to be a real trip, but real pleasurable for the men." A grin widened across his violet face. "Isn't that always the way it is?"

As soon as the intercourse started, he kicked the crate out from under her and she hung suspended, she was now 'sky diving'.

The yellow one spoke, "I actually heard from a girl that this wasn't that bad."

Green responded, "I don't care what your mother told you."

Their laughter filled the room. The girl's eyes began to water. The true professionals in the industry learned how to relieve the strain by shifting some of their weight onto the stomach of the man angled beneath, but this girl was no professional.

In fact, up until two weeks ago she hadn't even seen images like the one she was currently caught up in, except on a television screen at a frat party in college. She was way out of place, out of her depth back then; how far and foreign from any depth she felt now. She was an unwilling participant, having been abducted ten

days before, as she was returning home from a rally. She had been protesting the unethical treatment of animals. The irony was not lost on this sharp graduate student. She tried to find further meaning in what was happening to her, but her mind quickly slipped back into the body's hell. The laughter all around her made her retreat further inside where her boiling anger was a ruby contrast to the fading white pale of her skin.

A barked command from the speaker, and the levity was turned off, a tap gone suddenly dry as the metallic voice re-entered the room. "Shut your fucking mouths - everyone who can. The audience doesn't want to see your mouths moving."

The controller knew what the audience wanted. He was the one behind the glass, the mastermind of a sustainable, profitable abduction scheme of which the financial rewards were approaching the point of unbelievable. He was also almost completely anonymous, or so he believed, as he sat behind a bank of monitors skimming the camera angles along the girl's body. He watched all of the monitors at once. He somehow always knew what men wanted to see, his lean fingers punched the keys on a control panel, switching between cameras and broadcasting the images to his waiting customers.

He glanced at an open web page where the action in front of him came streaming across the net on a ten second delay. This was not a simple abduction; it was a marketing enterprise. The tender was sex, fear and pain - who could possibly get enough? A glint in the eye of the controller hinted at an internal deception - he was careful not to let himself identify which of the elements of his sex show he most preferred. The acid in his throat threatened to come up into his mouth when he spoke to the "actors" in the room. He kept them moving just like the cameras. The audience loved change.

The broadcast he was producing was on transmit only and to protected sources, making the direct risk of discovery slight. He'd considered the statistical probability of getting caught and his estimates fed his arrogance. He wasn't a kidnapper. The controller didn't demand ransom for the girl's return; there was no drop, and nothing to be traced back to them.

The ransom came from the accounts of the perverts of the world. Nobody ever went broke marketing to that segment of society. The controller punched up another one of the websites that marketed his video feed; live in progress, for ten dollars or DVD compilation of 24 hours for fifteen. The webmaster had gone so far as to post a scan of the police report of the abduction alongside the target goal or ransom at which the girl would be released. A graphic indicated the ransom progress, and right now, she was at 65 percent. She'd started out strong, and sales from her hometown drove her into the territory of twenty percent after a

few days, but business had slacked off recently.

The man in the booth knew why; the girl was angry, always requiring forced situations. There was only so much market for that. People wanted to see her change.

He zoomed the camera shot in on her eyes. She hadn't changed since she'd walked in that room for the first time. Anger, unfiltered by the mask of civility, burned in her eyes. He was as tired of her anger as the customers were, but instead of being frustrated, he practically quivered with anticipation. If she did not meet her ransom, she would be his. He would give her every chance, put her in every position to make the required amount of money, but he secretly wanted her to fail.

Two hours later the girl stood in the room apparently alone, when an arm reached into the pool of light and slipped under her shoulder. She looked at him and threw her arms around him. "Blue."

Blue was not involved in the sex acts. For whatever reason, he was charged with taking care of the girls. He quieted her gently, adding, "You're way behind dear, we need to do everything we can, there's only two days left." He saw her eyes sink inward, there was little left for her to give. He quickly corrected his course, "But we'll do it. We'll get you out early I predict."

"Really?" She brightened, "Where am I?"

"Close." A noise in the control room and she pulled closer to Blue, expecting the controller's voice would uncoil and strike out at her like a snake. She kept her distance from the box speaker carving an arc shuffling toward the door.

"Does he ever come out?"

Blue looked at the mirrored glass with an odd look, "you don't want him to."

She stood between him and the mirror cutting off his reflection and replacing his face with hers inches in front of him. "Thank you – for taking care of me." She looked for a moment every bit as beautiful and innocent as the girl next door, provided that one lives in a neighborhood where there is a girl next door who has the time and resources to be wholesome and idealistic. They took a few halting steps for the door, then her body shook with a new thought. "Will I ever meet him?" She tossed her hair over her shoulder and let the stray strands fall into her eyes.

Blue clicked his teeth like he was urging on a horse, and smiled.

As it turned out, she was fifteen percent below target on the last day of her captivity, and she did get to meet the man in the control room.

Her body was found two days later after an anonymous tip. Her eyes remained fixed on an imaginary point far beyond where they could have seen, features etched in disbelief. Still beautiful, but angry no longer.

Chapter 1 Key

A sudden urgency pulsed through Legacy's body; it was like someone had called his number and he had been waiting for a long time. He wasn't in a waiting room; the stark but serviceable area around him was his basement office at the FBI building in Alexandria, Virginia. It was 4:30 and almost time to leave. The sharp feeling reasserted itself, confirming that there was something that needed his attention. He clicked his knuckles together in an act of concentration he'd used longer than he could remember. His fists came together and his muscular forearms began a contest. The stress on the joints in his hands was audible. His eyes searched over the desk. He hadn't followed up on the one case that was farthest from the trash.

The brass nameplate on the door said Martin Legacy, Special Services, FBI. But that did very little to describe the man who had occupied the basement room for just over five years.

A better indicator of his personality might be the music that perpetually played in the background: a dissonant ringing that churned on for hours until unexpectedly it would erupt into a beautifully crafted and complex melody before falling apart again. The hallways around his office were famous for complaints of just having to pass his doorway and hear the racket – the workers couldn't believe that anyone could possibly choose to be around that noise day in and day out.

The tapes were from a collection of unedited studio recordings with savant musicians. It was the kind of thing that one might find playing briefly in a psychology conference. The patients playing the music had a condition that pushed them so far into their own minds that they communicated solely through music and organized their thoughts into tones, melodies and cadence. Legacy claimed that the noise did two things: it helped him think, and it kept others away. The flat, expressionless way he would relate the two results gave nothing away as to which he valued more.

Legacy scanned his broad mahogany desk searching for the item that he'd been waiting for months. An old paracentric key was the only tangible connection between living criminal and victims long dead.

A case as cold as the late autumn breeze that blew down the streets of northern Virginia had one last gasp of air because of Legacy. The crime had been committed over twelve years ago. At that time Legacy had been in the military –

leading a much different life than now. The rigid discipline of his former life had almost completely vanished.

Legacy considered organization in its traditional form to be a hindrance to his pursuit of understanding human motives, and even when pushed to organization by the necessity of his job, his efforts were less than inspired. He had marked out five sections on his desk with masking tape; each area was home to a wide array of pictures, police documents, press clippings and evidence from a single case plucked from the archives. He kept his least favorite case to the far left side of his desk and had been known to sweep an entire docket into an abnormally wide trashcan, which resided just below.

A special janitor was assigned to the office, and all of the papers that landed in the bin were processed and returned to evidence files. Legacy had no concept of the web of special treatment that surrounded him, but his breakthrough moments were enough to justify any unreasonable fuss. His genius made the world around him bend and flex to meet his needs.

After exasperating seconds of complete helpless searching, he saw something foreign on top of his phone, something he'd never dream of using.

A goldenrod sticky note read, "Check your inbox and enjoy the coffee."

The inbox, how could that possibly be of use to anyone? Legacy never checked his inbox; the interdepartmental, departmental, cross-agency, internal external memo pipeline was a direct connection into the inane bureaucracy he considered functionally useless. Yet today, sitting on top of a stack of papers, most of them marked "urgent", was an envelope marked in block letters LOCKSMITH.

Legacy gently slid the key out of the manila housing and felt the weight on his fingers. The original he'd formed in his mind, long ago, would have been brass. The duplicate that pressed against his skin was a clean silver-plated composite metal. Legacy was prone to distraction. His mind wanted to debate the origin of the metal that he weighed in his hand – but then, he heard a single beep of his watch and came back to the present moment. Five o'clock, not much time.

How had the delivery of this key slipped past him during the day? He quickly went over all of the comings and goings into his office that day. Eleven twenty-five, the regional director had entered and asked him something; it hadn't registered of importance, he hadn't even replied. The director got impatient and left seven minutes later. One twenty-five, someone had entered and spoke to him, couldn't recall what. Random comings and goings of no distinction until someone had entered and set a cup of coffee, prepared exactly how he liked it on the desk. He picked up the cup and tasted the jet-black liquid, now cold, and deduced that the key must have come in with the coffee. There had been no other

interruptions during the day. The internal phone had rung, but Legacy never answered the phone. His taste buds worked over the coffee until he decided that it was exactly room temperature, 72 degrees, and that enough sugar had fallen out of the solution to fix a time on the delivery. The key had been there for just over four hours.

A melody emerged from the piano clanging in the background interrupting his train of thought, a sweet harmonic sound that died as suddenly as it came to life. Legacy turned to the tape player with an uncharacteristic look of complete engagement.

He thought about how in the regular world people respond to people and leave background music in a place of inconsequence. Legacy's experience was the opposite. He thought of all the people who had passed through his office today. Background music held his full attention, and the sounds that most people placed great importance upon were akin to the stroke of a graphite point across an interoffice memo. They meant little or nothing at all.

The key Legacy was holding in his hand was where worlds overlapped. It meant the end of a search for a killer who left absolutely no trail of evidence back to himself, and it meant the end of Legacy's involvement in the case. It was the precipice of discovery, and even set back four hours by the interference of the inbox, it felt immediate.

As Legacy reached across the table, the cuffs on his suit started to ride up revealing two burn scars on top of his wrists. These were the cause of many discussions, and even appeared in his psych file. He always answered any questions with a blunt statement "they were self inflicted" and depending on who was asking he'd add "I've put others through worse, much worse."

His hand found what it was looking for. He pulled out an old rusted sea captain's lock from a plastic bag. On the label included with the lock it stated, "Slain Couple, Barbaric Discovery Bound and Gagged"

He paused, thinking about how barbarians never would waste their time on such deviant behavior. Barbarians had a clean, brutal way of life that didn't offer much time for perverse fantasy. The minute a barbarian started planning the elaborate death of two people, he'd get his throat slit for thinking small.

Fifteen minutes passed. The key was now warm in his left hand, and the lock had rusted imperceptibly more. He needed to put his wandering mind to better use, a quick review. Legacy looked again at the folder that contained the documents on the case. A note on the front page in clear, official handwriting read, "this one isn't going to be easy." He began to draw his hands together; the key would either fit the lock or not, and it would be over. He looked at the clock and started

packing up the file.

He remembered vaguely where it all belonged, a long filing cabinet marked “Fridge.”

The Fridge was the area where the coldest cases got their last official stamp of final review. They certainly never got solved. That was until Legacy came to preside over the Fridge. The resolution rate was something over ten percent for his predecessor, and that figure included cases that were resolved by confession or reclassification while sitting in the Fridge. Not all crimes stay crimes, almost five percent become accidents, or acts without any consequence. The regional director, prone to simplifying, called those cases AWACs.

The chief had explained the lingo to him on the first day, chuckling and snorting through what seemed to be a hilarious jargon-driven FBI anecdote.

Legacy had had to pretend he was listening, and resorted to resolute nods to convey attention; it was irrelevant to him what others called things or how things came to be. Each case was its own chaotic tune, played over a simple constant rhythm.

A silence blossomed as the chief waited for Legacy’s reaction. Nothing. Legacy should have known better and laughed, but he didn’t have much to laugh about at the time. The chief knew that Legacy was a special case, sent down from the central office. He probably forgave Legacy’s lack of interest on that day because the clothes covering him were the same he’d worn for the entire first month of his tenure at the Alexandria office - as gossip claimed, the clothes that he wore to his wife’s funeral. Actually, Legacy owned several identical dark suits and that their perception wasn’t quite true, but Legacy recognized that it was quite true that he had never completely taken off the clothes he’d worn to his wife Laura’s funeral.

Now five years later, key in hand, Legacy couldn’t muster a sign of satisfaction as the key reached the lock.

CLICK, it skated on the rusty metallic surface. There it stayed. A furl on Legacy’s brow, it wasn’t like him to be this wrong. He turned the lock to the light and realized that the keyhole was covered with a brass swivel guard that had to be moved out of the way before the key could be inserted. He’d studied the lock for hours, a thousand times in his mind, and could have described it down to the last detail with his eyes closed, but this close to the end of the day, Legacy always lost concentration.

The door opened. A woman’s voice spilled into the room, commanding and distant: she sounded like she was hailing a cab. The interruption didn’t sound the least bit important. Legacy slid the guard away from the keyhole, and that’s

when someone grabbed his hand and pressed their own palm up against it, shaking it professionally.

“Hello.”

Legacy looked up, something about her impatient tone didn't seem to mix with the perfectly applied make-up, and cropped black hair framing her fresh young face. She had a stiff, official posture. Legacy didn't need to hear another word. She was a product of the academy, down from Washington on orders: ambition and charisma shared signature marks on the defining lines on her figure. It took him no time to realize that whatever she said next was going to be a lie.

“I said, ‘Hello’.”

Well, maybe he would have to wait. Legacy had perfected a completely expressionless expression in his days in the army, and he was wearing it now. She continued.

“I'm here to help,” There it was. “I'm your new partner.”

“I had an old partner?” Legacy quipped.

“Agent Traxel has been your partner for three years.” She pointed to a desk across from Legacy's. “He packed up over a month ago.”

“He wasn't my partner.”

Wagner ran a curious eye over the papers on Legacy's desk. “I know they let you do whatever you want around here-”

“Listen, if introducing yourself will finish this conversation, just do it and move on.”

Wagner took an awkward step backward, like she felt the force of his words flow into silence, even the piano clanking from the tape player took a rest as if it were in some silent complicity with the moment. Wagner cocked her head and spoke.

“I'm Agent Spears. Brittney Spears.”

Legacy regained his momentum, “Well Agent Spears –”

“What kind of music sounds like that? I mean I've got a cousin who plays like that, and I certainly wouldn't reproduce it amplified.”

Legacy found himself answering the question before taking offense at the remark. Later, he realized he could have ended the conversation right there.

“You have to be patient, this tape was produced by a boy who can't effectively tie his shoes.”

The rattle became a loud pounding, it sounded just like -

Agent Spears chimed in, “Is that him banging his head against the keyboard?”

A voice in the background of the recording asked if they should stop the recording.

Wagner took quick steps around the desk and scanned Legacy’s tape collection. Each tape was labeled with an instrument, a name, recording time and the word “savant”.

Wagner continued, “Is this what you’re going to listen to all the time? My God, who could listen to a glockenspiel for 14 hours?”

Legacy looked up and found himself staring into Wagner’s deeply sarcastic green eyes. He was compelled to answer from a rusty internal social reflex. “Recordings like this remind me how much can be hidden under layers of resistance, real or unreal.”

Her words had the graceful arc of razor wire “Are you a recording, too?”

Legacy looked her up and down and then let his eyes settle on her shoes.

“The music has the additional benefit of keeping civil people away.”

“Considering this particularly charming reception, you must be beating them off with a stick.”

Legacy smiled inside, the tumblers in his brain had finally clicked, but he remained visibly unchanged as he regarded Wagner. He sat in his chair and looked straight ahead. The words were directed at Agent Wagner’s waist. “Now, are we almost finished?”

It wasn’t a question. She wouldn’t, however, give up.

“Is that the key? Does it fit?” Wagner continued. “They want me to learn from you. I tried being polite earlier when I delivered the key, it didn’t work.” The phone rang, Legacy didn’t move. Wagner fixed on Legacy’s eyes, which remained totally still, as if the sound didn’t even register.

“Aren’t you going to get that?” Pointing to the cradle attached to a curling wire that brought the phone into Legacy’s world.

“What if it’s a call from your daughter?”

The word “daughter” brought Legacy back into the world where people pick up phones and listen to other people’s voices.

“I have a cell phone.” It was a reflex; he’d trained himself to always immediately respond to anything concerning his daughter. He wondered, as he continued, if he’d been trapped into a conversation by Agent Spears or if coincidence was keeping the communication lines open. A part of him wanted to believe that it

was pure manipulation on the young agent's part. He could respect that. Coincidence was the cowardly way the world kept things in motion. The notion that he might have wasted ten minutes on coincidence angered him.

"I haven't tried the key yet. I don't answer questions, those are my rules."

Legacy found a crumb of sympathy crunching under his foot. "Ask for a transfer, today. I am your superior, right?" She nodded, "You are dismissed."

Legacy had no way of knowing that her orders had come from the very top; there was no way to change her assignment. Something about his tone said that she would have to set the place on fire to get his attention again. She had one last ploy.

The agent's cell phone rang, a melody of Bach she'd downloaded off the internet. Plunging her hand into her coat pocket, she headed for the hallway, reaching the door. Legacy's voice called out from the office, unexpected, forceful.

"Wait!" Legacy was standing. Whatever had caught his attention, it was now more than merely a passing interest. "Who are you?"

Wagner silenced the phone. "I told you –"

"I know, you're Brittney Spears. Listen, my daughter is fourteen, I noticed the humor when you introduced yourself."

"Does anyone really notice humor? I think you either get it, or you don't."

"That's the ringbone my daughter chose for my phone."

She took a step back into the office. "Look, I have an important assignment. It's only my second assignment and the first didn't end up well, so this is it for my career at age 23."

"I went through the same thing at 29."

"Did you go through it as a woman?"

Legacy hadn't expected that; a hint of interest lit his eyes.

"I see you are beginning to get me."

Legacy paused, put all aspects of her behavior since she had entered the room into an equation. An invisible timeline of events dangled in the periphery of his thoughts and like a three-dimensional puzzle, all he needed to do was focus his eyes on an indistinct point in front of him. He squinted as his mind went through a series of approximations that usually led him to a definite conclusion. When his eyes focused again on the room, Wagner was standing in front of him, holding the key; he could tell that she wanted him to offer up the lock. She was unlike

anyone who had knocked on his door in years – everybody wanted something from Legacy. She did too, but it was clear that Agent Wagner understood that asking was the surest way not to get an answer in Legacy’s realm.

A single beep from Legacy’s watch made him flinch. “Is that your wake up call?” Agent Wagner asked in a surly tone. Legacy checked his watch, and the time indicated that he had to go. In a quiet, ritual fashion, Legacy stood and prepared to leave. He blew past Wagner with the same even stride that took him to the door.

Legacy knew everything about Wagner from the moment he’d first seen her. She was the type who believed in laws, rules, and the distinct pleasure of being right by pointing to a code in a book and winning an argument without a thought wasted in contemplation of a solution. She could not be stopped, climbing the ladder in the official ranks of the bureau. He was equally sure that she had ammunition in her gun that would stop him, but short of that, he was leaving. But at the door, the room went silent. The plug to his cassette player had been ripped from the wall and Wagner stood holding the chord like a prize, daring him to notice.

Legacy stopped, still facing the door in front of him. “Plug it back in before you go.”

“Aren’t you going to try this key? It could put a killer in jail tonight.”

“Nothing in the killer’s world changes by my waiting for morning, my daughter expects me home at six.”

Legacy took another step, Wagner’s shoulders rolled forward in defeat. Legacy paused outside the door, his voice echoed from the hall.

“Come in early, read everything in the case file, I’ll be in at nine and you can tell me whether the key is going to fit, in your opinion. Until you know everything about the case, the solution is just another answer in a sea of questions.”

Wagner heard Legacy’s footsteps trail off over the concrete floors of the substructure. She walked slowly over to the desk and spread her arms in a pose of victory. She plugged the cassette player back in and, at the same moment, a stab of melodic perfection erupted from the speakers. It was like the tape was responding to her personal breakthrough, and it was gorgeous.

She flipped out her cell phone.

At the sound of a connection she spoke, “I’m in.”

The beauty of the tune pouring from the player collapsed into sour dissonance.

Chapter 2 The Talk

Not far away, at Legacy's destination, a study session of the highest priority was going on. Three teenage girls "studied" with second-year French books open flat in front of them.

"Nothing leaves this room, I mean it." Lane wasn't going to budge when it came to confidentiality. "I'll have your dad go federal on anyone that tells."

Giggles, shrieks and gasps, the recurring staples of the adolescent conversation rang down the halls of the large, turn-of-the-century apartment. Lane leveled a weighted stare at Chessapeake, or Chess, a bright young girl who, like the true masters of her namesake, had an intellect and intensity that asserted itself onto the world in a playful way. As carefree as she was, she had a competitive streak in her that was totally her father: she liked to win. Her emotions shone out of her eyes unfiltered by any of the baggage of adulthood, beaming beacons, ice blue, lighting up with the promise of a secret about to be told.

Trisha rushed into the silence like running water pulled a by fifteen year-olds hormonal gravity, "Let your dad interrogate me any day, please."

"Your dad is hot. Deal with it." Lane switched into a civil tone, her father was a lawyer.

"It's not her fault." Trisha's exuberance could be explained argued and acquitted.

Chess scowled at her friends, but the pinched expression could not possibly hold. Chess had a natural warm smile. She'd practiced it in the mirror for hours as a child. At fourteen she had perfected a series of facial expressions that could neutralize the sternest teacher at ten paces. The smile that Lane's comments about her dad had brought to life was filled with retribution and pride. Chess let her fingers dial an invisible phone.

"Pick up the truth phone."

Lane picked up an invisible receiver. "I've got it." Chess let her words trickle out pointedly. "My father is not subject of our conversation, n'est-ce pas? He is not the boy you made out with in the audio isolation cubes in French class is he? Shouldn't we be talking about him?"

"Non, non, non. Il etait un garcon; ton pere est un vrai homme."

Chess stood and let her fingers run along the wallpaper as she strolled around Lane. There was little beyond the walls of the lovingly decorated, somehow frozen-in-time quality to the apartment. Despite the loss of her mother suffered

by she and her father, the walls had echoed more of her laughter than the floors had drunk her tears in the years she'd spent growing up here. Her thoughts slowed her gait until Lane was ready to burst waiting for her to talk. Chess used the anticipation to let out with:

“Est-ce que ton petit-ami – grand?”

The delivery was perfect, “Is your little friend, big?” a squeal of laughter blanketed the room, and for a moment there were no French textbooks, there was no nation of France at all. The world disappeared outside and the three teenage girls wrapped themselves in a blanket of nonsense. The embroidery at the top read ‘best friends forever’ and it was warm underneath.

After a moment it was time to get back to the task, but the nonsense hadn't passed.

“Your top is dipping open. Or are you trying to impress us with your cleavage?”

Chess looked down, she was wearing a sweater, not a single cleave in sight.

“Actually, I was talking about myself.” It was Lane that was blossoming quickly and her private school outfit had been modified to invite notice.

Trisha threw a quick signal at Lane and both of them checked the clock. “Why do you keep checking the time?”

“Pas de raison.” Lane's watch beeped.

Chess saw that it was approaching six. Both of the girls were looking at the front door. They knew it would open soon. A wall clock started to chime and at exactly six the latches on the door began sliding open. Trisha's fingers twisted nervously in her hair. Three clicks, then they were open. Martin walked in pulling his coat off in one motion.

“Dad.”

He lit up hearing Chess' voice. It was a total transformation, like every bit of social energy he could gather was for her. His baby girl brought out every ounce of charm Legacy had – wooden, yet still a thousand times softer than the cold steel he so closely carried to his heart.

“Bonjour!” Trisha chimed in quickly. She extended her hand and Martin watched it for a moment before awkwardly shaking it. The father checked off his daughter with a glance.

“We're studying French.” Chess was used to filling in the gaps with Legacy.

“Really?”

“Oui. Actually, it's bonsoir!” Lane walked up to Martin. “And they kiss hello, in

France.” She leaned in and stole a cautious peck on his cheek.

Martin turned immediately to his daughter, awkwardness hung in the air until he spoke.

“Well if we are going to adopt French customs from now on, you can’t give me any trouble for doing this.” He kissed both of Chess’ cheeks then scrubbed the top of her head with his knuckles with a half-smile on his face.

Trisha swooned audibly; Lane pushed the back of Chess’ sweater. “Your daughter has a question to ask, monsieur.”

“I was going to wait until dinner, but I guess that this is the best time.” She shifted weight back and forth on her brown penny loafers.

“Whatever it is, yes.” Martin tapped her on the head with the newspaper he carried in his hand, then swiveled and headed down the hall.

“I want to go on a date, a triple date with my best friends.”

Martin stopped, a slow glance over his shoulder, “With boys?”

“That’s what a date is dad.”

As dry as the martini that was being delayed because of this conversation darted the response.

“Fine, you know the deal.”

“That’s not fair, it puts all the responsibility on me.”

Lane chimed in, “what deal?”

Martin resumed a measured step toward the study door at the end of the hallway. He intoned his answer to the girls.

“If Chess chooses a boy and he hurts her, I’ll end up in jail for what comes next.” The hum continued from Legacy; he loved being home, where the threats stayed in the family. “Make sure he’s the right boy, a mature choice, and we’ll be fine.” When Martin reached the end of the hall, he closed the study door behind him cutting off any reply.

A truck could be driven through the silence, but it wouldn’t be loud enough to drown the peals of laughter that burst out of Trisha and Lane the moment the door latched behind Legacy.

It wasn’t ridicule, but Chess blushed a deep red in front of her friends. Chess charged after her father, “I’m going to talk to him. He will say yes.”

“He already said yes.”

“He will say yes the way I want him to say yes.” She crossed the floor, clop clop clop, all the way to the study. The door closed behind her.

Trisha swooned staring at the study door, “My dad would never go to jail for me.”

Music was coming from a stereo near a high-backed chair. The rattle of ice in a glass and the radiator at a steady volume alternating between hiss and click drowned out the noise of the door latching, or at least they should have. She had to catch him off balance.

Three careful paces into the room, Legacy spoke. A deep voice, “Is this boy the one you’re going to marry?”

“Dad!” Chess screeched. “Are you trying to humiliate me? Those are my friends, they all date.”

She realized the weakness of her argument and saw her chances slipping away, then her mind landed on a trump card.

“You can’t keep treating me like a child. If you do I’ll resent you later –”

“Where did you hear that?”

“I read it in a magazine.”

“I can’t argue with that. I relent.”

Chess started for the door, victorious, the only thing missing was lip-gloss and she dug into her pocket to make the necessary re-application before greeting her friends with a smile.

Chess was only steps away from the door.

Legacy thought back to his former training at special ops, and the days when nobody turned their backs on him. He was a black eagle interrogator, the top one percent of the top one percent: meaning he got almost every one of his “clients” to break. Very few of the methods he had used in the past would be appropriate for a fourteen year old girl that he loved so dearly. Still...

SQUEEEK. His chair produced a painfully drawn out creak that stopped Chess in her tracks. The message was delivered: it wasn’t over.

“If you are ready for dating then you’re ready for the talk.”

Chess willed her feet to bolt out the door, but they stood still. “What talk?” she asked.

He looked over his glass waiting – Chess circled the comment like it was bait, not willing to commit. Her eyes slid to a sidelong glance.

“Every girl,” he continued haltingly “who is dating, needs to have a frank conversation with their dad about all of the things that go on between men and women –”

“You mean?”

Legacy tilted his head to the side neither confirming nor denying the content of the conversation waiting on her next words.

“I’m not ready.” She looked unabashedly horrified, defeated, and, totally wigged out. Legacy turned away. She muttered on her way out. “This isn’t over, I’ll be back when I – argh - I may never date.”

When the door clicked back in place, shutting behind Chess, Legacy’s relief couldn’t be contained, “Good,” he thought.

He’d bought himself maybe six more months of childhood. He looked at a picture on his desk of Chess in the sixth grade. She had her mother’s smile. He never wanted to lose her. Everything she did warmed his heart to its current temperature, livable.

At the same time, Chess brought with her a sense of loss that stung him to the core. She was so much like her mother.

Chapter 3 Ask

“BZZZ” Agent Wagner let the phone rattle along her metal desk. She’d turned the ringer off, but it hardly mattered, as the sound of the phone on “silent” mode could be better described as “almost silent”. The vibration traveled through her fingertips and woke her from a moment of deep concentration.

Wagner often substituted deep concentration for sleep. “BZZZ” this time the phone moved toward the edge of the desk. Wagner lurched forward to keep it from dropping into a waste paper basket. The caller ID read out 14 voice mails at 9:02 AM. “Totally unacceptable” she thought so forcefully that it echoed and she wondered for a second if she’d said something aloud. Wagner had made 54 phone calls over the night with explicit instructions to get back to her by nine.

Local law enforcement professionals know better than to leave an FBI agent waiting. She wasn’t going to start thinking about reprisals until ten, but there were going to be follow-up calls, and these would be conferenced with their direct superior to get their attention.

Her cell phone suddenly burst into a polyphonic song. Only one number had been programmed to ring through and it wasn’t her mother. She stiffened up like a soldier coming to attention. She scolded herself for the reaction. People who

want to lead never should allow themselves to act like – well to act like a follower. She was not a follower and she was in fact in charge of her entire class. Wagner had decided early in her cadet days that she would be the first female FBI director, and that it would happen before the age of fifty. Probably she overcompensated when answering the phone with sudden bluntness.

“I’ll be there in a minute.” Then click. She’d just hung up on the principal, or in her case the deputy director. She batted her eyes quickly until moisture gleamed in the corners, then she licked her lips, an old college trick to keep men looking from her eyes to her mouth. It kept their attention to what she was thinking and what she was saying, and that is the way she liked it.

There were plenty of reasons to look elsewhere and very few reasons to be disappointed. The stares of men had followed her since her second year of training. She’d been a late bloomer and she hadn’t grown into her 5 ft. 7 inch frame until well past graduation. Wagner didn’t give a second thought to her adult appearance, it was a tool, and she maintained it with artful precision. Something inside drove her to keep a sharp edge on every tool that she had. Her face hardly showed an outward trace that she’d slept only two hours a night for over a week. Her haircut, architectural and perfect provided a jet-black frame around a face filled with unflinching gunmetal resolve, cold and accurate. Her professional attire fit close to an athletic body. Wagner’s eyes were her real assets. On the job they seemed to stare beyond her surroundings, like they were in competition with anything that might confine her.

Natural light cast a blue tint after filtering through the dual pane windows of one of the most secure buildings in the country. It made the center atrium and social center of the complex feel more like an aquarium. Wagner looked longingly at the coffee cart line before pressing forward into busy hallways, confidently navigating the honeycomb of dividers and private offices that stood between her and the director’s large corner office. She wasn’t going to let herself overreact this time. She was comfortable, in her element, and ready for anything he could possibly throw at her. Or so she thought. It took only one statement from the director and about three steps inside the door from Wagner before she found her composure challenged.

“How in the hell can you do this to me, Bradley?” Not her best opening line.

Wagner was shouting from just inside the entryway at a tall, dignified man three times her rank, twice her age. “You’re putting me in left field.”

Bradley Wilkes had never tolerated crap from underlings. He was the one that the cadets called Ice. He turned toward Wagner eyes ablaze. “Call me Bradley again, agent.”

“I’m sorry Director Wilkes-”

“That’s not much better.” He said between clenched teeth.

“I don’t want to be pulled out of the action. I’m making progress, I keep developing leads –” She changed her tactic, “I want to stay close to the team. I’m learning so much just working around you.”

Wilkes' smile vanished before it reached the production stage. He seemed to take great satisfaction handing over a file. Wagner knew it had to contain some kind of punishment. “Here’s the file, take the train down and meet his supervisor this afternoon.”

With resignation Wagner let her fingers close around the heavy envelope. It had a picture on the cover of a young man in field fatigues. In the photo, he leaned close into a man tied to a chair. The young interrogator had an expression that was completely unreadable, disturbing in its complete blankness, and the look in the eyes of the man being questioned was pure fear.

Wagner broke her fixation on the photo with the sound of the door opening behind her. She looked up to see the director welcoming in a visitor, “Bob, come in, you’ve met Ashley right?”

Wagner dropped her folder and stammered. “Your honor.”

“Is this one of your daughters? I can’t imagine one of your girls would be that polite, or come to think of it carry weapons in a shoulder, and ankle strap.” He identified the positions of Wagner’s concealed weapons despite the fact that there seemed to be no visual evidence. “Must be one of the younger agents. I’m Robert Doorner.”

Doorner hadn’t visited their office in over three years. It had to be about the case. There must have been a new wrinkle. She realized suddenly that she was standing dumbfounded in front of the director of the FBI. He was about to draw back his lonely extended hand when Agent Wagner grabbed it suddenly, not remembering that her cell phone was still in her palm. A sudden vibration shot up both of their arms. Doorner didn’t show a sign of surprise, he merely commented. “Might have been too quick to judgment.”

“May we have the room, agent?” She studied the stiff precise military stance, tone. The news he was about to give wasn’t good. Wagner would have still put up her pension to stay in the room and hear it.

“Yes Deputy director, sir.” Wagner collected herself and her folder; she gave Wilkes one last questioning look before leaving the office, something big was up. The door closed behind her.

The meeting between the men started on a light note.

“She’s not much older than my daughter. She looks pretty young to be reporting directly to you Bradley.” He noted.

“I just gave her some distance. She lobbied hard to get onto this case, and considering how little progress we’ve made –” Wilkes replied setting up the director for the low expectations that he was peddling.

The director’s brow creased unexpectedly, Wilkes had known him for over twenty years and a display of emotion was almost unheard of. This was the man whose stony demeanor had earned him the nickname “flat line.” He was rumored not to have a pulse. Doorner hid his disappointment so quickly that the expression might have easily been explained as a flicker of the light. His voice presented a gruff charm.

“I know the type, give them a life raft when the ship’s going down and they look at you like you handed them an anchor.”

“Exactly,” Wilkes studied the heavily lined face of the operations director; he had been through public scandals, triumphs and years of unnoticed success. He didn’t want to answer the question that came next.

“So Bradley, is the ship sinking?”

“I’m sending her to meet with Legacy.”

Director Doorner sighed, his question had been answered, and it was clear that he wasn’t pleased. “So the lifeboats are in the water. I’ll tell you if this next one goes down it’s going to blow the lid on this operation sky high.”

THUD THUD THUD. Boxing gloves dug into worn canvas. Wagner worked the bag over like a blood quarrel between her and the center mass. She was going to have to do something she didn’t like to do today.

THUD THUD THUD. She couldn’t control it and it couldn’t be out of her control. There was a life at stake. She wanted a couple more hits before she changed into her travel clothes. Her travel clothes were indistinguishable from her work clothes, but she separated them out as a completely different category in her own mind.

THUD THUD THUD. Let a little more sweat seep into the hair.

THUD THUD THUD. Her life had no room for frustration, no room for the variables, uncertainty principles, or randomness. This detour wouldn’t change her course, whoever he was. He would have to bend.

Thud. Wagner entered the Virginia office, marble stonework over the front portal depicting a woman holding a flag in rippling, curving extension. Wagner was

willing to bet that the woman in the pose would rather be holding a cup containing triple cappuccino, like the one that was in her hand. She flashed a badge at the front desk and asked to see regional director Sam Bailey. A fresh-faced clerk was assigned to escort her. He looked out of place in the navy blazer and tie.

“I’m Dill.” He said in a lazy voice, he stared directly at pinstripes on her chest. “Follow – um follow me, agent -” Wagner said nothing. He finished the sentence in his mind. She walked through the metal detectors, confused when they didn’t go off.

In a relaxed tone, Dill explained that the equipment had broken down about a week prior and that they still made a show like it worked - to deter the people who might bring in a gun or a knife.

They got into the elevator and went to the top, the third floor. Cracked masonry tiles made a line down the center of the corridor. The line of broken tiles led to the door of Sam Bailey.

The clerk opened the door and entered without knocking. Bailey was on the phone and nodded pleasantly at the interruption. He silently offered something wrapped in tin foil to the clerk, a slice of homemade bread.

“Blackcurrant banana bread, my wife’s newest specialty.” He shielded the phone to explain. “Honey, I have to go. I’ll get their impressions for sure.”

He put down the phone, smiled up at Wagner. Wagner felt like she’d been dropped in the Deep South even though she was only twenty miles out of Washington. The capitol of the confederacy was only fifty miles away from the capitol of the union and yet the division of attitude was still wider than stubborn geographical distance would allow. Wagner stared at Bailey across a gorge so wide and so deep that she felt like if she’d stepped forward she might lose her balance and fall into the black current bread abysmal.

The clerk broke the silence “Tell Cecille, it’s the best yet.”

“I’ll let her know.”

The clerk backed out of the room, taking every last moment to stare at Wagner.

Wagner scanned the room, looking for some opening for their conversation. A series of framed fly-fishing images were against the far wall, a solid body iron cast safe sat behind the desk, it had the original FBI logo painted in raised gold leaf on the crown of the lock. The only window had blinds shut.

“It’s a southern custom to flatter the cooking of a man’s wife. It’s like winding a watch, doesn’t make much sense to anything but the insides, but it does keep

things moving smoothly.”

Wagner put out her hand. “How about a handshake?”

“Excuse the crumbs.” He shook her hand then pointed to a chair. Wagner sat.

Bailey looked her up and down. “So, what’s your game plan for getting him on the case?”

“It’s orders from Washington.”

Bailey couldn’t contain a long high-pitched chuckle. “Have you read his file?”

Wagner had, on the train from Washington. She knew that Legacy had taken over the cold cases division five years ago. He had taken a dead-end job and made it into modern mythology, an untapped niche. Cold case review was a formality before Legacy walked into the position. After the percentage of cases closed jumped, Legacy had become a bit of a magnet for unsolved crime. Bailey now received requests for his assistance around the clock.

“Unsolvable crime is a better way to put it. Everything that hit a dead end, all the sudden had a previously unseen outlet once Legacy started looking into it.”

Bailey took pride in the fact that his backwater office had a bit of star quality in the basement. “He thinks different than us, agent.”

“How?”

He walked to the window searching for an explanation. “It’s like that spider web on that stem, see it?” Wagner nodded. “You and I might notice a pattern, develop ideas about the geometry, the location of flies, how the prey became trapped by the sticky threads.”

Bailey turned back to Wagner, and in a warm tone. “Legacy would look at that and tell you which strand the spider made first and which repair he made last, and it gives him insight to where the next fly will be caught. His web is oh so tangled.”

“I bet he doesn’t have to use conditioner either, and his hair is still full and manageable.” Her voice was dry, snide.

“He developed his own method, instead of tracing clues back to the criminal, he projects his theories forward. He creates a profile of what the criminal will do based on what they have already done or who they should be. He got his psy-ops training as an interrogator.”

“And he was pretty good. His files indicate that he was considered the top talker in the FBI.”

“He was a lot better than that, miss. I still think that someone up your office and

other offices around Washington are praying that he'll finish his rehabilitation down here and come back to work. The Army says he could crack stone by glancing at it." Bailey lit a cigarette and blew smoke out the window. "Still legal in Virginia." He gazed out the window, posed like a statue. He had an indifferent way about himself. It was easy to see how he'd gotten to the top. He'd never asked anyone for permission to do anything. Wagner studied that part of him, because it was the only part worth her time.

Bailey seemed to have a perpetual inward smile, an amusement with himself that made everything he did seem annoying. The satisfaction that he took in being watched made Wagner choke on the cold breeze that blew in from the north. It smelled like vanity mixed with stale apples and tobacco. She cleared her throat.

"I'm just here to hand him an assignment then walk him through the work. Holed up in the basement you say?" She was ready to leave. Wagner turned on her heels and headed for the door.

Bailey was used to subordinates that tolerated him and waited patiently while he was grandstanding. He nearly dropped his cigarette as he tried to cut her off. "You'll need a strategy or he won't even acknowledge you're there."

Wagner was too quick to the door, and with a raised eyebrow and confident smirk she breezed through the doorway. She would get his attention. She had a reputation too, nothing got past her and to prove it she added one last comment. "You should have used a four wheel dolly when you moved that safe in, spread the weight." She walked over broken tiles to the elevator. She pressed the button.

Bailey's raised voice echoed down the hall calling in a sugary superior tone. "At least change your shoes." Change my shoes thought Wagner? Then she remembered, she was in Virginia, people didn't have to make sense here, and if they did even a fraction of the time they were put in a position of power.

Bing! The elevator arrived at the lowest level. A wash of green tinted light made the dingy cream-colored walls look like they were somehow bent. A trick of uniform light, flat surfaces can appear continuous over long stretches and the eye doesn't appreciate that kind of continuity. The eye will instinctively strain to make something else, and the walls seem to flex. Wagner's shoes made a clicking sound, which echoed down the hall. The buzz of the lights and a faint rumble of the furnace accompanied her like a choir. The sad thing was, the music was about to take a turn for the worse. She opened the door that had lettering on the inset frosted windows: Cold Cases, room BB2, Martin Legacy.

She straightened her suit, took a deep breath and stepped into the room. The bad attitude that had been cultivated over a morning of disappointments would see her through, she was sure of it. This would be done, and she'd be headed back to

Washington by mid-day.

Twenty minutes later she was standing in Bailey's office. Her lips quivered in visible fury.

Bailey's voice was sticky sweet barely veiling his expectation. "Didn't say nothing? Didn't even raise his head? Probably thought you were the secretary, the women around here wear shoes like that." Bailey left a lazy ring finger extended toward her shoes, raising his gaze and seeing if Wagner would rebound. Wagner met his stare and after a moment of internal calculation and then she smiled at him. It was a hollow smile, but appearances were all that Bailey respected anyway.

"I need to get to know more about Legacy. May I sit? May I have a piece of that delicious bread now?"

A beaming response from Bailey told her that she'd behaved properly. "Wouldn't that be the way to start off?"

Wagner took notes for the better part of an hour. She learned of Legacy's rise through Special Forces to become one of the most heralded field officers in the history of the American Military complex. He was what they called an "information quantity," which was the title given to the top interrogation specialists. These people were considered so vital during the cold war that they were the only agents shared by CIA, NSA, military and FBI. In intelligence circles it was well known that there were three people who got called when information had to be extracted. Two of them belonged to the other side, or sides, Gerhard Shulz worked out of Egypt, he'd shattered men made out of steel. Chrysa Valcheck, better known as the Chrysanthemum, was a medical doctor, organic chemist and sympathetic ear for the Ukraine secret service. It was rumored that people that entered her office ultimately begged for the opportunity to tell their secrets and that she would only let them tell after she was finished breaking their mind into a thousand pieces.

Legacy's ability to get information out of human sources was based on a technique that became known as Hollow Man. It was a modification of a common technique used where the interrogator assembles a series of educated guesses then presents them as facts depending upon the reaction of the person in custody. His intuition had such an overlap with reality that it was hard for anyone to keep a secret as he drilled so far into the bedrock of fact on which they were standing. Legacy's methods relied on him getting inside the mind – perhaps the mind isn't the best way to put it - inside the sequence of thoughts of anyone sitting across from him. Rational or irrational, fanatic or cold calculating capitalists all have an inner logic that is like a code, Legacy seemed to always crack the code and get inside. He was always in use.

“Human nature is the same the world over, I guess.”

Wagner looked up from her notes. This was getting her prepared, but she knew that history wouldn't help her get in the door. She had to find something that interested the man now. Legacy wasn't interested in himself, his own accomplishments or his own capabilities. If he were, he'd be back doing his old job; he certainly wouldn't be in the basement of a regional office. Bailey's patient smile made her dive right back in, “Tell me more about his daughter.”

Wagner had read about the death of Legacy's wife, but the details were blacked out on her report, making the tidbit of information from Bailey quite haunting. “He was five minutes late getting home, literally minutes away from stopping the whole thing.”

Bailey paused, uncertain of how far to go, Wagner picked up the tail end of the story, “I saw in the report that his daughter sat tied to a chair in the closet.”

Bailey added, “Thankfully not watching her mother bleed out.”

Bailey continued adding details about Legacy's life while sucking deep re-filtering the smoky air through the lit end of another cigarette. Bailey's face maintained a loathsome shade of exquisite indifference. Wagner decided that she had what she needed, or at the very least, had all she could take.

Bailey lit a slim, long black cigarette off of the dying embers of his last. Wagner couldn't keep the curiosity off of her face even though the slightest digression meant more time in his presence. A sour thought. Bailey wafted the tip in circles, drawing attention to his mannerisms. “I never smoke the same brand of cigarette twice in one day,” he continued with a self-satisfied smile “I wouldn't want to become addicted.”

Bailey was supplying her with more than textbook information. She wondered why. Wagner saw that vanity was the driving factor for Bailey, he might be showing off, but she also recognized a strong officious streak in the man - he must have gotten permission from above to give out secure parts of Legacy's file. The idea he was simply stupid crossed her mind; it was an attractive thought, one that she would revisit many times in her future associations with Bailey. Wagner knew there was still more to the story even after Bailey stopped talking. Should she go strong or weak - that was the question. She leaned forward, Bailey's eyes took a predictable parabolic arc downward. The frustrated pout of Wagner's lips was pure art.

“I just need something to get his attention, is there anything he considers important, or something he's protective of, anything at all?” She asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Something that connects in with his emotional side, has anything ever caused an outbreak of temper or anger?”

He didn’t take a moment to think, “He doesn’t have an emotional side.”

She decided it was time to test his pride.

“This briefing is useless then, they told me at headquarters that you had very limited influence with him—”

“There was a time when he came up here because he couldn’t get to his daughter’s web cam. He was going to leave to check up on her until tech fixed the blamed thing. I guess technology frustrates him as much as it does the rest of us.”

Wagner slid a slim laptop out of her briefcase. Asking no permission, she pulled a network wire out of Bailey’s computer and plugged it in to her own.

Bailey remarked how her computer suited her. “An odd convergence.”

Wagner looked at the screen, her fingers tapped the keys then traced the sleek lines tilting the screen to get a better viewing angle. She must have driven the high school debate club crazy. It was probably a coincidence that Bailey stared at all of the ports on the backside of her machine.

Wagner had found what she was looking for, as the face of Legacy’s daughter, Chess appeared on screen. Her home page loaded and Wagner hinted at a breakthrough for the first time since crossing the Mason-Dixon line. Chess was the best way to get to Legacy. She clicked on Chess’ bio page and read. Afterward she left with a plan.

Twenty minutes passed, three different brands of cigarettes littered the ashtray before Wagner poked her head back into the office.

“I need an access card, I’ll be here for another day.”

“Was it something I said?”

Wagner flipped her hair and smirked, then said with an edge “Isn’t it always about you?”

He chuckled through his nose, and then skidded a set of keys across his desk, her hands were filled and she caught them at the edge of the desk with her thigh. Bailey’s eyes reflected the glowing tip of his cigarette, satisfied. “Wilkes said that you never sleep.”

She eased away from cold metal and let the keys drop into her cupped hand. Wagner looked up and to her surprise Bailey had slipped past her and was standing in the doorway ready to leave.

“There’s a gym and a shower on the second floor. That and keys to the records room should keep you busy for the night.”

Chapter 4 Youth

Legacy buttered a piece of thin burnt toast and crunched distractedly while a bright fresh-faced Chess crashed over his shoulder reaching for his coffee cup. She wore her school uniform, skirt and jumper over a clean pressed white shirt. She brushed the crumbs off of Legacy’s suit talking and spitting more on top of the momentarily clean pinstriped landscape.

“Dad, turn down the toaster.” She snatched Legacy’s cup of ominously black coffee and took a gulp before plunging down another piece of toast for her father.

“Why is it that when you make coffee this shade it’s fine and when I make toast like this it messes up your whole morning? How come the toaster setting keeps changing?” He was off on a visual tangent. “Is that skirt at least two inches below the knee?”

Chess pushed his cup back into his hand, “In reverse order of your questions, yes, exactly two, I don’t know. Check it next time and because toast is my life.” Legacy knew that she always turned the toaster setting to black when she programmed the coffee machine on a timer the night before.

“I don’t like change.” Legacy played the game, it made Chess smile, and after three years, he actually liked burnt toast.

“I’ll be home at-”

“Six.”

“I’ll check in on you at –”

“Three.”

“The gun is in the –

“Hall closet.”

“Always shoot for-”

“The knees.”

Legacy didn’t like that answer, he preferred a tight center-mass cluster, six shots then reload. Chess had researched the matter and in an act that could be counted as teen rebellion declared that a knee shot hurt most, incapacitated best, and almost never led to a mortal wound. They had reached a compromise early on in

their intruder defense preparations; Chess got one shot at the knee, and if she missed she had to go for the head. Chess had become an unconscious marksman as a result.

Legacy let one eyebrow arch in a show of pained acceptance, then began packing any hint of emotions back inside for the remainder of the day. He grabbed his umbrella in one hand, briefcase in the other and was out the door.

Legacy could leave a room and it would feel like he was still there, because there never was an actual sound that went with his exit.

Chess harrumphed as the door closed behind him. She hiked up the hem of her skirt using Velcro patches to secure the hem where it suited her. She turned down the toaster before pressing down the plunger on a toaster pastry. She stomped around the kitchen gathering up her books and shoving them into her backpack. She did things her way too.

The shadows were cast long with soft edges from the overcast skies. Legacy checked his watch; he always caught the 7:32 train from the Terrace station. That wasn't completely true, on rainy days he used the awnings of the city center mall to backtrack and catch the 7:31 train from Baudley Station. That required preplanning, so he left three minutes early on those days.

He cleared security at exactly 7:42, if he was early he'd exchange a few sentences with the guard, ask him about his family. Legacy had noticed years before that the guard's security badge was thicker from the side than any other employee, and when the guard turned it over it revealed a family picture tucked inside the plastic cover. Anybody that kept their family that close to the heart deserved a reminder of them once or twice a day.

Legacy had a lot on his mind that day. It was clear that Chess was getting to that stage in life where he could not protect her openly. All of his work would have to be seamlessly constructed behind her back so that it was not thought of as intruding on her personal space.

He thought about many things on the walk down the hallway to his office, but not a single mental mention of the young agent, until he was reminded of her presence the moment he opened his door. She was there, in his chair, waiting, intruding on his personal space.

She moved quickly to the tape player and turned on the music. He didn't immediately recognize her.

"Are you?" He kept a noncommittal tone.

"You told me to come back. And you asked me to tell you if this key fit this lock." She pointed to both the lock and key out on the desk.

Legacy was unreadable, "Listen my answer is no."

Wagner lit up, "And what is my question?"

"You're here from Washington, I can't imagine you want to be here, unless my reputation has been completely forgotten so let's get this over with and you can go home." Legacy kept his words as clinical as possible, "I am unwilling to assist in any investigation that Jeremy or Tom or Paul think that I am needed for."

Wagner had a look of shock on her face and Legacy knew why. He had named the three top field officers at the bureau by their first names. Why did he get to call them by their first names? It was a clear double standard.

"Tell them that I looked haggard, unorganized and I'm unable to concentrate on tasks handed me. Mention that I still keep my wife's murder case in the back of the fridge and that should seal the deal." An uneasy look on Wagner's face made Legacy believe that she'd had a similar thought. "I know what is in my file and I love to live below their expectations."

Wagner stiffened with resolve and gave a reply that surprised Legacy.

"How about if I tell you with absolute certainty whether this key fits this lock, and then you decide whether you want to work with me."

"What do you know about the case?"

"More than you do at this point." She let her words linger a while on the sharp edge of the upturned corner of one side of her mouth, "I know the answer."

Legacy took the key from her hand, using the exchange to lock eyes with the young agent "Did you try the key?"

There was something deeply unnerving about the way he stared at her. It was like he'd entered a room of hers, a private place, uninvited. The most disturbing part was that he treated it like it was his home, even with her most private thoughts. Wagner felt her skin quiver, she wanted out of that office more than she wanted out of Bailey's. It took all of her determination to meet his eyes and say. "No."

There were thirty-six tells that Legacy could have looked to if he'd had any doubt that Wagner was telling the truth. Involuntary responses like the tightening of the skin of the forehead, even-numbered blinking pattern, pupil dilation to name a few, but there was no need. He did, however, harvest a wealth of information on how Wagner presented truth while guarding a greater secret.

"Then how do you know if it fits? I took it off the wall of a locksmith 200 miles away from a crime that happened twelve years ago. You're playing the odds, 50/50 to the layman, but altered dramatically if you know the details of the case. He had no connection to the crime, the victim, he didn't even need an alibi

because nobody ever questioned him.”

“Why would they?” Wagner chimed in. “But he did it. And that key is going to open this lock.” Legacy stared at her hand as she tilted the envelope holding the key and - CLACK. It tumbled onto the desk. She had been unready for the weight of the lock and it slid in her grip.

“You haven’t already tried the key.” He continued. It was not a question.

Wagner blew a stray piece of hair out of her eyes, “You asked me not to, and we’re partners.”

Legacy let that one slip by, and he asked her for the key that he’d left behind in the folder. He spoke his observations out loud as he held the cold steel in his hand. “Nobody has touched this, no oils, and it’s cold as the room.”

Wagner kept her face neutral. “I could have done it late last night wearing gloves.”

Legacy didn’t want to explain why she was wrong, the barrel of the key was made of a soft metal, and any resistance from the lock would have left scratches on the louvers. He replied dryly, “I hadn’t thought of that.”

He pulled a key out of his briefcase and put it into the lock. After a moment of fishing around the rusted interior sleeve of the lock, it gave a sharp click, and the lock opened.

The shock sent a visible shiver through Wagner’s body. Legacy watched as Wagner’s confidence turned to anger. Her feelings seemed so close to the surface that it felt like he might almost touch them.

Legacy walked around the desk and took all of the evidence from the case and with a long arm swept it into the bin that sat beside his desk. “Time for the next case.”

Wagner took advantage of the moment. “I have something for you that will sweep everything off your desk.”

Legacy felt a twinge of authority enter the room. “Put whatever you’ve brought in the filing cabinet, agent, I’ll get to it.”

Wagner launched into an explanation how this new case needed his undivided attention, that he needed to familiarize himself with the facts over the evening and that she’d come up with a plan to mobilize their assets by the next morning. It took her fifteen minutes to lay out a detailed organizational brief.

Legacy, in the meantime, moved about his desk shifting the other two cases across the division markers on the desk and away from the trashcan. He then pulled out another file and put it on the extreme left-hand side of the desk. There

were five cases again in front of him vying for his attention. He sat and began leafing through the documents in the center one. The noise in the background faded and he looked up.

Wagner was watching him with impatience. Legacy knew she would be there, but as he tipped his head up he managed a look of surprise. "Are you still here?"

Wagner looked like she wanted to overturn the desk and jump up and down on his chest with the heels she had discarded because they made her sound like a secretary. Legacy could see that she was looking for a way out of this assignment without conceding defeat. She wouldn't let this strange attention-deficit poster person ignore her. Legacy had once been told by someone very close to him that every conversation with him was a puzzle that had to be solved. Even silence drove people crazy around Legacy. Wagner filled the silence. "I saw you palm the key you had cut last night, the key for the lock, and realized that the key you left must have been the blank that you made to show the agents who were searching the locksmith shops. You knew that key fit, so you took it home expecting me to use the blank then tell you that the key didn't fit. It would have proven that I couldn't keep up with you and gotten me out of your hair."

She leaned over his desk forcing him to either stand or look up to a younger woman. Legacy sat with a supremely confident look on his face.

"I figured it was based on a guess, since you certainly didn't know enough about what happened to come to a conclusion." Legacy's expression was flat and unchanging; he noticed that Wagner couldn't even look at him. She blasted into a speech, she had a lot to prove and it seemed like she was trying to do it all in one breath.

Wagner went point by point, she traced Legacy's notes backward in time, and the profile he had created of the criminal as a meticulous, precise male. Also, there were the photos of intricate knots. This was a guy who would be working in a field where detail was paramount, one where he could work alone, a clockmaker or art restoration. Her feet walked a line back and forth on the carpet in front of Legacy's desk. She continued, not looking at Legacy for fear that she'd lose control and slap his expressionless face until it turned a blushing shade of red.

Her voice was under control by the time that she explained how the old sea shanty lock led him to fix on the idea of a locksmith. He'd then sent agents on errands in a radius of the crime, all looking for a trophy case, with a key inside. It would be somewhere in sight of the proprietor at all times. It would remind him of the perfection that he had experienced.

He instructed the field agent to make a half-hearted bid on the object. If the owner were eager to take it down and show it to the agent, he would do what he

could to make an impression of the key secretly and bring it back to HQ.

Wagner finished up by recounting what Legacy already knew, it had taken Legacy two years to find the right locksmith. After countless hours wasted in expedition, he hadn't backed off his theories because he had gotten into the head of the killer. He didn't have a shred of evidence, and he didn't need any to catch him. She finished with a phrase that stuck in his mind, a crafted complement that nonetheless struck home. "Your work on the case had a peculiar, forward-thinking brilliance – the kind that only gets proved right by result."

Wagner immediately stopped short after the compliment. She hadn't looked up since she'd launched into her narrative, something that Legacy took as fear that he wasn't paying attention to a word she'd said. But her fears couldn't be further from the truth. He stared at her, studied her, fascinated with something just below the surface. It was an interest level he reserved for only – well, to be honest he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt that involved with words that were not his own – still not a partner he thought.

"You read all the files in one night?" His most respectful tone still sounded like mockery.

Wagner nodded. "Now that we know he did it, it should be easy to connect him to the crime." Legacy could tell that she was up to something.

"Too easy, I would even anticipate that you're ready with that information. I would go so far as to expect you to slap it down on my desk in dramatic fashion." Legacy drummed his fingers on the loose stacks of paper on his desk. A few pages slid off the side.

Wagner produced a file, and she carefully laid it on the desk. "I'd rather not disrupt your system."

The locksmith was named Burt Edger. He had attended high school with Ms. Miller, and he got a job working in the same department as her in college at the reprographics center. Coincidence again when he opened a locksmith shop in the neighborhood where she and her husband moved outside of town. He was contracted to put new locks on their front door two years before the killings. "He was a very patient man," interrupted Legacy.

"He saw the act as inevitable; impatience didn't enter the picture." It was a grace note that Legacy obviously agreed with. Her assessment pleased him visibly.

"Exactly," Legacy found himself moved to agree, "you also read my case notes." Wagner nodded. "A laudable invasion of privacy."

"I thought so," Wagner stretched back in the chair, fingers linking behind her head in victory. "I did my part, now I need you to accompany me to Washington

for a briefing. We're going to be partners."

Legacy's face tightened. He didn't like the word partner. The word partner led to involvement. It wasn't personal, but a change came over his demeanor.

"I can't leave. I don't travel."

"You have seen duty on all parts of the globe." People never saw him; they never saw him coming and that was part of the job.

"I don't go anywhere, anymore. Whatever you think I'm going to do for you is not going to happen. Get out of my chair." His tone was suddenly dry and reprimanding.

Wagner never liked being told to move "It's your duty, I don't have to convince you – I can have someone who outranks you on the phone in five minutes."

"And I guarantee, I'll be less impressed with them than I was with you. You should have been honest with your expectations from the start. It would have saved you time." He'd already started digging through drawers searching for a file. He had begun taking notes on the folder cover when a hand slammed down on his.

"How honest do I need to be?"

"I can't train you in my methods, I can't reverse your instincts in one day, you're FBI through and through. I know about the reports and deadlines that came with taking a live case. I can't work with that."

"Give me a chance."

"Tell me why I am so damn important, tell me why standard methods are ineffective and the people on the case are so incompetent that you need me. Tell me that and I'll show you why we can't work together."

Demeaning the FBI struck Wagner like a blow to the cheek, her eyes welled up in fury.

Legacy compounded her frustration by putting pen to page, motioning for her to start talking. "I'll translate what you say, from FBI speak to what you're really saying as you go along. If that doesn't prove how far away we are, nothing will." He readied a pen in the crux of his angled fingers. The curves at the joints strongly indicated that they had been dislocated and or broken several times. Still, his grip was a rock and the pen hovered motionless in the air. If there was pain, it was controlled.

Wagner started, "We don't need you."

He wrote down, "We need you."

“There are other people we can go to.”

Legacy scribbled, “There’s nobody else we can go to.”

“It’s like you said yourself, it’s not life or death.”

Legacy paused then “Somebody’s about to die.”

She tore the paper out of his hand and scanned it for a moment. A wave of tension rippled through her body, and it seemed to persist swirling in the pale green waters of her eyes. Legacy couldn’t put his finger on what drove her desperation. Everything he’d written down was true; he could see it in the way his words had gone through her body. She would lash out at him soon and leave. It was exactly what he wanted, but something else lay below the surface of her anger. He had no idea what it was, and for a moment it fascinated him. Legacy didn’t hear what she had to say, and the sound of the door slamming brought him back to an empty room.

The paper was on the floor. She’d ripped it into remarkably uniform strips. And looking at a fragment of his notes, it finally hit him. He understood what was going on. Now he just needed to decide what to do about it. He looked over the desk at a phone that he hadn’t picked up in five years.

Wagner dropped her keys three times on the way to her rental car. It was a nervous tick. She dropped trivial things, like business cards and college boyfriends. She’d never dropped anything important. She’d never dropped her weapon when training in an Alkali swampland during training. Even when the first layer of skin cells turned slippery due to the drop in Ph levels. She had never dropped a coffee cup on the way to her mouth. It was her keys. Perhaps the sound of them clattering against the pavement comforted her. She couldn’t wait to discharge her weapon at something.

She wondered if she could tune in on any felonies in progress. No, killing somebody in the commission of a crime wasn’t the answer. It was an answer, but it wasn’t the solution.

She picked the keys up off the pavement. Her fingers began deftly flipping the keychain over and over like a pinwheel. The keychain slalomed up her fingers only to slide down the backside of her hand. It was like the old coin trick except as the ring moved up, her other fingers rotated the keys.

It did keep her mind off of her frustration, and it kept her hand off her gun. Two very positive results. Frustrated was not the right word, pissed off. Of course that was two words but she was willing to be verbose in this instance to set the right internal descriptive tone for her feelings. Pissed off and something else, she couldn’t put her finger on it.

She was going to have to report to her superior that she was ineffective in activating Legacy on the case. It would look even worse after the tantrum she'd thrown in his office in front of the director. There was no going back to this case; it was a disgrace. The only thing that could save her would be if one of the leads that she'd dug up before she'd left turned the case around. She started mentally reviewing every contact she'd made in the last week.

Fingers occupied, mind occupied and she still couldn't help her body from shaking in anger. She was so pissed off and something else, what was it? CLANG the keys dropped.

Her phone vibrated as she knelt to pick up the keys. Wagner thought that she'd inadvertently pushed one of the buttons as she leaned over, but a second vibration had her reaching under her coat to her belt where it was strapped. Bailey's voice was on the other end.

"Legacy called me, he needs you back."

"I've been humiliated enough for one day, I'm pissed off and – and-" she searched through her vocabulary for the most acid-laced word that would describe how she felt. She really wanted to get a little bit back from Legacy and the way he'd trivialized what she stood for, which made it all the more surprising when the word she spit out hit the air. "And ineffective." That was it, ineffective! She had never been ineffective in her entire life. It was a description that had never been placed beside her name, and now she was using it in judgment of herself. Bailey was also clearly not prepared for the quick change in her tone and his voice took on the syrupy false timber of step-fatherly support.

"You'd best hear what he has to say." She ended the connection and stood in the garage. Pools of light zebra-striped along her path back to the entrance. It seemed such a long way back.

Legacy sat in the conference chair in the central briefing room. The file that she'd left sat closed in front of him. Wagner entered from the door behind him, as she did her best to sneak into the room. Legacy's head rose immediately. A smile spread across his face. His opening move had been met, and he was pleased with the young agent's ability to adapt. She didn't let him enjoy the moment.

"So what did you learn in five minutes?"

"Nothing, I haven't read it. You realize that we cannot work on this together, I'll give you my insights and then you can take them back to your superiors. That's all I have to offer. We won't work together again after today.

Wagner thought for a moment, then walked slowly to a nearby chair, kicked it

out from under the table. She let the rattle of the metal legs ring in the room for a moment before quieting them by sitting down.

“On the inside, my heart is breaking Agent Legacy. Really. Am I going to sit here while you read it?”

“No,” Legacy was suddenly serious, focused. He made no wasted movement, and his eyes were as piercing as a blade. The temperature the room seemed to drop. Wagner pulled her arms close to her body and crossed them. “I am going to tell you what is in the report without reading and watch you. I should know everything I need to without asking you a single question.”

Legacy began. The case was certainly an abduction, or rather a series of abductions. Murders get attention and nothing matching any of the facts of the case. At this Wagner interrupted, “but you don’t know any of the facts of the case. You said so yourself.”

“I don’t need to.” Legacy didn’t bat an eye and continued. He told her that the first victims had been released unharmed, but that it seemed to be escalating and recently one of them had been killed.

“If you’re just guessing, I can talk to a psychic down the hall –”

Legacy spoke over her, every word emphatic. “And now someone has been taken – and this time they’re somehow connected to the FBI.” It was a connection that Legacy surprised himself with.

“How could you know that?”

“Believe it or not, you told me at the end of our last discussion.” When Legacy worked himself into this state there was no time for distractions; he pursued the facts like an addict. His voice was insistent. “An agent?”

Wagner, always a fast learner, began to reply in short bursts. “A cadet.”

“Female?”

“All of them.”

“A sexual predator,” He watched Wagner’s pupils as he interrogated the case through her eyes, essentially interrogating himself on the possibilities. Each time, she gave him a response that indicated yes or no something spurred him onto another thought. “No something worse, a group of trained rapists.”

“Close.”

“The perpetrator pursues originality, recognition – the repetition indicates confidence, an agile operation, something different, no ransom?”

“None.”

“Something’s wrong though, why is this case so desperate, if they’re looking at my methods – I mean usually they take years –”

“They can’t this time. We need to get the next one, that’s why we need your full cooperation.”

“You’re acting like this is a matter of national security –”

“They have the director’s daughter; she is the cadet that needs your help. The details are at a level for which you’re not cleared. I am not supposed to be confirming any of this – I don’t know why – they could arrest me –”

“Calm down, that’s my specialty. I needed to know, I was going to know anyway. We should take that briefing now.”

“We? Briefing, I thought you were through after this conversation.”

“I have known the director for twenty years, I knew his daughter, and I have a daughter.” He let his words sink in; the weight was surprising. Wagner wasn’t expecting emotion, and when it came out, it made gravity kick in stronger. His control over the room irritated her. If she’d only stopped to think about the irritation she could have learned an important lesson, but at age twenty-five, she preferred simply being irritated.

“Let’s go.”

Legacy didn’t move, “They’re coming to us.”

Legacy and Wagner waited in very different ways, for the briefing to come to them. Wagner had her keys out, flipping them around her fingers like a circus performer keeping her hands occupied. Legacy sat very still, analyzing her preparations for the arrival of the FBI’s top brass. He smirked enjoying the passive pleasure of watching another neurotic person. Her eyes flicked up occasionally as if to say “go ahead, call me strange you statuesque whack job.” Legacy was only guessing, but something told him he was on the right track.

“I really like to be stared at.” She broke the silence.

He shifted his attention to the corner of his eye and left it there for quite a while. Legacy didn’t really think about her as they sat in the room. His goal was not to make an impression; it was to find the proper level of help that wouldn’t commit anything to anyone. He could tell from his interview with Wagner that the situation involved a criminal who lived in a world of thoughts, not actions. FBI is based around finding people who act without thinking. He’d said that once in a high level meeting. He didn’t get invited to many high level meetings after that. It was a win win situation. Now he’d have to be careful to step on just enough toes where they’d still listen, but they wouldn’t want him to be their dance

partner. He planned his next move in silence.

After about twenty minutes the world came back into focus CLANK. Wagner's keys hit the ground and as she knelt Legacy actually noticed the face of the woman opposite him. He was moved to speak. "You should fix your make-up before they get here."

Wagner had smudged her lipstick. She took out her compact and after a swift succession of masterful brushstrokes, she puckered her lips, a wet, perfect, sarcastic kiss touched the air.

Wagner wasn't going to let him get the better of her.

"You should fix your tie." It was a perfect knot.

"I'm into grunge."

CLANK. The doors opened.

Uniforms walked in, straight, official, purposeful brisk steps. Following them was Director Wilkes who walked right up to Wagner, at the head of the table. He was about to ask for her to move when Legacy broke the silence.

"I saved you a seat beside me, Larry." The room watched as Wilkes bypassed Wagner and walked over to Legacy.

"Martin, we need you."

"I don't respond well to being needed."

"You respond to being challenged- "

"That's why you sent her."

A loud intake of breath signaled that Wagner very much wanted to say something at this point. She bit her lip as Legacy pointed a long finger in her direction.

Legacy saw a light go on inside of Wagner as she made the realization that she was the lure. Not a lot of dignity in being used, especially for someone so concerned with her image. She had come into his office thinking that she was in the game when really it was all going on around her. She shot glances at the door, and Legacy knew that's where she most wanted to be headed. They had many things in common.

Wilkes launched into his briefing, and Legacy openly split his attention. He looked at Wagner as she shifted in her chair, miles away. He could tell that she hadn't expected this, and beyond that she hadn't known why she'd been sent until now. Her disappointment was transparent. The tension on her face was like the top layer of a perfectly still lake, symmetric and balanced but waiting only

for the smallest impulse to plunge below.

Now, Legacy wasn't sure that Wagner's face was pretty although he did notice the way men in her vicinity stole glances at her and one of the women from the CIA delegation did the same. Wagner didn't look at any of them; the imbalance suggested some kind of charisma.

He thought for a moment, letting Wilkes drone on in the background. He interrupted Wilkes.

"Agent Wagner has already begun briefing me." Legacy turned toward Wagner, which consequently put his back to the Deputy Director.

Everyone around the table knew Wilkes. The air momentarily left the room. The agents stared at Wilkes, waiting. His composure was barely equal to the task, but he calmly replied, "She is not up to date on the recent developments--"

"I don't want to know recent developments," He let his opening statement sink in.

Legacy turned in an arc. He scanned the faces, seasoned agents all with specialties. Legacy went down the line and silently identified their role on the case, coroner, forensics, communications, three regional investigators, five national, CIA – it wasn't a parlor trick, it was his specialty, instant asset evaluation. He paused for a moment confused. Why would all of these officers be in this briefing room? He had known that this was big, but the assembly of personnel told him that every resource was being tapped, and the stunning part was, that it was being brought directly to his door. This assembly had been pulled from the case to meet with him, Legacy had been expecting a mixture of specialists, and what he got was a room full of leaders, these weren't people who were used to taking orders from anybody. The ripple that he'd started with his interruption went through each and every face at the table, and all of them had a reply. This was a team of the best the FBI had to offer, convened for the purpose of saving the Director's daughter.

It was an operation of the scale that comes around only a few times in a career, something with no estimable price tag. His gaze circled the room and landed on Wagner, she was the youngest by far. Legacy continued.

"The perpetrator of this abduction pursues originality, recognition – the repetition indicates confidence, an agile operation no ransom."

A murmur went through the room. An older agent couldn't contain himself and leapt into the conversation. "You're saying you haven't read the file?" Legacy nodded. "Why would he abduct and return without ransom?"

Legacy scowled at the interruption of his thought process. He stopped. He didn't

even look at the agent, instead turned to Wilkes and bit off each word.

“Keep your men silent.” It was a mode of Legacy’s behavior that hadn’t been seen for years. It was the side of him that kept him from being promoted and put him at the bottom of the list for the yearly company picnic. People in the bureau often spoke of his temper and related behavior. It was mislabeled as anger, arrogance, or intolerance. The truth of the matter is that his behavior was a well-honed result of all-consuming concentration. He had been trained for a single purpose, and couldn’t even conceive of breaking the concentration he required to pursue that purpose; therefore, any outside comment was dismissed as noise. Legacy had never worked with partners - it was a well-known fact.

Legacy in that moment returned to duty. His demeanor in years past was coming back to him as he strode about the room. Wilkes actually cracked a brief smile – he put out a hand to silence the offending and offended agent.

It was Wagner’s voice that brought Legacy back to the table “There have been no ransom demands.”

“Yet somebody must pay,” Legacy retreated into his thoughts, “something’s wrong with the timing, why is this case so desperate?” He decided to test a pressure point, he said, “the methods I use can take time –”

“They can’t this time.” Wilkes replied, “We need to catch them now; we need you to have these bastards collared in a matter of days.”

He nodded toward the senior agent. “I assume that a body has been found?”

Wagner jumped in “They haven’t escalated-”

Legacy turned to her. “They did, the day that you were sent seeking my involvement, they found a dead body. Isn’t that right, chief?”

Wagner’s words were a fast rolling percussion “We have been looking for the girl that went off camera last week, but it’s still a search and rescue, we have no reason to believe that she’s dead –”

“They found the body yesterday morning, agent.” Legacy said with stone cold certainty, he pointed to Wilkes.

Wilkes gave a military dip of his chin, signifying yes in the most respectful way he could.

The meeting ended after an hour, there were a series of expectations laid at Legacy’s door, none of which he fully committed to. He was “on board,” but as the members of the briefing left the table he knew that many would report private reservations to Wilkes about whether he was “fully on board.”

That was their problem.

It was five o'clock. He still had an hour before he needed to be home.

Chess sat stretching with her legs inching toward the splits. She was developing her own intuition, which told her that this move would almost definitely hurt, YES! She was right. A wave of the strain crossed her face. She was going to be a cheerleader if it killed her. "Now, uh, was not the time to, uh think about pain." She reminded herself. At a certain point in her inching downward, her weight suddenly became gravity's subordinate and it carried her to the floor, legs perpendicular to torso. She practiced her father's restraint for only a moment, and then tears welled up in her eyes. There was not an emotion for the kind, except perhaps the hatred of floor wax, and the rubbery tension that she was putting on her muscles inducing a time-tested response. She screamed.

Legacy was nearing his apartment door when he heard Chess' scream. His keys were in his hand and with practiced precision locks opened, CLACK CLACK CLACK. He pushed the door and met resistance from the chain lock. A hard shoulder into the center of the door ripped the chain from the wall and sent it door flying open.

Chapter 5 Shadow

Chess rolled over on the carpet in the living room, she gave the standard "What kind of freak breaks into his own house?" look at her father, then seeing the desperation in his face, she changed her tone to teenage disinterest. "I was going to get the door you know – ah!" A sudden stab of pain rocked her backwards, eyes rolling down and away from her father.

Legacy looked Chess over. She began rubbing her thighs like they were on fire.

The clock struck six. Legacy looked at his watch, perplexed. He had been early.

In a relationship where consistency had dominated the landscape, this certainly wasn't the regular homecoming. Something had been bothering Legacy since he left the building.

An hour later, there were take out Chinese cartons stacked in a small pyramid on the kitchen table. Legacy had started doing this kind of merry mealtime behavior early on after Chess' mother had died. It was all about the presentation of the food on the table – and very little about the food itself. Legacy wasn't a cook. They hadn't eaten a home cooked meal in years, with the exception of take out from "Home Cooked Caroline's Bistro". Legacy had no contact with his deceased wife's family – he knew they existed, but even if they knew about him and Chess, they had never invited them to dinner.

The pyramid was a childhood remnant that turned into a mealtime tradition. Chess couldn't eat any of the bottom cartons, until they'd both finished the top one. The top one always seemed to contain a mixture of steamed vegetables even though Legacy claimed to stack the boxes randomly. Legacy knew that she had certainly figured out his game by the time she was ten.

She walked into the kitchen, saw the food stacked on the table and announced, "Wow I'm shocked, steamed vegetables." Her tone was drab and distant. "Let's get this over with."

This time the top container was stuffed full of the greasiest, sweetest, fried-est offshoot of modern Chinese cuisine, orange chicken. It was her favorite. She looked at her father for a moment, as his hand reached for the top container and he spooned most of it on her plate. His hands were steady but something else connoted nerves. Chess served the rice.

They ate in silence. Finally Chess turned to Legacy having speared a giant piece of chicken. She pointed the chopstick accusingly at her father and let a little teenage drama seep into the room. "Why the wood splintering entrance? All the freaky strangeness?"

"What freaky strangeness?" Legacy swirled a glass of scotch and sniffed the air above it. "I am feeling over regular if anything tonight."

"You're bothered. I know you want to know why the door was chained in the first place." She reached over and dug her piece of sticky chicken through the rice on Legacy's plate, leaving a slug-like sugary trail.

"I don't." He lied. "Will you eat this please?"

He pointed down on his plate. It was a well-known fact that Legacy liked almost nothing sweet.

Chess spoke with her mouth full. She scooped the offending trail off of her father's plate. "A couple of your friends from work came by to drop off some paperwork—" Legacy leaned forward, but Chess cut him off "I used the SDP. I chained the door."

It was the standard delivery protocol. It called upon Chess to get identification of any unexpected visitor, and then upon confirmation a delivery was acceptable, but only if the materials fit through the gap in the door created by the chain lock. Anything that was a shadow's width wider than four inches had to be left outside or with the doorman.

Chess resented any rule that prevented her from being able to open her mouth or her own front door. She called Legacy's rules "the prison code."

Legacy sat leaning forward, but his head tilted and his eyebrows were arched. He should have known that they'd waste no time getting him all the documents for the case.

Chess shot him a questioning look.

The light in the room seemed to bend until it fell upon her face. She somehow soaked up the light in any room she entered even at fifteen when most kids duplicate every flaw they see in their parents then leave them in the dark. Her largest act of adult rebellion had occurred when she quit the debate team – to join the chess club. The most precious materials in the world existed somewhere in the interconnection of her heart and mind. Legacy felt her impatience build.

"Everything is in your study." She added, "I moved a desk lamp in there so that you'd have light."

Legacy paused as he pushed himself to his feet. "I worry about you." He couldn't look at her – he walked toward his study.

"There's one scrapbook that didn't fit through the doorway. I couldn't open the door, so it's still in the hallway."

Legacy changed direction and walked toward the door.

Legacy bent over the scrapbook in the hall. His shadow crossed the dim light and disrupted the glare off of the plastic coated front page. An oily smear near the corner caught his attention. It meant next to nothing on its own, but like so many things it is a reaction of improbabilities and happenstances that add mass and create their own gravity. Forces not dissimilar to those that had put Legacy on this case often cannot be broken down into obvious components. Many things happened and Legacy was back in the game. In this present, however, in this hallway, it was a simple equation of width and the way a shadow crossed the page that put into prominence a meaningless smudge. It was hardly worth a second thought, really.

The next morning couldn't have started worse. Light streaming through a large window in the study brought a wave of impulses to Legacy's optic nerve. The residual effects of caffeine in his bloodstream fed these impulses. Legacy remembered blinking at five am and now two hours later his eyes were opening again.

A pool of papers had been carefully laid out in rows and columns on the floor. He had put them there for a reason, something in his mind connected the contents better when they were viewed as part of an overlapping puzzle.

Words were running together in his head, but the facts of the case were clear, too clear. Legacy often wondered if recognizing the motives and basic human

condition of the sickest people on earth made him laudable or loathsome. He had been introduced to some new tricks of the sick mind and felt a little disturbed that none of them gave rise to any level of surprise.

Legacy hadn't said goodbye to Chess that morning. He left home at his normal time, but he was occupied up his exit with videotapes that had been stacked beside the briefs. He had saved them for last because the images of a crime can be so powerful that the details get hidden behind the potent emotional noise. It was like the light that penetrated his eyelids this morning – it flooded his perceptions and he couldn't see clearly until he'd looked away.

He was happy to look away from the video when it finished.

The tapes were the kind of thing that most decent people look away from immediately, but others are simply fascinated with it. Legacy knew that it would be the first thing that Wagner would want to talk about. She'd want to know his thoughts. Unfortunately, he was collecting the thoughts of the perpetrators of the crime, not his own reactions to their work. It wouldn't be easy to explain that to her. He walked the path to the subway.

A man shaking a tambourine stood in the entrance with a sign that read, "I only play for money." It was a very modern take on panhandling. It was an artist putting himself above his audience. Legacy could feel his mind borrowing from his surroundings; sometimes it was like watching another consciousness at work. He found that his mind obliged him by constructing a portrait of the kind of people he was pursuing.

He clenched his jaw, and it felt like a creaky vice as the two plates of teeth came together. He was uncomfortable. Legacy felt his involvement pulling at him in a way that he didn't like. There was no warm embrace from the facts of this case.

Wagner waited at the desk opposite Legacy's. The scowl on her face was the same as the previous day, but the suit that she was dressed in was a shade darker than the day before.

"You didn't see it coming?" Legacy wasn't much for morning pleasantries.

"Don't you like my suit?" It was exactly, precisely and explicitly the thing she least wanted to talk about.

"It won't work for today." Legacy quickly moved to his desk. He cleared one of the case sections and dumped a load of papers out of his briefcase. He picked out a roll of film and turned to Wagner.

"I need these blown up until they cover that wall." The long white wall had scattered photos from other cases. He passed over the film.

“I’m not your assistant.” She stood defiantly. Her suit stood with her, both seeming to be insulted. “And what do you mean this won’t work for today?”

“Later, I’m going to send you downtown to solicit adult movie stars in the area – and they’ll think you’re a narc if you’re dress like that.”

“I am a narc.”

“Be that as it may.” Legacy beckoned with a single finger. He knew Wagner’s greatest fear. “I know you didn’t expect that girl to die. I’m telling you right now that the girl they have now, the one that’s about to finish – is safe. We have at least a week.”

Wagner looked at him like the words he’d spoken were in some lost foreign language. “How do you know?”

“And pick up some coffee on your way back, ask –” He realized he didn’t know her name. “My secretary knows how I like it.”

Legacy was pushing around the papers on his desk, just as if the arrangement was some kind of puzzle. He heard Wagner’s final comment and it rang in his ears.

“I want to hear your thoughts on the case when I get back.

Of course she did. Everyone did. The troubling fact was that he hadn’t really developed any thoughts of use at all. There was no astonishing revelation or infallible blueprint that had formed overnight. After a night of study, he knew these men, but he was no closer to them.

Wagner needed to hear that the steps she was taking in her high-heeled leather uppers were steps closer – in reality, Legacy knew that they were simply taking steps. Whether closer or farther, he had no idea.

If she had known him better, this was the kind of game that would get Legacy a polite elbow to the bridge of his nose. She didn’t know him well enough to hit him, yet.

Telling someone what they want to hear is probably the least prosecuted crime in the world. Legacy let his mind wander into the morality of his actions. It’s only when the words cross the line into a lie that anyone really gets upset. Yet if a deliberate lie gets a person closer to their greater goal, is it really such a bad thing? Had Legacy announced that now he was certain that their task was impossible to complete in the time they had been given, if he’d told her how careful and methodical he perceived the criminals to be, it would have been a self-serving diagnosis. There would have been nowhere to go.

He knew the moment would come when he had to give Wagner his thoughts. An

eager person could have the tasks he'd sent her on done in two hours, so he expected Wagner to burst in the door any moment.

He closed his eyes. The sound of the clattering music from his stereo was like a struggle in the background. It mimicked what was going inside Legacy's head. Time slowed. Legacy sifted through the case filtering every grain of possibility, sweeping over it again and again like the second hand on a clock. The clock barely moved before he opened his eyes again.

Chapter 6 Dirt

Upon reading the details, Legacy knew why they needed him. The group that the case file called "the Vinyl Men" knew how to commit a crime. Their activities and methods were self-consciously unique, meaning they took great pains to protect themselves from the very organized methodical authorities by purposefully being random and unpredictable.

Precedent being the ground rod of investigation and profiling – there wasn't a lot to go on. Criminals who break new ground usually get away with it for a long time before their methods become familiar enough to constitute a pattern. Getting in front of them was not going to be easy.

Legacy recognized that his special ops training as an interrogator made him very good at deciphering behavior, but patience would be the single attribute that he would point to as the reason he cracked cases that nobody else could. He waited for the motives to fall in place behind the profile he created of the criminal. He didn't mind waiting years, he knew who his man was; it didn't matter if a few harmless decades passed by before he got him.

Decades were turning into days, and the minute hand on his watch was suddenly vying for his attention too, he had to concentrate.

The first file told the story of a prom queen, a pom-pom girl fresh off a parade float getting abducted and held captive for two weeks. Missy Anne Naverlau, a senior at a Burgess Florida High School vanished, tiara and all, only to reappear two weeks later in Maine on the campus of the college that she had been accepted to and planned to attend. Her original story triggered the investigation, but she had since recanted, telling the investigators that it was all an act of teenage rebellion.

A transcript of her first interview ran through Legacy's ears. Legacy concentrated, put himself in the room – walked around the environment as the girl was questioned, in his mind

"So you were walking to your car – "

“Yes, if I’d changed after – I could have walked faster, but the dress was dragging. At first I thought I’d snagged it on a car or something, but then I turned.”

“What did you see?”

Her voice trembled, “A man – a man in a leather suit.”

“Go on.”

“I should have yelled, someone would have heard me. I should have called for my dad, he would have come.” She broke down in sobs.

“We don’t have to continue.”

She snapped her head up like somehow the policeman’s reluctance to hear her story meant that he doubted her.

“I felt someone come up behind me then a prick in my neck. A sting or something, like a needle. And the man in front of me said that if I turned around it would leave a scar. They must have been working together.” She paused lost in thought.

Legacy could tell that she hadn’t thought much about the experience. She pieced it together as she spoke in a way that made sense.

It happens when reasonably sheltered people go through an unreasonable, unsheltered experience. The details make no sense combined so the mind stops looking for rational connections. It compartmentalizes the moments. It’s easier to think that everything about the situation is wrong and makes no sense. Her slow breathing, in and out– her shirt riding up her stomach, the fold of her capri pants brushing her leg hairs - she was close to recognizing reality again. A couple more seconds of thought was all that she needed for a breakthrough. But what she got was a dour officer asking the wrong question.

“Have you used needles in the past?” The officer broke into the silence.

Another heavysset agent chimed in “What I think Officer Dunn is asking is if you know the feeling well.”

“That’s a much nicer way of putting it, Officer Dumm.”

“I’m O’Connell, he’s Dunn, with an “n” D-U-N-N.”

She continued, “It’s hard to tell you apart, my apologies officers. After the prick, I felt weak. I fell back and someone caught me. And even though the man in the leather suit had a hat brim tucked down around his eyebrows I saw him do something – I can’t forget it – he smiled. It was like everything in the world was going his way, on the day that I was going to regret for the rest of my life. The

thrill he exhibited was sickening.”

Legacy followed the accounts of the next couple of days closely, reading more for the moments like the capture.

She woke up from her drugged state in a room. There was dried vomit in her mouth and nose, but her dress was clean and pressed. There was a mini bar in the room and a sink with a toilet. No windows or natural light leaking in from anywhere. Every ten minutes or so, footsteps on the roof would inform her that she was guarded and not alone. The bed was flophouse quality and the springs creaked as she lifted herself from the sweat-stained sheets.

The noise must have brought attention, because someone walked in the door only a moment after.

It was Legacy, or really it wasn't. But Legacy had burrowed far enough into the story that he was standing in the doorway when the figure that really entered brushed by. Watching what followed, he wished he were farther away. The man, his face hidden by a leather mask, body covered in a royal blue acrylic or vinyl mixture that looked like rubber and conformed like paint.

The report stated that he was “quite kind.” Legacy watched as the Vinyl Man mimed a conversation with the girl. When he was done talking brushed his fingers through her hair.

Missy pulled back and the man kindly patted her knee instead. He walked to the door and knocked three times. Three more Vinyl Men entered the room: Orange, Brown and Yellow. They wheeled in a metal frame nearly as tall as the doorframe, cubically geometric in form. It looked like it was some kind of fitness equipment, but seconds later they had her hands clamped to the corners, back arched over a center support, stretched out and immobile.

The three men were out the door with a gesture from Blue. Missy gathered a breath to scream, and it was only then that she found a very thin membrane over her mouth. It flexed to allow air in then sealed completely against outward pressure. All of the air leaving had to be expunged through the nose. There would be no screaming.

Legacy studied the device on her mouth. It was homemade; the design was simple and effective. It was the exact opposite of what an interrogator would develop. He was up against more than just a group of criminals; they were engineers, circus conductors and drunken stationmasters. He could have really enjoyed the chase if it were not for what came next, the sickness that ensued with him as a helpless observer – the video images were living in front of him.

Blue approached Missy face to face, he told her not to look down. His hand went

under her dress and he flipped a switch then came a humming sound. Pubic hairs began to drop out from under her dress. He leaned in to ask a question at intimate range.

Missy watched the officers in the interrogation room carefully. “He asked me if it tickled. He didn’t hurt me. He was the nice one.”

Dunn asked, “And two weeks later they let you go? That was it?”

Missy’s eyes darted up and left, lingering in a memory. “Two weeks of hell.”

Legacy would have handled the questioning in a completely different manner. If he had gotten to her, right after she’d been released, he might have found details that she would never admit to knowing now.

“This was the point in the questioning that she went inside herself and never came out again,” Legacy thought. There were more questions on the transcript. Legacy stood at the edge of the light watching the interrogation, scuffing his shoes on the grey-flecked industrial tile. They’d lost her. Her body language was closed off and her voice seemed distant and hollow in the microphone.

Legacy pushed stop on his tape player and the recording came to an abrupt halt. He was back in his office. There was nothing more of use on this tape. He scanned down the paper transcript and saw that the policemen peppered her with more questions but the answers became more and more vague. She’d realized that she was being humiliated, and then the use of the wrong tone, or the wrong words had seemingly put the police in fraternity with those who had watched her.

“How much did their incompetence cost?” Legacy was furious. He knew that his best chance lay with getting inside the first victim’s head. The first was where a criminal organization made all of its mistakes. This girl had retreated.

This was supported by the fact that two weeks later she recanted her testimony, saying that she’d spent the two weeks with her boyfriend on a cross-country trip. The pictures of her on the Internet? They weren’t her.

Legacy’s nails dug into the transcript, he was ready to push the file into the trash when his eye was drawn to one line at the beginning of the interview. How had he missed it before? He was so busy putting himself into the scene, he hadn’t noticed a very basic behavior. He hadn’t learned anything from the details of the abduction, but rereading what they had said, it was clear that this was not the case for the men who took her. The men had learned something from an earlier attempt, and they had to brag. He drew a line under a sentence of the transcript:

And the man in front of me said that if I turned around it would leave a scar.

There was another victim out there; they hadn’t found the first abductee of the

Vinyl Men yet.

Chapter 7 Darci

Darci sat outside a truck stop on I-84 on the outskirts of Salt Lake City. She had a self-styled quaff of hair that looked like a muffin top. The front dangled below her eyes like an uneven greasy hat brim. Two dazzling blue eyes peeked out of the mess. Her skin had a pale shine, but like her body it was thin and fragile.

“It’s all natural.” Darci said pointing to a stain on her shirt just beside the outline of her nipple.

Bong, one of the three rebellious skateboarder boys cutting school and listening to her story, spit chew on the ground and grimaced.

“So is that, but I don’t want it on my shirt.”

“Some boys got no control.” She said wetting her lips then striking a match and putting a cigarette between them.

A chorus of “damn” “whoa” and “shit that” came from the slacker boys. It was the most impressed they’d been in months.

Bong pointed to three more stains on her shirt. “How often do you wash this?”

His question was met with cat-trance sass. Darci smiled took a deep drag off of the cigarette. “Twice a day –”

A semi-truck rolled by but it was like the entire world went silent as the boys digested this news. Darci slugged Bong in the arm to break the trance. “Tard, every week, what kind of slut do you think I am?”

A watch alarm went off, and the boys explained that they needed to get home for dinner. Bong lingered after the other boys had mounted their skateboards. He did his best pre-pubescent James Dean impression and told Darci that he might be back, “after dark.”

Darci said nothing. She put her middle finger all the way into her mouth then sucked it clean. The boy was halfway to an erection when he noticed that at the end of the seduction she was flipping him off, middle finger playfully tapping pursed lips. Bong responded by finding somewhere to target his anger.

“Where’d you get that scar anyway? Was one of the guys pierced with a fishing hook?”

Darci touched her neck, a protruding scar, called a “visceral scar” because of the way the tissue extrudes and forms a lump of tissue. It was misshapen and sported pigment that was like a bright red volcano. Most people who have such a mark

pretend it's a birthmark because the kind of cut that makes them is almost always the result of the insertion of a surgical steel blade or needle.

"It's a birthmark." Darci sneered.

"My dad's a dermatologist, that's a scar. So what's up with the neck, baby?" It might have been all the concern a teenager could muster, but it sounded like a taunt.

"Go home." She turned away from him then hearing his wheels hit the pavement, she shouted after Him: "Don't come back till after nine."

She pressed the scar between her thumb and forefinger, annoyed. She was a long way from home.

Chapter 8 The Voice In His Head

A voice in his head cried "Legacy!" and then again "Legacy!"

The voice in his head was actually in the room. Wagner was inches away from his ear, and her tone was anything but secretive. She had a distinct "I won't be taken for granted" attitude of a rankled subordinate, the kind that begs not to sound needy. Odd combination, Legacy thought.

So was the sight that Legacy lifted his eyes to see after finishing his thought. Wagner was now across the room, waiting with an impatient pose, more proof that Legacy needed to think faster.

"Are you listening now? What do you think?" With a gesture to her outfit like she was a runway model showing off the newest fashion.

Legacy's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. Wagner had to be referring to the form-fitting sheer black top that she was now wearing. Under it, a bright fuchsia bra radiated a call for attention. Wagner explained that she didn't want to appear uncomfortable under scrutiny, and since Legacy made her more uncomfortable than anyone she'd met, she had decided to run her wardrobe by him first. The stunning part, other than the obvious stunning part, was that Legacy had the feeling he'd seen the outfit before.

"This is an exact copy of something I saw on a prostitute--"

Legacy turned to hide a smirk. "I can tell."

Wagner wasn't in the mood for a joke, "I am going undercover, pure and simple. It is immature for anyone to think anything else about the outfit. This will make me fit in better for this afternoon, right?"

Legacy snapped back to the present "Laci," Wagner looked lost. "from the

subway entrance on 25th. You copied Laci. I walk by her corner every night on the way home. She wears that on Thursday.”

“It’s Friday.”

“I told you my methods aren’t 100 percent.”

Wagner crossed her arms in front of her body in a gesture that resembled one that a pissed off prostitute waiting to be paid would give. Legacy quickly buried that thought and its origin. “So, I’m going into the field –”

“When I said they’ll think you’re an undercover cop in the suit, I didn’t mean that you had to dress as a local. I just was looking for you to tone it down so they didn’t run away.” Legacy could see the self-consciousness flooding into Wagner’s face along with a wash of fresh blood. She had taken the initiative to dress like a whore for no reason at all. Legacy knew what she needed. He turned away, “But now that I think about it, this might make your job much easier.”

She shifted in her high heels. Wagner walked with perfect balance even on uneven ground. “I still don’t see what we need with adult film stars. We’ve brought in experts-”

“I read their reports, none of them has ever been in a position of subordination like these girls. None of them have an idea what’s going through her head.” He tapped a photo on the wall. It was Missy looking at the camera, right before a session was set to begin. Her eyes looked vacant, her hair and make up looked like a movie star’s. She bore no resemblance to the woman they’d kidnapped. The seriousness of the task flooded into Legacy’s voice. “I need to interview five to ten women, have them in the office at one.”

That gave him a few more hours. He looked at the photos on the wall. Wagner had done an excellent job recreating the exact placement of the papers as they were spread across his room at home. Part of Legacy’s gift was spatial geometry. His eyes had a mind of their own, automatically drawn to and connecting specific parts of the investigation like constellations before his brain made the connection.

Many times, Legacy would find that his eyes were staring at exactly the report, or the exact place in a photo where his mind could find the next breakthrough in the case. He explained it this way: all the years extracting observational information out of others had made his eyes smarter than his brain. Interrogation is all about adding up all of the visual information the subject is showing then piecing together what is missing. There are unique rhythms to a man while he’s under stress. Find out what makes him sweat on the upper lip while his underarms remain dry, and those lips will be flapping soon.

Legacy was staring at a picture of a computer screen shot. He didn't know why. It was a money counter. The real time updated ransom that was the hallmark of the financial side of the abduction scheme web site.

Missy's body and soul had been worth 2 million dollars. It was an approximate figure based on estimates of viewership and commerce patterns in the industry.

The money side of the crime verged on elegant, Legacy thought, tapping the progress bar that never gave out the amount of donations, just charted the progress from 1 to 100 percent of the ransom paid.

Out in the vast digital distribution center, every minute of every day since Missy went missing, her abductors were amassing a small fortune.

A series of offshore web sites broadcast every moment of the show. Three to five daily broadcasts showed her stripped naked and used as an instrument of pornography by one or more of her abductors. The real perverts kept the channel on well after the sex was over, to watch the girl wait, frightened and alone, for the next session. The money poured in. Legacy had read that the Pamela Anderson/Tommy Lee tape had been worth over 300 million dollars in direct sales. People came out of the woodwork to get a glimpse of pornography with a recognizable face, something they weren't supposed to see. Now, these abductors had found another way to market to those buyers.

The free version of the site broadcast a still picture every six minutes. Ten dollars gave the viewer ten minutes of streaming video, then, like a peep show, the window would close.

The sites started out as a novelty item, advertising that a prom queen from Florida was about to become cum queen of America. They boosted the authenticity of the site by scanning a newspaper photo of the girl and the story of her abduction. The sites themselves were outsourced to foreign soil, countries that had become cottage industries to smugglers, thieves and money launderers and where laws regarding corporate privacy gave the companies almost complete amnesty regarding "information" transfer.

The outlets were further protected by a threat leveled by the abductors. They promised that if any of the distributors were shut down, or if their offices were raided, the girl would be killed. Add to that the fact that whoever had built the security around the router keys that repeated the signal from its origin to the outlets where it went out live to the public was a certified genius. Legacy went over the list of suspects they had that possessed the kind of qualifications that would baffle an entire federal investigative team for months. It was a very short list. Much of the original focus of the investigation had been on finding the programmer. If they could find the go-between that linked the broadcasters to the

distributors, the investigation would be over in an instant. However, the investigation had turned up nothing.

Legacy felt the futility of the reports like Braille beneath his fingers, it was a physical force and the message was clear.

He decided to review the timeline. Broadcasts started almost three months ago, in early June. Viewership began slowly, and then picked up when more people began to believe that what they were seeing was real. Like the symptoms of a sickness, a “viral” audience grew. It’s more than a little bit disgusting that authenticity peaks curiosity in this area, but all the reports by the “sex experts” that Wagner had mentioned agreed that it wasn’t the actual act of sex that drew the crowd. It was sex with someone that the crowd felt like they “knew.”

How did they know the prom queen? Everyone has a prom queen in their collective pasts. Most of them are not known for their beneficent personality as much as their beauty and attitude. Legacy’s prom queen was a pedestal type. She liked looking down from the podium at everyone. She hadn’t noticed the way that many of the guys were looking at her as she gave her acceptance speech. Kids can be cruel, Legacy thought, while looking at the work of adults scattered over his walls. He was looking for a sophisticated organization based upon high school impulses.

Ten minutes for ten dollars. It sounded like chump change, the kind of money an afternoon pole dancer earned sliding up the leg of a stock broker on his lunch hour. The piston driving power of ten dollars can only be fully understood with the scaling factor of computers. Ten overfed, undersexed, prom-queen reminiscent guys hit this site like a fly to flypaper. They want it on all day so that they can tape it and keep it close to their collection of figurines from some science fiction movie that totally changed their lives and broadened their understanding of man’s place in the universe. That kind of devotion is 240 dollars a day, times ten. Now let’s throw in the mix a spike in viewership when the action really gets going, maybe 100 people stop in for a quick peek for one of the three to five sex shows a day.

That’s almost ten thousand dollars. Now, add in the foreign market - the guys that never had a prom queen but wouldn’t mind seeing one spread wide, tied to a chair.

The hook for the site had teeth, and brought bile to the back of any decent person’s throat. The site claimed that every dollar went toward the ransom for the girl. The individual consumer was buying the girl’s freedom. At an undisclosed target price, the girl would be released. The people who paid the ransom were encouraged to think that they were doing something good, something helpful to this girl. This little grace note opened up a new market, the

people who sought to justify their perversion. The despicable result was that in ten days, their first victim had netted her entire ransom.

The second was a weather girl from New Hampshire, Carla. Her take was estimated at double Missy's total.

The next was a weather girl from Texas, Brit. Her angel face brought in an estimated "ransom" of over ten million.

The next girl was an animal rights activist in northern California, Jamie. She stalled out at ninety percent of her target ransom. Hers was the body they'd found in the woods outside of Brunswick, Maine.

The girl on screen now was a stage actress from New York, Tracy Bell. She had been in captivity for over a week, and with the publicity spilling over from an underground sex industry to a mainstream national case, the money totals were staggering.

It wasn't quite a credible news story yet. All of the girls filed police reports, but half had then publicly recanted that they were the ones on the Internet. The public didn't know whether to believe it or not. Clearly everyone wanted the whole thing to be a staged hoax, designed to make money off of the gullible, but that became harder to swallow when Jamie did not come home. A dead body is a hard thing to argue with.

The FBI had tried to keep a lid on the scope of the investigation. They thought that the publicity would give the Vinyl Men exactly what they wanted, a greater audience. With no ransom drop off, no geographical clues for where they were hiding and no contact from the abductors, the FBI needed more time.

Time was running out, and Legacy knew it. The girl who was just taken was the daughter of the FBI director, a pretty smile who was the public face of the bureau, even while finishing her training. It was a tradition to have a junior cadet fill this position. The idea was that as they were transitioning from civilian to agent, they were well suited to transfer information from the inner culture to the outer culture. They were making the change themselves.

The scrutiny would become national the moment she hit the air. There was no hiding this kind of truth. The director of the most powerful institution in the nation was going to witness his daughter stripped naked in front of a camera lens. With the largest standing army of law enforcement officers in the world at his disposal, there was nothing he could do but watch and wait. Rape, real and undeniable, was about to become a mainstream spectator sport.

Thousands of miles away or perhaps even next door, something awful was about to happen.

Chapter 9 Blue

A raven's hair nest moved slightly on the overstuffed pillow on the bed in the center of a perfectly rectangular room. Her head was throbbing like her brain was trying to pound its way out of her skull. "Mitch?" Her voice grumbled, dark and yet playful "Mitch, I think I melted my head."

In the echo of her voice back to her, bouncing off of the tin walls, soaking into the carpet, something was wrong. This wasn't her room, she could tell by the way her voice traveled through it. Laura knew that she wasn't at home. Her eyes snapped open. She decided in the darkness that she'd overreacted. She was on a bed, in a comfortable position. A voice in her head chastised herself for acting like a child. She moved her hair out of her eyes and peeked out at her surroundings. Danger.

"Not in Kansas anymore," she muttered. The bed creaked. Her legs folded into a crouched position underneath her. This was a dangerous place suddenly. Her training kicked in and she "cased" her environment like a thief planning to rob something from it, steal herself away.

Walking from end to end, she felt the uneven floor shift slightly as if it were on springs. There was no foundation. The walls were thin, a tap from her nails brought the sound of a metallic snare. A cool breeze circulated from an evaporative cooler in the ceiling. Her fingers skidded along one of the narrow metal ridges that reinforced the structure halfway up the wall. A slot wide enough for videotape interrupted the journey of her fingers. The odor around the opening was stale, like the kitchen in a nursing home. She would be fed through this slot. Laura knew that she now that she was on a mobile platform, a boxcar, or cargo trailer, converted to house laboratory animals. What exactly was the experiment?

Close by, Blue was carefully methodically sponge bathing an unconscious Tracy Bell. His hands massaged the glistening tan skin, skimming the curves. As the warm sudsy water poured over her body, she began to stir. Blue moved to her feet and began messaging them.

There was something giddy about Blue's movements. It was like he was watching himself from some kind of distant perspective and trying to make a good impression. Or maybe it was just an active mind spilling out into spastic, over-thought physical expression. Either way, when he spoke, his tone was measured and assured.

"Rise and shine." He dusted her legs with golden glitter. "Somebody has ninety percentage points to be happy with this morning."

Tracy perked up, but found her hands and legs shackled to the floor and spread in a depiction resembling triumph and helplessness all in one. “How long do I have?”

“They’re cutting you loose after initiation – about twenty hours from now.”

“What if I don’t get to one hundred percent? What will they do to me?”

“You will,” Blue began painting her quivering lips with fire engine red lipstick. “give it all you got, and the money will come flying in.” He jingled the lock on the chain while pulling up the fishnet stockings through the cuff of the restraint. “They should give me keys to these things. Don’t know why they don’t -”

“You told me once that they didn’t trust you.”

Blue gave a bashful look to the floor, as if he couldn’t bring himself to meet her eyes. “I never told you that.”

“What do they think you’d do if you had the keys Blue?” Tracy’s eyes shone through a satin mask that Blue tied gently behind her head. She leaned her head forward and kissed his palm. “I’m worried, Blue.”

Blue pulled away “There, you look like a – a fallen angel. You are going to pile up the money today.”

Tears began to run down Tracy’s freshly rouged cheeks, the smears looked like war paint. Blue tisk tisked with a sugary fatherly tone. He cupped her face with his hands and gently tilted her eyes to meet his sky blue pupils.

“I’m only letting them send in two today. You need a break.” He added in a pleading tone “I want to take care of you.”

He blinked and his colored contacts shifted just enough for Tracy to notice them. She could not have known that if the contact seats itself quickly after a blink, the pupils are in rest state and the speaker is telling the truth. An active pupil, one that is engaged in generating a story, will cause the contact to seat in a two-stage triangular fashion. If she had known what to look for, she might have known that she was being lied to.

“No.” Her voice caught in her throat in a rushed panic. “I need ten percent, right? And I only have one day left. You told me that the cash flows best – you said – “ She couldn’t make herself voice the request. A glint in Blue’s eye meant that he knew what she was asking for.

His work was almost done with this one. He had bent her around his will. Now she was asking, begging for the opportunity to multiply her troubles. He was sure the other Vinyl Men would oblige her. Blue remembered the defiance of her first days; it had been turned around completely. It was good that the room had no

mirrors because Tracy would not even recognize the person she had become.

She was now willing to do anything for the opportunity to leave. The boundaries would be tested today. Blue shook his head, imitating pity before leaving the room would strengthen her resolve – make her justify her actions as purely self-preservation. He'd wound up the tail of a wildcat, and whatever rules, whatever roles they made up today would be played by this actress with reckless abandon. It was too easy really, and he might have actually mimicked the final words she said in parting. Words spoken exactly as he expected, right down to the cadence.

"Don't let them kill me." She was unable to turn her head far enough to see him. Tracy strained against her restraints but Blue stayed just out of sight.

Outside the room he answered her in a quiet, overly pleasant tone. "I won't." He said, and began to hum "Singing in the Rain." Blue scuffed his feet and thought about how much like sickly sweet sunshine it would be to kill her himself. Not this time, he thought, not this time.

Legacy sat in a room with a group of silo-chested women. It was all silicone and attitude with this crowd, and with the number of administrative gawkers slowly walking by his open door, Legacy perceived that attention was the fickle servant of nature. In other words, it didn't matter how it got there as long as it was there. Fashion hugged, tugged and stretched sparingly over all the areas that men discover with their eyes. The posture in the room was strangely competitive. It was like all of them were vying for the attention of the straight-laced, square-jawed, Agent Legacy.

He must have been a complete change from the crowd that they usually entertained. He began in a commanding voice. Wagner noticed that all of the pierced belly buttons were suddenly at attention, something Legacy surely would have noticed, had he been looking there. His eyes were on their eyes; his voice was confidential like he was speaking to a room of equals. He worked to give them immediate, unconditional respect, because he needed expert answers and they had the experience.

"I have slowed down four areas on the tape that indicate what I believe to be a significant behavior by our abductors. I could be wrong, but any comments that you have will inform me on how to catch a group of sex offenders that deeply deserve to be in a prison system where they will certainly get similar or worse treatment that they are dolling out."

The unexpected barb at the end took a minute to sink in, but it was evidently very appreciated by the crowd. A young Latina with a stretched t-shirt that said "sexy" began to tear up laughing. The crowd joined her laughter and the

gathering became more like a social hour than a formal questioning.

Legacy had summoned up just enough charm to bring the group to him. He wanted to immediately retreat into his normal detached self, but he knew that this was just the beginning. A curt nod to Wagner who stood at the large television screen that they'd wheeled in for the proceedings. and she began the presentation. She pushed "play" on the VCR and the events unfolded on tape, accompanied by a room filled with comments. Everything was fair game, the voiced conversation with the screen seeming a bit too candid.

"None of the standard viewing positions." A sassy black tube-topped sexpert criticized. "You want to see this, this and this, and all you see is this." She paused then huffed. "Nothing special about that." She pointed to areas on the screen with a perilously long, pink-glitter painted fingernail.

Wagner entered the conversation, her voice sounded more abrupt than she intended "What's wrong with that?"

Legacy shot her a glance. She knew that he didn't want their guests to feel like they were among cops.

Tube Top laughed it off, she pointed out angles like a pool shark "Honey, if you got this, this and this going on, you want people to see it! Why else would you want to have it going on?"

Sexy noted, "Look at her face, she didn't want any of it." The levity was sucked out of the room.

"What tells you that?" Wagner burst in again.

Sexy squinted, as if she didn't like the question, "Lots of things."

Tube Top picked up the thought "She's got a survival face on. Everybody in this room has gotten themselves in too deep once or twice in their career."

A young-looking brunette with thick black eyeliner tattooed in a pattern that continued down the smile lines giving her a permanent cat-eye look "Or they get too deep in you. The one in the violet is in no danger of that." She pointed to Violet, a huge man in all ways but one.

Tube Top had a belly laugh that shook the floor. "That's unprofessional, that is."

Legacy could feel the air returning into the room, and with that feeling, he knew that they were ready for the tough questions. "So this strikes you as wrong. You never worked with anything like this?"

Sexy stood and did a little shimmy. "See 'tese? They're fake, and I wouldn't be in fron' a tha camera without them. Purple man is wrong as you get for this kind of entertainment." She looked Legacy up and down. "Let's say agent, that you

are like Purple man under your clothes, that's aieet with me." The room murmured agreement and Legacy suddenly found himself being regarded as if he were a prize at auction.

Tube Top snickered "Dress him up as Bo-Peep and I'll be one of the sheep."

Legacy gave a wink to Tube Top, and she had to fan herself. Wagner watched through a shocked expression as he played to his audience. Legacy quickly took advantage of his sudden status in the room "I'm curious about this behavior here."

He showed a section of tape where the girl was blindfolded, then the camera jiggled just before Blue entered the frame holding a sex toy.

The women in the room flinched watching Blue go to work on the girl. A scream escaped the lips of the girl. It poured out of the speaker before Legacy could pause the tape. "This isn't normal either, I would guess."

Tube Top "I seen people beg for worse."

"The action of bumping the camera, it's the only time he joins the action, I have no explanation for it." Legacy was frustrated at himself. He scanned the room and found something in the way Sexy stared at the screen. "This make sense to you?"

Sexy started slowly. "I seen somet'ing like that. A producer on my 27th film had a limp biscuit and he got off like that on a girl in the film."

Tattoo "How many films did you do before you stopped counting? That's when you know your innocence is lost."

Tube Top chimed in "I stopped at 150."

Numbers cascaded into the room. One of the girls counted all the way to 600. Sexy finished the discussion "I counted till 27."

After four hours of questions and answers, Legacy abruptly thanked the group and moved to the door. As he left the room, he signaled to a young agent standing outside the door with a large cardboard box. Legacy had arranged for FBI windbreakers from the central office gift shop to be sent over. A glance into the room from the hallway revealed that the group of women was overjoyed, fighting over sizes and genuinely thrilled with the show of appreciation. Instead of being pleased, Legacy allowed himself a rare moment of emotional judgment to creep into his mind. Legacy saw the adult film stars for a moment as girls who had fathers somewhere. His daughter was home, waiting for him to return.

There were voices in the hallway minutes before six o'clock. Chess heard the

muffled sounds and lost all concentration on her homework. The conversation was now stationary parked just outside of her door. Now that was unusual. That doorway was a no-talking zone. Moreover, alongside her father's hushed baritone was a woman's voice. Chess looked around the room for some sign that the universe at large had been altered in some kind of fundamental way. Before she could fully develop an alternate reality theory that allowed for her father to be talking to women outside of the door of their home, the clock struck six. The locks twisted and released, a percussive progression in perfect 3/4 time. Legacy either had an unconscious devotion to the waltz or a driving need to keep those in straight time waiting for that extra beat.

There was a pause before the door opened, for Chess it was like the tides had failed to pull in the next wave, and the shock didn't end there. An additional surprise occurred after the door opened. As Legacy entered she could hear footsteps trailing away. It was all but impossible. It wasn't a chance conversation or brief hallway greeting; someone had actually walked him to his door, and then departed. Legacy never allowed anything to intrude upon his routine. The door closed with a sharp click. Her father walked up and wrapped her up in a warm hug.

"OK now this is getting creepy." She said in a subversive teenage tone. Legacy nodded noncommittally, he agreed that the world was a pretty creepy place today. It was getting better when Chess extended her arms around him and squeezed back. "What's up with you today?"

He accepted the fatherly embrace but he must have noticed tension running through her wrists. Chess moved quickly to insure her advantage of surprise, she locked her hands in the small of Legacy's back and using a Judo move she leaned heavily on her right leg, pulling back her left, to shift his weight.

Chess was top in her class and it was a maneuver that sent her other classmates flying, but with Legacy, it barely rocked him back and forth, turning their hug into a dance. "Almost." He said, kissing her forehead.

"Do you have time tonight?" Legacy said pulling back with his hands on her shoulders. "We could go to the range --"

"The general rule is that we only go on the weekends." Chess must have seen something in her father's expression that made her want to give him a break.

Legacy thought back later that it must have been something pretty strong, because the teenage girl's response threshold for giving their father a break is almost insurmountable. Instead of offering more resistance, she changed the topic - "Other kids go bowling with their parents." And made a gun with her forefinger and thumb.

“Other kid’s parents take them to the Ice Capades, do you want to start doing that?” Legacy played upon Chess’ deep dislike for anything kitsch or tacky.

“What’s going on?” Chess asked.

“I want to see my daughter shoot. Is there anything more natural than that?” Legacy replied.

Chess stopped and seemed to be thinking it over, there were probably many things wrong with what he’d said, but she wasn’t in the mood for being difficult. Or was she? “Who was out in the hallway? I only ask because I’m not old enough to control my impulse to make you uncomfortable.”

“I have a new case, a live one.”

Chess slipped on her jacket and headed for the door, “If you have something important to do at work you can stay there after hours. You know that.”

Legacy’s voice dipped into a deep baritone, “Nothing will ever be more important than family.” He knew that his choice of words left Chess a void to fill in a word in her head. Legacy noticed Chess pause in thought.

“Again.” Was the word that rattled around the minds of both father and daughter.

They walked out of the house; Legacy patted his jacket feeling for his empty holster. He checked his own sidearm out of the cage everyday when he arrived at work and checked it back in on the way out the door. He would pick up Chess’ 38 from the gun locker he had at the range.

Legacy only allowed one gun in the house and it was fingerprint coded to he and Chess alone. There was a microchip in the butt of the gun that wouldn’t unlock the firing mechanism unless it recognized the finger on the trigger from a three directional laser scan that took under a quarter of a second to process. The gun made a decision faster than the owner could squeeze the trigger. Legacy had spent three year’s bonuses on the technology in that gun and it had never been fired.

Wagner was waiting for her drink at a coffee shop across the street from Legacy’s apartment building when she watched him leave. She had just ordered a latte with three extra shots of espresso. The girl at the register had called the drink the “late nighter.” She spoke with a clumsy camaraderie that told Wagner that she thought that the young agent was a fellow student. There must have been a college campus nearby. For some reason, all she felt was anger. She thought “How can people lead normal lives when other people suffer from their inaction.” It was a college student thought.

The male barista looked at Wagner's hair tightly swept back across her pale forehead and decided to throw caution to the wind. "The all nighter." He announced flashing his most charming smile. Wagner looked up at his eyes, he was cute, and it didn't matter one bit to her.

"I've decided I'd like it iced." She pushed the drink back across the bar.

Shivering on the floor of her cell, Laura huddled in a thin blanket ripped off the bed. The restraints kept her arms wrapped behind her. It was a special precaution; she'd heard Blue talk about it. They knew that they weren't dealing with a helpless victim, and Laura sensed that they liked taking her power away. They'd bathed and prepped her body while she'd lain still as a cadaver. She hadn't answered the blue one as he'd carefully painted a tattoo onto her inner thigh. She knew that she had less than twelve hours to escape.

Laura found a rough patch of splintered wood on the floor, and she scraped it across the nylon that held her shoulders locked behind her like some kind of iron embrace. It wouldn't be long now. Like a set of shoelaces the ropes were loosening at the center and she'd soon be free.

That's when Laura heard the noise.

Chapter 10 Snap, Crackle, Pop

SNAP, crackle, two shots and Chess put the gun down on the varnished wood counter. Her target hung fifteen meters away, a fair test for the accuracy of the nickel SIG 226 that she was using. It was an ugly weapon, but one of the most respected utility handguns in the business - all that her father cared about was that it got the job done.

She heard her father alternating hands and shooting at a target far down range. When the noise subsided he poked his head around the divider.

"You only shot twice." He said removing his gloves with his teeth.

"You look like you're snarling when you do that." She flipped her hair and pushed the button that reeled her target in. "anyway, my man is down and yours is still ready to par-tay."

"I've taken two shots and made it home for dinner." Chess frowned, she couldn't help herself. She knew that her reaction fed her father's obsessive overprotectivity. Was that redundant? She wasn't sure, but when it came to her father's health, playing it cool wasn't an option. He was all she had.

Legacy leaned around and slapped a button that caused Chess' target to approach

zipping down a cable and stopping less than a meter away. Two holes, left and right knees “Very funny, left kneecap” he observed. The other one was off center “what happened here?”

Chess used the gun as a pointer “If my guy was an amateur, he went down on the first shot to the left knee, if he’s a professional he’s wearing flexible armor, so I clipped the tendons behind the knee on the second shot. Very effective, and extremely painful. He’s probably looking for some extra strength Advil about now.” She reached around and pushed her father’s button. “Now with your guy, he’s wearing Kevlar and that center mass of nine bullets only slows him down.” The target stopped right in front of Legacy, “Now he’s ready to engage you hand to hand, and you’re out of ammunition.”

With a wry smile and a flick of the wrist a knife appeared from the inner pocket of Legacy’s vest. Never taking his eyes off Chess he made two surgical thrusts into the paper target. He explains “He’s dead now, and I bet he wishes he’d just stayed down when he took the bullets in the chest.”

Chess smiled looking at the two knife entry points, the ear angled downward to the brain stem, and the throat, clipping the innominate vein and the aorta. There would be blood coming and going and no oxygen in the brain to process it. She proudly took her father’s warm hand and led him away from the range, not once thinking that she had a very small, very strange family.

Chapter 11 Night Visitor

A click outside door and Laura stopped all motion straining to listen. There it was again, they were coming for her. Laura noticed earlier that there were two doors that were opened before anyone entered the room. An outer security door of some sort, it gave her warning that company was on its way. There was no time to set the table or get ready for guests. She went limp.

She heard the second door open, but not a sound of Blue approaching, before his arms were wrapped around her picking her up. “We don’t want you laying cold on the floor dear.”

Laura hadn’t noticed any change in the ambient light of the room as he’d entered. She concluded that it must be nighttime. All she needed was ten more minutes alone. Blue hadn’t checked her restraints and he headed for the door. Laura breathed a sigh of relief. It was the kind of sound that a predator’s ears drank in like nectar. Blue turned at the door to enjoy one last look at the captive. He was about to leave when he stopped focusing on the area that Laura had been laying. It was impossible that he could see the sharp splinter of imperfection on the floor between them.

But Laura saw him process the new information, like inside of his head the connections clicked like tumblers on a lock. His expression seemed locked in a battle between anger and pleasure. Then he relaxed, deciding on a neutral expression that was more ominous in its omission of his intentions than any snarl could have been. “My precious little darling, I’ve just been told a story of a naughty, naughty girl who wouldn’t go to bed.” His steps were heavy on the floor as he charged across the room.

A thought flashed across Laura’s mind, “This can only work two ways,” and she curled up protectively.

“Busy, busy, busy.” Blue’s voice grew excited. He grabbed her arms wrenching them farther behind her back rubbing them against the ropes that had relaxed, but still held her arms. The pressure from his grip was intense, and her tendons strained.

Her legs were coiled into her stomach ready to strike. She wanted to wait until he turned to get a shot at a tear of his ACL, but the relentless pain of his grip pushed her to act. Her heel separated the cartilage in Blue’s left knee. He let loose with a cry of savage and somewhat gratifying pain. “Sick bastard, so far so good.” She rolled off the bed and balanced momentarily on one leg, ready to strike another blow. “Now do I take the extra time to stomp on his throat until he’s dead, or just run?” she thought, regaining her balance. Laura saw Blue rolling on the ground and recoiled. She decided that since killing him would require touching him again, it wasn’t worth it.

Laura crouched low and with a burst of speed she was out the door. Her shoulders bumped the walls, coming to an abrupt stop. Laura found herself in a box corridor, the size of an outhouse with another locked door staring her in the face. She heard Blue gain his feet in the room behind her. He was getting up a lethal head of steam hobbling for the door. Laura had never been a fan of bullfighting, but the principle lent itself to so many real world applications. Blue burst through the doorway. A puff of air crossed her face and she slipped into his outstretched arms surprising him with no resistance. She planted her left leg as a pivot and Blue spun around. Now she could use all that extra momentum, her shoulder pushed into his chest and they both went flying into the locked outer door.

Light washed over them in a flash. It wasn’t night. Bright sunlight bathed her face. Her eyes blinked in the midday sun for a moment cut into geometric patterns falling over her body by fast moving shadows of bodies standing over her. She realized that several men surrounded her. A hood dropped over her head. Multiple sets of hands held her down. Blue’s voice had a raspy echo of recent pain.

“I told you to be ready for this. This one is a wildcat.” They picked her up by her bound arms and grappled with her free legs. Laura struggled fiercely. She landed another kick into soft muscle, probably thigh or stomach and heard a satisfying grunt accompany the concussion. She thought for a second and realized that this crew wanted her looking pretty. No bruises, no cuts or scrapes, and they all had on their soft hands because of it. If she’d had use of her hands, she knew this would be a different fight.

Laura had been trained to fight. She freed her left leg, faked a thrust with the foot and then brought her knee squarely crashing into a very square jaw. She felt saliva and with a little luck maybe even blood spatter her stomach. This was turning out better than she’d thought. A totally different voice whispered in her ear as her pants were stripped from her. “I’ll shove this up you and carry you like a Popsicle back to bed if you don’t stop struggling.” She felt the threat of a long cold metallic shaft, a baseball bat, against her thigh. Something in the tone told her that his threat was mixed with sick fantasy. He desperately wanted to make good on it. She relaxed.

“Fucking bitch,” was a mainstay of the conversation between the men as they tucked her back into her bed. It was like the personal pronoun “she” had been replaced with “Fucking bitch,” like a sentence couldn’t be made without it. Surgical straps of woven Kevlar now secured her every limb. “Make it tighter.” The voice was shushed, but he kept going “I lost a tooth.” Laura smiled under the hood. It was the last honest smile she’d manage for some time.

Chapter 12 Brief

Legacy watched Wagner put down the brief and look across the table. Legacy kept himself detached from the emotions building behind Wagner’s eyes. He had a knack for acting like he truly didn’t care what anyone thought of him. It was Oscar worthy if it was an act. He could see that Wagner clearly was not impressed with what she’d read.

“What dartboard did you throw at to put together this - ?” She waited for a sign that Legacy was even listening.

“Report?” “Crap.” Legacy sighed with disappointment. They’d given him a knife with a sharp edge on one side and a dull one on the other. He needed her to see the other side of the criminal and she simply didn’t see it. It was a waste of time to explain, but the young agent demanded it.

“Let’s start with vague.” She rustled to the front page of the document. Wagner read Legacy’s break down of the Vinyl Men.

They were rebels, but now they're on a tight schedule. The clock plays a very important role in their apparatus. There are no glitches, nothing is ever late. The organization is precise, no exceptions.

"So we look for people who shouldn't have a schedule, who adhere to a very tight schedule now." Wagner's tone told him she saw nothing of value in the point. "Why not say they're a highly efficient drill team who have relaxed into the porn industry."

"This group is on a tight leash, and nothing about their behavior in front of the camera strikes me as professional training. They are being forced into a very tight mold." Legacy looked at Wagner's eyes, they were not receiving. The savant string quartet that Legacy played behind their conversation left a metallic, tortured feeling in the air.

"So we want to find a guy that looks at his watch all the time? I must admit, I had been expecting brilliant."

"We want to find a group of guys that look at their watches all the time." Legacy turned up a screeching violin solo performed by a person who seemed to think that the bow and a band sander carried the same subtle musical nuances.

"Now we go from general to ridiculously specific in the span of two paragraphs."

"I like those two paragraphs."

"Blue is impotent?"

"Most likely."

"Do you have a personal relationship with him that I don't know about?"

"And he's had treatment for it. He's far too angry at others for this to be a private matter." His mind jumped forward as he heard his own words, what was he like privately? There was so much public about his persona, what was it like when he was not presenting himself to others? Legacy thought it was much different from what he was showing the world.

"Legacy?" Legacy snapped out of his trance, Wagner wore annoyed crease on her forehead. A photographer would have loved to capture her face in that moment, he thought. But before he could go off on another tangent Wagner poured out a frustrated bluster of mumble and murmur "that's five minutes of my life you've been wasting staring at the table. I keep thinking that you'll speak soon. That it's just a skip in the record, then you sit there longer. I really should bring some kind of senseless time consuming hobby for times like these."

"Like scrap booking?"

"It works for millions."

“Blue’s behavior parallels the point brought up by the – adult actress we interviewed. He’s the one controlling the camera, and he puts it down when he enters the action. Blue has too many control issues for me to believe that this is his first solution for his lifetime of embarrassment in front of women. He has tried everything violent to make himself feel like more of a man. He must have tried other things.”

“And he found this? None of this is in your report, none of the justifications or explanations. Why don’t you put any of your reasons in the report?”

He shifted in his seat looking at the pictures on the wall. The collage of images formed a clear picture somehow, like a Mazaika photo mosaic in which a larger image is comprised of thousands of complete smaller images. It seemed like the more he explained the details of his view, the less people understood the larger image he had in his mind. The picture Legacy could see had some solid certainties, that were like the lines of greatest contrast in a developing photo. They might be incomplete, they might be misleading, but the full picture would come in time.

Legacy’s mind in this analogy worked like an old fashion flashbulb, a tangled course of razor thin distinctions and he couldn’t believe anyone could sort them out other than himself. Thus putting details of his thought process in the report merely prolonged misunderstanding. Legacy knew the people reading this initial document would not trust his conclusions anyway.

“I shouldn’t have to, I am not here to convince you, agent.” That could have come out better, Legacy admitted to himself. The veteran of over a thousand arguments with Chess, he should have recognized the warning signs. It was not the right thing to say, however, especially because he knew how authority affected Wagner, and the mood of the room changed sharply.

Wagner steadied herself then asked, “Can you explain the location section?”

“I can.” The violins were screeching over Wagner’s shoulder.

“Thank God.”

“How about if we save those thanks for Laura’s homecoming.” Legacy spoke in the tone of a psychologist for the rest of their conversation. He connected the impossibly obscured dots of his Rorschach test report for Wagner. Her mood brightened considerably as Legacy explained that the contents of the paper were bold assertions without basis, rather they were well thought out assertions that obeyed the questionable physics of Legacy’s insight. By the time Legacy dismissed her, she wore a look of relief on her face. She said she was going home, but Legacy knew she would pass his report up the chain of command the second she cleared the doorframe.

Chapter 13 The Location Section

Director Robert Doorner sat in a dark briefing room. The shadow from a desk lamp cut across his face so that only his mouth and chin were visible to the other members of the committee that he was addressing. Director Doorner was all about straight lines. His suit was pressed at right angles on his strict instructions. His hair stood at attention in a short military cut, even the surface of his coffee was not disturbed at all as he picked it up with a rock steady hand.

“Deputy Wilkes, I see one or two points of interest in this report, but I certainly do not understand why this warrants a top level meeting. There is nothing in these pages is that I would call a solid lead.” The frustration of a father crept into his voice as he addressed the assembly. “That goes for everyone at this table. If you are all presenting your best men’s best work, you’d better think about a career change, gentlemen. This matter is not about my daughter, it is about the security of the greatest nation on this planet and if that is compromised-”

Deputy Wilkes cleared his throat. “It is Legacy’s contention that they are in a remote location.”

“How the hell does that help us?”

“It speaks to the frame of reference of their leader. He feels comfortable in outlying areas.” Wilkes took a drink of water. “It is also postulated that there is another victim out there, the first victim of this crime. If we can find her, we may have better information to follow. Legacy is convinced that they made their biggest mistakes with her.”

“And will any of this find my daughter in 10 hours or less?”

All the people in the room understood the time reference. The sites from which the Vinyl Men were broadcasting had posted that Tracy’s ransom had been met ahead of time, and they announced the day and time of the next “initiation”. It was the point in the “show” when the two girls met for a short time. It was a personal and psychological touch that blurred the line between victim and captor. It was the last chance for the outgoing victim to make the money for her ransom and, as such, had a truly disturbing quality.

The previous initiations had been the worst combination of one of the girls at her most innocent and the other at her most desperate. There were so many ugly moments with this case but initiation was the only act of pure betrayal. It was the only sex act that all of the previous victims singled out in their reports. It tore them apart to do to another unsuspecting person what had been done to them, to take away the dignity that had been taken away from them. Doorner wanted with

every fiber of his being to be able to save his daughter from the lifelong curtain that the experience would bring with it.

“I need information that gives results now. You’re wasting my time – this is your guy Wilkes, your brilliant guy. What’s his timetable with – this?” He picked up the report with a sweep of his hand. “How can all of this lead to an arrest in twelve hours?”

Wilkes shifted in his chair. “He’s working in a time window of two weeks. He wants to be there when the next girl is abducted, get everyone home safely.”

Wilkes knew that even with the cushion of his daughter’s safety, there were going to be expectations hitting the wall, hard.

Doorner seethed at the news. “Two weeks is acceptable to your man?”

An officer chimed in from along the table. “We’re working on a timetable of hours not days.”

Doorner stood in a quick motion. “That was the message of yesterday’s briefing.” He made a straight line for the door. He paused after he’d crossed the threshold then leaned back into the room. It was a startlingly awkward diagonal for the man.

“Does he believe in his timetable, agent?” he asked.

Walker nodded. “To my best knowledge, he believes he can get them at the next abduction.”

“Agent Legacy’s reports come directly to my office – before they’re proofread – before they’re typed.” A stutter step into the room made him look suddenly older than his years. “I don’t like what he says, but I recognize that he’s telling me what he believes and not what I want to hear.”

It was like the entire briefing room was empty the second he left. He was a man of great substance, and it was only fitting that he left emptiness behind him.

Agent Bailey took a long last draw on a gold tipped cigarette. He crushed it out in the ashtray on his desk, where the remnants of other brands littered the bowl. Every cigarette was a reminder of how unique he was. What a delightful stagnant smell to the room, he thought. His control over his environment was a point of great pride. That reminded him that the phone would be ringing soon. His wife always called him before he left the office to remind him to return the baking pan that he took to work that day. Today it was a honey walnut crème baked into vanilla marble cake. He’d eaten half of the pan before it became part of the secretary’s pool.

He wished he’d saved an extra piece for after his last cigarette of the day. The

cream would have captured and clotted the nicotine in his throat, and that sounded luxurious, toxic and delicious.

The phone rang. Agent Bailey picked up the phone and cradled it against his ear. He spoke in a lazy tone.

“Deputy Bailey.” He said.

An official voice greeted him. “This is the special assistant to Director Doorner.”

Bailey forced down a gulp of saliva, and then steadied himself in his reply. “You talk like I should know you, son.”

“The director has an unorthodox request.” The tremor of his voice had no extra breath for distraction. The cadence was stiff, and unquestioning. “He wants to set up an internal surveillance.”

“On who?” Bailey played the information gap game; he liked forcing people to fill in all the blanks. Especially when they were reluctant to do so.

“Agent Legacy.”

“Your office sets him on its top case and yet you simply don’t trust him. That’s an odd dichotomy wouldn’t you say so special assistant?” He waited for the name.

“Ford.” Bailey could practically hear the release valves strain as the pressure built between the man’s ears “He doesn’t want to disturb the agent’s techniques but he wants information updates on a daily basis.”

“Do you know why we don’t do this kind of thing to our agents?” A silence on the other end of the phone, the assistant was certainly expecting a short conversation with blind compliance. Bailey didn’t like matching expectations. “They know all of our methods. And the smart ones have them embedded in their subconscious – way below the radar of the average agent’s ability to deceive it. I am one of the most undeniably average directors in this country and I’m telling you that this tactic will not work on Legacy unless you find someone smarter than him to carry it out.”

“You’re authorized to go outside the playbook on this one.”

“What kind of promotion can I offer an agent for her cooperation?”

“What do you think it would take?”

Bailey leaned back in his chair and grinned to himself. He felt as though he was at his best dictating terms. “Unprecedented, meteoric rise in status.”

“That is acceptable.” He disconnected.

Bailey shifted in the chair annoyed that there was nothing sticky or sweet to pass his lips, because it was looking like a long night on the job.

Legacy woke from a dreamless sleep at sunrise. He had so much to do after wasting six hours the day before explaining his work. He was six hours farther away from finding the director's daughter. He especially liked the midnight call from Wilkes. After hearing the phrase "you need to substantiate," used in conjunction with every conclusion that Legacy had put onto paper, he reached his flashpoint, and made his own judgment. He would not be submitting any more reports. He told Wilkes as much before an abrupt disconnection.

Legacy had a reputation for icy control in the room, followed by bursts of temper outside. If he had been an operatic tenor, he would have been called a diva. However, as the only man who could perform surgery on the human mind without shedding a drop of blood, he was too unique to fall into a category.

It was not quite every mind, actually. Early in Legacy's work with the CIA he was presented with a child of twelve, daughter of the ambassador to the Baltic republic of Estonia. She had been delivering her father's coded messages back to the embassy in the Soviet Union. They were hidden inside her dental work and she was presumed to be the mule.

When they caught her, the state department brought Legacy in to see how far the damage extended. Legacy entered talks with her to determine if she had any knowledge of the information that she had been transporting. By the end of their first session, he was convinced that she was a pawn, and he even protected her from further questioning with his reputation. He found out, years later, that she had been the architect of the smuggling operation, and was her own dentist. She sent him a Christmas card every year from her dental practice in Maryland. She moved back to the US under diplomatic immunity after communism fell.

Legacy remembered the way her face expressed nothing during their conversation. It wasn't like she was covering anything; it was as if there was no actual thought put into any answer. The neutrality of that face stayed in his mind. It wasn't innocence, he knew that even back then, it was a void.

Why was he wandering back into those waters? Legacy knew his own mind and had become accustomed to being led by its whim. In his own private philosophy whim was like a breath of air that became substance when in contact with a mystery ingredient that he called "wham." He was waiting for the wham to hit him.

The wham came suddenly. The camouflage the Vinyl Men wore! Of course, why didn't he see it before?

The full body vinyl did more than color the perversion, having a complete second skin was somehow important to the safety of the group. Considering all of the complications of getting the materials, and preparation and application before each session – it must have been vital, because the process was far too complicated to be simply fetish. There was something identifying on their bodies or maybe just on one of their bodies of the male participants. Every body part was covered – it had to be important - but what was the catch? How would less than full body covering give something away, what was he looking for?

His breakthrough ran right into a brick wall. Blue had shown himself to be a master of misdirection. He was the kind of person who would go to ridiculous extreme to hide something unfathomably small. He'd start a forest fire to kill one tree. The body suits might be painted onto the entire group to hide a single identifying mole on one of them. There were so many alternatives open that Legacy couldn't close in on one for fear of letting a wider range of possibility go unnoticed.

Blue knew the angles of incidence - abduction was experimental science for him. He must be pleased with himself, satisfied, smug and ready to kill again to throw spice back into his dreary, unchallenged life.

Legacy pulled out a folder with a familiar name on the tab. Laura Doorner was a better student than almost anyone in her class. Her studies showed an aptitude for languages. Laura's beauty poured out of her smile like white silk against bronze skin. Men probably looked at her and thought that with a face like that, she didn't need anything more.

There was more. She graduated from Columbia at seventeen with two majors, ancient literature and pre-law. The picture on the front page of her file was taken at her graduation. The blue polyester mortarboard fitted below the hairline and the royal blue in her eyes presented a rich film-worthy chroma. Looking into her eyes, Legacy saw there was error in anyone who underestimated her. It might not be enough to match Blue on his home turf, but if she saw a weakness, Laura was the kind of person who could exploit it.

Legacy looked at the clock. It was almost time for Laura's first broadcast. Everyone had been accelerating their efforts knowing that something had to happen soon if they had any hope of avoiding it, but he knew it wouldn't. He knew exactly what was happening in the lead up to the broadcast, he knew everything he could about the rituals and routines and yet Blue was still winning. He felt like he might never be closer to Laura than in those moments before the world would become intimate with her – Legacy felt like she might be slipping away.

Blue stood over Laura, using a clear-weave baker's brush to spread a thin, glistening layer of oil on her body. There were silver and gold flecks in the oil that made her body sparkle like it was crafted from some streaked hybrid of precious metal. Her eyes popped open, her pupils rolling back momentarily. She was coming out of sedation. The lids of her eyes felt like shutters, stuck down with a dodgy mechanism for raising them. Then they were open again. A drip of Blue's sweat rolled off his nose and fell onto her forehead. He watched with delight as it made its way down the slope of her brow and mixed with the saline in the corner of her eye. Laura blinked, it was the only part of her body that moved, she was restrained with a series of criss-crossed thin leather straps against a solid pegboard. It was a process that took Blue hours, and left her in exactly the pose that he wanted. His brush reached Laura's lips. Blue traded it for a more precise tip.

"It's the lips that make the first impression. I say that lips are an hour and hair is an afterthought."

"Let me write that down."

"Cat's whiskers you are sassy. How are you feeling?"

"Can I talk to the filthy pervert who runs this place?"

"I'm the janitor."

"That makes my body the toilet."

"Your body is pure art. The muscles you have —" his hand hovered over her skin touching nothing, causing anticipation of contact nonetheless, "and their tone, incredible. It's why I chose the quartz flecks in the oil. It's hard not to make you beautiful my dear."

"Compliments are nice, but I'd prefer the key to this place and a map to the mountains around it."

"You think you saw mountains? Well, we've moved you since then, why do you think they sedate you every night?"

"Cut the crap, I smell the pine."

Blue picked up an air freshener and spurted the air. "Smell anything like this?" He made a spshsh noise pulling his lips behind the bottom row of his teeth and opening his mouth like he was swallowing some kind of gourmet dessert. The next thing that came out her mouth surprised him, like a warm breeze in early spring.

"How do I get out of this alive?" Her eyes evaluated the effect of each word.

"Who do I have to make like me?"

Blue was silent. He'd broken through her confidence layer much sooner than he would have expected. She was already prepared to put her life into his hands. It made him suspicious. This was exciting, his first victory and his first challenge coming so early in the game. He knew what she wanted to hear, so he didn't even give her a hint of it.

"Let's start with me and work our way up."

Laura squirmed in disappointment, but then something changed. She warmed to Blue visibly.

"You like beauty and form?" Blue nodded. "I can show you something you've never seen."

"I don't doubt that."

"Give me the eyebrow pencil and one free hand, and I will impression with them."

"I can't do that."

"The whores of ancient Cyprus used to paint fertility symbols on their bodies, they thought that they would make anyone who looked on their naked form, men and women alike helpless to their sexual spell. Don't you think you'd like that?"

Blue's eyes danced under the mask of vinyl, "Show me one, and I'll put it on your body."

Blue drew the outline of a body on a piece of paper. He loosened the bonds holding down her right arm and handed her the pencil. She put the pencil to paper and drew an intricate symbol curving up to the edge of her thigh. "Will it make me look special?"

Blue duplicated each stroke on Laura, fixated on her skin; it was a beautiful mixture of art and human form. He wet his lips. "It might. Let's keep it symmetrical." He moved the tip of the pencil to the other side of her body.

"Let me do my eyes." She extended her palm, asking for an eyeliner pencil. "I'm not helpless."

Blue looked at her, defiant, and utterly immobile pinned against a pegboard. She started to laugh. It was genuine, dripping in irony, a rich tune from a complex soul. Blue wanted to hear it again the moment it stopped. Instead of letting her see how interested he was, he thrust an eyebrow pencil in her hand and turned back toward his artwork. "I wasn't expecting all this extra decoration. Do your best to make them pop, we've only got an hour."

Legacy burst into the office at nine o'clock, seemingly on a mission. Wagner sulked in the corner, but Legacy barely gave her a glance, he was on to something.

"Hey." She started the conversation abruptly.

"I'm having the ten of the video frames enlarged –" he spoke to the coat rack, the desk and the walls instead of to his partner. "We need to make a chart the bodies of each of the men, label spatial quadrants for every square inch of each character in the video. There might be something else."

"Did you get a call from Wilkes?" Wagner replied.

Legacy had no patience for games "He called you right after he talked to me."

"I-" Wagner said.

" - Got a call from him at around 1 AM and Wilkes asked you if it was worth it to continue. What did you say?" Legacy spoke like he was reading from a transcript; there was no pause between the words for thought or objection.

"I said it was worth it."

"Now you're in the boat too."

Legacy let that sink in for a moment.

Wagner responded, "Why are you picking out video frames?"

Legacy explained, "The lights are halogen, three paired clusters with 24000 watts bulbs in each, bright enough for bleed through mesh, linen and even a thin membrane."

"You saw beneath their costumes?"

"I detected uneven shading beneath the colored layer. The same place on every one of them."

"Scars?" Wagner asked.

"I doubt it. Uniform length and width of the pattern indicates a design -" He lead her along and she followed.

"Tattoos." She nodded her head. "How did you get there?"

Legacy stopped staring at the pictures on the wall and beamed a proud look at the agent. "That's the best question you've asked since coming here."

"I'm a prodigy." She smirked, evidently coming out of her funk.

"There was a fingerprint on the outside of a photo album that was delivered to my door. It belonged to the first victim, Kelly."

“The first victim we know of.” Wagner corrected.

“Exactly.” Legacy walked over to the wall covered in photos and pressed his own finger on one of the enlarged frames. It left a meaty print. “I noticed the print because it was in smudge of something that looked like motor oil, Kelly was into motorbikes. She practiced with a Harley to ride in the homecoming parade. The abductors were still pretty new to the business when they took her, and they went after a familiar image. They took a girl on a bike. We’re hunting for a group of riders, and they all have tattoos on their forearms that are approximately seven inches of jagged design. They needed to cover it to cover their tracks and so they used fetish as their camouflage.” Wagner looked unimpressed.

“You’re excited about this?” Legacy had thought that she’d have been on the phone immediately. “Do you really think the tattoo is going to include names and addresses?” Legacy shook his head. “Then I’m going to the bathroom.”

The bathroom stall door shut behind Wagner and her phone was in her hand, a spastic series of speed dial beeps and a quick connection.

“Bailey here.”

Chapter 14 Snow Angel

Darci heard the manager rattling the keys outside the restroom door; it was time for the weekly cleaning. She’d been letting the hot water run at a trickle to warm up the frigid stall of the truck stop restroom during the night. It added a few degrees of temperature to the air, but she could still see her breath when she exhaled. She looked up at the window above the tank, judging that there was no time. She knew what he’d “ask for” in return for the night’s lodging. There was something about a man who sat all day in sweaty thick wool pants that categorized any act that led him to remove the garments as cruel and unusual punishment.

She had a headache from the fortified wine, and her bloodshot nineteen-year-old eyes watched through the crack of the stall, waiting for the outer door to open.

A car honked outside the building. It was cold enough for full-service to find popularity at the pumps. Darci privately thanked the driver of the car with an inner dance of devotion to those too lazy to pump their own gas, and vowed to someday repay the man or woman who had saved her from sweaty pants. Footsteps receded outside the door and she snuck out the back window.

She hit the frozen ground and felt a wave of freedom, followed by the sudden need to throw up. There was no one there to hold her hair back as chunks of the

past insisted upon being pulled up into the present. They froze to the ground like abstract art, it was a portrait, she thought, representing her life. She didn't notice the beauty in the sickness that lay at her feet and like most of the people in her life; it pretended not to recognize her.

Wagner felt sick in the pit of her stomach after putting down the phone for the hundredth time in the hour. She had called about half of the erectile dysfunction specialists in the country since her first cup of morning coffee. Her message sounded like the start of a crude joke. "I'm looking for an easy rider with a problem in his pipes." The bureau had put out an alert to medical offices, but she didn't want to wait for the data to trickle in. If only one of them could put a name to Blue, the investigation could be over in a matter of hours.

Medical assistants were scouring records, promising to get back to her if anybody fit the profile. The problem with Blue was that he was not the kind of person that made an impression that registered. He was the quiet leader who announced himself through behind-the-scenes actions, not words. In the real world, there would be no temper, no nerves, nothing that would call attention – he was a calm lake with a mirrored surface – with a monster lurking just below. All the people who had broken that surface were dead. What kind of chance did they have of someone recognizing this guy?

"I knew I shouldn't have told you." Legacy's familiar voice came from over her shoulder.

Legacy wasn't in favor of her wasting her time calling around. "There will be no trail to follow, Agent Wagner. Blue wouldn't leave any record behind."

She thought about Legacy's statements, looking for ways to prove him wrong. It was easier to project criticism onto him; he was solid, sitting only feet away. He had a purposeful stare, the kind that she remembered seeing in photographs of billboards of men going to work in the 50's. It wasn't optimistic pessimistic or cynical, his dark eyes brooded in thought. What the hell did he know?

A thought came to Wagner suddenly. She turned back to her computer and added two lines of text to the FBI alert. She hit send and waited for the replies. It wouldn't save Laura from today, but it might the next day, or even the day after.

Wagner peered back over at Legacy. He was staring right at her, like he knew something was different. She admired the way he collected all the energy of the room into his eyes, and said nothing. She broke the silence.

"I might have something."

"But it won't help us soon?" he asked, she nodded "That's good, we have

thousands of agents thinking about today. You're catching on."

"Smug isn't sexy." A dismissive nod.

"I'm glad you identified my biggest daily concern."

"Just because you work on geological time -"

"It isn't about how fast you're moving, it's if you're moving in the direction of your goal." He pushed some papers aside and leaned in with a confidential manner that made Wagner suddenly aware of her posture. "I'd rather be going slowly toward the answer than rapidly zigzagging away."

Wagner put a hand on her neck, searching for a necklace that she hadn't worn since she was in high school. The gesture was personal, and left her exposed. Wagner could have won a Nobel Prize in physics for the way she turned insecurity into defiance. "Too smug with that lean, I'm not going to tell you. Coffee break." She said in a clipped tone.

"I don't know what happened." Blue confided in an overly empathetic huff. He was painting black latex over Tracy's body. He left open all the areas that might be useful in the coming hours.

"Where are we?" she begged.

"Short," He lied, "it barely changed since yesterday. They must be getting ready for the new girl. This happened last time." He dipped his brush in a clear substance. "This is an actual mixture of sweat that I've collected off the ground, it should make your hair shine."

"What happened last time?"

"It won't happen to a pretty little muffet like you, anyway. You know what the men want out there, a performer like you should have no problem giving it to them. Have you ever wondered what a tuffet was, and why Miss Muffet ever bothered taking a rest in a place she must have noticed to be a spiders web?" Blue dipped a tube into a bottle marked *lubricant*, and then hooked it up an air compressor.

"I can. AH." CLICK, Tracy caught her breath and could barely talk as Blue shot the mixture into her body. "Is that-" CLICK.

"All done."

Blue left her face unpainted, hair slicked back tight against her temples. He wanted to see every dimple of every expression that she made. He wanted there to be no escape from her new identity, what she'd become - probably because

there was no escape from what he himself was. Some illnesses are best left undiagnosed.

His watch alarm beeped. She was ready. "Don't be gentle." Blue whispered into her ear.

A large graphics flat screen monitor was brought in especially for the broadcast. Bailey leaned against the back wall like he was waiting in the doctor's office. His usual casual manner was absent, indicating that maybe he had a heart after all. Wagner sat up front. She had done something to prepare for this event that she almost never did. She put in her contacts. She was very self-conscious of the fact that she was losing her eyesight early in life, but it was more than vanity that kept her hiding the deficiency. It was the fact that sight was considered a critical factor in her work. She had a genetic condition - underproduction of saline solutions -, which she was told that corrective laser surgery could actually accelerate. The thin corrective membrane that covered her pupils caused her to blink, and irritated her eye with every movement. However uncomfortable, it was necessary for the next hour.

People always commented on her eyes, they were perfect. "Obviously not thinking of function," she thought as her lids batted down like sandpaper.

Legacy was nowhere to be seen.

Wagner found him in the office. "We had a date."

"I'll watch the playback. Playback is where we have the whole picture." The original broadcasts didn't contain sound. Two purposes were suggested: to keep the participants from saying something incriminating, and secondly the limiting principles of upload bandwidth of Internet broadcast.

"The playback version is over an hour away." Wagner was dumbfounded. How could he calmly work while the crime was in progress? A chill went through her. Legacy saw the transformation, and chose to explain himself.

"I get too involved."

"You? Involved. That's a good one."

"I put myself into the crime scene, I'm not just watching, I'm there. It's a side effect of getting lost in the thoughts of others."

Wagner smirked sardonically, "You're there? Are you "you" or are you "Super you?" do you have a cape on?"

"I don't know how to explain it, I am at the crime scene. I walk around in it."

“You don’t find what you’re saying ridiculous.” Wagner found mordant humor in his words.

“Putting myself into the situation, live, in progress, will make me less effective.” He said, dismissing her. Wagner didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Just when she was beginning to believe in a version of the myth that followed Legacy’s name like the dictionary definition, reality crept in again. The man was delusional.

By the time Wagner got back to the situation room, the initiation was already in progress. The silent interlaced video images flickered. The women were kissing, a deeply disturbing portrait of bondage, spiritual and physical. Perhaps she hadn’t wanted to see the beginning, anyway.

Chapter 15 The Dowdry

The Dowdry was a tin hat, rock shack with cobwebs burrowed into olive green masonry. It sat on a rapidly failing compressed wood foundation that barely kept it from joining the rubble that slid down the mountain every spring. Lodge pole pines hemmed it in at the corners and kept the winter snow from drifting. Not far from the freeway, this backwoods bar was on the old rumbling bark highway – a road built by the logging companies in the forties that had never found its way onto any of the maps. It wasn’t the charm of the place or the owner that kept it in business all these years, off the beaten and even the unbeaten path. It was a marketing ploy that old Burly G’s second wife had come up with during the “good times.” They’d printed over a million matchbooks using the wooden sticks from the plentiful free lumber, and with the help of a few free drinks and miscellaneous favors, the bikers that stopped in made the bar known countrywide. Everyone who drank there was required to take three boxes of complimentary matchbooks and distribute them to bars from coast to coast. It was one of the first and most effective viral marketing campaigns that ever ended in divorce.

When Burly, short for a family name Burline, a huge Nordic looking man, found out that the news of the bar spread partially because of the renowned hospitality of his wife – he sent her packing with a thousand matchbooks and half of his savings. It might be expected that the bar hadn’t been the same since she’d left, but to the contrary, it had barely changed at all.

Driftwood mounted on the walls like trophies, harkening back to the days when forestry taxidermy was a rollicking good joke. Beer taps made from bark shed chips into the glasses like thick dendrological dandruff on creamy white beer heads. A different young woman kept bar, taller than his second wife, older than

the fourth, she was the sixth, showing twice the skin as the fifth, but a little more modest in the mind than the others. She went by the name Snowflake.

Snowflake was sitting on the bar dangling her legs over a squeaky rotating seat. A smashed up juke box had been spinning the same record for over a year and nobody seemed to mind. One of the men from the group in the corner called out for another round.

They were the regulars, the only regulars. They played pool, talked heatedly about which one of them had the best shot at getting on reality TV, and got drunk at eleven am.

They hardly ever talked to Burly, and that was strange only because everybody else talked to him. He was the county's central distribution hub for quiet concern. Burly once listened to a transient former engineer talk about industrial process adhesives and their uses for 23 hours solid. These new regulars stayed away from him, kept out of earshot. They represented an odd combination of coming to a public place to get away from everyone. One night they'd come in, sweat stains pouring down their shirts, and after three pitchers of beer, the short one told Snowflake that they'd raced there from the old Adventist summer camp about five miles off-road, and they weren't leaving until they couldn't find their way home. Two hours later someone came looking for the group. A greasy man with sunken eyes that she'd never seen before, and, come to think of it, had never seen since, showed up in one of those short school buses. He carted them off after he broke up the juke box with a rusty old three-sided chuck ax he'd pried off the wall. The incident had led to Burly's non-controversial edict that furthermore "no weapons used as décor."

Snowflake began her sashay over to the men's table, brushing her hips on the chairs on either side of her in a figure eight motion. The show wasn't for the regulars, or for her husband, it was for herself, and the part of her that yearned for a playful, graceful pace.

BEEP.

A small blackberry device on the belt of one of the regulars went off. The alarm cascaded quickly through the group and suddenly a chorus of alarms sprang from identical devices that each of them carried. Then one of the devices chimed in with a polyphonic tune, the song "Maniac" from the movie Flashdance. They all looked at him.

"It's us. The song." The beat of the tune led to him gracelessly reenacting the scene where the dancer runs in place with a wide smile on his face. The floor creaked.

A lean man with a Welsh accent and a shit-eating grin chimed in "where the hell

did you get that?"

The dance ended "The internet, took me seven seconds to download it." He nodded, smiling like a know-it-all prick that had absolutely no clue.

"What do you fucking mean it's us?" A sinister voice challenged.

The young one rolled up the sleeve of his flannel shirt and flashed a tattoo. It was a woman riding a motorcycle, but not an ordinary cycle. The drawing depicted a morphing of man, sex, and machine. The handlebars were a man's arms grabbing the spiked bracelets of the woman biker who rode the bike. The headlight was a man's head and his legs made up the seat, wrapping around the woman's back. Below the picture was scrawled "Rolling F maniacs".

The sinister one said nothing, but crushed out his cigarette on the younger man's arm. "That puts a period on it. Stupid bitch."

The regulars were out the door; pained complaints and crude innuendo could be heard following them to their bikes, then the rumble of the engines into the distance. That's what always happened, they'd get a page and run off like the president was waiting on them.

Snowflake, the person who actually did wait on them, didn't feel like she was being treated at all like the first lady when she counted up the tip. Her eyes wandered to the window and the street in front of the bar. She looked out, pretended to be thinking about something far away, but her real thoughts were close by hovering around a new man in her life. Someone who didn't remind her of anyone she'd met working at this place. She wished he would come in that front door again. She sighed looking at the painted hello kitty pattern on her nails.

"What's the matter?" Burly hollered across the bar, spit shining the glasses.

Snowflake held up a single dollar bill. She let her fingers work their magic and the paper weaved like a snake around her digits so that a single middle finger was visible to Burly, punctuating her displeasure with the tip. "Cancel the trip to San Martin."

Burly snorted in agreement. "You look out that window half the day. Nothing changed out that window except the weather in twenty years." He smiled as she walked back to the bar, brushing her hips along the smooth aluminum sides of the tables then disappeared into the back room.

She couldn't meet his eyes. He knew. She knew he knew. The only thing Burly could spot quicker than a customer without cash was a wife planning to leave him.

Blue walked across the compound. Gravel crunched under his work boots and skittered away from the tread. An old injury gave him an uneven gait, lurching to the right and consequently slightly dragging his left foot. He'd been told that if the knife had been an inch longer, he might have lost the leg at the knee. His chronic pain flared up from time to time. Today was worse than usual, the kick to the knee that Laura so kindly contributed put more drag into his gait. But it didn't slow down his pace as he walked from the trailers to what used to be the camp showers and gymnasium. Cleanliness was important to protestants, he thought. It showed in the fact that the men and women's showers occupied more space than the administration office, which he passed listening to the CLANK CLANK of metal clips against a hollow flagpole. It had once been the proud standard for the American flag and the Camp Exoter pennant, but now it was only a rope, three clips and a rusty cap.

Blade peeled off his vinyl mask and sweat poured off him like greasy dew. He spat on the hands, which he used to pluck the tinted contacts off of his eyes then looked up. Hazel eyes sunk into their sockets, cheeks pitted and oily, hair sticking to the sides of his face made up the man nicknamed Blade. He continued his progress checking his watch and muttering "Roll call."

He swung the main door open and walked in. Tile ran up partition walls to shoulder height. He did a head count looking around the room, and scowled as simultaneously his eyes lit up with delight. "Who's missing?"

Blade's men responded like a heartbeat under duress. They sped up, not fully knowing what they were reacting to. This was the same lazy group of thugs from the bar, although they hardly resembled their former selves. Now they displayed a regimented organization. It was a parade, no that's too grand. It was a dog show put on for Blade. No one wanted to upset the man who'd just entered the room. When Blade got angry there was always punishment, indiscriminate and crippling were his favorite two kinds. His cruelty was legend well before he'd put wheels under this abduction scheme. In the past, he'd organized this group of ruffians into one of the most highly sought, highly paid group of enforcers on the road. He'd hand chosen them from other biker groups and saying no was not an option. Blade had a very persuasive way of keeping his men in line, and he had rules about everything. He wouldn't let them gain or lose weight. He had a strict hair length code and it was different for each man. It was like he'd built the likeness of each of his crew into an ideal that he would not allow to change. The men complied, just as they complied with everything he said, because they'd seen what Blade had done.

He took on contracts that nobody else would touch. He would follow

intimidation farther than anyone else. Blade changed the minds of top businessmen, politicians and even organized crime lords. Not by putting a knife to their throat, but by putting a knife to the pulse of everything that man or woman prized most in this world. He hounded every interest of his target to the ends of the earth until they saw things his way. Accidents happened to everyone they'd ever met, until Blade got his way. Blade once amputated the leg of the college roommate of a man he was hounding with a blowtorch. The victim was screaming the entire time that he couldn't even remember his roommate's name. Too bad for him. All Blade did was leave his business card on the charred stub and suggested that he should give his old friend a call, let him know how he was doing. After something like that he'd evaporate into the roadway system, only to reappear a month, a year or even five years later and perpetuate a very dedicated, very personal reign of terror. His crew had achieved quite a reputation.

Now they sat in neatly divided stations, nozzles and air compressors fixed for the colored liquid mixture that was their costume to be sprayed onto their bodies. To the right of the door was Red:

His name was Sean, a tall lanky guy who served as the group's mechanic. Sean was Welsh, soft spoken, his eyes vacant, he was much more comfortable interacting with the moving parts of a bike than with any person. He was answering the questions of the man in the stall next to him: Vorest, Violet.

"It keeps sticking between second and third, I don't see why it isn't a priority." Vorest said smearing himself in a mixture of powder and oil before applying the color.

Sean saw their leader standing in the doorway then replied. "Blade sets the priorities."

"Well this should be one!" He said kicking the tub of powder in front of him and sending a cloud into the air, which he snorted deep like cocaine. Vorest had a dark islander complexion and a white hot temper. He was always looking for a fix and a fight. His laugh rattled like an engine, mechanical and joyless, and it cut out abruptly, like he was daring someone to find him less than hilarious. His jokes usually involved pain.

Green was in the next stall and he laughed at everything. He went by the nickname Feely, "I want you guys to start calling me the green goblin." He liked to give himself new nicknames.

"Right Feely." Sean said in a low monotone.

He was the mascot of the group, willing to do anything on a dare. Feely was their long haul rider, often making it from East to West coast "balls rattling" in a single straddle of the bike. It was particularly important to have a long haul rider

now because of Blade's rules involving commerce.

He made them buy everything by mail order, and nothing came to the same mailbox twice. So if they needed to buy parts, they set up a mailbox in Tampa or Tuscaloosa, ordered the part and sent Feely on the road.

Feely shrugged his shoulders and passed the talc under the plastic divider to Stones. "Here you go Stones, there's enough for your body, but it won't cover your dick."

"If I were you'd I'd be tired of myself in a week."

"I'm thirty-one and I'm proud to say after watching Dr. Phil I learned to make myself better through criticism of others."

"Somebody take away his TV." Stones smiled, very satisfied with almost everything he said or did.

Feely shot back, "Don't talk about TV to Mac - " He stopped short, just realizing that Mac wasn't there. He looked up at Blade. "Go easy on him, he's had a bad day -" Blade spotted the empty stall. His skin turned from parchment yellow to a flushed red in seconds. Stones took the conversation off track before he could expel his anger at anyone in the room.

"Our little friend should know not to step in front of bullets, he's so fuckin paper thin, it's going to go right through him and hit the other guy anyway" he grabbed Feely's shoulder and shook it. Feely wobbled like a sheet of tin. Stones let out a deep rumbling laugh. After a moment of breathless indecision Blade joined. Relief spread through the room and everyone returned to the task of suiting up.

Stones' area was stained Yellow. After a quick dust he began applying the vinyl coating on his skin. Painting the median line below his belly, he encountered what would be to an outsider a truly majestic sight. Stones had one attribute that nobody in the group could argue with, a porn sized penis. It mesmerized the group like a religious object. Many had knelt in front of it – that could explain the confusion. The experience he offered was the kind based on stimulus alone. At the base of the argument about Stones was that he never felt alone, even when there was nobody in the room. It explained the way he got away with behavior that others in the room could not and also the way he thought about himself. His dick gave him a numerical advantage of adjusted net worth. He had the one object of influence that could not be bought or sold and he knew it.

Mac rushed in ranting, "The fucking TV, can't get my E, how am I supposed to get it together without E?"

"You're late." Blade projected from the doorway.

Mac stumbled and nearly fell over the brown stained bench in his area. “Fuckin TV – it’s not my fault. It’s the satellite.”

Blade approached him in even, measured steps. He let words slip out the same. “You know my rules, nobody’s late, no excuses.”

“Come on, it’s not me.” Mac held up his hands in front of him in a defensive posture, which only angered Blade more.

“Do you think I’d just punch you? I’d never do that.” His right eye twitched, pupil lazily dragging itself from the corner and focusing on Mac with fresh anger.

“I’m not saying you would – it’s a mistake.”

“It would be over too quickly, I like it when someone is waiting for the punishment to come. Do you want it now or later?”

Blade saw the recognition in his eyes. Later was always worse, he’d pick a time when everyone was drinking and happy. There was an instance when he’d waited a year for punishment, then called for it just before the guy was going to meeting up with his family that he’d been away from for six months. He took a gusher over the right eye to the reunion. If a person didn’t stand for the punishment, they ended up dead. He had two pinpoint daggers, assassins’ weapons that were silent on the way in and bloody on the way out. Blade always got in his due, when it came to payback.

“Now.”

Blade put his hands together. He had a secret that made his punches legendary among the people who were on the receiving end. He did what he always did to get the adrenaline running. With a quick twist, he popped a knuckle on his right hand out of joint, excruciatingly painful, his arm lashed out almost as if by itself, striking Mac in the throat. Blade heard his knuckle pop back into joint as it pushed into the meaty flesh of Mac’s throat. The second surge of pain brought a smile to his face. Mac staggered backward falling over the bench and landing on the hard tile. Blade received and dealt out pain in one elegant motion, it was the product of the sickness that infected his pleasure centers.

Mac, meanwhile, was rolling on the floor, gasping saliva and blood into his lungs.

“I like TV.” Blade said with brutal levity, a husky laugh in his throat. “Anyone like it more than me?”

The men were silent. Mac struggled, unable to talk.

“Then raise your hand.” Blade pointed directly at Mac. Mac slowly raised his

hand, fingers curled still from the shock of the hit. Blade burst out laughing. “You’re in charge of getting it fixed... it has to be fixed by next week.” The joke spread through the room but just as the mood was passing. Blade added “paint up men, don’t want to be late for the initiation.”

Chapter 16 Tasteful

“Kiss me, kiss me like a reckless schoolgirl with a crush, on my lips. Sugar lips baby.” Tracy’s improvisation skills hadn’t blossomed in captivity.

Wagner had turned away from the picture when Tracy touched Laura. This was the second time she’d watched the video, the first time with audio. She could now hear the desperation added into the act. Tracy clearly was willing to do or say anything to keep her captors happy. Laura was immobilized, the pattern of knots that held her spread across a frame were expertly executed. Her mouth was wide open, a bit inserted in the back teeth that kept it in a forced an oval look of shock. Nothing could change the series of perversions about to happen.

“I’ll start by rubbing up against your chin. Then if you don’t eat, I’ll relax these muscles,” she touched the area where her pubic hair met her stomach.

Wagner’s heart was racing, futility was pumping through her veins, ice in her bloodstream carving out a throbbing pain in her head. Her own discomfort was trivial, in that moment that she knew that it was happening. It was real, the kind of real that is as personal as a facial expression or fingerprint. Odd, slightly connected thoughts went through her mind, like the fact that there were thousands of nuts that collectively didn’t believe the moon landing. She was willing to bet that the people who fought reality, the most stubborn doubters, were out there watching this and believing everything. No one wanted to be skeptical of this event, and Wagner knew why. Sex was the ultimate argument, and watching the live image, she stood and made footsteps quick to the bathroom.

She vomited. It was warm and full of acid. Her body dug deep into her digestive tract, but it couldn’t pull the experience from her mind. The geography was just all wrong. A splitting headache accompanied the final heaves – then she looked up into the mirror. A strand of hair had fallen, curled around her face, and for all the preoccupying beauty that stared back at her from the mirror; the only thought that went through her head was “I used to see her on the way to class.” She brushed the hair back and set about to fix the rest of the damage.

Wagner left the restroom and found Legacy waiting outside directly between her and the conference room. He said nothing, but for some reason he stood waiting. Wagner stood statuesque for a moment, looking up at her partner. She took his

silence as smugness. “Real nice talking to you.”

Wagner brushed past him, hesitating at the door to the conference room. Naturally, she had no will to go back. Legacy’s presence standing over her shoulder, made it almost impossible to back down.

The audio from inside was bleeding into the hall. A woman’s voice yelled through breathless bouts of fake ecstasy, frantically signaling to her captors “everybody get in here – and - finish us off!” The controller’s voice came over the PA; a vacant sound ordered all of the colors to report to set. Wagner felt another wave of nausea. From behind her Legacy raised his voice in what seemed like effort to cover the sounds of the production.

“You don’t have to go back in there. The people in that room are going about this all wrong.” Wagner looked back at Legacy and saw a quick flash of something resembling concern, but coming from Legacy a closer translation would be a pause in judgment. It made her feel selfish. Legacy quickly adopted his regular tone, adding “Everything those investigators have done up till now has been useless, going back in there with them just includes you in their failure. It’s pathetic to keep failing the same way. Come back to the office.”

“You always know just what to say.” She quipped.

“It’s a real gift.” He said falling in step beside her. They didn’t speak on the way back to their office, but at the door Legacy leaned in and opened it for Wagner. She brushed under his arm and turned, catching Legacy face to face. This was the time when most men would fall under Wagner’s spell. “You know you overcompensate, you’re emotional and fragile you sit around debating your own shortcomings, which, granted there are many.” Legacy was not other men.

“Something else you should know about me, I work better when I’m pissed off. So we should be very – productive.” Wagner was already sinking into her chair and turning away from Legacy’s area of the office.

“Fine for you, but is there anything that makes you easier to work with?” Legacy stared at her like he was waiting for a reply, one of the first times he wanted to hear her voice. Wagner’s silence was delightful, and operatic.

Chapter 17 Quack Shop

“WHOOOOO HOOO!” Mac, Brown, garbled a cry of victory. His bald head bobbing in and out of the spray of the showers. “I love to stick it to the law.”

He licked his lips, snorted the air and water mixture deeply “It’s like fresh bread.”

Vorest, Purple, was always looking for fresh pain. “I like both of them there at the end, it’s like having an old girlfriend and a new girlfriend at the same time.” He threw a wet towel over the plastic of his shower enclosure; it smacked the wall beside Stones. Stones didn’t flinch. “Stones, the way you gave that parting gift to the actress.”

Stones peeled the yellow away from around his lips, said with a sly tone, “Felt like a dozen clowns getting into a compact car.” He examined his lower appendage, holding it like a jeweler cups a precious gem. “I think I’m chafed.”

“Pussy.” Feely, Green, mocked him from across the room.

Vorest corrected “Ass.” It was like a high school filled with felons.

Mac ran through the divided areas with a huge bottle of hair conditioner “I’m a warthog! I’m a warthog!” He yelled splaying the white creamy fluid across Vorest, Feely, Stones, and Sean.

Sean tried to grab the hair between Mac’s shoulder blades to slow him down. Mac squirmed away. But all too soon he found out why Sean wanted to slow him down. The stream of conditioner splashed spastically off the walls as he turned. Then it landed on something that was completely un-tiled. The blue body vinyl took a splash across the chest and Mac was face to face with their scowling leader, Blade.

“I’m sorry, I was a warthog.” He pleaded. Blade brought his fists together, and Mac stood still waiting for his punishment with closed eyes.

Blade wiped the conditioner off his chest with a finger then shoved it into Mac’s mouth, scrubbing his back teeth.

A smile broke across Blades mouth like a jagged path to hell, “Take it back warthog.” Blade was in a good mood. Feely let out a high-pitched laugh, everyone joined. Blade put his arm around Mac who playfully licked his finger. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“A warthog cums in volume. Five hundred milliliters - “ Mac started.

Stones cut in “Isn’t that a pig?”

Mac continued “A pig that gets almost no action, so he stores it up. Half a liter each time he blows his wad.”

Blade held up the bottle of conditioner. “Half liter?” He squeezed the remaining contents onto the floor. “If any of you could do that, I’d get rid of the rest.”

Mac said “I’m going to figure out the TV receiver problem today, I’ll have it fixed – like that.” He snapped his fingers.

Blade raised his voice for everyone to hear, “This guy fixes things,” finger snap, “like that, and I like that. He’s a good guy.” Jeers rang along the walls, Blade put up one finger to silence them. “And if he shows up on time I don’t feel much at all like killing him.”

Vorest chimed in “We do.”

Blade continued, “One more, one last whore. And we’re coming up to our reward.” The room became quiet they knew what came next. “We don’t live like kings, we live the life that allows us to keep living the life. People think they are better than us. I’ve never met anyone better than us. Out in the world, there’s a tidal wave of sperm swimming free because of the work you did in the last hour. The FBI-meets-actress angle drew our first million live, and it was so fucking good. Our subscribers are talking about it all over the net. It’s going to make international headlines.”

Blade strode around the room. “We are an entertainment network, and an international incident.”

Blade’s voice dropped with sinister finality “Killing the actress might be the best marketing we could possibly do.”

Sean spoke up “But she made the ransom.”

It wasn’t decency that made the room reluctant to spill her blood. “We should be consistent.” Feely agreed. Blade snapped his head toward the dissenting opinion with a brooding conflict: he looked like he wanted to kill them and thank them at the same time.

“We riders do have a code, don’t we?” A grumble of laughter.

“Secret ballot,” He held up five pieces of paper and distributed them among the men. “Dump the bitch breathing, or the body?”

Feely asked, “Why don’t you vote?”

Blade said in an even tone “It’s all the same to me.”

Chapter 18 Curled Queen

Tracy pressed herself farther in the corner hearing the outside door open. It always took ages from the first sound until Blue would open the inner door. The seconds stretched her nerves until pitched like the wires strung to the far keys on a piano. How long would he take this time?

A full minute later, she heard the key go into the lock, minutes more and the lock

turned. The hesitation must mean something. Blue wasn't looking forward to this errand. It was over for her, she knew it.

Blue had bits of papers in his hands; he thumbed through them like a dealer churns a stack of cards. "I told you it would come to a vote if you didn't make it."

Her eyes filled up with tears, "Have you counted them?"

"No," Her head snapped up, clearly surprised. He explained "I thought it was better to do it in front of you." He glanced down at his hands.

Tracy's mouth trembled as she spoke "I really did good today, right? They must have noticed." Blue flipped the ballots onto the floor, read them like tealeaves. It was an elaborate act, a poker bluff that invited speculation and dread. With her life on the line, Tracy showed great restraint waiting moments before blurting out. "Good news?"

"Yes - I don't really read them. I just do what I want to do." He said arms spread wide and welcoming. He took on the outward countenance of a preacher and it seemed fitting when Tracy uttered "Thank God." Tracy let out a sigh of relief.

A dark transition overtook every aspect of the man she knew as Blue, his tone of voice dropped off into a black abyss. Malice, somehow built from humble playful beginnings. "Let's not bring him into it, yet, it feels like you deserve punishment after what you did today. Look at your soiled sinful body, and your newly sinful mind." His steps toward her became heavy and imposing. Unseen to Tracy a knife, barely three inches long, dropped into his hand, covered by his palm. "Stand in the shower please."

"What? I did what you said—" Her voice was cut off. She chirped in fear as he swooped in and tucked the blade under her throat. With a brisk step he led her to the shower. A fierce tango, bodies locked in a strained embrace. This was the moment that he lived for, the uncertainty, the balance of life and death. Her gasps for air fed a fire in his eyes, a savage light. Tracy looked up into them; she had always counted Blue as a friend and now everything, even the shape of the room and colors, changed in her eyes. Trust gasped, dying, and betrayed on the edge of a surge of panic and recognition.

This was Blade's foreplay.

Fear shook her body in waves, her skin wrapped around useless muscles; messages came from a useless brain. Impossible was the only way to describe the kind of futility and helplessness that Blue was able to bring to bear in the last moments with his victims. He breached the walls of all of their senses and pulled their insides out. Safe to say that the best way to describe the final ordeal was in

the words of one of the women who made it through their final meeting with him. The transcript hung in Legacy's office, the last moments of a two-hour interrogation after which the girl said nothing. "It made me forget the torture, all I can remember are those moments with him."

Tracy tottered on the edge of a silver blade, red blood trickled from a superficial wound, and she would never again see the world through those crystal blue eyes.

Chapter 19 Futility Bay

Two days later, Wagner knew almost everything that there was to know about the male erection. She'd spoken to over a hundred specialists in E.D.D., and combed every record searching for a biker who couldn't match rubber to road.

Yes, she picked up some bad biker lingo too.

She'd worked the angle from both sides, matching the biker groups to the specific deficiency of the lead member, and matching the patients of thousands of doctors to a single rider. It wasn't a realistic to find that one person who matched Legacy's description, especially in such a tight-lipped community, but it was better than doing what he did, which seemed to be simply to sit and stare.

The music was getting to her. It had been a marathon of some instrument invented in the seventies – presumably to torture the poor souls who never learned to dress properly. The player had been banging upon a clutch of strings with a mallet or perhaps his head, for fifteen hours. Wagner cursed everything in her wicked life that had brought her to this point.

Legacy had spoken in small packets since the initiation. He'd watched it, once. That's all he needed. He told Wagner to do the same. Of course she'd watched it over and over every night when she went home. The following installments, five in all, were stacked on top of her VCR at the hotel.

Wagner put down the phone with a little more force than usual after another fruitless call. Legacy could see her make a mental note not to lose control like that again. Legacy continued to stare. Wagner flung the phone across his line of sight and it crashed into the wall. One more resolution, broken. Her scowl told him that she didn't give a damn if it got his attention. Of course, it was moments like this when Legacy took notice and had something helpful to say.

"You're doing your job all wrong, you know?" He said, flat as the world before Galileo.

"What?" She said, although she'd heard him clearly. If only there was another

phone, a heavier phone.

“You’re acting without thought. Use your mind, narrow down all of those actions until all you have to do is call one person. Instead you call the phone book and get nothing. You weren’t second in your class at the academy because you used the phone book second best.” He continued, “Sit and think until you just have to call one number to get your result.”

“You’re asking me to sit around doing nothing?” Her tone only slightly resembled a question.

“Flinging that telephone was the most sensible thing you’ve done in days. Has your telemarketing barrage gotten you any closer to finding Blue?” He shrugged his shoulders. “I know you are anxious to interview Tracy.”

“Tracy is dead, it’s been two days, don’t act like you don’t know.” Her emotions spilled out and her eyes looked suddenly weary.

“Don’t be ridiculous. She’s fine, Blue is just giving us some time to chew on; he wants us caught off guard when she shows up. It’s not a guess, it’s a fact, and she’s fine.” He paused, watching the upswing in Wagner. She lit up almost instantly. He found a distracted part of his brain thinking about how he could produce the same effect again so that he could watch her react, Legacy had no more surprising good news so he had to settle for showing off. “The news will break later today. She’ll be home tonight. If I’m wrong, I’ll start senselessly calling hospitals asking if they had any biker patients who were capable of all manners of deviant felonies and smart enough to cover all of their tracks except the random FBI call, picking a single grain out of a sandstorm.” Legacy could barely stand the thought of producing any such conversation on the phone, but he knew it wouldn’t be necessary. Tracy was alive, the drop-off would tell more about the Vinyl Men’s location than they wanted.

Legacy leaned over the papers on his desk, and the strangest thing happened. He heard Wagner approach, and she retrieved her broken phone - that was all quite natural. But on the way back to her desk she paused near his chair. He felt her hand on his shoulder. The warmth of her grip circulated through his body in a gratifying manner that disturbed him deeply. He liked her, a bit fascinated by her irrational methods and her need to present a perfect appearance. But she intruded on his life, and nothing in that category had pressed past his rigid defenses in years. Legacy thought about his cold shoulder, the other one, and realized that the idiom “turning a cold shoulder” was really more caring than indifference. The only reason one turns a cold shoulder is if the other holds warmth. Blue killed Jamie, and everyone had supposed that she must have done something that angered or upset Blue. Legacy was beginning to believe the opposite, that she must have been the one he cared for most.

It was four in the afternoon when the information broke rattling through the rafters and settling in the basement. A young man from community affairs, later they'd find out his name was Brent, came into the office with a memo. He had a no-nonsense style that appealed to Legacy. "Half the agency has hit the ground in North Dakota - "

"Body?" Wagner fixed her gaze on Brent's perfectly groomed hairline, not wanting to read his expression. With jet-black hair swept back meticulously, it resembled a shoreline finding a nautical prow line peak in the center of his brow. Wagner had the most remarkable way of picking out a person's defining characteristic in a moment. Legacy followed her eyes and agreed. This guy was a straight shooter – arrow right through the forehead.

"Breathing."

Legacy cast a sidelong glance at Wagner, who pretended not to notice how masterful he was in both practice and theory. Brent continued.

"I took the liberty of getting you two tickets on a shuttle flight tonight – " Wagner was already on a flight of her own.

"There's nothing sooner?" She said looking at the time.

"Sooner would be now." He observed. "You're up against the clock making that flight. There's a car –"

Legacy objected "They need to bring her here."

Wagner replied, "They're not going to do that."

Legacy wasn't budging "Well, that's what they have to do."

Wagner paused in the middle of what Legacy guessed to be a frantic, pre-travel gathering ritual, "The first six hours are the ones that shape the testimony and consequently the entire information chain elicited from a victim. You said it." There was a certain satisfaction in quoting Legacy back to himself.

"That is why she should be on a plane, now."

Wagner slipped her coat on "Nothing like an abrupt change of venue in the company of federal agents to put the mind at ease. Pack up Legacy."

"I can't go." Legacy shifted in his seat uncomfortably. He knew that he wasn't going to get his way. "I shouldn't have to, arrangements should have been made."

"You could have made some useless calls." The comment was lost on Brent, who completed an awkward triangle between them.

Brent backed out of the room, his pace slow, like he was holding himself hostage

until he got to the door, just for his own safety. “I’ll look into bringing the entire crime scene here, but on the off chance that that requisition doesn’t go through, you have thirty minutes to make your plane.”

Legacy liked him even better. He gathered that his smartass tone was the way Brent projected confidence within the formal structure of his position. An immature but respectable way of expressing command as a young agent. Most of the agents he knew expressed confidence at the wrong time, through jargon and superior FBI speak. Brent told Legacy that he was not going to get his way and still left him with a smile. Legacy backed away from his position, like a chess master who knows he’s beaten. Conceding one piece at a time until the final gambit.

“They probably want 24 hours to process the scene.” Legacy dug a hand into his pocket.

“You have been waiting for a fresh witness, Legacy. You can see these maniacs through her eyes, and I’m telling you it could - “ Legacy pulled out a coin and set it spinning on his desk, Wagner pulled out her most forceful and convincing tone “ - it could swing the whole case.”

Legacy watched the coin spin “I don’t see that, Blue’s refined his drop technique. She’s been drugged for the last two days.”

Wagner slapped the coin down, “So a little time has passed.”

“You’re going to be my eyes and ears up there. Keep a line of communication open –”

“All I want to hear is that you’re getting on that plane with me. We won’t be this close again until we collar them.”

“They need to draw blood and do a blood oxygen test – there’s only the slightest chance that –” Wagner’s body shook in anger. Legacy could tell that she missed a lot of what he said in the next minute, until Legacy forced the issue. “Listen, agent” Legacy’s hand came slamming down on the desk. “While everyone’s chasing around the drop spot, you hit the town. I think she spent the night there, maybe even longer.”

“Why?” Wagner asked.

Legacy was already withdrawing back into himself; he had no energy for explaining his rationale. “Do the blood test, drag the biker fleabags for a unresponsively ‘drunk’ companion, and keep me up to date.”

Wagner knew that there was one topic that would tweak him “Is there anything you want me to ask her?”

That was the question that hurt, Legacy knew that nobody would drill into her experience the way he could. He knew that he could bring it all back to the surface, and sift through her emotions, tear into them until the concrete foundation of reality that they were built upon was exposed. He could know everything that she knew in five hours, but looking into the distance at the facts he'd assembled on Blue, he doubted that much if any of the raw knowledge would lead him anywhere other than looping a victim back into their own pain.

Blue had a sick specialty, and Legacy wouldn't put it past him to plant horrors in the background of a victim's memory – just so the torture continued out of captivity. The other victims had long since closed their doors to those paths, and he knew that if he opened them – if he put Tracy back in that place - it would also shed light on the weapon that shredded her soul, cutting her no less than Blue's knife had pressed into the neck of the previous victim. Wagner left in a huff as he let his mind slip around the situation like fading sunlight along a wall. It hardly mattered anyway, he couldn't leave town, it just wasn't an option.

Wagner threw open the door to a black Lincoln town car. Why the hell did the agency always use black Lincoln town cars? They certainly didn't qualify as unobtrusive; everyone knew that feds were packed into every black Lincoln town car on the road.

She could tell he was struggling with something outside the parameters of the case, and she couldn't care less. This case wasn't about him, it was about the life of a girl who lived in Wagner's dormitory, and if it didn't stop it would be about the girl after her who lived on a different street somewhere in another town. She didn't have an ounce of respect for him in that moment. "Why am I here?" She thought as the brightly lit, drab stone buildings of Civil War era construction swept across the tinted windows. For all of her anger, she was aware that the act of leaving that office, his office, actually lifted a weight off of her. She pulled out her cell phone and made a call. "Federal Bureau of Investigation, Alexandria office." The car swung onto the interstate highway. This was the fork in the road where Wagner's loyalty divided. "Chief Bailey please."

Darci stood in front of a two-for-one snack rack at the Pump and Go, debating what to steal.

She let her mind create a fantasy around the cookies that cost fifty cents more than the other cookies, which cost fifty cents less.

There must be something special that comes with that price tag, something that would fulfill her more, give her fifty cents more inner worth than she had before consuming them. She definitely wasn't a bargain shoplifter, and a quick grab and

tuck had the package inside her oversized front sweatshirt pocket. Utah fashion was the best for shoplifting. They should call it the shoplifting state, she thought. A crafty smile passed her lips – for a moment the crime was her life - and it was going well. She looked up at the clerk, an older lady with thick rimmed glasses and hair that stood on end with lift from some beauty product that really should have been recalled. Something on a fuzzy black and white TV above her shoulder caught Darci's attention. It wasn't the checker-box surveillance camera monitor that had certainly just caught her master crime on tape – it was the news report. A girl was being led through a crowd of reporters, blankets wrapped around her body. She babbled in a language incoherent to almost all of the listeners, save Darci.

"It was Blue, and his eyes. Blue eyes – bleeding on tile. There wasn't sex – pain is Blue. Sky Blue."

Her sluggish steps through the crowd of reporters were also familiar to Darci, except in her memory there were no crowds and no blankets. Darci read the name below the video image, but the letters were out of place, all wrong. Darci knew something about the girl that no one else did. Tracy didn't notice the crowds and she couldn't feel the blankets. The chill that froze her mind and body couldn't be seen, or warmed from the outside.

"That girl, that girl was me." She approached the cashier, leaned over the counter, getting as close as she could to the screen. "It should say Darci." It was at that moment that the broadcast cut to commercial and it was like the strings of a puppet were cut. Darci staggered backward, no longer drawn toward the image on screen. A trained eye would have seen the anguish and loss in her stare. An expert might have diagnosed the situation as significant and delicate.

The clerk was not a trained eye, "What you been drinking?"

Darci dug into her stuffed pockets and offered up a bribe. "I'll give you back these cookies if you let me use the phone. I need to call the FBI."

The cry for help was met with the unending compassion of a convenience store clerk. Actually compassion overstates the sentiment, tough love without the love. "Put those on the counter and if I see you in here again I'll call the cops, they might have the number for the FBI."

There were at least two people in the world that could have entered the shop that would have made the standoff between Darci and the clerk even worse. And in one of life's shit-cannon moments, they happened to walk through the door at that moment.

Darren and Bone Pike were brothers, stoners and founders of the Ski Bikini Appreciation Society of Greater Utah. Their father, a former federal prosecutor,

was a partner in the most prosperous firm in the state. They looked like the standard-issue, youth culture shit heads, but in reality they were a caricature drawn in green ink, dripping money.

Bone burst in the door holding his breath. The game was called Convenience Store Gauntlet. He was going to try to keep it held until he'd bought four different items from four different rows of the store. This test of skill and speed was the fresh brainchild of Darren who expected his brother to yack before making it to the counter.

The frantic ransacking of the shelves broke the silent standoff between the clerk and Darci. Whatever might have been said was now buried. In the time it took Bone to hit the counter with four items and unload a sustained rancid burp fueled by the gush of air leaving his lungs, Darci found her legs and began to back her way to the door where she intersected precise spot where Darren was doubled over in laughter.

"Tha- that was awesome dude. Whoah." Darci bumped into him. She turned and was face to face with nervous, pale shale gray eyes. Darren flipped his long stringy hair out of his face and some of it tangled in with hers. It was like their hair had an idea that neither of them had the time to follow up on at that moment. She was losing her balance and Darren reached out an arm to steady her. "Sorry babe."

Darci snarled, "Get off of me." and shrugged off his hand. A package of cookies fell out of her front pocket.

The clerk trumpeted behind them. "She's stealing, stop her."

He knelt down and picked up the broken cookie, it might have been her skewed impression, but he seemed impressed that she was stealing the expensive ones. Darren made no move to restrain Darci; rather, he gave her a nod of appreciation and returned the cookie to her pocket. A wink said that finding out she was a thief was cool.

Darci said, "Pay for these and I'll find a way to get you back. I'm around." She didn't wait for an answer pushing her way past him out into the cold.

Darren nodded at his brother who rocked back and forth a little unsteady from the oxygen deprived head rush. "Pay the lady." Bone pulled out a stack of twenty dollar bills from his crotch pack and dropped a couple on top of his purchase: a bottle of drain-o, a candy bar, toilet paper and a package of replacement windshield wipers. He then proceeded to vomit on the whole stack.

Needless to say, there was no drain to fix, or car needing wipers. Life was a pointless game for the brothers, and there were no rules.

Bone staggered toward the door. Darren watched Darci through the yellowing weathered plastic sheets that made up the nearby bus stop enclosure. A bus pulled up and she waved it on. He let a shiver of the outside world into his reality for just a moment, it was as close to maturity as he allowed. A craggy voice screeched over his shoulder.

“That little snow angel’s a tramp, bona fide tramp. She made fun of that poor abducted girl on TV.”

“How?” Bone was always looking for a laugh.

“She wanted to make a prank call the FBI, tell them that she was the same abducted girl too or some damn nonsense.” Bone remembered his change and walked back to the counter, “You don’t get any, I don’t know what else she had in her pockets.”

Bone shrugged, he was pretty certain that Darren had loaded his pockets with candy. He flipped the earflaps on his hat down and trudged toward the door. Darren held the door open, then as he passed lunged into his body bumping him into a display stack of oil cans outside the door. The cans scattered, snow flew up in a cloud and when it settled the boys stood staring back into the store, posed in unbelievable enthusiasm, like they were in a Mentos commercial, holding stolen candy flipping off the clerk.

The international airport in Bismarck was officially closed when the converted military transport 707 touched down. Wagner looked out the window. There was no evidence of the earth beneath her other than the sound of the engines struggling to slow and stabilize the plane at the same time. This was the white out that they’d promised when she took off. There couldn’t be worse conditions for gathering physical evidence, and she doubted it was a coincidence.

She gathered her carry on and made it through the concourse, all the while cursing the person who had sent her. At least it couldn’t get much worse.

She stepped out into the frigid night. A black town car was waiting for her on the curb, and the distance almost killed her. Before she even crossed the threshold, a chill went through Wagner’s body like nothing she’d ever felt before in her life. They sky cap had warned her that her coat wasn’t rated for the Dakotas, where the “wind splashes the skin like ice water.”

Stepping out of the automatic door into the night air she understood the warning in a more personal way. The first place where the swirling wind struck was crawling up the open sleeves of her overcoat. Like a submarine with the hull breeched, it flooded her arms. Before she could wrap her arms tightly around

herself, the vortex of air snuck into every opening of her wardrobe. The biggest insult came when involuntarily she drew a deep breath in reaction to the shock. The wind had won, and it engulfed her body from the inside out. She couldn't manage to talk when she shut the door to the car behind her. The agent behind the wheel asked "That your coat?" She couldn't answer. "I'm supposed to take you to the station - " She still couldn't answer, and instead her head bobbed in an approximation of a nod.

The greeting that nature offered Wagner turned out to be one of the nicest parts of the trip. And she would have gladly taken a second plunge into the elements hours later to avoid the crippling emotional chill playing out in a smoky interrogation room in the local sheriff's office.

The rural office hadn't seen action like this since – well, never. The locals had given complete control over to the feds by the time Wagner walked passed the entryway that housed clusters of dark suits – along corridors filled with stern hunter's eyes, and purposeful strides. There were no familiar faces, although the officers calling the shots on the ground were waiting for her arrival. She knew her special treatment would ruffle her fellow agents. Wilkes had arranged a private audience for her with the victim.

Tracy drew the smoke of a glowing cigarette into the bottom of her lungs, as she held a steaming mug between her cupped hands. Her words were infused with a distant emptiness, like she was a witness reporting back and not the victim. The story however was very personal. "I tried to keep some of the – physical evidence, under my fingernails – in my mouth, but Blue knew. He knew everything."

"If you'd allow us to swab, even after a couple days - " Wagner leaned in.

Tracy's eyes rose from the bottom of the cup, "Don't stick anything in me, not my nails and not my veins. I'm not fucking evidence."

"You don't know what traces - " Wagner replied bluntly.

"I know." She half stood leaning out over the table toward Wagner, "and I'll tell you how I know – Blue filled my mouth with rubbing alcohol and bleach then told me that if I swallowed, I'd go blind and crazy. My gums burnt for hours but I didn't notice it because he put his knife to my throat and told me that all of the blood in a human body could drain in under a minute." Her expression turned mocking. "I had other things on my mind."

Wagner controlled her urge to cut in, she knew that Tracy needed to be in charge, and even though it went against every impulse that Wagner had, she sat in silence and waited for Tracy to come back to her.

“Do you know what it’s like to be worthless? Down in your soul, to feel like garbage? I can’t tell you a single thing about the men who abducted me, I have no idea how long I traveled to get here and the only part of the experience I have is up here.” She pointed to her head, “and I don’t trust the words that my mind is sending to my lips, I don’t know if I’d help you if I could. I don’t know who I am. He turned me inside out.” She looked away, a flash of horror in her eyes. “I might even be him.”

Wagner reached across the table, Tracy flinched, but Wagner reached past her arm and took a cigarette out of the pack on the corner of the table. A deputy stepped forward with a lighter then stepped back beside a sign that read no drinking eating or smoking. Wagner expelled the words efficiently as she exhaled. “Your blood might tell us something about where you were – you don’t have to trust anybody, and we don’t have to trust you.” It was clinical, and cut straight to the point. Tracy’s mouth bent up into a poison smile.

Tracy spoke, looking over Wagner’s shoulder into the darkness. The tone was like she was still talking to Blue, daring him to step from the shadows of the interrogation room, “He made me into this and the fucking, burning truth is that only he understands me now.” She crushed out her cigarette, laid her arm out on the table. “Take your blood, I have nothing more to say.”

Wagner turned around in frustration looking back at where Tracy had been staring and at that moment she saw some of her own demons catching up with her. From her angle she could see through the darkness to a glass door to the hallway leading to the entry. Agent Wilkes entered the lobby. Even from fifty yards, he bore the unmistakable stride of someone who was pissed off. Reporting to him was going to be her own bloodletting experience.

Wagner and Wilkes sat in the break room. A bank of vending machines lit Wagner’s face and gave Wilkes a fluorescent outline. There was nothing left to eat, so Wagner drank instant coffee with extra cream.

A lipstick stained cigarette butt sat in an ashtray between the agents. It had been taken right down to the filter before becoming the object of art that reminded Wagner how long they’d be speaking; the pleasantries were long gone. Impatient voices spoke over the ashes.

“Where the hell is more important than here?” Wilkes roared.

Wagner stumbled into a sentence that sounded vaguely Samoan. “Ah, hah – no.” Her voice caught in her throat somewhere between excuse and condemnation.

Wilkes wasn’t listening, “There is no satisfactory answer. There’s no way I can hold my head up after this investigation is over, win or lose. But we cannot lose. Are you getting this?” Wagner nodded.

“If the one unique strategy that I bring to the table. If the one man who I stake energy, resources, and confidence in turns out to be a waste, then we lose. I won’t even have the weight to fall on my own sword, agent. And I’m being literal. So when you tell me that you’re done with the only witness we have and are going out into the field after only thirty minutes, I ask you: where the hell is more important than here?” Wilkes didn’t wait for an answer; he pulled a cell phone from his jacket pocket and dialed a number. It was 2 AM in Virginia when the phone rang.

Chapter 21 Preservation

Legacy’s eyes were open; they’d been open for almost five minutes staring at the far wall of his bedroom. He didn’t move or make a sound. There was activity on the other side of the wall, footsteps far too heavy to be those of the elderly occupant. Mrs. Winch was an old widow who voiced the odd hallway or condominium association complaint. She stood up at all of the meetings to urge for more security in the complex because she had so many valuables in her unit. After thirty years of complaints, someone had listened to her, it seemed.

Legacy had called the police four minutes previous, after he was sure there was a break in – in progress. Now, he waited silently, knowing that any noise could wake Mrs. Winch and alert her to the situation, potentially setting off a powder keg on the other side of that wall.

Thud. Another noise from beyond farther away, an interior hallway, it could even be near his door. Legacy was out of the bed and silently on his feet in the span of time that it took most people to flinch.

He’d trained seven years with special ops – until they discovered his hidden talents in the interrogation room and he was reassigned. Legacy had proven himself in the field as a highly rated military resource. When they told his colonel – Franks, an aging hawk –that they needed one of his best operatives to get information out of captives, it probably translated in his head like, “Give me one of your best field assets because we want him to chat with people too important to kill.”

Col. Franks had told his men repeatedly that nobody was too important to kill. He held a deep belief that bad guys went to the bone yard and bending the rules for some only encouraged others to be worse. Negotiating set up a hierarchy of evil that somehow exempted those at the top from the ultimate punishment because they were somehow a more useful evil. Franks had no use for evil. Legacy remembered how he spat on his shoes the day he’d left the regiment.

He put on a pair of shoes that he kept beside the bed and was in the hallway.

Legacy skimmed the wall heading for Chess' room – three doors down on the right – he hugged the carpet edges because the tack sticks underneath spread out his weight and made his stride even more silent.

Another sound behind him, shrill, urgent, a scream. Legacy slipped through his daughter's door to find her sitting upright, baseball bat gripped in her hands. She had the family reflexes after all. Legacy clicked his teeth, and Chess relaxed hearing the signal.

Legacy hugged his daughter pulling his lips up to her ear. "It's the next apartment down"

A second scream came through the walls, followed by a rattle of words that were indistinct. Finally there was a thump on the wall, and the sounds of a scuffle.

Chess pushed her father away "Do something."

Legacy replied barely audible "I can't leave you."

The sound of footsteps continued in the other apartment, but the outcry was over. The alarmed voice had been silenced.

Legacy looked into the whites of his daughter's eyes, the light from the hallway cast across her face in a stripe just wide enough to see the depth of disappointment in her expression. Legacy couldn't stand it, he motioned for silence and she nodded. He slipped out of the room racing his own shadow gliding deftly on the wall. Legacy wanted to make the errand a quick one.

He knew that the assailants were in escape mode and the hallway offered the only access to the stairs or fire escape and down. Legacy scuttled down the locks on his door, and pushed it open with a click. Legacy crouched in the entryway, lying in wait for whatever passed.

He didn't have to wait long. The door on Mrs. Winch's place was thrown open and a man entered the hallway, as heavy steps came toward Legacy's door. The lighting in the hall cast a shadow forward that the next light couldn't quite fill in and judging from the angle, the slight shade that hit the doorframe meant he was about two paces away from Legacy's door. The calculations were instinct, he was a much better predator than his flannel pajamas and corduroy slippers suggested. Legacy's hand shot out, catching the fleeing man's forearm.

Legacy had the leverage, and the strength, but the fat intruder had fat, lots of it. When he spun around like a turntable ornament he looked at his smaller attacker with surprise that verged on disbelief. Before he could explore the feeling fully, pain hit him and brought him to his knees. Legacy had a grip, thumb to forefinger between the split bones of the forearm. The grip pinched down on the tendons running to the hand and played the nerve center like an over stretched

string of a violin.

Legacy's command tone was barely louder than a whisper "Is the old lady OK?" "Yes." The fat man said wincing in pain. Honesty is always a quicker defense than a lie. Legacy believed him.

"Are you alone?" Legacy increased the pressure trying to get another quick answer, but all the blood rushed out of the fat man's face and the pain caught his breath leaving him unable to speak. Legacy eased off, but it gave the man time. The fat man gasped out "I work with a team, one of us hits each house on a floor."

Legacy studied his wide, dilated eyes, he was ninety nine percent sure that it was a lie. In his experience, fat men are often slower on their feet and quicker to think. He puffed out, "Sammy is in your house right now."

His neighbor across the hall, Paul opened his door at that moment leaving it on the chain. "Do you need any help?" The sound of his daughters crowding the hallway behind him covered the approach of the police up the stairs.

"Freeze!"

Legacy had no time to think. Three officers of the Alexandria police stood with guns drawn.

It changed the game, now anyone hiding on the floor would be desperate. Desperate enough to take a hostage, being cornered and ready to do anything so as not to be taken into custody. Legacy couldn't take that one percent chance. He released the fat man and ran inside his home.

He found Chess on her bed, and she hugged him tightly. "Did you get him?"

Later, they were all in the hallway. Mrs. Winch was shouting at a group of officers about the response time, she hadn't thanked Legacy for calling them. She seemed fine. There were other things in the hall that were not at all regular. An ambulance had pulled up in front of the house and two EMTs were wheeling away a stretcher with a frightened young girl still bleeding from a cut to her head.

After the perpetrator "slipped out" of Legacy's grasp, he'd broken down the door opposite and it had come down full weight on his neighbor, one of the daughters had suffered a head wound from the splitting wood. They were going to be OK, but the suspect had gotten away through a back window in the other daughter's room. The youngest, Laney, wouldn't let go of her father's broken hand, and although each tug was a splitting pain, he let her hold on. She was shaking with fear.

Chess heard her father tell the police how the perpetrator had gotten away from him. She waited until the door was closed behind them before she added her opinion.

“He didn’t get away from you.” She paced the front foyer, furious.

“He told me that he worked on a crew and that one of them was in my apartment. It could have been you bleeding –”

“Yeah, I’m thrilled a seven year old and a defenseless grade school teacher took that guy on and not you.” She pleaded in rage, “Please don’t say that this happened because of me.”

Legacy wasn’t ready for the deeper truth to be tested that night. He kissed her forehead, said “Good night, Chess” and walked back to his room.

Chapter 22 Painted Love

The morning didn’t return any dignity to Laura. There really was no morning in her world. She slept until Blue came to wake her, make her up for her next role. The camera’s eye had captured her wrapped in plastic wrap, the only holes for her mouth and other points of entry. Leather fetish, baby-doll, schoolgirl were all now in her distant memory. Still she sat stoically, carefully painting her face and body for the next session. Blue now gave her the freedom to mark her skin with fertility runes and glyphs – he thought it was quaint to have some history brought into the brothel. He always kept one of her hands bound and for good reason. The one time she’d had both of her hands free, she’d found a way to sneak a pair of tweezers into her mouth and then just before they were supposed to go live, she’d cut the ties on her hands and was strangling Brown and Yellow was bleeding. A stun gun had brought her to her knees. The boys took out their fantasies, and their anger on her, but she never gave them the satisfaction of being a victim.

Laura performed like there was nothing at all wrong going on when she was on camera. There was a detachment to her performance, as she created the illusion that she was in control. Things were not being done to her, things were just being done. Her eyes were wide open the entire time. It was the kind of power that most people give away to their abductors, but she never did. Blue pushed her to react, but she didn’t flinch even during his most shocking sermons. Blue started to develop an attachment to her, instead of the other way around.

Laura dusted her eyelids with a neon eye shadow then turned to him and batted her eyes, pursed her expressionless lips. He couldn’t help but laugh. Eleven minutes to air.

The group was waiting a couple of buildings away their costumes form fitting around lanky arms, boney shoulders. It was clear they didn't like Laura at all.

Feely, Yellow, watched the door, "It's those fucking spooky eyes."

Brown added, "She reminds me of my mother."

Purple cracked a smile, "Thanks for getting my dick hard."

Brown shot back "Don't mess with my mother."

Purple put forefinger to nostril and snorted out a bullet of mucus on the carpet. Green surprised everyone in the room by opening his mouth. "I'm having a hard time getting hard with her."

Yellow continued, "That's what I mean it's those fucking eyes."

They waited watching the door in silence. Green walked over to a case of champagne sitting by the door. He asked Brown "These were outside all night, right?"

Brown nodded. Green picked up a bottle and began shaking it like he was playing a Tommus. "Nice and icy."

Ten minutes later Laura entered the room, dressed the part of a slutty schoolgirl, glasses and backpack completed the costume. Each day they changed the surroundings slightly to represent the theme of their performance. Many things had occupied the center of the room: airline seats, military bunk beds, a sandbox filled with mud, but today there was a long banister with a chandelier hung overhead. The cast led her into the foyer then started spraying her with sticky sweet champagne – she was the entertainment for a graduation party. She kept her eyes wide open even though the bubbles stung. Laura turned away from the camera. Only Blue would notice what she was doing, and if he ever figured it out she'd be dead. She wondered if any of her colleagues would see what she wanted them to – it would be easy to focus on anything but the pain and suffering, she'd learned that early on.

The "graduate" was moving in to straddle her, pulling his vinyl-covered friends into a circle around them. She drifted off, eyes open but at least it didn't feel real. Her mind clung to the fact that she had two secrets and either one of them could break through the circle.

Chapter 23 Biker Bar

Wagner would never have guessed how many biker hangouts there were in the greater Bismarck area. At around 3 AM, with the winds blowing granules too small to be called snow, particulate ice was a better description; she stumbled up

to The Potter's Wheel. A hippy biker that had established itself as a "drink and dive" in the seventies. It had become popular because during the cold winters, a customer could drink himself silly then crash in one of the upstairs rooms without ever leaving comfort of climate control.

Wagner strutted up to the bar. The room greeted her with a series of whistles and hoots. A wood-burning fireplace cast a reddish glow over the packed long wooden benches. There were only three tables in the place, but they went wall to wall. A no smoking sign hung on the stovepipe that fed the warm exhaust up through the rafters. Carved beside the sign was the word "weed." Wagner did a tactical scan of the place and made a decision. She did a playful spin approaching the bar. This was a role-play that she would have never tried before meeting Legacy. Even though she was in no mood for the attention she played into it, leaning forward on the bar, and calling over the bartender.

"What can I get for you little miss?" The bartender was a stout tattooed teen whose shaved head and stubbly beard looked like a mushroom cap sprouting from his shoulders.

Wagner said in a tipsy-loud voice that she'd learned from her father "Three shots of tequila," putting up four fingers and fanning them in his face. She noticed his nametag, "Jake." Lingering on the K, a smile came to her lips "and some - information." Her tone dropped on that last word. Eavesdroppers lost the conversation thread but everyone in the place watched.

The bartender looked around nervously, Wagner pinched one of his chubby cheeks and continued her balancing act in front of the crowd. "I know that if any of these roughnecks hears you talking to a police officer, you won't just have a pierced nose-" Wagner drew her finger around the curve of his throat and tickled his ear. "You'll have a pierced neck so lets keep this part of the conversation private, give me the drinks and lean in or I flash a badge and take you outside."

They were the center of the room, and the center of the entire biker nation for a moment.

Jake put two beefy arms on the bar and settled in to talk to her. A few of the patrons cheered, thinking it was his lucky day.

"I want to know about some recent traffic, not local." Wagner said.

"Nothing's local, nobody lives in this shit hole - don't jerk me around because you've got a badge-" Jake replied.

Wagner broke out into a hysterical laugh. She spun on the barstool and waved her hands excitedly like whatever he'd said was the best joke she'd ever heard. Confusion painted Jake's face until her elbow came down full force on the nerve

in the center of his wrist. That same wrist would tingle for another week. Jake gave a muffled grunt.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” Wagner announced her apology while pinning the other arm to the bar with her forearm. Her next breath got to the point - “Want me to go for the eye sockets next, Jake?”

Jake couldn’t move his arm. He was face to face with Wagner and had no leverage to resist. “We’ve had about ten new faces this week.” He stammered, “My whole arm is burning.”

“That’s good, did any of them have female baggage? The kind that can’t walk?” Wagner watched his eyes.

“A rider carried his bitch up to their room. He said that she was drunk, but she was doped.” He winced.

“Blonde?” Jake nodded, teeth grinding “When did they arrive?”

“Two days ago.” Wagner did some calculations, that timetable put her in this bar less than a day after the initiation.

Wagner smelled blood in the water. “How does a biker arrive with a doped up wife?”

“He drove up in an old Econoline van, but he was a biker, only bikers find this place –” he replied.

“And me.” Wagner reminded him.

“My lucky day. Can I have my arms back?” Jake’s cigarette was burning close to the skin between his index and middle finger. Wagner released her grip, and let him stand upright. She didn’t see the quick hand signal he made to the room, and Wagner was too intent to notice how quickly the place began to clear out behind her, only because of what Jake said next. “Your guy hasn’t checked out yet, he’s still here.”

Chapter 24 Bat Of An Eye

Legacy shut the door to his office and popped videotape into the player mounted on the wall below a LED projector. As the bulb warmed up, the images of the day’s events began to fill the far wall. Laura was almost life-sized on the screen that dropped with an annoyed tug from Legacy. The worst part of his day was beginning.

He stood in the room. Champagne splashed off of Laura's almost naked body, soaking the floor in a radial pattern outward, making the carpet hold the pattern of his footsteps as he toured the room. Legacy approached Laura before the sex acts started; her eyes were fixed wide looking at some point in the distance. It was like she could exit the room leaving no tracks at all.

The other forms in the room began to move. Laura spoke when the controller gave her words to say, turned and twisted with his desires. Legacy watched the long curving black lines across her forehead. It was like war paint, she went to battle giving them everything they wanted and nothing more.

Legacy paced around the Vinyl Men, he had worked out a personality sketch for each based on their "work." They displayed a consistency that was tightly controlled.

They acted like a pack – a social structure built around a leader who supplies individual members of the group with very specific, highly specialized responsibilities. Although the surroundings changed daily, the sex acts from girl to girl remained almost constant, demeaning but not especially defined by the personality of the victim in the middle. They hadn't dressed up the prom queens as prom queens. The actress played the same parts as the animal activist. The prey was not the important part of this equation. Laura stood bent over the railing, flashing a glimpse of the chain that ran between her nipples, down, and then disappeared into her pubic hair. Legacy stood by her, dug his fingernails into the soft wood of the banister. He actually felt the wood, it was so solid, and the room was very real to him. He could feel something coming together, but he wasn't sure yet what it was. His mind scrambled through all of the tapes he'd seen, searching for something to connect to what he was watching. He drilled down into the aquifer just above his medulla and there it was – "What an idiot!" She could have been anybody. In that moment Legacy realized how they picked their victims.

The 3D photorealistic crime scene slipped away. Legacy's eyes found the familiar shapes of his study coming back into existence around him. It was three AM; Chess wouldn't be going to school until 7:30. He waited for the sun. Legacy knew for the first time that he had found a short cut to get ahead of them – and with each second ticking off the clock, he worried that he was giving back his lead.

Wagner rounded the stairs gun drawn. The music droning out of the jukebox from the bar below thumped through the aged timber floor. She was looking for room number 5, the second room on the left. It was a deluxe room meaning the window wasn't broken and the lock worked. A phone rang at the end of the hall,

then another closer to her.

Wagner knelt in front of the door and holstered her gun. Her hair fell into her face as she removed the pin holding it back and inserted it into the keyhole. Click. Far down the hall a door opened and a broad-chested man came lumbering out of his room. Bleary-eyed, he charged down the hall.

The unexpected speed with which the man closed on her caught her off guard. She barely had time to stand before her shoulder came under an urgent grip. Wagner's impulse was to neutralize the man with a quick thrust of her elbow into his septum, but something stopped her. She looked into his eyes and sensed that it was not after all an attack.

Her theory was immediately supported when his stale breath spilled out a warning. "Cops in the house." He ran on.

The bartender, by warning the upstairs occupants had just lowered his official status from piece of shit, to dead piece of shit. She braced herself, knowing that her temper would not serve her here, in this hallway. There was nothing to take out her frustration upon.

Ring. The phone rang in room 5. Wagner knew it was a signal. Another lout was coming down the hall at breakneck speed and after a quick calculation Wagner stepped out to meet him.

The moment his hand reached out to push her out of the way, it was blocked by her left hand, and then she slid it into the crux of her right elbow. This made Wagner the pivot point for a newly constructed biker merry-ground. Using all her weight, she heaved downward causing the biker's center of gravity to drop, concentrating the force of his impact on the lower portion of the door. The lock stood no chance as the human battering ram went face first into the bottom panel, shoulders hitting squarely with a resounding crack. The door flew open.

Wagner stepped over him in the doorway as she drew her weapon, finger locked to the trigger in a cold embrace. The lights flickered as they came on, illuminating in yellow and brown tones through two dusty burnt lampshades a messy room with rumpled twin beds. She saw the remains of a half eaten dinner, and an open window. He'd been in this room only moments before.

Wagner walked over to the phone and picked it up. She didn't wait for the voice on the other end. She said, "Jake, you'd better pray I catch him before he kills again, cause I know how to make sure you never sleep with both eyes closed, ever." She slammed down the receiver.

The cleaning crew swept through the food court at 9:45 every morning. Only one

“customer” sat amid the sea of plastic chairs and white acrylic topped tables. Wagner had been there for over an hour, waiting for nine o’clock on the east coast, when it was safe to call Legacy. The hour time difference gave her more time to contemplate the words she would use when he picked up the phone. She’d been over and over the events of the night – agents had responded and made The Potter’s Wheel into the hub of the largest manhunt in the history of the bureau. Wilkes had shown up, with a more forgiving line on Legacy’s methods, seeing as how they had almost netted the drop-off man. He’d put his hand on Wagner’s shoulder, and pronounced in a deep baritone “close.” Close was not in her vocabulary, close is not what penetrated into her blood. The journals of crime are not etched in the text of “close.” The trail didn’t get any fresher than last night and it couldn’t have chilled any faster in this frigid place.

She looked at the pathetic Dixie cup she’d filled with water in the drinking fountain. Her first drink of the day and it wasn’t coffee. Of course there was a coffee shop in the food court, but it didn’t open until ten. Anyone who could wait for a cup of coffee until ten danced on the edge of the seventh circle of hell – no, worse, they river danced right over the edge into a tepid Dixie cup of water. Ten o’clock mall coffee drinkers were the problem with the Dakotas. She was about to expand her theory worldwide when the nagging thought popped back into her head. What was she going to say to Legacy?

Her phone rang, right on time, five minutes to ten. She flipped it open. “Wagner.”

Legacy didn’t mince words “Big news.”

Wagner responded, “I know Legacy, I blew it, I had the drop-off guy, and he slipped right through my fingers.”

Legacy said, “What?”

Wagner “I ruined the assignment, our guy was staying in a fleabag motel five miles from the drop, and he got away. Isn’t that why you called?”

Legacy plunged forward, “This changes our conversation. Was he driving a van? Don’t answer, he was driving a van, and I’m willing to bet he had instructions not to check in to any fleabag motel. That’s good; it gives us a timeline to work with. How long had they been there?”

“Didn’t you hear me, I lost him. I could have closed this whole thing, but I let him slip out the window.”

“Now let’s find out where he came from and where he went.”

“Why aren’t you an ass when I do things wrong, and – when I am - “ She searched for the proper term.

“A little ray of sunshine?”

“Yes, like that, you save your harshest criticism for when I deserve – I deserve something -” She stammered.

“Praise? I’ll work on that. You haven’t had your coffee yet have you?”

“No.”

“Get it, and sit down because I’m about to change your mind.”

“It’s going to be four minutes until the coffee shop opens.”

“I can wait.”

“You want to – engage in small talk – maybe something personal - for three minutes?” She could feel Legacy cringe on the other end of the line. “Call me back.” The conversation restarted with a steaming latte in Wagner’s hand and finished with the cold dregs of the unfiltered espresso at the bottom of the cup. Wagner needed some steadying at the beginning, and Legacy knew exactly how to put her at ease.

“You made a mistake with the bartender, but having him cuffed and in custody in the middle of that company might have been disastrous for Laura.” He explained that word would have gotten back to the group – quickly if not instantly through the biker network – and they would have killed Laura. It would have been a flick of the wrist riding down some open road. Legacy concluded his analysis. “I’m not saying this to make you feel better.”

Wagner breathed a sigh of weary caffeinated acceptance, “I’ll be spending the day here.”

“You should get another coffee. You’re out.”

Wagner looked around the mall to see if there were any cameras on her. “How do you do that?”

“They brought in a specialist to study me once.” Legacy quipped.

Wagner replied, “I want a copy of the study.” A young man with a push broom walked up to the table and cleared the coffee cup with a polite nod. He’d evidently mistaken her fixation on the cup for impatience at the service. By the time she realized what was going on several moments of silence had passed, and she returned her attention to the conversation. “Sorry, I got distracted, you said you had big news?”

“I’m proud of you, a lot of good work happens during a distraction. We’ll talk about it when you get back.” Legacy said.

“My plane gets in around ten, I could be at your place at eleven.” Wagner replied.

The words came out like a gag reflex, “I – well –” a sweet melody erupted from the over Legacy’s shoulder coming from the speakers of his tape player. Later, Legacy told her that it was a tape by a teenage boy, who’d never been out of an institution. Legacy had been waiting for the clarinet savant to get to this moment for over seventeen hours of total chirping chaos.

It was like the fleeting blossom of a cactus flower, a moment of transparency in a parched desert. Legacy had gotten a glimpse of a tortured soul buried under so many layers of mania that it took days to find a way to the surface only to leave a fleeting message, which almost no one could decipher. He didn’t miss the irony that he was listening to someone screaming to get out, while throwing up new barriers against anyone attempting to get into his life. An impulse, it must have been a simple impulse in his brain that flowed downhill into stream of words. “I need to clean up the place.”

“We can work my hours for a change.” She flipped back.

“I’ve really got to start pulling my weight. You’ve got to go.” Legacy stated bluntly.

“Why is that?” she asked.

“Turn in the direction of the receiver is pointed.” Legacy said.

Wagner’s eyes followed the vector up past her mouth and over her shoulder and came eye to eye with the young server who’d taken her cup just moments before. He had returned with a fresh steaming latte.

“Now you’re just trying to impress me.” Wagner couldn’t repress a cautious smile of reckless delight.

“Bye, Wagner.” Legacy hung up the phone.

The beaming boy from Duluth explained that there were free refills for pretty ladies in this seating section of the food court until 10:07. Wagner let him think that the smile was for him. He turned red. Maybe it wasn’t that bad of a town after all.

Chapter 25 Eye Pi

Tyke sat in front of a blossoming bank of computer monitors in an unfinished 18x24 industrial-looking room. He read something on the screen then snickered in a condescending tone at the ignorance of the average guy who posted on his forum. He had no experience thinking like an average guy. Tyke was his screen

name when he'd halted half the NYC transportation systems to impress a cheerleader when he was fifteen. He still had never dated a cheerleader in his mid-twenties, but he had spent time in a federal penitentiary, and was then recruited to create computer security devices clever enough to fool people like himself.

In his free time he ran a public Internet forum – IF – where geek-speak was the currency with which respect was bought and sold. It was the place where Tyke was the richest man in the world. The place where tech-heads of all shapes and colors posted questions about technology ranging from the Apollo Program era to the nanotechnology boom that Tyke predicted would destroy the world before anyone had much of a chance to enjoy it. His theory was that the moment that people could fit a nuclear powered device into a box of crackers – people would no longer trust snacks. Since snack foods were necessary for the sustenance of all of those who understood technology, there would be a mass starvation of nerds. Then the nanos would battle the regular people for the dominance of the planet. But a planet without ding dongs would be hard to fight for, so Tyke favored the nanos in the final confrontation, unless Patrick Stewart happened to still be alive.

Tyke's fingers rattled across the keyboard typing a snotty response to a question about the proposed resolution of the new HD3 chip shipping to DILA projector makers in the fall. "Questions about resolution are about as interesting to me as what my shrink says to my problems with authority, but. . ." then he went on to answer the technical question in mind-numbing detail. Tyke conservatively estimated that he typed 120 words per minute, but he distrusted measuring devices and would only estimate.

The phone rang – his ponytail flipped in counter motion.

"Tyke's Crib." He said into the receiver.

Legacy was on the other end. "Stanley?"

"You bitch, don't you ever call me that, my momma calls me that and that's all. You're trying to piss me off, you must want something." Tyke liked to consider himself a badass in the mold of Samuel L. Jackson over the phone.

"You're the only guy I know who can handle this." Legacy replied.

"I'm the only guy who can handle most things – my skill set pisses off impossible." He shifted his frame in his ergonomically designed mesh-backed chair.

"Is that why you're sitting at home in a faded NAB t-shirt, answering questions about projector settings in the middle of the day?"

"You posted that question? You dog, you know I hate questions about optics."

“And you can’t lay off of them because you’re fascinated with your own weakness.” Legacy liked that about him, “Look, I need something done fast.”

Legacy and Tyke had worked together at the NSA for a short stint. They had a kind of kindred bond because everyone treated them as a unique commodity. They’d played chess at lunch for almost a year, until Tyke lost a game and vowed never to talk to Legacy again. It was a part of their relationship that always seemed to crop up right about this time in the conversation.

“How did you beat me?” Tyke demanded.

“That was ten years ago, are you still thinking about that?” Legacy of course knew that he still was.

“Tell me, just tell me if you cheated and I’ll do anything you want.” Tyke jacked into his headset and paced in front of the screens. Legacy made him wait for the answer.

“I cheated.” He finally said.

Tyke danced around the room like he’d just won the lottery. On a side note, he had won two separate grand prize lottery drawings and no one had ever been able to prove fraud. “I knew it. How did you do it?”

“That wasn’t part of the deal.” Legacy could practically feel the blood draining from Tyke’s face. He knew that years of his free time would be reliving the terms of the agreement they’d just struck. Tyke returned to the conversation in a grudging tone.

“I can figure it out, now that I know.”

“That’s strange because I was working under the impression that you’d assumed that I was cheating over the last ten years, and you still hadn’t figured it out.” Legacy twisted the knife deeper, as Tyke contorted in silent pain. “I need to know how to get every TV channel in the country playing on my TV. What do I need?”

“You’re going to have to go old school, band 2 broadcast satellite with a rack set of decoders – and you still wouldn’t be able to get HBO. Why? What are you thinking?”

Legacy wasn’t ready to spell out everything – there was only one person who needed to know what was in his head.

Chapter 26 Visiting Team

Legacy met Agent Wagner at the door of his apartment. There were no visible

signs of her having been on the road, nor of her having worked 36 out of the past 40 hours. Legacy marveled at the visual of her coming through the door. She was the first woman in his house in years; he hadn't been aware that the inside of his place was more like a crypt than an apartment until someone crossed the threshold and entered. Something about her enthusiasm breathed life into the place for a moment.

Chess peered through the crack in her bedroom door to get a glimpse of Wagner as she walked side by side with her father to the study. Legacy said in a loud voice, "Goodnight, Chess," as he passed her room. It forced her to retreat before replying. "Goodnight, dad."

The study was wall-to-wall videotapes, pictures, and copies of official testimonies. Every part of the walls was covered with documents from the case. Video stills covered the windows like a collage made in a manner that only Legacy's subconscious could decipher, if there was any order at all. Anything that might catch his eye and bring the facts of the case into convergence, bring the walls crashing in, was posted on the four walls. Five girls surrounded his living area and the bed was made, buried under the paperwork of the investigation.

"I guess you do bring it home." Her tone was the same as his daughter just before calling him a "freakazoid."

Legacy stopped short, for a moment. What had surprised Wagner? He didn't see anything odd in the room – it was all connected and laid out based on the competitive relationship between fact which followed a radial pattern around the pictures, and theory which climbed the walls and ended up on the ceiling looking down on the hard facts. It was chronological, working in clockwise fashion around the room beginning at magnetic north. It seemed pretty obvious to Legacy. It seemed that having a partner was going to be hard work.

"All of the victims were on local TV. Four days before their abduction. This one," he pointed to Missy, "was interviewed on her prom queen victory while practicing to ride a motorcycle in the resulting parade."

"Sure that's not national?" Wagner quipped.

"And Carla filled in for the weather girl - Brit was live on scene of a fire. Tracy was interviewed at a protest against habitat destruction in the Bay area." Legacy looked up from his notes. "All local TV news."

Legacy let it sink in. All of the hours Wagner's team had spent trying to find a thread to tie the victims to their abductors, and there was nothing. No more contact than a roulette ball to the eventual cup that it lands in. This pack grabbed an image off a screen then hunted it to extinction. Legacy went on to explain the

technical details that made it possible to get all the channels in the country on satellite. There were over two thousand pre-digital, forty-foot dishes that could be hacked in order to do the job. Most of them were sold in the late seventies, and tracking down their owners would be near impossible.

“Anyway, Blue would have covered his tracks so well on this purchase, we’ll never pin him to it.” Legacy said distractedly.

“You give him too much respect.” Wagner added.

Legacy’s head snapped up, nothing she could have said would have offended him more. “Contempt” there was edgy restraint in his voice, “it’s not respect.” He pointed to a picture that hung on the wall right beside the door, like a sentry, he had to pass every time he left the room. It was Blue. His eyes burned into the image, Wagner had to snap him out of it.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” He swung his gaze onto her face. It fit so well with the pictures of pretty women around the room, Legacy looked at the crest of her forehead as it sloped down into apologetic green eyes. He almost blushed as he remembered “3am”. Lovely.

It was a joke that he’d heard when he was in basic training. The human mind finds the beauty in anything around 3am. It was the best time to threaten the life of a prisoner who had a fear of death – even a miserable existence has merit at 3am. Happy memories of his former life were hard to come by. Wagner reached out and touched him on the shoulder.

“I meant that you understand his capabilities better than anyone.” Wagner brushed invisible lint from his shirt.

Legacy took the awkward silence. Wait, did he really just think that silence was awkward? He’d have to come back to that thought. He took the break to add to her education.

“In the world of interrogation, knowing a person is more of a deductive process than additive. I learned what a person won’t do a lot quicker than I get to know what they will – I know Blue wouldn’t leave a trail, but I can’t tell you what he did to cover it up. He is all about input, nothing escapes him. Does that make sense?” Legacy was actively soliciting response in the conversation – it must be 3am. He ran up against something she’d said earlier, on the phone she’d claimed that he was ‘just trying to impress her.’ Was he? Was that possible?

“It makes perfect sense.” Wagner added in reassurance. He looked at her a moment then realized that she was responding to what he had said aloud and not what he had been thinking subsequently.

“They’ll move on their next victim in seven days. All of the previous girls were

on TV between seven and eleven thirty PM eastern time, four days before their abduction.”

“With a thousand local channels out there, what do you think our chances are choosing the same one they do?” Wagner asked.

Legacy didn’t have an answer, at this point he knew who the Vinyl Men wouldn’t choose, not who they would. Predicting the negative was a particularly frustrating brand of certainty.

“It gets worse,” he confided. “I can’t verify that Laura was on TV before her abduction. We could be chasing around a system that they’ve already abandoned.”

Chapter 27 Kick Rocks

Blue sat in the rec room at the complex. It was a stained, pegboard lined open area, where children used to play church dodge ball – and have nightly bible story readings. Now it was an Orwellian version of hell, over a hundred mismatched TV screens lined the long wall, stacked with the kind of care that most people reserve for their high school yearbooks or office policy handbooks.

Dust collected in the musty corners, particles weighed down by thick billowing cigarette smoke. Blue scanned the images, all obscured with snowy interference. This is what Mac had been talking about; the TV distribution amplifier was on the fritz. He couldn’t get a good image unless he turned off all but one set. What good was one TV set to Blue? His mind worked too quickly for one story, or one input of any kind.

He tried closing his eyes and turning up the audio on multiple channels, but that was filled with static and crackle. This was no good at all. He found himself impatient for Mac to return. Then he could blanket his mind with images and ward off that headache that always seemed to come when there was no avalanche of other stimuli. He could feel it pounding beneath his temples already- it may have been the reminder of the heart that caused him pain.

What he could not see would have fed the pain until it became razor sharp retribution. Police surrounding the biker bar in the Dakota’s, near the drop point he’d carefully planned for young Tracy. The event went totally unnoticed, or he would have been waiting for Mac’s return with a knife in his hand. Instead, he turned his attention back to the closed circuit feed of Laura. In his boredom, he’d been merciless with the sessions, scheduling them one after another. He’d given permission and strict instructions on how to pierce her nipples on camera; the second one was almost complete when he turned his attention toward her eyes.

She watched the fishhook barb go through the hole and Blue saw the recognition of what it would take to get it out again. It was a fleeting moment, a flutter of her eyes before locking out her emotions again. She was a challenge like none of the other girls had presented – the other girls were like drilling teeth, the minute Blue got beneath the surface there was pain. Laura was killing off her senses one by one. She was dying in front of the lens, piece by piece. Finding a pocket of life was like tapping cold blue water beneath an ancient sun baked desert. Her eyes were deep wells, still full beneath the surface. She was beyond beautiful.

Chapter 28 Conjugal Visit

Mac filled up the tank; his hands clamped regretting the cold metal pump that no longer had a clip to hold the flow steady. He had to do it the old fashioned way, standing over the nozzle, smelling the methyl fumes with his cigarette ash dangling an arms length away from ignition. If Darwin were right, a fireball was imminent. CLICK, the tank was finally full.

He handed over the cash to the aging clerk. “Thanks, come again.” Something about her tone made him want to steal something on the way out of the store. He fought the impulse, because Blade would kill him for even thinking about it. Mac wondered if the news of his slip up had trickled back to the home base. He forced himself to put it out of his mind. Anyway, the only news that arrived at camp was through the TV, and until he picked up the mail and got it back there, there was no reception. The thought steadied him as he tucked a chocolate covered snack cake into his pocket and left the gas station.

Mac scanned the landscape. His head turned back and forth walking to the van. Someone looking at him might think he was afraid of detection, or nervous about the stolen snack cake, but it was really Mac’s clumsy way of looking for someone. He didn’t have a lot of practice at being discrete.

Mac pulled the van into the parking lot of a mail-it store, pulling up his pants twice before entering. He came out moments later with a package, almost an arm in length. He delicately placed it on the seat next to his, as this was precious cargo. This was the key to getting his beloved TV back in operation. Only one more errand left.

He cruised around the back alleys, knocked on the doors to gas station rest rooms. She couldn’t be far away. This is where he’d met her; this is where he’d dropped her off. She said she’d wait for him. She couldn’t be far.

After almost an hour he found her, huddled in the back alley behind a Wal-Mart store, face masked off by hood strings pulled tight. Her legs tangled and she almost fell in her excitement to get to the van. “Mac!” she screamed. Mac

grabbed her in a bear hug and pulled her in through the passenger window.

He pulled the hood back and her bright orange-streaked hair fell down around her shoulders. It was the first time he'd looked at Darci in a long time. He kissed the piercing above her right eyebrow.

"Dove, you're sitting on something important." He pulled the package out from under her, copping a feel. "Well that was worth it."

Darci laughed.

"Not that you could do much damage, what do you weigh? Fifty pounds?" he pulled her onto his lap, light as a feather. She squished into the round mass, and Mac made a clumsy fish for a compliment, "You could fit in my belly, you tasty dove." he was at least four times her weight, but a beaming smile made it clear that it didn't matter a bit to Darci. He was her man.

"I guess I need a big man to hold on to, to keep me from blowing away."

His mood changed. He buried his face into her stomach, like a petulant child "I thought you'd given up on the plan, I couldn't find you." Mac complained.

They talked in the warm van, and Mac fed her a snack cake. All was forgiven, but Mac only had a few hours.

The van rolled away with promises about the future still lingering in Darci's ear. She just had to stick to the plan and Mac promised that she wouldn't be forgotten. She shivered, although not from exposure. She was thinking of that future reward – and somehow it felt equal parts a threat. Maybe in her gut she knew that her involvement with Mac would end up being a bounty on her pretty little head.

Planning a strategy for contacting every local broadcast station on a certain day and asking them to pull any story containing the image of a young, pretty woman was the kind of task that Wagner, in her usual enthusiastic kinetic mode would have jumped into recklessly, breathlessly searching through unending waters. Legacy watched her on the edge. She looked ready to take the plunge and Legacy chose that moment to remind her that the television connection was shared by all of the women, except one, Laura.

"So your breakthrough is broken?" Wagner couldn't believe what she was hearing "You know what we call that? NOT a breakthrough."

"It must be there, I just can't find it. Her planner is much like I suspect how you keep your planner, every moment accounted for, every day." Legacy picked up the faded blue planner off of his desk. "I can't find it."

“And without it – all we have is an abandoned method –”

“He hasn’t abandoned it. It’s not like Blue to leave behind something that’s working for him. He shows the meticulous care of a practiced addict – and addicts have their routines and their drug of choice.” Legacy thumbed through the pages of the planner and it fell open to a picture of a young man in a sharp business suit. It looked like a coincidence, it felt like random chance but Legacy distrusted both of those principles. He’d grown accustomed to following unconscious choices.

“Call the boyfriend for an interview.” It was like he was hearing the whisper from the page– maybe the boyfriend was part of the secret.

Wagner offered the kind of explanation that annoyed Legacy “Of course, if anyone would know where and when the Laura’s image was being broadcast it would be the insecure or possessive corporate boyfriend.”

“Maybe.” Legacy replied.

Richard Mercile was neither insecure nor possessive. His charisma came from a place that was none too bright, however honest and keenly self-aware. There was the odd person who didn’t immediately take a shine to Richard, stranger still the person that didn’t eventually grow to like him. It didn’t hurt that he was tall, chiseled, with a long stride and firm handshake, which he offered to Legacy after touching Wagner on the shoulder in a collegial fashion. His confidence and warmth made almost any gesture seem appropriately earnest.

They met in the conference room, to avoid exposing him to the barrage of images of crime scene recovery photos that plastered the walls of their office. Legacy didn’t like leaving his office. Wagner had asked him for a phone interview, but since Richard only worked two hours away, he suggested that he come to talk in person.

Legacy saw the action for what it was, a man’s desperate attempt to involve himself in the solution to a problem he couldn’t possibly solve, but equally couldn’t get out of his head. He saw the look in Richard’s eyes and thought back to an image reflected of himself - the lowest part of his own life was standing in front of him, eyes darting from Legacy, to the table, then back to Wagner. Legacy could tell that he was disappointed that there wasn’t a room full of people all engaged actively on the phones, Internet and satellite converging into some huge secret government surveillance – hunting down the people who had taken Laura.

The handshake was brief and formal. “Agent Legacy?” he asked. “Is there some

movement in the case?”

“Backward.” Legacy said with a tone of finality. Robert bowed his head. He was a lawyer, not an optimist, and it took only a second to shake him down the lowest level of human expectation: futility.

Wagner shot a look at Legacy, gauging whether he was being heartless on purpose. Even when he explained later that he needed to strip away all hope from the boyfriend so that he would stop “trying” and report only honest recollection.

Wagner added, “Laura appears to be in no immediate danger.”

Robert’s frustration took a natural arc into anger, “What exactly do you call immediate danger?” Wagner looked away – this certainly wasn’t her crowning moment.

Legacy’s words came quickly, allowing Robert no time to think. “We think that she was chosen by random – on a television screen. There weren’t any television appearances scheduled in her planner, and she kept meticulous notes- “

Robert interrupted. “If it wasn’t in the book, she wasn’t there.”

“Handwriting experts,” Legacy held up his hand and waited “agree that nothing was added or changed in her book, so we’re at a dead end. We can’t think of a way that her image could get on this screen without her knowing about it.” He strummed through the pages of her planner, “And it appears like she didn’t do anything that wasn’t written down.” Legacy’s voice droned on – a calculated move to draw Robert’s attention to the sounds of the words themselves.

“She was taken from in front of my apartment – I keep wondering if I’d been at the window –”

“But you weren’t. You really haven’t had anything to contribute, even with all the chances you have had and all you’ve done is run around giving apologetic, useless statements- that’s all we have from you in the reports. You’re so concentrated on your actions –” Legacy fanned the police reports in the air, “but there’s nothing in here that will bring her back to you.” Then Legacy leveled the stack at Robert’s forehead, “I think you keep making this about yourself. It’s a waste - let’s call this interview, Wagner stamp the time.” His pronouncement, Robert knew, was final.

Robert looked like his blood was boiling under the surface of his skin. Then just as suddenly as the energy gathered, it was channeled elsewhere. “The tapes. The PSA tapes.” He looked up with the sincere expression of discovery. Legacy looked a pleased shade of smug.

An hour later Legacy and Wagner sat in their office with a new strategy

developing. “Why didn’t we know about those tapes?”

“The same reason that we don’t know everything— “Wagner didn’t let him in with a follow up question. “We don’t know everything.”

“Circular logic.” Legacy pointed out.

“Did you do that on purpose, back there? Did you manipulate him?” Wagner asked.

“You can’t force someone into anywhere in their mind.” He drank from a steaming cup of coffee, the cream he’d just added swirling to the top. “Patterns that restrict the mind break down only under the right conditions.” He swirled the cup. “Like your behavioral patterns, there’s coffee an arm’s reach away. You refuse it. Why do you have to have froth, and milk and steam and markings all over a four dollar cardboard cup concoction before you think this coffee is worth drinking?”

Wagner’s phone rang; she picked it up all the while beckoning for a sip of Legacy’s coffee. Legacy reluctantly handed over his cup. “Uh-huh” she said into the receiver. “Great.” She walked over to the drinking fountain and dumped the cup down the drain. “The PSA with Agent Laura Doorner was on the air in two cities that night. I’m going to buy you a cappuccino.”

White foam splashed up the silver lining of an oval-bottomed pitcher as it was pulled from a hissing spout of steam. Streams of specialty jargon spilled out of Wagner like a second language with a cadence of fluency. “Double-half caf two percent almond milk latte extra hot –‘

“How many drinks did you just order?” Legacy butted in.

A smirk from Wagner and she rattled off another order with a similar level of café-wise specificity. “And tonight, make it breve” She added at the last moment before losing the attention of the harried barista.

“Almond milk is the secret.” Handing Legacy a cup.

“What does breve mean?” Legacy inquired.

“It means that they use half and half instead of milk.” She purred with contentment drinking from her cup. Smooth as silk. “We’re getting closer.”

Legacy took his first drink, “Almost as good as coffee.”

Wagner’s cell phone rang, and she paused briefly as she saw who was calling on the ID. “It’s Bailey. He has been digging up some information on biker groups linked to abductions.”

Legacy always scowled when he heard Bailey’s name, but there was something

more, his stare made Wagner uncomfortable.

“I’ll come by your house in an hour.” Legacy nodded, the minute that she was out the door he went up to the teen behind the counter and asked if he could trade for regular-sized coffee. The boy looked at him like he was from “planet drip.” Legacy was amused that even the words small medium and large had been banished from the establishment. In small deference to Wagner, he splashed some almond milk into the cup instead of cream, an action he immediately regretted upon taking a sip. He thought about returning the coffee again, but the line reminded him of Moscow. Everyone seemed to be talking the same language as Wagner so it was going to be a while. He decided to take a long walk home.

Agent Bailey always appeared as if he was in the middle of a conversation. Mouth pursed, always awaiting the next point of contention. A self-satisfied smile hung on his lips like he was winning some kind of internal argument. The smile disappeared abruptly when somebody entered the room, as Wagner did now.

Wagner suspected the behavior was a calculated way of throwing anyone who entered his domain off guard. It made every greeting an interruption, every entrance an intrusion.

“Dear Agent Wagner, thank you for dropping by at this late hour.” A smoky clove scent hung in the air.

The dim yellow lamp cast a different light upon Agent Bailey. His eyes shone like a cat’s in the shadows “I don’t know why you don’t just bring Legacy in here –” Wagner began.

He saw that she needed a little push. “I got something for you, that psych profile on Legacy, it was done just after the meltdown.”

“Have you read it?” Wagner asked. “I’m content in my own world, agent.” He bluffed.

Wagner snapped back. “You’ve read it.”

“Probably.” Bailey smirked, “Just to get perspective. Remember, though, the explanation of cancer won’t cure it.”

“Everyone talks about him like he’s damaged –” Wagner answered.

“Read the file, and if you want to defend him after you see all the damage he’s done – he was a traitor, you know – way before what happened to his wife.”

Wagner raised her eyes in silence that lasted a full revolution of the earth.

“I don’t believe you.” Wagner replied.

“Why, agent?” He was stone-faced. “Talk to me.” He set his ashtray on top of Legacy’s file. Wagner had just enough curiosity weighing on her to convince herself that it was an investigation and not a betrayal that she was embarking upon. An hour later, after giving Bailey a complete briefing on the state of the investigation, Wagner left with the folder in her hands. She was already late, but she decided to stop at the corner coffee shop to sit down and read.

Chapter 29 Escape Plan

Laura cowered in the middle of her living space. She had moved from sleeping on the squeaky cot to the center of the floor. There, under the sheets, she hid her head and upper body under three layers of sheets, each doubled over twice. Her legs protruded from the bundle, naked and pale. Blue watched through the closed circuit TV monitor, as the head shook from side to side in a rhythmic “no” gesture. He marked it down to a control phase that she was going through. An effort to dictate the terms, even if they were only the smallest ones, of her daily routine. As an experiment, on the second day of this behavior, he’d turned down the heat in the dead of night. Her legs had turned a silvery blue, but she did not rise and cover herself in the blankets, which were stacked in the corner of the room. She hadn’t touched them since their delivery.

Blade tapped on the screen where the shape of her head skimming underneath the sheets moved back and forth. He raised his voice to Mac who sat across the hall in the rec room. “Has anyone requested that we take a major whiz on that pretty copper’s face?”

Mac replied “hundreds.”

Blue licked his forefinger then again smeared the screen. “Get the boys together.”

Mac turned “It’s three in the morning –” a glance across the room at Blue told Mac that arguing was the last thing he wanted to involve himself in. “I’m going.” He walked out of the room passing a sign, exit to cabins.

Blue whispered to the screen, “no means yes – you little cock tease.”

Laura kept her head under the sheets, tented beneath the layers of white cotton. She had a coveted secret. The sliver of wood lifted from the floor when she had scuffled with Blue had exposed a thin crack leading to the outside. By gently scuffing her front teeth, she’d opened up enough of a gap to see the ground beneath the raised trailer.

She could tell when it got dark, and when it was getting light. This might not seem like a lot, but Laura knew that her next escape would be her last chance, and her only advantage was if she could time it under the cloak of night.

Being seen wasn't the only obstacle in a clean getaway. Blue kept a trio of Rottweilers in one of the structures that she passed when Blue escorted her back and forth between her trailer and the studio. A squeaky hinged door was the only thing that separated the snarling pack from the civilized world and other than an obvious fear of their master, they displayed a consistent hostility equal to the expectations of their breed – she had heard them each time charging out onto the compound at the first sound of movement.

Add to that the fact that the unknown geography around her cage beyond the few certainties that she had discerned – clues like the sound of dissimilar doors opening and shutting in the distance meant that there were a number of structures, the complete lack of mechanical noises, no cars, no trains, gave her the indication that she was somewhere truly remote, but not so far away as to need a generator for electricity. There was no concrete under foot when she walked between buildings. The dirt that she squeezed between her toes and studied carefully under the sheet was dry and compacted like the area between buildings that used to be a parking lot or maybe a well-traveled footpath. Blue was careful not to give her the briefest peek at the world around her. There was no certainty that any cover other than darkness would hide her when she made her run. She could wander out in the middle of a desert, or on top of a mountain – or the worst option of all – she could stay.

Laura rubbed her teeth obsessively against the wood slit on the floor. A little more of an opening, and she'd be able to tell the color of the sunlight, and the color would identify dawn and sundown. Then, some day, they'd come for her with the fullness of night in front of her, and she'd slip into the blackness like the blankets they'd stacked in the corner. Clean, warm and safe.

Chapter 30 Chasing Style

Director Wilkes didn't need to be reminded what his office looked like at four in the morning. He had been a witness to the predawn shadows every night since Laura had been abducted. The communication from Agent Bailey made his normally expressionless face turn downward into a scowl. Two hundred agents under his charge had nearly every US citizen who'd ever ridden a motorcycle under the microscope – thousands of hours of pornography were being compared

for a ‘signature style’ – “Jesus!” he thought. “I have men studying porn for fingerprints and I don’t have a single piece of solid evidence.”

Could this possibly be the best that the finest law enforcement agents in the civilized world could come up with? They were chasing style and transportation methods with the incalculably small possibility that someone would trip and fall on something that resembled a clue. He squinted, eyes beyond tired, and then an accompanying sharp pain in his temples.

The pain was a messenger from just this side of the impossibility of his circumstances. Wilkes could understand being confounded by a foreign agency – but believing that a motorcycle gang of sexual predators could keep him in the dark was beyond operating specifications. A meltdown was only days away, and it would coincide with what he knew to be the final punctuation to the case; the death of the director’s daughter on his watch, in front of an audience of millions gone mad.

It was ten after four now, but the clock in Wilkes office was wrong. There was no time, no time at all.

Wagner closed the folder, both disturbed and fascinated by its contents. She was in her rental car now, as the coffee shop had closed hours ago. The street lamps were buzzing with an electric hum as the light poured out into the last wave of early morning darkness.

She pulled out a cigarette and put it to her perfectly drawn ripe persimmon lips. Wagner inhaled, and let the familiar drug creep into her body. She had grown up on a nicotine and caffeine cocktail, and her body called for the mixture like a security blanket. She carried two emergency cigarettes in a tin that used to contain mints. Why two? A logical question, but Wagner knew herself well enough to know that if she needed one of something, then in reality she needed at least two.

Wagner wasn’t going to sort it all out before ember met filter, so it made no sense to go over and over in her mind. That didn’t stop her, however.

It was impossible to tell if the bureau had studied Legacy in an effort to produce more agents like him, or to isolate him and keep the disease from spreading. It was certain that his particular specialty had great value in a world of secrets. He found ways to unlock the human mind that mirrored a chess master taking apart a computer opponent with his creativity. The rules are fixed, the board is set, and it made no sense that he could do things with the pieces that nobody else could, This, however, was the case with Legacy.

His cognitive function was described as similar to the way regular people process auditory information. His brain was always on, processing ideas the way that most people process incoming sounds. Information coming in on random vectors, at different volumes and pitches flooded his senses. It was a system that needed almost no actual input to perpetuate.

In the section on his methods, the writer of the report had included a brief background on behavioral science as it crosses into human psychology. Most people process ideas more like the sense of sight. We look at something, decide what it is, what it represents, and move on to the next “image.” Thoughts are most often contained somewhat like a field of vision.

The doctor went on to explain that Legacy could concentrate on a single thread of logic, but like a person in a crowded bar, there were background streams of information are incoming all the time, his conscious mind was constantly sifting other information. It made him seem hyper perceptive at times, and distracted at others. His mind was tuned to the human voice like no other instrument the doctor had ever encountered – mentioning that Legacy was probably controlling the report he was preparing by giving out only the side of himself that the bureau wanted to see.

The report ended with a cautionary addendum. “He has convinced me in no uncertain terms that his release of the young spy Anna was nothing but a rookie mistake. Which begs the question, why would I be so certain of only one fact in a report that raises more questions than answers. I have made an excellent career of trusting my judgment” the next part was highlighted, making it the only part of the report that everyone had read, “therefore it is with great pains that I break from it and follow a hunch. Legacy is hiding something about Anna, and I believe he would hide nothing short of traitorous conduct. If Legacy ever developed an agenda counter to our goals, I don’t believe I nor anyone with “planar” two-dimensional thinking would ever be able to detect Legacy’s three-dimensional intersection with our world. This makes him a unique danger to our objectives, at least in the abstract. He should be moved to a place that limits his access to information and never drawn back into the mainstream.”

The accusation, and the fear of the unknown must have resonated with the people who read the report, because it was dated a week before Legacy was reassigned to the cold case division in Alexandria.

Wagner could see her breath in the crisp pre-morning air. A list of names followed – the people who had read the report former director Mitchell, Director Doorner, Deputy Bailey, Special Forces Commander Evans and one name that she didn’t recognize, Therisa Kale.

Legacy had been branded a traitor, and because of his special acuity at

manipulating the truth, they would never be sure. Now, they were pulling him back into the mainstream because the potential reward outweighed the risk.

The sun was beginning to float into the atmosphere of the eastern sky, just free of the illusion of being supported by the land, when Wagner slid the report under Bailey's door. She went straight to the office and waited. Wagner knew that Legacy would arrive at nine, and even though he was potentially the most dangerous man in the whole universe, she expected that he had totally forgotten the fact that Wagner was supposed to meet him almost ten hours earlier at his house. He entered and nodded distractedly. It had undoubtedly slipped his mind.

Who the hell was he?

Laura hung from the ceiling, arms cuffed to a bare pipe. She wore a blindfold and her body moved like it was caught in a gentle breeze. The colors of a pinwheel swirled around her. Her mind was slipping away from the darkness that pressed itself on her. Her buttons had all been pushed, and there wasn't much left of her conscious mind for Blue to play with.

She heard the door open, and the group began to shuffle out. She felt blood trickle down from the skin on her wrist rubbed raw. They always stopped when there was blood. What were they stopping for?

She raised a husky voice from the bowels of her consciousness. "Where are you going? You sad, pathetic, useless men. I'll tell you when this is over. You'll see it in my eyes."

The screen went blank and the video ejected. Legacy stood in front of the TV and waited for Wagner's reaction. He jumped in.

"What does this tell you?" He asked.

Wagner put her hand to her neck and pushed into the muscle below the gentle curve into the back of her ear. She needed circulation to think, at least that was the message that her neck was trying to sell to her hands. The moment of pleasure was suddenly cut short by a gasp of surprise. Legacy had both of his hands on her shoulders and in his strong grip it felt like her whole body was about to melt through the mesh designer chair and form a puddle on the floor. Wagner sighed and released all of her tension. She had absolutely nothing to say, but she knew that Legacy was waiting for an answer.

"She had to say something, we keep missing it." Legacy's hands released their grip and clapped the air.

"Exactly. She's past her personal breaking point- "

Wagner didn't even miss the backrub, "and she calling out for help. How is this supposed to help?"

Before he could answer, Brent stepped through the door.

Legacy welcomed him, "You're becoming a regular visitor." Brent stopped for a moment noting the proximity of Wagner and Legacy. He seemed the smallest bit annoyed as he gathered his message.

"They've found your first girl." His eyes addressed Wagner directly, "In Maine."

Chapter 31 The Girl

It was a hazy sunny day, where the lower atmosphere churned the yellow rays into a dull blonde illumination before it hit the ground and ran along blue green coastal moss and swept up the shore to meet a gathering in a small rural town.

Legacy walked the old, cracked railroad tie path up to the assembly. The press was everywhere – black tubes of moving glass fused to their eye sockets, mouths stuffed full of potential controversy. Flannel-clad residents milled about.

Matching earth tone garments from chain stores were the norm in the patiently eager gathering. And there was Legacy, standing a full head above the average height in his perfectly fitting navy suit – eyes set on the podium like a sniper waiting for a target.

There was chatter everywhere, but no one talked to him, as was normal for Legacy. He thought about walking up and announcing that Kennedy would be arriving shortly riding a unicorn (he'd leave the question of which Kennedy up to personal choice and generational bias).

He was considering this plan when low and behold what stepped up to the podium stacked with microphones from all over the country was a platinum and pink swirl of hair that looked like a candy cane connected to a teen scalp.

Her name was Sofia Darren and for the next ten seconds she would be the most photographed person in the world. Legacy studied her, pushing up to the front. The fresh paint on her face, glitter pressed in formation around rosy cheeks spoke to the fact that she'd carefully prepared for this moment. The camera's flashed and she smoothed out her "wild child" spandex tee shirt so that nobody would confuse the wrinkles in the fabric with any kind of body imperfection. She certainly didn't want anyone to get the wrong impression of her. Though she couldn't hide the fact that she loved the attention.

"I am the girl that everyone has been looking for." She cocked a sly half smile at

the crowd then let a somber look wash over her face. “A gang of masked motor bikers kidnapped me almost six months ago, and the shame of what was done to me – really and totally kinky stuff that I cannot repeat in front of my mom and dad, who are in attendance.” she nodded toward the man standing next to Legacy. A man in a tight sports jacket, knuckles white on the shoulder of what must be her grieving mother. “And the worst thing is that they went on to do it to others – and distribute it around under their own video label called Abducted XX.”

She went on to describe her abductors, known to her as The Choirboys. The aging town sheriff would later get to the podium and confirm that he did remember that a group of riders had come through town on the exact day that the girl was reported missing by her parents six months previous. Legacy found nothing about this public display convincing.

Sofia took childish delight in choosing different microphones in which to pour out the details of her time riding the roads. She leaned in choosing a fuzzy capped NBC microphone to let out how at first she had fought against any kind of sexual advances. “But look at me.” she stepped back and went to profile – she was a tiny thing. “I didn’t have a chance.”

Then the questions began.

A reporter asked, “How many were in the group?”

“Six.” She answered, a shiver went through her body, and she blurted out inappropriately “I could handle more.” A woman in the crowd gasping in shock put Sofia on the defensive. “Ask your husband, he’s seen it.” Sofia stiffened, people always had judged her harshly in this town, and they still were doing it. Legacy watched as the girl struggled with how to react, and self-control did not win out. She decided to really shock these hicks into a coma. “I guess I should tell all of it, no sense in holding back –”

Legacy raised his voice, “I’ve seen enough.”

He stood in an FBI conference room. Legacy could have hidden his anger if he’d wanted to – but it wasn’t worth his time.

Wilkes pushed pause on the remote, catching her with her most wounded, backed-into-a corner pose. “The time line fits, and it’s what you said we’d find. We can have her here in two hours.”

“I’ve been there.” Legacy huffed. Wilkes shot a questioning look to Wagner. Legacy didn’t give him time to question, “don’t waste much time on this.” He said standing and walking to the door.

Agent Bailey squirmed, shifting polyester against the plastic base of his seat

reminding people of his presence. It could have been a physical embodiment of a charged withdrawal from nicotine, and or the presence of a superior being upbraided by a subordinate that had broken through his persistent slack southern disinterest and conducted directly into his pants.

Wagner called out, “Legacy, wait.”

He teetered at the door, his palm clasped around the warm brass handle. Legacy knew that turning back meant explaining himself to everyone – but leaving meant explaining himself later to Wagner. This was the price of having a partner.

“She has calluses on the crux of her thumbs-” Legacy announced as if everything would fall into place after hearing it.

Bailey looked at his own nicotine stained fingers and laughed. “That clears everything up, agent.”

Wilkes said, “Jesus, Martin, if I wanted a fortune cookie I’d order out. What the hell are you talking about?”

Wagner was the first to catch on “Her thumbs.” She walked around behind Legacy and reached around him hugging him tight. “Hooked around the rider’s belt loops, it would take weeks, and it would mean –”

Legacy finished her sentence “She was hanging on,” Legacy’s hand slid over Wagner’s, a little pressure on the tendon in between Wagner’s thumb and forefinger and her grip popped open like an automatic lock. “She wants attention.”

Wilkes cut in “Bikers, sex tapes and testimony that proposes an exact timeline fit before the ransom demands of the first girl and this is supposed to be a coincidence?”

“It’s supposed to fit. It’s marketing, promotion in front of the press to the people from her hometown. This is a convenient distraction.”

“I’m pursuing the biggest abduction case since the Lindbergh baby and the entire country didn’t have minute by minute updates on that one. Tell me why I don’t run down every lead that comes my way?” His fist pressed into the soft wood of the conference table.

“You’ll get tired.”

“If we weren’t old friends –

“It’ll be easier to break this case than it will be to end that sentence.” Legacy was glad that he’d stayed; he’d forgotten how much he liked Wilkes’ misguided full body commitment to finishing a job. Legacy knew the history of Wilkes and the Doerner family. Wilkes had known Laura in diapers, and he’d sooner fling

himself into a fire than watch her suffer. Legacy could see that his old friend stood in front of him ready to direct the full resources of the bureau at any shadow that crossed the radar. He even detected the scent of a stronger emotion that crossed the line of a paternal, professional relationship with Laura.

Legacy's thought process always took him into the realm of none of his damn business, but he couldn't help it. Soon he'd know more about Wilkes' vulnerabilities and limitations than he wanted. Legacy invaded the privacy of everyone he spoke with. Another reason he hated talking to friends. Thank goodness he didn't have many.

He turned to the television screen where Sofia had been caught in mid-sentence, wounded and ready to wound. They'd made her feel like an exaggeration of a person without ever taking the time to find out if it was true. They should know that the shock they felt was the smallest tip of the iceberg of the true vulgarity that hemmed in the real world like grotesque gothic bookends.

Wagner's voice cut into Legacy's thought process. "Legacy, we could bring her in and you could get inside her head and show us –"

"I've been there. She's about to say something that will shock the crowd, mainly directed at her mother. She'll wish she hadn't said it right after it comes out." Legacy pressed play.

Sofia lashed back at the crowd, "You think that was bad? They used to superglue my lips together then go for triple penetration, think about it!" Gasps from the crowd, a smug look on Sofia's face turned crimson as she realized that the prevailing reaction in the crowd wasn't shock, it was an almost dehumanizing form of pity. They were not like her, they could not understand her. Anger set into her features, they would never understand.

Legacy paused the tape again. He tried not to pity everyone in the charade. "Don't waste much time on her."

In the hallway a minute later, Wagner caught up to him. Wagner walked several paces with him before saying, "There's something else."

Legacy was surprised, was she beginning to read him, "They wouldn't understand."

Wagner watched the glare off of the wall panels in an effort not to meet his eyes, "Try me."

Legacy stopped, it took him a moment to find the words, "She wasn't afraid, every one of the girls who crossed paths with our guys were afraid – she wasn't."

He let that sink in for a moment. He saw something cross her face, something

like pure concern. Not that she needed any particular emotion to make her face shine, even in the dim hallway light, but Legacy saw a strobe effect of emotional understanding. At the mention of fear, the yellow flecks of her inner eye danced a jittery ballet of speculation and memory combined. Someone had once immersed her in a kind of fear that wasn't contained at the time of the event, but instead continues to spill forward into every facet of their life, filling them like a tower of champagne glasses without the assurance that the bottle would ever empty.

Legacy cut into her ocular tango with a message of hope. "But we learned something from her."

Chapter 32 The Regulars

The boys were at their regular table when Snowflake approached with check in one hand and suitcase in the other. She flashed them a satisfied smile and let her hip rest on Mac's shoulder as she explained to them "Pay at the counter, I'm out."

Swat. The flat of Vorest's hand smacked her in the butt. She stiffened and looked back at Burly out of habit. Usually he'd raise his voice in defense of her, but this time he looked away and made his way into the back room.

Feely took it as a permission slip and pulled Snowflake onto his lap. "I notice the pierced nose, tongue, and navel darling, can I assume that you've got a stud on your muffin?" He began to peek down her pants when her right hand caught him with a forceful slap across the face.

Stones caught both of her hands and forced them high behind her neck causing her to catch her breath. Vorest's hand closed around her windpipe choking off a scream, but allowed a breathy gasp of words that sounded like they were produced more on the inhale of air than the exhale. "What do you want?"

Vorest recognized the question. It was one that they'd often heard from the lips of frightened people. Back when they used to collect dirty money, it was usually from the skinny pusher with a broken nose and at least one fractured finger. Now it was a fresh-faced waitress with a mile high attitude. She needed to be grounded, he thought, sliding his hand up her thigh. "What do I want? What don't you want to give me?" Another voice suddenly shook the room.

"Let her go, or so help me the sun will shine through the spots I put in all of you." Burly held a long over-under shotgun naturally in one hand, with the crux of his elbow guiding the barrel.

Mac helped Snowflake to her feet and dusted off her chest with a napkin "Didn't mean anything by it, Burly. Just a going away present."

Stones kissed her hand and she snapped it away like a rubber band. “Sassy kitten. Goin’ to play in ‘nother sandbox?”

Burly’s face fell. He was the largest man in the room, yet it looked for a moment like his hulking combination of flab and muscle was composed on a frame of pure air. He pushed his Snowflake out the door with a nod.

She was going to meet her County Commissioner, the one who would show her the world, or at least the greater Suffolk county area. Burly’s protective gaze escorted her out of the building for the last time, a going away present that ended with the door smacking back against the stop. The overhead bell ringing like it was chiming out the number of wives of Burly. At 10:30 that morning, it was just past five.

Chapter 33 Learning curve

The bells of a church chimed in the distance, reminding Legacy that time passed with or without his consent. How long had he been sitting in silence? By Wagner’s gaze at him, it must have been at least ten minutes, but less than an hour, because she was waiting expectantly without seeming pissed off. Legacy could not explain a newfound desire to keep her engaged. He had in fact taken the ten minutes to collect his thoughts, so that they would best inform her of the strides that they had made by viewing Sofia spouting lies in front of a bustling hometown crowd.

“She’s opened the door to a world of conjecture that I probably would have never found.” He paused, “Never being the type to market pornography.”

Wagner saw her opening, “But she has no connection to the actual abductors –”

“Her connection is in the marketing. She’s following a pathway that the Vinyl Men opened up when they started their franchise of sex and abduction.” He said, with a little impatience hanging in his voice.

“The standard investigative paradigm of pursuing the truth is not going to work when the person you are following is so much smarter than the truth.”

“Smarter than the truth?” Wagner asked with a laugh.

“He leaves only the fragments of truth behind him, so much so that lead away from him.” Legacy responded. “But by studying behavior we can project backward to the conception of this kind of project, without involving Blue.” His eyes lit up, “What questions does one ask before this kind of abduction?”

“I wouldn’t know where to start.” Wagner exclaimed.

“Start with what we just saw, why did Sofia give that fake speech in front of her

home town? Answer: because these are the people she went to school with, ran around with, annoyed, impressed, and ultimately, dismissed. Why did she come back? These are the people who are most likely to develop a fascination and want to see her sexually subordinate.” He waited for the thread to be picked up by Wagner.

A hundred questions later, they’d fleshed out a scenario that seemed so wrong that it could well have been the path that the Vinyl Men took in starting their brotherhood. Take a girl, any girl, perhaps a girl who’d been with them for the ride, take her and spread her across a table like a buffet. That’s where it started, hunger, and it was probably developed by their frustrated leader as some kind of Dionysian celebration after they’d finished a job. How did this celebration then become their job? A market developed, in a way that Legacy couldn’t see until Sofia. It developed from the grassroots. It was a road that tapped into new technologies and gave old ties that last chance to see something familiar in sick entertainment. Sofia might not be the first, but she was taking the same path as the first girl took and that was as good as a map to the starting place.

“They tapped into a group of people who knew the identity of the girl being used in the videos?” Wagner asked.

Legacy nodded, “Probably through one of those websites that links classmates together, my daughter has a link to one on her homepage. I’m going to ask her to take it off.”

Wagner then surprised Legacy; “It was probably the girl that thought of it, wanting to show all those people exactly how right they were about her. Show off –”

“Infamy is better than being forgotten.” Legacy responded. “The email would read, “prom queen” or “cheerleader from Lincoln class of 99 taken by thugs. See the kinky footage for thirty dollars “.

“Who wouldn’t want to buy that?” Wagner spit out through a thin, constricted scowl.

Legacy was sure that the girl on the podium was a derivative version of the abductions that they were seeing now. Their pioneering effort produced a new category in pornography. The Vinyl Men had cultivated a new audience, and it was evolving from high school sweetheart to a local TV to the new world of Internet porn. Each girl represented a larger slice of an audience that they could market directly to by way of the Internet, until Laura took their scheme national.

“So we start looking for a connection to direct marketing of pornography using a local girl as the bait- “ Wagner was well into note taking and list making.

“Or if you are right, the hook.” Legacy snatched the note pad from her desk.

“Does this help?” He asked, referring to the notepad “I always thought of note taking as a way to waste time.”

Wagner let the smallest cloud of offense drift across her angelic brow, Legacy burst out into a beaming smile as if to say, “I got you.”

Wagner kicked him in the shins on the way to the door.

At the door she turned, “I’m going to get Brent to track this down.”

“About the face painting –”

“Can it wait?”

Legacy had already turned away then something in him decided it couldn’t. This was a move that his brain would later question, “Sofia had glitter on her cheeks, soft lines on her eyes and sloping color which drew attention to her very pretty face. You do the same thing around your lips and on your cheeks – my question is this: it’s all for attention right? I mean there’s no other purpose?”

Wagner blushed; she hadn’t suspected that the details of her face had ever crossed his mind. “I guess it must have something to do with attention.”

“I don’t think Laura wants any more attention and yet she paints her body up each time.”

“True.”

“So what are the lines meant to draw attention to?”

Wagner glanced up, “We’ve had cryptographers and symbolists go over every inch of every design without even the hint of anything meaningful.”

He saw no quick answer. “You can go.”

Wagner fought back her curiosity as she went to find Brent. The answer to why Laura covered herself in those marks was the next step inside the mind of Laura.

Legacy thought about the day ahead of Wagner scrambling after the merchants, searching for someone who’d been approached to buy videos of their high school sweethearts being twisted like a pretzel. Even when, at the end of the day, she had a name to go on, Roman Tanner, and a thread that might just reach all the way back into the past from his favorite spirit squad leader to the present abduction, even then she wouldn’t have gotten as far as Legacy did that day. It turned out that Laura had sent a painted message, but it would take Legacy another 48 hours to figure out how.

A series of strange phone calls ended Legacy’s day at the office. The strange part

was that Legacy, according to his long tradition of telephone ambivalence, didn't answer a single one of the calls, yet he found himself speaking to each caller.

It began with the unfortunate coincidence of the delivery of his coffee by, well, the woman who delivered his coffee. The cup hit the table in exact synchrony to the phone ringing, and the coffee woman, (let's call her Stephanie because she is of no consequence, and most people of no consequence have long names like Stephanie) mistook the reach of Legacy toward his cup for an interest in the ringing phone. Being the helpful person that Stephanie was, she delivered coffee everyday after all, she picked up the phone and handed it to him.

Legacy received the phone like a coaster being set underneath a long stemmed wine glass being held in his hand. It had no purpose being there. It took him a moment to even move it to his ear, a moment during which he covered his displeasure with Stephanie by conspicuously turning away from what he guessed would be her helpful smile, if he looked up at all, which he never did.

Now, strange calls require strange callers, and Tyke's voice fit perfectly into the mix. "I need your help." There was a sound in his voice that was deeply unsettling like he'd lost control.

Legacy countered the urgent emotional tone with "Do you have that breakdown for me yet?"

"I'm in the middle of a breakdown, man." Tyke responded.

"Send it. We'll talk later." Legacy said, his phone manner a bit distracted. He always had problems focusing when he was on the phone, perhaps because there was just that thin auditory track couldn't possibly keep him interested for more than a few seconds. Or, the greater possibility was that because he hadn't intended to answer the phone, he'd considered the conversation done before it had unfortunately began.

"This is a social call."

A social call? Legacy didn't even know what to say, he hadn't had one of those in years. Was it possible that Tyke thought that they were friends? He hadn't had one of those in years either.

"I need something, that I know you got." Tyke launched into a whiney complaint.

"I'm not going to tell you how I cheated." Legacy responded.

"I have someone special coming over, and I need that thing you got – that thing that pulls them in." he said.

"Them?" Legacy asked.

“The ladies.” Tyke wrapped his voice in secrecy, a stage whisper, on the off chance that his special visitor was near. Legacy stared at the receiver for a full five seconds. In his mind he pulled substance around the sound waves and made them a physical entity, a piece of insecure art. The one thing he was sure of was that Tyke would say more ridiculous things.

“They’re always buzzing around you like a bee to honey.”

It was a bad comparison for a number of reasons, as bees have a facilitator relationship with honey, nothing amorous. “Where did you get this idea?”

“You’re tall and let’s face it man, your eyes are dreamy. That’s what I heard from almost all the available female gene pool when we worked together.”

“You’re deluded.”

“What about that hot secretary that used to walk down three flights of stairs to deliver your coffee every day even though she didn’t work in your department. No wonder she got such great legs.”

“Stephanie?” Oops that was the name he’d made up.

“Man, you never got her name? She flat out shines and you never get her name. That’s what I need, just a little fix of that so I can take my relationship with Kelly to the next level.” Tyke poured out his heart in a crisply punctuated ramble. He had obviously spent too much time with computers committing text to speech and his cadence matched the structural need of a processor to understand it. He was near to begging, “I’m hooking you up.”

It was a trade, Tyke had obviously completed the favor that Legacy had asked and he wanted one in turn. Legacy felt completely unequal to the task of giving any kind of romantic advice, but he realized that Tyke’s friendly manner made him feel oddly accommodating.

“What makes you think I can get you Kelly?”

“Even if you don’t notice the way women react to that “intense and wounded” thing you’ve got going on, you get inside people’s heads? That’s what you’re best at right?”

Legacy couldn’t disagree, he found himself being drawn in to the challenge. A phone conversation was becoming interesting – maybe he’d have to reconsider the next time the phone rang.

Tyke continued, “I never consult people that are worse than me at anything – I’m guessing you definitely had a “first D” on par with Kelly.”

“Had a first D?” Legacy asked, not knowing that the explanation would run long.

Now, saying that Tyke had a unique view of social interaction was a continent-sized understatement. Living among his computers, toys and gadgets in which a fortune of time and money had been invested, but Legacy had to admire the fusion of emotion and thought that went into a system that Tyke had coined the “first date continuum.” It was a detailed analysis of the way men and women couple off, and was likely several volumes long. Legacy got the brief version because of Kelly’s imminent arrival.

It went something like this: The coupling of men and women is completely and totally governed by the first person they ever dated. Because this happens at a time of relationship innocence, there are no external forces that dictate the pairing. That first girl is an accurate indication of the level of likeability or inner desirability of a man. This quotient, which Tyke sited almost like an element, “first D”, this first D is not a variable; it never changes during a person’s life. It gets recognized as a part of his nature, and although later in life money, social standing and other exterior affects can lure desirable women to be with less desirable men, those relationships were built on factors that at any moment could be taken away. The most stable relationships, like the equal pairings of electrons and protons within an atom, are when the man and woman are equally desirable.

That first girlfriend sets the tone that nature has in mind for the rest of a person’s natural life. Tyke knew that the women that he most admired in junior high went out with the most admirable boys. It wasn’t the right boy, or the strongest boy that got Mary Borra Charpenter to go to second base with him. Neither was it incidentally a member of the baseball team. It was Tyke’s best buddy, fellow computer nerd. He was a good guy and he deserved her.

Legacy sat through the explanation intrigued by the notion that his daughter’s first boyfriend would tell him everything about her present and future charisma. “I’m not sure I totally agree –”

“Who was your first, the first girl you dated?” Tyke shot back like he was protecting a beloved pet or at least a theory in which he was heavily invested.

“My wife.” Legacy replied slowly. Time stood still for more than a breath.

“Then I’m right, man. She was the most beautiful thing I ever saw in person. That’s the truth.”

Legacy was somehow grateful for the words that came so easily to Tyke. They were the truth about her from another person, something he never really allowed himself to experience.

“So is Kelly on par with the first girl you dated?” A long pause followed.

“Believing in the theory puts a lot of pressure on your first date.”

“You’ve never dated anyone? At your age and income level?” Legacy knew that by phrasing it like that, Tyke would pop.

“I’m always busy helping out my friends.” A sound in the background cut panic into his voice and on the sharp edge Tyke yelled out “She’s here. What do I do?”

“Open the door.”

Chapter 34 Carry Out

The door swung open inappropriately fast, revealing Kelly. He could only focus on her briefly, however, because the door slipped out of his sweaty palm and he nearly fell over chasing the knob with the slapstick air of an old silent movie. The moment stopped with the squeal of the hinges locking and pressing the door into retrograde motion, luckily Tyke’s face was there to stop it. He smiled brightly because he’d long ago determined that weeping was a conversation killer. His eyes however did gleam. What Tyke saw through his eyes made the moment worthwhile, however.

Kelly truly lived up to Tyke’s billing standing in the hallway in knee-high socks, jet-black hair tied back and held in place with a set of black lacquer chopsticks. An ornately colored tattoo on her pale shoulder dove beneath a form fitting cropped black tank top. Kelly, in fact, was the primary reason that form fitting clothes were designed, with her chest trimming down into a flat muscular stomach that the bottom of the shirt cut across just above the belly button. Kelly had a light complexion and an elitist sneer that might have made her appear hostile if it were not in balance with sly, playful dark brown eyes. Tyke knew that if she was his “first D”, he was a good man indeed.

Tyke steadied himself in the doorway. “Just a second.”

He darted out of the room back to the phone.

“What do I do next?” Tyke’s voice poured out pure liquid insecurity; Legacy spoke in a logical, steady fashion.

“Describe the background of your relationship.” Legacy said.

“I’ve seen her fifteen times a month for the last two years.”

“Are you stalking her?”

“She’s the delivery girl for the Chinese restaurant downstairs, she’s completing her master’s degree in sociology at U. Penn and she graduates in three days, I’ve read all of her papers- she’s got the cutest disenchantment with the collective character of modern suburban communities-”

“Focus, do you still live spread out across that ugly, unfinished warehouse floor?”

Tyke was about to defend the visible substructure steel; open wire conduits and lack of drywall divisions that served as his open plan décor, when Legacy reminded him of the immediate objective.

“When you answered the door.” He continued, “and immediately turned your back on her you didn’t give a very good excuse so you’re going to have to speak. Tell her your wallet is in the kitchen.”

Tyke’s speech sputtered out.

“I’m near – kitchen.” The battle between cool and speed made his motions jerky and robotic. “My wallet.” He reminded Kelly in an overly loud voice.

Legacy poured exact instructions into Tyke’s ear. Tyke was used to programming where probability is replaced with binary certainty. He didn’t want to hear that one piece of input could lead to a thousand different streams of output depending on how Kelly was feeling standing in the hallway with his lunch in one hand and a receipt in the other.

“The instant you get off the phone, tell her you were on a call with your family and they always drive you crazy.”

Legacy continued, “You need to explain yourself as a natural progression – when you walk up to her, say this: “It’s funny”. Just that, “it’s funny”.

“What’s funny?” Tyke shot back.

Tyke perceived a slight romantic streak buried in Legacy because his voice punctuated the speeches for Kelly with an involving emotional tone - “That’s the point, you’re preoccupied by the call and you haven’t filled in all the blanks. Now if she wants to simply get out of there, she’ll say yes, not ask for an explanation and reach for the money. If there’s even a spark of interest she’ll ask you what’s funny. Brush it off with your most charming, least serial killer smile and say: “this place, I know it must look strange,” Legacy corrected himself “no check that, “odd”, don’t use the word strange. Then continue: “I inherited it and I just don’t know what to do with it yet.”

Tyke spoke the words under his breath like a mantra.

Legacy burst in to his religious moment “Now I assume you tip her well so she remembers you.”

Tyke was totally thrown off. “The tip isn’t included in the price of delivery food?”

There was silence on the line, Tyke imagined Legacy pouring over the variables,

looking for some way to salvage this situation. There was no way to predict the human heart, but there must be a way to find out if there was a heartbeat for this relationship. Legacy said, “Get an envelope.”

In the twenty steps from his desk to the entryway, Tyke had to be transformed from a cheapskate oddball into a thoughtful imperfect soul. “Remember, first name only on the envelope. It’s important.” Tyke hung up the phone knowing that the moment he disconnected Legacy had brushed most of the contents of the conversation aside, remembering only Tyke’s promise of continued help on the case.

Now, Tyke’s mind was fully immersed in the rise and flow of the tide that was Kelly breathing in and out waiting for him. The hallway seemed unnaturally long as he walked up to her with an envelope in one hand and a carefully counted out zip lock bag filled with the exact change. When Kelly saw the bag she smiled like she knew what to expect from Tyke, or so she thought.

“It’s really quite funny.” He tried to sound nonchalant – except people who are nonchalant are not trying.

“Yeah.” She said distractedly taking the bag of money and handing over the cartons of food. She was about to leave when her eye caught the sight of the envelope in his hand. “What’s that? Do you want me to drop it in the mailbox for you on the way out?”

She flashed him a glimpse of bright white teeth through the veneered doors of a deep plum color, opened and shut along the curve of her lips. Tyke was impressed by the kind gesture. Kelly was incapable of not offering help, even to the exact change guy.

“I heard you’re graduating soon, and so I saved up all your tips and put them in here.” He handed over the envelope, and she pulled out a check for 200 dollars. The amount was just adequate to be heartfelt without seeming unearned. She’d been to the door almost two hundred times after all.

Tyke saw her doing the math in her mind and decided to emphasize one of Legacy’s important points. “I just put Kelly on the check, I didn’t know your last name.” It diverted her attention for the amount of the check. “I didn’t know if you were like me – I spend all of my cash. I thought you might appreciate having it in a lump sum.”

The smile from her lips had spread up into her eyes and bloomed, Tyke could have cried right there and then, if he were able to blink. He stood in tableau waiting for the breath bringing Kelly’s thoughts into perfect lyrical accompaniment to the music of his soul.

“You’re a nut.” She said leaning down and tucking it into her sock. She looked him up and down “What were you saying earlier about something being funny.”

The conversation started, and to Tyke’s great delight it continued well past the point of being thankful. At one point she laughed and brushed back her hair tucking it around her ear and Tyke was almost certain that she found him interesting. As it turned out, part of her interest in sociology centered around the human interface with computers and how group personality could be traced online through chat sessions and messages. It was one of her research projects. Tyke swooned thinking that he could be of any use at all to Kelly.

After she left, and for many hours into the future, the smell of Chinese food was like perfume to Tyke.

Chapter 35 His Call

It was time for the second call, although Legacy didn’t know it yet. Wagner entered the office. A telltale sweat ring on the outer curve of her ear told Legacy that she’d been on the phone most of the afternoon. “Never mind” he thought, as he shifted his eyes back toward the desk, where written transcripts of all of the videos were laid out haphazardly. He scanned several threads at once, but he kept coming back to one place in the tape.

Legacy’s proximity alert went off. He looked up and was face to face with Wagner.

Inches away from him, a frown came to her lips.

Wagner leaned over to his desk phone, picked it up and put it to his ear. “I had the call transferred to your line.”

Agent Tanner was on the line. “Hello, Tanner here.”

Legacy replied, “This is Legacy.”

“Agent Wagner contacted me.”

“Good.”

An inevitable war of male declaratives was cut short when Wagner joined the conversation and guided them to a topic, to *the* topic. Tanner had received an email through an alumni website purporting to have a prom queen from his high school class on video at Camp Sex. The “camp” was described as a two-week military style course in which young ladies learn basic sex training. The men all wore uniforms and ski masks.

“It was almost six months ago, I deleted the email, but I recognized the girl, she

sat next to me in history.” Tanner thought for a moment, “Her name was Darci.” Wagner cut in, “As soon as you have a contact number for her or her family call my cell.”

Tanner replied, “Will do, agent.”

Wagner put down the receiver then held up one finger for a moment of silent appreciation, then began. “That fits the profile. This could be our girl. But wait there’s more. I got into thinking about Blue and his faulty equipment.”

She paced in front of the desk, almost strutting.

“Little boy Blue has got a personal problem. But, if our boy were as thorough as you say he is, he wouldn’t leave a paper trail. Where does that lead us? I found three ED clinics that have had fires that destroyed records in the last four years.”

Legacy replied, “That’s a lot less calls.”

Wagner said “We’ve got a lead on Darci, now we might be able to pin down an area that Blue considers home territory. Good day.”

Wagner pushed her fingers together in an interlocking pose, it was like she’d just finished a virtuoso performance at Lincoln Center and awaited the appreciation of the gallery.

“And?” Legacy had obviously thought that it was just the first movement.

“What do you mean and? That’s it.”

“We haven’t gotten into Blue’s head, and for that matter Laura’s head – what you did is good, but trails have a habit of going cold around this group, I won’t feel comfortable until we’re a step in front of them. I keep coming back to the fact that Laura’s trying to tell us something.” Legacy responded.

“I’m yours all night long-”

Legacy looked up, and in the deeply uncomfortable pause that followed, he wondered if Tyke was right and he really was completely irresistible to women. Wagner’s cheeks went red, then her blood ran from her exterior like the tide sweeping back leaving an impression on the sand, and then her face went suddenly pale. “I meant- “ She stumbled “that we should start with dinner first, early, I’ll cook.” Legacy raised an eyebrow as she backed into the corner. “I don’t want you to get the wrong impression.”

“You’re asking me to dinner, then you’re mine all night long? How could I get the wrong impression?” Wagner couldn’t hide her amusement nor could she easily suppress a laugh. Luckily for anyone in earshot a laugh rang out. The quality was so pure and so genuine that Legacy wished for a moment he had it on

tape, the tone was no less inspiring nor less rare than those beautiful oases of music in his collection.

Wagner looked at his towering frame, his short cropped hair that tucked down around his temples, giving his face an angular symmetric feel. "I am not attracted to you whatsoever." She added like it was part of a punch line of another hilarious joke. Her laughter was infectious; it brought a smile to Legacy's face.

"Your smile needs practice." Legacy met her eyes for a few uncomfortable moments, then she searched for something to say and found only name that could kill the mood.

"I have to drop my temporary assignment papers by Bailey's office."

Legacy watched Wagner move for the door, stumbling halfway there and sending a rolling chair scuttling along the floor in her search for balance. "First time walking." She explained, re-tucking her shirt, smoothing it around her hips, and backing toward the door.

Wagner was deceiving him, that much was obvious.

Legacy could tell something was wrong, but fortunately for Wagner, the earlier conversation with Tyke had brought a series of emotional connections into his mind that threw off his normal ability to peel off the layers and understand the real meaning behind off-hand remarks. Because of Tyke, he thought the display of nervousness could be a discomfort due to the proximity of his overpowering, newly reported charisma.

The thought made him shake his head in an effort to clear the image from his mind, like an etch-a-sketch. It didn't work, he was going to have to try not to look her in the eyes and analyze her anymore. He wasn't sure exactly why, but perhaps it was out of respect, or perhaps he knew, even then, that he didn't want to know. There were only a few people that he gave that kind of privacy to, his deceased wife, his daughter, his tax preparer, and anyone who he counted as a friend, a vastly under-populated category, he admitted internally. That must be where Wagner fit in.

He reached across his desk to the phone. He had to call Chess and let her know that there'd be company for dinner. Legacy dialed knowing that three calls in one day was a personal record, but he also couldn't contain a little excitement, he knew the trail was getting warm.

Legacy remembered once explaining to Wilkes the kind of logic his mind formulated to figure out what would happen next with a given criminal fixed to a certain crime. He explained that reading behavior is like doing one of those thousand piece puzzles without the benefit of knowing what the picture looks

like when complete. That was why Legacy liked the cold cases where he could coax the pieces into place by geometry alone, over time. With the crisis of holding the world's most powerful law enforcement division up for some kind of perverse, naked ransom – he knew that taking the case called him far from his operational comfort. He couldn't wait for the connections, striving for perfection was something he'd have to put aside. He was going to have to force some of the pieces together and make them stick.

Chapter 36 Arranging Flowers

Blade watched thirty television screens at once. His hands were busy in his lap, stringing a line of smooth colorful beads ranging in size from pebble to Mac's feminine sized testicle. He had Stones, Mac, Feely, and Sean lined up behind him, but when he talked to them, his eyes almost never left the screens in front of him.

“Warm them, grease them, and insert them with your tongue during your next session” the beads dangled from his outstretched fist like an invitation, none of the men stepped forward to claim them. Feely shifted in discomfort sealing his fate. “Feely” He froze. “Don't worry, you don't have to put them in. Sean will, but you will take them out using your teeth.”

Sean grabbed the string and went over to a table where he carefully dripped oil down the beads' surfaces, coating the string with an oily sheen. One got the impression that he liked the task, as it was more mechanical, belonging more in his world. He almost certainly would have preferred working on a bike, but at least this gave him a task with kinetic outcomes.

Blade looked at the group. Sean, or any of the men for that matter, would have done anything that Blade asked, even without the promise of money, women or power, he simply liked the consistency of his authority. They liked being on a bike and knowing every moving part was working together regardless of the destination. They didn't really even think about it. Like Sean prepared the beads, making them shine for their next ride, he never even considered where they were going.

Feely wasn't about to take any shit from Blade today and he let him know it in the strongest of terms. “Aw man, I just brushed my teeth! Couldn't Mac do it?”

“Mac and I have something to talk about.” It was an ominous portent – like being told that one would have to stay after class to talk to the teacher, except the teacher is a raving murderous sociopath.

The room cleared, each man finding some reasonable excuse to walk faster than

normal for the exit. Feely used a made up hunger, Stones and Sean headed toward the garage with the intent to tinker, and Mac was left with Blade. Blue and Brown whenever their video images went out, Mac waited for Blade to speak.

“They think they’ve found the first girl we took for our little pretty Barbie fuck dress-up party. Calls herself Sofia Slut or something. They got the wrong girl.” He kept a playful lilt in his murderous voice.

“Yeah, they’re pretty stupid.” Blade suddenly scowled. Bile rose in his throat, giving the decay, receding gums and nicotine painted teeth an unpleasant marinade. The spittle that crept into his words was toxic.

“But they’re looking for a first girl, and next time – they might find her” he bit the F and swung his face toward Mac.

“She won’t tell them anything.”

“But she will when they find her. There’s a new wind blowing from the federal ineptitude which lets us feast upon its rosy apple red schoolgirl.” A blade flashed from its wrist sheath as it slid into his palm. Blade tapped the monitor showing Laura moving in slumber. “Someone’s looking for her - somebody who don’t seem afraid of the dark, and he’ll find our first mistake cause he doesn’t want this to last. We need to cut our ties.”

“I told you I dropped her off somewhere between here and Provo.” Mac responded.

“Why mention Provo then?” He asked.

“I didn’t.” Mac backpedaled “I mean it could have been Leadville for all I know.”

Blade produced a packing receipt “And the satellite part, you picked that up in Provo, that’s a couple of times that you have crossed paths with that city. And it’s not that pretty, unless someone in it is.”

Blade recalled that Mac had brought Darci into their group on a ride home from a job in Vancouver. She was his girlfriend, and Blade had convinced him to share her for their usual victory video shoot. This one turned out different, because of an idea that Darci had to market it to all of the uptight snobs and slobs who’d wished they’d banged her in high school. The shoot turned into a two-week marathon and the public school patrons, who had become expendable income losers honoring boring jobs and their blathering wives, couldn’t get enough.

Darci had had enough after three days, but Blade milked the abduction angle. She was in whore boot camp and they put her into costume after costume, finally

he agreed to let her go because she threatened to go to the cops. The information loop wasn't closed around her, he couldn't be sure who knew Darci's whereabouts, or who would come looking. Blade wasn't ready for his enterprise to be criminal, not yet, so he let her go. Mac took her to somewhere between their camp and Provo and let her out.

Mac could tell what Blade wanted. "I'll go get her."

"I sent Vorest, to cut the ties. Now where do I tell him to look?" Mac told him what he knew.

Blade gave Mac a final piece of wisdom as he walked out the door. "Drink it off, women like Darci weren't worth the sum total of the ejaculate that had passed their lips." Of course, Blade knew very little about the subject and it was one of the few subjects he would ever underestimate.

"I'm going to the bar."

All he needed was a drink and then another four after it. Blade didn't believe that Mac was capable of deception, other than self-deception. He even questioned whether two thoughts could simultaneously exist in Mac's consciousness without a mental fission that would blow his head straight off his neck block.

Chapter 37 Give Away

CLUNK, the door slammed behind him. Panic hit Mac like a bucket of ice water. He had seen Vorest deal with people before, he was known for his enjoyment of putting people through pain.

There was a time in Mexico where he cut up a courier to get the drugs out of his stomach. He did it without killing the man. Vorest split the vertebrae with the man lying on his front, tapping into his stomach with the accuracy of a surgeon. The man used his hands to drag himself to a river and drown himself. The pain of exposing that many spinal nerves raw was the kind of torture that brought a hum to Vorest's lips, all the way back to the Rockies in that particular case. In fact, it had become his tell. Any time one heard him hum a tune; they knew it was from fresh brutality.

Mac could hear Darci's scream mixing with that sadistic hum in his head.

Mac sped off, down the old dirt trail that led into the dark steep logging road through the woods. His headlight shone yellow coloring a world bathed in the grey blue light of a sliver of the moon. It didn't matter how bright a light was in this landscape, it soaked it up and left deep shadows lingering in all directions away from the source.

He heard a predator's heavy tread as it scurried through the underbrush on side of the dusty track. It must have been big, because the throaty Harley engine wasn't the most subtle accompaniment to the stillness of the remote mountain night. After about five miles twisting and turning downward, the road leveled. A single neon rod twisted into the name of a bar cracked the colorless landscape. Mac let his engine unwind with a fire that he could never express himself. He needed the speedometer to climb above one hundred, partly because it felt like his task was urgent, the other reason was that it was his entire fault.

Mac knew that it was selfish bringing her to the camp the first time, and when he saw what they put Darci through during her stay, he wished he'd never met her. She was so much prettier and more fragile than anything he'd ever seen before. She'd told him that sharing her body was the way that they could be together, and he'd agreed to it. He remembered the first time he'd known that she was better than anyone he'd ever met; she'd grabbed his huge arm and looped it around her and said that she felt like she should thank him every time she curled up in his arms. She went to sleep whispering thank you in his ear over and over. That was when they were on the road together, before they'd come to this hell in the Rockies.

He owed her.

The bike rocked against the kickstand as Mac pushed his weight off of it before coming to a complete stop. He took all three stairs in one jump. The warped boards creaked under the strain.

He slapped a twenty on the bar and told Burly that he needed the phone, all night maybe. He needed to find someone. Burly looked him up and down and pushed the twenty back at him while laying an old rotary phone on the bar. It was a Monday; the bar was empty, which made it the largest phone booth in the west. He dialed information for the Provo area.

Chapter 38 Report Back

Bailey put down the phone with a smile. He had just reported the progress back to Wilkes.

He was quite proud of himself for being useful but not doing any work himself. It was the recipe for promotion at any government agency. The work, any work, could be criticized no matter how stellar, but aiding the work while remaining only a component in the outcome was a one-way ticket to a promotion. There was no one better at being adequate at his job than Bailey, and he had been well rewarded for his undistinguished participation thus far. His new challenge, to rise above his current position in charge of a local agency required either a slow

progression of building a good reputation, something he didn't believe possible, or the confluence of important people knowing his name while not associating it with anything too bad or too good. After all, no one wanted to be overshadowed by a subordinate, especially at the top, nor did they want to promote someone who made them look bad.

Bailey fluttered his fingers along a stack of folders on the case, he didn't think that Legacy had a hopscotch chance in hell of bringing these men to justice, but he saw an angle in the case that would leave his imprint with the higher ups. He picked through the remains of pastry sticking to the tin foil that lay on the corner of his desk. There was a crumb left from his fresh lemon zest lingonberry scones, a morsel which he plucked and placed onto his back teeth. Bailey tasted a win for him in this case either way.

Chapter 39 Food Groups

A knock at Legacy's door set a whirlwind dinner into motion. Wagner entered with four grocery bags. She unpacked the contents of one bag that contained a vast array of cooking utensils. The other bags contained a range of food that afforded her the latitude to make almost anything on par with any of the finest casual eateries that were popularly attended by people who longed for a kind of nostalgia that never really existed except in old rusted reproductions of advertisements and posed pictures of pie eating contests on the wall. She looked like a formal version of one of the cheery waitresses that one would find in such a place, black tights tapered up her legs to a short black skirt with a white silk shirt tucked in.

This was the first time that Legacy had seen her out of a suit. This was her version of casual. Not a hair out of place, or a single beaded cuff lace turned in onto itself.

Legacy looked down at Chess and found that she wore a delighted smirk on her face as she introduced herself.

"I'm Chess. You're dad's partner."

Wagner looked at Legacy waiting for an introduction. He could tell by her amusement that it was a test.

"Agent Wagner." Legacy clarified.

The sight of her father's meticulously presented partner must have made the insides of her mind race. He decided this because she was completely without comment.

“I could use help with dessert.”

Chess politely accepted the invitation. A look of conspiracy crossed Wagner’s face as she led Chess into the kitchen – she had no idea what kind of cook her apprentice was. Chess found ways to ruin almost any food product, neglect was her favorite tool. She was famous for burning popcorn, hot pockets and easy mac – the trifecta of simple microwave foods. Legacy waved, then turned to hide an amused concern about what came through those doors next.

Quail stuffed with saffron and rosemary shiitake mushroom stuffing, a three-point injection of the meat with a raspberry jalapeno butter that added just enough spice to make the red pepper Parmesan rice seem tame.

“Any vegetarians?” Wagner asked serving the placemats rather than the people sitting in front of them.

“None.” Chess answered, “This looks delicious.”

“I can’t take credit, Chess did most of the sauces.” Legacy perked up.

“Under strict supervision.”

“My father was gourmet chef. He said that if I had spent as much time cooking as I did training to put a man twice my size through a wall, I’d be in one of the top kitchens in Paris right now.” Wagner said in a tone that indicated that she was more proud of her father’s opinion of her than her own culinary abilities.

“Your father must be disappointed.” Legacy said before he could put his normal social graces in check.

“Dad.” Chess shot back at him.

“Observation, not insult.” He responded.

“He’s a broken man. He reminds me of you.” Wagner spun her knife over her knuckles, a complete pro, changing grip from cutting to attacking, and leveled the tip at the breast of the quail.

Chess was so impressed that she imitated the move with her fork and it ended up on the floor after skidding off of the tablecloth. Legacy looked on as something very important happened. Instead of looking after the fork, both girls looked at each other. It was a moment of inclusion – something that Legacy realized he’d never been able to teach his daughter in their solitary life. Legacy noticed with a strange contentment that he was not a part of.

And in that moment, the symphonic oddity of Wagner’s presence in their dining room was drowned out with the combined laughter of Chess and her in a kind of diminished harmony, poking fun at Legacy. It would be only ten or more times like that, where they ganged up on him, or he was the object of their surprisingly

like-minded, but well-meaning ridicule.

“Well-meaning ridicule” was a concept that sounds like a bit of a contradiction until one becomes a father to a daughter. The drive to get attention from their father, especially a stoic one like Legacy, becomes a full-time occupation. The dirt collected can’t be flung back into the face of the parent, that shows lack of respect and Chess had more respect for her father than anyone in her life. This is where it gets semi-contradictory, another trait of the adolescent girl, with the addition of a third party added to a conversation, all of dad’s character ticks are fair game. They can and will be taunted. In this context the daughter shows how observant she really is through her willingness to share her father’s flaws another person.

It’s complicated, but it couldn’t have been too painful because at the end of the meal, Legacy asked Chess for a glass of wine and sat at the table enjoying it rather than taking scotch in his study alone.

“You must be having a blast.” Chess said as she poured the wine and set it in front of her father. Legacy took a sip. There was a dusty residue that rose to the top of the glass.

Wagner and Chess cleared the plates. A series of clanks and drumming of footsteps in the kitchen and the door opened. It was dessert time.

Chess and Wagner brought down the house with their personal crockery cups of crème de leche custard presented along with a display of butane torch mastery. Wagner caramelized the sugar around the edge of the cup then scorched a cursive monogram into the top layer. When she came to her own, she didn’t bother with her own initials saying it was all for display. That didn’t sit well with Legacy who grabbed the torch and scorched AW into the top of hers while the ladies watched on laughing.

“Martin, I’m surprised you knew my first name.” Her lips pouted ever so slightly.

“It stands for Agent Wagner.” The pout became real until she lifted her eyes to his deep chestnut pupils and he added “Angela.” Legacy simply uttered, “Got you.”

She could have stabbed him, she was so pleased. The dinner was one of those meetings of strangers that go much better than planned. It was the very discord of their personalities that worked that night, under that roof, in a way that none of them seemed prepared for.

At around seven thirty, as the last of the dishes hit the drying rack Chess piped up “Can I be excused? I’m beat.”

Something didn't sit well with Legacy, a hair trigger went off in his mind, and the last sentiment of the night was not going to be serious. What was Chess up to? "You bugged my room."

"No, I was just going to listen at the door—"

"This - case, it's very sensitive—" His tone was protective.

"Dad, I know what you're working on —"

"How?"

Wagner said, "It's all over the papers, the country is treating this like a baby down the well situation – excuse the crude analogy but there's really nothing pleasant to compare this to." She turned to Chess. "Your father is right though, stay away from the door."

Legacy wasn't ready to have real conversations in front of a third party. Chess sensed his growing displeasure and chimed in. "After hearing a mature discourse from my elders, I choose," She flipped her hair posing for her father as the model child "to reread the Gnostic gospels and go to bed." A quick peck on the forehead, one last little joke at his expense indicating that she was really the parent and he the child, and she left the room. Wagner verbalized what Legacy was almost always thinking.

"She's great."

Legacy agreed dipping into a proud tone "I know."

Three hours later they were fast-forwarding through tape, looking at sections that Legacy had highlighted from the transcripts. Transcripts that could hardly be read – so much so that Legacy would point to the next section or read off time code rather than verbalize what was said on camera by the participants.

They sat in the middle of the storm that was the escalating paper explosion that covered the flat vertical surfaces of the room and spilled onto the floor radiating out from the television and chairs. Every page that had been written every interview and analysis of the case was in that room and had passed through Legacy's hands before landing in its current resting spot. Legacy consistently surprised Wagner by his ability to locate whatever document he needed by standing in the middle of the room and accessing some kind of internal topographic catalog that he charted off of the constellations of pictures on the wall.

Wagner noticed that pictures and captions were the only things allowed on the walls and all text documents were confined to resting surfaces. Nothing was filed, or inside a drawer of any kind. He had explained upon her first visit that

once things were out of sight, they were, for him, truly out of mind.

Wagner flipped forward to another section of the tape almost an hour after the one they'd been viewing.

Wagner let out an annoyed huff. She was tired of sliding backwards and forwards looking for sections of the video where the participants spoke. Not only was it an assault her visual cortex, all the positions being changed, the wide shots turning to close ups, the impersonal nature of unnatural speed making a real document seem like a cartoon -Legacy could tell that she was frustrated by the process.

Asking Legacy to change his ways was like staring up at the stars and asking for some new pictures. She took out her laptop and then produced a plastic divider sheet notebook filled with discs. Using her DVD drive and a piece of software called Time Code Crunch, she located the next section of the transcript by typing in the time provided by the transcript then playing forward on the DVD.

"We've got a system going here, agent." It took only seconds to get to a still image of the group on camera. She hit play and Blue's voice crackled over the speaker a static complaint.

"She moves like a cat, but she doesn't purr enough." The camera moved in to a close up on Purple.

"Freeze that." Legacy studied the clear digital signal on screen. Two sadistic eyes peered out of the form fitting purple mask. "That's good." A pure form of human viciousness seemed to deflect light away from Purple, Legacy soaked it up and his voice became sinister too. "He's a killer, and he enjoys what he's doing."

Wagner looked over and saw that Legacy had a chart of important moments for each Blue, Brown, Green, Yellow and Purple – Legacy had put that moment in the Purple column. She asked, "How did you know that Blue was talking directly to Purple?"

A frown creased Legacy's even brow, "I always know who he's talking to. In fact you could read any line off this transcript and I could tell you the speaker."

Wagner picked a paper out of the stack and read. "How does that feel?"

"Full sentence please – " Legacy demanded.

"What?"

"If it's 'how does that feel, cunt?' it's Purple, if it's 'How does that feel, bitch?' it's Yellow. Brown says 'Howsabout that baby?' Green never talks to her directly, he'll say, 'Do you think she's had enough' or 'I think she's done.' Blue

doesn't ask questions, he gives orders." Legacy was distracted, already moving on to the next moment in the video.

"Give me the time numbers on the side of the transcript and I'll pull the moments that you highlighted up. Afterward I can give them twenty second handles and compile a DVD reel of all of them."

If he was impressed, he'd decided not to exhibit it. Legacy rolled a pearl of wisdom around the tip of his tongue. "New ways aren't always better."

"Just this time."

Almost an hour without a word passing between the pair, articulated by the tapping of keys on a keyboard and the occasional screech of the computer speaker as it cut into the audio of the digital video momentarily and gave a split second snapshot of what was going on in the session. Groans, screams, and foul language were the usual accompaniment – the soundtrack played like a haunted house, with all of the edges rounded off and all the sharp objects blunted by the distant nature of the evil. It barely seemed real. Legacy had to remind himself that these images were being broadcast through the air on wifi and satellite Internet connections all the time. They surrounded and penetrated walls and buildings into the most civilized recesses of everywhere.

Legacy filled up his time while Wagner was compiling the disc, tracing a thousand obscure connections on the walls, eyes darting between pictures and reports, transcripts and diagrams. He knew he could step into the settings of any of the abductions and feel the grass or gravel beneath his feet. Legacy prepared himself to lay in wait at each location – and ready himself for the next abduction.

He only noticed that Wagner was done when she stood directly in his line of sight holding up a disc. "Make a fresh pot of coffee and I'll show you what I've been up to."

It was one of the few appliances in the kitchen Legacy knew how to use.

The pronouncement no almond milk for creamer was met with a face that made the statement equivalent to let's eat household pets for dinner. Legacy couldn't believe the topics that lead Wagner to unfiltered displays of emotion. He'd seen joy and disappointment, but never did he expect that a lack of pressed nut creamer would bother her.

There was a moment where she teetered on the edge of going to the local convenience store, but in the end it was agreed that using cream for creamer wasn't the most unnatural of purposes. She was in a hurry to show Legacy the compilation of video. In the dead of night with a coffee pot spitting out steamy gasps of water into the basket, Wagner flipped her notebook open on the counter.

Legacy watched the first few clips like a conductor watching the trains come in and out of the station. No surprises, it was clockwork, but he had to be there to confirm a previously formed schedule of expectation. Green never showed on camera on Mondays, Purple liked to mark Laura so that his smell would stay on her during the shoot. He'd wipe the sweat under his arms above her top lip or spit some of his sticky tobacco brown spittle onto a lock of her hair then curl it down around her cheek.

Yellow and Brown got the dirty work, the kinds of things that professionals get paid extra for. They did them on command, trained dogs, and never initiated anything without Blue telling them. Green was always the first out of the room and the only one of them who routinely seemed to set his own schedule. He would walk out and in without a word from Blue. Knowing the temperament of Blue, Legacy was sure, after watching the tape, that Green had some kind of essential job outside of the shoot. The girls' faces changed with each cut, but the behavior of the men seldom changed at all.

"When did that line start coming up?" Legacy pointed to a message that scrolled across the bottom of the video. "Any disruption of this video web cast by federal authorities will result in the termination of the subject." It was on some of the clips and not on others.

"Brit was in the crosshairs when this became a federal investigation. And the minute our people yanked on the wires of the Internet distributors and put out feelers on where the money went – this message popped up." Wagner responded.

"Blue put it up." Legacy watched another clip where the image was framed slightly low. "He leaves room in his frame for the message. That's no accident. He controls every aspect of the images we see."

Wagner watched as three more examples of Blue's camera work flashed across the screen, each keeping the content high in the frame.

"Push him and he responds with a threat." Wagner said.

"Speaking of responses. Where is that section that I put a star by in my notes, that's the section I need another set of eyes. It's what I wanted you to look at the other day."

Wagner said, "It's about an hour away."

Legacy replied "Fast forward."

Wagner hit him with a quaint smile, fast forward. How does one fast-forward a disc with digital information with pickup lasers ready to scan any sector? The chiding look reminded Legacy of why he so needed a female perspective on the next clip. There were some things that Legacy could not process, and although he

knew the clip was significant, he didn't know exactly why the alarms had gone off in his head.

"There." Legacy said seeing the image materialize on the screen at a touch of a button. "That's it."

A thin trickle of blood cut a path down Laura's bound wrists making a line or crimson that would soon soak into the raven slope of her hair. She spoke, "You don't get to control everything. See it in my eyes." The words repeated in his mind. It was a flash of desperation, set jaw, nothing about the delivery of words could be found at any other time in the transcript. They were the words of a girl pushed to her limits – Legacy recognized those limits, having come up against his own and having pushed others into facing their own on so many occasions in the past. This was a raw tap into Laura and what she was saying had a frantic importance.

"I know Laura, and that's not her." Legacy looked up and saw shock on Wagner's face.

Wagner said, "She's terrified."

"Look past that, she has a purpose. Terrified people want to give up, she wants something else, something about her eyes, line of sight, something she's seen or wants us to see." Legacy responded.

"The lines around her eyes, are drawn by her, they line the inner eyelids. The curves match the curves on the fertility lines that she paints on her body." The eyeliner marks indeed bulged and curved creating a striking pattern, like the eye was in full blossom.

"Your experts say that she draws these lines to exert control over her body, but the patterns – " Legacy couldn't quite grasp the meaning.

"The runes are gibberish, we've had teams of people looking for any hidden meanings and they've found nothing."

"She wants you to look at her eyes." Legacy and Wagner turned toward the voice. Chess stood in the dark hallway.

"Chess? Glad to have you eavesdropping, come in." His voice was so calm he couldn't possibly be furious underneath.

"I'd rather stay here." She replied.

"Dear, you shouldn't be seeing this." Wagner said.

Chess stepped out of a long shadow onto the linoleum of the kitchen. Her face glowed in the yellow light and her eyes sparkled. She had something in her mind that she knew would make her father happy, and all of the grotesque

circumstances melted away under her bare feet as she walked to the computer. “Find a frame where she blinks.” She watched Wagner advance the video until her eyes were closed motionless.

Legacy and Wagner stared at the screen. A wave of energy crashed outward as they saw the message in a bottle that Laura had been so careful to guard from her captors and yet so desperate to have others find. Etched in dark lines on her eyelids were two perfect symbols slightly out of character of the older glyphs that decorated her body. Legacy recognized them immediately.

“It’s Mandarin.”

“Hea Wah” Chess sounded out the words.

“What does it mean?” Wagner asked eyes wide.

“Nothing.” Legacy said.

But Laura obviously had something to say and now they were listening. Wagner threw her arms around Legacy’s neck hauling her off of the ground.

She rocked back onto her feet and Legacy’s hands gripped her tight by the shoulders and he looked like he wanted to say something to the young agent at four in the morning, but then came another input from the room.

Chess smiled, “I’ll go.” Legacy turned. He had almost forgotten how much he wanted to kill his daughter. The smile didn’t help; she’d used that smile to get away with murder from age six to ten. He knew if she was going that far back, she must know she was in a childish kind of trouble.

He whirled on her and looking down the bump on his nose expressionless and her smile crashed upon those rocks. She turned and walked out of the room allowing herself a skip as she turned the corner onto the shag carpet.

It was a move that Legacy was not intended to see. The irregular footsteps let him know that she was proud of herself no matter how angry he was.

It was an act of rebellion that only a father and daughter with a very complicated playbook could have called. The room Chess left came alive with activity in her absence.

Wagner was on her feet, “We should turn this over to IT to isolate the blink frames.”

Legacy responded, “That’ll take too long, I know someone who’ll have it done overnight.”

Wagner was incredulous, “But we need to report this up the chain, this could be a major break in the case —”

“Let’s find out.” Legacy pulled out his cell phone.

“Who is up at three AM?”

Tyke was always up at three AM; in fact he called the time between three and five in the morning prime time. It was his time to be at one with himself with no interruptions. Tonight, prime time was preempted by Legacy time.

“This should be easy for you.” Legacy said into the phone.

“That’s not fair Legacy.” Tyke snorted in disgust. “You know that everything is easy for me.”

“Then stop being so versatile, I’ve got another call coming in.”

“At three a –”

Legacy set down the phone, allowing himself a moment to enjoy Tyke’s indignation. There was something satisfying and amusing about chipping away at someone who thought he had no weaknesses.

Legacy excused himself then went down the hallway to Chess’ bedroom to unruin her life.

“What you saw on that screen was ugly, and I don’t want anything ugly like that to touch you, do you understand?” Legacy started, looking directly into Chess’ eyes. The hall light flooded the dark room and father paced in front of daughter, creating a slow strobe pattern of light on her face.

“It was indeed the first time I’ve seen anything like that, so it did make a lasting impression.” Chess countered.

Legacy’s chest caved in with defeat, it was like the air inside him turned solid, but every method of exhaust would just pollute the air between him and his daughter further. He sighed instead of speaking.

“I’m just kidding dad. There was a porno on Veronica’s big screen half the night last sleep over.”

“Which one is Veronica?” his inflection rose, Legacy couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“The one you love. It’s all over - “

“At your age?” Chess took her father’s hand and pressed it to her shoulder, he stood leaning delicately on her, testing reality like a grounding rod after a lightning strike.

“Did I help you with your case?” Her eyes shone pure and true.

Legacy answered, “Yes, and could you make me one promise? One that you also

promise not to break.”

A smile lit her youthful face, it was the kind of expression that Legacy was beginning to miss, even before it went away, “Anything, dad.”

Legacy found their normal banter waiting for him as he crossed his hand over her forehead. “Conform your life to the image that I have of you inside my head until you’re at least twenty one.”

“If you can morph that image so that I have a tiny tattoo on my shoulder.” Chess teased.

Legacy strode toward the door and spoke into the open hallway, “Twenty-one it is then.”

Chapter 40 Dog Tags

“Between dust and dreams there is life.”

It was a phrase barked at all the recruits day and night.

The saying was coined by the man who trained Legacy at Special Forces. He was a big man with loose vocal chords that could dig deep into baritone to find just the pitch that made his words resonate filling the chest of every man in the proximity of his voice.

Legacy loved the phrase, partly because he had no idea what it meant. He remembered that it was used to motivate, the idea being that before a man returned to the earth he had to work to make his imprint or his life would be no different than a dream. But Legacy thought the words more closely stated in fact that life could be bent toward either the pursuit of death, dust, or alignment with the ideal, dreams. In Legacy’s reading, every step away from the ideal was one closer to death. It was the kind of saying that kept a man’s engine running.

Legacy made it clear from the day he showed up at age seventeen that he would not just get through his elite training, he would dominate it in every phase. There was a Special Forces test – the first week of training everyone ran one mile a day. The second week the run went up to two miles twice a day. By week five, the men were expected to complete a full training regimen during the day, while running five miles five times a day. This was a marathon of will. It continued until half of the men who started the training dropped out. This occurred on the second day of the fifth week.

Legacy didn’t stop; it wasn’t good enough to be in the top fifty percent. He continued running, five times a day, five miles. Others in his unit started joining him, once or twice a day. This lasted until the third day of the seventh week,

when Legacy did back-to-back seven-mile jogs, returning at three AM to find his training officer, Perkins, waiting for him at the barracks door.

Legacy would never forget the words he imparted on that dewy hot night. He said, “I went through this ten years ago, and I didn’t want to quit either. I ran the course until my lungs were ready to explode. I quit on the second day of the seventh week.” He paused to let Legacy appreciate the math, “so get your ass to nine hours of sleep and miss morning call. Oh and if I see you on the trail again, I’ll shoot you.”

Legacy scraped down the carpet to the study. His limits had been tested so often, two nights in a row without sleep was like a holiday. When he saw Wagner slumped over her computer, deliberating over each image and recording the Kanji characters in her notebook – glasses perched on the slim bridge of her nose, eyes marbled with red streaks like a good cut of meat. He gave up a little ground to encourage his fellow agent.

“We’ll call a meeting in the morning, we shouldn’t get to have all the fun. You need some sleep.” He observed.

Wagner stretched and let a drowsy look of contentment slip over her face. She pulled both arms out of the sleeves of her jacket leaving it over the chair and her standing in white dress shirt.

Legacy continued, “We’ll need a qualified linguist to go over all of the findings.”

“So?” Wagner purred in a husky tired voice.

Legacy watched her step out of her heels and sink an inch on his horizon line. She was still shoulder height and strangely provocative holding a shoe in one hand and pulling a clip from her hair with the other. Legacy stared at the attractive pose standing in front of him with one emotion flooding his thoughts: fear.

“So where’s the guest room?” Wagner asked passing by him on the way to the bathroom. “I won’t make it back to my hotel in time for an hour before morning.”

“Miss morning call.” Legacy said.

“Like hell I will.” She gave him a sidelong look over her shoulder, as her hair cascaded around her face, a disheveled accent to the precision of all other aspects of her appearance. It was worthy of a series of photos. Legacy could see that she was in a vulnerable position and decided to handle the matter better than he usually would.

“Sleep in your car. That’s my advice.” Wagner squeezed her face together,

composing the mental diatribe against Legacy constructed in three compelling movements. Legacy amended his statement, "Or you could sleep on the couch in the living room." He busied himself flipping through the transcript and when he looked up ten minutes or perhaps three hours later, Wagner was gone. He could hear her steady breathing in the other room. It pushed him into a world of strange satisfaction.

The next three days were like waves crashing on a dirty shore. Movement forward only to suddenly pull back, dragging hidden sediment, making the waters more cloudy than ever. The period of stagnation was a cakewalk compared to the complete ruin that would follow.

The first wave came the next morning when a section of staff linguists were called in to decipher the message that Laura sent via her eyelids.

Wagner and Legacy entered the familiar conference room and were greeted by a posse of people who looked almost like the same person. The same glasses adorned the same thin, finicky faces. Not an ounce of fat in the room, the surgeon general would be pleased. The room was a fish tank of the same species and all stared at the videoconference image of Wilkes as they made their presentation, even though a live audience sat at one side of the room.

The only oddity in the group was their leader. Jay, or Agent Lightning, the sloppy, choppy delivery of a young leader of the brain trust spoke in lower-class southern dialect of which all of his formally dressed and composed colleagues must have found at very least nominally annoying. Legacy knew of him, there was a connection between prodigies. He'd moved up the chain of command to his position simply because he soaked up words and culture in one swift linguistic stroke that none of the others could keep up with. There was no nuance that hid from him, even when studying the driest of textbooks. Within a week of starting a new language, he was reading the literature, and writing academic critiques.

The one language he vowed never to learn was French. "French was like a frilly lady wearing too much par-fum." That's what he said, and Teutonic studies majors in the room would turn beet red whenever the subject came up.

He knew how to put together almost any sentence in a way that would piss off someone. It was a gift, and probably why he still spoke in his country accent, having mastered hundreds of speech variations perfectly.

Legacy liked him immediately.

"I got good news," He waited a little longer than was comfortable before finishing with "And more good news. But lets get the confusing part out of the way first. The message the girl so artfully scratched on the outside of her

eyeballs is nonsense. It means nothing taken word by word or put into clusters, groups or structure loops. It is not a code either, and I'll tell you that sent most of my team to the head-scratcher from which they never came back."

Wilkes showed impatience "What are you trying to say?"

"The joy of being me director of the linguists division," He said in a lazy drawl, "Is that I never try to say anything, I am as exact with language to the width of an atom. That's why it even took me a while to catch on to what the lady was really saying."

A gesture from Jay and the group sprung into action, holding up carefully prepared flip cards with the Chinese symbol, the translated meaning and the phonetic pronunciation.

Legacy scanned down the definitions and instantly understood what Jay was talking about. It was gibberish, fish, trail, dog, ear, water immersion, sell – even when the timeline was taken away it was almost impossible to find a cohesive message out of the scramble. There was a strange moment when he looked over at Wagner whose lips moved as she read and reread the words – she looked back while still chewing an assembly that she'd been working on. She said "Tail of dog immersed in water – that could be – what the hell could that be, Legacy?"

Legacy shrugged, he knew the answer was coming. "It means nothing, no? Right? Now read the phonetics but banish all accent."

"Fis – to – ga- loo – pro – fo- U – ta." Jay waited for one of the audience to pick up the trail. "There's more, about her surroundings."

Wagner was eager to continue the message "Da – see – Jen – ee – gsu. The first girl is in Provo Utah. It's Darci Jennings, the girl we've been looking for – the girl that marketed pornography to her high school classmates."

Legacy was on a different track, silent but just as meaningful. He remembered a satellite part purchase from Tyke's list that was sent to Provo and the date was a day after drop-off of the last girl. They were narrowing the operational area of the Vinyl Men, and if they could find Darci, they could stick a pin in the map.

Jay was still speaking. Legacy caught up with him mid sentence "- the times she gives for sunrise and sunset don't make sense."

Legacy asked, "What if she were in the mountains, sheltered under a peak?"

Jay pointed to Legacy with a pen with enthusiasm like he'd just won something at auction "That sir is why I have to take more interest in the world at large, yes an uneven surround could take minutes off one and altitude could add to another, I'll get someone qualified to work out that point." He was about to turn back to

the screen when curiosity shifted him back to face Legacy. “You’re the crazy one, aren’t you?”

An audible gasp from his colleagues, knowing the arsenal of syntax that Agent Lightning did, meant that choosing a word like crazy was the harshest kind of cut possible. It meant that searching through all possible expressions; crazy with all its judgments was the best.

“I prefer the term nut-case.”

Jay convulsed with laughter. He put a finger to the side of his nose and saluted Legacy while hardly missing a beat, jumping back into the presentation.

The meeting concluded with Director Wilkes issuing orders to a team to scour the Provo area for Darci Jennings. It was difficult for him because he was still entwined with Sofia. He had assigned manpower to investigate her as the possible first abductee. The wear on his face and the tear on his hairline however indicated to Legacy that he would take this new lead seriously and pursue it vigorously no matter how much pride he had to choke down admitting he was wrong.

Legacy felt like he needed to express his support for his boss so he raised his voice before the meeting broke. He shared with everyone gathered at the table his own views on their work. “I understand that there is much more freedom in being wrong. A person can be wrong in so many individual ways that it allowed them to consider their mistakes as part of their personality. I understand that some of you will, at some time, disagree with me.” If he had looked up he would have seen Wilkes looking on, his mouth had fallen open in disbelief, but it didn’t stop there.

Legacy went on to explain that he didn’t consider it a character flaw to disagree with him; it was simply misplaced human ego. He ended by chiding Wilkes in front of everyone in attendance “Let’s not make that same mistake again and in the future, believing me the first time will save time.”

Legacy finished with a varnished, affable smile. He thought that Wilkes took it well.

When he looked over at Wagner, her face was a mixture of disbelief and horror, but he knew that inside she agreed with him and was just too polite to say anything.

Wagner mouthed the words, “Shut up.” But he had one last thing to say.

“Forget the mistakes of the past and concentrate on making the mistakes of the future. That’s what all of you are best at.” The end of his speech was met with complete silence.

The only one in the room who could breathe was Agent Lightning, who seemed downright delighted by the whole display. He applauded then began laughing until some of the others joined. He'd probably pull a muscle sprinting to his notebook to write an academic analysis of the elocutionary force of their interchange in his online journal. He could well entitle the blog "The Silent FU2". The meeting broke up and the participants scattered.

A wave of federal activity crashed into Provo Utah that afternoon, in the form of a troop of thirty liberty-grade agents with two national advisors. The wave receded three days later having found no trace of the girl Darci, nor a single caffeinated drink to keep them company in their round the clock search.

The messages on Laura's eyelids did produce one significant break – a fissure between Wilkes and Legacy. In classic Legacy fashion, he showed no signs of recognizing the cold wind that blew through the conference room every time they locked eyes, the one only everyone else seemed to notice.

Things were rough all over. Even with the area around the Vinyl Men shrinking, there was over 200 thousand square miles of territory within the band of mountainous area a day's drive from Provo.

For every new development that inched them closer, there was a tick of the clock that punched them back. The office that Legacy and Wagner shared seemed to shrink and the panic of finding solutions before the selection of the next girl hummed in the walls. If Legacy was right, there were only four days until the girl would be selected and six before she'd be initiated before an audience that was fusing the singularity of this perversion with the popularity of a fad.

The money tally on Laura had grown into the tens of millions, and although the ransom target wasn't released until two days before the girl's release, it was hard to believe that Laura's wouldn't eclipse a hundred million dollars. This was just the money earned in Internet distribution. Legacy shuddered to think at the economic engine that direct to home sales would unleash. The buyers were everywhere. They should all be charged, and he wasn't thinking about their credit cards.

Wagner's discovery of a fertility treatment clinic that had a records fire in Grand Junction put one more dot on the map. But without Darci their only chance to seize control of this operation lay in wait, in the next abduction. They had to be there when the group laid hands upon her, and then ride that new stream of information back into the night.

Since the discovery of the message on her eyelids, Wilkes had ordered that the video should be viewed frame by frame and mapped out item for item that appeared. The results were collected on a large-scale map on the wall of the

conference room. Every product that appeared on screen should be followed back to any possible purchase point. A deck of Bicycle cards in a gambling hall set would be traced back to the manufacturer, eventually found to be sold in twelve thousand outlets in all fifty states. This data would be compared to the costumes and the chips and the felt on the table. If any item were slightly unique they would know, and use special marking on the map to show that a specific purchase must have been made from a specific shop.

The board quickly became a dense stand of pine that spread from coast to coast. Pins standing at attention, almost on top of each other because the props, costumes and sets were more than just a gambling scene, it was a cheerleader tryout in leather, and a high school reunion with sex toys, and a French country house bound in silk ribbons and, of course, the penitentiary visiting room.

The agency had ten thousand active investigations, yet it functioned around this case. Every agent knew that putting these men behind bars meant more than a promotion, it was also the validation of the agency that they served. This abduction brought international scrutiny in the form of daily front-page headlines; no story had ever lasted this long under the constant watchful eye of the world.

Up to thirty-two acts aired daily along an Internet media pipeline that had almost the same audience as a cable network. Laura, the face of a nation's struggle against crime was, at almost any moment of the day sliding out of her clothes, standing amid her captors, treating them to the kind of intimate contact that she would have prosecuted if she were in any other position.

Wagner was watching the end of one of the sessions on day two when a hand reached in and turned off her screen.

Legacy stood over her, lacking a response she said, "They pierced her tongue."

"Don't get caught up in what's happening now. It's all about what comes next. Work on that."

Wagner instead, told Legacy of the new directive to examine every frame of the video. He sneered.

Legacy couldn't believe that every time he gave his superiors information, they misconstrued it wasting time and effort. He'd told them to look for a biker group and a first victim and they'd jumped at the first biker and victim they could find. It didn't matter that the rest of Legacy's report told them that the bikers would not be moving around the victim, or that the victim would exhibit a fear of her captors. They'd wasted thirty-six hours on Sofia.

Now they were looking frame by frame because he'd found a message on

specific moments in the video. They weren't building a theory on Blue and how Laura's elaborate message delivery, which almost had eluded their collective efforts said something about how much she respected the intellect of her captor. They instead were cataloging a museum of terrors and graphing the results like lost sheep, two more days wasted.

He looked at Wagner for a moment, saw in her face how much she wanted to be one of them - and he reached down below her desk and pulled the plug on her computer monitor.

"I'm going to have lunch." He disappeared out of the room. She thought of following him, but decided to utilize the time with him out of the room.

Legacy had been working on the same flip chart since just after dinner the night before. He said that he'd show her when the time was right. Wagner decided in his absence that the time was right.

It was not at all what she'd expected.

An organized flow chart of all of the women who would certainly be on television during the three and a half hour window during which Blue would pick his next victim. Every name given a color that must have corresponded to their profession, their ages written beside and a passport photo stapled beside. Notes like "Blue might like her position of power," or "Not a step up," feathered the margins on a perfect diagonal from the chart text.

It looked like a sketch Leonardo Da Vinci would have presented; it was so symmetrical in its freehand form, verging on artistic. The fact that he was capable of such organization surprised her.

Every picture had two breakdown columns, Legacy's comments and Blue's comments. The style of commentary in Legacy's box was familiar, factual and unemotional. Blue's comments were erratic and sometimes vulgar. Although she knew that they came from the same pen, she could hardly believe that the division could be explained within one man.

It was here that she saw the disturbing nature of Legacy's gift. He could crawl so far into the mind, usually a criminal, that the vulgarity became a second part of his own nature. Every time he undertook to write notes as Blue his mind went to a place that could not be explained. And in those moments it's exactly who Legacy was. He was a killer, liar, rapist and cheat, sitting cross-legged in his study, daughter sleeping down the hall at night.

Wagner's eyes scanned the pages, and she imagined so many faces. Was there any way to be sure that Blue would even be looking when this or that one flashed across the screen? Reading the margins, her heart began to race and sweat

beaded up on her upper lip.

Wagner burst into the women's restroom, fidgeting with the buttons on her blouse. One by one they popped open showing a hint of a peach satin bra. Her heart thundered, "Is this a panic attack?" She thought, "How can I trust him?" Was she going crazy? Was she beginning to believe? And did the answer yes to one of the questions presuppose an answer of yes to the other?

She assessed the damage in the mirror. Her face looked perfect, it could have been worse, but then again, the weakness of a reflection is that it only showed the outside.

Chapter 41 Third Nights

The third night was also the third dinner Wagner cooked in Legacy's kitchen. The regularity of having three at the table was beginning to show in their conversation.

Especially with Chess, who was beginning to look at the young agent as a trusted entity. Their candid conversations about middle school social politics for girls left Legacy in a fog.

The emotion that ran through every schoolyard discussion, such as the girls who were vulnerable to any mention of their shape, baffled him. It didn't matter if they looked perfect if they wore the wrong color or wore the right color in diagonal instead of horizontal stripes. Or the rumors about who was going to give what signals before the 'girls choice' dance so that the girl could ask the boy she wanted without really taking a risk.

The topic of 'girls choice' dance launched Wagner into an anecdote about how she'd hooked a boy's belt loop to the tetherball rope when he'd said no. She'd later found out that he had a crush on her, but his family was going out of town. The schoolyard humiliation put a damper on their love, Chad Harper, or dangling Chad as he was known until he moved, had never forgiven her.

Chess bubbled over with laughter on the third night. She wanted to know everything about Wagner, how she dressed, got her hair that way, she even brought up the topic of cooking.

Legacy couldn't believe it. Chess was the girl who had once threatened to dye her hair pink in rebellion if Legacy brought home a cookware set. But there they were chatting about how Wagner had clarified the butter before letting the parsley soak into and add to the character of the fish.

Chess hated fish. And she asked for a second helping, then let fly with the most

candid comment of the night. “Do you think I might look – beautiful? Someday?” Her face shone in youthful innocence, whatever Wagner said would be taken far too seriously.

Wagner responded, “You are beautiful right now.”

Chess continued analytically “But not like you, I’m two categories below at least, I’m friendly, shy pretty.” Chess said dangling her fork over the ridges of the herb-encrusted cod on her plate.

Legacy took a hold of one hand on each young woman, he said in his most deep, rich supportive tone “Do you know what makes a woman truly beautiful?” It was a melody, the resonant command tone made both Chess and Wagner catch their breath, in a trance, waiting for his answer. Legacy let his eyes wander back and forth, he was in complete control and it was time for the answer. “A cup of hot black coffee.”

The dishes were cleared and dinner concluded with Wagner promising to help Chess with her make-up next time she came over. This raised an eyebrow with Legacy.

“No make-up.” Legacy said.

Wagner crossed behind Legacy and her breath brushed his ear. A confidential message, “Her friends are getting tattoos and piercings. Do you want to wait until it gets to that?”

Chess stood at the table. “I know you guys are talking about me. I’m just going to my room to cry myself to sleep, can I get either of you anything first?” She knew exactly how much sass could be excused.

Legacy grumbled then relented, “No lipstick.”

The thumbs up from Wagner sent Chess skipping from the room. “Goodnight, Dad. Goodnight Angela.”

Legacy couldn’t remember having heard Chess say her name out loud before, it made him think about whether or not he liked the name for the person. Wagner caught him staring at her.

“I know I should never wear white.” She pointed to a stain on the white shoulder strap.

“I was looking at your body. To see if it fit.”

“Fit what?”

“Your name.”

Wagner must have had a couple of glasses of red wine with dinner because she

did a playful twirl shifting weight between her legs to put motion into her skirt.

Legacy parried with “I like the name Angela better when it’s said than when it’s on paper.” He left the room before he could show any of the embarrassment he should have felt sooner.

Later that night, around three AM, Wagner stumbled to the living room door, her blouse untucked, names and numbers tumbling around her head so much that she was distracted to the point of finding Legacy’s voice unexpected.

“Goodnight.” He said, without purpose, or agenda. It was the closest he’d come to issuing courtesy to another person in years.

Wagner, her feet so heavy the carpet felt like quicksand, was in no condition to appreciate the gesture. She casually nodded her weary head and left the room.

Legacy was back onto the trail of the manifest of satellite parts delivery, it had seemed so promising, but it turned out that Blue was too smart to have the parts shipped to the same P.O. box twice. The pickup in Provo identified the model receiver that the Vinyl Men were using, and narrowed the corridor but it didn’t point to a door. They might be able to sit on the next order, if only they had a year to crack the case. Legacy missed his old job.

The paper he was holding had Tracy’s name at the top. It was an autopsy report.

Legacy drifted into an inner dialog between himself and the trial lawyer father of Tracy whose deposition after finding the body was one of the more poignant and eloquent retracing of steps that he’d ever read. Legacy was standing in the morgue watching the father standing over his daughter. The man hadn’t talked directly to his daughter in years and yet his memory of her recounted in testimony to the police made her into a perfect child. He embraced her dead body and her life long defiance of him and all he stood for - all slipped out of his hands and he was holding his child again.

“Beeeeeeeeeep!”

Legacy came back to the present found his arms cradling the paper from which he was reading. Notes in the margins, with answers to questions that he had for the father about what a person looking at his daughter on a TV screen would know immediately. In scraggy handwriting that didn’t look like the rest he had written, was one word: DEFIANCE.

Legacy found the phone on the eleventh ring. The voice on the other end didn’t have time for greetings and launched right into, “It leaked.” It was Tyke.

“What leaked?” Legacy asked.

“37 seconds ago on the internet – “ His voice was strained.

Legacy tried to put him at ease. “What took you so long to call?” Tyke had always been high strung. Whatever it was, it wasn’t as bad as Tyke thought.

“His system for picking the girls off satellite TV is in the fucking press.” Legacy retreated within himself with those burning words as his company. He let the receiver drop from his ear. He watched his one secret advantage slip back into Blue’s hands through the public domain. Legacy rediscovered an anger that he’d thought he’d tamed with all of his routines and regimens. Someone was going to pay for this mistake, and he knew that it would most likely be in blood.

But before that would happen, he was going to get to the bottom of this. Legacy made one call, and he spoke deliberately. He gave orders, and used every emotional leverage point to give those orders the full force and weight of country and God. And when he was done, the director of the FBI, one of the most powerful men on the planet, obeyed. He was to get underway in early hours of the morning and come to Legacy.

Legacy hadn’t reported the selection process to anyone up the chain of command. His knuckles crackled under a tight grip as he asked if Doorner knew. A pause, then it came back that he did. Legacy told the director how much had been compromised by this leak and that everyone up the chain of information had to be coaxed to the meeting. There was a traitor in the group.

Security around the building was stepped up with the surprise arrival of the highest dignitary short of the president. Legacy walked through the large glass front door to a bustle of activity that crisscrossed the lobby.

He still hadn’t explained to Wagner the details, all he’d told her was that he’d called an important meeting, and that if shit and quicksand could mix that was the cocktail he preferred to serve in a huge trough beneath the entire gathering. He was going to be pulling someone down, in the way he used to in the field. Without regret, thought, or remorse he would destroy someone today.

Chapter 42 Dry Sparks

Legacy blasted through the conference doors like a cannon; he icily regarded clerks serving coffee to members of the gathering, and took command. Everyone could feel the explosive power of his power unleashed. “No coffee, nothing to eat. Nobody gets comfortable.”

The clerks looked at Director Doorner, who nodded, confirming who was in charge inside the confines of those very special circumstances. Cups were whisked from the table and Legacy’s eyes toured the room. Doorner, Wilkes, and

Bailey sat awkwardly on the receiving end of a ten-minute diatribe. Members of Wilkes staff sat across the table, three of them. One pass of the eyes told him that any one of them would buckle under ten seconds of scrutiny. They were educated, but untested in the field.

People who spend time in the field looked like Wilkes and Doorner, they wouldn't give up their secrets without a fight.

Doorner brought one thin freakishly tall secretary, whose devotion shone out from behind her plain looks and bookish chic glasses. She'd do anything to protect the man sitting across from her.

Legacy held up a newspaper, banner headline citing, "Abducted Girls TV Ties."

"How did they get this?" He processed every move in the room. The head scratch to the shifting in the seat. "Nobody should have known, but you all did, right?"

Doorner was the object of his abrupt tone, and although inwardly offended, he nodded with great civility. His secretary tightened her grip on a pen that she used to take notes and practically snarled at Legacy.

Legacy prowled the room, and Wagner caught a glimpse of what made him so good in the interrogation room. Nothing escaped his senses. He laid out the rules, hands on the table palms up. One question that everyone at the table had to answer looking into his eyes. "Did you leak this information?"

One by one they stared into Legacy's eerie still pupils and gave their answers. One by one the answer "no" seemed to take all of their energy to say and the relief was palpable when their turn was over. Legacy had a way of making a room of grown men and women feel the weight of their possible guilt the same as if it were real.

Wagner watched the circle come round to her, standing at the door. She felt something grip her from the inside as he swiveled on her with a questioning look. She heard a voice rise inside of her.

"I am the spy. I reported on your progress."

Legacy took one look at Bailey and confirmed what Wagner had said. His eyes lost their intensity for just a moment then he said in a voice that Wagner would never forget. "Did you leak it to the press?"

She wanted to weep, to breakdown right there; she wanted Legacy to know the answer without asking the question, that she'd failed him. She'd failed Laura too, she realized. Her mouth moved but no words came out.

Legacy had his answer, "Of course you didn't." She felt for a moment that she was forgiven, but his next words came quickly with venom. "But you gave away

this investigation to whoever did.”

They’d all passed the test. Legacy put a single finger down on the table and pressed. It was meant to focus his mind on one spot – but his thoughts were going in a thousand directions. There had to be someone else who knew. Tyke respected secrets more than he did his own brilliance. Wagner. He hadn’t seen that coming, but he did know that she’d never jeopardize a clean collar on the Vinyl Men. He couldn’t be that wrong about her.

His eyes snapped up from the table with one final question for Doorner. “There’s no one else who knew this information?”

“Absolutely none.” He said thinking that Legacy must have failed to find the leak. However in that line he was completely wrong, in that moment Legacy figured out exactly who it was, he just didn’t want to believe it.

“Have security escort the aides to holding. I need to talk to the directors in private.” Wagner touched his left shoulder and he practically flinched.

“Legacy.” Her voice pleaded.

“Get out.” He responded.

“You would have known anyway when you asked –” She said.

Legacy took her hand from his shoulder and replaced it by her side, like he was posing a doll with great care and yet emotional attachment that vanished the second it was in place. “I wasn’t going to ask you.” Legacy didn’t read the people closest to him. It was something he couldn’t tell her before, and he didn’t expect that she’d ever know now.

Bailey left the room like it was a matinee performance, a lazy smile on his lips. Wagner didn’t make eye contact even when he brushed by her in the doorway. She was still looking back at Legacy. Even when the chamber doors shut with her on the other side she didn’t feel like she’d escaped the pull of Legacy on the other side.

She knew how a fish must feel not understanding the tug from inside, but knowing that their guts were ripped out with every struggling motion. And she couldn’t help believing that she deserved to be on the hook.

Whatever was going on in that conference room buzzed in the shadows of the corridors well beneath the lowest levels of the superstructure. Legacy was in control of the entire building, and his energy powered the turbines that kept oxygen moving. He allowed people to breathe his air. Wagner reached their office and slumped in his chair taking a deep breath and slowly exhaling.

Legacy dropped his interrogation powerhouse persona the minute the door closed

behind Wagner, as it was no longer necessary. Everyone in the room knew it. He reached out a long arm across to shake Director Wilkes hand.

“Congratulations, Daniel, your men passed.” A look of confusion crossed Director Doorner then Legacy extended his other hand, “the same for you, Bob.” There they stood, in an awkward triangle, both shaking a different hand of Legacy’s.

“So it was all Wagner?” Director Doorner asked, pulling back.

“I didn’t say that, Bob.” Pulling his hand forward so that he could shake it in synchronization with Director Wilkes.

“Is this some sort of test?” Wilkes asked impatiently.

Legacy dropped both hands suddenly. “You know it is, you also know that I didn’t find a single liar in the bunch. There were only two people who could have lied to me on the first try and gotten it past me. But only you, Daniel, are observing my behavior – the trait of a guilty man trying to discover what he’s let slip.”

Wilkes smiled and chuckled. “So you think it’s me?”

Legacy drilled straight into his cerebral cortex and came out on the other side with a core sample, visually of course. “I know it is.”

Wilkes looked between Doorner and Legacy. His affable smile dropped and he spoke. “Do you want to interrogate me?”

Wilkes had seen Legacy in the room; it was the mental equivalent of turn of the century dentistry with no anesthetic, while using a dull drill. The cost of spending fifteen minutes fighting Legacy was a price that he was unwilling to pay. He turned to Doorner.

“I have nothing to show for endless hours on this case, and this lead represented less than zero chance of honing in on them. I needed an excuse, for when this case, the most important case in history of the Agency, did not end favorably. Legacy’s investigation appeared to be a way not to shoulder the entire blame.” Wilkes’ pragmatic tone and military bearing gave even words spoken in cowardice and confession a noble bent. “I chose a target, someone who everyone would believe would be capable of fucking up the case by taking his eye off the ball.”

Legacy added “Never mind that we’re old friends, eh?”

“I never liked you, Legacy.” He stared him down.

Legacy took the temperature of his words, “Yes, Daniel, you did.” He said with finality.

Doorner stood in a slow calculated motion and he spoke in slow, calculated phrases, “I can’t replace you Agent Wilkes, it would take a month to bring someone up to speed. Legacy, you have my apologies, but I’m in Daniel’s corner on the viability of this lead, it was worse than a needle in a haystack. Still, you should have failed on your own merits not with the carpet ripped out from under you. Daniel there will be repercussions when –” Doorner folded his hands in front of himself hearing his own slip of the tongue and standing at attention for a moment as the error slipped past him and out the door, “I mean if this does not end favorably. Now, this discussion has been a great waste of time.”

Doorner left the room like the trailing edge of a cloud burst with Wilkes quickly on his heels. Legacy could tell that Wilkes didn’t want another word to have to pass between he and Legacy. Whether it was shame or animus it was hard to tell.

Chapter 43 Dope Friend

Blade kissed both of his hands in a tender gesture before putting them to Laura’s temples and messaging in a therapy oil that he’d applied in two small circular dabs. Any more would be far too much, as she was on the maximum dose. He’d found the mixture one of his trips to Mexico. It was dissolved in a cyclohexane solvent that allowed the drug to be soaked in through the skin. The drug itself was organic, but it made librarians into hippies in front of a person’s eyes.

Behavior alteration was one of the secrets to his sex trade. Everyone loved to watch his girls break out of their molds, but what they and the girls never knew was that by increasing the amount of oil that went into their temples, Blue could create a level of initiative, erase the boundaries of what constituted the molds in their sober lives.

“How much have I made you?” She asked in a slur. The drug’s effects were strongest at the point of application. If a drop got on her jaw or lips they became numb. Blue worried for a moment that he’d become careless and would have to postpone the next session.

He hated anything that threw off his timetable; after all, as she reminded him with cliché words, time is money. She was like a taxi ride, where bells dinged and fare accrued.

Laura took the pencil in her hand and lifted it to Blade’s face. He flinched thinking that if she wasn’t so completely under his control, it would end up in his eye, and they’d be in a bloody fight within moments. He knew, however, that she’d become as attached to him, even more so than the other girls. Still there was something that made him uneasy at moments like this, with her wide mirrored eyes training on him and the low husky sound of her breath tickling his

ear, it was like he could hear the rumble of a distant thunder, a sound of deception inside her. The sharp tip of the eyebrow pencil drew down the bridge of Blade's vinyl nose, then playfully around the nostril. Blade almost laughed in earnest, but cleared his throat instead and pulled back.

She couldn't follow him far, her body was tied down under a web netting of inch wide leather straps. There was nothing on her face, it was naked. Blue thought about how he would wet the straps before the session, and then they would shrink, start to pull, cutting into her soft skin. By the end she would surely be gasping for air with a constricted rib cage and clawing at the individual straps for a relief that would only come with his knife. She would beg for him to pull out his knife. He wasn't ready to kill her yet, but he foamed at the idea of trying out the scene without cutting beneath her skin. He bristled inside but maintained a kind of hesitant charm in his voice. "I'm so sorry I have to do this, it's what they want."

He poured a bucket of water over her body.

"You don't fool me." Said the glistening Laura. His eyes were so far away that it was impossible to make out what she'd meant. Blue felt uneasy, so he attempted to calm Laura. He would give her a reward before sending her in front of the cameras.

"You're past a hundred and fifty million. I think that you've become the most expensive single object that has ever been sold." He told her, looking at his watch and fleeing the room. The broadcast was about to start, and he would be as angry at himself for a delay as he would any of his men. Well, almost.

The control room had a bank of televisions, and it didn't take him a second to hone in on the one spewing the minutia that penetrated his own interests. He didn't need to turn up the volume, reading the ticker on the bottom was enough.

Code for choosing co-ed sex slaves broken, TV prime time line up where they get picked. Don't let your daughters on TV between 4-7 pacific.

Chapter 44 The Gang

The Gang of Five had owned the flophouse for over forty years, a farmhouse surrounded by waving fields of brown grass and covered with the remnants of failed farming rusted past recognition, waiting to infect the careless trespasser with tetanus. There were over thirty members in the biker gang making the name a questionable choice, but it must have been appropriate at one time. The leader Big Dog, an impossibly ugly man, always joked that nobody in the group could count so it hardly mattered.

Bikes stood at all angles at the bottom of a long wooden staircase that led to the stretched porch area. A keen eye would notice that bikes progressed in value walking up the path until the nicest bike, Big Dog's, practically sat on top of the rotting, angled first step. It was the way Big Dog liked it. He didn't have to swing his leg over the saddle; he just eased off the step onto his ride.

The Gang of Five was a bit of an ugly operation, working outside of the bounds of even the lax rules of biker society. It's hard to imagine what kind of fraternity would be scowled upon within the community of bikers that accepted nearly every shade and nuance of brutality and vice within its shelter, until someone heard their job description.

They stole bikes.

Big Dog sidestepped a passed out comrade on his way to the phone, then kicked him as an afterthought.

"Get the fuck off the floor." The biker stirred "I've got a business call or I'd stomp your balls, if I could find them."

This was the snitch call he'd been waiting for. There was a group of Canadian bikers, the pussies, or at least that was the name Big Dog gave them in his head, they were rolling through Chugwater, on their way to Sheridan, and they were all businessmen riding new custom bikes. This was their vacation, and Big Dog was going to show them some "hospitality", he was going to be their native guide and lead them to a bus terminal where they could buy their ticket home. Twelve custom bikes would fetch about a hundred grand, and that was if the fence cheated them blind, an expectation that was usually met. Big Dog was violent and imposing to regular folk, but other core riders knew they could take advantage of him. He wasn't someone to be feared. He owed people debts, not the other way around. He'd put the tip of a knife to the pupil of a rival, but he'd never pushed it in.

He picked up the phone and found himself speaking with someone who had.

"Hello Big Dog." Blades' attempt at warmth was more sinister than most people could conjure on a meth binge. "Wasn't hard to find you."

"I wasn't running." Sweat broke out across his body, and he looked out the window like reckoning wasn't far behind. Big Dog was practically panting. "Where are you?"

"Want to invite me over?"

"Sure."

"Really?" His voice sounded like a creaky door.

“We’re still friends, right?” He knew they weren’t friends. One of his rookies had made the mistake of pulling some chrome off of Blade’s bike about three years back. He remembered his name because Blade had made him repeat it for two hours on a video recording. Blade made him repeat over and over “I’m Keith Logger, and I’m going to die.” He’d tortured him after each time he said it, like he was completing the meaning of the phrase and if he didn’t say it he’d cut off a finger at the first available joint. There are four discreet joints in the finger and by the time the offender died, he had less than three fingers left. He’d sent the recording to Big Dog with a promise to repeat the process on him.

Big Dog offered everything he had to get the bounty off his head, then had sent two paid assassins after him. Blade sent back the killers with a thank you note. He hadn’t harmed them at all. Big Dog had asked the men why and gotten back the response, “He didn’t seem to think that trying to kill him was personal.”

Big Dog knew that his debt was personal, and the bribe had been rebuffed over a pay phone in Oklahoma. Big Dog remembered it like the dying words of his mother, which were “You’d never run over your own mother.”

Blade had said, “That’s not the way I want you to pay.”

Big Dog asked, “Is there anything I can do?”

Blade had answered, “Nothing.”

The echoes of that conversation still rang in Big Dog’s head as he moved through the house filling his pockets with secret stashes of money and weapons. A cache of cocaine hidden behind a wall socket spent like pure green. He pulled up the carpet tack strips in the corner of his room and picked out a pistol from a water-damaged hollow. All the time he kept up a distracted half-conversation.

“So, how have you been, there was a rumor that someone finally caught up with you – and well – you know.”

“There’s something I want from you.” Big Dog froze. Was this a real offer? Or was this a trick? “You’re going to need all of the weapons that you’ve been grunting around collecting.”

“You got me wrong, I’m on the can.” He dropped his handgun.

“Your shit sounds like a semi-automatic hitting the floor.”

“You got it all wrong - “

“I’ll make you eat that shit if you don’t shut up and listen.”

“And then –”

“You do this and you’re free.”

Blade explained the task. Big Dog was going on a killing spree. Blade described a specific method of death for each of the targets. He made Big Dog write them out in such detail, that Big Dog thought that Blade must really want to do the job himself, and that delegation was only possible if it were done exactly as specified.

“Flip the main breaker when you’re done. That’s important.”

“Why?”

“That’ll tell me you’ve finished the job.”

Big Dog wanted to ask how but the snarl in Blade’s voice quieted him.

Blade saved the names and address for the end. It was the icing on a sadistic cake that shocked the Big Dog to the point of interruption.

“Are you shitting me? This is who you want – dead?”

Blade let the silence crackle in between them. Rural Wyoming phone lines were still primarily underground copper lines from the turn of the century and the effect was a background static that presented itself as almost a message. “Don’t ask questions, or I might show up personally to answer them.”

Big Dog understood, but at the same time he couldn’t believe who he was being asked, rightly told, to slaughter. This was the kind of hit that would cement Blade’s already legendary brutality. It was impossible that he or anyone would give this kind of order. It was inhuman. Big Dog spat tobacco juice down onto his belly, a self-respecting hyena wouldn’t pick over these bones, he thought.

“When do we go -”?

“You roll now.”

Chapter 45 Architect

Doors passed at regular intervals, like the worn skip of a record, 37, 36 – Legacy brushed down the hallway on his way back to his office. He knew exactly how many doors away any office in the building was from his. It was something that he’d picked up while studying the schematics of a cold case where an architect was killed over a contract dispute fifteen years ago.

Legacy taught himself the trade, learning everything about the design of the building in which he worked. He knew every length of conduit, and every buttress and stress point in the building, including renovations over its hundred-year history, but it was an imprecise art, and he was constantly finding differences between the physical structure and the plans. 35, 34. It turned out that

the way an architect uses space is a lot like the way a painter uses color. It was impossible to be 100 percent certain, 33,32, but Legacy had become so in tune with the slain man's designs that he recognized that a building attributed to his partner was indeed his design. He'd been killed for a contract, by someone who had access to his plans for the site. 31, the elevator doors opened, 30, 29, it was silly to count the elevator's over-sized yawning doors as two, but imprecise to count them as one. Silly always won out over imprecise in Legoland. Why did he think of that term right then?

He and Wagner had agreed that she would go back to her home department in Washington. At least that's the way the conversation had gone in Legacy's head. 28, 27. He couldn't have her around during the next few days, and given the circumstances of her betrayal of his trust she would jump at the chance to leave in good standing, even though he would never work with her again. 26,25,24.

Legacy had been shot by friendly fire on two occasions. Once in the neck, and another time a bullet from a comrade had grazed his temple. He had patrolled with both of the men who had shot him on subsequent occasions. Neither wound was as damaging as the one that Wagner had delivered to him in the conference room today. It was fatal. The autopsy on their partnership had not been performed yet, but Legacy was ready to dispose of the body. He was a man ahead of his time. Ten doors in a cul-de-sac off of the hallway all counted because they were all visible, 14, 13, 12, 11.

Luckily Wagner put up no resistance, 10, 9, 8, to his suggestion,7, 6, 5, unfortunately all of the conversation that he'd had with her, 4,3,2, was inside his own mind. Once he opened the door, he'd have to have it in real life, 1.

The door swung open, and Wagner sat at her desk, tears streaming down her face. Her eyes had turned a dusty blue, diluted by a swirl of emotions that kept her body, ironically, perfectly still.

If Legacy was affected by her condition, he didn't show it in the least. He'd walked into far more emotional situations without batting an eyelid, people screaming, wrath of God curses, grief on the order that no person would ever willingly involve themselves in. But that was different and he knew it, he never cared about any of those people and there was nothing that they could do to get under his skin. Wagner was not measured on any scale of indifference. She mattered.

He stepped up to her desk and after a nervous glance, he began his speech. He explained quickly his plan for her to have a gracious retreat from this office, without any mention from him about what had transpired. This was all on the very reasonable condition that their partnership was terminated immediately and that she leave without a fuss.

It was a reasonably good pitch, but Legacy was still checking the runners on third and first as he spoke unable to see the signals coming from the bag until he raised his eyes and it was too late.

The bag, Wagner, seemed prepared for her confrontation with Legacy. Legacy read deep beneath her pupils. She was ironclad certain, sitting with her neatly organized mechanical pencils and sure grip pens, that their talk would be all about shame, guilt and remorse. Luckily for her, Legacy had no vitriol for betrayal. He appealed to her professional side – giving her a way to come out of the situation unscathed. Wagner had long since passed that point, she was scathed, really scathed, and it scratched under that raw surface that Legacy thought that she'd trade career stability for quietly being pushed away from his office and this case.

“Like hell I will.” The tears now burning down her flaming rosy cheeks, “If I leave, I get reassigned, and with Laura four days away from the next initiation, I don't have that kind of time and you know it.”

Legacy tested her. “You betrayed me, and you ruined our best chance at saving that girl.” He pointed to a picture on the wall, Laura's face shining in her cadet photo; it showed no hint of the trials that poisoned the latest images of her. Legacy could almost feel the effect of his words on her. She was so receptive, he wasn't certain he could go through with it.

Legacy was lying to Wagner, but he couldn't take another chance on her loyalty. The reason for lying seemed justified. Every time Legacy made eye contact with his “partner” for more than a split second however, he saw that his words called up a pain inside her, a deep disappointment that he could see that she attributed to herself in the entirety, and not just this mistake on the job. Watching her accept responsibility so completely made it very hard to push her out the door, but he did.

Wagner spoke like a squeaky door opening, a continuous and somewhat disturbing sound. “I'll go on assignment, to Provo.”

She knew that the teams had been unable to locate Darci, but Legacy let her continue on the thought because, well, Provo was not here and that's what he ultimately wanted, her absence.

She continued, “I'll find Darci and I'll fix this. And I will only communicate only with my senior officer until this gets wrapped up.”

That earned her a blank look from Legacy. It took some help for him to understand.

Wagner nodded at him, “You are my senior officer.”

Legacy rolled his eyes. He'd always disliked hierarchy when someone considered him in charge. He respected his superior officers, but he never learned to put himself on the same plane as his commanders even when his advance in rank made it statutory. He turned on her.

"You should know that by now." The defiant look on Wagner's face stung in a way that he was not expecting. She'd turned around everything that he'd wanted out of the conversation and had taken the prerogative of being hurt in the process. How was it possible that he was on the defensive? Not ten minutes ago, she was standing before the Director of the FBI admitting that she was the source of the leak of information from this office. Admittedly, she was not the one who put it into the public domain, but she alone gave her superiors the ability to pluck and use Legacy's investigative methods in isolation to serve themselves and not the case.

It was the kind of intellectual dishonesty that made him abhor the human intellect. Especially in a governmental setting where such manipulations happen daily, the best ideas get taken, changed, mutated, and finally spat out by someone "in charge" who wants to take credit for something he doesn't completely understand. And the parts he does understand, the parts he added, ruin the original idea.

How long he stood in front of Wagner before registering and uttering the last words he would say to her in person until the conclusion of this case was unrecorded by either he or Wagner. Given the processes that Legacy went through, it was probably a matter for the archeological records. He and his original thesis stood still, she had to leave but he didn't want to send a signal of acquiescence with a goodbye.

Legacy had to be sure that this stray wouldn't ever come back to his door, even if he didn't truly believe the words coming out of his mouth. Legacy said "Going to Provo gets you out of my sight and that's all I care about right now, so go." He added in a guttural invective, "It won't change anything."

Wagner said nothing, the tears had dried, but the clenched jaw pulling her smooth skintight across her cheekbones persisted. "It might change things for her." She pointed back toward the far wall. Legacy looked at the wall where she'd pointed, and then quickly back at Wagner and lit up. He recognized something in the picture that he'd never seen before. The dim light muted the colors in the photo and Laura's expression lifted off the page. It was right there, all along, the reason Blue had chosen her. He scanned the photos of the other girls in his mind, letting memory drift together with a waking dream and turn the pictures into black and white. With the color removed he saw the same thing crystal clear, each time.

By the time he looked back across the room, excited to share his discovery with his partner, she was gone.

Brent walked out of Legacy's office about ten minutes later with the most bewildering feeling of his adult life. Not since the time when he had gotten his first of a series of straight A grades at the academy had he felt this surge generated by the unknown. He'd always been a moderate-to-full-on underachiever throughout high school. People had expected a lot from him and he simply never delivered. He was the second string quarterback, a relief pitcher, and solid B student regardless of class.

After graduation when the pressure of expectation abated and he began to pursue a spot in law enforcement in a small-town training academy for security guards, everything clicked into place. The structure of his daily routine built walls around him that he'd never had before in his life, and instead of feeling enclosed, Brent began to climb. Six months and he was better than any of his trainers, a year later he was hearing the curious sound of flattery, by some of the best in the business.

He delivered Legacy's mail, because he'd heard the rumors about brilliant the washout downstairs. Then when Agent Wagner entered the picture he had a totally different reason to plan his day around multiple visits to their door. She had a piercing look that shot through Agent Brent's heart and severed his spinal cord on the way through his body, turning him into jelly each time.

This was a visceral reaction that Brent was completely unready for, he'd always kept his romantic life quietly undistinguished, even though with his square jaw and short cropped jet-black hair he was often the object of attention from the ladies. The challenge that a mere moment with Wagner presented was far beyond a long-term relationship with another, a point that Legacy would have agreed with, had they breeched the subject.

But Wagner was not the subject of their strange conversation, nor was he exactly certain what he'd gotten himself into wandering out of the door to their office with a notepad filled with, of all things, symptoms that he needed to match with a sickness. He'd explained to Legacy that he had no medical specialty, but that didn't seem to concern him. What did interest him was that their work would remain completely secret and that he could pass the results only in person, and only to Legacy or Wagner.

He had a faint idea that Legacy was using his obvious devotion to Wagner as a substitute for professional trust, because after five years he still worked in an office filled with strangers. What Legacy didn't know, was that he could have trusted him anyway. Brent had many of the best qualities of law enforcement, all of them stalwart. If Legacy were as in tune with emotional values as he was the

factual, he would have felt that in their first meeting.

Brent clutched the notebook and looked at the first page, labeled in bold ink, RULES. Don't do any of the research on site, don't use any FBI resources, and don't use your real name when contacting sources. It felt like he was entering a secret society. He wondered if they'd have a wink, nod, and anonymous triple flex handshake over a bathroom stall before passing the information back to him. He smiled even though the thought of keeping secrets from his employer made him uneasy. For all of the reserve that he felt accepting the assignment, there was a tinge of excitement. He looked forward to passing the notebook back to Wagner personally and maybe share a conspiratorial smile. Yes that would be nice, Brent thought.

Wagner didn't drink on the plane. Clamato mixed with tequila was her official airplane drink. Not enough people had an official airline drink, Wagner heartily recommended cultivating a separate airplane personality, complete with different choice in wardrobe, drink and demeanor. She sat in her usual navy blazer, thinking that the drink was going to be her first step along the road. She had heard that it was like drinking a spicy shrimp cocktail followed by a hazy maritime mellow. She knew that she needed it, but the agent in charge of the Provo investigation in the airport was meeting her and she didn't want to have the flushed cheeks that always seemed to accompany even a single alcoholic drink. Her new airline persona couldn't overcome her land-based chemistry. So she planned a bait and switch on her senses by ordering bloody Mary mix, with Tabasco and sipping it through the hollowed-out stalk of a piece of celery.

The spicy liquid flowed onto the back of her tongue, and she let it flow forward over all of her taste buds before swallowing. It was a cheap college student's method for making a single drink last. During her poor student days, she'd spent more than night at a club nursing a drink, and this one got her almost all the way to the Rockies.

"On the left side of the plane you will see . . ." Wagner squeezed her eyes shut and her mind altered the captain's voice, making it rebound like an echo chamber. "The dead body of Laura Doorner. On the right, a disciplinary council which is convening at Agent Legacy's request." Wagner frowned in discomfort and the pilot's voice came back clear and strong.

"And we'll be going over the continental divide soon where the rains bound for the Atlantic and Pacific get clearance to land and begin their journey east or west." The assured voice of the captain made Wagner long for certainty. Questions confronted every design, and she was afraid that the only answer would be found over a lifeless autopsy table. She wasn't ready to concede that

particular outcome yet.

The wheels chirped an arbitrary complaint about friction and rotational energy and the conversion thereof.

She had landed on the other side of the continental divide, her problems should now travel west, and she would follow them regardless of the voices that questioned her.

At 5:07 eastern time, the feed for the Laura went to static. At 5:10 Legacy got a call from Tyke.

“Tell your boys up in operations to look for a tack signature on a long-wave arc at these coordinates.” He spewed out three twelve-digit sets of numbers. “One of the receivers I put a trace on requested a re-initialization thirty seconds ago, it should give you a location.”

“I can’t believe Blue would be this sloppy.” Legacy tore the page of notes from his notebook and stood, uncertain where to go with it.

“Maybe he didn’t have a choice, the signals been down for three minutes. This might be it.”

Legacy’s voice rose in anger. “No. It’s not. He had plans, and he never scraps his plans.”

Tyke let it pass. “Sure man, it’s probably just a lucky break. There’s no way he’d know you were scanning for a socket connection like this old satellite receiver requires. He slipped up.”

Legacy called up the website on his computer, a test pattern had replaced the usual feed. “I’ll believe it when I see it, how long will it take for the satellite to reacquire?”

“Five, maybe ten minutes.”

Legacy entered the operations room, with all hell breaking loose around him. Screens showed the transmission break, and all of the websites that had lost the feed. People scrambled from station to station in the unreasonable assumption that somehow what they were seeing might change. Legacy gave the number sets to the tech in charge, Edwards was his name, and he wore an angry scowl. He didn’t like the interruption. “Where did you get these?”

“It’s part of my investigation.”

“Why the hell isn’t it part of ours?” An underling whispered something in his ear. “Sorry, special Agent Legacy, I meant to say why the hell isn’t it part of

ours, sir?"

"I just worked up the theory."

"Yeah, right." He tapped the computer keys, called up a communication window with an old FORTRAN interface prompt. "I'm taking to the satellite now, let's see who it's talking to."

"And where. My source said we should be able to track this down to fifty square miles." Legacy added. "The source you worked this up with just a few minutes ago."

"That's right." Deputy Bailey entered the room. "Is this really important, or is this a glitch?"

Both Legacy and Edwards dismissed Bailey without a word, fixated instead by the stream of code. Edwards spoke, "So if this establishes a link, are we going to see Laura again?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"It's communicating. Why are you looking for this kind of receiver, it's over thirty years old?"

"It's got certain properties that the abductors – utilize."

"I can see where this might be hacked for receiving an open channel to programming. Is this how they got all of those local channels?"

"Something like that."

"It's communicating. If they're using it for distribution we should have picture in the next ten seconds."

They watched the websites, all still flashing a message of disconnect from media.

Chapter 46 Mission Incomplete

Wagner set a purposeful stride dragging her carry on bag across the worn mustard-colored carpet of the Provo International Airport. The man she was seeking made it easy for her to find him. He looked like he was practically seducing his watch, considering the attention he gave to the oversized face strapped to his thin wrist. Wagner judged him to look about 30 even though she knew he was well into his forties. His name was Yu, and his mixed Taiwanese, Samoan ancestry gave him a huge frame upon which he appeared to be almost paper-thin. He swam in his dark blue blazer simply because no amount of

tapering could accommodate the broad shoulders that dominated his razor wire frame. Perhaps it was this dichotomy of being a small man in big shoes that gave him such a dogged personality, Yu was already well known at the FBI for his commitment to completing any mission. It was this trait that got him the Darci assignment. The failure to come through, and undoubtedly three sleepless nights with absolutely no progress, showed on his face. He tapped the glass of his watch as Wagner approached.

“I’m on final boarding call.” He said.

“Then we’ll make it quick.” Wagner replied. Yu’s eyes shot skyward like he knew that nothing with Wagner would be easy. They’d known each other in the Washington office. Yu respected her thoroughness and had requested her on the original assignment until he’d found that she was working with the notorious Martin Legacy.

Ten minutes later, Yu’s plane pushed away from the gate and he and Wagner sat in the airport bar. It was tucked away from the concourse, hidden like the den of ill repute that it was.

Wagner sipped the sinful combination of soda water and lime. Yu was preparing to be off duty and he ordered sea breeze after sea breeze.

“You made me miss my plane.” He crunched ice on his back molars.

“You had a backup.” She was certain that he had.

“We have an active lead right now; all of the field teams have been reassigned.” Wagner gave him a look that told him that he would have to deal with her in the bar, or expect a companion on his plane ride out. Yu huffed out a long sigh. “I suppose you want a personal briefing of the trails I’ve covered.”

“I read your preliminary report on the plane.” Yu motioned to the bartender for another drink.

“Then you know she’s been seen around town, sleeping in restrooms and stealing candy bars – she cleaned out a locker at the bus station on Wednesday – must have seen us coming.”

“Must have seen something coming.” Wagner corrected.

Yu had the air of false detachment. His voice was flat, face flat, air leaked out of his nose. His act didn’t play with Wagner. It was empty theatrics.

Wagner responded, “More likely she was a mess that someone came to clean up, someone less forgiving than the police.”

“We worked on that theory.” His defensive posture suddenly dropped, replaced by a defeatist sprawl. “What do you expect to find out here?”

“Answers.” Wagner said with steely determination.

“You might be able to get them, kid, you’re a sharp one.” Yu bit the fruit off of a plastic pick drawn from the empty ice of his second drink.

After an hour more of pointed questions from Wagner, the table was in great need of being bussed. Four glasses vied for space in front of the downright chummy Yu. He had developed an airline personality right in front of Wagner without ever leaving the ground.

“That’s my second option.” He said hearing the intercom announce first boarding. “We have two hundred miles in Wyoming to comb for a satellite dish about this big.” He spread his fingers to the width of a grain of salt. “As seen from outer space.” He spoke with a stutter so near laughter that it came across sounding like tears.

“You’ll make it.” Wagner smirked.

“True.” Said Yu, shifting his light frame on the wooden seat. “I heard you are in the door with Martin Legacy. Desk to desk” He held up his hands to represent the position of the desks, palms inward.

Wagner nodded.

“What’s it like rubbing up against brilliance? Eh?” He growled in his deep baritone, clapping his hands together.

Wagner let her voice drop “You tell me.”

Agent Yu laughed all the way to his connection in Phoenix, the flight added two hours onto his journey but he wore the inconvenience with an oversized smile, the impossible kind a child carves onto the face of a squat pumpkin. He liked Wagner, and he thought that if she had been there in the first place, his team might have turned something up.

Wagner saw one hole in the investigation by Agent Yu, and while it was a pinhole in an otherwise rock solid edifice, she needed to track it down before the trail could be considered cold.

She stepped out into the last few moments of sun that would bathe the Utah landscape in a warm orange light. The effect was intensified by the mammoth streaked stone-face rising sharply just east of town that served like a reflector, sending back the warmer earth tones to criss-cross the city floor.

Wagner felt there was a possibility that Darci, by all accounts a free soul, stayed in this area for a reason. It wasn’t the scenery. The only kind of reason, if Wagner’s memory served her, that a girl her age would linger in a town like this was the attention of a man. It was a dangerous game staying in one place, being

the only living link to a group of vicious criminals. Love as an emotion was the equal of fear in youth, and then the scales tip back slowly as years pass. By the ripe old age of 23, Wagner needed to prove her theory true. She could feel the tingle of her own fear of failure, located somewhere back in the coelomic cavity of her inner ear. The flush of romance she felt only briefly, and at increasingly longer intervals of time in between, like an echo of a peal of faraway laughter. Wagner studied her features in the side mirror of her rental car; they were exactly as she remembered herself looking at eighteen, save the severe expression. A bath and twelve hours of sleep would not erase the misfortune that set her on the path of law enforcement, but suffice it to say that if the eighteen-year-old Wagner were to see Agent Wagner on the street, she'd shriek and run away. Wagner remembered running from trouble into someone's arms, and where it had led her. The recollection reminded her that at eighteen, fear might aid gravity and send a girl underground, but no force in the heavens could push them away from their primary attraction.

Wagner pulled her sedan into the parking lot of a strip mall, irregular signs marked stores like Alice's Nicks and Snacks, and Express Communications Beepers, places that she couldn't believe anyone would have any business in even during full daylight, then drove around to the back alley. It was one of many alleys that she would visit during her search. The convenience store next door was home to one of the many colorful clerks whom she would shove a picture of Darci under his or her nose and ask the same question, "Have you ever seen this girl?" And if they said yes, she would add her own follow up in hopes of getting to that emotional magnetism that kept her in orbit around the same old dumpsters and mini marts, instead of reaching escape velocity, hitching a ride on the 15 freeway and exploring an exotic new world of out-of-town trash cans and convenience stores. She would ask, "Was there any particular boy that showed interest in her?"

The night wore on, and since convenience stores never closed, Wagner had something to do with every minute of the present darkness. Everywhere she went, she heard the same story, another agent had already been there, sometimes twice asking about the same girl. On the rare occasion that the clerk remembered Darci, her follow up yielded nothing. The girl was a wisp, a puff of air entering and exiting leaving no lasting impression on anything or anyone she touched. It was all exactly what she'd read in Yu's report. Wagner cursed Yu's blasted efficiency.

The news of the murders in Wyoming broke at 5:02 AM. Agent Yu, leader of the field team who'd made the discovery, came to the podium just in time for the top of the hour news cycle to flood the graphics department with speculative catch phrases to display beneath the footage of the press conference. Things like

“Internet bloodbath, will the government come out of this clean?” and “Abductor Bikers take Bullets” filled in the vacant space between Yu’s words and let everyone know exactly nothing about what he was saying. The message did filter across, however.

Yu walked to the platform buffeted by a stiff western plains breeze, swaying slightly like a man in the initial stages of a hangover. He explained that five bodies had been found, all brothers, and all fit the body type of the men referred to by the media as the “Vinyl Men”. Agent Laura Doorner and the final brother of reportedly six were not among the bodies. The largest manhunt in history was being undertaken in those morning hours to find the missing brother, the one that matched the description of Blue, now known to be Bertrand “Blade” Henry, and he was most likely on foot.

A reporter yelled a question into the momentary pause. “Why would he be on foot, there’s report of motorcycle traffic in this neighborhood last night - “

Yu cut in, “It appears as if the group were themselves victim of a sudden attack from a group of bikers. I won’t comment on the details as it might compromise the investigation, but I will say, this looked personal.”

Almost a perfect punctuation to Yu’s final statement, a young ATF agent came charging out of the house and threw up in the bushes. Undoubtedly this clip would be played over and over during the next hour with the subtitle “Vigilantes serve justice cold.”

Yu backed away from the podium and the indistinct roar of the press corps. A team leader thrust a phone into his hand the minute he turned away from the cameras, and he put it to his ear. The voice on the other end was unfamiliar.

“What did you mean by ‘personal’ in your press conference?”

“I don’t know who you are – “

“I’m routed directly through Director Doorner’s office so it maybe we can cool the formalities?”

Yu looked at the aide, who’d supplied the phone, nodded to his silent question, “Is this real?”

He spoke candidly.

“The attackers went to great lengths to make certain that these men went through a great deal of pain before they died. Very individual in nature, each was taken to specific room, to enjoy a specific type of torture. They all ended up in the same place, however.”

“The bodies weren’t left apart, that doesn’t fit.”

“No they all were found apart, I was speaking less literally, and I meant they all went to hell.”

“Did you think I’d enjoy the metaphor?”

Yu took a guess, “No, agent Legacy.”

“Well, I did. It probably tells me more about the way the scene was designed than the photos will. This man wanted to send these people to their own personal hell. So speak freely.”

“Always do.” Yu found himself wanting to please Legacy, and he had no idea why.

“Have you processed the scene?”

“We have a hundred agents on scene, I doubt that we’ll find any new evidence larger than a grain of salt in our next sweep.”

“Did you find a fingerprint on the dedicated breaker circuit for the satellite?”

“That’s not part of the crime scene.”

“Humor me.”

Yu was used to delegating tasks like this, but something in Legacy’s voice told him not only to move, but to move quickly.

The rusty metal screeched as he carefully lifted the front plate of the breaker box. He pulled out a pen flashlight and examined the socket connection for the satellite. Dust on the lower curve plate of the switch told the story that this switch had not been flipped.

“Nope.” But with the penlight on something caught his eye as he swung the metal door closed. Cobwebs sticking to the outer door in matted bands, he swung the light up around the edges of the box and found dangling connections that used to end on the door. This had been opened recently. “Wait a second.” He reexamined the box. In the upper corner, right under the hinge, he found it. A fingerprint in the dust on the main breaker, he reported it to Legacy.

“Can you think of a reason why a band of criminals would take time from a revenge crime and flip the breaker?”

“One of them had a live chandelier wire shoved down into his stomach.” Yu commented.

“And a light switch nearby. Right? This was a decoy. That breaker switch is the reason we found them and it was flipped intentionally. He lured us in.”

“He trapped a hundred federal agents, for what? A sneak attack?”

“Blade wanted all our resources engaged over here – so he could get back to business over there.”

“He got my attention.”

“Thank you for your help, agent.”

“I’ve got squads looking for a trail.”

“You won’t find it there. Blade is far away. The good news is, this means everything’s back to normal.”

“How is that good news?” Yu heard the click of the call disconnecting; obviously goodbyes were not in order. He called out to a passing agent, “Get someone in here to process the breaker box.” He walked up the stairs to the house bustling with activity; his breath turned to fog as it mixed with the air. Just moments before, he had been hot on the trail, but now he was beginning to feel the cold.

Chapter 47 Shopping Spree

There were only 17 shopping hours left until the broadcast television airwaves would become a vast multi-channel department store from which one item would be marked for theft. Blue would turn on the TV at precisely 4 pm Eastern and watch for three and a half hours, and his range would span every channel on the dial. Even with the seeming impossibility of his task, Legacy felt like a predator on a silent trajectory to run down his unseen prey. His senses had boxed Blue into a vast area of internal consistency he referred to as his repetitive tendencies, and if he behaved like Legacy knew he would – there was a chance to take the whole group of them down. Legacy knew something that no one else knew, and that gave his vision a clarity that no one else could see.

In examining a human face, the study of biometrics breaks down a face along an axis. The symmetry, or lack thereof, is expressed on a grid with the long axis crossing between the eyes and the lateral cutting just beneath the nose. It forms a ‘T’ down the midline of the face. Some of the more jovial scientists in the field call this simply “The Truth”. The truth be told, most expressions can be mapped on the same grid, it is the way that scientists eventually hope to allow robots to analyze the emotions of the humans. “Forget having an psycho-analyst when that happens.” Legacy thought, making his way down an unfamiliar corridor toward an exit from the office that he’d never used in all of his time at the Alexandria branch. It faced west and his home was east, but today Legacy was not taking his regular lunch. Instead, he was heading across town. He looked at the faces in the crowds that passed him, trying to picture them in monochrome and then recreate the victims within everyone. The same associations he’d seen so clearly in his

office.

Computer software actually bleeds out the colors to make the ‘T’ grid more pronounced and this allows the expressions and characteristics to be read with greater accuracy.

“This is it.” Legacy’s mind leapt only hours before. Blue had chosen girls with facial symmetry that became obvious when all of the layers were peeled away. With the color gone, the expression of their faces also revealed the same expression, one of determination in ascending degrees. Legacy didn’t need a computer to read the human face, he should have noticed it before, in fact, but the emotional image that each victim presented, the rosy cheeks and the smooth, evenly tanned skin distracted him. He had never looked at the victims like he should have. He should have viewed them as suspects, with an eye towards discerning the detail of their underlying condition and tendencies. It was a mistake that stared him flat in his very contoured face in the reflection of a subway window. He moved onto the train.

The ratio of the distance between their eyes and mouths was another constant; it was like Blue processed their biometrics along some code that would result in the greatest satisfaction for him. “He’s looking for the perfect girl to break.”

It’s no wonder that they all were considered beautiful, symmetry is the cornerstone of physical beauty. He gazed out the window at the passing scenery. The crisp air cut around the aerial producing a thin contrail wisp of cloud, meaning that the temperature was near, but not below, freezing. A half hour later Legacy was standing in front of a cut stone façade that hid the ultra modern interior of the Terrace Towers. It was a blend of the colonial outside to appease those prone to be drawn to history and the broadband contemporary style lobby and interior fixtures to satisfy those who prefer looking to the future.

Eying the graceless contrast, Legacy decided he would feel ill in the very near present. He stepped out of the elevator, a single doorway led away from the top floor lobby. There was only one door leading from the plush marble accented lobby. A small circular plaque on the door read “Tyke Conspiracies,” but it flew out of sight as the man behind the door opened the door farther with a swift kick outward. He wanted both hands free with this visitor, and he wrapped them around Legacy. He carried the faint smell of body odor, tuna and powdered cheese. Tyke surveyed his visitor’s response to his embrace and made the excuse “I’ve been using that new crystal deodorant,” all the while hugging him closer.

“Use more.” Legacy said simply, knowing that the only way to truly connect with Tyke was to insult him.

“I do, I mean I will, but now I’m busy helping out this pain in the ass friend

who's got me making two hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of machinery into a giant Tivo." His words bounced off of the rough in-wall frames, scattering into the catacombs that were his unfinished penthouse apartment. Some rooms were practically normal, but they stood as enclosed islands of drywall in a vast plane of a metal-framed maze that extended outward until one reached the windows. Those were covered in a dark tint that made even direct sunlight seem strangely cool. Something to do with projector glare, Legacy bet. Banks of data projectors, DLP, DILA and LCD pointed at white tarps that hung stretched where walls should be circling the main "workplace." This place looked like it was laundry day, every day. The 1.5 hi-gain video screens had the same amount of luminance workspace as one thousand twenty-inch monitors.

Tyke was the kind of person who jumped from technology to technology, always thinking the kind that he didn't have was better than the one he did, regardless of chronology. It seemed like a very simple explanation for his spending habits. He could not concentrate on the same project for any length of time; it was practically impossible for him to wake up one day thinking he'd work on the same thing that he did the day before. His sporadic approach would cripple some people, but it motivated him. Tyke would not sleep until he'd finished what he was doing. This led to some interesting weeks of unbounded progress accompanied by humanity-draining insomnia. It was a cocktail of results and pressure that Tyke had perfected.

He loved fresh challenges, because they made him finish old business. "I built a moat for one of the top three fulfillment companies in the country." He said with pride, urging Legacy to guess which one.

"A moat?" Legacy instead replied.

"Yeah, firewalls are for pussies, when they get me, they get a moat around them – fire never even touches their walls." He spoke his own terminology as if it were accepted jargon, which Legacy thought is probably how jargon gets accepted in the first place. It comes from people like Tyke.

"I've got about two hours of work left on your instructions, but my questions are: why are we doing this here? Why at all for that matter? Didn't they bust up their party this morning?" He reached for a pair of wire strippers and went to work on a ribbon of wires on his workstation.

"If I'm wrong, we've wasted an afternoon." He was proceeding with his plan to choose the next abduction victim. He hadn't told Wagner, or anyone for that matter, the truth about how the leak of the news story affected Blue's plans to choose the next girl; it didn't. Blue was a vain man and he didn't let anyone tell him what to do. Anyway he had a system that had produced rewards time after time to change it would show weakness, something Blue did not intend to do.

“I thought you were never wrong.” Tyke chimed in.

Legacy rubbed his fingers together below his nose, staring intently at the tips of his fingers, into the grooves that confirmed his own singularity. Somewhere in the overlapping whorls and the maze of indented lines was a pathway, all he needed to do was connect it across an infinite pathway to another person, and the one thing he couldn't do with this vector diagram was miss. He needed to be someone else for the rest of the day right down to the behaviors that most people would say were untraceable and as unique and impossible to copy, like a fingerprint.

Blue would keep his appointed hours in front of the TV, and that the next girl would be chosen the same as always, despite the leak. The FBI would not interrupt the symmetry of the crimes that Blue was crafting. Nothing had shown him even the slightest trouble, much less the kind of upheaval that would make him change. He didn't change, people changed for him, bent around his will. He would be sitting in front of those screens tonight and he would be searching for someone with just a little more pride, an identity a little more sure and confident. He was going to be looking for the best possible woman to ruin, otherwise what was the point? He couldn't imagine that it was a risk. It was like the police had been handed a phone book of the entire country and they were told that the next victim would be chosen from it. No, Blue felt quite safe, and equally secure in his choice because of one simple reason: he had no idea of who it would be.

Tyke listened to Legacy explain their next step, let all of it soak into his binary world and offered a suggestion. “Why don't you let me run a biometrics program while you're watching the feed?”

“It won't work, symmetrical faces are going to be all over the television, we watch one after another symmetrical face on TV. Anyway it's not just symmetry, it's the expression mapped out across the cheekbones tells a story about the woman, and the story is progressing. There's no way to put that into a computer.” The only computer that could process it all, Legacy thought, was his own. “I need to get ready.”

Legacy's eyes shined with a steely, slightly foreign anger that he kept in check just below the surface. He was beginning to let Blue creep into his consciousness, a cold intrusion to ready him for the choices that were about to be made. Neither mercy nor remorse nor indecision could cloud his view of the faces that were about to parade in front of him.

Legacy felt the beginning stages of a trance. He asked if the color could be drained out of the video feeds. When Tyke asked why, Legacy could hardly recognize his own voice as he growled, “That's how I see them.” He kept his eyes straight forward. The images of all six girls appeared in his mind, larger

than life, colorless, and motionless – they were nothing less than a vast landscape of human geography.

He heard Tyke murmur something defensively about taking a lunch break and ordering Chinese food before shutting out the world entirely. His mind was cleared of everything except the details hidden in the chemical specs deposited on glossy paper forming the image of the abducted girls.

Using the truth 'T' lines, Legacy set about seeing a progression, as each girl represented a step forward in both physical beauty, strength of character and conviction. Blue was looking for someone with the kind of outward beauty matched with an understanding of exactly who she was, the kind of certainty that would pose the greatest challenge to break. He was a sculptor looking for an image within a slab of the most formidable marble.

Legacy recognized the desire to push up against his limits. A small part of him coveted the idea of a kind of perfect failure; finding a secret that even he could not coax out of a person. Something so sacred that it wouldn't be given up to anything or anyone. He'd come across that kind of resolve only once in his career. It was the encounter that had been the only notable "mistake," on his otherwise perfect record. The speculation at the time the "mistake" came to light was that he was a traitor – as an amusing aside. It was the only time that he'd lied to a superior officer. The army was right about one thing - there was one case where he knew much more about the subject than he told them. But thinking of her missed the point entirely, and before he could get to the point, chopsticks were thrust into his field of view from above.

Tyke dangled the delicate looking white wood and then waved it in his face like a snake charmer bent on coaxing him out of his dark retreat.

It was clear Tyke wasn't certain if there'd be any venom, by the way he jumped back when Legacy's eyes snapped open. Tyke must have risked the interruption because of the importance of what he had to say.

"Kelly." Tyke said pointing to the door and a shapely young woman wearing black tights that disappeared into short red skirt. She held a second bag of food; Tyke learned that ordering four meals meant that they came in two bags. Two bags gave him almost thirty seconds more time seeing Kelly, that calculation includes two bag retrieval trips.

Legacy managed a reply "How is everything going?" He spoke in a low tone, careful not to be overheard by Kelly.

"We're dating," He could barely contain the joy of the world that had spread across his glowing face. "She's way out of my league. Kelly, come and meet my – my - " He stammered suddenly realizing that he had no way of introducing

Legacy, 'my friend' didn't really fit, 'colleague' was outdated, 'lover' was wholly inaccurate – Legacy saw him stalling out and extended his hand.

"Former instructor, at the Washington Bureau." His hand enveloped hers and Kelly unconsciously leaned forward, swooning visibly at his chiseled looks that outlined years of experience and steely eyes that dipped down deeply into charcoal complexity underneath.

Kelly proved to be playful from word one, as she turned to Tyke and said "Oh, my God. Be glad I didn't meet him first" She said, walking the thin line of teasing. She turned to Tyke, "So you weren't kidding about the FBI?" Throwing a glance back to Legacy with a wink, "I thought he just wanted to impress me." The pucker of her thin expressive lips on the word impress was the kind of flirt that she obviously loved laying out there as bait. She knew that Tyke would rise to take it.

"She's toying with me. We won't last. It's a fling." He said handing over the money for the food.

Kelly continued talking to Legacy, unable to take her eyes off him. "That's his way of dealing with possible future rejection, to preempt it. What he doesn't know is that his neurotic insecurity attracts my appetite for self sabotage." Beneath thick black eyeliner, her eyes danced a calculatedly immature, intellectual jig.

A twirl sent her skirt just above the propriety line, to finish the tease and she was gone. Legacy could feel the insecurity rising in Tyke, which he quickly diffused by saying "I think she likes me."

Tyke's temples throbbed in frustration, and for a moment, after finding the perfect stinging comeback, he discarded it in favor of "I'm going to die alone."

"That's the spirit." Legacy found that the smell of food gave him an appetite. The afternoon had quickly dissipated and his hunger reminded him of the arrangements he needed to make. "Can I use your phone?"

Tyke waved him to an antique replica phone mounted on the wall above a small table in the middle of the hallway. Picking it up, Legacy realized that it was not a replica per se; it was an expertly crafted modern forgery of the old cedar box phones that they used in the old west. The coils, wires, springs and casings all put together lovingly from junk and restored authentically to the period.

He took a moment before raising the earpiece to study the braided black wires leading to the pick up, where the electric impulses would soon become a familiar voice. The fact that Tyke would have such an artful reverence for old technology made Legacy look at him in a different light. Legacy was not the type to bandy

about the word ‘genius’ as a reward for excellence. Tyke had always struck Legacy as a genius, but he hadn’t realized until that moment that he was also an artist. The thought breezed through Legacy like the hum of electricity that perhaps all geniuses are artists regardless of their field, because perfection is just a word for immeasurable beauty.

He felt the strange sensation of wanting to comfort Tyke, “Kelly was testing you, she wanted to see if you can handle more than just “going out” with her. She wants to know if there’s a chance it will be a relationship.”

“How did I do?” Tyke asked.

“You failed.” So much for kind words. He caught himself, “But she’ll give you another chance, keep your eyes up. She wants to be everything you think she is.” Legacy dialed one of the few numbers he had memorized.

“I thought you were bad with emotions.” Tyke had laid out all of the boxes and popped the tops.

“I’ve had a lot of emotional input recently. Anyway, the beginning stages of a relationship are all about tactics.” He raised the receiver, craning his tall frame to speak.

Tyke plunged his chopsticks into the nearest box, letting them stick up like miniature standard bearers proclaiming victory over his internal conflict. He had eaten alone for almost six straight months. Today he would have lunch with a friend.

Chapter 48 Criminal Hem

Chess felt the rush as the last bell of the day sounded and the chairs squawked in unison as twenty students pushed away from their desks. The movement hid a small smile. “I got away with it,” She thought.

She’d spent the entire day in rebellious glory. She wore a small silver hair clip, keeping her flowing red hair from falling into her face. It was one that agent Wagner had offered the night before, when they’d talked about make-up.

The dress code at Cherished Hills Academy, called for school uniforms, loafers, tennis shoes only in gym class and only black hair clips were allowed. Chess had seen her friends flaunt the rules with pierced ears and colored nail polish, but she’d never participated in open rebellion until today.

She spotted her friends outside the classroom. She was sure they would notice her painfully obvious ride on the razor's edge of the wild side. Chess strutted toward them like she was on a Paris catwalk.

"Bzzz, bzzz." Chess' phone startled her, and she jumped comically into the middle of the gathering of girls waiting for her. A cackle of laughter as Chess put the phone to her ear.

"Dad?" She asked.

"Who else would it be?" Legacy was stern curiosity.

"I meant, dad." The question retracted.

"Chess, I'm having you picked up today. I just – you haven't left yet, right?" he asked.

"No. Whatever." She replied.

"Great, well –" An awkward pause from her father, something was definitely up; she'd ask him in the car.

"Bye, dad." She pushed the phone deep into her coat pocket and looked up to see all eyes on her.

Trisha, the smallest of the group pushed back her long black hair and braved the waters of unbearable torment and stammered, "That was your dad? Can I touch the phone?"

"Pathetic Trish." Chess answered and the moment passed. She didn't mind having a father who towered over the other dads at parent teacher conferences, or even a dad who melted the hearts of her adolescent friends. What nagged her was that he was frozen in time, and he had no ability to accept that she was changing. He showered her with the same kind of attention that she needed at age six, even at age fifteen. She was beginning to feel burdened by the private "Saturday Evening Post" meets "Guns and Ammo" world that he had created. It would only get worse with the events of the day.

She listened to the basic flow of the girls' conversations, waiting for someone to notice the hair clip, or the twinkle in her eye that would lead them to her secret. They talked of a report that was due soon and not even begun. Then her mind skipped like a record across time, following a totally different thread of thought in her mind. She was being picked up?

She'd practically forgotten about the old VW cabriolet that they had in the garage. Her father used it for educational day trips to historical sites around the capitol, but usually it was only for the weekends. This was a weekday. Where were they going? Something was not right. She thought approaching the large

central doors of the school that spilled out upon a central rotunda and a faculty parking lot.

Megan, the gossip of the group, broke her trance, “What is that you have in your hair?” Chess turned to the voice, only to see that Megan was aiming at Cathy. Cathy was the flirt and tease of the group and she’d dyed a strand of her hair bright purple. Cathy had layered it under her natural hair and no one had noticed. She was nearing the door, the demarcation point at which nobody could put her in detention for purple hair. “Miss Riverton!”

Steps from freedom, the entire group froze as Vice Principal Graif, the hawk, called to them from down the hall. He had spotted the offending follicles from his perch in the school store. He wrote thirty minutes in detention for Cathy and then turned his eye on Megan’s skirt, which was an inch out of school specifications. An inch too long might have been acceptable, but upward meant thirty minutes detention, minimum. He tisked the girls with a disapproving click of the tongue, and then his eyes rested on Chess hiding in the middle.

“Why can’t you all look more like Ms. Legacy?” He asked, noticing everything in proper proportion, “She practically glows with a warm wholesome charm.”

Tension surged in the moments after he’d left, then it was gone. Trish cracked up, she pointed at Chess. “Principal’s pet.” Chess looked at all of the friendly faces encircling her, not a trace of annoyance or jealousy. What had she done to deserve her friends?

“What did your dad want anyway, Chess-a-pet?” Cathy asked shoving the detention slip into her plaid pocket.

“He’s coming to pick me up.” Even as she said the words, they sounded wrong. Chess got a strange feeling as she backed away from the group toward the main door. She realized that he hadn’t said “I’ll pick you up,” but no other arrangement of words made sense at all. He never let her share rides with friends even though some were the best sixteen-year-old drivers in the state. He wouldn’t even allow her to share rides with their moms and dads – it wasn’t a discussion. She walked home in a group.

Alarms went off in her head as she stepped out onto the front steps of the school. She saw the lights in the rotunda. “I’ll have you picked up” took on new meaning for her. Her entire cadre of friends stood in the yawning front door. They craned to get a look at Mr. Legacy, but instead they saw an incredible orchestrated abduction.

Chapter 49 Battleship Plan

It was almost time to start. Legacy knew that he was currently coloring outside the lines, working off site, bending rules. He wasn't concerned about what others would think, particularly. That wasn't what kept him glancing at his watch with a nervous urgency. He was on the clock now. There were only so many minutes until the next girl was chosen. After that, there were so many hours until she was taken.

It was an odd pressure amplified by his recent work on the case with Wagner. Her dedication to every detail of the case brought with it a certain inertia. Her drive to see Laura safe was kinetic. Legacy sat peering through the darkness waiting for the three separate 2000-watt bulbs and millions of mirrors to illuminate someone whose features and form beckoned to Blue. Legacy could feel Blue's impulse patterns surge through his own mind. It was a rigorously practiced estimation. Legacy spent hours going through the behaviors that he witnessed on tape. Not many people engaged in conduct that was remotely close to Blue's, therefore his behavior became very narrowly defined by relatively few visible traits. The jump from behavior to the patterns of thought and decision-making was less of a science. He navigated the skewed synapses of depraved felony like a computer recognizes a face; in subroutines, unconscious thought as complicated as a weather pattern, fragile as any system software authored by Microsoft.

On the balance, he thought, making his final preparations, he was not that different from Wagner. His own methods were cerebral, but the difference in effort was minimal. They both extended their reach in a thousand directions grasping at straws, and although they'd come up with nothing – Legacy gave grudging respect to Wagner. Her intuition was something he hoped to channel, as he was about to be watching faces, like tiles in some kind of living mosaic.

He organized the screens along simple axis markers labeling them A-T along the bottom, then 1-10 along the y-axis. A1 was the lowest left corner, T10 was the top right. The stacked images like the rows and columns of an extreme Jeopardy game filled his vision.

In the minutes leading to 4:00 Eastern time, when the clock really started ticking, Legacy practiced calling out his images. Tyke would freeze the feed, marking the digital recording so that they could go back to that image later with the touch of a button. Legacy knew that the odds of spotting the exact frame that caught Blue's attention would be next to impossible. Instead, he would first keep all of the women who were remotely possible. Then, in the hours after, he would go through those images and decide if they fit all the criteria of symmetry, expression and age. Then he hoped he'd have a handful of faces that he could act

upon. It was simple, actually, all he needed was to intercept one thought from Blue: “Her.” Get there before his men, then spend ten minutes interrogating the abductor and he’d have the location of Laura. This was a fact. Tyke counted down the moments before 4 pm, and then gave Legacy one last boost of confidence.

“So, how are you so sure that he’ll use this same time slot and this same method after every media outlet in the country reported on it?” The clock read 3:59. He sure knew how to pick his spots.

“I could be wrong.” Legacy said with an inward smile. Tyke belted out a long genuine baritone laugh.

“Let’s play battleship.” Tyke began the simultaneous recording of 1531 channels and Legacy started calling out his shots.

“C1, R5, T7.”

Chapter 50 The Choice

Across the continent, spires of lodge pole pines rose around a clearing. In the clearing, a compound of wooden cabins and outlying huts signaled the only human presence for miles around. It would have been a rustic scene of frontier living were it not for the line of rectangular trailer cabs that lined the dirt parking lot, connected by electrical conduits terminating in large heating and cooling units in what used to be the supply shaft breach in the ceilings. Also, the huge oval satellite dish that adorned the large central recreation center hardly seemed the kind of comfort endemic to such an outlying area.

When someone works so hard to get away from people, it seemed odd that they would open the floodgates of television and essentially invite all of it back into their living room, along with commercials.

This was no longer a camp for children. The entire compound had been leased to a survivalist group before the current occupants bought it in a cash deal so quiet that it hadn’t entered the books of the rural mountain county, nor had it even been heard by the falling trees. Property taxes were billed in the name of a fake corporation, and paid in cash, so nobody complained.

The former occupants had made modifications to the property. The place looked like a military training camp. A trail down the middle cut through sections of tall metal pipe then under barbed wire traps elevated twelve inches above the dirt, finally ending in a firing range – it was an obstacle course meant to be run with an automatic weapon slung until the final sprint to the “kill zone.”

The first time Blade had seen it he pictured overweight middle aged men plodding through the course only to fire colored point balls at a series of weathered targets. The targets a rainbow of circular paint layers under which some danger once had been outlined. Maybe it was a tax collector, or an environmental lawyer. Blue extinguished his cigar on the heel of his boot then walked into the community room.

The group was all assembled. A punch bowl filled with pomegranate juice and everclear sat in the middle of a long table. It was his favorite drink. He loved the irony of feeding his soul and killing his mind at the same time.

"I heard on TV, we've all been captured." A roar of laughter went through the room. "Gave some time for Sean to get his dick straight again."

Mac chimed in, "When do we go back on the air?"

"Initiation. Which leads us to a little window shopping."

Mac picked up a chicken wing from an obscene mountain of freshly barbecued meat, and pointed to the rows and stacks of thrift store televisions that lined the wall; he pulled an imaginary trigger "Bitches, bitches, and more bitches." His open-mouthed growl left no mystery about where all the extra sauce went. A fraternity-like atmosphere meant that anything could be said, no matter how ignorant, arrogant or incendiary. The sound of an organ over a southern Baptist ministry program spilled from the TV at the bottom front of the pile. All the rest of the sets were quiet, giving a soft spiritual hum underneath the raucous discussions.

The word 'fuck' was used more than 'amen' at a revival meeting, but the bravado of the group milling about the Cheetos and bean dip was misleading. They were all posturing around their leader, hoping that one of their inane remarks would call attention to themselves, put their own relationship in a special light with Blade. It could be that the word 'brunette' would conjure up a memory of the second girl, the one whose hair Blue cropped short and slicked back lovingly before every session.

A simple comment such as, "Fucking brunettes, I want fucking brunettes this time." like the one spouted by Feely indeed did garner a sidelong smile from their leader.

Their secret society originally bound by blood and suffering had shifted into a less urgent emergence of family-like relationships. Everyone had begun to seek the approval from a dominant male, which Blade only gave out sparingly. His long fingers brushed Feely's shoulders. Feely positively flushed with pride which instantly turned to shame as he noticed that Blade had used him like a napkin, leaving lines of hot wing sauce across his skin. Mac was the first to laugh, joined

by Stones who always used the selection process as a time to get bulging-eye drunk. Vorest snorted, happy that Blade had chosen a target.

Vorest's failure to find Darci was not a disaster – it was the fucking end of the fucking world. Blade knew that Darci was an open door, and whoever came upon her could walk right through into their living room. All of his designs to keep them cut off from the world could be toppled by the stroke of luck that was Darci landing in the feds lap. On his arrival, Blade had slapped Vorest so hard that in the cup of his hand where the air pressure had broken the capillaries just under the skin and a scattered pattern of bright red dots marked one cheek. Blade had almost shut down the entire operation. Then he'd heard Vorest's report: he had overheard one of the FBI agents talking about their reassignment. They hadn't turned up anything and they were following a new lead in Wyoming. Vorest suggested that maybe she was dead. Blade didn't like suggestions, but he figured that their door would have already been busted down if they had the slightest inkling of the whereabouts of Darci. If that stupid girl had been laying low this effectively for this long, dead was a good bet.

Blade looked across the room at Vorest. His bright red cheek had faded to violet, like a bruise. The snarl on his face probably kept an unhealthy amount of blood circulating around the curves of his facial articulation. He was a mean bastard, but he'd done what he was told, and he hadn't slept an hour under a roof since Blade had ordered him down to Provo. He deserved a little recognition. Blue waved him over.

Blade asked him to put his palm flat out on the table, right beside the sour cream dip. Vorest complied, not knowing what to expect from Blade. However, he could see something in Blade's expression that invited him to play along rather than be ordered. A whisker's width difference between the two, but like a nick in an artery, that can mean all the difference. Everyone gathered around as the pipe organ chimed at a quicker pace, like it was building to some kind of crescendo.

Blade pulled out one of his razor sharp spike daggers from his boot and let the tip rest gently in the center of Vorest's hand. "If you can grab it without shedding a drop of blood, it's yours."

This was a gift from on high. Stones openly gaped at the thought of Blade giving away his signature knives. Mac and Shane closed the circle around Vorest urging him to pull his fingers up and around the metal blade and claim it as his own. Blade snapped his fingers and spun the hilt, setting it into motion like a top. The smooth tip glided on the flat surface of his palm searching for an imperfection in which to dig in and churn a gushing well of blood, he had to do it quickly. Vorest concentrated waiting for that moment when the flat of the blade presented itself slowly enough to – he took a deep breath – grab.

He turned his hand like he was grabbing the handle on a coffee cup, and snatched the cold silver metal. It hovered above the dip, and a wide smile crossed Vorest's face. He would be keeping his prize.

A drop of blood fell into the white creamy dip below his hand, a visual representation of the contradiction of innocence or victory. A paper thin line of bright red crossed the length of his hand, creating a spillway at the end where more drops collected, then leaked down the tip of the dagger. Vorest licked the blade clean with a snarl then handed it back to Blade, who slapped his hand with his dirty palm. He then offered him a chip dipped in his own blood. He spit a brown pulp of chewing tobacco lazily out of his mouth, and then ate the chip. The place erupted.

Fists pounded shoulders, thick boot heels, bone-like extensions of their feet assaulted the floorboards and a mixture of anger and joy mingled in their voices sending up noisy mixed signals swirling in tobacco smoke. Blade patted Vorest on the shoulder a signal that he was again his brother. Blade couldn't hide his respect for brutality and Vorest was the only face in his gang that had no room for mercy. It gave him power. He would never be able to combine his talents the way Blade had and lead his people to the perfect symmetry of sex, violence and money, but he the kind of henchman who would avenge his death equal parts out of loyalty and the excuse to kill. It brought a shimmer of added saline to his sunken eyes.

A static laced voice called the gathering to the far wall. It came from the television.

"Have you sinned?" His southern twang lent a musical interpretation to every stressed vowel sound.

"He's early." Stones looked at his watch.

A hand raised by Blade demanded silence. It was time. The boys gathered around the sets, each of them knew to say nothing. It was even a bad idea to chew loudly. Mac pulled the tap on the keg the minute the selection began. Blade had a three and a half hour sermon to choose one face out of an exponentially weighted, ever changing crowd. His eyes twinkled in the cloudy gleam. His eyes no longer had the capability of detecting the colors that poured into his sockets – but that hardly mattered because Blade somehow looked directly into their souls. The beauty and consequence of a much greater mosaic, an unconventional canvas of human domination, which he alone saw.

The preacher croaked out the opening stanza of a familiar verse. "Someone out there is in pain."

Blade smiled inwardly, the corners of his mouth drew together as his eyes

widened soaking in every last ray that radiated from the wall of monitors. Where was she? He moved his lips in exact time with the preacher's.

"Someone out there is searching."

And somewhere in the next three plus hours, an image would be plucked off of one of the screens and chosen as the next victim. Blade thought ahead to the course of events that tonight would set into motion. He would select two of his men to ride into the night, one of them straddling a motorbike, the other driving a conversion van. Their orders would be strict, wheels would spin across asphalt without halt, and their engines would not be turned off until they were back at the compound. He protected his men the way he protected his property, with a strict doctrine designed to minimize risk. These forays out into the world were their only necessary contact, and therefore left the only opening to those who wanted to track them.

He would send his men tonight, and they'd be back in two days. With the take of the sales counters on his video empire reaching near a hundred million, he predicted Laura would double it leading into the next girl. That was enough. Anyway, dumping their bodies together right after the initiation would end their exposure. This was their last pass as predator on society and with the dawn, two days in the future, he could see their identities melt into the rocky mountains splashing off the rocks like a spring run off.

A close fit on a screen in the upper left brought him back to the moment. Her smile asserted a kind happiness not echoed in a perturbed flicker of her eyes. The conflict between how she felt and how she wanted to be perceived fascinated Blade for a moment, but he knew it was a brief flirtation only. The perfect girl had eyes that knew what her mouth was doing and approved. His eyes read the annoying logo that lived in the left hand corner of the image. The perfect girl wasn't on channel five Boston tonight.

The room flinched as they saw Blade's interest spike. In the silence they waited for the command that would set everything in motion. It didn't come, in fact the energy stored in Blade's clenched fist released and he grabbed for a beer. He loved to sit in his seat surrounded by the warm bodies of his friends and proceed to fill his bladder until it nearly exploded. It gave him the sensation of an unconventional yearning. The smell of this group would never wash out of the curtains; they were the component parts of human wrong. Blade was their brain and conscience. He was saying no to girl after girl, but there would be more, and anyway it gave him time to be with his men. He could feel their attention upon him. It wasn't so bad to let this part of the ritual continue. His last choice had to be his grandest stroke, but how could he do better than the daughter of the FBI director? Even as the question flashed through his mind he knew the answer, he

knew it would come. The perfect girl was already streaking toward him on the airwaves. The image alone remained to be seen.

Blade pulled the flame of his lighter toward the tip of his unlit cigarette with a long intake of breath.

Several cigarettes later, Blade rose from his seat. He was standing taller than he ever had in his life. Two fingers extended toward one of the screens, a pronouncement, a proclamation, a damnation coming to his lips in a single invective syllable “go.”

Chapter 51 Catch Up

Legacy paced in front of the “mission control” setup of Tyke’s that NASA would envy. The elegant curve of an eggshell made up the front of his designer workspace. Tyke fused with the computer controls around him, and wasted no energy moving around in his space on a four caster stool attached on rails that let him glide silently from station to station.

They were reaching the end of the three and a half hours and Legacy, buried in Blue’s persona scowled in triumph each time he called out a new position on the grid. But doubt began to climb into the lower chambers of his consciousness. Was three and a half hours really the cut off point, or had Blue always simply found his victim in this window? Had he missed a fleeting image that could possibly be Blue’s perfect fit? They could always go back over each video feed again and again, but given the fact that riders had already been dispatched in pursuit of the girl, time was of the essence. Indecision could easily turn this into the foolish sidetrack venture that Wilkes had pointed out in the conference room. Legacy’s concerns didn’t end there. He worried that he would fixate on some aspect of the girls that he personally considered perfect. His own personality threatened this hunt as much as the limitations of mimicking Blue. One slip out of Blue’s mind frame and the picture would not emerge. They had to get it right on the first time through, that’s what Blue had already done.

And while others might have become tentative and unsure coming into the last minutes before 8:30, Legacy called his last shots with detached confidence. Tyke practically collapsed onto his keyboard as the alarm sounded, indicating the time was up. Sweat made his shirt cling to his body; he was drained physically and mentally. He looked like he’d ridden a stage of the Tour de France while playing a Russian grandmaster of chess at the same time.

“That was intense, dog.” He said with raised fist, like a great realization had been made. “I need some Sunny D.”

He barely recognized Legacy's voice; it froze him in his tracks.

"When we're done." Legacy slid the stool across the floor, tapping the back of his knees and causing him to fall into his seat. "Dog."

"I'm feeling you." He replied sensing Legacy's presence beginning to return.

They went through the saved images, restoring each one in full screen to get a better picture. Two hours passed. A blunt nod meant the girl had passed the first test, a shake of the head meant she was erased.

After a bathroom break, Legacy noticed stains down Tyke's shirt and the smell of tangerine wafted into the room. Legacy's fist clenched. Normally he would think nothing of an unscheduled break, but in Legacy's current state, mimicking Blue's every tick, he had to restrain himself from slapping Tyke silly. Instead he cracked his knuckles hard. The look of discomfort from Tyke made him feel a little better.

Three more passes and Legacy was happy, he'd whittled it down to only those trophies that Blue would surely notice. Tyke noticed that he hadn't only picked the beauties of the bunch. "You passed on some pretty fine ladies."

"How many are left?" Legacy croaked. He knew the number he was looking for: it was one.

"Seventy-two." Tyke read the counter.

He'd gone through all of the criteria and he was 71 off his ideal. "That's too many." Legacy moaned. "Blue picked one, why can't I see it, with that same certainty? He wants strength, he wants rebellion, the kind of mind – " a sudden question made him veer off topic. "Are any of these girls famous?"

Tyke replied, "I recognize three, one of them was my wallpaper –"

Legacy interrupted, "Don't tell me which" he knew the dangers of beginning an experiment presupposing the end. In interrogation there is no worse sin than expecting a result. An interrogator that pushes for an answer usually gets it, but most of the time it isn't worth a damn. If they wanted the interrogators ideas instead of the captives, they'd turn the lamp around and ask him what he thinks. Legacy wanted an answer so bad that he could supply it himself if he weren't careful.

Tyke looked like he needed some clarification and a shower, but Legacy only had time for one.

He began "It's just like in physics when they tried to prove that light was a wave, they proved it, and when another group of scientists got together and designed an experiment to show that light was a particle, they proved that, too."

“You sound like you need a light beer.”

“Neither group got the answer completely right, that’s why I don’t want you to tell me which of the girls are famous, just keep them playing in a loop. I need to get this answer completely right.”

The phone rang, Legacy looked at the receiver annoyed that it would enter their conversation uninvited. Tyke moved to pick it up, giving an excited excuse along the way, “It might be Kelly.”

Legacy waved him off, turning his attention back to the screen. The pictures flashed before him. Who did he most want to dominate, diminish and destroy? Who would entertain him most watching the struggle between her own identity and the one he would cruelly impress upon her? He tried to recreate Blue’s needs within himself, the need for other people to validate his position of power.

A voice broke his concentration, “Legacy, it’s for you.”

“Who?”

“It’s your daughter.”

A singsong squeal of saccharin delight greeted his ear. “Daddy.” Her tone reminded Legacy of a pistol firing.

“Let me guess, auto-dial in my study.”

Chess continued as if he’d said nothing. “It was so nice of you to have me picked up after class by your friends.”

Legacy imagined her sitting in a room with two immaculately dressed agents. Dark suits, dark demeanors, and loaded weapons, the assurance kept him focused, but he didn’t think Chess would appreciate it.

“And coding me A05 was so – considerate.” A05 was code that spanned key witness to fugitive; it influenced the amount of security and conduct of the detail guarding her. It was supposed to keep her from having access to a phone. Chess continued like she was continuing Legacy’s chain of thought. “And it looked like I was being arrested by six officers, in front of my friends! What a common mishap between a teenage girl and her peers!”

“I’m sorry, I needed to – do something and I couldn’t leave you alone.” Legacy explained.

Chess forced nonchalance “And you have me under house arrest? That is not normal, you are not normal, and I’m OK with that until “not normal” turns into this. I don’t even know what this is. So I don’t know that I’m OK.”

“Don’t blame yourself.” Legacy said evenly.

“I blame you. And don’t try to undercut me by agreeing with me.”

The maturity of her tone bit into him like no tantrum could. “You know, my friends, by the age of 15, they’ve all said fuck you to their parents, most of them out loud. And they all keep waiting for me – it’s considered the modern right of passage. Well I’ve never even thought it – but guess what?”

Silence on the other end of the receiver, followed by a dial tone.

Chess slammed down the receiver then turned to a young agent sitting across the room, hiding a smile. “Is there any rule about smoking?” He shook his head. “Does anyone have a cigarette?”

Moments later she took a long drag, which burned down deep into her lungs. Her body tensed wanting to expel the foreign substance in a coughing and sputtering fit, but she held it down in an act of sheer will. She wouldn’t be embarrassed again today. She caught a glimpse of the young agent watching her out of the corner of an eye. He looked away, sounding amused. “First time?”

She exhaled slowly and let the air clear, knowing that her speech would sputter otherwise. “I’m a dangerous fugitive, can’t you tell? I’ve been doing things like this all of my life. Now I’m going to my room where I’ll be hatching a plot to overthrow the government, and my first act after the coup will be to fire you.”

Chess had to pass by the agent, and as she got closer she could feel her skin glowing from the embarrassment of being rude to him. She tugged her hair around her ear in a self-conscious gesture, if she didn’t look at him, everything would be OK. Two steps and she would be past him, she glanced up to check her own math and found herself staring at him. Blonde hair, tall, with a boyish face. The glow turned into a full bloom of red when he mumbled. “Aren’t you just something?” The vagueness of the words and the slight drawl on the vowel sounds left her breathless. Chess found poetry in the delivery of the words whether it was intended or not. His voice went up and down her spine, round trip in a heartbeat, interfering slightly with her motor skills as she scuffed both feet and lurched forward almost falling not once, but twice. It ruined her plans to level a judgmental stare at him, and at the last moment she switched to a perturbed inward pout. The problem with the pout was that, she couldn’t look at him to see the reaction without ruining the effect. Chess suddenly had a deep need to be perceived as a malcontent, and she had absolutely no idea why.

She would learn later in life in the trial and error of dating that it was because this attitude got the most attention from men who wanted to be challenged, but in her first brush with the blonde agent, it came naturally. The hall door shut behind her and her brain was like an FM dial flipping from static to music then back to static to music, drowning out her recent anger.

Chapter 52 Fall Guy

Legacy kicked a rolling chair and sent it scuttling into a “wall” which had been framed, but had no drywall to stop or slow any approaching object, such as a rolling chair. It was not the only thing in motion. The morning clouds passed quickly out to sea, the afternoon batted an eye a moment later and the sunlight angled through the shades of Tykes’ apartment. It was almost the next day.

Legacy thought of the riders moving across the country, a steady march toward their unsuspecting target. They had practiced this six times already and their professionalism at taking someone was daunting. They could have her by now, he thought.

Seventy glowing faces played on a loop; he hadn’t gotten rid of a single one in almost seven hours. Each was totally different in character, but all matched every single criterion that Legacy could squeeze into his head about Blue. He was getting a headache – without some kind of new criteria, there was no way to match her to Blue’s type. Legacy knew that he had all of the motives of Blue the criminal, but he was lacking some connection into Blue, the man who desires sex because he can’t have it.

Legacy knew that mimicry could not replace experience any more than his imagination could blunt the real blade that was about to be put to some young girl’s throat. Useless random thoughts popped into his head.

The beguiling beauty of Helen of Troy had created the first literary reference of a sex crime. Few people viewed her case the way he had, as an abduction and subjugation that led to dependence. Legacy had no problem rewriting literature to suit a more behavioral view of the subject. Anna Karenina was the story of a woman who went mad because of a lack of creativity, unable to think up more than one solution to her failed marriage, not because of a heated indiscretion. Legacy felt like Abelard, after his cutting recommitment to God, the tools to manufacture hysteria over sex had long since dwindled in him. Whenever Legacy could not manage to manufacture a certain way of thinking within himself, he looked to others who had done it for him in literature and the arts. It didn’t seem to be helping today, except that it increased the tempo of the pounding in his head. Maybe his mind was in countdown mode and it wanted the rest of his body to understand the urgency in the form of an aching throb.

He walked into the kitchen where Tyke was almost swallowing the phone his mouth so close to the receiver. It had to be Kelly. A brief search of the cupboards produced a bottle of Advil sitting among aging condiment bottles and spices. Tyke put down the phone and a thunderbolt struck Legacy at the same time.

Legacy knew where to get his missing criteria, the answer was staring him in the

face.

“You always want to have sex but you don’t right?”

“That’s a nice way to talk to a friend.”

“Right?”

“Sums up my existence.”

A glow welled up behind the corneas of Legacy’s eyes as he formed a question and it burst into a bright fireball at Tyke’s answer. “What is it about Kelly that tortures you, and what brings you bliss?”

“It’s the same thing, dog.” Tyke let down some of his slang and a surprisingly raw young man’s voice spilled out “I never know what’s going to happen next.”

Legacy thought back, it was exactly what Wagner had said about him. He should have seen this part of Blue’s attraction, his screening process the physical, and but it was all about the mental.

“Mystery, and defiance.” Blue valued the emotional response to the pictures as much as he did the physical. He rushed back into the room with the screens.

“Speed them up Tyke, do it now!” One new filter might get him down to a manageable number. Images flew by, the cycle played twice and he seemed to be lying in wait for a certain picture on the second run through. He walked up to the screens like a man possessed as it paused on a single image. “Is she famous?” He pointed to the beautiful image on the screen. The shadow of his finger brushed a fresh rosy cheek, devious eyes pushed out through the filtered light and color. The response time seemed like it was ages.

Tyke nodded. “She is the next Britney.”

‘Where is she, now?’ Legacy barked, breaking into a run to the phone.

Boots thudded against the compressed soil, kicking up the top layer of dust just enough to cloud the next foot’s descent into the fresh footprint that came before. It was too organized for a stampede, anyway. Hooves rarely supported the kind of weaponry of these lethal pack animals.

A sea of cars separated a battalion of agents from multiple sets of ascending stairs that led to a brightly lit arena thumping with bass in an evening sky dominated by a an almost metallic silver full moon.

Wilkes didn’t like the long shadows cast by his agents, they were shrieking announcements in a quiet business. Everything was amplified tonight however. The voices on the radio were a little too frosty, they knew who their prey had in

captivity. Laura wasn't a picture on the news to some of these young men and women. Imagine the effect of the personification of the agency they served, on continual tortured display. A bitter anger fueled an acidic smell on the breath of his field agents. Wilkes knew that he had to keep everyone on a short leash tonight, and even if he didn't he had Legacy in his ear reminding him.

"What if it's not tonight?" Wilkes had asked Legacy not an hour before while he was on route to the site.

"It will be tonight, I'll stake your reputation on it." A hint of warmth in the ice that had formed between these old acquaintances, Wilkes had to cover his chuckle by clearing his throat.

Chrome reflections of helmet-clad agents distorted their strides making them impossibly long and fluid. The tightly packed cars forced the agents into a single file zigzag path. The private security guards had told Wilkes that the situation was under control.

Sabita Fare was a complicated, sarcastic version of the reproduction of youth and beauty that pop promoters had almost given up on before she came along. Her name, pronounced like Tabitha with an 'S', was better known than the president among teens and tweens. Of course the president never had a hit single or a show on Disney TV. She had a private army guarding her because at 17, she was the most stalked persona in the world. Smearred eyeliner became her trademark, as well as her ability to well into tears while standing strong and belting out her newest hit "Tear Seduction" in a crystal clear lyric pop voice. The story within the song told of a girl who used the tears of one break up to seduce her next man.

The childish whim embodied in the double entendre of the bridge she currently shouted into the night sky with a mixture of triumph and loss, "irresistible miss, irresistible misery, irresistible miss me, miss me, now you've got to kiss me." Lyrics like these set her above the bubble gum, boyfriend-likes-my-best-friend songs that earned her contemporaries one record in the charts followed by a predictable spokesmodel gig in the mid-twenties, and a predictable thirties rehab.

The crowd roared as her voice cracked - a well-practiced, oddly melodic squeal. The commotion around her in the deep shadows of the wings was not unusual, not that she would have noticed anyway. When Sabita took the stage, her devotion was to the next note.

The cheers of a packed crowd of teenage boys and girls filled the outdoor auditorium to capacity and spilled out of the exits. It reached fever pitch when she put her ruby lips to the microphone and chirped, "Thanks, goodnight."

In a spry transformation, she walked gracefully off stage, her hips following the beat of an internal tune. Calls of "We love you!" and "One more song!"

followed her into the pitch black. A hand clamped down on her arm immediately as she came off the stage and a voice shouted above the crowd. “No encore tonight honey, we need to get you out of here.”

It was her father. He had taken a call from an FBI Agent Wilkes as his daughter first stepped out into the spotlight. He hurried her through the backstage maze toward the sanctuary of the trailer. Wilkes had promised to take her into protective custody. Until then, there was hardly a safer place for her than in front of twenty thousand adoring fans. On the way from the stage, he ran into two private security officers, one a towering man, the other a bit diminutive. They proceeded to grab the outside arms of the couple protectively and guide them backstage.

The corridors were surprisingly empty as they navigated the way down below street level. The security officers were of the minimum wage variety, and they exuded boredom and more of a commitment at sneaking peaks at Sabita’s low cut bustier wet with sweat after a strenuous concert than noticing their surroundings. They never paused to look deeply enough into the shadows to notice two unconscious guards, stripped of their uniforms. The bodies were hidden only feet from the intersecting corridors they were about to pass. Everyone was looking straight ahead.

“Wilkes.” Legacy’s voice crackled in Wilkes’ ear, and in an unconscious reaction his teeth ground together. Enamel on enamel, he hadn’t taken orders in the field in almost a decade. Legacy showed his characteristic sensitivity. “Wilkes, I’m telling you to seal off the area now, the men who have Laura are in that arena.”

“That has yet to be established.” Wilkes grumbled.

“It’s a fact.” Silently, and eagerly, a part of Wilkes already knew that it was true. Skepticism was the inherited mask of caution that all upper level bureaucrats wore to work. Rising to the position of director had changed Wilkes. It had made him risk averse, but his memories still overflowed with decisions made that were way over the lines as they were currently drawn. He was like an impressionist painter who’d gone back to painting realistic bowls of fruit – his current product was solid, tangible and acceptable.

Wilkes responded, “I thought I’d wrecked this train.” It was the first time he’d mentioned the leak. Legacy said, “It would be more appropriate if this concert were in Phoenix.”

“Out of the ashes, eh?” Wilkes warmed up.

“Who do you have leading the team?” Legacy asked as if no answer would please him.

“The best I’ve got. I had to pull him off of his assignment babysitting on this wasteland of an agent who used to be my friend.” He said.

Legacy replied, “How many people were watching me?”

Legacy remembered the operations that Wilkes supervised back in the day. “I don’t want perfect intel, that’s the easiest kind to fuck up. I just want to know one more thing about my opponent than he knows about me.” He still operated that way. Wilkes would have one more person-watching Legacy than he knew about if he had to fill the entire Alexandria office.

There was something strange laced into his memories of Wilkes, it felt like respect but tasted bitter. He had known that Wilkes answered to a higher power, which meant he twisted the information that Legacy exacted from his targets like a rifle spins a bullet inside a barrel. It’s supposed to make the result more accurate, deadly – but part of Legacy never believed that Wilkes had the aim or the taste for the kill. People who rise to director status either have a taste for the kill or they live in compromise. Legacy didn’t trust compromise.

Wilkes’ voice crackled through, coming to a sharp point “They’re at the gate.”

Legacy changed gears for a moment and thought about how boring it must be assigned to look over his shoulder. There was absolutely no challenge to eavesdropping on Legacy. After a short time, the unfortunate agent certainly would figure out that he barely noticed additional presences when they shouted at him. He’d come out of the woodwork and stand paces from him in the sunlight, but he’d never understand a thing about Legacy. So unless Legacy himself opened up – the mistake he’d made with Wagner – the poor mole would be privy to absolutely nothing.

Poor bastard, he thought with a sardonic grin.

Chapter 53 Abduction Junction

Brent felt his senses sharpen with each angular footstep he made toward the shining jewel that was his goal. He took the stone steps three at a time, his gear silent like he was hovering in space. His team were ghosts behind him – well-armed ghosts with a serious, solid purpose.

Brent was surrounded by a jacket of anger barely kept in check, and that was why he didn’t chatter. He kept his orders in tight bursts. Brent blew by the gate guards, delegated one of the agents at the rear to explain what looked like a small invasion to a couple of fat men in neon security shirts and caps. He heard their voices become raised behind him. This was his chance to let out some of his mood.

“Don’t shoot the civs unless you have to.” He spoke into a headset that connected everyone in his troop. There were no laughs, but a thaw of tension.

The crowd was pressing for an encore. It rang through outer halls and passages of the near deserted stadium. The only stragglers were the few people who’d left the venue to smoke. What an oddity to have people leave a concert to smoke, Brent mused, giving hand signals to his team to fan out across the natural flecked granite stone floor. Shrieks of surprise greeted the approach of the militia, but the sound melted into the evening sky blanketed by a chanting teenage army inside the venue.

Brent could see the door to the backstage at the end of the hall. Three men in neon polo shirts rose from their folding chairs, dropping stale crumbs from the ribbing of the material that betrayed their sedentary style of “guarding.” On cue, their radios crackled.

“Send the agents through, problem at the trailer.”

The security guard with the largest waist and shortest inseam then pointed to Brent with his walkie-talkie and said, “Are you the agents?”

Obviously, he was the brains of the operation.

Brent ignored him, and jumped the tables set up to barricade the backstage door in a single fluid movement. He plunged into the dimly lit passage, seeing out of the corner of his eye a sign that said “Restricted Area.”

The chanting suddenly stopped, that was a very bad sign.

Moments before and farther ahead, another group was still on the move, the security team escorting Sabita and her father down the grated steps to ground level. On one side of them was a private parking area, on the other the sound of the crowd chanting in rhythm was a booming heartbeat vibrating in the metal doors, even in the silence between syllables, “SA – BI – TA”

Sabita had heard it a thousand times, but the wall of sound seemed to annoy her father who wanted to be alert to any approach in the corridors. They came to the exit. The short one slammed into the wide bar with his elbow and the door swung out to reveal a world that concert goers seldom see.

The grounds behind the venue hummed with a rumble of generators and idling diesel engines. This was where the equipment buses and dressing trailers parked. Forget everything commonly associated with the words bus and trailer, however, when putting them together with a superstar tour. The trailers were packed tightly with luxury items, furnished with the latest in chic decor. They closely resembled a compact version of a five star suite. Sabita’s had large tinted windows for a public display of privacy and a walk in glass refrigerated pantry

that housed three carefully sculpted fruit bouquets (fruit cut to look like flowers) and an assortment of sushi flown from the coast twice a day.

Sabita seemed eager to get back to her refuge and lock herself in and wait. Her father kept glancing in to the shadows that fell between all of the parked trucks. He didn't notice what the tall security guy did. He put his hand in front of Sabita protectively and hushed the group as he brought them to a full stop.

A pause when he looked at the gleaming trailer. Squinting seriously, like he was surveying a prizefighter lined up to separate his head from his shoulders. He shook his head and pointed at an empty chair beside the door, "Wasn't there a security guard in front when you left?"

Sabita's father let his anxiety show "I left so quickly."

Sabita raised an eyebrow. "There were two, there are always two."

The small guard sounded a little excited like an unconcerned onlooker in a bar fight, "There aren't two now." He was obviously the kind of prick that thought that other people's problems were amusing.

The tall one said in a quiet ominous tone, "Someone's inside." He took charge, backing them through the door from which they'd just come. A door across the hall emptied into the front of the auditorium, the guard put the walkie-talkie to his lips and announced "Send the agents through, problem at the trailer." He switched frequencies in order to talk directly to the house manager. "House lights up."

"We're going out into the crowd, it'll be safer there. Wear this." He pointed to the short guard.

The short guard pulled a bandana out of his pocket and tied it onto her head, hiding her signature long auburn hair. She acquiesced nervously, looking at the door from which they just come, expecting it to open at any moment. She tucked the flaps of the bandana behind her ears. The arena was suddenly silent; the house lights had evidently knocked the wind out of the frenzied crowd. Finally her mind came to the question that it should have asked at first mention.

"How will we be safer out in the crowd?"

"I should have said "I'll be safer", darling." Sabita felt the needle enter her neck and the drug quickly spread up the innominate artery. There was barely a second of confusion before falling forward into her father's arms.

The surprise on his face would quickly give way to a lifeless fixed gaze as Feely took advantage of the defenseless man, completely unwilling to drop his daughter to raise a hand to protect himself. He slipped behind him and pummeled

the base of his neck with a flashlight handle. His legs buckled, and Feely let him hit the ground after cutting in on his daughter like he was in the middle of some kind of sick dance. She fell into his arms, ending up face to face with her attacker. Sabita's lips moved but no sound came out. Her face was chalk white yet somehow she fought to keep the muscles in her face moving over and over, silently mouthing a message. He saw her anger, and pulled her closer whispering in her ear. "Wait 'til I get you home darlin'." Her eyes rolled back into her head and she went limp in his arms.

"I love the way their nipples get hard just before lights out." Feely said, moving half of her weight onto Stones' shoulder.

Stones glared at him with a look that said he was all business until the job was done. He had already slipped on a shirt hiding the security polo beneath, and he waited with Sabita leaning on him as Feely did the same. The agents should be coming pretty soon, he thought, looking down the dark passage. "Let's go." He urged, pushing through the door and pulling his cargo along. The height difference and dead weight caused three of them to sway like they were in a drunken three-legged race. The crowd was streaming up the stairs of the amphitheater. Moths flew in the bright lights that filtered down onto the crowd. Stones avoided these hot spots like he might burn up if the white light touched him, finding a handicapped exit tucked in the darkness to the left of the stage. They were out of the building and walking in a sea of cars in minutes. Red break lights on station wagons filled with tweens courteously allowed them to pass. There wasn't an agent in sight and about a hundred yards in the distance, the van sat parked on an outer wing of the lot. It was far enough out that other cars weren't hemming it in, and it emptied onto a service road. They were a five-minute stumble to complete freedom.

Wilkes took the news update well.

An unfamiliar voice crackled in his ear. It was disturbing in every way imaginable.

"We're at the trailer, the father is out, we found two security guards stripped and unconscious. Do we have containment on the crowd?"

Wilkes could barely contain a thunderous, almost out-of-body anger. "They saw us coming. Get into the crowd. The local police are on their way, we'll have roadblocks up in ten minutes."

Legacy cut in through the radio chatter. "Ten minutes will be too late. Blue gave them a plan and he knows our playbook, you're going to have to go off the page to bring these guys down."

It killed the career officer to countermand his own order, but he'd been wrong in a room in which Legacy was right before. He could credit his decision almost as much to protecting his dignity as agreeing with Legacy. "Legacy is right." He knew right after he said it that Legacy could put himself in charge of any situation, as he was now in charge of this operation. The men reported to him, but Legacy was running the show. "I need sharpshooters on the high ground, and every available agent standing in the middle of every road leading from the venue. Nobody leaves." He pulled the headset microphone away from his lips, afraid that he couldn't contain his frustration from erupting into a tirade that would likely include every vulgarity in the English language interspersed with Russian and Farsi slurs he'd learned on assignment. He would say them all if he lost Sabita tonight, but not now. He let the mic spring back realizing something about the field report. "Where is Agent Brent?"

Brent took one look at the unconscious security guards and had reversed course heading back down the steps. He had sent the rest of his team ahead, but he'd known what they were going to find. The confirmation that the trailer was empty came across the radio as his feet hit the impacted dirt and gravel parking lot. Brent ran full speed across the maze of cars, headed for the main access road. He could see cars that were filing onto the main ramp that led to the freeway. He had to get to that intersection, each heartbeat meant another car was racing away from the venue, and any of them might contain the girl he'd come here to save. His body moved back and forth in an off balance stride, straining for any more speed that his legs could give him. His muscles began to burn, and the pain gave him new strength, he wanted to be reminded of the consequences of his failure. This pain was the least of that that was to come.

Legacy had listened to the mission fall apart from Tyke's living room. It was like hearing the final broadcasts from the ground reporters watching the Hindenburg, a fiery plunge with no way to intervene. The slight tilt of the unfinished floor beneath his feet did not benefit his balance either. He felt like he was on one of the center spheres of a perpetual motion machine, the type that had become so popular on executives desks. His station was unmoving but in rhythmic disequilibrium as forces moved through him to their point of action. It was where the metronome pushed outward and things actually happened. It was outside his sphere, literally. The only person he could blame was himself, he knew if he'd seen the location, been on site it would have been different. Blue had known the venue, and had given specific instructions – the kind that Legacy was cycling through his brain to recreate. He picked up a thread, it wasn't much, but it could help. "Wilkes, scan the fringe of the lots, look for three people, they'll be headed

for a van, and there might be a bike parked nearby.”

He relayed the instructions without question, and Legacy could tell that his well-placed words earlier had broken his leadership. Wilkes had started to question himself in the field, and once a commander starts blurring the line of command, he might as well step back entirely. It appeared as if that’s what he’d done.

Wilkes was now taking orders from Legacy – if Martin had stopped for a moment to think about it, he would have marveled at wresting control from one of the most accomplished, powerful men in the country. Beware if Legacy ever became a presidential advisor, he’d be running the country before the presidential *crème fraiche* was stale.

“I’ve three lined up with a limp payload between them. Parking lot P, vector southwest, in the overflow lot.” He waited for a second and when Wilkes did not reply he added. “Copy.”

Legacy spoke the language of authority “Mark the forearms of the men with your scope. Tell me what you see.”

Stones and Feely stumbled up to the van making just enough joyful noise that other concert goers thought they were having a little too much fun. The truth was that Sabita was the first girl they’d dosed who had displayed such a heart rate. Stones checked her pulse every twenty paces as was directed by Blue. There was always a helpful spike in the beats per minute when the girls felt the needle go in, and that help push the drug up through the blood brain barrier. In Sabita’s case, she’d just come off the stage where her aerobic workout kept her at a sustained plateau, the injection circulated quickly to the brain, but a constant drum roll heart beat had pushed the toxin deep into muscle tissue on a systemic level. Her legs were the first to start trembling, then her biceps contracted, bringing all three heads together with a thud. The last fifty feet they had to slow down to a crawl, but as Feely leaned Sabita against Stone’s tree-like frame and pulled out his keys, he knew the experience would be the best that retelling could offer. He could see them with all of the guys grouped around them, jerking around to uproarious drunken laughter. He spoke while turning the key in the lock. “This will be something to tell, won’t it Stones?”

He turned back and could immediately tell that something was wrong. Sabita was slumping to the ground with a spattering of blood on her cheek. Stones stood frozen.

Feely took a step toward him and realized that it wasn’t caution that kept him propped rigid against the van. A sniper’s bullet had come through the bottom of his jaw on angle through the back of his head, it looked like someone had pulled the plug of a bathtub and brains drained out the hole under his chin. If his

expression said anything about his bewildered last thought, it would have been a question like “Why can’t I turn my head?” There was no anger, no pain, simply an unanswered query that never made it to his bloodied lips. Time, which had seemed to move so slowly as Feely examined his slain friend, caught up to them. Stones fell like a rag doll, all of the neural signal cut to his muscles. Feely stutter stepped between running for the driver’s seat and retrieving Sabita.

He thought about driving up to the compound without Sabita, and then dropped to his knees, pulling at her arms and dragging her into the cargo using the van door to protect him. He looked out into the night sky the entire time, waiting for another raindrop to turn out the lights completely. Nothing but clear skies, he closed the sliding door and the latch caught twice.

Or was that the sound of a clip being slapped into an automatic rifle? Brent kept a level gaze on Feely. He knew that a cornered animal was the easiest kind to shoot, and he had to restrain himself from letting his trigger finger find that warm, natural firing position.

Feely raised his hands, a warped manic smile coming to his quivering lips. “Is there - is there only one of you?”

“Only one of me –” Brent began slowly, but his effort to calm Feely only gave him an opening. If he could get past him, he was free. A knife flashed in Feely’s hand and with a quick motion he drew it back to throw.

Two bullets ripped into Feely - one into his upper throwing arm, the other into his chest. The sniper hadn’t waited for an order. Brent waved his arms in a panic “Stop shooting, who is shooting?”

It was too late, Feely was on the ground, blood spilling from front and back, soaking into the clay soil beneath him. The knife dropped harmlessly from his fingers. Feely shrugged impishly as Brent approached, his face set in a childish panic. “I dropped my knife.” His glassy eyes fixed on Brent “You’re in trouble now, you drew blood, only Blade is allowed to draw blood. You’re in trouble now.”

His breathing was labored. The interrogation would have to be quick. Brent pulled out his first aid kit and went through the motions of stabilizing Feely. It was only trappings. This deal had been closed with the wound gushing into his lungs. It was all a matter of watching the second hand on the clock.

He spoke into his headset, giving the home base all of the details of his condition. His clinical assessment was laced with anger, why the hell did that shooter put that second bullet into him? Brent had the situation under control, ten feet from the victim with body armor and, more importantly, the ability to duck – the explanation was obvious; the entire agency wanted these men dead. He

should have seen it coming.

“An ambulance is on the way.” Wilkes cut in with an update.

“He’s not going to last.” Brent heard footsteps behind him as his team assembled near the van and secured the scene in a thirty-meter arc. He glared into Feely’s eyes. “Where were you taking her? Where is your home base?”

Feely shook off the latest question as he did every other one that he’d asked while Brent worked on him. He smiled, something just beneath the surface of his expression screamed to break through. Like a buried confession that desperately wanted to be brought into the light of day, his clenched teeth, stained pale red, kept everything in.

Legacy entered the radio chatter and it immediately went silent. “Agent Brent, from your descriptions I see a high side of five minutes. Do exactly what I say. Don’t let him see your face whisper in his ear “We’re on our way home.” Keep the microphone close, I need to hear.”

Legacy could hear the rustle of Brent getting into position, he thought about how awkward the intimate distance would appear to the onlookers. The response came quickly “We can clean the blood off the seats before we get back right? He won’t know any better.”

Legacy fed questions into Brent’s ear.

“How do we get out of here, I can’t find the freeway.”

“I-70, you always get lost, I’ll drive.” He raised up a hand to push himself into a sitting position. Feely had no strength left and fell back, face to face with the agent. “You fuck. You fuckin’ cop. I’m dead.” Convulsions gripped his body as he spat blood in a spray that covered Brent’s face and slipped invisibly into his neat hairline.

“Fuck.” Brent knocked the earpiece out of position wiping his face clean. It was over. Feely knew he was dying.

“Sir?” An agent’s voice came from over your shoulder. “Agent Legacy is asking for you.”

Legacy never asked. Brent had come to know Legacy; It was probably the worst misuse of the word “asking” since the Huns “requested” entrance into Warsaw. He replaced the earpiece; it was like coming midway into the current of a stream of orders. “Repeat please.”

Legacy’s voice carried an almost electric current of urgency “He’s not done. Tell him he’s dead.”

“If he knows he’s dead - “

“He’s afraid of Blue, he won’t say anything or think about anything else including his own death until we remove him from the equation. Just say, he’s dead.”

Brent stood over him. “He’s dead.”

An angelic look crossed Feely’s face. His features softened. “Oh, that’s terrible.”

“Where is your base?”

“I’ll take you there.” His body convulsed in a coughing spasm, then his eyes fixed. Brent thought he was dead until he heard his voice sputter one more time. “He was such a sweet man.”

Brent’s voice had the finality of a customer service representative explaining a list of fees to an irate customer “He’s gone. No ID on them, but from the looks of it we have Yellow and Green.”

Wilkes’ voice burst in “I thought we already positive identification on both of them in Wyoming?”

Brent answered, “Legacy was right.” The words must have stung, because Wilkes didn’t say anything, even though he hadn’t read the brief that was eventually printed in the final report with very few changes. This is what the report had to say:

The bodies in Wyoming represent a distraction, and an odd glimpse at the man who leads this group. He is patient beyond belief. Blade constructed, recreated his family unit around himself. He carefully selected the members of his gang, and assembled them as perfect body-type matches to the brothers who tormented him through his childhood. The fact that he was followed, even idolized by their likeness must have been very satisfying to his ego, it kept the monster fed. The brothers that held him down and spit into his mouth were now kept rigidly in line cowed by Blade’s violence, which lashed out at them. They probably never knew that he was striking out at his past as much as striking out at them. It is my opinion (which is as good as fact) that he always expected to use that resemblance as a final distraction. He expected that when his real family died, a mistake would be made on every level of the investigation and all hell would break loose. He did not know I would see it as a plot. Killing the family was always his escape plan. The complexity of torture that led to the death of each of the occupants of the Wyoming house presents itself as proof that this was no mere vengeance killing by a gang of bikers. The ability to buy a few days of confusion in the aftermath of his final crime, and if there is any comfort to be taken in the carnage it is the fact that something had made him alter the timing of his plan. He’d played his cards early. They were dead and he hasn’t finished. All of the kidnappers are still alive, and working towards their next goal with the

only change being that most of the FBI is no longer focused on their next objective, too.

Chapter 54 Copy

Brent waited in an eerie silence for someone to respond to his request. After what seemed ages, Wilkes came on the line and told him that a team was on its way. “Copy.”

Brent walked ten paces into a bright patch of halogen light from a lamppost. The blood on his hands shimmered and smelled metallic. There was nothing he had wanted more than to see the men who took Laura bleed. He looked into the wet sticky mess, coelomic cavity fluids sticking to tissues floating in the rapidly oxidizing puddle. A fresh drop slid down his forefinger and entered the pool; he could have sworn that he saw a brief image of Laura’s body glistening in the reflective surface. Somehow the air changed the color before his eyes and it became fresh crimson lifeblood as his hands rose, creating long night shadows. He was no prophet, but he knew that he had Laura’s blood on his hands.

“Forensics.” Legacy thought is the most overrated science in the world. Biologicals are for those with no imagination. He didn’t like fiber evidence, either. People committed the crime and only an examination of people could describe the depth and breadth of the circumstances surrounding a criminal act. Maybe he was pissed off because he simply didn’t want to start putting together another puzzle, or maybe it was the fact that he knew that he didn’t have the time. Blue would have the entire organization underground within hours – and in the forensic playbook, it took days. Add to that any one of the steps could hit a roadblock and the situation appeared to be aided by anything less than a fiber that had a map stamped on it or a genetic code that came with a utility bill complete with a current address.

What sickened him weren’t the mistakes in the field however; it was a nagging feeling in the pit of his stomach. It was something he couldn’t quite put his finger on, but it rumbled on regardless. There was something about the operation other than the result that personally didn’t sit well. What could it be?

He looked across the table where Tyke pretended not to know the outcome of his night was disastrous. He stared back, waiting an explanation. Everybody wanted an explanation for everything and it seemed like Legacy was the only person on duty at the information desk.

“Did he get away?”

He shrugged and said in a weary voice “Not yet, but he’s going to.”

Legacy stood to leave. Tyke stood at the door awkwardly deciding whether to shake his hand or pat him on the back as he passed. Something in Legacy’s posture told him to do neither, and after two days of close quarters they parted in complete silence.

Halfway across the country Wagner wasn’t having much better luck. She’d gotten six propositions from truck drivers as she showed her “pretty face” in gas station after gas station – in the files it said that Darci frequented the convenience stores, sometimes making them a perch for weeks at a time. Wagner had sifted through groups of world-weary teens, drinking from soda cups the size of soup tureens, smoking clove cigarettes to ensure that it stayed on their clothes and announcing their subversive culture to everyone downwind. But she’d gotten only vague statements.

“Yeah, I seen her around.” Said the rebel son of a local dentist.

“She was like trippin’ on somebody – love of her life or something.” Continued a girl who looked barely in her teens. She inhaled deeply on a cigarette and blew it toward her bangs. “She didn’t act heartbroke, though.” She batted her eyes toward a greasy haired skate punk.

“Hey, we were in love twice a day, regular.” He snarled.

Wagner asked a question that always came back negative, no matter how many times she asked it. “Have you seen her in the last week?”

“Last Thursday.”

She snapped her notebook shut and moved on. Wagner moved through a hazy overcast day feeling like the mood of her surroundings was beginning to sink beneath her skin. Snow was never far away in Provo, the mountains rising from the hills to the east. The architecture was 1960’s authentic. Nothing had been updated, including street signs, since the Eisenhower era. It might have been charming in a climate more friendly to paint and plaster, but most of the buildings cracked and peeled in intricate patterns, openly reminiscent of the past.

Wagner drove along a strip of greenbelt called Sunny Day Park. It was abandoned. The surroundings reminded her of her geographical exile from the case. She hadn’t heard a word from Legacy since boarding the plane. She refused to call in, for fear that he would order her reassignment. If he put in the paperwork and she didn’t show up it could mean a reprimand in her file. Wagner could handle almost anything that she could confront, but the moment that it went into her file, paperwork would destroy her. She wouldn’t give Legacy the

chance to reel her in, although the idea of a well-made cup of espresso made her bite down on her ruby red bottom lip. What she wouldn't give for properly foamed soymilk.

A banner at a little mom and pop convenience store read "new cappuccino" Wagner was half way past when she saw the sign out of the corner of her eye. She slammed on the brakes and seeing nobody on the road behind her, reversed back to park on the street in front of Gas and Loaf.

An appropriate name, considering the two young men sitting on the stoop in front of the door. They looked like surfers, with long dyed hair and tanned skin. Wagner approached the door when the bleached blonde said "Don't go in there, lady, clerk's a complete bitch." She noticed the designer mock turtleneck and expensive watch on him. He was not the kind of kid she was looking for. His friend, the one with avocado green hair, chimed in singing "Stay, stay the night!" imitating the grating falsetto of the lead singer of the rock group Chicago. He stood and put his arm across the door.

Wagner flashed a smile, then a badge. Either one would have sufficed with the boys, and a nod of her head sent them on their way.

Wagner had skimmed the reports passed down from the agents that come to the Gas and Loaf before her. They'd described the owner-operator as "uncooperative". She had answered no to every question – even when after a series of "no" a young sparkplug agent had asked her "If her responses were part of some local comedy routine?"

She said "no."

It was hardly the kind of affirmation that Wagner needed along an already cold trail. What she needed was cappuccino.

What met her inside nearly drained her of all will to live. The cappuccino machine was really a cocoa machine that dispensed powdered, sickeningly sweet chocolate mocha cappuccino. It came dispensed in cups of 12, 22 and 32 oz. "Who drinks a quart of this crap?" Wagner thought, eyeing the HOT TUB extra large cup. She filled a 22-ounce cup and headed toward the cashier. It was a long narrow store, which gave her added time to observe the sour face of the aging store attendant.

She took a sip on the way, a habit hand to mouth. Her distaste must have shown because the clerk smiled with gritted yellow teeth and said. "Makes you fat, too. That'll be 75 cents."

Wagner wasn't sure that she'd heard her correctly, "What?"

The clerk explained in a raspy voice "It tastes bad, it makes you fat and it wires

you up. It's your generation. Refills are a quarter."

Wagner defended her generation by refusing to stoop to insult "Can I have a lid?" She stepped closer and flashed a bright smile.

"Fed'ral cop?" the clerk asked. Wagner was about to ask how she knew when the clerk turned around with a twinkle in her shrewd-looking eye "I saw you flash the badge. You're wasting your breath and your face with me, dearie." The clerk zipped her mouth closed and threw away an imaginary key.

"Too bad," Wagner thought. She was starting to like the clerk, much like the way one appreciates cactus growing in another yard or clotted sour milk in somebody else's cappuccino. Which, coincidentally, was the same cottage cheese curd consistency as the skin on the clerk's cheeks, chin and nose. A series of moles and pock marks bulged and fell like rock outcroppings down her loose jowls. Up close, it was hard to look at her without flinching.

Wagner turned to leave as a disdainful snort caught up with her about halfway to the door. She thought of the satisfaction of topping off her drink, without offering the quarter refill charge, right in front of the smug clerk. That led to the fantasy of pulling out her service revolver and putting the cappuccino machine out of its misery.

Two sets of magazine racks flanked the exit, and although it was not her usual habit to scan the fashion magazines, she found herself fixed on one headline. It read "Are you ready for the best fitting swimsuit of your life?"

Wagner doubted if anyone from Provo was ready for anything less. OK, perhaps the truly indifferent folks who only wore a swimsuit once or twice a year – wait, that was the entire population. Most of the readers shared almost none of the same values as the editors, yet one never found literature in any of the permutations of the Gas and Loaf stores across middle America. These fashion magazines were everywhere, and there was one in the hands of the clerk.

Agent Wagner reached the doorway and paused. The magazine text made her think of Legacy. He talked about how he was always open to trivial thoughts that impressed upon his world. He opened his arms to every thought equally, those that he sought out to analyze and those that simply drifted in upon the wind. It was, he'd said, not because he was more intelligent than others, but that he did examine every thought that he had more completely than almost anyone.

Why had she connected the headline to Legacy? She stood in the doorway, eyes fixed on the words. The best fitting swimsuit of your life, it was absurd. It meant nothing. Somehow it kept people with limited discretionary spending coming back to the sticky, glossy pages. They must find some kind of harbor in the inflated drama of another's struggle with thigh fat and capri consciousness that

only covered half of what it should. Then she knew what the clerk needed, she felt it in her shoulders then the feeling moved upward and became a gleam in her eye.

“Are you just going to stand there?” the clerk asked.

“Don’t talk. We’re being watched.” She spat in a stage whisper. “Your life might be in danger. If you know the girl I’m looking for.” She swiveled on a heel. “You know the picture I’m talking about. Those men who came before, they weren’t with the bureau.”

“They showed me a badge that looked just like yours.”

“Did you examine it? The Chinese mafia does a beautiful forgery.”

“He was a Chinaman.”

Liu would be pleased. “He’s watching this store, he knows that this is his best lead.” The edge of her statement hung in the air, razor thin and easy to miss if viewed from the front. It was the unfamiliar thrill of mystery and danger that pulled the clerk out of her safe hiding place to face Wagner’s challenge. She said, “I knew that girl was nothing but trouble.”

Wagner stepped back up to the counter and found a comfortable angle to lean with her hip pointing outward, elbow resting on an advertisement for chewing tobacco.

Wagner asked her again about Darci, entreating her to “Act casual and point to the TV like we’re talking about a new show.” She was pleased to find that the clerk’s memory of her was detailed and descriptive. She’d only seen Darci twice, but both sightings were memorable. She told Wagner about the strange behavior of the girl and the way she mocked the poor abducted girl. Her description of Darci’s hysteria brought on by the images of the missing girl’s televised return made Wagner’s ears burn – it must have brought back all of the horrors.

Why didn’t Darci go to the police? Wagner stopped taking notes for a full intake of breath.

The clerk snarled and explained how Darci’s laughter proved that the girl was either on drugs and totally out of it, or just another selfish teenager mocking other people’s pain. “What’s the matter with you?” The clerk asked.

Wagner felt the tightness of her skin stretched against the bony frame of her forehead. She pictured Darci watching the aftermath of her ordeal reflected in another girl’s eyes; it must have shaken the ground beneath her feet and sucked the air out of the room around her. The clerk cleared her throat, annoyed.

“Well?”

Wagner eased the creases in her forehead, gave the clerk the prompt she needed to continue the narrative. “I’m afraid that if we put you in protective custody these men will have the resources to get to you.”

“I’m not afraid.” Her eyes lit up.

The clerk then spoke of the shoplifting, thinking in an obvious way that the investigation must have something to do with theft. “Cookies were probably just the start for a no good hoodlum like that.” Wagner imagined that it would take more than a few packets of stolen cookies to redeem Darci. But that wasn’t what made her go underground, the timing didn’t make sense.

“This all happened the day they found the girl?” She asked.

“Yeah a couple of weeks ago.”

The sequence didn’t fit. Maybe Legacy’s prediction that the Vinyl Men came back to erase their mistakes was right. If her torturers had caught up with her last Thursday, Wagner should be looking for a body, not a witness.

The next thing the clerk said came at her like it was in orbit around an imaginary center mass comprised of her, the kidnappers and Legacy. It came from nowhere and seemed to lead out into the darkness of space, only to come back around and clock her with a revelation even Copernicus would be proud of.

“Then I saw her slap that Edmunds kid. Everyone knows the Edmunds’.” She spoke the name like it was part of local lore. Wagner nodded in stone agreement to keep the words flowing from the stagnant woman. “Well anyway, she did what everybody round here wants more than anything to do. Right out there.” She pointed to the spot on the pavement outside the store with specificity, like a monument should be put up on the exact site. And a contumelious chuckle erupted followed by a wet and very common hacking cough.

“Last Thursday.”

The Edmunds kid suddenly became the last person to see Darci, and the punch she had landed on him felt like it had come to rest in the pit of Wagner’s stomach. She was worried that it was too late.

Wagner pulled up to the North Cliff gated community, the only gated community in town. The town didn’t really need any gated communities, it was on the list of the most safe places to live in Utah. The distinction of being the safest in Utah must make a mockery of all of the other safest cities in the country.

Still some people, like the Edmunds, liked to have the feeling of going through a gate before parking their overpriced, oversized vehicles in the stubbornly regular sized parking spaces allotted to each tenant, parking space width being one of the

last great social equalizers.

It was one in the afternoon, and Wagner rang the bell for “common cottage” 3A. “BZZZT” The word ‘cottage’ was another affectation of the ruling class of people who paid so much for an apartment that they couldn’t possibly call it by the name allotted to it by the real estate code. “BZZZT” She rang again, with no answer.

Wagner noticed a button marked “hospitality room” and pressed it. A deep vibrating voice shook the speaker. It would have sounded much more commanding if each of the words hadn’t resolved in an effeminate lisp.

“Hospitality.” Before Wagner could say anything, the deep bass voice continued. “Come on in.”

The door buzzed, rattling the screen and sending shivers up the side of the light blue cape cod absurdity that stood in four clusters inside the high-gated walls. There was no cape nearby, or cod for that matter. False wharfs and planked walkways lead from one building to another. It created such a false fiction that one half expected Captain Crunch to saunter past.

Chauncy, the general manager and hospitality room curator, met Wagner at the door with a cup of steaming cappuccino. Before she could say anything his meaty hand laid the cup in hers. The circle of his forefinger and thumb easily spanned the circumference of the rim.

“I’m a big man.” He replied to her unspoken observation, “and I’m getting bigger every year.” He patted the flabby gut that hung in the spotlight of one of the recessed lights overhead. Not only was Chauncy largest, blackest and baldest person that Wagner had seen since arriving in Provo, he immediately proved himself to be the most intuitive as well, “Thought you sounded like the cappuccino type.” He said in an apologetic tone, not wanting to offend if he was off, even though he knew he was not.

Chauncy had a gift for knowing what people needed. “You’re looking for information, not real estate.”

Wagner’s heart sunk, she thought for a moment that Chauncy had already received a visit from the FBI. “Somebody spoke to you?”

Chauncy chuckled, a deep rumble, “No darlin’, I’m in hospitality, I just know what people want.” He was a talker, and he began reciting some of his hospitality highlights, each story laced with a level of professional pride and reverence that Wagner wouldn’t have expected. “When one of the Dixon kids of the complex called down asking for extra towels, I knew instead to call a plumber. When the divorcee in cottage 2A met with the local radio personality in 4C, I knew not to

show any west facing apartments because of the fact that maintenance was always called to fix the deck railing after her visits – and I won't even take a stab at explaining how it came loose.” He leaned forward and raised his eyebrows like he was telling a secret in a crowded room. “Perhaps the ex was behind bars for something that funded the sleek SLK that she drove, and she was recreating the feeling of her new life with him. I'm talking too much.”

He picked up the serviette and took a pair of dainty tongs and picked up a sugar cube, then replaced it. Chauncy smiled humbly, “You don't want sugar.” He said flatly.

Wagner liked him more with every syllable. His voice had an easy way of convincing the listener that he was there to please. “No thanks.”

“Sweet little thing like you stirs it up without adding a thing” Something in the rumbling compliment was so genuine that it made her blush. The lisp reasserted itself “That's the color I want for my nails.” He held up his hand painted nails to her face.

“It will bring out your wild side.”

“That's the only side I've got, sister. So, you're not here for a tour?” his voice rose slightly to keep from affecting a know it all tone.

“Have you seen this girl?” The picture of Darci, creased from days of changing hands gave it a fittingly vulnerable look. Her pierced features looked like they might actually lift off the page in a kind of Braille that only other rebellious souls understood. She was an easy ID.

“She stayed in the Edmunds' cottage for a few days – ate the hospitality cookies three times a day. Pretty, but frayed, same expression on her face, like the tread of an old shoe.” He said, staring at the picture.

Wagner said, “I need to talk to the Edmunds boy.”

“I'll do anything if you can tell me how you get your complexion so creamy smooth.” Wagner cocked her head to the side and they had a deal.

Chauncy was about to play a part in the investigation, in his eyes, he was aiding and abetting a federal agent who had better skin tone than anyone he'd met.

Wagner tapped on the door of cottage 3B, the penthouse unit that spanned two of the lower units with panoramic views of the freeway and local strip mall in the distance. A voice, groggy and half-stoned crackled over the intercom. “Who is it dude?”

“FBI. Bud.” She couldn't help herself. Motion within the cottage cranked up like a blender working up to speed in an immediate, directionless whirlwind.

Wagner peeked in the pane of glass beside the tall wooden door. The early afternoon light shone off the textured walls and vaulted ceilings of the interiors, looking like a swirl of vanilla ice cream on a hot summer's day. A flash of flannel crossed the kitchen entrance, which could have easily been a trick of the light or maybe the blink of an eye for how fast it happened. Wagner knew that the occupants were on the run. She casually unholstered her weapon and walked back down the steps.

On the other side of the building, sneakers hit greenbelt slipping in a rotary motion that started with a cartoon-like leap from the lower balcony. Darren was the first to his feet struggling toward the entrance to the underground parking garage only yards away without looking back to see Bone struggling to his feet. His face was covered with mud after having slipped and landed in one of the marsh-like areas of one of the overactive brass sprinkler heads.

Darren waited for him steps inside the garage with a very tangible need. "Keys, tell me you got the keys. Dude, you're bleeding."

Blood trickled down the brim of his nose; his tongue darted out to taste it, in a move meant to gross out his brother. Unfortunately, Bone had forgotten that his face was also caked with mud - a fact that his taste buds reminded him of with a sticky dirt frosting effect. Darren smiled as he doubled over spitting his mistake into the dark corners.

"Dumbass." He chided.

All was forgiven seeing the keys emerge from his brother's shredded cut off pants pocket. "Let's go."

Darren darted around the Lexus back bumper and hit the keyless entry button unlocking all of the doors. He reached for the handle but found a large hospitable hand blocking his entry. It belonged to Chauncy. The other hand grabbed him by the scruff of his neck. "Running off?"

The clicking of Wagner's heels on the rigid concrete floor of the parking structure was calculatedly slow, letting her approach grow in the minds of the two boys until her stature visibly increased. She looked over the pair with a serious expression. Neither one of them would look at her. Bone's eyes darted around like they were following the movements of a bird in a cage. His mask of mud and turf a sharp contrast to his large white eyeballs.

Wagner detected the stale smell of pot on the boy's pajamas as she split between them walking toward Chauncy, who stood holding up a set of car keys. The keys changed hands with a loud clank.

Darren finally got up the nerve to say something. "This is complete -"

Wagner cut him off. "Failing to respond to a federal agent is a serious matter. Running from or evading an agent who is pursuing you as a principal witness comes with jail time."

Bone found his tongue, "Our dad's a lawyer."

Wagner snapped back "My boss is the head of the FBI."

Darren's jaw looked like the hinge had dropped out completely. It hung at an angle, his mouth searching for a response. Chauncy broke in with a chuckle, so irregular it sounded like an echo even before it hit the concrete garage walls. Wagner had asked him to box in the kids' car, now she was putting the same fences around their options. Pretty soon, if she spoke with the right authority, the ideas would solidify around them until they were more effective than a jail cell. The adolescent brain can invent no end of its own torturous confines if nudged toward a blossoming future despair.

"We don't know his name." Bone offered.

"Shut up dude." Darren replied.

"Whose name?"

"The guy who gets us the pot." Wagner was dumbstruck, but to Bone it must have seemed like she needed convincing because he added. "You know, Jerry."

"Dude." His brother conceded.

"I thought you didn't know his name." Wagner followed.

"We don't, lady." Stone offered not realizing his blunder.

She countered, "You don't know Jerry?"

"Whoah."

"I'm not here for Jerry."

"What do you want?" Darren leaned forward into the light, flashed a smile. He had a kind of bumbling warmth that Wagner hadn't given him credit for earlier. He brushed a long lock of hair off his forehead and slicked it back into the flow of his long hair. For a second, he almost seemed like a person who was exactly his age, but nowadays no one over the age of twelve could possibly be like that. They all have to seem wiser, or more discontent, gifted or troubled than the generation before them. "Officer babe, we're clean. Hey, this is me being nice."

Wagner sneered a half cocked smile aimed to threaten the boy. Defiant laughter went through the Darren; he wasn't stepping down, so Wagner walked over. Within inches of his face she remarked, "I like the nose ring." She grabbed the stud that dug a trench between the septum of his nostrils. A plaintive howl of

discomfort and embarrassment filled the garage. Bone watched, laughing and bleeding.

A car took that moment to pull in; Wagner changed her grip so that it looked like she was playfully tweaking his nose, when really it was rotating the piercing.

“God, please, stop. Alright, we’re sorry, whatever.” The list of things to say to make her quit flowed almost randomly from his mouth. Wagner didn’t hear a single one.

“How about I wear this eyebrow piercing on my index finger.” She jammed her finger into the hoop, and then pulled it out an inch, stretching the skin above his eyebrow and bringing it into perhaps the most thoughtful expression of his life. “Or my middle finger.” The hoop fit on her finger, now she was effectively controlling his face like a bit controls the movement of the head of a horse. All the while flipping him off for his troubles.

“This is me being nice.” She said.

Within five minutes, she had them vying with each other for who could be the most helpful. The showdown had saved her probably three hours in a police interrogation room, and innumerable headaches with their father, the lawyer. A wink in Chauncy’s direction was an invitation for him to leave. She was ready to go to work.

“We met like you said.”

“Stealing? Why were you stealing anything?” Wagner said looking at the gleaming Lexus key ring in her hand.

Bone cut in “That lady at the Gas and Loaf totally asks for it.” Bone didn’t have the sense to filter his honesty, and an odd companionship between stupidity and honor.

Wagner recalled how her conversation with the clerk from the Gas and Loaf had pushed her to steal a refill on a cappuccino – one that she didn’t even want, for that matter.

Her gaze swung back to Darren. “And you started a sexual relationship?”

“I liked her.” Darren said protectively.

This wasn’t what Wagner was expecting, usually women like Darci chose men who can hardly conceive of sentiment. It makes them feel more comfortable with the shabby treatment they ultimately get.

Darren’s greasy hair was the constant preoccupation of his skinny fingers, pushing the coiff around, searching for a way to hide behind it. His story came out halting every once in a while, like he was letting the other people in the story

catch up to his thoughts, or maybe he was just skipping like a record back into the groove in his head where he could still hear the echoing of his own words.

Darren described the way they'd hooked up after the gas station. She became a regular at the gate, and at the hospitality room buzzer. He offered to get her a key once, but she'd dismissed it by saying something cute like "Fuck that, I stop coming if I'm either welcome or expected."

"I should have known right then."

"What?"

"She was holding back." His voice took on an adolescent approximation of a sage-like quality. "Just like when you're working a new trick on the board, if you hold something back, that's when you get hurt. If you're all in, you'll answer the bell after using your head as a friction brake on a gravel road, just to get that last ride. You get me?" His speech had a ring of familiarity to it, he probably used with all the girls. Wagner processed the boy, and played along.

"Yeah, that's deep. And she held back, where did that take her?" pressing him to return to Darci.

Darren forgot entirely the position he was in, "Bet you never had anyone hold back with you."

If she had been able to escape the absurdity of the moment she would have recalled several relationships, all of them ended by her. It was always the same, face-to-face meeting with a different handsome young man who no longer held her interest – interest wasn't right – they had simply lost their relevance in her life.

Wagner flexed a lean, iron tricep and pulled Darren to his feet. "I don't have time for games."

"Jesus, lame, hold on." Again words spilled out without connection, "I was getting to that."

Wagner turned away from him and withdrew far enough into the shadows of the garage to become a faint outline.

"We had fun, she told me about how her parents died in the war – um – you know, the last one." An obvious history buff. "That she'd hitched a ride to Provo, and that she was waiting for a friend to join her before going down to Mexico. I thought it was a girl friend, cause you don't tell your boyfriend about another boyfriend, but then something strange happened, and now I'm not so sure."

A snicker in the corner broke the silence. Bone, muddy, bloody and giggling at the misfortune of his brother. "She got you, man." Wagner began to wonder what

would count for strange among these brothers.

“I’m going to meet her at the Kmart deli for an Icee and some fries, and I wait about twenty minutes and go out to have a smoke and wait some more outside. I’m not a patsy, but I think maybe she’s asleep in one of the dressing rooms so I ask some of the Kmart crowd if they’ve seen a girl like her. And one of them says that he was smoking in the loading area about ten minutes back and he saw a girl in a van.” A squeal erupted from his brother expecting the next tidbit of the story. “Shut up.”

“I come around the corner and see her in the passenger seat talking to this old biker-fatty.”

“Why do you say biker?” Wagner asked.

“Tats, belly and beard – and something he said. Anyway she kicks her leg over him and they start to rock the van.”

A whistle through Bone’s nose as he began to convulse in laughter. “And he watched, the whole thing. He waited till they were done before going up. Classic.”

“I was fucking being polite.”

“They were fucking, you were being polite.” Came from his brother.

Wagner could see that the truth of the matter was that he hadn’t known what to do. And the intervening time hadn’t supplied him with any better answer than the one he’d had on that day.

“I got angry and I banged on the van door.”

“After they were finished.”

“They opened the van door – He was doing up his pants. She introduced him as her uncle before I could even get pissed off. She was so smug and formal. Then he lumbered out and told me to stay the fuck away from her, and that if I didn’t, he knew my name. She could hear the way he was threatening me and she just laughed.” He turned on his brother’s laughter like it was some distant echo of hers.

“Dude, shut the fuck up.” Bone wasn’t quite ready to stop, but he managed to lower the volume. “That’s when the biker guy talked about being on a short hop, and he’d be back through town soon.” He looked at Wagner like he’d said something important. She stared blankly back. Darren explained, “A short hop is a biker term for pit stop on the way home. Anyway I split.”

“Then you took her back – and she dumped you again.”

Wagner pulled Bone to his feet and sent him back to the apartment. He had been keeping Darren on the defensive. She needed everything he had, and Darren himself had noted the dangers of holding back.

The minute Bone disappeared out of the bright corona of the open exit, looking back protectively like somehow something might happen to the paint job on the car during the interrogation, Darren's story changed. It wasn't the facts of what he'd said; it was the tone that accompanied the narrative. It was mournful and full of self-doubt. Darren obviously cared much more for Darci than he wanted to admit, his pride and a faint sense of urgency crept into his voice like he might somehow catch her from her fall with something that he said, something useful he remembered.

Darren hadn't left the area immediately as he'd said, he'd gone back into the Kmart and ordered more fries and waited. His instinct was right, about twenty minutes later Darci came in, looking like a total babe, certainly not looking for him as she gazed coyly down the rows of value priced merchandise. She spotted him and walked right up to the table. He'd pretended to believe the story that the big bald man with his zipper down was her uncle. She told him not to ever mess with her uncle because the boys he ran with had the kind of temper a man doesn't learn, it's the dark kind that a man can only be born with.

"Darci finished two plates of fries then she kissed me goodbye. We went back to normal until –" Darren receded into a memory, from his expression Wagner could tell that he blamed himself for something.

"Until what?"

"I got a call, from the uncle." Darren brooded.

"What did he want?"

"A favor."

The word 'favor' sounded like a foreign word. Like even now the concept did not match anything he could understand.

"He said he'd been phoning all over trying to find me, and that I was the only one that stood between Darci and the morgue. I remember how he said the word 'morgue'; it was like an immediate threat for her, and a later threat for me at the same time. He was desperate. He kept saying over and over that I had to go out in the middle of the night and find her and take her to my house. I must have been waffling, because he burst out with "I KNOW WHERE YOU LIVE."

"This guy was ready to jump down the receiver and strangle me." Wagner could guess how the fat man felt, especially when she first met Darren, but she was beginning to warm to the concerned attitude and dusty soprano tones of the boy.

His face seemed to re-experience details of the story he was telling on a five second delay. The words came out of his mouth only to have his facial expression catch up after a short break.

Wagner looked differently upon the lines across his chin and brow that she'd thought must have been created by the set of a smug expression. Now she saw in the crease between his eyebrows, a look of concern.

"I did it. I found her." A look of triumph crossed his face moments later. "I told her that her uncle called, and she basically did everything he told her to do without question. That included living with me."

"That was last Thursday."

"Thursday was the day she came to live here."

"Hold it, the clerk said she saw Darci hit you on Thursday." She said, eyeing him suspiciously.

"I called her uncle a fat fuck." The anger caught up with his eyebrows and they creased the center of his forehead. "She went back to him, I'm so stupid." Tears welled up in his eyes.

"Where is she now?"

Ten minutes later, Wagner pointed her government-issue rental sedan out of the gated community, still digesting Darren's tearful last thoughts. She looked out of the tinted windows and saw no one to congratulate her on her fine work. Behind her there was only a weeping boy, and a hospitality room manager who desperately wanted her to stay and trade make-up tips. Neither of them had what they most wanted; only Wagner had walked out with it all.

Legacy would later send a memo breaking down the qualities that made Wagner so effective in fieldwork interviews. She had, after all, tricked him, no small task. Wagner had an almost irresistible ability to draw out the exact emotion that she wanted of the people she questioned. Many of them marked it down to beauty or charm, but it was more than that. She possessed both traits but not in their rare magnetic alloy. It was her manipulation of emotional response, the trap she set in a vacuum.

People, especially men, claimed she radiated charm, but that was just because they projected their own desires and emotions onto her. In essence, they loved her blank reflective quality because it brought everything back to themselves. Wagner, her perfect make-up one thin layer in the mask of her intentions, lured people with the promise of nothing, and the expectation of everything. She got the information from Darren, and countless others, in this way.

She wondered whether to call Legacy. His prediction of the very existence of a first girl had culminated in Wagner being just 26 hours behind Darci on a trail that led directly to the door of the Vinyl Men.

The service on her phone crackled and for some unknown, but universally shared response among cell phone users, she slowed her car into an abandoned fairgrounds parking lot on the edge of town. The collective misguided conclusion that stopping would somehow increase the stability of the waves of communication the same way the ground slows to a solid stop below ones wheels. Cracking paint on a nearby sign read “Home of the Bain Brother’s Circus and Pony Meet”. Wagner imagined Darci standing on this road only a day before, sign in her hand. Darren said she was headed out on the 43 south. Wagner had calculated the van’s working range on a two-lane highway would be no greater than 300 miles in the mountains. The supplies that Darci had swiped from the house before leaving implied a trip verging on the longer edge of that range. It made sense that her “boyfriend” had dropped her at a convenience store while filling up the van. It made more sense why Darci was always at the local gas and sip waiting. Her man might be along this road at any time.

Wagner held down a button and the autodial engaged.

Her eyes fixed on the once colorful Bain Bros. Circus sign. It was now a weather-stripped, chipped-up reminder that once a year something happens, or used to happen, at this place. She knew that he wouldn’t answer his phone and that was the only reason she was calling. She worried that Legacy would no longer listen to her. He’d be too busy thinking of the unstated reasons that she’d called to hear what she had to say. He was a bit like a circus, taken in moments, or still frames of performance, he was awe inspiring, unique and fantastic. But once one viewed him in entirety he was a bit kitsch. It was hard to take the entire performance seriously even though each act was complicated and expertly done. The people who knew this side of Legacy saw his existence through the distorted fun house mirror pulled out of a sad solitary clown car – the bowed Mylar reflection, the kind that stretches the neck and squashes the chin into the nose. The content of his insight did not change the ridiculous picture he presented, a man colorful, cracked and chipped on an off ramp of the fringe of the world. She reprimanded herself for letting her focus shift. When had she started doing that? Darci was her main concern. Legacy was a concern, yet without contradiction Laura was her only concern.

The call connected, Chess’ sweet familiar voice filled the dynamic range of the earpiece “I’m not home, so press one for me.” Not even a mention of dad, he must be two.

It was just like him to have an even numbered box, the irony, she thought. She

didn't know what to say after the vague tone trailed off in her ear. Her voice muffled by indecision jumped into the silence "Legacy, this is Wagner. I've got a trail on Darci – she might be going to meet her boyfriend, and get this, if I'm right, he's one of the abductors. Route 43 probably ending in Hammet County, Colorado. Thought you should know –" her voice ran on with a purposeful drone even though she'd said everything she wanted to say. "I'm following the chain of command – reporting it directly to you."

The phone beeped, connection lost. She silently thanked God for the divine mercy of the dropped call.

Her tires through gravel sending dust skyward in a thick cloud, like she was covering the point of origin of her retreat. Perhaps it was the lingering presence of a particle of merging dust thrown up from a previous car that had cut off her call to Legacy, and if so, she needed to return the favor.

Chapter 55 The Dark Lost Its Meaning

"She sounded nervous, she needs you out there." Chess said in a voice that, if it were a coat, it would have been threadbare.

Legacy hadn't been ready for this walking in his door in the middle of the night. He had been expecting a thousand different variations of anger. There was none of the sting of childish spite in the tears that ran down her face. She was worried about Wagner, a kind of selfless concern for which never in history has an appropriate winning argument been formulated to counter. When something is that real, no one has the right to change it. Chess stumbled on, reading a notepad from which she had transcribed Wagner's short, troubled message.

"She gave directions, why would she give directions if she didn't want you to come?" Legacy was consciously not looking at Chess. Rather, he took in the room over her shoulder where three agents, stone faced and well-practiced at appearing detached, stood like turrets of stone. Chess was rattling off syllables in quick rhythm like a teletype machine in the newsroom of one of those old movies. Legacy looked for the long string of paper tape so that he could read back the part he'd missed.

"We can talk about this after we send them home."

"You weren't listening, they aren't going, you're going. They're staying."

One of the stone faces in the living room turned toward Legacy. An appreciative smile opened a brief fissure and he said, "We called in for authorization to extend –"

“On whose request?” He nodded toward Chess.

He couldn’t quite determine why, but it upset him.

“All of you, out.” He said, and the men responded to the commanding tone, packing up to leave.

Chess’ words sprung forward like a burner coming to light, flashing fire with a single purpose, “You say it’s all for me, that you need to protect me. It’s like you’re punishing me, you’re blaming me for a weakness that for the life of me I’ve never allowed myself to demonstrate.” Her voice chattered on the verge of hysterics. “Maybe you’re doing this because you know I don’t need you anymore and that scares you. It scares you that soon you won’t be able to make up my mind for me.”

They locked eyes, Chess had changed; her face had assumed a look of cold calculation. Suddenly, there was no weakness at all in her fifteen-year-old body. Did she need him? Legacy couldn’t be sure if she’d said that because she knew or just to make him question himself. Either way, he knew that she was right. He was so proud of her, standing clenched fists, with white knuckles showing her determination to help Wagner, and see her safely home. He teetered on the edge of telling Chess what she wanted to hear. He could no more walk away from his role in her life than command the darkness into a particular corner of the night sky. Standing there at the height of her capacity of a young woman, Legacy started down the road to forgiving himself. A wave of the past crashed over him, warm like plasma, then, with a cold tingle, it all came back to him.

The cast of her features reminded him of a mistake he’d made in this same hallway nine years before. It wasn’t actually a mistake, truly, it was more of a discovery of a weakness that no man should ever discover they have. No one knew the truth about what happened the night his wife died. He had never told the parade of analysts, psychiatrists, or friends.

He’d walked out from an aluminum coffin that night, “BING” filled with fear, sensing from the first puff of air released by the opening of the elevator doors that death was not too far behind him. He raced ahead of the feeling coming to his door, thrown wide open by the intruder, and finding a body, face turned away from him, hidden behind the large entryway chair. Blood pooled in the grout and created a maze on the entryway floor, he couldn’t step one way or the other - then a sound in the closet.

Scratching on the wall, he’d thrown the door open and been flooded with the strongest emotional pulse that his nearly dry heart had ever produced.

It should be explained at this point that Legacy had walked around the scene of his wife’s death a thousand times in his mind. It was certainly the recreation of

the event gave rise to his vivid way of projecting himself into a crime scene. He'd done it so many times - walking around the body, noticing the position of the auburn hair, matted burgundy against a brick red tile floor. In all of those times, he'd never had the strength to open the closet door again. That was the one memory that he held with such shame that he could not return to that moment, even in the harmless confines of his own mind, years later. He had always worried that somehow his secret might get out if he ever opened that door again, that some look would translate onto his face, in a twitch or glance that could be noticed and read like profanity in the margins of scripture. It would shout out the monstrous truth that he locked in that pie-shaped room.

What had this week been to Legacy except a series of the breakdowns of everything normal in his life. The intrusion of a partner. The inclusion of that same person into his daily life, followed by betrayal and casting her away.

Legacy couldn't deny his urge to listen and let in the world when Wagner was around. She'd taught his daughter new rules of engagement. Now he hardly had a choice.

He'd taken on this case with a spider's web and sticky strings of expectation wound around a central core of disappointment, and now as he watched it all unravel he was still unable to drop it. In defeat he still didn't have the dignity to concede.

With both bikers dead, he'd arranged for an elaborate ruse, Sabita had been reported missing, abducted by the same thugs who had taken Laura. It bought them a day, maybe 36 hours of waiting for a miracle. Legacy, however, didn't believe in miracles and even as he set up the conditions for the arrival of one. It was ridiculous; a drowning man searching for pockets of air in between the slippery layers of liquid, knowing he will find none. How could he explain that to any of the thirty trains of thought that were pulling in and out of his head at any given moment with solid concrete destinations.

How could he square his life, with the actions he had begun to take? If he could have sat down across from himself he would have grilled the man in front of him for answers, but there was no one in front of him except the statuesque figure of his daughter. She needed a different answer, but he decided to give her the truth.

He slowly walked over to the hall closet and opened the deadbolt with a click. Chess caught her breath hearing the latch slide back into its casing. The door protested before opening, and Chess walked silently behind her father's wide shoulders peering through the triangle created by his elbow and forearm resting on his ribcage. His breaths were irregular. Deep, then short, short, deep.

Her eyes adjusted to the dark closet. Legacy stepped out of the doorframe with a

look she'd never seen on his face. Somehow, she could tell, he expected this to be some kind of revelation, the answer to a thousand questions. He motioned his hand with such finality almost as if to say this room explained everything about him. The look on his face contributed to the feeling that the explanation wasn't flattering. He said simply. "Tell me to go and I'll go. I love you honey."

He walked down the hall to a very important meeting with a glass of scotch; his knees traced bicycle circles in the air, like he was remembering how to walk. His mind was committed completely to another place and time. One in which he'd come home to find a body, and all of his fears had projected outward and he saw clearly that the still body was that of his daughter, Chess. Then when he'd opened the closet and found her alive, all he could feel was relief.

He'd loved his wife. She'd crept into the fiber of his being like no one had ever before or since. And when he'd realized that it was her dead and Chess alive, he was relieved. It was a feeling that ebbed like a slow geological tide and did not recede for months after her burial. Everyone thought he was sick with grief, however that came later, and lasted for a good amount of time. He was equal parts relief and shame.

Chess peered into every crease of blackness, every nook where carpet met white paint. What she saw, she could not say.

Chapter 56 Late Deliveries

If they'd driven through the night, they'd be here by now. His impatience was quickly turning to anger.

Blade paced on the worn tufted industrial carpet in the control room. He could tell something was wrong. Even though he wasn't expecting a call upon the completion of the job, in fact, he'd given express orders to run completely silent on these missions. He still could not shake the feeling that something was wrong.

He adjusted a camera, zooming in on Laura's face. There was a bit between her teeth and shiny beads of residue from earlier copulations in the corners of her mouth. Her mouth stretched each time Yellow pulled on the bridle and his weight shifted into her from behind. Fresh jockey silks were hanging on the wall; there were still two more riders to come after Yellow. Even though they were not broadcasting, they kept up the façade. They couldn't give Laura any reason for hope, that would ruin the whole game.

He tore his eyes away from the screens and looked instead at a figure on a palm pilot in his hand. Thirty million dollars was sitting in an account. Laura

accounted for twenty million of that sum. It was the kind of ransom demand that would have been impossible to collect and protect the identity of the recipient in almost any other case. He was the breadwinner of so many pornographers, they were lining up to feed him a piece of their prize. Clean, pure revenues that couldn't be traced any easier than a drop of rain could be tracked down a river.

There was more money in human flesh than all of the major entertainments combined. If Shakespeare were alive and as smart as they said, Blade thought, he'd be writing and directing porn.

Blade couldn't quite tap the source of his unease. He'd read the reports of the concert, the scene of disarray. It all seemed to be going to plan. But there was something in the release of information, something in the way things were related to the public that sounded – crafted. There were reports of journalists complaining about access, and although Blade knew that the last thing the FBI wanted to do was advertise its gross failure to the public. He was waiting expectantly to hear the approach of tires, and the familiar guttural laughter of the Harley engine accompanying the van.

If they'd driven through the night, they'd be here by now. He'd send the boys away for the afternoon after this session. He had to prepare for the worst. He was the best when preparing for the worst. A dubious smile crossed his lips thinking of the worst things he could do to the girl still locked in his cage.

Yellow was in the home stretch. Laura's hair cascaded down and fell into her face as he let the reins go. Before the rhythm could even be broken, there was a fresh rider. The orange silks had been taken from the wall, and Yellow was staggering into the blackness out of sight of the cameras.

He was met at the door by Blade; a brief exchange sent him out of the room with a jump in his step. Blade sent him away; he spoke loud enough to be heard by everyone in the studio. Blade wanted to be alone in the compound with her tonight. The eerie chill of that thought crossed the floor and climbed up her naked limbs. Laura began moving at a fevered pace, alive with a new purpose. She needed to finish this session; she needed to get back to her cell. Blade watched her from the doorway, sending his most sympathetic glance her way. She had on blinders, eyes forced straight ahead; she knew what she had to do.

When Blade reentered the control room, he looked at the close up of her eyes in the camera lens. She was as blank and mysterious as instinct itself. Her senses behind a stone wall, grey concrete eyes feeling the pressure of the air from the surrounding atmosphere poked forward like they wanted to burst from her head.

Blade informed the rest of the men that they could have the afternoon off as they filed out of the room.

“Lay low and stay close.” That was his message for each nodding matchstick head. He knew that would send them to the nearby bar where they’d sit on wobbly bar stools drinking the piss nectar of some domestic brewery.

It would give him time to set about covering the tracks of a suddenly very weighty organization. If his feeling were right, there would be people coming after them. It was always best in any conflict to give the opponent a moving target. He mouthed a silent deadline of 9pm tonight to the air surrounding his lips. He assured the air that he would be initiating the new girl, or be riding down some midnight highway, arson blazing from his tailpipe, ashes falling through his headlights like a rainstorm formed in a codicil of hell.

He often thought about what the girls he’d chosen would be doing right now if they hadn’t been taken from their miserable lives.

Was there an invisible wind that blew through the souls of people that left the residue of unrealized torment? Were there other potential girls who felt a stinging cold in their spine when they brushed against a stranger in public, or when they saw their image on a closed circuit TV in their local drug store? Did they feel a fleeting tingle because it might just have well been them bent over a librarian’s desk learning new ways of collecting a late fee? If they did, Blade was willing to bet the most fragrant white pus that collected in front of his stained gums that they pinched themselves beneath their shirtsleeves trying to bring the torture back.

He sucked his doctrines back into his lungs through wheezing nostrils. It was a product of his condition; all of his fluids, saliva, snot, and even semen were less viscous than normal. It might have been his physical deficiencies that caused him to need to test the limits of pain of all of the normal people he encountered. The dumbfucks who could spit, chew and spew like regular people. The kind of people who wet their eyes with their own tears and saw red when they were angry. Blade never saw red, and although it wasn’t an excuse, he never would, nor would he do any of those things that bring pleasure to the idiots of the planet. The only crossover between him and them was money. It was the sole prop in the counterweighted systems of supports that constitute happiness in a society that he found himself running with the mainstream in pursuit of. He would take their money, without batting a dry eye. And he would satisfy himself on the way out the door.

Blade had never planned on splitting the money amongst the group. This was something that he chose not to share with his long time comrades. In fact, he had spoken of the day of cashing out many times, reciting like it were a passage from a prophecy, reassuring everyone that the equitable distribution of the ransom was in the stars. Even Blade could not rip out the skeleton of the constellations and

blink out what was predestined.

They were the workers, they were given sex, food and lodging, any two out of the three and they would be happy on a normal day. He led them to a blissful three months of having it all, he certainly wasn't going to extend his generosity and pay them for it. One wouldn't think of dividing a diamond that grew to immense size against the rules of pressure and probability. It would be a crime to divide a jewel, the way one shares is by putting it on display in front of the world.

He glanced at Laura, her nostrils flaring into an unconscious sneer, the cameras tracing her perfect skin tone down the side of her figure until it disappeared into the shadow of her satin undergarments.

Blade felt at that instant the drums of distant twisted humor that beat somewhere well beneath the cover of his pumping heart. It sounded haunting, wicked, like some dark tribal ritual had found its way deep within him and died.

Chapter 57 Sex Talk, Part Two

Chess was ready with her answer, but they'd decided, well, she'd decided that they had to meet on neutral territory. She suggested the kitchen. Legacy had countered with the breakfast nook, trying to make his mood into something a shade more playful than the grey detachment that seemed to hover between his lips, coloring even joyous words with whispered despair.

They sat at the kitchen table, neither wanting to bring up the past or future. But after a half cup of cocoa the future seemed easier to bridge than looking back. Chess carefully chose her words, letting her father make as little or as much of her complaint as he wanted to.

Legacy surprised himself by smiling. She would make a wonderful fencer. She sat there smiling back at him.

Legacy spoke, "All you're asking - you want me to change. Be a more regular dad?"

"No, dad, I want you to let me be a regular teenage girl."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but there's some crossover there - I mean if you're going to be living a regular life -"

"I concede there is overlap, you'll have to seem regular in some circumstances. But you also have the freedom to be what you've been since I was a little girl."

"An enigmatic pain in the ass?"

“No, my hero. And that’s all you, you can’t fake that kind of stuff. But you’re not my hero right now. Because you’re letting everyone else suffer for my sake, then expect me to – to”

“Love me?” Legacy’s pulse jumped, he realized that whatever Chess said next would be in his engraved in thoughts for years to come.

“Forgive myself.” He looked at the guilt in her eyes, it was a family trait, or so he guessed. “Or you.” She added she cinched up her nose like she used to do as a baby when she didn’t like something, but hadn’t the words yet to express her feelings.

The phone rang, and Legacy reached across to answer it, his eyes never left Chess, however. She perked up as his hand crossed her field of vision.

“You’re going to answer the home phone?” She asked incredulously.

“On occasion, whenever things overlap.” Out of nowhere, Chess’ lips were on his cheek marking a spot with gloss, arms around him digging into both arms and rattling the receiver on his way to his ear. That moment didn’t last long though.

The minute the phone made contact he was pulled into another world. It was a hollow place of uncertain rewards and distant voices crying out for help. Legacy never wanted these voices following him home, but now, he realized that silencing them through action was the only way of keeping his new life in balance.

“Legacy I have something on that medical condition - “ Brent’s voice a clinical monotone. He sounded a little like a doctor himself. “I wanted to share it with you.”

Legacy knew immediately that he was trying to hide something. The word share is often used to conceal something else.

“I have an outpatient in Humboldt County, Colorado.”

Legacy put the phone to his chest and spoke to Chess. “Can you pull up a map of Colorado on the internet?” Chess saluted, rushed out of the room.

“Just one?”

“There are only 17 cases in America, only three that match gender and age range. This one was the most promising, he has no listed address, prescriptions dating back to August of 2000.”

Chess came back into the kitchen carrying a snow-white laptop displaying the political boundaries of Humboldt County. It was a neighbor to the county Wagner mentioned in her message. It couldn’t be coincidence, this was the guy. He looked up at Chess’ beaming helpful face. Wagner was heading into trouble.

“What did Wilkes say when you brought this to him?”

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

“I mean, I’m not the first person you came to with this, am I, agent?” This was the part of the conversation Brent had expressly attempted to avoid.

“He wants to trace the bike, and the van. He wants to follow the evidence we have, not open up a new front to the investigation.”

“Especially since it builds on evidence coming from me.”

Brent flashed back quickly “I don’t think so, sir. Blue posted a schedule on the website, and it’s thrown everybody into frenzy.”

“He posted a time – for her execution.” Legacy said with grim finality.

Brent was taken aback by Legacy’s proclamation, not because he was right, but because he sounded almost upset. It was like the echo of a deep anger found its way to the surface. Brent corrected Legacy, it wasn’t a set execution time, Blue promised his audience of millions an initiation tonight at nine, or an extraordinary finale with Laura. The statement promised a full hour of entertainment either way.

Legacy felt the transformation coming on, in the walls around him and the floor beneath his feet. Everything slipped away in pieces like colored sand draining out of an unseen hole below him. He was back in Blue’s studio, watching Laura enter the room. She was flushed, sweating like she’d just been drug out of a sauna. She glowed with a visual sensuality, ripe and swooning, it was the work of an artist. Legacy never stopped to ask if he were driving the fantasy, or if his close contact with the killer drove a parallel set of impulses that existed inside Legacy, but were not him. He would want to believe the latter. He held the phone to his ear still, even in the fantasy.

He spoke to Brent, narrating what he saw transpire in front of his very eyes.

“He’ll play a game, gaining her trust then attacking her according to a strict schedule in his head.”

Blue had Laura tied facing away from the control room, blinders on, prohibiting her from seeing behind her. He kept leaving her field of vision then waiting silently behind her. At a certain click of the clock he inserted a razor thin stiletto into her back and leaving the handles protruding. Each time he would rush back to her and mime his complaints to nonexistent attackers behind her. Each time he’d regain her trust only to slip away again, repeating the torture.

His voice rang hollow and distant even for a telephone, “The death blow will come exactly sixty minutes into the session, and it will be at the moment she

feels safest and most secure. He'll build his deception like an orchestral piece, layering until he gains her trust. That is when he will tell her it's over and she can go home, then he'll slip in the blade. He'll want to be eye to eye when she realizes that she's been alone with him the whole time."

"Oh God."

Chess' voice called him back to reality. She stood, her eyes fixed on her father, filling with tears. For a second Legacy was worried that his own daughter thought him a monster for the scenario that he'd laid out in his trance-like words to the agent. But her shaky voice actually gave him strength. "Catch him dad. Catch him now."

Laura's death was five hours away.

"Why didn't you call Wagner?" He knew that Brent liked and respected her. It was one of the reasons that he listened to Brent, even though his attention to Wagner didn't seem strictly professional. It was the reason he hadn't immediately informed him that Wagner was heading in the direction of his patient.

"I can't get a hold of her."

Commercial air was far too unreliable to meet the literal deadline that Blue had posted.

"Get us a plane. Bend the rules, go military."

Thirty minutes later, Legacy was standing on the tarmac.

No flight plan had been filed, a maneuver that Wilkes was going to pay for when the homeland security division audited his authorization of the mission. Legacy called the need for secrecy a "habit," and Wilkes read between the lines; Legacy didn't want anyone to sabotage his work. The only thing that Wilkes had denied was the request that Legacy pilot the plane himself, a task that he was more than qualified to do. Wilkes noted colorfully that Legacy had better things to do than jump a ten million dollar plane into the side of an arguably priceless mountainside. He called it fiscal responsibility. At any rate, he had a volunteer who wanted some flight time, and loved mountain air.

Agent Brent sat at the controls of the sleek jetliner as it sheered free of the black asphalt of Riley Metro Airport near highway 72 on the outskirts of the old part of Alexandria. Agent Brent had been flying planes since he was twelve; his father was the manager of a rural flight school and airstrip. He'd trained in hopes of joining one of the traveling air shows that came through town twice a year. He remembered the stunt that brought the FAA agents to his house. When he was fourteen, he'd TP'd his principal's house in broad daylight, from about seven

hundred feet. It was an incredible feat of flight, getting that second gable that hovered just behind a tall crabapple tree in the back yard. It was the development of skills like this that got him noticed by the federal government.

Brent wasn't performing air show acrobatics today, but a seamless transition game. The plane had barely dropped down out of the sky for moments, hardly time for it to lay down blocks after a sprint landing and before the engines flooded with fuel for take off. Legacy met the agent with a nod at the cabin door, and then sunk into one of the seats in the back. No small talk, no "Are you sure you can fly this thing? Or where's the stewardess?" banter. They were committed to averting a murder. It was the first time ever for either agent to know down to the sweep of a second hand, exactly when a crime was going to happen. Racing the clock is part of any law enforcement officer's daily routine, however the exact moment where abduction becomes murder is usually hidden from them. In this case, knowing when that line would be crossed kept the cabin shrouded in silence.

Legacy sat and pretended to read the documents on the doctor treating Cory Benoit for his illness. He didn't need to go past the cover of the documents to know that this was his man. The picture inserted in the cover under a thin film of laminate showed a man leaning on a motorbike, his muscular arms crossed over a sunken chest leering at the camera. The history that they had on him was going to be useless. A man this ruthless in the way he secured his business wouldn't let any information about his life slip into the hands of the government. He was the kind of person who would flood his own file with misinformation simply to control the kind of crimes he would be suspected of by the novice agent. It was in fact true. Blade had stuffed his file with reports of criminal activity ranging from wire fraud to espionage. It wasn't hard to get one of his low-life friends to implicate him in nearly any crime that Hell's Angels, or Thunder Mafia, or Los Caminos Roja had ever come into contact with. That was a lot of felony material from which to cut an ill-fitting criminal suit.

In the end, his file looked like such a patchwork of hearsay over such a wide variety of criminal activity that he became a forgotten legend. He fit no investigation perfectly because he was like no single criminal. The only thing that Legacy could tell for sure from a brief skimming of the documents during landing was that Blade had a substantial reputation. His specialty was enforcement for the highest bidder- and he threw in a special brand of cruelty for free.

All of the people in his line of work had an advanced degree of cruelty so becoming known for finding ways to surpass his peers was notable. It was like being known for being racist in the KKK, dressed garishly at a rap concert, or fat standing in line in a Costco snack line. It was a distinction not easily achieved.

The wheels skimmed the earthen landing strip stirring a puff of red-brown dirt billowing behind the plane; some of the air being sucked back into the engines like the exchange of smoke between nose and mouth in the French inhale of a cigarette. The commercial flight would have taken three hours, and his watch showed less than an hour had passed. The front wheel touched down. Legacy started. It was like the solid ground had brought him back to solid thinking. He recalled Chess' face at the door, beaming pride as she promised to lock the door after him.

He thought of Wagner's last exit from his office, ashamed and defeated, but willing to do anything to avoid being taken off the case. Even if that took going to the ends of the earth, ironically. Now she'd ended up on the verge of cutting in on the marathon dance that Blade was distributing to the world.

Legacy knew that she was getting close, because anything less than full engagement with the enemy would have brought Wagner to a land line to report her position. She was a smart agent, and she knew that going it alone risked Laura's life. Still he wondered if she wouldn't get wrapped up in the discovery and follow it past the point of no return.

"The doctor lives about twenty miles down I-70 in a town called Rugger." Agent Brent said as they walked across the landing strip to an awaiting car.

Legacy smiled, "Go talk to him if you like. I'm going to the county courthouse."

Agent Brent looked him up and down, "I'm with you."

They pulled up in front of the courthouse fifteen bumpy minutes later. The sedan that had been brought up from the office in Colorado Springs didn't take to the ill maintained roads of Hammet County. The spring thaw chipped away at the edges of the concrete roads, making every internal crack into a tire swallowing chasms.

"Leave the equipment in the car." Legacy ordered. "I don't want you looking like an FBI agent."

Brent wore a utility vest that announced his occupation to anyone who had watched television depictions of federal agents. He swung his automatic weapon from a secret compartment his hip pack and put it into the trunk. He dropped the vest in afterwards then turned to Legacy looking for approval.

Under a dark tank top, muscles rippled from repetitive use in the gym, all groups equally toned. Legacy thought that there must be some compulsive disorder to explain the uniform build. That moment Legacy felt himself turning an imaginary corner with Agent Brent, the discovery of an affectation was the first indication of common ground between the two men. Actually the second, he thought, they also both shared a concern for Wagner. The sudden realization

brought his breathing to a halt for a moment.

Agent Brent took the pause as an offense, he held out both arms, imploring him to verbalize what wrong with his appearance. Legacy nodded, even though Brent stuck out both in dress and stature like he'd stepped out of an early film by Marlon Brando onto the modern streets of Manhattan. "Not much better." It was the nice version of what Legacy was thinking.

Chapter 58 Road Work

Wagner looked around her surroundings and wondered what brand of hick human experience led someone to fit into this place. The stout bartender spit shined silverware that looked like it was civil war era, and peered over the taps at his only customer that afternoon.

Little did he or she know that business was about to pick up.

Wagner had tracked Darci to a mini mart twenty miles north, where she'd switched onto a two-lane freeway leading into the high valley towns of Blake and Hammet. The trail dead-ended there. She hadn't made it to either town; Wagner had spent the better part of the afternoon canvassing both areas. It took approximately twenty minutes for each – there wasn't much to see. Four gas stations, a Taco Bell and a series of convenience stores that sold "live" bait later, and Wagner had decided to retrace her steps. Still wondering why people in two different stores put quotes around the word live in their advertising of "live", she'd come across a small service road with a sign for Burly's Logger Lodge and an arrow. Did they want to emphasize the fact that their bait wasn't really alive? A bumpy ride down the road did not make the logic any more clear. It might have been a more philosophical look at what life really is, questioning if bait, a metaphor for the condemned is ever really sold to into its destiny alive.

The highway she'd pulled off of, connected with Interstate 70 fifty miles farther up the road. If Darci's destination hadn't been along the old two-lane highway it would have been much smarter to stay on the larger road then cut over into the mountains. Six lanes gave much better odds on getting a ride, and Wagner was willing to bet that Darci knew the practical math of hitchhiking much better than any story problem she might have come across in a math class. She'd come a long way. BUMP, Wagner came back to reality in time to dodge a branch that swept across the single lane. The lodge pole pines were soldiers lining the road encroaching right up to the sides of the car with their branches. She pulled into a clearing that stood adjacent to Burley's.

The dark cabin was deserted and Wagner bypassed the bartender and decided to sit at a table and collect her thoughts before ordering. She stared at the barman,

waiting for him to look up and come over. He did neither. She became inexplicably anxious taking out some of her frustration on the mountain man. "Can I get some service?"

"Waitress quit, orders at the bar."

If he'd looked up during his disposal of the law of the land, Wagner missed it. She couldn't believe it. She'd been so close to catching up with Darci and now she was taking shit from some backwater buffoon who didn't properly maintain his service road. The temperature around her face rose suddenly and she abandoned the idea of being rational. She just wanted a win, "I'll wait."

"For what?"

"For you to hire a new waitress."

He looked up, and after a pause the room filled with a rumbling laugh that rolled in his throat like a bowling ball looking for pins. He said nothing, but with a good-natured wink he picked up a pad and waddled toward the end of the bar. "I haven't been on this floor to serve a customer in fifteen years, lady, but I've been told I have bad habits, so I might as well break one of them with you."

He swung his frame around the corner of the bar and found quite an astonishing thing. He didn't fit through the narrow gap. He shrugged. Wagner approached the bar.

"Give me a diet coke."

"Hell of a thing." The bartender said still looking at the gap. His eyes swung across to Wagner's face. "I'll get you a light beer." He popped the top and continued before she could complain. "See if you pass the cigarette test." He offered her one from an open pack. "People who stumble into this place looking like you do are either artists looking for solitude or cops looking for trouble. Take the cigarette and you're an artist, leave it and you're a cop."

Wagner smiled and pulled one out, the bartender's skull emblazoned lighter quickly flicked into action. "Why can't I be a smoking cop?" The smoke filled her lungs, draining the bright ember tip quickly down the paper wrapping.

"You are. An artist rarely has a weapon slung in a shoulder belt, saw that when you reached for the pack." The fat man had his charm, and also a perspicacious bent certainly a product of years of rowdy crowds, knowing when a fight was about to break out on the floor. His eyes gleamed, then flitted to the entrance. "I think I just spotted the trouble you're looking for."

Wagner followed the bartender's eyes to the door, where a visibly grungy, worn out girl entered the bar. It was immediate, unmistakable, Wagner had been

looking at that face for the past week, it was Darci.

“Burly Bear!” Darci lit up seeing the bartender. The combined weight of the road, her trip and the pack on her back dissolved into the shadows of the dreary room and it was like the sun shone just under a gleaming layer of her skin. She leaned over the bar and let her cheek sink into the upper roll of fat below the bartender’s rib cage, pressed close to his heart.

“I thought you were gone for good.” He grumbled.

“How’s Mac?”

Burly looked at Wagner. “The police are looking for you.” Wagner coughed, sputtering.

Darci chided him “Why would you say a silly thing like that?”

Before Burly could answer Wagner cut in razor sharp “Because I’m a federal agent, and I think you have answers to my questions.” She looked her steadily in the eyes as defiance welled up. Wagner didn’t have time for games; she needed to cut through the role-playing before it started.

What would Legacy say about now to cut the legs out from under her? She went through a mental checklist that Legacy said he used as an unconscious algorithm whenever he was put in front of an interrogatee.

Since she herself wasn’t a freak of nature, Wagner would have to go a more deliberate route, checking off the list best as she could remember.

Was there a weakness that presented itself in the appearance of the person being questioned, some affectation of behavior or style of dress?

In this case, Wagner could see the piercings like pockmarks all contained fake gems as decoration. Her rebellion included the need to be noticed.

Her clothes were tight; the outline of her demi bra drew attention to her chest, the same with her panty lines. She was afraid of being lost in a crowd, and would go to extreme lengths to get the eyes on her.

Next question: did the person exhibit strength or weakness before the interrogator identified himself?

She had run into the bartender’s arms dismissing Wagner as a woman, a trivial part of the scene. That spoke volumes about her view of her own importance, and her need to feel protected, and secure. Ignoring something is always the weakest reaction, but that is not to say that confronting it is always the strongest. There are many parts of the mind that become engaged the minute a problem is taken on. The fear of engaging the parts that solve a problem is the embodiment of weakness.

Last question before a word is spoken: does the person want to be treated with respect? It was a simple yes no question, based on all of the intangibles collected and analyzed from answering the first two questions. Wagner answered with authority. No.

Her cigarette had burned down a quarter inch; Burly and Darci were looking at her in reluctant anticipation of what was coming next. By the looks of them she hadn't said anything in about a minute. Her disconnect had put them on the defensive, without saying a word and the advantage was clearly hers before she opened her mouth. Oh, God, was this how Legacy operated? She felt fresh blood rush to her cheeks. No time for her own weaknesses. She jumped in with the urgency of pursuing an advantage could be lost any moment.

"You could save an important life, be remembered for something other than being a slut." Wagner layered her voice with the kind of cruelty that she could tell Darci had come to expect. Darci's eyes registered nothing.

Burly rose to her defense "Hey now," He slapped his hand down on the bar, Darci turned to him like a savior. "Let's not make this – OWWW"

Wagner planted her thumb in-between the knuckles of Burly's middle and ring finger pressing through the flesh and feeling the wooden bar below. Burly's arm went numb an instant after the pain shot through the muscular flab that looked like it was held together by a patchwork of connected tattoos. He pulled his hand back and was rewarded by pins and needles that stung his fingertips and enveloped his arm. "Damn, damn!" Wagner's face softened into a heartfelt look of concern, turning back to Darci. Wagner slipped a hand around the teen's waist and led her away from the bar.

The confrontation could have gone either way, it could have been a disaster, but in the aftermath Darci was more isolated than ever. Wagner lead her over to her table without a word and pulled out a chair. Darci sat like one condemned, she felt her power slip away, helpless as she was in the past.

Wagner tried to reassure her with a smile. It would have worked coming from most people, however, in Darci's life, evil always presented itself in her life with a smile.

Chapter 59 Last Ditch

"Creak, creak, creak, creak." The obsessive repetition of jumping jacks had put a spring into the boards under Laura's feet. "Creak, creak, creak" She had to keep in shape, she had to have something in her life that listened to her commands and did exactly what she wanted. Her legs and arms still obeyed, and that meant she

still had something left inside her that listened.

She was petrified of the way Blue had been conditioning her mind, scared that she would tell her legs to do something and they would be unwilling without permission of her captor at some crucial time, and that crucial time was approaching fast. The indoctrination went so deep that she feared that it would take a drill to the base of her spine to drain his will from her. She was divided against herself in every thought of rebellion or revenge. Even her dreams of killing him lacked satisfaction. She'd wake up sobbing, screaming, "no." Her limbs shook like his death took away the chaos control that kept her from moving outward in all directions and breaking apart.

Disgust flooded through her and pushed her body erect. Then she'd start doing jumping jacks, always in the same place. She carefully stepped off paces from the far and sidewalls before beginning. The exercise continued until her muscles no longer listened to her mind. She loved that last moments, when it was clear she had no control. It made her feel like there was a point at which everyone's boundaries are the same.

"Creak, creak, creak." Tonight was special. Laura heard the motorcycle engines roar into life. She'd heard Blue giving them permission to take a break after the session. This was her chance. She watched the boards flex below her feet.

She'd chosen the location of her exercise routine carefully after studying the position of the support studs through her peephole in the ground. This was strategically the weakest area of the floor. The sun would go down soon, and she would put this circle of hell behind her. The finality of her next thought reverberated in her mind – there was no going back, freedom or death were the only acceptable terms. She'd already surrendered too much.

Blue watched the video screen in the mirror between peeling off his mask and splashing his face with the icy cold ground water that ran throughout the compound, keeping the memory of the last winter in every drop. He wasn't looking forward to the shower that would close his pores and leave his body shaking under a downpour of the same icy temperature. His doctor had told him that the stiffness in his arms and back could be worked out with improved circulation. His skin clammy and red from being encased in the blue plastic wrapper would soon be cold as marble. He stepped into the shower. He needed to be alert, with all of his faculties ready to experience what came next. The men left only moments before, and what they didn't know is that they'd never see him again. Blade had complete access codes to the accounts, and he didn't need anything from this shithole so packing would be quick.

All that left was the pleasure of keeping his appointment with Laura. An hour with Laura. The disappointment of losing two men and his last victim evaporated

in the intoxicating pleasure of thinking about his last hour with Laura. The water hit his skin, and his lungs filled. He screamed like an acid was pouring over him. The pain was all consuming as blood rushed into areas that were practically dry of all life moments before. His chalk white flesh went crimson. He would have the shakes for ten, maybe fifteen minutes, and then he would be in full control again.

The medicine of the fresh blood felt like poison as he dried his skin and doused himself with a specially medicated powder and steroid cream. The disease was getting worse, these showers were getting more painful and the rebound time was shortening. One of his jagged nails came free of his towel and jerked across his chest. Like two pages of yellow old paper curling back separating the skin parted, he began to bleed. He looked into his hollow eyes and saw sunken geriatric tissue around the sockets of his 30-year-old eyes.

He lit a cigarette, his hands still shaking, the flame danced inches in front of his nose. He watched the mirror closely. Blade had to wait until his eye batted down before he did anything even if he felt like the shakes had passed. His feelings on the matter were unreliable. The blink response signified that his condition was coming back to normal. The unconscious action was the most trustworthy indicator of regaining control.

Blade watched his face like he was watching a clock. Soon he would get see the face of his true love, the face of the tortured, the face of the damned.

Legacy got back into the sedan, watching the dashboard clock with a sour look on his face. The blinking centerpiece that had always provided consistency and stability was now his betrayer. They had entered the county government offices with a list of criteria that Legacy thought necessary for the kind of operation Blade was running. They came out with a list with three addresses, one of which was sixty miles away and only accessible by hiking trail. He secretly doubted that it was the place he was looking for, because although it fit his minimum criteria, it seemed unlikely that they would hike hostages back and forth from the property to the access road.

Legacy knew that the location would have several out buildings along with a main residence. These were men of appetite and anger; they couldn't live like the Waltons stacked on top of one another and maintain peace. Blade would have chosen the place for seclusion. There would be little chance of someone happening upon it hiking in the woods.

Finally, all of the girls described direct sunlight in their walks back and forth to the sessions, they couldn't see it through their heavy canvas masks, but they felt

intense sun on their exposed arms and legs. Legacy was taking a risk, but he believed the compound was on or near the top of one of the mountains that rose up like sentinels out of the valley.

Three properties matched the criteria, and they were headed toward one now. Agent Brent checked his weapon a second time even though he knew that the maintenance was perfect. He snapped the magazine into position, then went to his ankle holster and checked the .22 that was inside.

Tree limbs reached out across the cracked asphalt that wound like a snake up toward a set of buildings. The skittering complaints of pine needles across the top of the sedan were a reminder that not many cars passed along this road. The switchbacks only gave Legacy flashes of their destination before dipping back into the trees. He knew the further he drove the greater the risk of being spotted, but he was counting on the fact that the session was about to begin. The men should be busy doing other things.

Brent turned to him a couple times with what he guessed was a warning, but each time, he shook his head and like an etch a sketch he cleared out his opinions and left the thinking to Legacy. Like he was reminding himself of what Legacy was good for.

Legacy could sense that Brent was waiting to take charge on the ground operation. He'd never seen Legacy in action, he had no idea that the skills he left on the field almost ten years ago were good enough to be distinguished among the most elite military operatives in the nation. This was not a guy who needed his hand held, but Brent would find that out in his own time.

They were a mile away from the main building cluster when Legacy pulled the car to the side of the road and they got out. He said only "Keep up," and began a charge through the woods upward, zig zagging through trees. He kept the fading sun at a perpendicular angle to keep their shadows mixing in the trees and avoid long silhouettes approaching the main house. He reached the clearing and saw a glint of metal from behind one of the tinted windows -definitely movement. Someone was inside. The property management company had stated that there hadn't been a tenant in three years. Either the old tenants were really taking their time moving out, or new tenants occupied this place.

"It's them." Brent huffed in Legacy's ear. He hadn't realized that his pace would have pushed the youngster. Brent must have seen the amusement in Legacy's expression and offered defensively "The jacket and armaments I carry weigh a ton."

"Sure, are you ready?" Brent wasn't ready for the aggressive, flash powder style of military engagement. In the FBI most of the situations of engagement contain

no armed enemy, no resistance to the call “Federal Agent!” a point which he was about to explain to Legacy when he noticed that he had already pushed silently off his perch on the edge of the trees and had made it halfway across the open clearing.

Legacy knew something that Agent Brent did not, he knew that the leader of the Vinyl Men was not a criminal; he was a modern version of Grendel. Blade had turned his very personal flaws into a war against everyone who was to blame. And since there was no one and nothing other than perhaps his own flawed chemistry to blame, everyone was fair game. The game had an intricate set of rules in Blade’s mind, although he saved his most involved theatrics for the women whose natural understanding of sexuality mocked his unmatched intellect. Even though torture had complicated rules and procedures, he would kill a man with neither fore or afterthought.

Legacy kept moving across the field up the slope to the wooden door in front of him. Hesitation was the unseen participant in every operation, sometimes friend, sometimes foe. They were not going in with the intention of arrest, they were a lightning strike before the thunder could announce their presence.

Blade would draw first blood if he had the chance, Legacy was sure of it. He braced his body, lowering his shoulder into the weathered hollow core wooden door still decorated for Christmas. Remnants of a velour bow and the skeleton of a wreath made a bulls-eye in the center of the door.

Legacy knew exactly what kind of sound it would make when he hit, unfortunately he had no idea of what was on the other side. Life gives ironic reflections of who we are in an almost constant series, and he’d have to examine that thought – later.

Chapter 60 Retribution Run

Blade heard the crack of wood. He stood, half painted, dribbling excess royal blue down a puce mesh drain. He dropped the metal paint sprayer, and his feet were in motion with a speed that had him at the doorframe by the time the nozzle hit the tile.

He ran toward the sound, metal flashed as long thin knives appeared effortlessly, drawn from two hidden hip straps that his hands brushed past as an extension of his running motion. The deep twilight lent a mixture of rich red and burnt orange to the sky. Instead of concern, a sudden euphoria filled his body. He tuned out everything in the world and concentrated on his favorite thing: punishment.

Blade, or Blue, or half Blue in this case, the diagonal stripe that went across his torso also cut his face into uneven quadrants ranging from fully painted to thickly splattered, had a long loping gait that along with the flapping pieces of blue skin, made him look like a zombie.

He burst into the room where the sound emanated and took in the situation in an instant. There was a hole in the trailer floor and Laura's bed was propped up against the wall. Blade moved to bend over the hole drawn by a speckle of blood on one of the sharp splinters wickedly sticking up along the edge. His neck snapped towards the bed that towered over him. She must have used it as a ladder, then come down with all of her force on – something was wrong – the smell of blood, it wasn't the stain he smelled, there was more. The warning alarms sounded in his head as he backpedaled slightly from the hole.

The bed leaned away from the wall. He scrambled backward staring up as the frame traced an arc that he could tell he could not escape in time. Crash, the metal bar slammed into his shoulder. The leverage had come from the floor, if he'd remained at the hole it would have been a broken neck, but he only had a dislocated shoulder to thank Laura for. How could he ever repay her for this intense pain? Blade gritted out a smile through the agony of pushing his shoulder back into place. He'd think of something.

He looked up and saw her bloodied arm poised to strike him again. He pointed the tip of a knife up through the spring frame, daring her to bring her flesh anywhere near his freakish dexterity. There was nowhere for her to go, the exit was within reach of her deadly captor.

Blade relished her indecision. "What a bad girl you've been." He said in a saccharin rich tone. His wounded arm began to shake uncontrollably; it was a betrayal.

"Poor thing." Laura spat back. Blade turned furious in an instant. "I've known who you are from the start."

In a slow animal growl, "Yet there's part of you that wants to apologize, and throw yourself on my mercy even now."

"You have no mercy." She said, walking slowly toward him.

"Making your response perplexing. You stupid whore." He said returning to his natural voice, demeaning and decisive.

Laura's eyes were in a trance as she stepped forward, uncertainly, almost within Blade's grasp. She reached down and picked up his lighter and flipped it over in her hand. She held it out as if she were returning it, then Laura changed direction suddenly by vaulting backward off of the spring frame. She disappeared through

the hole in the floor.

The force of her lunge spread through the frame and reminded Blade of his wound. A white flash of pain filled his eyes. It was the kind of pain that should have been followed by a blackout, but Blade resisted the darkness regardless of the consequences. He wanted to feel the pain, mixed into her pain. The thought of the sadistic cocktail was enough to keep his eyes from rolling back into his head.

Blade wedged his good arm beneath the frame and it slid off his body. A few deep breaths and he struggled to his feet. He checked his watch with a grunt as his shoulder socket turned outward at an angle he'd never seen his shoulder hang before. It was bent backwards at a thirty-degree angle, and, glancing down, it was now pushed to the periphery. Ten minutes until broadcast, he might be late – that was unacceptable, but he was beginning to entertain the grotesque possibility. That bitch would pay for this. He would cut tears of blood into her beautiful rosy cheeks.

Laura landed softly on the pile of blankets she'd thrown down the hole under the trailer right after breaking through the wooden floor, just before setting her trap. She knew that she'd need them in case everything did not go well, and she took careful precaution to wrap her hands in the spandex roller-girl waitress costume that had been freshly supplied for her next appearance before picking up the stack.

RIGGA, RIGGA. Noises above her, the rattle of metal shifting. The injury she'd inflicted upon Blade would keep a normal man incapacitated for at least ten minutes, CREEEAK, she knew that she had only seconds.

Laura broke from the sanctuary of the undercarriage of the trailer; there were four equally ominous directions of the compass dial that could be followed. In the gloom of an ever-deepening darkness, she was sure of only one thing. The high ground was to her left.

A slow motion escape had been her plan from the very beginning. "Get out of the madhouse, then sit tight until the element of luck was out of the equation." A couple days of watching, planning would cement her escape. She'd learn their habits, the ins and outs of the operation and she wouldn't stop until the odds of her escape were all stacked in her favor, not theirs. She'd be in control this time, she needed that so much that it hit the override button on her inner need for a straight downhill plunge that might lead to a road or outcropping of houses in the valley below. Her salvation certainly didn't lie on the trail upwards, but it was the safest play.

She raced past the flagpole, crouching low, giving less of a profile for the outside

porch lights of the buildings to catch and magnify. She could hear the dogs yapping far away, someone was approaching their kennel she thought, and she knew exactly who it was.

At the edge of the clearing she plunged into the brush, twigs caught at her carefully styled hair; branches ignited the fire that was the large open wound on her arm. She'd gotten it plunging through the trailer floor, and the bleeding would be her first priority when she found a place to stop. She'd have to choose the location carefully...

Suddenly with a tremendous clap, the spot was chosen. She would stop, right here. Pain crashed over her body in asymmetrical waves. A shrill abbreviated scream escaped her lips before she could remind herself that any noise above a whisper was suicide. Laura looked down at the instrument that had abruptly stopped her progress. It was grizzly steel toothed trap, grinning up at her like a ravenous mechanical beast. The teeth were grinding into the bone just above her knee. She pulled at the jaws, forcing them beyond the puncture wound only to have a fresh wave of pain flood into her arms causing them to shake and lose their grip.

SNAP, it bit again, razor teeth lining up along the same marks as before. Laura had never felt pain like that before in her life. Not when she'd broken her collar bone skiing, not when her brother pushed her back through the shower door and she landed on a thousand pins of broken glass, not even more recently.

There was nothing to compare the sensitivity of raw nerves re-engaged. In fact, Laura thought she was going crazy because the very act of breathing seemed to make the white hot sensation burst into flame. She had medical training, only in field dressing and first aid. It would have taken a trained specialist to notice that the offset of the steel jaws had caused the most painful kind of break. The concussion on two different sides of the thick femur bone near the socket had caused competing fractures which traveled to the middle of the bone then traveled down the marrow to meet.

Every articulation of the knee joint was a fresh stab into the wound, every vibration traveled through the marrow stimulating the most sensitive pain centers in the body.

A noise, a voice below, Blade was urging the dogs to find her. The percussive commands: "Go – Get her, find her, girls."

Her hands grabbed at the steel in a panicked search for leverage, and she pried the trap open enough for her to twist her bloody knee out and draw it close to her body. There was a sickly smell that mixed with the blood, an oily musk smell. Was she being drugged, too? She should have known that Blade would have

trapped the woods surrounding the compound. If there were something on the jaws of the trap, it would be deadly.

Waiting for the grip of death would have been almost a luxury at that point for Laura. She thought about the soft fingers that would message her into a semi-conscious daze before turning out the lights. There might be moments of peace mixed in there somewhere – and that kicked her into motion. Death could be enjoyed from any position on this shrinking world of freedom that she'd thrust herself into by kicking out that panel in the floor. She'd like to at least have a view.

She had to move, her position had been given away. The details of her climb away from the trap, up through the brush, would never come back to her. She was lucky, she thought much later, because it must have been pure fear that dragged her two, three hundred yards up the slope. Fear of what was behind her, moving relentlessly, coming through the darkness, with a predator's sense of mercy. The jingle of collars and the yapping of dogs were approaching the trail behind her, but what she feared was human, or at least human in form.

Laura took the lighter out, turning it upside down to bathe the cap in the flame. She pressed it to the flesh on her arm, the wound closed without sensation. Her body barely noticed the pinprick inconvenience.

She heard the loud yapping below, they'd stopped for some reason at the traps. They were waiting for their master. That gave her precious moments. Would she have time?

She set out the blankets covering her within the hollow recess of a long needled evergreen. The crunching steps of Blade approached below, his anger seethed in a grumbling indistinct gnash of vowels and consonants which she was sure was some brutal old world incantation that would have frozen her heart if she could have made them out over the night's sounds. She repeated the process with the lighter. She pressed the metal cap against her bloody knee grinding it into the interior of the burbling wound. That's where she'd find the lighter when she woke up. Her heart thundered. It was too much, and Laura's consciousness punched a clock that the toughest men in her class would have already have filled. She felt like she could see the darkness gather in the deep shadows then bleed along the ground until it entered her pupils. Barking, voices, rattling chains became a background static to the inner chatter of her mind. She was a brave girl, that's what they'd say when they found her. A brave, dead girl.

Blade stumbled into the main cabin, the place that used to be the administration building, nearly a half hour later. He picked up the phone and dialed. The time that it took for the call to connect was unacceptable; he was already off his schedule.

“FBI”

The call that rang from the rotting rafters of the old A-frame building. The high ceilings plunged quickly along sharp diagonal lines to meet gaping bay windows; they were entering what used to be the lobby. Many cabin resorts were built like this in the seventies – and it was the model for all of the old IHOP restaurants. The sturdy frame of this building had withstood a lot of neglect, and in a climate such as this, neglect works almost as quickly as a coordinated wrecking crew. Legacy was through the sturdy door first.

Legacy tumbled through the door, turning his deflected momentum into a graceful roll. He felt the texture of the thin gummy carpet as he pushed himself to a crouched position.

He knew it was the wrong place immediately. The lobby was filled with people, and the people all had magnificent coiffs with some combination of dirt or braid, dreadlocks or rainbow-colored hair. The grungy couches met equally decrepit clothing and formed a mesh of upholstery and human - it was difficult to say where one stopped and the other began.

Legacy put away his gun. He felt almost as surprised as the faces that greeted him. The fact that he was in the field again, drawing his weapon and shouting orders was as incredible as the shock that, unfortunately, did not wash faces of the trespassers clean.

Brent charged around questioning people, confirming their error. He wanted to believe that this might be some kind of cover for a complicated operation – but nothing about this place smacked of Blade’s obsessive style. Blade wouldn’t even walk through this lobby.

The dirty hippies, or “dippies”, (and considering the amount of smells that Legacy had been confronted with since entering, he wouldn’t mind if the name stuck), had formed a cluster around Legacy. The broad shoulders must have given him away as a representative of authority. They looked at him in the strange kind of combination of fear and anger that teenage protesters have confronting *the man*.

Was Legacy *the man*? It certainly looked like they felt he was. It was time to blow their minds.

“Sorry folks, we had a tip that Jimi Hendrix was hiding out up here.”

He turned to Brent and shouted, “No Jimi?”

Brent shrugged; his face registered a confusion that told Legacy that he was too young to even know who Hendrix was, or why he was a hero to ninety percent of the people in this room.

“Move out.”

Behind him, a sudden wave of energy passed through the slack jaws and dilated eyes, questions hurled at Legacy as he marched toward the exit. “I knew they faked his death.” Was the common thread, Legacy produced a sharp military turn at the door and said; “I can’t comment.” then left the building. He was *the man*.

Brent peppered him with nearly as many questions as they double-timed it back to the car. “We didn’t check the rooms, that could have been a front, couldn’t it?”

The free spirited crowd did not mix with Blade’s bikers, not even as a fence around the operation. “It smelled wrong.”

That was all of the explanation Legacy gave to Brent, who jogged alongside him for the next quarter mile. They sped away from the resort, neither man spoke of the fact that Blade was getting closer to killing his next victim with every tick of the clock.

Time was not on their side. It was already past five, Laura would be on camera now, her body exposed and her mind toyed with until her heart stopped beating. The deathblow would come at six.

They sped down the road, Legacy pushed the accelerator down and hit fifty, bumping through wheel trenches on uneven dirt roads winding back to the highway. Brent stared forward, jaw locked in frustration, but his feelings didn’t matter much to the silent wheelman skipping the bottom of his car across the uneven terrain like a flat rock across the smooth surface of a pond.

A glance over at his passenger opened up a window into his mind. It was the kind of instant appraisal that Legacy was legendary for, and it gave him his answer. He didn’t want innocents to pay for his anger. He wanted one very specific person to suffer for his feeling of helplessness. He wanted to take Blade down. Brent himself had become a loaded weapon, and Legacy could tell that he’d better be very careful with whom or at what he directed Brent at. He looked like he could go off at any minute.

Legacy skidded onto the main road clipping a gleaming silver pole of a chain link fence. A bright spark flashed across the passenger side. Brent gave him a look, and said with a deadpan tone, “Good luck getting back your deposit.”

Humor was the last thing that Legacy expected from his companion. The look on Brent’s face was rigid, his jaw was set like he’d just said something like “Let’s kill them all,” but behind his eyes there was a measure of awareness, and that’s what made the comment funny. Legacy was quietly reassured.

He didn’t have the same feeling about their next destination, it either was the

place and they'd be tight up against the clock or they'd have missed their chance entirely following this very lead. There'd be no one to blame if they didn't get to Laura, and that was ok for Legacy. He didn't want anyone to blame.

Chapter 61 Unwanted Escape

Tears ran down Darci's face, washing into the rainbow-colored temporary tattoo that circled from the point of her chin up to her right eye. The pattern was tough and beautiful, but now the design had broken down with river marks creating shorelines of residue. She would have liked to follow one of her tears down and away from this place, maybe pick up some brown or green on the way to somewhere else.

Darci didn't have that option. She was sitting in front of the cruelest officer of the law she'd ever encountered. This heartless bitch was making her examine everything that happened in her life, viewed in one continuous arc. She wasn't allowed to compartmentalize by the random places she'd been. Or even make distinctions by lumping all of her experiences into the intoxication of a constant adolescent binge of alcohol, ecstasy and marijuana. All of the excuses that had been buttresses against collapse were now paper-thin partitions and led to a resulting flood of tears.

The agent didn't let her think, she kept feeding her question after question. Everything the agent wanted to know by now, she knew. Her love affair with Mac, or "Brown" as she preferred to call him, who had originally brought her to the biker's lair. The agent had seemed revolted when she'd learned that Darci had been the catalyst for the money making side of the operation. She herself had marketed her images to the websites in her hometown. The men were incidental, just like she'd said. People who'd wanted to see her get fucked wouldn't care if it were by nameless, faceless blobs. It was her painfully low estimation of men. She was, unfortunately, right.

Darci had protected only one thing, and that was because the agent had bought her statement at face value, wanting to believe it and thus leaving it unprobed. Darci told her that she'd come back for revenge, personal revenge against Blade. It was indeed a fantasy of hers, so the tone and delivery must have been reasonably convincing. She hadn't told the nodding agent the real reason, that she was in love, and why would she guess that anyway? Nothing about Darci spoke to romance, except with Mac's meaty protective arms wrapped around her. There she felt safe, and after being in a perpetual state of imbalance, riding wheels that rattled like they were within a revolution of coming off, "safe" had a fresh ring to it.

The question was coming; she could feel it materialize out of the stale scent of decomposition that moved through the place, stirred by the wake of every movement, every unwashed customer's entrance. The walls began to close in on Darci. The agent wasn't going to let her leave until Darci told her everything. There was nothing she could do but stall, and maybe hope for a natural disaster. Maybe an earthquake would bring the dusty walls down on them and she wouldn't have to answer the question she could see building on the agent's lips. Darci imagined the timbers snapping. She felt the rush of musty air escaping the dark and brittle phloem of the supports. In her imagination, everyone was looking for cover, while she was sitting calmly at the table. Darci could see the beam above her waver then drop as if released from both sides. She smiled, knowing that the act of crushing her bones would hardly even slow it down.

Darci had a vivid imagination, helped by the fact that reality was the disciplinarian in her imaginary family. The only way to keep away from the punishment was to go inside herself. Darci's eyes focused again and as she looked up, she slightly repositioned her chair under the heavy beam that hung above.

The sound of the bottle returning from the lips of the agent to the table startled her, Darci stared at the spot on the table like it were to blame for the sudden noise.

Agent Wagner said in a reassuring tone, "We need to know where they are, then we can finish this, none of them will ever get to you again, they'll be behind bars for life."

It registered in Darci's eyes before she was able to contain it, the sweet shift of satisfaction replacing fear. What a relief it would be to have Blade out of her nightmares, gone forever behind bars and if there were any justice, getting the treatment from his fellow inmates that he so richly deserved. In a flash, she was imagining him being awoken surrounded by a group of four, maybe five hulking brutes ready to initiate him.

Darci's mouth started to move, and the agent leaned in.

Darci struggled, and then finally said, "I've got to go to the bathroom."

How could she explain it? This was her dream, and yet it was surrounded by her greatest fear. Never to see Mac again? It was impossibly cruel that she would go through all of this and not end up in his arms. She snuck a glance over her shoulder at the agent. Her face looked so perfect, strong and defiant, like a boxer's or maybe one of the models on a French catwalk. She didn't smack of compromise; in fact there was nothing in her unwavering gaze that suggested she would comprehend capricious love. The agent looked like she'd planned every

line, every color and every intersection that drew her into another person's eyes. Darci, in comparison, reflected as complete chaos.

She couldn't risk telling the agent and losing Mac, Darci thought, rounding the corner and hearing the compressor for the ice machine kicking in, echoed on the rafters above her. It was the perfect accompaniment for her thoughts, which roared through her mind inefficiently, churning out an internal cacophony. It churned out a theme song for the dispossessed.

The women's bathroom had been turned into a storage closet, so she unlatched the L-shaped piece of metal that kept the ill-framed door shut and used the cover of the open door to walk into the men's room. The place was immaculate, which didn't surprise her, Burly always kept his place clean. She sat on the toilet, but she didn't pull down her skirt, she just sat and cried. Then decided. The agent would just have to wait.

Wagner's beer washed over her back fillings, chilling the metal and lingering, mixing with her sweet breath and coming out with a sigh. Darci had left the table two minutes ago, and she was beginning to get nervous.

She had her, Wagner knew she had her, but something spooked her at the very last minute. She would have followed her, but for the fact that she had a clear sightline below the saloon doors that lead to the women's bathroom, and they hadn't moved since she'd closed them two minutes ago. In fact, she hadn't blinked even as she retraced every aspect of the conversation she'd had with Darci. Still something didn't make sense.

What was she missing? If Darci wanted revenge, why wouldn't she simply give them up, did she want it to be personal? Was Darci really interested in plunging in the knife herself? She didn't look like she had it in her. Wagner took a deep breath and thought about how Legacy was always telling her to step outside her own assumptions.

Was there any chance that she hadn't come for revenge at all? Was there a benevolent option? Wagner remembered the boyfriend, the one so interested in protecting her. Was it possible that she felt some loyalty to him after all that he'd done to her? If she saw him as being her rescuer, that could go a long way in the mind of a confused, abused child.

Her questions were interrupted by the sound of a roaring pack of motorcycles outside. The throaty engines thumped out a vibration that Wagner could literally see in the form of a nervous spoon on her table. Then something quite surprising happened.

The front door of the place opened, but instead of the expected bikers it was a pretty-faced but somehow fragile young woman in a fancy cocktail dress.

Wagner monitored the conversation; she didn't have a choice, as most of it was shouted.

"Snowflake?" Burly, too, seemed to be taken off guard.

Snowflake looked on the verge of producing pear-shaped tears. Her eyes glistened. "My county commissioner – " She couldn't get out the rest of the sentence. Wagner guessed that it was bad news because of the sobs. If it had been 'my county commissioner just gave me a check for ten thousand dollars', or even 'my county commissioner decided not to run for a second term', the reaction would not be laced with so much heartbreak. Snowflake's words were coated in a teenager's myopic sense of loss. She could not have predicted the train wreck that would follow.

"Don't take another step, Snowy. It's over."

It sounded like some kind of alpine soap opera. Wagner could only guess at their history, the dirty-faced refugee showing up at sundown, expecting to be welcomed back. But she wasn't welcome at all, Wagner felt the bartenders' resolve in the curt exchange, and it looked like the situation was beginning to sink in for the young woman, Snowflake.

Wagner had seen people fall apart before, in fact she'd read about the topic extensively and her favorite Dr. Sopklem, PHD had broken down the visual aspect of complete emotional breakdowns into five distinct categories. It was a fascinating topic that toed the line from disintegration to explosion. It was descriptive, and complete. Wagner added a sixth category that night. She watched Snowflake's features flush with grief only to drain completely, snow white. She stood in the place she was most familiar with, and she was completely lost. Her arms stretched outward, trembling, then fell to her sides like the strings cut from a marionette. Snowflake cast about her eyes for an anchor, then seemed overwhelmed by every object in the room, like it was the first or last time she'd ever see again. Her expression, desperately sad, finally emptied of emotion completely.

She turned on a squeaky floorboard, and only then did Wagner notice one of her feet was bare, the other was in a heel befitting a night on the town. Something had changed, and her wardrobe had been unable to keep up.

Whether out of guilt or sympathy, Burly raised his voice once more at the willowy girl who'd been his sixth wife. "Go back to him Snowy, only a fool wouldn't take you back."

Wagner heard the haunting reply, and she wished she hadn't. Snowy said with a hollow finality, "He won't." And then she was gone.

The phone rang as she crossed the threshold; it sounded like one of those obscene security systems that they have at large chain stores that nobody pays any attention to, but is of a pitch that is designed to startle anyone nearby. Burly went to the phone.

Wagner's mind was on the bathroom: she'd let her eyes wander to the meltdown with Burly's sixth ex-wife. Could Darci have slipped out? Wagner stood and walked toward the saloon doors. She heard Burly on the phone, "Sounds like the boys just pulled up, you want to wait?" Then she heard a bark through the receiver that was audible clear across the bar. The man on the other end of the line didn't want to wait.

She pushed through the doors and tapped softly on the door marked "Cowgirl". No movement, no sound at all. She pushed the door inward.

The dark supply closet was the last thing Wagner expected to see. A pull chain above ignited a yellow bulb that dangled from the rafters.

She moved quickly to the "Cowpoke" bathroom and pushed open the door. A message was scrawled on the mirror in eyeliner. "I'll be back at midnight, and I'll take you to where they are."

Cinderella was at the ball, damn it. She'd slipped out the back. Wagner stepped back into the hallway, retracing Darci's path to the back door, and looked out into the blackness of the mountain night. The chill in the air pushed through the screen of the back door, and it gently flapped inward to an irregular beat.

A creaking in the floor directly behind her brought her back to the moment. She froze, feeling the presence of someone directly behind her. The place and the time were all in his advantage, the confinement of the doorframe, and the sound of the compressor masking the approach. There was no time to draw a weapon, not any time to think as a hand came down upon her shoulder.

Legacy checked his watch. Even by breaking every traffic law in Summit County, it had taken him twenty minutes to make it to the access road that led to the next site.

The towering rocks, rich with metal ore, had turned their cell phones into fashionable pocket watches. Brent looked like he didn't want an update; just another reason to pull the trigger – reasons like that weren't in short supply.

The GPS didn't recognize the twisting "road." The triangle that represented their car drifted across a blank void like the computer itself had no idea what they were doing. They'd found a hole in the web of technology; exactly the kind of place Blade would covet.

He knew they were getting close. Legacy saw the rocky entrance to the clearing a split second before he had to execute a hairpin turn. He told his sullen passenger, “Hold on.” He bottomed out the car on the center earthen ridge between the tracks. It slowed them just enough to take the turn. They slid a moment; the wheels came in solid contact with the uneven ground and thrust the car up like it had been lifted upward by a giant hand. The roller coaster ride brought out the child in Legacy; he stopped the car and leapt out, practically skipping into the headlights.

There in the paired pools of halogen headlights was a crude parking lot, where a car very similar to theirs was parked alongside a cluster of jet black, chrome frosted, mint condition Harleys. Legacy pointed to the car and Brent understood almost simultaneously with being told. “Wagner.” Brent immediately fell in step. It was like having a puppy. A really deadly, smart and highly trained killer puppy.

Legacy remembered his first assignment paired with a tracker dog in Myanmar – it had been a humbling experience for him. He’d been at the top of the operatives list, and yet the dog ended up calling all of the shots on the mission. The dog exhibited perceptions that had impressed the young agent so much that he’d begun training with it on his furloughs. A particularly raucous game of ‘how much is he holding on the streets of inner city DC’ had caught the attention of a social worker working overtime in the neighborhood.

Legacy had just gotten done shaking down a low life called Misbehaving, Meese to his “friends”. His dog had found him.

“My dog thinks you’ve got more than Morgan over there, wave to Morgan.”

Meese lifted his hand and waved to his archrival pusher across the street, who smiled broadly, then returned to massaging his neck. He’d met Legacy a few minutes earlier. Meese pulled out three bags, one of which held cocaine. Legacy looked at his dog “How did you know he had coke?” The dog cocked its head and pushed his snout between Legacy and Meese. Legacy chose a spot on Meese’s neck and snapped his knuckles; stinging the skin, “Damn, what did you do” he sputtered craning his neck around. Legacy let him go and he hit the ground like a colostomy bag.

“I just injected you with an experimental drug that stays in your system for a month, anything in the narcotic family hits your system and your brain stops getting oxygen. A brain’s important –” He added. “Even for you.”

The younger Legacy actually was a bit of an idealist. His lesson for Meese didn’t end there. “If I hear you sell to children, even one, I’m coming back and giving you the booster shot for this every month for the rest of your life.” He turned to

leave, and there was Judith.

“What’s going on here?” She always had a nose for injustice, although this time she’d initially misread the situation, thinking Legacy was part of some thuggery. Then, with a bright smile spreading halfway across the world she said, “Martin?”

Another voice shook him from his thoughts, and even though it was far closer it seemed hollow, unwanted, and it took a while for the sound to replace the “Martin” that sounded so full, so real, so needed.

“I don’t think they take to kindly to strangers.” Brent managed a bit of some smirk and swagger combination he’d seen in the movies.

Legacy realized he was standing in the doorway of the bar. Three men at a nearby table were the only visible occupants of the rotting wooden cavern. He saw that they were frozen in fear. Then something odd happened. Fear melted away, and they were barking with laughter at each other. They snorted and shoulder patted their way back into a grumbling chatter.

It was clear that they didn’t recognize either Brent or Legacy as a threat. Whatever they were expecting, it wasn’t them, and it was scarier than two military-trained killers. No emotion on their faces other than relief. Legacy couldn’t wait to meet the man who inspired this reaction, and it seemed like he must be coming to meet them soon.

Legacy recognized the three men immediately; Purple sat with an angry sneer on his face, back to the door. Brown had his fat ass hanging off both sides of a solid wood chair that complained every time anything on him shifted, which was often. Green sat facing the door, quiet as a math professor at a singles mixer. He didn’t try to hide his nerves, staring at the portal through which the inconsequential Agents Brent and Legacy had passed. They didn’t matter at all. It was the next person who came through the door who very much did matter.

Brent turned to the trio like he was going to engage them in conversation. Legacy quickly steered him toward the bar. “It’s them. What time is it?”

Brent checked his phone. “Ten till.”

“They’re waiting for Blade, I can’t think why they expected him early unless something spooked them - “ A thousand things raced through Legacy’s mind as he scanned the place. Then suddenly urgent thoughts turned into urgent action. “Call in, and keep an eye on them.” Legacy was out of his chair, headed for the door.

Brent followed him, straining for a casual gait that his legs obviously had no idea how to produce. He saw what had launched Legacy into action. There was a table near the back where two chairs were drawn away like their occupants

would return at any minute. In the ashtray, a thin plume of smoke rose from a cigarette that had nearly burned down to the filter. Even from ten yards it was easy to see the lipstick imprint drawn in an arc around the tip. It didn't look like a shade that any of the men in the corner could pull off. He did know someone, however, who could.

Brent broke into a sprint as he left the building, catching Legacy at his open window as the car started. "Legacy."

"Use the phone, call in, get helicopters floodlights and roadblocks, we still don't know where Blade is, and if any of the other colors in that bar go anywhere, erase them."

"It's Wagner, isn't it?"

Legacy punched the car into drive, his voice was stone cold, and it pushed Brent away like an icy hand on his shoulder. "Laura's clock is down to nine minutes, Wagner can take care of herself."

Legacy's voice sounded convincing, but something in his eyes as he charged the trail ahead of him reflected in the rearview mirror. His worries were spreading out rather than consolidating, the opposite of what was supposed to happen.

Wagner knew who they were up against: an inventive, brutally efficient sociopath who had made a living out of the chaos of a shadow world he called home. He hadn't yet felt danger recoil onto himself. People mistake criminals like this, thinking that their crime defines them. Their crime is the most recent symptom of their warped inner workings, it is their latest cruel art, but it is still a hobby compared to a highly elastic basic drive. At the core of the most feared modern predator is self-preservation. Wagner was in full assault mode with Laura's life on the line. It was her anthem, but somehow, Legacy thought, in the chill of the thin mountain air, it rang like a death knell. If Legacy were emotionally capable of startling revelations, he would have leapt far enough out of his seat to eject when he came to the end of his bumpy journey of thought on the subject of Wagner. He wasn't sure if he was careening upward to rescue Laura at all anymore.

The taillights curled red tracers like the tip of a sparkler, bouncing into the vast darkness of the quiet mountain. Gun to his head, he couldn't honestly say what was at the front of his thoughts, rushing into the same danger at a pace that every other adversary of Blade used to run away from him. The trees, row upon row, gave the light more and more filter as the car climbed, until finally, from his vantage, there was no evidence that light or life existed at all.

Wagner felt a large hand clamp onto her shoulder. Her body tensed as a mountain of human flesh pushed her up against her midsection. She caught the faint scent of spearmint, and a voice pressed into her inner ear.

“You need to get out of here.” Burly shifted his weight pointing his gut diagonally so it didn’t rest on this little toothpick of a woman. His frame, if he lost his balance, would have spread her like peanut butter up against the wall. Burly didn’t want to have to clean the wall. “Trouble is on the way.”

Wagner slid to the floor. Burly reached out a hand to her shoulder, “Are you OK?”

Wagner only needed two fingers, and with a snap of leverage, she turned her shoulders into a hand crank, spinning the pressure into the slow separation the bones in his wrist. In a blink of an eye, she had turned and was kneeling before Burly. Burly’s eyes flooded with pain, and tears began to pool in the corners. Wagner was controlling the floodgates. She pressed her thumb further into the joint, her nail pinching the connective tissue.

Burly somehow maintained an even tone. “Jesus, little lady, I’m trying to help you - “

She cut him off, “Let’s start talking about what I want to talk about. Where did she go?” Wagner couldn’t let go of Darci’s trail. The concern of the bartender, even the sincerity of his warning, didn’t throw up any alarms.

Burly heaved a minty sigh, and he decided that it was far less painful to give the agent what she wanted, rather than argue with her.

He pointed two fingers on his free hand toward a rusty sign, gleaming in the half moon. “Trailhead to the compound starts right there.”

“I’ll take the road.”

“The back trail is faster, even at night. The road winds all the way out to Park Canyon Bridge.” His husky voice began to quiver. Wagner released her grip.

She paused, considering her options. The fact that the bartender didn’t want her to go back into the bar area was clear. He hadn’t moved a step and his message was protective. “Protective of what? Of her?” Wagner’s thoughts rang so loud in her head that she was sure that he could hear her. The presence of something or someone hung in the air. It was Blade. Burly knew when his customers were scared. Years of running a bar had tuned his radar carefully to the moment before blood was going to be shed. Blade was on his way; knives were out.

None of the information that hung in the air filtered into Wagner – it seemed like she’d have to make a decision without all of the facts. If, for example, she had

any idea that Brent and Legacy stood only yards away, it might have changed her reasoning. She might have pushed past the mountain of a man who filled the hallway and ordered a final round for the men in the corner. Instead, she decided if there was any chance of getting to Darci before she came into contact with Blade, it was worth the gamble. One last confirmation - “Darci started coming in here about six moths ago?”

He nodded, “She smiled and winked every time she picked up drinks for them, she made little toothpick decorations with the fruit – she’s a kid. She’ll end up going to jail with them, and she doesn’t deserve that.”

“Do you know what they’re up to?”

“Drugs? Theft – the regular.”

Wagner did her best in the dim light to judge the bartender’s eyes. She made a snap decision and pulled out a pen, then plucked a detached scotch label from the utility shelf. “It’s a satellite phone number, call it and tell the man on the other end these exact words.” She wrote a single sentence.

Burly looked passive, indecisive, it was probably the trait that had made so many women walk out on him. He needed something – what was it?

Wagner perched up on her tiptoes hauled back and slapped the large man full force across a chubby cheek. “There’s more where that came from, don’t disappoint me.” She flashed a smile. A rumble began in Burly’s tummy, erupting past his stinging cheek and finally coming out of his nose and mouth simultaneously. Burly had a therapeutic break through in that hallway; he’d always hesitated when someone walked out on him - in his own world. Bang! The back door crashed against the frame. He finally got out the words. Wagner had already left, and he spoke under his breath, as the message wasn’t for her. “Leaving me is the biggest mistake you’ll ever make, don’t walk out that door.”

Trailblazer Wagner was five minutes up the trail when she began to hear noises ahead of her. Twenty yards up the trail a shadow crossed the moon, it might have been a coyote, or a bear, or a tiger. Wagner’s identifications betrayed her east coast city upbringing. She had less understanding of alpine predators than grasses that she crushed under foot. It didn’t slow her down a bit. Her instinct that anything truly dangerous wouldn’t announce its presence kept her plunging forward toward the noise ahead at breakneck speed.

She knew that trusting Burly was a huge leap; however, it was one she took at a full run. It all came down to his breath. Not the odor, that was putrid. The sound of breathing told Wagner a lot about a person. The sounds that a person calculated were not half as interesting as the ones they didn’t control at all. They couldn’t conceal the nature of the breath that they had been drawing into

themselves since birth. Very few people can control their breath with the same precision as his words. Legacy could. It was number 321 on a list of reasons to dislike Legacy, pages and pages were filled and she was even printing the mental list double sided nowadays to save space. Still she wouldn't mind hearing his voice to calm her racing pulse, or at least in order to redirect her anger.

It sounded crazy but she'd thought she'd heard his voice outside the bar, just as she'd left. It was over the racing of an engine – another reason she was sure it was paranoia, because she'd also thought that the engine sounded exactly like her own car. So, in her mind, Legacy was outside the bar, yelling, stealing her car. Wagner knew why she'd created it. What was it about the tall dark father figure head case that put her at ease during crises and pissed her off at all other times?

Her legs raced over old halved out logs compacted so far into the earth that the fact that were once stairs was almost completely lost to the feet which alternately skidded off or sunk into sections of the wood – at the top, the sound of breathing became louder. Wagner was almost on top of her when she topped the stairs, and what she saw made her pause.

A pool of light filtered pale green by the pine needles. There was a compound of buildings. The down slope after the top of the stairs had hidden the cluster of outbuildings from sight, but now she could see their location winking from behind the trees.

There was the movement again. Two different sources now, and one of them was getting louder. It was approaching. She and Darci were not the only ones out walking the silver tipped edge of the moon.

Chapter 62 Bar Tag

“Do you think he's going to bust up the place again?” Mac grumbled. The memory usually brought a laugh from the group, but tonight, not even a smile.

Vorest spat back, “This dump could use a kerosene and a spark plug to complete the make-over.” He flipped his lighter back and forth with a clicking sound like he was threatening the timbers around him. The timbers, comfortable in the dark recesses of ancient slumber, were unimpressed.

Sean nodded, staring at the door where Blade would soon make his entrance. He turned to Mac, smiling belatedly at his joke. He scanned his eyes over to Vorest, who was so jittery that parts of him looked out of focus. Some men, when they are threatened, like to intimidate weaker people or break things. Sean sat silent like he expected everything.

His father was a mechanic and every day he'd come home like clockwork, stoned beyond reason. Father would hit mother, mother would slap oldest daughter Kim, Kim would lock middle child, Sean in the closet where he'd take care of the youngest daughter, Nelle. He didn't remember molesting her, there was no agreement whether it was him or his dad, but the accusation had sent him away from her for life. He had ridden thousands of miles to get away from the cycle, and yet he'd become a participant and enabler in the torture and violence against innocents. He'd become his father. Experts would add him to the statistics. He sometimes wished that he could bring himself to put a bullet between his own eyes.

The thought spurred him to speak, "He'll be here any minute. What do you think he needs us for?"

"It's obvious, Feely and Stones fucked up. We need to find a replacement."

"Should have taken that sweet piece of candy sitting in the bar, where did she go anyway?" Vorest growled.

"Why didn't he just call us back to camp?"

"He wants to make this beating public."

"You call this public?" Sean looked around the bar, only a square head from town sitting talking into a hands free cell phone headset. "I think he just wanted to know where we were – he's cut and run."

Vorest punched Mac in the chest, half because he was closest, half because he had never been able to read Sean. He might be one of those quiet killers, and right now he didn't need enemies, he needed allies. "Fuck you. He's walking through that door and kicking our asses and then you'll be sorry you said that."

Sean waited for him to catch up to his own logic. It didn't happen. "Sure, I'm wrong."

The tension suddenly shifted. Before they were afraid of Blade walking through the door and now, strangely, they worried that he wouldn't.

Ten minutes later, the phone rang and a message was delivered through the fat bartender. Blade had fixed the problem, and he wasn't coming after all.

Wagner heard the attacker coming through the trees, along with the shriek from Darci. She acted on reflex, taking long fluid strides over the uneven ground, and yet somehow launching herself gracefully into the pile, gun drawn, screaming. "Federal Agent, I'm armed."

This was all academy training, but nothing in her experience had prepared her for

what was at the bottom of the scrum. The attacker hadn't cared in the least that she was FBI or that she was armed. Her shoulder struck the attacker and her gun hand brushed against a sagging coat of warm soft fur, heaving the animal off of Darci and sending him skidding down the slope.

The animal snapped its jaws at his attacker, drawing blood on the fleshy part below Wagner's chin, inches from her throat. She could tell that its jaws had the power to send a lot more than the trickle of blood running down the ridge of her collarbone.

Wagner pulled Darci off of her knees, "Are you bleeding?"

Darci looked like she was about to cry, looking at the three deep marks across her midsection where the animal had raked its claws. Darci couldn't answer, she was frozen and had gone sheet white. She held out her hand, covered in blood. It was like she wanted Wagner to verify something she couldn't bring herself to believe.

The flailing dog finally regained traction, skidding to a stop far below. It quickly began circling outward looking for a safe, fast way back up the ridge to its prey. Wagner judged the distance to the nearest building and began tugging on Darci to follow. Her legs moved like concrete stilts, stiff and heavy.

Wagner heard a yelp, and then the sound of running. The dog had found its trail.

They were halfway across the clearing, nearly to a small 8 by 10 enclosure when the dog broke from the dark underbrush. Forty yards were gobbled in half. According to the shadows created innocently from the lamppost light, the heads of the women were almost touching the bloodstained teeth of the dog.

The snarling beast was ten yards away when Wagner pushed on the door. It didn't budge and, much worse, the gun which was in her hand dropped from the effort. She knew it was too late to pick it up and take aim on the dog. Wagner had made a huge mistake by not simply waiting for the dog at the clearing's edge, putting a bullet in the chest to slow its breathing then walking up and putting a second in the brain. It hardly deserved a bullet in the brain for protecting its home, but looking at the situation she was in now, she saw the error clearly.

Her mind raced trying to make up for her body's error. There was something strange about the rough-hewn door, something that didn't fit the measure of its utility or perhaps some detail that would give her leverage – then she saw it. The hinges were visible on the outside of the door. Most hinges are on the inside so that nobody can simply remove the door and enter the house. It makes the usual swing of a door inward. This door swung outward, making her original push ineffective. She took a deep breath and pulled. It flapped open, banging against

the exterior wall, bringing the other occupant of the room to his feet. This was the dog's house; there were bars on the windows and the door swung outward because it was built to keep things inside, not discourage entrance from the outside. Wagner had hoped to pull the door shut once entering, but the surprise of finding another dog waiting on the inside had cut her enthusiasm for being locked inside the room. The two dogs growled and circled the women.

Wagner couldn't stop thinking about the defensive wound patterns that the ME would examine on her body post-mortem. What a strange image to take into forever land. There was a hint of a smile on Wagner's lips, she hoped that it would linger, and that someone would have to guess what in this terrible situation had put it there.

Agent Brent had to repeat every third word he spoke into his headset. Sitting near enough to the bikers that he couldn't shout, he kept an efficient cadence and military structured communication pattern through the crackling connection back to Washington.

It wasn't the overcast skies or even the accompanying pressure drop before a storm that interfered with his satellite unit; it was most likely it was some kind of magnetic content in the rocks. It was only a hundred years past that these ranges had produced a rich variety of ores for a nation with a growing appetite for silver place settings, gold for rotting teeth, and, later, uranium to ensure a quick death for anyone who tried to take the gold or silver away. Most people think that the magnetic charge somehow interferes with the signal, and this is not the case. Each phone has an identifying chip that allows linkage to a series of communication satellites. It's this chip that changes the equipment from an extremely expensive receiver (like a radio) into a communication device.

Brent heard each of Wilkes' excited words perfectly clearly, however, getting his position back to Wilkes took a gymnastic exercise of speech, the long program, minus the medals and leotards.

Wilkes didn't know that his side of the conversation was perfectly clear, and he yelled into the receiver, "There are four units on the way on the ground. One will be in the air in forty minutes, and the entire area can be contained by dawn. Copy."

"We have two agents in the field, we might have to move before containment." Brent didn't want to wait.

"Say again."

"Agents in field, 6 pm deadline for Laura approaching." He spoke in packets.

“Laura’s broadcast has been delayed, tell your agent he has more time – hold.”

Thoughts raced through Brent’s head, Blade had never gone off schedule. What did this mean? It was two minutes to six. Had Legacy interfered with the execution? If so, he should probably take down the men in the corner, it would at least satisfy his need to deal out some punishment. If the bartender would only get off the damn phone go in the back, he could probably shoot all of them – calculated, painful chronic injuries they’d take with themselves to the chair. With no witnesses, he could contend it was in self-defense.

A flood of narrative from Wilkes interrupted his thoughts of revenge, pouring like salt water onto an open wound.

“Blue just entered the frame - he’s dragging Laura in by her neck. She’s in a wig. Move your resources, agent. He’s putting her in arm restraints – oh, Christ.”

Brent shouted. “What?”

“He’s showing a knife to the camera. Move your resources! Now!”

Brent hadn’t been able to make clear the fact that he had no communication with either of the agents in the field. He was as helpless as any other viewer to the atrocity. Wilkes’ usual rock solid tone began to crack, barking orders to others around him. Moments passed, as the voices in the background rose in a loud commotion.

The words, indistinct, washed over the airwaves, occasionally popping out like a rusty nail in a clamoring construction site. Brent didn’t care much for drama. He’d once been dragged to a theater production of Pirates of Penzance by a fresh faced theater major. Brent had found himself earnestly wishing that the boat would sink, all hands on deck. Brent had a no tolerance policy for non-participants – he lived real action and couldn’t understand anyone who pretended to play a part. Wilkes voice woke him from a bad daydream and slammed him head first into nightmare.

“OH, GOD!” His voice rattled the earpiece, then eerie silence. “It’s over.”

Brent cast his eyes around the barroom wildly. He wanted so badly to lash out at something. He was met only with dubious stares of the bikers who had begun to pay attention to the agent’s behavior.

Wilkes continued, clinically, “Her back’s to the camera, we can’t see the wound, but the volume of blood indicates a cut artery, she’s limp in the restraints.” His voice found a hollow reserved for those who thought they’d seen it all, only to find one gutting image left. “Never seen a girl – it’s over, wait for backup agent.” He murmured in a stupor, “Seen a hundred men die -”

Agent Brent disconnected, he didn't want to hear that last part, he didn't want to hear any of it. He surged from his chair, he didn't know what he was going to do, but it involved payback and the men in the corner. He took one step in their direction and his phone rang. He stood like a stone monument to indecision in the middle of the bar. The bikers studied him like he was somehow familiar – categorized but not identified, yet. One of them took the time to sneer and blow smoke menacingly from nostrils.

He didn't want to hear another word, but his sense of duty ran deeper than his vein of retribution, just barely. He pushed a button on the phone and was more than a little surprised at the hushed, disturbingly familiar voice that came across the line.

"I'm calling to report - I've been calling but I couldn't get through, but now I am."

"How did you get the number?" Brent demanded.

"Well, I got this number from a girl agent –" the voice sighed, struggled to be understood like he believed cops spoke a different language "She told me to call"

Brent noticed the slight echo, doubling the sound of his breath and it clicked for the young agent, he turned to the bar. Brent locked eyes with the man on the other end of the phone. The bartender slouched over the phone, hiding the receiver in a thick hand. Brent closed the distance between them in brisk steps, reached across the bar, his fingers reaching for the phone, disconnecting the surprised bartender. He picked up the conversation face to face without skipping a beat.

"What did she say?"

Burly took the sudden shift in his customary way, chewed and digested the strange turn of events like it was part of human nature. He'd seen enough strange human nature in his days that this agent appearing in front of him provided only the opportunity to deliver his message.

"You got here fast."

"Where is Agent Wagner?"

"She went up the back trail to the old church camp- little while ago."

His slow country drawl caused Brent visible discomfort in a time when every tick of the clock seemed to bring a fresh crisis. Burly couldn't tell what nerve he was tapping into, so Brent courteously decided to bring him closer to examine the problem face to face. He grabbed the bartender by the shirt and pulled him across the bar with a sudden jolt. Burly's feet scuffed around wildly searching

for the ground. Brent knew he was pressing hard, too hard, and he knew it but he couldn't stop himself. Wagner was at risk.

"When?"

A rumble that Brent originally mistook for a massive gastric belch escaping the fat man's stomach erupted in the night air. It was joined by another rumble, amplified again and again. It was the sound of engines churning to life.

The men in the corner were gone.

Brent bolted for the door. He was outside, a wall of yellow light was aimed at the door and he squinted, staring into a row of three headlights and what struck him immediately wasn't surprise. It was the flat, ridged grip of the gun stamped in the center of his forehead, propelled by the arm of the fat one. He was quick for a man carrying at least twice the natural weight for his frame. This lightning strike to the forehead was called the stare down, for the way it blurred the vision of the man who was hit. It was evidently the fat one's signature move.

"My signature move." Mac told the teetering agent in a chummy tone.

Brent didn't black out, but the sudden concussion on the visual cortex made him completely incapable of fending off attackers.

Blade usually took over when they were helpless, but tonight there were several things that didn't go according to plan.

"Why didn't he go down, Mac?"

Mac was just as surprised, "They always go down."

Sean didn't want a chat, "Pop him and let's go."

Vorest stepped forward and put a fist into the gut of the teetering man. His hand crunched, at first he thought it was the ribs of the man he was hitting, and a smile came to his face, but it disappeared in an instant of realization. Fist running full force into Kevlar on a cold night meant something was going to go crunch, and it wasn't going to be the Kevlar. It was like punching a concrete wall.

"Fucking A, my hand!" he searched the recesses of his dark mind to find the perfect word to express the moment, there it was, just where he'd left it moments before, "FUCK!"

Mac stepped in with another blow aimed at Brent's forehead, but this time he was ready. Even though he blinked a blurry cocktail of blood and saline from his eyes, Brent rolled his head backwards. It was a good guess, the butt of the gun skidded off of his hairline.

Brent's training kicked in and somehow as he rolled on the wooden porch, he

found two semi-automatic glocks in his hands as he pushed himself into a crouching position. Now the only question was: where to shoot? Everything was shadow, flash and blur. He decided that since nobody in the vicinity deserved to live as it was, he'd concentrate on the shadow and blur and open fire.

Shots rang out one after another, with no space between explosions; then with careful count and two magazines almost spent, a single bullet in each gun, Brent listened. The night had no more violence in it, there was only to the retreating sound of engines. Even in his delirium, he could tell there were only two. A bike stood, headlight still shining on the entrance of the bar. A body slumped by its side, one of the unlucky blurs, Brent thought.

He didn't know that he'd actually granted the biker's wish. Sean was finally dead. His arms were in an awkward embrace over the neck of the bike, his last gasp of air was filled with warm exhaust.

Brent whirled on the door, pointing both smoking guns in its direction. Burly leaned out, "Don't shoot."

"You set me up." Brent yelled.

A chuckle from the doorway. "You're not very smart are you GI Joe?"

Brent wasn't sure about what made sense in the tense moments that followed, and he wouldn't be for quite some time. Burly detected the uncertainty in the air, "There's a saying in these parts: If you can't trust a man with a shotgun pointed at you, who can you trust?" He pumped a shell into the chamber.

Brent took a second to clear a thick wall of cobwebs that separated his judgment from his perceptions. He realized that the fat bartender was right, if he'd wanted him dead, he wouldn't be talking to him. Brent lowered the weapons and as his vision began to clear he realized that he was pointing at the window rather than the door anyway.

Burly was lifting him to his feet the next moment. The air was silent, consumed in darkness. Brent lost track of the time that Burly had gone down and turned off the motorcycle and headlight. The next thing Brent knew he was sitting in a chair in the bar, pulling bloody napkins from an old chrome holder. He knew logically that the napkins were not coming out bloody, but he could have sworn that they actually spat from the holder pre-soaked in a glistening deep ruby stream. Brent's life became like a slide show seen through a muddy red lens. He was fighting the welcoming blackness with everything he had. Brent had to get up that mountain and warn Legacy that he'd lost containment, and with that thought, he pushed himself to his feet, or tried to. The next instant, he was lying on a broken table. All of those bloody napkins couldn't be his, could they?

Wagner heard a shrill whistle. The dogs appeared to judge the quality of the command before backing off. They were so close to unprotected flesh, it took a second sharp, insistent pipe before they backed down. The noise of their frantic chase had drawn the proprietor of the compound out into the night. A tall, lean specter appeared in the doorway, looking less like a man than a parchment-skinned walking cadaver. There was unbridled delight in his eyes, like he'd just come from the most satisfying moments of his ugly life.

“Ladies?”

Wagner shuddered. His tone was deadly sweet and incendiary, like a wisp of fairground cotton candy soaked in kerosene. She looked up and saw the flashpoint immediately, gleaming in the monstrous recessed eyes of Blade. There was something about the light entering behind Wagner that made a mosaic of colors play across his skin.

“To what do I owe the pleasure, Darci? And you brought a friend.” Wagner’s eyes drifted from him to measure the distance between the door and where she lay. It wasn’t enough. Wagner had never seen the man before, and he’d never seen her. She might be able to explain her presence as part of Darci’s strange migration.

Headlights flashed across the silhouette of Blade in the door, lighting up the side of his face for a moment. He stiffened up looking strangely uneasy for a moment. His voice remained calm, “The boys are back from the bar, what good timing.”

Blade knew that the approaching rumble was not the sound of motorcycle engines. He did a quick calculation, and then let go of the door.

Wagner heard the door creak as it eased back to a close rusty springs. The light falling across the dirty interior narrowed until only needles around the improperly hung door stretched across the interior. Blade’s voice called to her from the darkness, “Agent?”

Wagner was sure that she’d look up to lock eyes with pure evil, but to her surprise, he was gone. There was a slap of wood against the doorframe. It made Darci shudder beneath her, and drew Wagner’s attention to the irregular breathing of the girl. She was petrified. Wagner reached down to her ankle holster and then felt the cold clammy slap of a hand that covered her own like a tourniquet. A whisper entered her ear flicking like the tongue of a snake.

“Let’s not take out our toys - yet.” There was urgency in his voice now. It wasn’t like the playful address at his entrance, “We don’t have time to play.” Wagner whipped her head around. There was only blackness staring back at her but she

could smell his stale breath hovering at an intimate distance in front of her face.

Darci began heaving, great convulsion-like dry sobs until the contents of her stomach surfaced. It was the only time in Wagner's life that the smell of bile was a welcome change in the atmosphere. Vomit is not always the gatekeeper for tears, but for Darci it was like her entire body remembered Blade and protested in its own way.

"You look delicious – but you smell surprised, agent. Guns and girls in my chapel can only mean one thing. You followed the little red riding slut back to grandmother's house." Wagner's eyes adjusted slightly and she recognized the geometric pattern of the primary illumination in the room. Silver moonlight filtered through a stained glass representation of the story of Cain. It was just enough light to make out the form of his attacker, more than enough to strike back.

Her weapon was pinned down, but Wagner felt her body surge preparing a response to Blade's hospitality. Darci must have known, felt her body change; she choked from the darkness, "Don't do it."

But it was too late to change anything but the direction of the blow, palm smashing into the bridge of Blade's nose.

A normal man would have been incapacitated for several seconds, giving Wagner the chance to draw, but somehow Blade held onto Wagner's hand. Wagner's knee shot up, sunk deeply into the gaunt man's stomach, pushing organs up against the spine before retreating. That would certainly –

But before she could complete the thought, she felt the holster ripped from her ankle tearing the cuff of her pants. It was now in Blade's hand, Wagner locked eyes expecting some sign of pain or shock. Instead, she found something equivalent to an orgasm in Blade's world, and though it stemmed from pure evil, it had its roots in pure bliss.

Darci's voice cut the silence just before Wagner received a slap that burst blood vessels on the inside of her mouth.

"It's how he always wins. Pain gives him an advantage." SMACK, her words were punctuated with a white flash.

The dogs bayed and howled, they were keen to see the violence. Teeth, impossibly white, gleamed from lips curled in sinister snarls. The home crowd atmosphere distracted Wagner from raising her guard more quickly, at least that's what she thought. In truth, there was almost no response that was quick enough to defend oneself from Blade. Another blow, again open handed and ferocious after a blazing fast recovery from the first. Wagner's skin stung and

she imagined the blood flooding her face looking for a way out, and finding none, permeating all of the interstitial spaces. She felt the clamp of a handcuff around her wrist and then her arm pulled like a rubber band until it met Darci's left hand. They were cuffed in a tight embrace.

Blade took Wagner's second set of cuffs and pulled Darci's right hand over Wagner's shoulder reaching down through her crotch and meeting her left hand. Effectively both ladies ended up like a ball of yarn, the chain dug into humiliating areas leading to the discomfort of a chain link wedgie. She'd only known Blade for two minutes and he'd already degraded her. Wagner began to empathize with the bile that Darci extruded, realizing its physical presence came from a deeper understanding of the man who stood over them.

It was the kind of mental understanding she never wanted to have. Blade tugged at the restraints. Wagner imagined that it was as much for the pleasure of seeing both women flinch as to make certain that there was no way of escaping.

Wagner watched his every move, probing his physical weaknesses was imperative, and she made a mental list, not knowing when or if she'd ever use the information. One thing was clear, Blade was fast, and took advantage of every weakness instantly. The strength that it took to rip the leather straps of her holster off her leg required the kind of grip that a shop vice aspired to. Anger was a gateway to a violent ecstasy just below the surface.

She heard the creaky springs complain as they stretched open and light from the outside flooded inside. Darci's face was white as a sheet, and the dim yellow of the lamplight, mixed with the silver blue of the moon flickered like an old movie playing over a textured stretched canvas. Except the scratches were real, and the flicker Wagner imagined was Darci's life force so delicate that it could be snuffed out with the flip of a switch. Wagner felt pity for her; even though she hardly had the luxury or distance of sympathy, it still welled for this young lost girl. She'd come back all this way, just to see if hell was how she left it.

Blade looked around outside for a moment, then thundered back through the door. He dragged them roughly onto a nearby battered aluminum sled, and pulled them out the door like some kind of trophy kill he needed to get home while the meat was still fresh. He left the door open and called the dogs back to their patrol.

Chapter 63 Anonymous Monster

Legacy growled to a stop under a flagpole, metal clips rattled against the hollow pipe in a nervous titter. He ignored the welcome sign, instead drawing his weapon and moving quickly to the large central building. The satellite dish

mounted on the shallow rake of the roof gave away the fact that this was the central command area. Everything that came into or went out of that compound dialed in through that aging iron monster pointed anonymously out into the night sky. He wondered if the man who'd invented the technology understood what kind of sick doors it would open up? Of course by those standards, the person who invented rope deserved to hang many times over for the permutations of torture that he invited into the world.

Legacy slipped silently into a side window. He needed to concentrate on silence. He hadn't been that careful on the way up, in his haste he'd made no efforts to veil his approach. His first commander had told him that quick actions led to immediate mistakes, and he completely agreed. Only the imminent death of Laura pushed him into the mode of a strike force, no time for the luxury of deliberation. His fingers brushed the chair rail that lined the reception room about halfway up the wall. The hum of electronics in the next room carried through the solid wood.

He changed course, he didn't want the control room, he wanted the studio. A small side door marked "commissary" caught his attention. The doorknob had been repaired recently, and he could see no reason why this bunch would repair anything they didn't regularly use.

A click put him into a dark area filled with black curtains hung from the ceilings and weighted at the bottom with chains. He rushed down the length of the curtain, the force of the moving air making it ripple. At the end he was met with a pool of white light. A body hung from restraints. Legacy knew the characteristics of a dead body. He'd been a dead body once. Thirty seconds of stillness – it was the one stunning punctuation in his life and it was what made him keenly aware of the full stop of another.

"Laura." He inwardly sighed. He raced around and came face to face with the body. What he saw was unexpected. It was wrong in so many ways that his senses didn't know where to start. Blade hadn't savored this death, it was quick and ugly. This in no way resembled the kind of ending that Blade wanted to present his viewers. Her young and curvy body was encased in dark satin that deepened in color where damp. Blood soaked the front of her dress, it stuck against her skin. Her face was tear stained, dark lines ending at her chin then reemerged, as mascara stains became visible dark oases below the surface of the blood. It seemed like the makeup streaks won the race to the ground but were then quickly flooded over.

A low growl brought Legacy back to reality. He looked off to his left at what the scent of blood had brought out to prowl.

Legacy looked off camera, left. Wilkes watched the strange pantomime from

headquarters as he examined the body. They had, of course, been studying the gruesome picture when all of the sudden, Legacy had entered. Wilkes showed his frustration openly, slamming his fists into his pockets. If only Legacy had arrived ten minutes earlier. Wilkes asked himself if he had put ten minutes of roadblocks in front of Legacy some time during the investigation that they were all now paying for? Wilkes was not one who second-guessed himself, yet all he found racing around his desolate synapses were doubts. He was going to have to stop that immediately if he was going to be of any use.

This mission had turned into a mop up operation, and now Legacy's presence there could push the group they were hunting to immediate flight, melting into the darkness. What else could possibly go wrong? Wilkes could only hope that Legacy had it under control and that there wouldn't be any surprises.

Legacy braced his body and stared into the camera's lens. Wilkes didn't see the danger until it entered the screen. A wolf or a dog, some kind of savage beast, leapt into frame and Legacy went down, twisting in what looked like a very specific kind of embrace.

Legacy spun with the fluid movements of a bullfighter. He jerked upwards, his forearms framing the throat of the dog as it thrashed wildly, feet looking for some kind of solid ground. His mouth moved like he was talking to it. What the hell could he be saying? Wilkes thought, instantly admonishing himself for the question.

Legacy felt the muscles heave beneath his locked arms. He had the dog firmly in a ranger grip he'd learned to subdue children. It was not the kind of memory that disengages a person from past reality, rather one that brings it all flooding back. With a quick effortless move, he dug into the well-defined musculature of the dog's neck and made a quick turn, rolling the head like his forearms were conveyor belts moving in opposite directions. Snap. The rage and fury that had been coursing through the dog's body moments before drained, lagging only slightly behind the physics of consciousness, before finally flickering out.

Chapter 64 Legacy's Embrace

Legacy dumped the body on the ground unceremoniously. On a slightly incongruous impulse he decided to name the dog Dead Max. He didn't have much time, and the roaming dog told him that his adversary was expecting him – or at least expecting trouble. A dog like Dead Max wasn't trained to differentiate between different types of prey. Anything that didn't smell like his master was fair game – Dead Max would have to be chained up most of the time to protect the other residents of the camp.

Blade probably let them run free at night, partially as an insurance policy against any of his own crew getting themselves in trouble by breaking curfew. It seemed that the punishment for not following Blade's exact timetable might be death. Legacy's speculation didn't change the fact that there were many missing people on this compound, not the least of his concern was the proprietor.

He walked briskly around, surveying the blood that stretched out into the grout lines of the tile beneath his feet, making his journey around the possible evidence annoyingly long. He pulled on the straps from which the body hung. The knots were good, he'd seen plenty of knots in his day and these were the kind that almost seemed like a natural extension of the weave of the rope. Legacy wasn't going to be able to get her down without a fight, and it was important that he did. Legacy stared at the camera, there was a message that he needed to send – and he knew the audience wouldn't appreciate the manner in which he was about to transmit it. Nobody was going to understand, so he might as well do it fast.

Wilkes couldn't believe his eyes. He crushed an empty paper coffee cup in his hand watching the screen in horror. What in the hell did that idiot think he was doing?

Had the stress of being in the field broken the man whom Wilkes had, quite frankly, always questioned the sanity of? There was no question that Legacy knew he was being watched as he walked from the frame after his eyes quickly dipped to the camera lens and purposefully tapped his nose twice. Then, he'd done the most disgusting thing that Wilkes had ever seen on camera.

Wilkes had seen it coming from the moment he grabbed who he thought was Laura like the dog, reaching across her shoulders to get leverage. Her head spun like a compass needle searching for true north. He'd snapped her neck and left it propped on top of the stalk like a broken child's doll.

Wilkes hadn't been able to watch after that. He'd turned away, toward the bullpen filled with agents ready to move on the mountain compound, turned back and shuddered while letting out guttural sounds of displeasure. Wilkes' eyes painted the screen, side to side, up and down, thinking that under scrutiny the senseless image would vanish into the background, somewhat like the theories of physics that become invisible around the bullet, carried on the principles that define it.

Then Wilkes heard something that almost made up for everything he'd witnessed. "That's not Laura."

It was a low-grade agent who made the observation first, one that would be receiving a promotion soon. He ran to the monitor to study the face. It was, in fact, not Laura.

He would learn later that the girl was named Snowflake, a fitting name for a thing of such beauty and fragility. She was a victim of circumstance. Legacy would comment later that it must have been so unsatisfying to snuff out this life. It was hardly worth the trouble of cleaning the knife, but it would make it look like Blade was a man of his word. He'd kept his promise, and his schedule, two of the many things for which Blade was willing to kill.

The truth exploded through the room. Everything entered slow motion around Wilkes, and nothing could be said or done quickly enough to satisfy the single desire brought into new focus by a few gleaming pixels on the screen. "Pull up tape of Blade with Laura, run hand geometry, and a comparative height analysis. We want to get this right."

"We already have that data on Laura, sir - "

"Compare it to the execution footage."

Tapping keys had a wild new purpose; the chatter had something foreign and almost impossible seeping into the background. It was hope. Even with the renewed life of possibility, it was difficult watching the taped execution, seeing the knife flash in fire only to be extinguished by blood.

"Laura's almost two inches shorter by these calculations." Wilkes clasped the man on the shoulders. "That could be a mistake."

"It isn't. Tell the local agents to move the second they get there, helicopters land on site, no perimeter, no waiting for a net."

"Sir?" dared question one agent. The sledgehammer response came thundering down.

"These are my orders, agent." His voice carried a promise of crushing anyone else who had anything to say.

Another agent in the crowded control room pulled away from a phone to give Wilkes an update. "They're almost fifty minutes out."

"Tell them to push that to thirty. Our window could close at any minute." He tapped the screen, right on the nose of the deceased. He'd been so used to seeing Laura dressed up in costume, every aspect of her makeup and hair changed so often that he hadn't dreamed that the girl staring into eternity might be anyone else than the director's daughter. He got the message.

Legacy had turned the girl's head to get Wilkes onto the right track, kick his cautious administrative style into action and put more boots on the ground faster. The nose of the victim was pierced; a small embedded diamond stud glinted under the hot production lights. The ridges next to the stud were planted, that

took months of epidural growth – it wasn't a recent addition. It was a different face.

“Should we call the director?” It was the same agent who'd spoken before. A thin young man with a nose that filled his face and mocked his profile. The mop of blond hair that grew under his nose and the one that sprouted from his head grew in slightly different geometrical configurations.

The agent stopped, had the phone poised in his hand.

Before he could think, Wilkes was in his face, straining at his height to engage the man eye to eye. “Slap yourself as hard as you can, and then tell me why – if it's that important to you agent.”

Without hesitation the young agent raised his hand and struck himself across the cheek. The sound relieved any of the observers of the idea that it might have been a stage punch. These were men who knew the sound of physical contact. The young agent's voice dropped far below the level of the public address that had initially gotten him Wilkes' full attention. “He's her father sir.”

Wilkes was angry that his decision was being questioned, especially by someone who didn't understand the gravity of bringing the director into the equation. Interrupting the director's bottomless grief was a poisoned proposition. Wilkes hadn't secured Laura; he hadn't even seen Laura. It was irresponsible for him to raise doubt about her execution. Everything in his years rising through the ranks of administration urged utmost caution with any news that increased expectation. He couldn't win by playing this information early. He knew that he could only lose twice. The rookie didn't know the game, and he acted automatically without regard for procedures, like a regular person.

“He's not sleeping.” The agent said quietly, like it was a detail that might tip his decision.

Wilkes glared at the agent, his dense wrath balanced against the vaporous argument of good intentions. The only thing closer to career suicide than making the suggestion would be following it. Wilkes spoke quietly,

“Make the call. And prepare a jet for the director out of Reagan, wheels up in twenty minutes.” Wilkes was a father, too.

Blade looped the chain around the hitch on the rear axle of his motorcycle. It was more of a battleship than a bike, however, with a tread so wide that the tires resembled those of an economy automobile. The dual exhausts puffed out the first brown smoke off of a cold start.

He heard the approach of Vorest and Mac, but he wasn't concerned. The enemy was already in the air, borne on microwaves and rudder blades. Their airships would be above every road for a hundred miles, approaching like the vengeful thoughts of all of the lives they'd destroyed. Blade relished the chase. In reality, he was relieved that he wouldn't be invisible any longer.

His "gang", now the size of a small jazz combo, met for the last time on the flat parking area.

Vorest raged above the engines "What the fuck is going on? Who the fuck are they?" He pointed to the women bound and strapped down to the sled.

"New friends, say hello ladies. Now where are your manners?" He said kicking a cloud of dirt into their faces.

"Darci?" Mac said, causing her head to spin awkwardly toward the sound of his voice. She didn't, or couldn't, say anything, Mac wasn't quite sure. Mac stood frozen, like he'd been completely erased from existence, drained of guts, heart and blood, only to have them replaced in his chest cavity with some kind of industrial foam-like emptiness. It pushed outward on his ribs. His eyes were slick black marbles, rattling from Blade to the sled and back. Each time he looked at Blade his smile seemed a little more menacing, like he was feeding it off of the pain from each look exchanged by the couple. He might have burst into laughter if Vorest hadn't intruded.

"We should get –"

"I've got everything in my side bags. We keep the girls for insurance, fling them over a cliff once we're free." Blade cut him off, annoyed.

Vorest stomped over "So you're all set? You're all packed, forgive the fuck out of me if this doesn't look like you've been planning this solo." He got too close and found his neck riding on the tip of a knife that Blade produced in a flash.

"Have I ever fucked you over before?"

Vorest took a moment of introspection. With so little cluttering his mind, it didn't take long to conclude that the cold steel on his neck trumped anything that it could come up with. Mac was glad that he decided to take a diplomatic course. "Fuck you." He spat on the ground.

The knife disappeared as quickly as it was conjured; a trick that undoubtedly was the final piece of magic witnessed by those who'd lost their lives on that point. Bravery returned to Vorest – of course flagging so quickly under pressure perhaps bravery is not the right word – the bastard child of bravery scuffed the earth and grumbled every vulgarity that seemed appropriate for the moment. It was a long list.

Mac was comforted by the streaming profanity, it created a vacuum in his mind and the pause gave him a chance to think about Blade's question. He hadn't really ever fucked over his crew. He'd left them to die, broken some bones, and buried one alive in Montana – something he totally deserved – but he'd never broken the code of conduct expected of a leader. If he'd ever betrayed them, he'd done it the right way and nobody ever noticed. If that didn't garner him a little trust nothing would.

Mac thought of the millions of dollars, and looked at the scowl on Vorest's face, and came to a decision.

He swung his leg over the bike as engines roared to life around him. Seconds later they were on the trail again, heading back down the mountain, sparks shooting high into the sky every time the metal from the sled skidded across a rock in the road.

A dog bayed behind them. Mac thought it sounded like it had undergone some kind of soul crushing loss. He could feel Darci's eyes on him, but he couldn't bring himself to look over. She was farther away now than she'd ever been, the intervening space was as great as the distance between the dead and the living.

Darci heard the mournful sound barely over the guttural sound of the muffler. A hot breath washed over them when the engines revved between gears and the sound of the dog came in that momentary shifting silence. She looked over and saw Mac – her white knight – riding beside the sled looking forward, jaw set. She couldn't take it. She cried out in a mixture of horror and devotion that no one should have to experience together, "MAC."

The sled veered, CLANK.

The concussion jolted her into pained silence. She felt the metal sled hit something and saw stars, whether they were in the sky or from the sharp knock to the head she couldn't be sure. A glance from the driver of the bike told her that the timing was no accident. Her silence would be appreciated, even if it were due to lack of consciousness. She was numb, and disbelief churned in an empty vessel leaving her heart to pump what felt like dry powder through her veins. Darci stole another look at the fat man bouncing on the springs of his seat. Then all of the sudden, he accelerated and disappeared from view.

She imagined that soon a rock would pierce the bottom of their sled and open it like a can opener. Then the percussion would go from bruised to bloody. She looked at Wagner struggling, with her bonds, and she found a growing curiosity with death. The sled flipped up again, catching her on the cheek, another cold metallic slap in the face.

"I want it to be over," played over and over in her mind. She was about to get her

wish.

Legacy raced out of the central building and into the flat parking area. He saw the taillights of the bikes winking in the distance like the faraway advertising of grief and defeat, only 9.99 plus shipping and handling.

“Act now!” he thought, the irony of the moment stored in a compartment of his brain for the retelling of the story.

But there was something standing between him and immediate action. Another prowler entered the pool of light created by the overhead lamp. The snarling copy of the one he’d dispatched inside. It waited on the edge of the light, uncertain of what to do next. Legacy realized that it was the blood of his partner that was making him so cautious. “He must smell it on me,” he thought.

Legacy didn’t have time to play games. Decisive action led to a gambit that was all or nothing. He planted his feet in a wide stance, and then began to walk toward the beast. It was a walk and a force of nature all at the same time. No hesitation, no compromise, he approached with the confidence of death on the march, clicking off the distance that separated them.

The dog began to act anxiously as Legacy continued forward. It skittered left then right – the uncertainty made the creature look like it was limping. Then suddenly something caught Legacy’s attention, the dog seemed to be staring at a fixed point behind him, but as he drew closer he realized that the animal’s eyes were not gazing at something behind him, rather they were riveting deeply into his own.

A gust of wind came up from behind him and something, a scent or possibly the dead chill of Legacy’s eyes made the difference. The dog fled into the night, vanishing silently back into the shadows. Then, a safe distance away, an almost unearthly howl brushed the wind. It was a vast, empty sound that lasted only a moment then decayed so slowly that it almost never seemed to end.

Legacy decided later that it wasn’t fear that had ruled their confrontation, as he’d originally thought. It was uncertainty, if the dog had known either that it was going to win or lose the fight it would have engaged, that’s what it had been trained to do. But the commodity that Legacy presented was so unnatural that it brought the dog to an understanding of his foe. The shattered cry that accompanied this understanding could have been for his dead partner or it could have been the harmonic that it felt from that single moment of connection to the crazed human. Legacy felt the sound echo through the night and he knew where the almost spectral sound had originated.

He knew that it was simple animal fear that drove the dog into the night. But for a long time after that, long after he'd forgotten his own reassuring internal account of the evening, he wondered what was located far behind his own eyes, deep inside, that could be so terrifying.

He turned his attention to the trail. There was something odd about the way one of the taillights flickered. A deep wide imprint led to the parking area. Blade was dragging something behind his bike. Legacy bent down, seeing something glint in the lamplight. It was sapphire green with glittering specks on one side, yellow ivory on the other. A chip from a painted toenail.

For one gut wrenching moment he thought that the cargo they dragged away must be bodies, but his mind was jumping forward in an annoying way. It had nothing to do with the fact that Wagner hadn't been accounted for.

Legacy's ranger training, a fog in the backdrop of his life, returned in a split second. It didn't need to be called upon, it was simply there. His body moved with silent, efficient speed to the end of the driveway. The pattern was rigid, like one of the bikes was dragging a sled, but who was on it? Laura would be dead in the killing room if Blade had access to her. Laura wasn't a passenger.

It could be Darci, or Wagner, or both.

He gazed at his own car sitting in the camp parking lot, worthless for pursuit in this rough terrain. The ruts in the road could easily be avoided along a two-tire line, and these bikers probably knew them like the ridges of the handgrips on their bikes. An unconscious map that allowed them to glide down the mountain and not bump and scrape every turn.

Legacy took only a moment to dismiss the idea of driving – he followed the sled path back to a building that must have served as a kennel. The smell of gunpowder, thin in the air, gave him the chills. Someone had spent rounds in this room, and he expected neither of the parties who carried firearms to miss their target. The lack of blood hardly comforted him – not only because Legacy would only know comfort if it hit him so hard that it collapsed a lung – also because his ability to process comfort had shut down, and it would remain so until Wagner was safe.

An observer – which strangely enough there was one, might have thought Legacy's behavior to be closely related to the dogs that patrolled the compound.

He covered the field in deft strides. He never stopped for long, his legs propelling him efficiently to the next piece of information, confident that his mind would catch up with his stride during the journey. It was the way that Legacy worked, it was the reason he was such a valuable asset in the field. These moments, piecing together the special identities, relationships and actions of

those who stood on this ground in the minutes, hours and years before. He had such a history of the place by the time he found Darci and Wagner's trail into the woods that he could see the drop-off points for the campers, smell the digestion of an antique septic system in the far lot, and more importantly, he knew that there must be a shortcut down to the bar.

This was once an active church teen camp after all; there couldn't be a more traveled route away from this place. Rebellion is the most brutally conformist action of the modern Methodist teen, he thought with a wry smile. It didn't matter that later he found out that they were Presbyterians – the trail to the bar was still there.

Wagner was the woman who'd left the lipstick mark on that burning cigarette in the bar. The trail bypassed the long arching dirt road with a rickety bridge over the dry riverbed, but he wasn't going to leave anything to chance. His pace quickened, sensing that his mind was about to lay in a destination. And then there it was, a plan he may have rejected on merit, but one that his body adopted without question. Wagner had that effect on people – even him. If there was any chance of recovering Wagner from the hands of that madman, it lay in a little madness of his own.

He let the glow of the building soak into his eyes for a moment longer. Something bothered him about the trailers parked in lines beside the central building. He saw the blast heaters sticking out from the tops, one of the fans churning full blast, rattling hot air into the car below. Why was that one on full and the others hummed at a constant low whirr? Before the question fully formed, he knew the answer. He paused for a moment to scan the ridge for whoever had left the door open.

Blade didn't plunge into the darkness at his normal death wish pace. He knew that if the sled flipped, he'd lose the cargo, and there was no time to reload. There was no reason to have an insurance policy that had expired. His wit was so delightful, it roused his boundless mind into life, a feeling he had every time he felt the power of death coursing through his blood. Like the explosive power of the fuel that charged spitfire into the chambers beneath him, warming his loins and pushing him forward. This was the place where he created his own mythology with him at the center, a monster in a theology that served only his needs and damned all those around him. Sometimes, just for the sin of looking at him.

A light flashed in his side mirror, Mac was pulling in front. He always wanted to take the bridge first, its rickety slats were ready to pop and crackle into dust and the fat man liked to practically fly over them. Normally he would have chased

him down and run him off the road for the insult – but tonight in this black garden, revenge could be cooled, saved for later.

Another light flashed across the road, and at first glance, it looked like a different one entirely.

The full weight of Mac's cycle crashed into his, and the angle of contact was the most unfortunate decision of what would prove to be the very short life of the instigator. If Mac had chosen an angle less sharp, their fuel tanks would have collided, BOOM, if he'd approached from the back the force would have shifted into Blade's bike like a pool cue knocking into a ball, and they would have found Blade's bike on the valley floor far below. Perhaps because he'd never listened during the two-day physics course that made up his remedial science course that he failed before leaving reform school, he'd played crossing guard unintentionally, coming in at almost a right angle and, in effect, having Blade crash into him.

The concussion knocked the wind out of Blade and dug so deep into the layers of Mac's protective blubber that three of Mac's ribs cracked inward with the blow, then split outward as the wheel rim withdrew, leaving a powerful tissue explosion away from the body that carried the bones like the hinge on saloon doors. The world spun, colors traced every light and soon every star was the tip of a radiant fireworks explosion, every twig was the crackle of the dying flame.

The sled holding Wagner and Darci came to rest on Mac's legs, and as he pushed himself upward it was like Darci had just bounced jubilantly into his lap. The violent jolt had pulled the handcuffs off of her wrists leaving raw, red skin circling her pale white hands like bracelets. Mac grabbed Darci into his arms, her head bobbing with what looked to be sobs – but he didn't seem to notice. It was as if, in his head, Mac had somehow turned sad into happy, sobs into gurgles of laughter. There she was, in his arms like the end of some kind of romantic movie, moonlight cradling their embrace from a lover's lazy crescent.

Blade stirred, stood, smiled. He'd thought that he'd emptied the fat man of everything that was his. There was something left, what a nice surprise. Blade couldn't resist the opportunity to inflict more than just the brief pain of death. He approached slowly, letting the embrace warm them before his cold deadly fingers descended. He felt the anger in him rise up with each fresh wave of pain planting on his left leg. It wasn't broken, but it was bent. He scuffed the trail kicking at the gravel. The texture of the road bothered him, but what of it? He couldn't control everything, only life and death, the two least unique properties of any creature on earth.

He swung his arm in a wide arc across his body. When he pulled it back to his side, a dagger rested comfortably in his palm, he did the second arm with less

flair. He had garnered everyone's attention with the first blade drawn. The pain of Blade's wound punctuated his words.

"Your fucking bitch just GOT you killed Mac," Mac didn't look up, still staring with delight into Darci's eyes, and Blade clicked his teeth, "maybe I should kill her first."

Blade watched as Darci's pale blue eyes flashed with the color of steel and her skin flushed. He continued in a mock country twang "THAT got someone's fuckin' at-TEN-tion."

He was only steps away when Mac somehow lifted the sled off of his legs and brought it up to his chest. It looked for a moment like he was going to use it as a weapon. Blade backed up a step, planting firmly on his injured leg and almost tumbling to the ground.

Mac pulled the sled up onto his chest, and leaned in and gave Darci a kiss on the forehead. He either couldn't speak or he had nothing to say, abruptly the sled dropped to the ground. Mac slouched, all of his strength gone.

Blade sprang forward, with his arm raised high. He saw that look on Darci's face as his knee pushed into her stomach – it was a delightful mix of hatred and fear. Somehow she engaged every muscle in her body and rolled Blade's knee from her sternum. Clank. The knife came down glancing off of the sled, inches from her throat. He was impressed. He'd been in the presence of many grown men unable to come up with that kind of strength, even in defense of their own lives. Blade let his eyebrows find a sarcastic arch, "I'm so disappointed in you. Look at the mess you've made, and here I am trying to clean it up – tisk tisk tisk." The finger he used to gesture for shame then raised to his lips, "Shhhhh.

Blade let the tip of his knife wander over all of Darci's piercings. Nose, ear, eyebrow, lip then lower to the nipples, he tapped on her shirt. The clink of metal confirmed it. "Why didn't you let me do those? Or are there more prizes down below?"

The tip of his knife went down past her belly button and skidded along the zipper of Darci's pants. "Zzzzzip." Blade watched her eyes widen thinking it was his effect on her until he felt the blow to his forehead. An open-handed blow from Mac sent Blade reeling, he back-pedaled several paces until his footing became more steady. A little more force might have sent him over the edge. He retaliated instantly throwing the blade in his left hand at Darci.

Mac again came to the rescue rolling his frame over Darci, basically becoming a shield for her. The point planted in Mac's back, and then Blade walked deliberately over to retrieve it. "It's like the first kiss isn't it? Let's make out, you slut."

Mac's skin was pierced again and again, but he did not move. Blade's arms swung in efficient quick strokes, but he was getting tired. Sweat beaded on his brow. Every time he tried to move Mac, he met resistance, even though there were incisions clustered around every main organ accessible from four inches beneath the skin of his back.

Blade turned away and paced in the misshapen light of a headlight now ajar, partially masked by the chrome blinder, shining more upward and to the side than forward. Blade didn't need this detour, felt like leaving them. He knew he couldn't pull the extra weight that Mac added to the sled, especially with the dubious looking back wheel, which spun with the spokes moving closer, then farther away in a single rotation. Blade looked back at the man clutching the girl beneath him. He began to wonder if the anatomy of grotesque obesity somehow protected Mac by shifting all of his organs forward into his belly when attacked from behind. It was the only plausible way that Mac was still breathing. This whole situation was unacceptable. He glared at Vorest, who straddled his bike ten yards down the trail, waiting for whoever won to join him. Blade picked up a heavy rock with the intention of lowering the deathblow onto his dear friend. Then, suddenly, his problem was solved.

Mac must have stored up all that he had left in the short break from being a human pincushion. One might say he did it, but they'd be wrong, it must have been adrenaline that heaved his body from the sled and set it into motion. He and Darci simply began to roll. They rolled until they reached the place where the road fell sharply off and the slope continued all the way down to a valley of trees below. Mac made the edge on the bottom and then unhesitatingly dropped off the world. Darci disappeared from view an instant later. Her eyes, pressed close, stubbornly fixed on Mac's – knowing that her final image of the world was coming soon, and she'd be damned if that last iris movement were only filled with her tears. The breath that she expelled so close to his lips would be mixed with his.

"Saved me the fucking trouble." Blade shouted after them, it was a fitting eulogy. Vorest nodded from his bike.

Blade looked around the glittering carnage that comprised the wreck and the blood soaked killing zone and made a painful observation. "Where is the agent?"

Chapter 65 Short Cut

Legacy swung into the driver's seat of his unmarked government car and decided that it looked a little too clean, and that it could use a little character.

He didn't head for the exit; instead he wove through the buildings to the back of

the compound. Then, passing the kennel, his route became a vector – across the clearing and hitting the brush at full speed.

Branches scratched every side of the car as it scraped over a long fallen tree trunk. There was a very tenuous relationship with the footpath, in only nominal contact with all four wheels below. Legacy saw the glint of metal in front of the car and then a sheer drop off. He plunged over the edge, finding steps beneath half of the car and precariously angled tree roots under the other.

It was like half of the car was on a hydraulic lift and the other was in quicksand. If it were physically possible for two sides of a Ford to travel at different speeds, this would be the proving ground. Only the initial velocity gave Legacy any control over the vehicle.

Then, suddenly, the stairs were gone and the front of the car crashed into the soft, level ground like a cigarette being extinguished. He'd lost a tire in the front, or maybe it was just flat, and the engine had crept almost a full inch closer to the cabin. The plastic covers had popped off of the air conditioning vents as the ducts had migrated along the floor. The car slowed, but kept moving along the crude, narrow path.

Legacy's brights were useless, covered by the ever-thickening underbrush that crowded so close to the car that the side windows began to pop. He pushed the gas pedal closer to hell. Everything else had gone there tonight, he might as well assist.

Legacy realized in the last frantic moments of his car journey that he wasn't actually thinking of anything. He reacted to the road, pushing fears aside, saving them for a combined grief if he failed. Otherwise, he needed to concentrate on getting down this mountain – suddenly, he broke into the open. His brake lights must have blazed from the force of his foot, but it was too late.

He was part of a sliding sheet of earth, and down was the order of the day. The pitch of the slope was deadly. The car spun and Legacy was now facing up, watching where he'd come from. Legacy slammed the transmission into drive and gunned the engine; it was like swimming against the current. He wondered what an air bag would do to protect him from a sixty mile an hour crash. He doubted if it would do much.

A tree trunk snagged the back wheel and turned the car again. He didn't know whether to be thankful that it slowed the car or freshly concerned that the next tree trunk would flip the vehicle entirely. He got his answer an instant later when the car hit the small creek bed below. Legacy's fillings rattled, but a little injury actually added to his efficiency, gave his concentration a purpose and punctuation. In this case, it also gave him a full stop. The air bag exploded from

the steering column, a full-force white out slapping him in the face.

He hit the accelerator. The engine still hadn't given up, but there was no gear that engaged the transmission. No movement wasted, he pushed his way past the air bag and got out of the car. If he'd taken a moment to examine his handiwork, he would have been amazed at how much damage the modern sedan can take before resolving to an inert form.

Legacy was twenty yards down stream before he picked up the path he'd left on the ledge of foliage that stood sentry above him. A few steps and he saw the lights of the bar winking between the trees. He sprinted, long, gliding strides over uneven turf, busting in the back door of the bar. His mind took in the bar, and although the scene was as strange as he could have imagined, it did not alter his course in the least. He broke out a shoulder-height pane of glass from the small squares of clear coke-bottle translucency windows that made him wonder about the kind of glasses one would need in order to be able to focus on something on the other side. He concluded a short argument within his mind by busting another pane of glass at eye level.

He aimed his weapon out into the darkness. He waited for moving targets, three, possibly four, head-on, depending on their velocity. The conditions were extremely difficult for an average, or even better than average shooter. With Legacy on trigger, however, they didn't stand a chance. Letting Blade have access to Wagner's mind and body was completely unacceptable, but inevitable if he so much as flinched. It wasn't confidence that kept his hand steady as a rock waiting those moments; it was the threat of consequence.

Minutes passed, people squawked behind him, his attention was enlisted elsewhere. What was keeping Blade? All of the possibilities that ran through his mind along the topic went from bleak to deadly. Was there another secret trail down the mountain? This was taking too long.

A hand rested on his shoulder, but that wasn't what made Legacy turn. The crisp clack of a long barrel weapon being loaded, that was worth a look.

Legacy turned to find an almost comical picture. The bartender, a landslide of fat that somehow found some inner balance at his gut line had a shotgun trained on him, threatening him, of all things, not to hurt anyone. The conversation was almost as surreal as the circular sum of the concepts, violence, threats, bullets – "If you pull that trigger there'll be blood."

"Yes." Legacy didn't move his weapon.

Legacy's eyes flicked from the weapon to the man, confirming something that the low quiver of his voice had already informed him. This man had the conviction to cripple, perhaps, but to kill, no.

“I won’t let you kill anyone.”

Legacy turned back to the trail. “That’s not your call.” He opened his jacket to show a FBI insignia.

“How do I know you’re really FBI?”

“Pull the trigger, we bleed jet black blood.”

Burly took a moment “Your friend got ambushed by the boys in the corner.”

Somewhere in the back of his mind Legacy already knew that. He’d seen Brent lying across a bench, blanket draped over him, pillow under his head. “I’ll check him once this goes down, I can’t split my attention right now.” Burly hovered, unsatisfied. Legacy glanced over his shoulder and something in the appearance of the place gave him an idea “They’ve got his sister,” He nodded in Brent’s direction. “I can’t let them get away.”

Burly’s face turned to stone, a blunt nod and he backed off. Legacy had recognized that this was a family bar; probably handed down to the fat man and that family connections would be instantly respected. There was something else about the bartender, something about the way he kept his area behind the bar separate from the customers, like he was protecting something back there.

Burly made one more comment, one of those inconsequential statements that Legacy barely registered. Unfortunately, it was one that would become vitally important in the minutes that followed.

No time to investigate the big man’s words, because at that moment, the upper registers of a deep growl could be heard, carried on the wind.

There was a slight rise beyond the parking lot outside the bar. Legacy trained his weapon and waited for the headlights to crest and then fall.

The whine began to transform into a rumble as it came closer. A freight train could have hidden its approach in the sound of the wide-open air-cooled engines. Legacy parsed the moments, like he was slowing the frame rate of a movie that he was watching. He got in between the moments; all it took was a deadly stillness in his own body. Everything was concentrated on his target.

Two riders, with a sled dragging from the bike in the rear. Twenty more yards and they’d be within range.

A wail crested in the air, at first Legacy wondered if it were being broadcast from the bikes, but an instant later, when the flashers came into sight he knew that it was his worst nightmare.

Everything slammed together in his head like the collision of stupidity with insanity. It’s difficult to predict the intersection, but everyone knows when

they're standing on that corner. The big bartender had said that he'd called an ambulance – why one would charge in with flashers and sirens in this desolate place was obvious. The driver wanted to make an entrance.

Legacy saw the bikers stop on the ridge, too far, he thought, just barely, to mark. They appeared to be discussing their options over headsets used to block out the rumble of the engines.

The driver of the ambulance tumbled out of the driver's seat, a bullet found his heart before he could even look impressive leaping to the ground. The result was an awkward flop into the dirt. Legacy hadn't seen the murder; his world was concentrated on the men on the bikes. He had registered the body dropping, there was a certain sound a body made when it hit the ground and would never get up again. Legacy felt eager to repay the favor. He felt the malice radiating like a ripple on the surface of a murky pond, but it wasn't just a feeling that drew his finger tight against the trigger.

The rider who'd shot the man lit up in the gun muzzle flash. Even from this distance Legacy could tell that he enjoyed taking the life of an innocent.

Legacy made a quick decision, which reminded him of the reasons that he hated making quick decisions.

The biker pulling the sled was unarmed, but his partner still had his gun raised. It stood to reason that the armed rider was the most dangerous, but Legacy knew that the most dangerous weapon on the field was Blade. He had to take Blade out first, and then the partner would fold. His gaze snapped back and forth between the bikers. Legacy couldn't imagine that Blade was not pulling the sled. He would want to be close to his prize at all times, there was no way that he would let his hostage be under the control of another, it would be the same thing as letting her loose. He craved the proximity to pain, so the chain from that sled had to be connected to Blade.

Crack, crack, two rounds were discharged in a heartbeat. Between heartbeats, to be more precise. Legacy watched the man fall backwards, both rounds exploded in his chest.

He took no time for celebration, with brisk efficiency he moved the sight of his gun over to the other bike, ready to repeat the process if the mark didn't drop the gun and – Legacy's eye twitched, the man was gone. In the split second it took to splinter his attention and focus entirely upon the first target, somewhere in the time after the report of his weapon, the second man had vanished.

He'd killed the one sitting harmlessly on the bike and let the one with killer reflexes and deadly aim live. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time, but that time had passed. Legacy couldn't see enough of the field through the square-

cut glass, and there was a very small chance that the second biker had gotten his position on that second shot. It would take him a moment to steady himself before he could respond and by that time, Legacy needed to be on the field.

Legacy sprung forward toward the door. The glass checkerboard that had been his blind only moments before exploded in a rain of high velocity rounds and popcorn-sized shards. That answered the question about whether he'd gotten his position. Legacy's adversary had reflexes. He collected the information, processed it for now, then filed the strength of his opponent in the same way he did a weakness. He viewed any characteristic as something that could be used against his opponent, especially strength. He knew that in a battle of life and death, the person on the other side was much more likely to fall into a trap based upon the assessment of his own strengths than end up the victim of his weakness. The thing about having near-lightning reflexes was that in combat, he doubted that he'd ever had to get a step ahead. He was like a racer who stalked the pace knowing he could always close in an instant. Legacy needed to keep his head down, and his feet moving. He needed to be at least two steps ahead of this guy at every turn.

He burst through the door, low, and heard the wood pop with two more rounds at chest height. Reflexes tend to be built over time and they do not adapt quickly to new tactics. The man who wanted Legacy dead was a born killer, but he was used to killing a certain breed of person— stealth didn't have much currency within his enforcer world meaning that all of his reflexes would be geared for straightforward, bloody combat. Legacy glanced up long enough to check his position, right where Legacy thought he'd be. Legacy needed to get close.

Legacy realized that somehow he had been wrong about Blade pulling the sled, and he had the fleeting thought as he crouched low and made for the flashing lights of the ambulance; if he had been wrong about Blade before, why should he trust his assessment now? He thought of the alternatives racing past the front bumper and cutting at sharp angle for the dark tree line at the edge of the parking lot. Stop trusting himself, stop thinking, stop moving. The options didn't seem to be very comforting.

Branches brushed his shoulders and thick, high roots pulled at his feet, forcing him to shorten his stride. Legacy was about fifty yards from the sled and closing fast. Each time the flasher circled, Legacy found cover from the angle of the bikes, and it was a good thing too, because almost every sweep of the red light was punctuated with the snap of a round or two in his general direction. He was almost close enough; he knew that there was no margin of error in his next shot.

Blade knelt behind the sled, behind Wagner. He must have sensed the danger, noticed the kill angle represented by the agent's approach because he raised his

voice and froze the night.

“I’ll kill her agent, kill her while you watch.”

Chapter 66 Deadly Decision

Any doubt that Legacy had vanished. This was Blade, he’d recognize the lifeless, dispossessed voice whispered in the confines of a shell or amplified in an open-air stadium. It was less a voice and more a signal of something sinister rushing to fill the air. It flowed into his ear like a complex code, layer upon layer of information that needed to be decoded and deciphered. There was nothing simple about Blade or his words, especially when his message was simple.

He had chosen to open with a threat; he’d chosen to speak first. Blade was giving away something – Legacy racked his brain in an effort to figure out what it was.

The still undercurrent of an unfinished conversation gave Legacy the chance to approach into no-man’s land. He saw Blade’s face for the first time. A lean, haunting face so devoid of life that Legacy imagined that Blade could sit on the slab in the morgue and undergo every observation of the coroner until the first cut, and only then would the barest flinch betray that he was alive, if even that did. The deep sunken sockets from which his eyes, wide and probing, traced Legacy’s progress seemed almost welcoming.

“That’s far enough.” His gun was raised to take aim, but just as the barrel targeted, it squirted free of his hands, the result of a decisive kick by his hostage. It lay yards in front of him and suddenly he was helpless.

Legacy stopped. He said nothing. There was nothing to say.

Blade held up a thin chain, the kind that might be used for a dog leash or a bike lock in a trusting small town. It was wrapped around Wagner’s neck one and a half times. The result was a semi-slip knot that had enough friction to bite into the flesh, enough give that a single tug, like a rope tug on a chainsaw, would separate the two living centers of the body, physical and mental, into two dead halves. This could be done with a single flex, faster than Legacy could possibly move to aim and shoot. There really was nothing to say and nothing to do, so Legacy stood still and let the silence slip between them.

Then something came from Blade that Legacy would have never expected. It wasn’t the words but the urgency that betrayed their purpose, and there was something very familiar about the way he spoke.

“You’re the one.” Blade’s voice raised into a hearty chuckle, then abruptly it died and Blade scolded Legacy congenially, like an old friend, “You fucked this

one up good. You should have left me alone.”

“Call it a character flaw.” Legacy said.

“Lots of people dead because of you.”

Something tripped in Legacy’s mind. He knew Blade didn’t care at all about body count. He realized that Blade had been dancing around the topic, holding the chain, speaking of death all in an effort to find the value of his hostage. He’d been waiting for some bargain to be struck so that he’d know how much, personally, that a snap of his wrist would cost the person he was negotiating with. He’d showed his hand by talking about the body count; there was no way that Blade shared remorse for any of his actions, and he actually wanted to see how it impacted Legacy. It wasn’t much, but Legacy knew he might be able to use it.

Blade continued, “Put down the gun or your partner gets it.”

For a moment everything went dark, there was no way he could have known Wagner was his partner, but there it was. He remembered the gun in his hand to his side. It seemed as useless as if it dangled from a lifeless appendage. There was no way to raise it in time. He loosened his grip to let it dangle on one finger. His feet carried him even closer toward the sled, plodding forward like in a dream.

Blade smiled, then twitched and the unconscious motion let a little bit of saliva leak from the corner of his mouth. His tongue smacked around the outer rim of his lips and caught the escaping liquid.

He tugged lightly on the chain and breath caught in Wagner’s throat. Finding a struggling equilibrium, Blade found the exact amount of tension that made Wagner’s breathing sound labored and desperate. The wheeze finally halted Legacy less than ten paces away.

Legacy still didn’t look at Wagner, he knew what he’d see and he didn’t know if after, he’d be able to do what he had to do. “Where’s the director’s daughter?” Legacy opened simply.

Blade bristled with savage pride, he pointed to his temple with his finger and pulled an imaginary trigger. “She couldn’t live with herself.”

“There was only one reason why I wasn’t pointing this weapon at your head –” he said re-seating the butt of his gun into his palm and slowly pulling it toward his other hand to aim.

“What about her?” He tugged the chain attached to Wagner.

“I’ll read her her rights for aiding and abetting.”

“What the fuck are you talking about - this bitch is FBI.”

Flat and final, “If you say so.”

Blade stiffened, and when he spoke next, he had changed his tone. “Laura’s not dead. Yet.”

Legacy heard the sharp turn of the conversation and allowed a moment of optimism. If he could keep his attention off of Wagner, if her life could remain trivial during this crucial stage of negotiation, it might be irrelevant enough to leave it intact. All he said in return was “That seems unlikely.”

Blade slapped the metallic side of the sled, and the clang rang out loud and sustained for longer than either man would have guessed. Blade’s words were almost drowned out by the noise. “I’ve had a hundred guns waved in my face, but I’ve never felt like the bastard would pull the trigger – with you, I have no idea. It’s –” he searched for the word, finding the one furthest from Legacy’s mind “fuckin’ refreshing.”

Legacy knew he’d been bluffing all along, trying to sort out how valuable his hostage was. It was the pause after he’d announced that she was his partner that gave it away. Blade wanted a reaction. No, he *needed* a reaction. He wouldn’t have given away his insight for free if he had been certain of it.

Legacy could see in his eyes, the windows to bright streams forming calculations that typically are carried on the warm impulses of the average human, except that they functioned so much better beside the cold circuitry that coursed through Blade’s body. Legacy peered behind the sockets of Blade’s eyes and saw only a reflection of human evaluation, although Blade’s brutality tinted the image with an animal perspective. Not a nice or curious animal like a otter nor with a single instinct like the piranha, or even consciously evil like a rat feeding off of the carrion of its own like flesh. Legacy saw and categorized the evil burning within his adversary. It was the evil of purpose. Blade did things because he could. He was the gale force wind that whipped into a tornado whenever he was near trailer parks and needy neighborhoods, but calmed when confronted by authority and left the brick bank building standing.

Legacy had won the opening move, and he sensed that Blade knew this as well. He had to be careful in the next moments not to give him any opening for payback.

“Make no mistake, I’d like to soak you in your own blood, but I have orders.”

“Afraid you might never find the body?”

“Her body is not worth your life. Think of that before you speak again.”

“This life must be worth something to you, innocent life, agent of the United-fucking-States.”

Legacy made a mistake by glancing down at Wagner, he realized it the moment his eyes touched her face. There was so much life left, so much potential – and even now it didn’t seem possible that any of it would be reached. Both men knew that she could be dead with a single thought; it would only be a conscious act of mercy or preservation – “no” Legacy thought, there was one other option. One way to keep her face, swollen from the strain of the blood being pumped through the trunk arteries into her head while the release veins were unable to carry the same volume back under the pressure ringing her neck. She had about two minutes.

Wagner must have used a different analysis, because her face pleaded for an immediate release of pressure, death was on her lips waiting to be pulled in with the next intake of breath, as far as she knew. Legacy could see it and although he had full control of his pity reflex, fear was something else. He learned it abruptly in the most disturbing way. In between heartbeats, as he glanced at Wagner, her face became that of his daughter, Chess. It was like the introduction of a single image in a continuous feed, and the shock went through his body. He froze in the moment and there was nothing he could do to bring himself back to the reality of the situation. Blade hadn’t noticed in the dim light and with Legacy always presenting a front as flat and smooth as a pane of glass, there was little change from expressionless to frozen. But Legacy also knew that frozen oozed fear, and that fear was a mainstay of Blade’s cravings, he couldn’t leave it on the table long unrecognized.

He heard Blade’s voice before his eyes focused on what had actually happened. “Stupid bitch.”

Wagner had lurched upward, the only direction she could go and not increase the pressure. It appeared senseless, Blade standing behind her. Her neck sprung upward like a jack in the box, except that it traveled along the path of a pendulum, always the same distance from Blade’s hands. Both men were shocked, and it seemed like it was the last of the strength that Wagner had. She slumped forward, and the wheezing sound stopped.

Blade still held the chain, the weight of Wagner’s body tugged against it.

“I’ll drop this when you drop your gun, you might be able to bring the young thing back.”

Legacy paused, he wanted to throw the gun to the ground immediately, but he knew any sense of urgency would give Blade the upper hand. “Tell me where Laura is first.”

Every second was a fresh metronomic pound within his mind. There were only so many pulses that could be ignored before the body forgot which way the currents flowed. His own temple throbbed waiting for Blade's response, which was slow coming.

"Still with Laura, you're like a dog. I'll leave a map a mile up the trail. You might be able to save everyone. Be a fuckin' hero, agent. All you have to do is drop the gun." Legacy tensed. Blade must have thought he needed the extra coaxing, and he added. "Do it and it's over, then we're even."

Legacy had heard the cadence before, different words, but the exact same illocutionary force. His eyes widened as he realized that this conflict wasn't even close to over, the matter wasn't close to over. Until that realization he'd been willing to examine several options; now there was only one.

Thirty years ago, Legacy had been interrogating an Indonesian boy of sixteen continuously each hour, matching up with a year of the youth's life. He'd been the messenger, the courier of explosives that were meant for an army installment on the western tip of Bali. Legacy had discovered that he was actually the mastermind of the rebel group. He'd trapped this youth who was so confident in his own intellect that he doubted the very existence of anyone smarter than he was. Until he sat across from Legacy. The interrogation had started like so many others had, but somewhere, the questions seemed to flow organically and uninterrupted by thought from Legacy's mouth. He had all of the names of the other conspirators and he placed treason onto each of them until the boy believed that he was the last one in the empire that he had built. He gave up everything piece by piece, not realizing it until the very end, still confident that his own mind hadn't given up anything important until the information formed in front of him as a summation in the words of the American interrogator.

Confronted by the loss of everything, and only upon the realization that he'd told Legacy everything, only then was his manner contrite: his words came out carefully, almost clinically, "Release me and I'll never bother you again."

Legacy remembered his blood turning to ice. The boy was not lying – it was pure truth. He had placed himself at the center of the morality compass and labeled himself good, which Legacy recognized was the closest thing to pure evil a man can do. Everything about the delivery seemed genuine, his face a fixed mask. But the likeness didn't fit the part of his voice that was attached to, and it made Legacy shudder. The hatred that burned deep inside that child wouldn't rest until it flamed up and engulfed him, his family, his friends, his people. Revenge would be the boy's life until Legacy was extinguished; Legacy could tell that. At least, he believed he could, because it made him feel better about the fact that he recommended a swift, clean military scrub, off the books. Legacy even

accompanied the escort that walked the boy out into the fields under a satin black moonless sky.

Two shots from a service-issued side arm and a lifeless body fell to the ground. The boy hadn't said anything, but just before the bullets had entered him, he laughed like the punch line that was about to come somehow amused him.

Legacy hadn't said anything in reply to Blade's "deal." As far as Legacy was concerned, it was a promise of future destruction that included everything in his life. Blade was just like the Indonesian teen. He would never give up on turning the tables. Legacy suddenly felt scared. Saving Wagner meant losing a grip on someone who would not rest until he had revenge. That wasn't where the fear arose, however. It was the thought that his frustration would include the destruction of anything that he loved. Blade would certainly come after his family first. And he'd have resources.

Legacy's hand twitched reminding him that his aim had been held too long – how long had he drifted off into his own thoughts, a minute or more? Blade looked content to dangle Wagner's life in front of him until his offer expired.

He could tell from Blade's expression that it was only seconds that had slipped passed since the entreaty. There was no urgency creeping into the sunken cloudy whites of Blade's eyes.

Legacy could think of no alternative other than raising his pistol and shooting Blade. He couldn't have this standoff repeated with Chess dangling from Blade's chain and it thundered in his mind that this ugly creature in front of him would not rest until that very reprise.

He turned on the laser sight and a red bead traveled across the space between the men until it rested at Blade's feet, then suddenly Legacy dropped his weapon. He said in the most direct command tone he had ever produced.

"Now drop her." The play-acted contrition would take a second to dissipate and in that window he might get Blade's will to acquiesce to his own. It was only a theory when Legacy shouted, but it became surprised reality when Blade suddenly dropped the chain and sent Wagner falling to the ground.

What happened next Legacy should have expected.

Blade looked behind him where Wagner had knocked his pistol into the brush then, finding the metal gleam in his headlights, dove toward it. Legacy retrieved his gun only to find that Blade was out of sight, and armed. He took off at a sprint reaching Wagner's body in time to flip the sled onto its side and deflect three of the four bullets that rained from the darkness. The other bullet hit just below the rim of the metal sled and ended up in Legacy's left shoulder. The

Kevlar stopped it from piercing the skin, but the joint felt like it had been ripped open along a very narrow seam. Legacy had felt many kinds of pain before in his life. There was the dry sustained pain of torture, the white-hot pain of a bullet vaporizing blood on its way through the body, the needles around a broken bone fixed in the field that needs to be traveled upon. This was new. It was local to the point of feeling like a surgical procedure had just been completed on the exact area of the ball socket of his shoulder. It was a metal sliver in his flesh that had serrated edges.

Legacy switched his weapon to his good arm and swung it across the dark entry into the forest. Every third heartbeat, he took his eyes off dark brush and pressed his lips to Wagner's, forcing air into her lungs. He could tell from the level of resistance that the windpipe had been damaged but not entirely broken and after a few breaths, Wagner spit back air in a raspy gulp. She was alive, but that was where the good news ended.

The sound of a motorcycle engine being gunned drew Legacy's attention, but there was no clear target to draw his fire. A cloud of dirt covered the taillight and there was nothing to aim at except the grumble of the engine and perhaps the seam that separates silhouette from the black backdrop of night. It would be like firing at a fleeing shadow, and Legacy actually questioned if a bullet would meet any resistance if it bisected him in his current state. He couldn't take the risk of wounding him anyway. This was a demon that had to die tonight, and he had to be there when it happened or he'd be looking over his shoulder the rest of his life.

He tugged at Wagner's shoulders and pulled her backward through the door of the bar.

"Legacy? Where –" her breath entered her lungs like a leaky pipe in reverse, great labor went into every syllable "I thought I was dead."

"You were." He said leaning in close, it might have been his mouth or maybe just his breath brushed her ear. Wagner looked up at him, the surface of her eyes smooth as glass, a question within pushed past Legacy's determination without a sound. He decided that there was no quick way to answer her gaze, and instead pretended to misunderstand - it was one of the most awkward moments of Legacy's life. In his mind he converted the sentiment into an emotion that he could process; he came up with concern, Wager was concerned about her well-being. Legacy looked up and found Burly only a few feet away. "Take care of this one, keep her head at an angle, body prone – tell the next paramedic not to trach her unless she turns blue." He tilted his head back toward Wagner. "Wouldn't want to ruin your looks."

He started to pull away, but a sudden burst of strength and Wagner held his

forearm. Legacy was surprised to see that she had tears in her eyes. “You told him I was nothing-”

“If he thought you had any personal value – I” Legacy thought for a moment, he actually believed that Blade would have killed her no matter what he was able to convince him of – he didn’t know how to explain to her that most of what he did was merely stalling. Then, suddenly he knew exactly what to say. “I’m glad you killed yourself, made the negotiation much easier.”

“You know how to give a girl a compliment.”

He felt the smile even though he’d turned away, heading to the door. There was nothing about a person’s voice escaped him, especially the shape of the mouth of a person speaking. Legacy was certain that it was a smile.

Legacy dislodged the chain that held the sled to the second motorcycle. The body of the bike was still warm as he straddled it and kicked the engine back into action like it had never stopped. Legacy had seen the damage on Blade’s motorcycle, and he knew that the trail would amplify any mechanical defects. Blade would have to be careful to get out of this mountain valley alive. Legacy had none of the worries that Blade did, only the commitment to kill or die. It was like the old days.

The noise of the chopper engine, something that must have been a point of pride approaching any of his biker hangouts, was now a serious detriment to Blade’s stealth. Legacy heard it as a hum that even the intervening foliage couldn’t mask at over a mile off. Every quarter mile, Legacy cut his own engine and coasted the lumbering wheels, struts squeaking, as he listened for the far off grumble. It was getting closer each time he checked.

The road, cut deep with ruts, pitted by indentations of the granite geological migration, had been treacherous in the car and Legacy’s presumption that a bike handled the path faster had been true. However, the idea that it was less dangerous had been tested several times since leaving the bar and Legacy had come to realize that a single gash misjudged would land him face first in a stand of trees. His back wheel kicked out by an unexpected stomach-sized rut, and his forearm had brushed one of the corners. The blunt end had hidden a razor sharp point. It had opened up his protective vest like a zipper, stopping just short of his wrist and cutting just deep enough for a breeze to come through to his skin.

It would be embarrassing to die chasing someone, Legacy thought, although he wasn’t quite certain why. He preferred dying, however, to letting Blade get away. Legacy knew that the snare on his arm was nothing compared to the torture of his heart worrying each day that Chess would be used to exact revenge upon the man who disrupted the perfect business. Blade really ought to have

turned the blame onto himself for allowing the vapor trail that led back to him out onto the cold mountain air. He would bring that up next time he saw him.

Legacy pressed his ride faster and faster. They were nearing the river, and natural foot trails must traverse the banks from one side or the other somewhere near the road. He cut the engine expecting to hear the engine noise growing, but the burble of water was the only sound.

Blade was out there, hovering in the air. He wasn't running, so he had to be attacking. Legacy laid down his bike, and immediately heard a spitting sound as two rounds cut the air inches above his hairline. Legacy rolled, finding the cover of the trees bruising as he came to an abrupt halt. The sapling tree behind him shook with a surprised tremor like it was expecting Legacy's back to bend rather than have the force carry into its leaves. Blade knew exactly where he was, that was good Legacy thought, disoriented, the world still spinning. Legacy didn't need his senses under control to act. It was one of the things that had kept him alive on several missions behind unfriendly borders. A weapon was in his hand. A single bullet fired, seeking out a target he hadn't even recalled choosing, and the gas tank of his target's motorcycle erupted in flames.

A cry of fury down the trail was reward. Of course, Legacy thought finding his feet, Blade had wanted to replace his defective wheels, gain the advantage of unhindered flight while choking off his singular pursuer. His hand must have known the motivation. He'd thank his finger later, now he had to be far away from this place. He flung a rock across the road knocking at a tree on the far side. He took a deep breath then set off low and fast along the exact same path as the rock had flown, not two seconds previous.

It was a field maneuver that called for following an obvious decoy, but it only worked when getting a position on a target that valued reasoning over perception, and those targets were far and few between. Legacy had used it only a couple of times and neither time ended up dead – ending up dead, his field instructor had often said, was proof that the tactics were wrong.

Blade would know that there was no way that Legacy had gotten across that road quickly enough to make the careless noise of a rock striking a tree. He'd also think that the lit up road would be impossible to cross without detection. And as Legacy's legs burned from his crouched sprint, legs bent at acute angles throughout each power stroke that propelled his body skimming across the road at half his normal height, he felt the firelight flash on his face, flames still shooting into the air just above the lowest boughs of the trees. Legacy felt so exposed in the darkness that it was hard to fathom that Blade was not taking a bead on him like a target in a shooting range, leading him slightly and pulling the trigger. But Legacy considered unlikely that Blade had even caught a glimpse of

him unless he was staring directly at the point of entrance or exit to the road. The fire was acting like a natural floodlight on the dark landscape amplifying any shadow passing in front of it while engulfing everything directly behind the flare.

Legacy half expected that Blade might have the kind of vision that the beast from the movie “Predator” had. Chess had made him watch the movie to ask if Special Forces was really like that. He remembered his answer, “Yes, exactly, right down to the tactics he’d used to fight his last alien.”

Five steps from the safety of the brush, on the other side of the road, was the area of greatest danger. If the predator had been tracking Legacy, this was where the proof would come. Legacy dreaded that the last thoughts of his hyper-perceptive cranium would be focused on the idea that he couldn’t believe that the muscle-bound man he’d seen murder every principle of wet work was now the governor of the largest economy in the union. He slid, without a sound, into the bristle and undergrowth of the wooded fringe. Eyes closed, he held his weapon ready to return fire by gauging the sound of the report of Blade’s weapon. But there was no sound other than the crackling metallic blaze in the roadway. Legacy swung his head, no longer concentrating on the last position that he’d known Blade to occupy, rather intent on the patch of ground on the other side of the road that the gunfire had come from only seconds before.

Legacy waited, he would have waited for dawn, but Blade’s confidence in killing strategy went against him that night. The fire had fallen, collapsed onto itself and darkness reclaimed the landscape. There was a black tide that lapped against the edges of every form and the periphery blended so much into the abyss that if a person was not looking directly at an object, he couldn’t really be sure it was there. It was the kind of landscape where death came out of nowhere and was so swift that the blackness beat the wave of pain and the last image a dying man had was the same as the one he had only a split second before. Blade had silently flanked Legacy’s last known position and stood with his chest pressed close to an old growth lodge pole pine.

It was the perfect place to attack; therefore it was under Legacy’s silent surveillance even before he saw the swift shadow of Blade add the slightest increase in darkness to the shadow the tree cast. It was as though light itself had a fear of his form, or perhaps he was simply faster than the eye believed.

Even looking directly at the tree, Legacy barely made out the agile approach. He was certain, however, that a bullet would track the shadow down.

Legacy had only a second before Blade realized that his target had fled and he was the one exposed. He put a shot through the meat of the tree about three feet from the roots. Spring, and the damp sap inside the tree might have slowed the bullet and kept it from breaking out the other side. In the dead of winter, it

might have frozen the outer ring and directed the bullet harmlessly away, but the late fall was dry, brittle and offered less resistance to the composite metal round that Legacy's pistol fired. Blade stumbled back, then shouted "Son of a –"

He fumbled his weapon, sweeping the other side of the road, looking for a sign "Fuck – nobody does that to me." He unloaded all nine rounds in his clip at all of the possible places of cover that he could see.

A tree root six inches from Legacy's face split, the smell of acid smoke and earthy decay filled his nostrils. Across the road the crack of gunfire died out. Click, click, click came the sound of a pistol empty of rounds.

He leaned out from his hiding spot to see Blade spill into the roadway at a bullish stagger. He had the air of someone who wanted something desperately; perhaps it was simply to see the eyes of the man who killed him. His wound oozed a dark liquid that clung to his shirt and made it shine like an oil slick.

"I'm bleeding, I've been hit and I'm bleeding." Blade said in a quiet astonished voice. "I need – I need – help me, for god's sake, you fucking fed."

He pointed a long accusing finger at the dark bank of trees. Then, as if he'd entered a bargain with the blackness in front of him, he eased the frantic grip of his other hand, which pressed into his wounded belly. He dropped his bloody pistol onto the road.

Legacy stepped forward enough so that his form lifted from the dark contrast of the tree trunks. From the road it must have looked like one of the trees had taken human form to stand at the edge of the road.

He had seen men at the edge of their own mortality change into submissive creatures, and although he hadn't expected this quick of a transformation of Blade, even he could tell that the shot in his stomach left him only about thirty minutes of life, if left untreated.

Blade stared at him, blinking obsessively, pain glistening in the sweat beading up on his face and collecting in the craters where tears would never run. He slowly raised his hands. "You beat me twice, should have known you wouldn't be easy."

"Don't take it so hard."

Blade snorted, caught off guard. He stared hard at the officer of the law who'd so often surprised him, and his eyes narrowed. "Always knew the only man that could catch me would be a killer worse than me."

"I'm not a killer."

"So you don't advertise" He said with a wry smile, "your secret's safe with me."

I have one too.” Blade smiled, he’d brought his hands behind his head and was linking his fingers behind his neck.

Legacy had his pistol trained on Blade’s chest, his eyes fixed in conversation somewhere behind Blade’s eyes. There was nothing on the face to indicate what was about to happen, and it was the ripple of his laser sight that actually caught Legacy’s attention. There was a flash of movement that started in the torso and spread, conscripting Blade’s hands into sudden motion, chopping downward with great speed.

It could have been like a some kind of harmless ritual dance, which Legacy thought no doubt there were many performed under the silver moon at one time in this part of the country. The spirit of one of those dancers could have been taking a stroll through the countryside when he’d come upon Blade’s dying body and decided to inhabit it for one last physical thrust before entering the ethereal plane.

It was nothing that poetic, flashes of metal left both of the hands released sharply just after passing Blade’s ear made their message much more deadly, but equally eternal to the argument of the spirit wanderer.

Legacy pushed off of the earth with his leg and he felt the first knife hit and imbed just above the knee joint. He jerked his head suddenly to the left like a man cracking his neck. He heard the other knife brushing by his right ear, feeling a glancing slash to the neck. Blood trickled down his shoulder blade. He was unbalanced and fell sideways onto the road. The concussion hit his ribs and made his next breath of cold air burn. That second one was aimed for my eye socket, Legacy thought, blinking and pulling his gun to sight on Blade.

Blade was deadly still, in fact if it weren’t for the inarguable fact that a piece of sharp metal was sticking from his left leg, Legacy might have believed that Blade had not moved at all. Blade stood there like a statue, arms outstretched like they were ready to carry in a load of wood.

“That’s the third time you’ve –”

Legacy raised his weapon and fired. The bullet entered the neck and cut off all further discussion. Blade’s next draw of breath was filled with blood, and it spat out instead of his next word. Anger swelled as color entered Blade’s cheeks for the last time. He began flailing his arms about, casting symbols and sign with them for a moment, like the positions meant something.

He dropped forward onto his knees and the blood followed the gravitational pull, pouring out of his neck. He caught a breath, not daring to look up again on the chance that he’d lose this last opportunity to speak. He spoke to the dirt inches in front of his nose.

“I was born to kill: either other people or myself.”

Legacy walked up pressed the barrel of his gun to the back of Blade’s head and pulled the trigger, twice. The shots rang out in the night. “You made the wrong choice.”

Legacy thought of how the execution would look in his final report, it brought a fleeting smile to his face.

Legacy rode back to the bar with the knife still stuck in his leg. With what Blade knew about killing, Legacy wouldn’t have been surprised that the removal would have led to a river of blood, and his quick passing.

He felt a wave of what his wife must have felt, knowing she was going to die, not knowing how the living would continue without her. It was the longest ride of his life.

Chapter 67 Home Time

The field around the compound bristled with activity. Portable floodlights, drawn by trailers the size of small cars painted the hills, stretching out for miles. The navy blue FBI jackets formed a visual continuity in the foreground, all of the people looking to be of the exact same variety, like a field of tall blue grass on the move by a gust of wind.

A helicopter touched down in the center of the parking lot, flanked immediately by two black town cars. The steps fell to the earth before the wheels touched down and Doorner filled the archway. Formality was dropped, and he took the unfolding steps two at a time, almost beating them to the ground. The director took no time to survey the operations or even respond to the few agents that approached, their lips moving in precise military diction.

He didn’t hear a word, pushing them aside and yelling for a bullhorn. Doorner took the bullhorn like a charged weapon, putting it to his lips immediately.

“I’m here honey, I’m here.”

One of the local agents pushed in close with his assessment. “She’s probably down the back trail – I can show you - “

A voice cut in, it was the kind of voice that expected to be listened to and somehow that expectation was always met. The words were stripped completely of the urgency that surrounded them, and somehow gained attention above the din. “She’s somewhere up there, director.”

Director Doorner turned to see Agent Legacy, upper leg bandaged and seeping blood from beneath, shoulder in a splint, standing on the rise beside the flagpole,

scanning the mountains in the opposite direction of where the agents were concentrating.

“Legacy?”

Legacy didn't reply, he felt the answer must be obvious, and to reinforce it to the director of an intelligence agency wouldn't show the proper sensitivity.

“Where is she?”

The local man burst in again, his accent flat as the central western state he came from, thinking that persistence and repetition might lead to acceptance of his observations. “As I said, sir, we're of the mind that she took the trail around back.”

Doorner had had enough. “Agent Legacy, inform this group of agents that I will kill the next man who talks to me.”

“Will do.” He said, and an ironic smile passed between the men as Legacy pointed to an area up the hill.

The local man backed off, literally taking a few uncertain steps backward before turning. The director was known everywhere as being a man of his word, and even the most vacant threat carried a potential disaster.

Legacy was kind enough to cover his retreat “Talk to her like it's a phone call – occupy her thoughts until she decides there's no deceit, don't try to coax her out.”

Doorner glowered at the instructions, but followed them to a tee. “Hey baby, it's your dad. I've been awfully worried about you. I, I miss - “ he looked to Legacy again, realizing that he had become the center of attention of the men around him, who'd come to a sudden halt. Legacy only nodded his support. “Talk like you always do.”

Doorner continued, “I miss our discussions about the use of lethal force in hostage situations – and your ideas concerning field chain of command are better formulated than most of the officers at Centcom, but don't tell them I said that.”

Five minutes of chatter, some of it stunningly earnest from the gruff old-guard tiger, when, finally, a voice came from the woods. It was shrill and exhausted and it carried through the background noise like a far away siren.

Laura screamed when the paramedics approached, her father pushed them aside and cradled his daughter in his arms. The slope of the land fought against the old man's grip, but he leveraged her body gracefully, tenderly, onto the waiting stretcher. He hesitated before drawing his arm from the crook of her neck. Doorner bent down and kissed her forehead, and the tear that dropped onto her

cheek was immediately camouflaged in her own.

Doorner looked back at the place where Legacy had been standing and found that his towering form had slipped away. He half expected the man to appear at his shoulder at his mental call, such was the lore surrounding the strange agent. He knew, logically, that it wasn't the supernatural forces that shaped him. He'd met a few men like Legacy in his time, and it was like the constellations that guided their journey were different than the ones seen by the rest of the people in the world.

The medics were checking Laura's vitals and reflexes before moving her. Doorner let his eyes drift from her upwards to the stars above him, appearing to an outside observer to be in prayer or at least the profession of profound celestial thanks. He had no idea how he came to stand in this desolate field holding his living, breathing child, but he wasn't going to be a man of great power or reason for the next few hours. The medics gave the OK sign and they were on the move. He walked with Laura to the helicopter then sat as she gripped his hand like she half expected it to lose form at any moment and fade away. He squeezed right back, trying to reassure her that it would not.

Chapter 68 Explained Inquest

The formal inquest was well into its second hour of questioning. Legacy imagined the stenographer was beginning to realize how dreadfully boring her government job was and always would be, but she continued to pick and pluck the instrument in front of her as if it were a fine instrument playing a somber and meaningful piece of music. Every note had to be exactly correct, predicted as much as recorded at the moment the word entered the cognizance of the committee members and became part of the grand symphony.

Actually, it didn't matter what metaphor she coated her tedious job in, she still wanted to hurt every person on earth who talked.

Legacy stared at the woman, much more interested in the recorder of the meeting than the topics of the meeting itself. He watched the movement of her hand, the graceful curve of her neck that seemed to be held tightly in place by the swept up hair that urged gravity into a counter motion upward. Her chin hovered like it was following the odd request of her hair. She was fascinating.

"I have no interest in the question whatsoever." Legacy replied. He hoped it was the answer to the question that had been most recently asked, he wasn't paying attention to the conversation.

“It occurs to me,” said a plump man in dress blues, “that we can learn much simply observing the agent.”

“I’m just suggesting that he recount the results of his methods, and give insight.”

“I have no interest in that kind of accountability whatsoever.” Legacy said, now certain that he was answering correctly.

The head of the commission shuffled some of the papers in front of him, stalling, like his next duty was not particularly his favorite. “Now the matter of the death of Corwin Wells-”

Legacy glanced up, confused by the name.

“The man you’ve come to know as Blade – can we bridge this sensitive matter?”

“It’s why I’m here, isn’t it?” Legacy let his gaze travel across the room to where his two character witnesses, agents Brent and Wagner watched the closed, informal hearing from the raised rotunda that circled the conference room.

Legacy knew the more adjectives before the word investigation or hearing, the more trouble they might think you are in. For example, had it been a “closed informal supervisory hearing,” it would have been even worse. Nothing in Wagner’s gaze foretold any danger, however. Wagner nodded to him, signifying no doubt that she had been relatively pleased with his performance up until now.

“No, no, this isn’t a – we’re just looking for the facts and your report leaves the events of the final bullets – the ones that entered – um” he searched through more papers even though he knew exactly what they were going to say.

“The back of his head?” Legacy offered, and the man nodded like a sales clerk confirming a wildly favorable sales price. “I left that out for reasons of incrimination.”

Wagner scowled then; Legacy could feel it without looking back at her.

Legacy had known that absence of reporting on those final moments with Corwin Wells might lead to a dismissal. Legacy thought of his favorite movie character, “You can’t handle the truth!” a general had screamed it, and everyone who’d ever taken up secret service work loved him for saying it. Some of the bravest men are in prison, while the cowards look through records searching for a way to put the next one there.

Legacy, however, didn’t think himself a hero, or even brave in this instance, merely pragmatic and final. He had to be very diplomatic in the way he expressed himself on the record.

“I shot him through the back of the head at close range using my sidearm –”

“Was it perhaps a misfire, or some mistake –”

“No.”

The officer made an attempt to correct him “And you meant for the wound to – slow his pursuit –”

“He was unconscious when he took the bullets.”

There was a sudden still in the room. Even the stenographer had stopped and now stared at Legacy in shocked silence. Legacy was pleased to have gotten her attention and took the moment to impart some advice.

“You need to take a vacation soon, or you’ll be the one answering questions.”

“Me?” She asked, not wanting to be the subject of Legacy’s observation.

A phone rang on the front desk and one member of the commission whispered the message into the chairman’s ear.

“We’ll have a recess.” The stenographer moved to mark the tape and tear off the long roll of questions and answers from the previous hours, but the chairman looked at her directly as she was in process and said, “Leave everything.”

The doors to the observation room above were opened and Wagner and Brent were escorted out; then the committee members filed out. Legacy was alone. He knew what was about to happen, down to the timing of the next entrance, but that didn’t change his mind about how he would handle it. In fact, he still didn’t know exactly what he was going to say, a remnant of the days when he asked the questions and never gave answers back. He wasn’t good at making himself understood, in a traditional sense, so he’d have to rely upon his thundering charm. That thought almost brought a smile to his face.

The clank of the bar rattling the wood as it slid the bolt out of the way to allow the door to swing inward vibrated, then was swallowed up by the modern inner surfaces of the inquest room. The large oak door, a fixture surely of the original design when everything was stone and marble, its latching mechanism would have been as sharp as gunfire had the room not been updated. There was carpeting up to the chair rail, and sound-buffering ceiling shingles. Legacy imagined that Doorner had been around long enough to be able to compare the effect of his entrance in both settings, and he bet that Doorner was thinking mainly about architecture when he entered.

“You’re going to make me put you in jail. The hero of the FBI is now going to be called in for court martial. When this court reconvenes you are going to tell the truth, and before you say anything, I’m going to tell you what the truth is.”

“I saw Laura at the press conference.”

Turning on a dime, Legacy saw that Doorner wanted something, “How did she

seem?” Doorner’s sharp steel grey eyes held Legacy’s attention in an uncomfortable way. Legacy figured that this man could command attention from almost anyone, and began to see how he’d carved out such a place of power.

“She seemed almost whole –” Doorner nodded, as if much cheerier assessments had been made but somehow, this one was satisfactory.

“You like to tell the truth.”

“It keeps me out of trouble.” Doorner almost laughed.

“You could have made it look a lot more like an accident.”

“It wasn’t.”

“Then you knew it would lead to something like this.”

“He was the ringleader, pure intellect, brutality and persistence. It wouldn’t be over when he went behind bars, he’d keep going. I couldn’t match his intensity all of my life. I beat him on that one field, but three out of seven he would have been standing over my dead body.”

“That’s not a reason to execute the man –“

“He would have struck back through every underworld contact he’d made in twenty years of riding the asphalt, he would have reached out from his cell to finish the job on your daughter then if he was feeling ironic, mine. I didn’t want to be ready for the challenge he presented every day of my life - “

Doorner let his fingers skim the tape of the stenographer. “I can’t make you a hero without an official debriefing – there’s a shake-up coming and someone has to come out of this looking like a good guy. Believe me, I know how hard it is for an agent to look like a good guy these days.” He ripped the long tape from the roll and the end curled up like a ribbon. “I’m going to use this to wipe my ass, I’ll have the stenographer type up a new one I dictate. You’re coming to Washington with a new title that has you reporting to no one but the new regional director.” He said it like a challenge, expecting to be countered.

Legacy disarmed him, “That sounds great,” Doorner looked relieved, he turned for the door, “But I’ll need a favor.”

“I just did you a favor,” Doorner said, raising the trailing edge of the stenography tape.

“That made your life easier not mine.” Doorner squinted like he was looking at a totally new species, not without some fascination.

“If I’m going to stay, I will accept no official commendation. I will stay in the Alexandria office and report only to director Wilkes - “

“Wilkes is on his way out. His performance –”

“Present company included, he is the man I respect most at the agency.”

Doorner’s lips receded, clenching the wrinkles out of the skin around his mouth. Legacy continued without pause, “We have a history, and I trust both his internal and external logic.”

“His final report cites you for insubordination –”

“And that’s exactly how it should, in all honesty, read. It’s people like you who make things read the way they want them to.”

Doorner suddenly burst into a smile, “You’re trying to make it easier for me to submarine your promotion.” A gleam in the old man’s eye told Legacy that he’d come across a man who’d probably never allowed himself to be manipulated in his life. He dropped the tape at Legacy’s feet.

Doorner walked to the door at a jaunt, his steps as careful as a minesweeper’s, his words marked the counterpoints of an internal composition exactly. “This is going to hurt the person who requested specifically to report to you. Lateral moves are never popular at the agency.”

“That’s their problem.” Legacy said with some satisfaction.

The director turned at the door and studied Legacy, eyes shining with a special cocktail of wisdom and mischief allowed only to the boys that live inside the minds of old men. “Sure you don’t want any say in who gets the praise for the operation?” Legacy shook his head. “I could promote Bailey for his part.”

Color visibly drained from Legacy’s already pale face; he thought of all of the people who should be rewarded for the safe return of Laura and wouldn’t include Bailey in the meanest part of the periphery. He looked at Doorner and saw that he was waiting for an answer; behind the impatience Legacy saw a punishing brand of enjoyment that only military men recognize and respect.

Doorner wasn’t going to let him out of the room without a concession of some sort.

“I need him here with me.” Legacy said in a lifeless monotone. “Giving a fine man like Bailey more power and influence over the affairs of the FBI might seem like it is a great idea,” he gulped down a thin mixture of bile and saliva collecting in the back of his throat. “But I must selfishly request that he is not given a higher post because I require his direct supervision.”

The director looked like he was about to burst out into laughter, but a form-fitting official shrug and he was all business again. “I’ll find someone else then, as a favor.”

Legacy watched the director exit the room; he waited for the other shoe to drop, as he knew that it would.

“You owe me one now, Agent Legacy.” Rang down the corridor where the director had just exited. Legacy could tell that Doorner hadn’t even turned his head back toward the door, and had been staring directly forward when he’d spoke, so confident that Legacy was waiting on his words. Legacy could also hear that the words were said through lips pulled tight against the bottom of his jaw, either a scowl or a smile, Legacy thought. He wouldn’t know until it came time to call in the favor.

The day was hazy, low clouds hung vengeful in the sky – plotting the return of a late-season snowstorm. Legacy entered the train station and caught the 5:40, just like he had every day. It was almost like the events of the past twenty-four hours hadn’t even happened, like a day had been skipped and now the world was back in order. Except today he was going the other way. Out of Alexandria and into the industrial areas surrounding the harbor.

He stepped into the high-rise building and after passing by several “undetectable” wafer-thin security cameras mounted in the textured ceilings, he boarded the freight elevator that serviced Tyke’s floor.

A minute later and the door opened, Tyke stood behind the door, his big grin inches from the chrome hinges. He held an envelope in his hand. It was the culmination of a special project Legacy had asked him to investigate. Tyke offered it to Legacy then whisked it away before Legacy could snatch it.

“I came through for you again, bet you’re wondering whose name is in this envelope?”

“I knew that if it was done on a computer, you’d eventually be able to figure out who did it.”

“Don’t you be saying eventually like that – your boys are still scratching their heads and bobbing them up and down in planning meetings about how to find this guy. Whose name I’m giving you.” He held up the envelope like a lawyer presenting evidence to the jury. “Now I get something before I give.”

“Seems like what everybody does these days.”

“They suspected me right?”

Legacy snatched the envelope from his hands with a gesture of such quickness that Tyke’s fingers double clutched the air in a kind of tactile disbelief, the envelope had just been in his hand. Legacy put it in his pocket without looking at the paper inside. “I saw your name as a person of interest when going through the case documents, that’s when I called you.”

“So, you knew all along it wasn’t me.”

“No, but I knew you would be able to give me a name, and if you couldn’t – well that doesn’t matter now.” He said, patting his inside pocket and turning to leave. “I’ll get my “boys” to work arresting this guy.”

“How do you know that name’s real? I could be punking you.” Tyke stood on his toes to add a couple of inches to his contumelious grin, but when Legacy wheeled around on him, he immediately began to rock back and forth on his legs nervously.

Legacy smirked. “You’ve tried to outsmart me before face to face, and it didn’t work.”

“What if I hadn’t been here?” he said, and with all the bravado drained from his voice, Tyke sounded strangely humble. “I would have beaten you and then you’d have gotten in trouble for bringing me in on it in the first place.”

“I would have found you.” That was how one leveled a threat.

An earnest curiosity put a crease in Tyke’s baby-faced brow “How?”

“The same way I beat you in chess.” And for no reason other than camaraderie Legacy found himself saying, “I owe you one.”

Legacy could hardly remember the impulse to engage someone outside the family circle, but he didn’t give a second thought as to why it would come out now. His mind was in a restful state that allowed him to hover near operational normalcy. This is the way people deal with the unending stream of information that consciousness supplies – or at least this is the surface that is easiest to present to the world. He walked into the hallway and in a moment, DING, the elevator doors opened.

Legacy attempted a smile at the doorman, but it buckled on his lips to form a sneer. The man neither noticed the intention nor the result. It took a lot of energy and went unnoticed, and it was the end of the briefest phase in Legacy’s life, the one where he would appear to be pleasant to others.

Legacy gripped the familiar second floor handrail where he made the turn into his hallway. The wood was soft and slightly concave, light brown showing through the dark mahogany stain from years of fingers pressing the last good area where one could get a handgrip before the wood bent into the wall at the landing.

He touched his fingers gently just above his top lip. It was an olfactory test to which he already knew the answer. The rails had been cleaned, as they were everyday with a cleanser that smelled slightly of orange peel. The scent was as

regular as Legacy was, but tonight it smelled a little less tart, like the smell had faded from its afternoon application sooner than usual, or the cleaner had been diluted. Perhaps the furnace had been blasting on high all afternoon and carried the scent from the surface of the wood to hidden corners of the building.

There was one other possibility, Legacy thought opening the locks on his door and pushing the door inward.

Chess stood with a stern look on her perfectly angelic face. “You’re late. Two hours.” She pointed to the wall clock with such drama as if she were expecting it to loosen itself from its frame and fall to their feet in shock.

Legacy put a hand to her hair and let his fingernails comb back from the widows peak until it stumbled over a variety of clips that held it, kid fashionably, in place. “Hey, I failed to come home last night.”

“That’s right.” Chess set her jaw, but the corners of her mouth were at odds with her posture and kept peeking upward. Her eyes lit up with joy. “Wagner told me everything, I’m so proud of you.” She jumped as high as she could but still needed the ready help of her father’s strong arms to help her climb up and link her arms around his neck. “You got the bad guy, you’re my hero.”

He carried her effortlessly into the main room. She twisted around until they were face to face. “And as a reward, I’m not going to tell you what I did while you were gone.” Mischief flashed in her green eyes. She tried a judo move, which was immediately reversed.

A trap door opened without a word and she fell, she found her backside hitting the couch cushions with a sting of wounded pride. “I was just kidding dad.”

“So was I.”

“Me landing on my butt is not a joke.”

“I found it to have a kind of representational humor.”

“You are so esoteric.”

Legacy had no idea what she was saying, but before he could ask, Chess’ face turned suddenly serious.

“Agent Wagner was medically evac -”

“She’s fine.” Legacy cut in. “Concussion, laceration, broken bones - all of them – but that’s all.”

“Very funny dad. What do you want to order for dinner?”

Legacy was about to inform her that Wagner had been discharged from the hospital, and was going to list Wagner’s exact injuries, then thought the better of

it. Chess didn't need the information; all she needed to know was that Wagner was going to be all right. He prided himself momentarily on filtering information like a normal parent would, then continued the discussion in a way that almost no normal parent would. "She also damaged her attitude and won't be able to argue with me for at least two weeks, so if you wouldn't mind picking up the slack dear," Not waiting for a reply he continued. "And she has a misaligned sense of emotional balance. The doctors are recommending a complete brain replacement if she continues disagreeing with me."

"You can't wait until I pass that one along, can you."

Legacy didn't even crack a smile. "I think we should make something for dinner – how would we go about doing that?"

"We have flour, pancake mix and pinto beans in the cupboard."

"Delicious."

Legacy realized during the extended half argument, half discussion, or the new word that Chess coined that night, "arguscussion" that they had while waiting for the pizza to arrive that he enjoyed arguing with his daughter. Perhaps adolescence wouldn't be so bad after all.

Two weeks later, Legacy sat at his desk staring at the pale recess in the back of Wagner's neck. A week before she'd turned her desk away from his and announced that it was a permanent move.

She was under the impression that this was some kind of punishment – after he'd rejected a present from her. Understandably, it was a thank you gift for saving her life. Wagner was visibly angry when he'd thrown her present into the trash bin after a cursory inspection, but she became livid when he explained the decision to her. The gift in question was a set of wireless headphones that could be paired with the stereo and in Wagner's words "Allow for the complete private enjoyment of the music furnished on his very special tapes." Legacy countered with the silent proposal that the gift was more worthy of removal by janitorial professionals, but when Wagner had plucked it from the bin and pressed for a reason, he'd explained that music filled a room and thoughts filled a head. She was asking him to fill his head with music – but that would interfere with his thoughts. Then he suggested that she use the headphones, as they wouldn't bother her. That's when the desk was moved, a grumbling sound punctuated by spats of Wagner's complaints. Legacy hadn't offered to help.

Legacy found the new arrangement much less distracting, and strangely he'd found the back of her neck fascinating. In the week that he'd had to examine the movement, structure and extension of her skin compared to her mood, Legacy found an expressive new entity. He could tell from the pressure of her fingers as

they slid along the base of her hair, how much tension was in Wagner, whether the phone call she was on was going well. A slight blush of the skin came with a new thought and foretold the announcement of something pleasant. The recess seemed to deepen ever so slightly when she needed something. Legacy found that he could often prompt a desired reaction by asking for her feedback on something in one of the cases they now shared. The expression she had on her face when she turned to answer was always some shade of official sternness chosen at random from the cadet catalog of proper office behavior, but there were always the undercurrents of excitement and involvement that were like a breath of fresh air into the room. The stale old cases found a little life each time Wagner brought her mind to bear on the details and reminded Legacy of the reasons that they'd gone unsolved in the first place; they hadn't been working on them.

Legacy could see that Wagner was fully engrossed in one of the reports on an old blackmail case and he took his opportunity to exit the room unnoticed.

"You're standing, why are you standing? It's not time for you to stand." Wagner grumbled, but she didn't turn.

Legacy grabbed a bouquet of flowers from his briefcase and the crackle of the paper brought a pink flush to the skin on Wagner's neck. "Man this place is boring."

Legacy still said nothing, allowing the anticipation to bubble into a tempest in Wagner's mind. He took long strides for the door. "Who are the flowers for?" she blurted out, still keeping her nose down in the report.

"I have an errand, and it's none of your business."

Wagner's hand went up to her hair and she tugged a ring from the configuration that was swept up high at the back of her head. She twisted the hair around her finger in a repetitive motion and it almost calmed her into silence. "I should have followed Agent Brent when he was promoted to the Washington office."

Legacy squinted, like he was trying to squeeze the truth out of the image of Wagner's neck. "I happen to know for a fact that the promotion was offered to you first, before Brent and that you opted to stay here."

"Hah." Wagner managed, in a forced tone. Then to cover she began to rant. "You never change, you think the world is all about you -"

Chapter 69 Another Mystery Solved

Legacy slipped out of the room. He judged that with a full head of steam, that

she'd continue talking as if he were there for another five to ten minutes. She'd probably save up the indignation of the moment of realization until later in the week when she was having dinner at his house, then unleash the entire argument again without the benefit of having a willing audience. Chess enjoying the blind-siding satisfaction of the moment would double the effect.

Legacy quickly clicked onto the business at hand. Literally, he carried a stunning assortment of flowers, so grand that it would be almost embarrassing displaying them on anything smaller than a conference table. Legacy hadn't thought of that when he'd purchased them, he was still getting used to adequate, or even socially accepted displays of almost anything.

He crested the third floor stairs and walked into a labyrinth of cubicle offices.

Heads turned as he walked past. The secretary pool seemed very interested. He didn't understand why, as he was seeing most of these people for the first time in his life. Yet they somehow seemed to know him. He kept his nose to the air, and realized only later that he must have looked quite arrogant.

Legacy had no idea who the flowers belonged to, and had only one sense to go on – smell. He stored the distinct citrus perfume smell in his memory.

The problem was the scent of the flowers was working against him. They made it hard for him to set any course based on smell, because the strongest impulse along those lines followed him at arms length at his side.

After several minutes of wandering the halls he was no closer to finding his target and he'd covered nearly every nook and cranny in the building.

A hand tapped low on his shoulder and he turned to see a woman of medium build, slender, handsome in all aspects staring up at him in wonder. Legacy recognized her immediately, or at least the scent of the citrus hand cream, it wasn't perfume after all, "Can I help you, agent?"

"You're the one who brings my coffee, everyday, why do you do that?" The sharpness of the question was unfortunate, but the woman shrugged it off.

"Who cares? Are those for me?"

Legacy handed her the flowers and they seemed to almost tip her over. He put his hand on her shoulder to counterbalance, and felt a shiver go through her. A smile flashed across her face accompanied by a blush the color of the deep red roses the filled the center of the arrangement.

"Thank you –" Legacy said.

She could tell that he was waiting for something, and somehow she knew what it was.

“Doris.”

“Thank you Doris.”

Legacy felt the ripple of secretaries leaving their desks to congregate around Doris even as he walked out into the hallway. He imagined that the story of the crazy agent in the cellar would have a new crease to it. They’d all have their theories as to why Legacy had chosen that day to deliver his appreciation – and as far as Legacy was concerned any of them could be right, because he didn’t know why he needed to reach out or even if he had really needed to do so. All he knew was that for three years he hadn’t even known whom he should be thanking, and now she was Doris. He knew he could have simply waited for her to arrive on that day, but he knew that the effect would be much greater if he climbed the stairs to visit her for once.

Legacy thought about going by Bailey’s office on the way back to his own, just to see the shock on his face, but he decided that the distastefulness of being in a room with him wasn’t worth the mischief of seeing him deal with the completely unexpected entrance of his star agent.

He reached the end of the hallway and made a turn down into the stairwell. Legacy paused, thinking of what was waiting for him at the bottom. He felt the stir of something quite foreign – it was pressing him into motion. It could have been anticipation, but Legacy marked the odd feeling down to simple boring curiosity. Maybe Wagner was still talking to no one. That would be something worth seeing. He quickened his pace.

Loyal Reader

Thank you for reading the first Agent Legacy mystery. I hope you enjoyed Agent Legacy, Agent Wagner, and the delightful Chess. Another Agent Legacy is being penned as you read, so keep your eyes out for the next mystery.