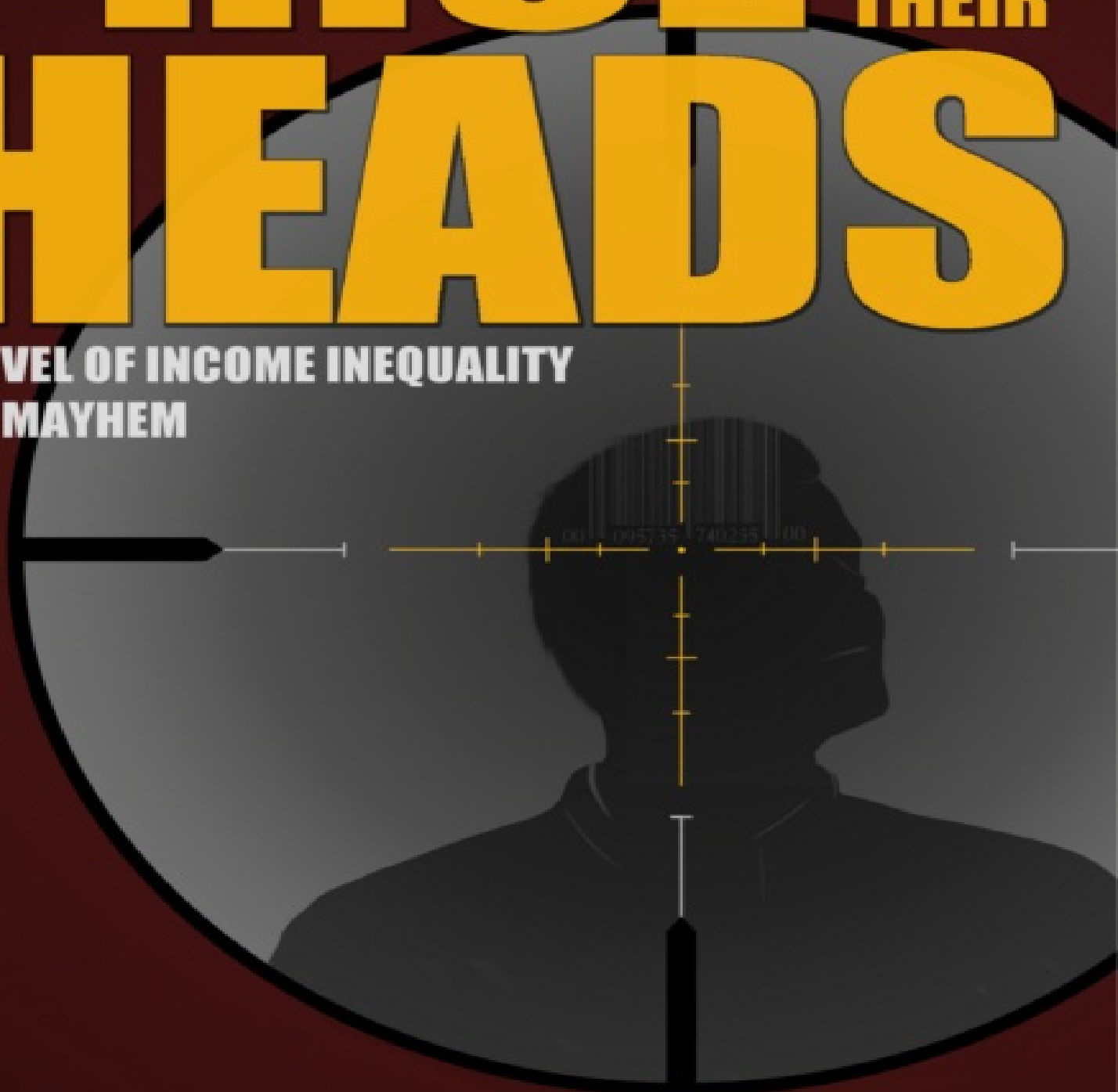


PRICE ON THEIR HEADS

A NOVEL OF INCOME INEQUALITY
AND MAYHEM



AUTHOR OF *THE G.O.D. JOURNAL*

JEFF POSEY

PRICE ON THEIR HEADS

A Novel of Income Inequality and Mayhem



By Jeff Posey



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Price on Their Heads
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DEDICATION

To my favorite human, Danielle.
Fortunately for me, I'm married to her.

Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Welcome Home, Jimmy!](#)

[Lawyers of the Dead](#)

[Price on Their Heads](#)

[815](#)

[Viral](#)

[Danged Yankee Woman](#)

[Write Fast](#)

[Media Circus](#)

[Hey, Little Brother](#)

[Jimmy](#)

[Sum of Jimmy's Parts](#)

[Kidnapped?](#)

[Out of the Bag](#)

[One Word](#)

[Black Water](#)

[Go!](#)

[You're Next](#)

[Three of Five](#)

[Asset or Liability?](#)

[Chaos Deserved](#)

[Knife the Bastard](#)

[By the Blood of Jimmy](#)

[Be Cool, Man](#)

[Crazy Like Jimmy](#)

[Dark Matter](#)

[Declaration](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

Titles by Jeff Posey

Excerpt from *mayhem inc. a novel*

Excerpt from *The G.O.D. Journal: a search for true gold*

WELCOME HOME, JIMMY!



“**I READ YOUR** letter,” Jackie said. His brother smelled of cigarettes and sweat through his dress uniform.

“I didn’t know you could read anything that wasn’t in a schoolbook.”

“How can you leave *tomorrow*?” Jackie couldn’t believe it. His older brother, running out on them. He used to protect them. He used to care. “You saw Momma. And Pop. What am I supposed to do?”

Jimmy sat on the couch with his knees wide. “Listen, Jacko. I don’t leave until late. Things are about to get better. I promise. I’m going to take care of things. And I’ll have all my new pay sent into Pop’s account. You’ll be fine.”

“We *won’t* be fine. Momma’s dying. Pop drinks all the time. Stupid Mr. Willoughby is kicking us out.” Jackie felt tears and a sob like a spasm. He gritted his teeth and clinched his fists. He wouldn’t let his Marine brother see him cry.

A hoarse shriek came from their mother’s room, followed by sobbing and their father comforting her, “Sweet baby, oh my sweet baby.” Jackie imagined him patting her with one hand and reaching for a bottle with his other.

“Jesus,” Jimmy said. “How long has she been like this?”

Jackie swallowed, sucked in a breath of hot, sick air, and ran a hand through his hair. “Few weeks, maybe. I don’t know. It’s getting worse.”

“Boy.” Jimmy shook his head. “That’s hard shit to take.” Jimmy scanned the room. His forehead gleamed with sweat. He waved a hand at Jackie. “But look at you, all graduated now. Valedictorian and everything. And not even eighteen yet.” Jimmy laughed, his voice high and strained. “Did you apply for all those scholarships like I told you?”

Jackie nodded. “But I can’t go.”

Jimmy frowned and opened his mouth just as their mother shrieked again. “I gotta get out of here.” Jimmy stood and kicked his duffel bag against the wall. “Come on.”

Jackie followed him out the back door into the night, as dark as it could

get so close to the big house, lit by spotlights along the exterior walls. Jackie didn't see him get it, but Jimmy drank from a can of beer and lit a cigarette. He paced a narrow strip of manicured lawn that ran along the service driveway. Jackie climbed onto the picnic table where the groundskeepers took their lunch. Most nights he liked standing on it, Mr. Willoughby's castle-sized house blazing behind him, the private botanical gardens of his estate sloping down to White Rock Lake, a tall hedge and fence protecting the property from the public trail that ran along the water's edge. Even amid the palatial homes that ringed the lake, Mr. Willoughby's stood out: taller, whiter, better lit, surrounded by the most acreage tended by the largest and lowest-paid crew of illegals. The richest of the rich, with all the power he could buy, and yet the man did nothing for anybody, especially their mother. A woman who scrubbed his floors, cleaned his bathroom, tolerated those other horrible things he did to her, and even lost a baby because of him, Jackie's little brother. For thirteen long years. Jackie's whole life that he remembered. And there was far too much he remembered. Far too much he saw. Mr. Willoughby was the only man Jackie knew with absolute certainty deserved to die.

From atop the picnic table, when the interior lights were on, he could see into Mr. Willoughby's corner bedroom. Sometimes the man would stand at the window smoking a cigar, a glass in one hand, staring out over the lake. At what? What did a rich man see when he peered into darkness? But Jackie saw no one in the room as his brother paced and smoked behind him.

"Why not?" his brother asked, starting another cigarette.

"Why not what?"

"Why can't you go? Especially if you get a scholarship. Valedictorian and everything, for Christ's sake. That's gotta be a free ride to somewhere." Jimmy threw his empty beer can on the lawn. Jackie liked the way it looked. Trash of a poor white man dressed in the country's finest military uniform spoiling the rich man's perfect turf.

"Even with a scholarship," Jackie said, "still takes money."

"You'll have my new paycheck, I already told you."

"You know how much debt Pop's in?"

"From what? Gambling?" Jimmy held up his finger for Jackie to hold his answer while he retrieved another beer. "Hey, you want one of these?"

“No,” Jackie said. He never drank. Never wanted to. Didn’t want to be like his father. And couldn’t believe Jimmy would be so stupid as to think Pop had gambling debt.

Jimmy came back and popped the top, took a gulp, burped, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and sat at the picnic table. He looked up at Jackie standing on the tabletop. “What kind of debt?”

“Medical, what do you think? For Mom.”

Jackie glanced at Mr. Willoughby’s window and saw him standing with a phone to his ear. “Hey, you ever shot a sniper rifle?” He imagined the glass pane shattering, Mr. Willoughby’s head exploding.

“Maybe. Why?”

“Guess,” he said, and jumped down. He sat across the table from his brother.

“Now, now, little brother,” Jimmy said. “That’s no way to think about the man who let you use his private library to get yourself all educated.”

“He won’t let me in there anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Not since Mom got sick.”

Jimmy blinked and scratched his jaw. “What’s that got to do with it?”

Jackie shrugged. “Maybe he’s afraid it’ll rub off on him.”

Jimmy shook his head and laughed. “The rich bastard thinks he’ll live forever.”

“Not if I have anything to do with it,” Jackie said.

“So how much, Jacko?” Jimmy asked.

“How much what?”

“Debt, you jack-off.”

Jackie shrugged. “About forty on credit cards. Maybe one-fifty to doctors and the hospital. They froze Pop’s accounts. When Mom found out, she stopped going. Stopped taking her medicine. Stopped everything. Except dying. Which is all we can really afford, anyway.”

Jackie kept them fed by scavenging food from the big house kitchen and did laundry when he had to. Both he and his father pulled clean clothes from piles because neither bothered to fold and put them away. The little apartment where they lived behind Mr. Willoughby’s vintage-car garage hadn’t been cleaned in months and smelled like old men.

“You talking thousands?” Jimmy asked.

“No, millions, you dumb Marine.”

Jimmy rocked forward, slammed the picnic table with his left hand and pointed his right forefinger at Jackie’s face. “Don’t you ever say shit about this uniform, you hear? I’ll slap the crap outta you.”

Jackie held his gaze without flinching. His brother often threatened, but never laid a hand on him. He could say whatever he wanted.

“Your letter said you’re leaving the service,” Jackie said. “I figured, before your time’s up and all, maybe you got kicked out.”

Jimmy finished his beer, added it to the lawn, and fired another cigarette. Looked at Jackie through a billow of smoke. “I volunteered.”

“For what?”

“Can’t tell you.”

“What, are you a spy now or something?”

“I said I can’t tell you.”

“Did they even tell *you* what it is?”

“Don’t be a stupid kid.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Duh.” Jimmy flipped his half-smoked cigarette butt. It arced like an errant fireworks shell and exploded in a spray of orange glitter on the service driveway.

“What’d they train you to do in the Marines, anyway?”

“What do you think?”

Jackie shrugged. “I dunno. Peel potatoes, maybe.”

Jimmy laughed, formed a gun with his hand, fired a round into Jackie’s face.

“Kill people?”

“The Marines ain’t a fucking charity, Jacko.”

“So why’d you volunteer?”

Jimmy sighed. Threw his leg over the picnic table bench to sit sideways and looked toward the black lake. “Because they asked me. And it’s an honor.”

“To kill people?”

“To work for...to get the job...,” he sighed, “to kill the right people, goddammit. Okay?”

Jackie turned that in his mind. Kill the right people. The ones who deserve to die. “Like Mr. Willoughby?”

Jimmy laughed. “Fuck no, you little jackass. We kill people on *behalf* of rich fucks like Mr. Willoughby.” He laughed until Jackie feared someone might hear, one of the security guards, or worse, Mr. Willoughby himself.

“But you could. If you wanted. Kill Mr. Willoughby.” Jackie leaned forward and whispered. “You’re trained to do it.”

Jimmy laughed again, quieter this time, and lit another cigarette. “How did you get so twisted, little brother?”

Jackie blinked, his eyes stinging. He didn’t want to be so twisted. It just boiled up. He thought about making Mr. Willoughby die all the time now. The man had humiliated his parents since he could remember. His father’s eyes always went flat when Mr. Willoughby spoke, but his mother would never look down like most of the women on staff. Jackie wouldn’t look away, either, even when the old man glared at him.

One time when they happened into the library together, Mr. Willoughby asked Jackie how many men in a business meeting you should trust. Jackie said no one. Mr. Willoughby laughed, and then said, “The richer the man, the less you should trust him. Trust me, I know.”

Jackie thought about that a lot. Only poor people could ever hope to earn trust. Rich people could never be trusted. Especially ones who made more money in an hour than his parents earned in a month. Maybe even a year.

He looked at Jimmy. “When Pop told him, asked him, he said, ‘I give you a place to live. The rest of it’s your problem.’ That’s what he said.”

Jimmy’s cigarette glowed as he pulled on it. “Pop asked him for two-hundred K?” He shrugged. “What’d you expect him to do? Hand it over?”

“No!” Jackie slammed his fist onto the picnic table and it rattled as much as when Jimmy whacked it. His hand stung and shrieked in pain. Like his mother. He felt a catch in his throat. “He asked,” he said, his voice husky and thick, “for enough to buy Momma’s pain meds.” He swallowed. “So she wouldn’t suffer so much.” He sniffed, eyes watering, throat tight.

Jimmy smoked the cigarette to the filter and flipped it to the driveway, an arc of darkness without a spark of life in it. “How much?”

Jackie rested his forehead on the cool picnic table. He didn’t have the energy to hold his head up anymore. “I don’t know. Pop said three or four bucks a day just for the pain pills, the generic stuff.”

“A hundred bucks a month?” Jimmy asked.

Jackie nodded, his forehead scraping the tabletop. “Something like that.”

“I could’ve paid that.”

“Pop didn’t have it. Neither did I.”

“And old man Willoughby refused.”

Jackie raised his head and nodded. “Stopped paying her when she stopped cleaning the house. And docked Pop’s pay for all the time he took off.”

Jimmy lit another cigarette, his eyes scanning the shadows under the trees. “The piece of shit. He probably wipes his ass with hundred-dollar bills.”

Jackie sniffed and swallowed. “I looked him up. He’s the one-hundred-twenty-seventh richest person in the country.”

“Really.”

Jackie nodded. “He’s worth more than a billion dollars.”

“A billion dollars.”

“One-point-three billion dollars.” It felt good to say it, the hard “b.” More money than he could imagine. “Want to kill him now?”

“Maybe.”

Jackie felt a rush of heat that surprised him. Might Jimmy really do it? His heart raced. A prickly sweat made him itch. What if they got caught? They had to be smart about it. “If we wait, the cook might beat us to it.”

“The cook?” Jimmy asked.

“I saw her in the kitchen, when Mr. Willoughby sent his dinner back the other night because he didn’t like it. She pulled a knife out and jabbed it in his direction, and then she saw me and gave me the stink eye.”

“She doesn’t have it in her.”

“Maybe. But I’ll bet everybody here would like to stick a knife in him. Maybe we could all go up there together. Make the world a better place.” He mumbled the last part and looked down. If all the people who worked for Mr. Willoughby participated, it wouldn’t be as wrong. It couldn’t be, if everybody wanted it.

“You said he’s kicking you out,” said Jimmy.

Jackie nodded. “We gotta be out by Monday.”

“Why? He got a new mechanic and maid moving in here?”

Jackie shook his head. “Walt said Mr. Pye said he didn’t want anyone living here again. Especially with kids.”

“Walt and Mr. Pye,” said Jimmy. “Same damn thing could happen to them. But they don’t have it in them to stick the old geezer, either.” Jimmy stood and stepped up onto the bench, and then to the table. He looked up toward Mr. Willoughby’s bedroom window.

“He up there?” Jackie asked.

“Yeah. Looks like he’s bitching out poor Mr. Pye again.”

Jackie climbed up beside his brother, grasping his arm and pressing against him. He felt the billowing heat from under his coarse wool coat, smelled his cigarette breath, and saw Mr. Pye getting the arm-waving wrath of Mr. Willoughby.

“What do you think he did?” asked Jackie. Mr. Pye went out of the room and Mr. Willoughby poured himself a drink and stood at the window looking out.

“I wouldn’t be that man’s butler for one-point-three billion dollars a year,” Jimmy said.

“Me either,” said Jackie.

Jimmy told him to wait there and jumped down, went into the house and stayed inside longer than Jackie thought it would take him to get a beer, but he waited, standing on the picnic table, rocking back and forth to work his legs. He noticed his mother had stopped wailing. The screams and moans meant she at least still lived, and the silence seemed eerie. When Jimmy finally came back out, he’d changed into all black. A knit cap over his hair and black gloves.

“One more,” he muttered.

“What?” Jackie asked.

“Mr. Pye came over.”

“Just now? I didn’t hear him.”

“He whispered.”

“What’d he say?”

“Said if we can’t keep Momma quiet, we have to get out right now.”

Jackie felt his heart tighten. He thought it had gotten as tight as it possibly could, but another sharp ache arced out. That’s what Mr. Willoughby had been arm-waving angry at Mr. Pye about. “We can’t take her anywhere tonight!”

“We don’t have to anymore. And I’m going over there right now. Have a word with that freak.” Jimmy disappeared into a shadow.

Jackie jumped off the table and ran after him. “What are you doing?”

“What do you think I’m doing?”

“I’m going with you.”

Jimmy stopped. Jackie couldn’t see, but felt his big brother assessing him. “You don’t have the balls.”

“I hate the bastard too. It’s my right.”

Jimmy chuckled. “Your right, is it? Okay. What the fuck. Come on, then. You still know the place and you gotta grow up sometime. The camera still busted over the pool entrance?”

“No, they fixed it. Got infrared and everything.”

“Shit.”

“But the painter bumped the one on the west side. It points out over the lake now. I saw it this afternoon. Walt says he watches sailboats on it now.”

“Take me there.”

Jackie glided ahead of his brother and it felt like a movie, sneaking from shadow to shadow, stopping and waiting, listening. He wondered if the Marines trained Jimmy to do stuff like this. Sneak up on a mansion and kill the rich owner. It seemed more like spy work than Marine work. He turned and watched his brother move like a cat in spite of the beer and nicotine. He’d definitely been trained. A shiver went up his spine. What if they really did kill the old man?

On the west side at a little-used door, Jackie walked to it and turned the handle. “Locked,” he said.

“I thought you said we could get in here?”

“I said the camera wasn’t pointed right.”

“Shit. Alarm still work?”

Jackie shrugged. “I guess. When Walt turns it on.”

“So why’d the hell you bring me here?”

Jackie pointed to a flap beside the doorway. “Old doggie door.”

“I can’t get through that,” said Jimmy.

“I can,” said Jackie. He knelt before it, put his hand through, then his head, and began to squeeze through the tiny door. When he got through, he turned around and poked his head out to look at Jimmy.

“What the hell am I supposed to do?” Jimmy hissed.

“Wait a minute.” Jackie stood and looked at the alarm on the door. A red LED light flashed when it was armed. It wasn’t flashing. He knelt and put his head out the doggie door. “Walt hasn’t turned the alarm on yet.”

“Well then open the door and let me in, you moron.”

Jackie opened the door and Jimmy came inside. He used a little black cloth from his pocket to wipe the door handle, and handed it to Jackie with a hand signal to wipe everything he’d touched. Then they squatted in the dim kitchen. Jackie handed the little square of cloth back to his brother.

“We shoulda got you gloves,” Jimmy whispered. “Don’t touch anything.” He nudged Jackie and pointed toward a door. “That still the cook’s room?”

“Yep.”

“She still deaf as a brick without her hearing aids?”

“Yep.”

“Nobody else in the house?”

“Mr. Pye.”

“Besides Mr. Pye.”

“Nope.”

“Any new cameras or anything I should know about?”

Jackie shook his head. “Nope.” It had begun to feel like a game. They were just sneaking around like they used to as boys.

“Mr. Pye still in the same room?”

“Yep.” First floor, opposite side from Mr. Willoughby. He didn’t let any of his servants get too close to him. Though he did seem to have an affinity for Jackie, at least for a while. Jackie used his library, like Jimmy said. And he asked lots of impertinent questions. Mr. Willoughby tolerated some of them. But after his mother got sick, Mr. Pye swept him out of Mr. Willoughby’s way like his mother used to sweep dust bunnies.

“Let’s go,” Jimmy said, standing and moving toward the stairs.

“Wait,” whispered Jackie. He went to the wooden block that held the cook’s knives and pointed. “This is the one she waved at him.”

Jimmy looked around, grabbed a dishcloth, and threw it to Jackie. “Take it with this.”

Jackie put the rag around the handle and pulled the knife out. The blade made a slight metallic ring. Like a sword. He couldn’t believe they were

actually going through the motions. It felt pretend. Unreal. They couldn't possibly kill somebody. Even Mr. Willoughby. His heart raced and his head felt like a balloon.

He followed his brother up the stairs and through the big double doors that led into Mr. Willoughby's bedroom, four or five times the size of the garage apartment where he and Jimmy grew up. Jackie had never been through the double doors. Jimmy hugged the wall and peeked around the corner. Jackie crawled below him and looked from Jimmy's knee level.

Mr. Willoughby stood talking on a phone. Low at first, but then his voice rose in a laugh. "You know, the older I get, the less I can stand to have those people around me. I mean, the *sound* that woman makes. I'm not putting myself through that again. I'm getting rid of everybody and just having day help from now on, the more invisible the better."

Jackie's heat rose with Mr. Willoughby's voice. *Those people. The sound his mother makes. Putting himself through it.* He clenched the knife handle through the cloth so hard the tendons in his fingers burned.

"I don't know," Mr. Willoughby said. "I never should have let them stay here with kids in the first place. I don't know what I was thinking. That youngest of theirs has a head on his shoulders, but he'll never amount to anything. Like we've said before, subhuman genes always win out if you let them."

Subhuman genes. The words rang in the air like the knife blade. Like a call to do something, a challenge, a demand. *Subhuman genes.* Jackie sneered and rushed out as if pulled by a rope tied to his hips, but something jerked him back. Jimmy grabbed him, twisted the knife out of his hand, and pushed him back. Jackie fell to his knees and watched his big brother go low and fast at Mr. Willoughby, the knife in his hand, the dishcloth still around the handle.

"Yeah, well, if you find a good one, I'll buy 'em from you. They're nothing but slaves anyway." Mr. Willoughby laughed. "We'll talk later." He threw his phone down on a bedside chair and turned to see Jimmy.

"What are you...?"

Mr. Willoughby raised his arms in pointless defense as Jimmy plunged the knife into his chest.

Jackie imagined the plastic human skeleton at his high school, where the sternum ended, how the ribs flared out from there. The blade plunged

all the way to the handle. He couldn't breathe.

A gasp exploded from Mr. Willoughby's lips, and he turned to see Jackie on his hands and knees, watching. Mr. Willoughby reached toward him, his fingers splayed.

"Jacko," he said. "You're the only one...."

Jimmy pulled out the knife and a waterfall of blood flowed down Mr. Willoughby's pants. His eyes lost their focus on Jackie, and then he crumpled to the floor.

LAWYERS OF THE DEAD



WITHOUT A WORD, Jimmy took Jackie by the arm and led him out of Mr. Willoughby's bedroom. He left the knife in its pool of blood beside the body, shoved the bloody dishrag under the cook's door, and then he pushed Jackie out the kitchen door they came in, setting it to lock behind them.

Jackie followed from shadow to shadow, a reverse of how they'd approached the house, and his mind, his ears, rang like a tuning fork. So loud he couldn't hear or think or feel. He walked like a zombie behind Jimmy, who squeezed his forearm to pull him around obstacles.

At the back door to their apartment, he told Jackie to wait while he went in, and when he came back, he pulled Jackie to the bathroom, where Jimmy washed himself with bleach and peroxide and then inspected Jackie.

"You didn't get much on you," Jimmy said.

Jackie lifted his hand and ran it through his hair.

"By God, Jacko," Jimmy said, "we did it."

Jackie shook his head. *He* didn't. Jimmy did. He swallowed, his mouth dry. What had they done?

"Here." Jimmy gave him a wet washrag. Jackie wiped his face and neck. Nausea roiled his stomach and he looked at Jimmy, who sat on the toilet lid.

"Hurl," Jackie said, and Jimmy jumped up, lifted the lid and seat, stepped aside. Jackie fell to his knees and leaned into the toilet, opened his mouth and everything came up, the knife, the bloody kitchen rag, Mr. Willoughby's eyes going flat and distant. The way he said "Jacko, you're the only one...." The only what? The only one he thought didn't want to kill him?

As he wiped his mouth, trying to make sense of everything. Before Jimmy grabbed the knife from his hand, Jackie was going to do it. He started to rush Mr. Willoughby, the plastic skeleton in high school in his mind. He remembered thinking exactly where to stick the knife. Like a science experiment, not a thing really happening. But he also remembered what Mr. Willoughby said on the phone. *Subhuman genes. Never amount to*

anything. Nothing but slaves. And what Jimmy said. Kill the right people. The ones who deserve to die.

But of course Jimmy would do it instead. Jimmy was trained to do it. He looked up at his brother, who put his hand on Jackie's back.

"You better now?"

How could anything be better now? He'd just ruined his life. After pushing himself for years to be valedictorian, now he and Jimmy had become...the word wouldn't come. It hovered just out of reach. Like a breath of fog hanging before his face on a cold morning. The final breath of life. *Murderers. Subhumans. Deserve to die!*

"Boys!" his father called. "Boys! Come quick! I think we've lost her."

Jimmy helped Jackie stand and took the washrag to wipe his mouth and his chest where back-spatter got him. He flushed the toilet, and guided Jackie down the hall toward their parents' room.

Their mother lay in bed, her eyes half-open, dark and sunken, her skin the color of the white sheets she preferred, her hair wet and stringy, a tangled mess. Their father stroked her head and looked up at them. The room smelled of defecation and whiskey. Jackie felt his raw stomach churn.

Jimmy knelt and put his fingers against their mother's neck. Pop stared at his face. Waiting for the verdict. Life or death. Jimmy looked up at Jackie and shook his head. "She's gone, Pop." He dragged his fingers over their dead mother's eyes to close them and then put one arm around their father and hugged him.

Jackie just watched. His dead mother. His drunk father. His trained-killer brother. Jackie was supposed to have been the good one. The top of his class. The one who would do it right because he had a good head on his shoulders. The *only* one.

"Come on, Pop," Jimmy said, pulling his father by the arm.

"I don't want to leave her." Pop put his head on his wife's chest and cried like a baby.

Jimmy looked at Jackie. "Come on," he said, standing. "We've got to take care of things."

Jackie left the room, suddenly too hot and damp, the spirit of his mother like a summer fog. He followed his brother into the living room and watched him pick up the phone.

Before he spoke into it, he leveled his eyes at Jackie. “Can you be cool?”

Jackie nodded.

“Shit’s about to happen.”

Jackie kept nodding.

“Don’t lose your shit.”

“I won’t.”

Jimmy held his eyes a moment and then nodded. He dialed the phone and said, “Hey, Walt, hi. Jimmy here.” He listened a moment and looked at the ceiling. “Yeah, just for a day, but Walt. My mother just died.” He listened. “Yeah, I’m sure.” Again, he listened, and glanced at Jackie. “Yeah, the police or coroner or whoever you call, I don’t know.” He nodded. “Thanks, Walt. I appreciate it.” He laid down the phone.

“Police?” Jackie asked. His second word since the murder after *hurl*. What would the police find? A double murder. Mr. Willoughby and his mother. Maybe they killed each other. He blinked. That didn’t make any sense.

“We have to do it this way. It’ll be alright. Just don’t do anything stupid. Don’t say anything to anybody. You’re in shock. You’re supposed to be. And if they ask you anything, stick to the truth. Except for *that* part, you know. We were up here with Mom and Pop then, you know?” He patted Jackie on the shoulder. “Why don’t you go to your room, lie down until they get here. I’ll take care of Pop.”

Jackie sat on his bed and looked out the window waiting for the police to arrive. They would see his mother’s body, and then they would find Mr. Willoughby’s body, and then they would take Jimmy away in handcuffs. Jackie too. He could already feel them biting into his wrists.

The house went quiet. No more moans and cries of pain. No more drunken mumbling. Just the creak of Jimmy moving around. Destroying evidence. Fixing things. Things so broken they couldn’t be fixed.

Jimmy came into the room, their boyhood room, still with two beds, and he sat opposite Jackie. He’d changed from his all-black to military fatigues, even boots and cap. “We’ll find a place for you and Pop tomorrow.” He looked at his wristwatch. Shook his head. “Today. It’s past midnight.” He took his cap off and turned it in his hands. “And I’ll leave you money. I’ve got enough. Plenty. Did you ever get your driver’s

license?”

Jackie nodded, wondering how Jimmy could think about normal things after killing a man.

“Good. We’ll buy a car, too. Do that first.” He sighed and looked at Jackie. “If you’re not going to get any shuteye, then start packing. I’ll pack Pop. I’ve already got all my stuff ready.”

Jackie looked around. “We won’t need anything in jail.”

“They’re not taking us to jail. Listen, Jacko. Mom just died. As bad as it sounds, it’s the perfect cover. We were here all night with her. You don’t have to make anything up. Nobody will question that.”

“But Pop....”

“Is delirious from grief and drunk on whiskey. We were here all night. Like we really were. With Mom and Pop. Like we really did. Keep to that and we’ll be fine. You got that?”

Jackie nodded and Jimmy went out.

An ambulance arrived first without sirens or lights and two burly young men in blue uniforms walked by with Jimmy leading them to their mother. One of them glanced in at Jackie, but seemed embarrassed and looked away. Respect for the survivors of the dead. Or avoidance that death could happen to them. Would happen to them. Everybody dies sooner or later. Nobody gets out alive.

Jackie just sat. Other men in uniform arrived, police, and then men wearing medical gloves hauled his mother’s body out on a gurney, zipped in a bag. He would never see her again.

“Come on,” Jimmy said. “Walt’s giving us a ride.”

“They haven’t found him yet, have they?” Jackie asked.

“Just shut up about it,” Jimmy hissed. He began throwing Jackie’s things into an empty pillowcase. “Don’t ever talk about it. To anybody. Ever. You got that?”

Later, Jackie stood holding his pillowcase in front of the garage doors, Walt’s car behind the ambulance, one police car. The smell of exhaust made his vision waver, the ambulance and the squad car idling, a soft crackle of radio traffic spilling from each. Jackie listened and tried to make sense of it. They were on different channels. But they spoke in code or something, and he couldn’t find the thread. The sky to the east lightened. Dawn came in spite of everything. In the whole scheme of the

universe, humans didn't matter at all. Taking the life of one didn't matter, either. He had to believe that now.

Jackie saw Mr. Pye hurry from the big house, his bowtie askew, eyes wide, arms waving. He clutched a police officer and pointed back toward the house. Jackie couldn't hear what he said.

"Easy, now," Jimmy said, gliding up beside him.

If things were normal, he might ask Jimmy what he thought Mr. Pye's problem was. But maybe not. Not with his mother so newly dead. His father sat hunched in the back seat of Walt's car. A Ford Taurus. A car for a common subhuman man. Not like the exotic cars in Mr. Willoughby's collection. The ones his father works on. Worked on. Past tense now. From now on, everything would be past tense.

The police followed Mr. Pye into the house. More police cars arrived. One of the ambulance men came over and told them it would be a while.

"What's going on?" Jimmy asked.

"I'm not supposed to say," and backed away. It sounded like the answer Jimmy gave when Jackie asked him what made him volunteer his way out of the Marines. To kill the right people. On behalf of the rich people who controlled the world. He probably wasn't supposed to say that, either.

Jimmy paced and smoked cigarettes. Their father slept in Walt's back seat. Only Jackie paid attention. Waited for the inevitable. A morning breeze began to blow and cleared the exhaust fumes. He took a deep breath and felt better. Felt the first flicker of justification. The bastard Mr. Willoughby deserved to die. For what he didn't do for his mother. For what he did to her and everybody else. A man like that didn't accumulate such extreme wealth without being the equivalent of a thief and a murderer. He and Jimmy had done the world a favor.

A man in a suit talked to Jimmy and took notes. He glanced a few times at Jackie. Then the man came toward him while Jimmy watched with a hard look.

"I'm Detective Santos," said the man. He had dark hair and acne-scarred cheeks. "I know it's a hard time for you. But we've had a development. Can I ask you a few questions?"

Jackie nodded.

"Did you go outside last night?"

He wondered what Jimmy had told him. He almost didn't care. Maybe

he should just confess. He shook his head to the question, and then nodded. "The picnic table out back. To get some air. My mother...it was hard to be in the house sometimes."

"I'm terribly sorry for your loss, and I know it's a hard time for you. Did you go out alone?"

He shook his head. "Jimmy. My brother." He looked at Jimmy, who had his eye on him. "He smoked cigarettes. Had a couple cans of beer."

Detective Santos nodded and made a note. "Did you see anything? Hear anything?"

"I don't know. My mother moaned and screamed a few times."

The detective nodded. "Anything else?"

Jackie ran his hand over his hair. "I don't know. Jimmy flicked his cigarette butts. Threw his empties onto the lawn. I don't know. What do you mean?" He felt like he was acting okay. Like maybe he might pull it off. He didn't dare glance toward Jimmy. He might lose it.

"Did you go anywhere other than the picnic table out back?"

Jackie nodded. Pointed toward his parents' room. "Into their room. Where my mother was. And the living room. And bathroom."

"How about outside?"

"Outside?" He looked at the detective. Shook his head. "Just the picnic table."

"Did you see anyone else?"

Did he see anyone else. He nodded. Tell the truth. Jimmy said to tell the truth. Except about what he couldn't. "Mr. Willoughby."

"You saw Mr. Willoughby?"

Jackie nodded again. He could feel Jimmy glaring at him. He hoped their stories matched. "In his bedroom. When you stand on the picnic table, you can see his window."

"You were standing on the picnic table?"

Jackie nodded. "I like doing that. You can see across the lake."

"What did you see in Mr. Willoughby's room?"

He told of watching Mr. Willoughby gesturing frantically at Mr. Pye. He didn't mention that Jimmy had seen him first, and then Jackie climbed up beside him.

"Mr. Pye was in the room with Mr. Willoughby? You saw that?"

Jackie nodded. "Mr. Pye has to. It's his job."

“Did you see anyone else with him?”

“You mean right then?” Jackie realized he had effectively split in two. One talking. One standing like another person, listening, judging. One an actor. One a conspirator to murder.

“Did you ever see or hear anyone make a threat against anyone here?”

Jackie wondered why Detective Santos didn't let him answer questions. He seemed to be in a hurry, to want something. He moved sideways to block Jackie's view of Jimmy.

“Nothing real,” Jackie said. “Just a little, I don't know, anger at him, I guess.” He thought about the cook. The bloody rag Jimmy stuffed under her door. He should be reluctant to sell her down the river. But it occurred to him she would be better off in prison than wherever she might end up after Mr. Willoughby kicked her out. She had nowhere else to go. She said so all the time.

Detective Santos raised his eyebrows. “But you did hear or see something?”

Jackie sighed. “The cook. Mr. Willoughby sent food back. Said it was no good, and the cook pulled a knife and made, you know, poking gestures at him.”

“At Mr. Willoughby?”

“Yes. Toward him.”

“At Mr. Willoughby's back?”

“Well. He wasn't exactly in the room.”

“When did this take place?”

Jackie shrugged. “Few days ago, I guess.”

“A kitchen knife?”

Jackie nodded.

“And you saw it?”

Jackie nodded again.

Detective Santos looked at him a moment, and then raised a hand. A uniformed police officer hurried to him, Santos whispered into his ear, and the man hustled to the house. A moment later, he returned and handed something to Detective Santos. “If you saw a picture of the knife the cook used to threaten Mr. Willoughby, would you recognize it?”

Jimmy walked toward them and Detective Santos turned and raised his hand. “A few more minutes alone with him, please, Captain Key.” Jimmy

raised both hands and backed a step away.

Captain Key? Why didn't Jimmy tell them he'd gotten promoted? Mom would've liked that.

"Do you think you can identify the knife from a photograph?" asked Detective Santos.

"I don't know," Jackie said.

Detective Santos held out a picture and Jackie leaned close to look. "Is this the knife you saw?"

The close-up photo of the knife showed blood on the carpet and handle and blade. Jackie recoiled. He couldn't breathe for a moment.

"Do you recognize this knife?"

Jackie nodded. "What did she do with it?" His voice came out high and tense. "She didn't do herself, did she?" He instinctively misdirected them. No planning. No thought. Like when he'd started to rush Mr. Willoughby with the very knife in the picture. A force other than himself directed him.

"Do herself?"

"Kill herself."

"Why would you say that?"

"Well. Mr. Willoughby was kicking her out. Kicking all of us out, except Mr. Pye. And she didn't have anywhere to go."

"Did you ever hear her make a direct threat?"

"You mean in words?"

Detective Santos nodded.

"I don't know. I don't think so." Even the truth wasn't as hard and fast as you thought it was. He really couldn't remember.

"Anything else? Anybody else make threats against Mr. Willoughby?"

Jackie shook his head and looked down, and then back up. Did that make him look guilty? He felt sweat beading on his skin, a prickly heat beneath a lizard-skin cold.

Detective Santos breathed out a long sigh. Tapped his notebook. "How long has your brother been here?"

"Last night. Got here just in time. Momma saw him in his dress uniform. That was good. A good thing." Jackie looked at his brother, certain he could hear his performance.

Detective Santos nodded. Thanked him. Gave him a card and asked Jackie to let him know when he had an address and phone number. Turned

and nodded to Jimmy, and then went to their father, who snored in Walt's back seat.

Jimmy stood beside him and spoke without moving his mouth. "You did good." He put his hand on Jackie's shoulder, and it didn't feel right. Cold and unfamiliar. Like a push. Like a puppet master. But he didn't move away. They were in it together.

Detective Santos gave up on their father, who didn't wake after repeated taps on the shoulder. If he and Jimmy hadn't been right there watching, Jackie wondered if he would have slapped him around a little more. No, they wouldn't. They had their culprit. The cook was doomed.

He watched Jimmy light and smoke another cigarette. He obviously didn't care if he committed suicide by lung cancer. Yet, Jackie wanted a cigarette, a drink of whiskey, something. He didn't care anymore.

Jimmy squatted beside him, cigarette smoke clinging to him like the scent of murder. How could the police not smell it?

"It won't be long," Jimmy said.

"How do you know?"

"They'll take the cook in soon."

"She didn't do anything."

"Shut up!" Jimmy hissed. "Never, ever say that again. She'll be better off. And she's crazy anyway."

Jackie hated his brother. Hated him for coming back. Hated him for being there in his dress uniform when his mother saw him for the last time. She would never remember Jackie compared to that. And he hated him for arriving just as their mother died, as if it had all been planned for his schedule, his benefit, before he went off into the secret world of spy-killers. But worse, he hated Jimmy for leaving in twelve hours or so, abandoning Jackie and his broken father.

In the cold light of morning, they brought another body out on a gurney. Mr. Willoughby.

When they closed the doors to the ambulance, Jimmy whispered, "One-point-three billion dollars."

What would happen to all that money now? Mr. Willoughby didn't have a wife or children that Jackie knew about. Where did the money go when the one-hundred-twenty-seventh richest person in the world dies? Did the government just take it? Maybe he had a will, and he would leave

it to...what? Mr. Willoughby didn't seem to believe in anything except getting richer and being an asshole to the people who worked for him. The government couldn't make that right. Nothing could make that right.

Maybe it went to the other rich people. A secret network of spreading the wealth when one of them dies. Maybe it went to the one-hundred-twenty-eighth richest person. And maybe it was so much, it jumped them up to seventy-fifth-richest or something.

"Where will it all go?" Jackie whispered to Jimmy.

Jimmy snorted a laugh through his nose. "That's how rich bastards get rich. When one of them dies, the other ones fight over his remains like jackals."

But poor folks don't get to join in the fight. They get nothing. They get thrown out of the dead rich man's house.

Walt sauntered across the driveway toward them.

"What's going on?" Jimmy asked.

"Can you believe this? They've got the cook in there now," he said. "Giving it to her pretty hard. I can't believe it." He was a thin man with a big belly, a balloon on a stick, like a pregnant woman, though Jackie would never dare say that to Walt. He'd been good to them. Kind. Sympathetic. But he couldn't do anything for real. Not worth anything. Being a poor good subhuman man meant you had little to give. And anybody who worked for Mr. Willoughby was poor. He made sure of that.

"You think she did it?" Jimmy asked. He didn't even glance at Jackie. How had they learned to lie so well?

"I can't believe it. But it had to be," said Walt. "I didn't think she had it in her. I knew she hated him. Hell, everybody did. But to kill him?" Walt shook his head. "I just didn't think she had it in her. I didn't think anybody did."

"What are they asking her?"

"I can't hear. But she's wild-eyed as hell. Her hair looks like she stuck her finger in a light socket."

"Don't you have cameras and stuff in the house?" Jimmy asked. "Didn't you get her on tape?"

Walt shook his head. "Mr. Willoughby wouldn't allow it. We covered the outside. But nothing in the house. He wanted no records."

"And nobody else broke in or anything?"

Jackie's heart raced. How could Jimmy ask such things?

Walt shook his head. "We would've seen 'em." Shook his head harder. "Nope. Had to be an inside job. Either her or Mr. Pye. And it wasn't him."

Jimmy stole a glance at Jackie, who looked away from him. Instead of panic, he felt proud they'd gotten away with it.

A few moments later, Detective Santos led the cook out of the house. She did look wild, her hair frizzed, her desperate eyes wide and unseeing, like a trapped animal. A police officer put his hand on her head as he guided her into the back seat of a squad car.

"Good thing she's old and crazy," said Walt.

"What do you mean?" asked Jimmy.

Walt snorted. "This is Texas. They love their death row. You watch. Mr. Willoughby's lawyers will do everything they can to send her to the death house."

"He'll have lawyers?" Jimmy asked. "Even though he's dead?"

"Shoot, yeah," said Walt. "Rich people have lawyers no matter how dead they are."

PRICE ON THEIR HEADS

THE PHONE ON his desk, a wide wooden table without drawers, buzzed and he hit the button. “Yes, Janice.”

“Miss Maura Booker is here for her one o’clock.”

Jackie sighed. The persistent reporter from New York. He’d put her off for as long as he could. And besides, things were about to break open anyway. “Send her in.” He scanned his desk, wondering how a reporter would see it. Messy, undoubtedly. But he had a system of piles. So close to publication of his life’s work, messier than usual, but he didn’t care. Why should he care? Let her report anything she wanted. He didn’t have anything to hide. Except that one thing twenty-five years ago. Long enough to forget it. No, not true. That kind of thing no one ever forgets.

Before a firm knock came from his door, he felt something change. He wondered if the power plant surged and the electricity spiked. He glanced at his computer screen, which didn’t flicker or crash. Nothing seemed different out the window. The lights in the room were steady. He shrugged and called to come in. A woman in her mid-thirties with long brown hair stepped into the room and the air pressurized, a pop followed by a metallic ring. He widened his throat to equalize the pressure, but it didn’t help. “Ms. Booker?”

She strode across the room and extended her hand. Shorter than average, buxom beneath a red jacket with black stitching, a white shirt buttoned to the top, and black slacks with red shoes. No obvious makeup, but her eyes stood out like spotlights, and her lips were full and moist. She carried a worn soft-sided briefcase and gripped his hand firmly. He caught a scent of something unusual, vaguely floral, a familiar essence he couldn’t name. He felt his mouth go dry and chided himself. On campus, pretty women abounded, were always available for ogling, and he ignored them with ease. Why should this woman be any different?

He motioned to a chair beside a small coffee table strewn with economics journals and a plaque for placing third in the faculty bowling contest. It screamed *boring!* so loud he wished he’d thrown it out. He cleared his throat and offered her a drink.



“Water would be great, thank you,” she said. “I prefer no ice.”

He detected no northern accent, no obvious regional inflection. He wagered she came from somewhere other than New York. But not the South. A true Southerner would ask for iced tea with more sugar than could dissolve in the liquid, and with an *ah* sound for the *i* in ice. He poured two plain waters from a pitcher, both with no ice, also his preferred temperature.

“Thank you,” she said, “for seeing me.”

“You’re a persistent woman.”

She grinned, and he admired her lack of makeup, her eyes not painted like a cartoon character. She trusted her natural beauty. “Before we get into anything difficult, perhaps we can get some formal details out of the way. Your full name and current title?” She smiled at him. A girl’s smile with a woman’s eyes.

He narrowed his eyes back at her, turning her odd phrase in his mind, wondering what difficulties she imagined. He dutifully plucked a card from his desk and handed it to her.

She read it aloud. “A. Jackson Key, Jasper Karsten Professor of Economics, Texas A&M University.”

“At your service,” he said. “Perhaps you will do the same for me.”

She smiled. “Of course,” she said, handing him her card. “And may I have your age, please?”

He hated telling her that. Made him seem so old. But maybe he could turn it around and find out her age. He’d already noticed her bare ring finger, as if it mattered. He held her card to read it. “I’m forty-two and this says Maura L. Booker, Senior Poverty Correspondent, *The New York Times*. Washington, DC. And *your* age, Ms. Booker? It’s only fair.” He grinned, still wondering what she thought would be difficult.

She cocked her head with another smile, this one asymmetrical. How many smiles did this woman have? The statistician in him wanted to count. “That’s a little out of date. I’m back in New York now. And I’m thirty-five.” Did she have a twinkle in her eye? Jackie felt a rush of heat. She deposited his card into her briefcase and extracted a notebook and a late-model smartphone. “Do you mind if I record our conversation?” She began tapping the screen of her phone.

He did mind. He didn’t like those things. Too much chance of a slip-up

memorialized into the record. He didn't even know her angle, yet. He might need to tell her to go away, though the idea filled him with regret. "Could we talk about what you're reporting on first? What's a Senior Poverty Correspondent from New York doing talking to a lowly economics professor in Texas, especially with the expectation that it will be a difficult discussion?"

She smiled. It seemed genuine, less manipulative than her others, but Jackie knew how the face could be more mask than conduit to the soul. "I'm not covering poverty anymore, at least not directly. I'm on special assignment to write a series on income inequality, and several people I've spoken to in the last few weeks have mentioned you. Apparently you're about to publish a paper that has people," she hesitated and looked up to her left, "talking."

"Worried," he corrected. "Angry. Militant. Pissed off. Just waiting to go ballistic."

She laughed. "Well, some of them. They tell me you've developed a way to calculate the price to the economy for allowing a certain few people to accumulate extreme wealth. Is that correct?"

Jackie refrained from nodding or confirming anything. He didn't trust this woman, especially didn't trust his unreasonable attraction to her, and until he knew what she knew and what she wanted, he would be a brick wall. "Where are you from? I don't hear New York in your voice."

She laughed an easy laugh, but he caught in the way she scanned her eyes around his office that she realized he wasn't going to open his veins and bleed for her. She folded her hands over her notepad. "Born and raised in Kentucky. Went to school in California and Virginia." She smiled, and he knew what it meant. Get the pleasantries over with so we can get on with it, please.

"Degrees?" he asked. He wanted to know the intellectual level of the woman. Actually, he wanted to know much more than that. He had an urge to lean forward and breathe in her scent.

"Psychology, and then an MBA in finance."

"Interesting combination. Any relation to James M. Booker, the Nobel Laureate economist?" A man Jackie nearly worshipped who also had roots in Kentucky and connections to schools in California and Virginia, among other places.

Now she gave him a lopsided wry grin. “My great uncle.”

He felt his mouth gape open and nodded. “His work on the political economy was brilliant. Constitutional economics. Economic ethics for politicians and the captains of industry. He was a mastermind at making people squirm.”

“Yes, he was. Me included.”

He raised his eyebrows. “How so?”

She shrugged. “He had a way of challenging your every belief, every statement, to force you to look at it from,” she sighed, “every exhaustive direction.” She raised her hand and let it fall, as if her great uncle picked her up and dropped her.

Jackie nodded, finding her so charming he could barely think. “I can imagine. I heard him speak several times. Tried to get on his graduate staff, oh, twenty-something years ago, but I didn’t make the cut and then he got sick. And then, of course, at great loss to us all, he died.”

“He mentioned you to me. Once. Though I just recently made the connection. That’s partly why I’m here.” She watched him without volunteering more, her lips pressed tightly together.

He stared at her. Was she holding back a smile? Was this woman flirting with him? No. He misread her. He didn’t know her at all. “What did he say?”

She laughed, a musical thing. “One of his graduate students gave him a copy of your PhD thesis. He said if you could gather hard evidence and build a convincing model, you could, and this is exactly the way he said it, ‘illuminate the case for constitutional economics above politics.’ And, conversely, he said some might take it as permission to commit violence based on income inequality. In fact, that may have already happened. Do you know a man named Alan Binder?”

That James M. Booker would make such a statement about his work moved Jackie. He didn’t know he ever had the man’s attention. He blinked and tried to remember Alan Binder. “I always confuse him with Alan *Blinder*, former vice chair of the Federal Reserve. Such an unfortunate name for a man influencing our monetary policy. But most of the Fed’s leaders seem blind most of the time, so maybe it’s a good name.”

“And Alan *Binder*?”

He nodded. “Something like one-hundred-seventy-fifth on the *Forbes*

richest list, offshore finance, venture capital, big into lobbying our elected officials on relaxing certain currency arbitrage investor disclosure rules, I believe. Why?”

“A man murdered him last night.”

“Murdered?”

“More like assassinated.”

He tried to remember the results his model showed for Alan Binder. He recalled a high multiplier of around seventeen. Binder had no family and upon his death most of his money would be distributed to various charities and startup business owners—Binder, remarkably, said as much publicly. Most rich people didn’t casually reveal the intent of their wills.

Jackie’s work made him know one thing for certain: Binder’s death meant a tidal wave of new money would flow through the economy, like a dam bursting that would cause wave after wave of new activity and wealth-creation. Exactly what Jackie had spent his professional life documenting and modeling. He wondered if Binder’s executor would let him study the flow of money from his estate into the economy. It would be a great case to document. But he dismissed it. He was past that in his career. Let a graduate student tackle that. He might even suggest it to a couple.

Jackie was about to publish his new model that ranked the world’s richest five hundred people by how much their wealth accumulation depressed global economic output. When extreme amounts of money are hoarded and invested in derivatives of wealth, the real economy suffers. He studied the dissolution of Mr. Willoughby’s wealth after his death, plus many others, and from that built a general model that, on its academic and intellectual merits alone, should earn him a place in history somewhere around the knees of Ms. Booker’s great uncle.

On his ranking system, Binder fell in the top thirty.

Maura watched him while all this raced through his mind. “Is it a good thing or a bad thing that Mr. *Binder*’s no longer with us?”

“What? Well, it’s terrible. Terrible. Of course.”

“But you believe it’s good for the economy?”

“Well, yeah. The hoarding of capital, like a monopoly, prevents the entire economy from working efficiently. Capital, labor, and goods have to flow without blockage for a free enterprise system to work best. Super-rich people like Binder are a burden to our economic system. Most of them, not

all, concentrate wealth, they don't actually create it. It's like trillions of hidden little private taxes that flow into their pockets, collected from the poor and shrinking middle class. Usually because of unfair laws and regulations in the government, which usually exist because the super-rich lobbied for and made big campaign contributions to get."

"What's an example of a tax like that?"

"Economists call it rent-seeking. A good way to think about it is shady dealings. Anything granted by the government, from resources like mineral rights on public land, to a relaxation of disclosure laws—when you earn money from favors delivered by politicians or regulators, it's effectively a tax on the poor and middle class paid to the rich."

"Your new economic model proves all that?"

"Well, it's not actual proof. It's an approximation that builds on the backs of others, like your Great Uncle if he were more on the modeling side of things. It helps analyze the macroeconomic effects of the dissolution of hoarded wealth. It's a planning tool for better government policy. Policies that financial institutions and multinational corporations and the ultra-rich will likely fight tooth and nail. Those special laws and lax regulations that allow them to get obscenely rich cost them a lot and took a long time to get in place."

Maura looked into his eyes, hers moving from his left to his right eye. She wanted to tell him something. "They caught the man who killed him. Binder."

He watched her, unsure where she led. "Good."

Now she held his gaze like a lioness focused on a kill. It made his scalp tingle. This must be the difficult part. "I spoke with him last night by phone. He mentioned your name. He said he found your list online and saw Alan Binder's name on it. He knew the man well enough to get close to him. So he did it."

Jackie ran his fingers through his hair and gave a nervous laugh. "That's a little crazy."

"He said he did it for the greater good. For the economy. He said it was the best way to help the underclass, and that your work showed him the way."

"He missed my point entirely!"

"He called it your *hit list*."

“It’s not a hit list,” Jackie said in a voice that sounded too much like a juvenile whine. He tried to modulate it better, but felt a strong need to defend himself. “I put it together for the art department at the journal, so they could make a graphic chart. Their first headline called it a ‘hit list’ because, I don’t know, they thought it was funny or something. I certainly never called it that and I told them to take it off.” He stood and paced his office, trying to calm himself. “They must’ve leaked it.”

She tapped her pen against her notepad. “I’m surprised you haven’t heard. It’s all over the news. Fox is saying you’ve put out a contract on rich people.”

He paused, grasping for how to deal with “news” like that. But he instantly recognized how the death of Binder and the leak of that stupid hit list would play in the echo chamber. “I’ve not been looking at the news. I’ve been focused on getting this out.” He waved to the final draft on his desk, neatly stacked, only one correction after going through it a dozen times. “I told Janice to keep the world at bay until you arrived. And I just finished this. My final proof. It’s due today.” He paced another round while she watched. He admired her silence. Like her great uncle. Making him squirm. “It’s in the news about my list influencing this murderer you talked to?”

Her eyes went flat. “He hasn’t told anyone but me, that I know of. And I haven’t told anyone but you. Even my editor.”

Jackie combed his fingers through his hair again, wondering if he should believe her. “So the cops won’t be coming for me, I guess.”

“Not for this.” She leaned back, which parted her red jacket and he couldn’t help notice the shape beneath. He swallowed. “People have warned me about you,” she said. “Cold calls from people who aren’t sources, but know I’ve been asking around about you. They say you haven’t published enough. Haven’t consulted with your peers. Have never had a grant accepted. There’s a coordinated campaign building to discredit and attack you, did you know about that?”

He waved his hands in the air. Fortunately, Jasper Karsten predicted this would happen, so he’d given it a little thought. “Well, sure. I published some papers early on, and the response was extreme. The mere suggestion that the rich and powerful, in aggregate, depress the economy makes for instant enemies. So I stopped publishing. And even seeking peer

collaboration. That helped quiet things. But I still feel a suspicion, a resistance to me. People watch me. At parties, I have a bubble around me that all the well-appointed people avoid. Even other economists treat me like I'm radioactive."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "It's a radical idea, to put a macroeconomic price on the ultra-rich."

"You get that here, on campus? Tell me what happened." He could see her fingers twitch, she wanted to take notes so badly. If only his students had more of that desire. If only that idiot hadn't murdered Alan Binder and mentioned his name to this woman. He hoped the man didn't spill his guts to the police. But it didn't matter. None of it would matter after his paper published. They could all go to hell after that. He was even willing to go down with it.

But right now, this gorgeous newspaper reporter wanted to ask him questions. And he wanted to keep her attention. Though, to be fair, what in the world could she see in a skinny economics professor with a shaved head? No. She just toyed with him in exchange for quotes for her article.

"This is an ultra-conservative school," he said, thinking about how to be quotable. As if he knew. "The George H.W. Bush library is here. And while he was a relative liberal compared to his son, he proudly carried the Reagan anti-government, pro-big business standard—like all politicians do these days, even the Democrats. And there's the military school here. This is prime breeding ground for cannon and corporate fodder that feeds the entire spectrum of Eisenhower's military-industrial complex."

She raised her eyebrows. "You dropped three presidents' names without answering my question."

Jackie felt his face heat, but he smiled at Maura and she performed one of her variations on a smile back. Sunlight angled through the tall windows behind her. She looked angelic. When had a woman ever made him feel like this? She brought troublesome news, asked difficult questions, yet he felt giddy. Like a teenager. "You were on your debate team, weren't you?" he asked. "No, you were the *leader* of your debate team."

"And you were the leader of your obfuscation team."

He laughed and he realized how much he was ready for it to all be over. After he published, he didn't care if the likes of Alan Binder lived or died,

didn't care if armed men used him for justification to start a revolution, didn't care if idiot politicians and voters ignored the wisdom of his recommendations. He had done his part. A part that even James M. Booker appreciated long ago from his dissertation paper alone. Jackie had been wound so tight for so long, intent on his model and preparing for publication, his entire life's justification, that he'd forgotten how to let go, to laugh and relax. He deserved being in the presence of a beautiful lady. It made him smile.

He felt Maura watching him. "I'm a difficult interview, aren't I?"

"It's beginning to look like it."

"I apologize for that. I've been, I'm just...would you like to go outside? For a walk? I need to get out of here. And it's a pretty day. The campus is pleasant before summer hits."

She cocked her head. Did she have any idea how gorgeous she was? "Right now?"

"Yeah. Right now. We'll go say hi to Sully." He still stood from his pacing, ready to go.

She sighed and her eyes asked the question: Sully?

"Lawrence Sullivan Ross, nineteenth governor of Texas, Confederate general, founder of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas—now known as Texas A&M University, home of the fighting Texas Aggies. The CTs keep him polished up and when they jog by in military formation, they sing out to him, 'Hi Sully,' or something like that."

She folded her hands on her lap, not yet ready to follow him. "CTs?"

"Corps Turds, as student members of the military are affectionately called here."

"Why?"

"I've successfully tried my damndest not to find out."

She agreed to walk out with him if he agreed to continue their interview. He nodded without definite promise. He opened the door and spoke to his secretary.

"Janice, we're going out for a little campus tour now."

Janice raised her eyebrows. "Is your cell phone on?" At the same time she pointed to a pile of call notes.

He shook his head on the phone calls, and pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. He turned it on with a flourish.

“He never remembers,” Janice said.

“I don’t like the things,” he said. Why did he always have to be available to talk? And he knew they could track him with it. He didn’t like any of that. He made Janice promise not to call unless it was the end of the world, and then he escorted Maura out into the warm day. An early summer breeze shivered tree leaves, young men threw a flying disc with athletic intensity, and throngs of people, some in khaki uniforms and dress shoes, hurried along sidewalks.

“You’re not worried?” she asked.

He shook his head not knowing what she meant. “You’ll be okay out here. They’re just a college kids.”

“Of somebody hurting you.”

He put his hands in his pockets and looked around. “Not really. I guess. Should I be?”

“Conservatives are circulating a petition against your work among economists at every university in this country,” she said, “and some in other countries. None have officially signed, of course, since you’ve not published yet. But an unauthorized draft of your report is said to be going around, though it’s harder to find than your hit list. When Binder’s murder is tied to you, that will be incendiary.”

“Bastards,” he said.

“Who?”

“It had to be the magazine crew.”

“Now that it’s leaked, what do you think will happen?”

“It’s mainly that stupid diagram, isn’t it?”

“It’s about to get worse, Doctor Key.”

He took a few steps, feeling warm in his long-sleeved shirt. He was annoyed he didn’t get it out there first. It was only right. But if it got out and it motivated people, then getting publishing credit didn’t really matter. He imagined what would happen to it in the public debate sphere.

“I guess the conservatives will rip it one way,” he said, “and the liberals another. Tear it to nothing. Like most ideas.”

His self-pity didn’t stick to her at all. “Are you worried about what some people might do with it? Like this Binder incident?”

He didn’t intend to admit what he imagined people might do with his work. What Binder’s killer did with it. What he, himself, had been a party

to years ago. Jackie knew how easy it was to step over that line and just make people go away. It was easier than most people thought. “I don’t know how to prepare for something like that.”

“I could help.”

“How?”

They slowed on the sidewalk and strolled, side by side. Students rushed past in both directions. He felt like a different man with this gorgeous woman. Before they met, he’d imagined her as disheveled and tired, like all reporters must be. But she had something very different, a bright exuberance, a subtle yearning for reason, explanation, justice. Nothing attracted Jackie like a curious mind bent on justice. That’s how he imagined himself.

“I’ll help give your side of it,” she said. “Explain for popular readers what you mean. The conservative alarmists will say you’re advocating the murder of rich people, giving justification to a class uprising, a French Revolution, with your formula behind them to, uh, justify their violence in a quantifiable way. And they’ll hold up Alan Binder as proof.”

He nodded and ran his hand over the beard stubble on his chin. He should’ve shaved closer. “I guess they could say that.”

“That there could be a class revolution?”

“Well, of course there could.”

“And your model could be an engine that drives that.”

“If revolution is driven by clear awareness of what is being done to you, then yes, you are correct.”

“Does that worry you? Make you feel responsible?”

“Worry me? Sure. But responsible? No, not really. People are responsible for their own actions based on the facts. I simply collated and interpreted some facts. And you know crazy people find justification for murder in anything from the absence of a woman’s head scarf to the way a preacher preaches. The history of our species has proven the danger of militant crazy people beyond any doubt. And my paper makes it very clear that I advocate only nonviolent political means.”

He turned to her and jabbed his finger into the air toward her magnificent chest and repeated the mantra he used to paint over his violent past. “We must use constitutional, high-level policy mechanisms to phase out and discourage the extreme wealth accumulations of the super-rich, the

top point-one percent, *not* violence. And only for macroeconomic reasons, not short-term gain or class preference.”

He froze, embarrassed to find himself jabbing toward her chest.

“You have passion,” she said, her eyes studying him. “I like that.”

Her words did something physical to his heart. It literally felt like melting. Like it became molten. He wanted to kiss her. Instead he turned up the harangue, an argument he’d practiced in front of a mirror at home.

“If we do it right, GDP will rise for years, maybe as much as double. Imagine the true wealth *that* will generate. Reagan was wrong about trickle-down economics. Rich people hold onto their money, they don’t spend it, so it doesn’t trickle anywhere. Unless you lance it out by government action. And when they do invest it, it’s usually in some scheme tilted in their direction with government rules to match. Release all that capital back into the free market system where it can generate real wealth shared by more people, and the real economy will boom.”

The sidewalks were clear now. He made a theatrical shrug. “If people don’t want to see that, if they can’t take that argument without wanting to kill one another, then, hell, I got nothing to say, I guess.”

She smiled at him. A disarming smile. This woman’s way of asking a source to spill his guts on the record. Or did she flirt with him? Just a little? “I can help you say that. I can help people understand that you’re not just putting a bounty on the heads of rich people everywhere.”

His eyes widened. She’d revealed her angle. “Bounty on the heads of rich people.” He grinned. “Is that the working headline that got your editor to approve this trip?”

“What do you prefer?” She opened her notepad.

Man, she was unrelenting. Like a good reporter should be. He didn’t know how to take her. He wasn’t often flabbergasted by women, but she made him feel off balance.

“How about this,” he said. “I prefer a constitutional amendment that restores some New Deal-style controls on financial institutions. From a macroeconomic point of view, we proved as well as is possible that they work. When we removed them, the whole economy started getting out of balance. And it has to be a constitutional amendment to keep the supreme court from messing with it. It’s got to be the undisputed law of the land. That’s the only way I can see to turn our so-called free enterprise system

back into one that actually resembles free enterprise.”

She took notes furiously. “A constitutional amendment?”

“It’s either that or the price of guillotines will skyrocket.”

Her pen stopped writing and she stared at him, her mouth parted. “Can I...?”

“No.”

“You don’t even know what I was going to ask.”

“Can you quote me on that. And no, you cannot.”

“But you said it.”

“Off the record.”

She looked him up and down, torso to forehead. “It’s traditional to establish that first.”

“My refusal to allow you to record our session is proof enough that we established my unwillingness to go on the record.”

“Your agreement to meet a reporter is proof that we entered an on-the-record agreement.”

“What would Uncle James say right now?”

“Oh, you’re making me debate myself now? Okay. *Great* Uncle James would say, ‘An unstated, unwritten agreement can in no way be considered binding by its very ethereal nature, especially among people with no devotion to ethical decency.’”

Jackie grinned and stared at her. “You...that’s funny as hell.”

“You remind me of my uncle.”

“That’s a compliment,” he said.

“Not Great Uncle James. Uncle Henry. He never even got a Social Security number. Never does anything on the record. He very nearly doesn’t exist.”

Jackie grinned and held up a finger. “Smart man.”

“Uncle James thought him a fool.”

“And vice versa?”

She grinned and he couldn’t help but smile back. “Of course.”

“Every man is part fool.”

She stared at him a few moments. “If I could get you to be yourself, to speak openly and let me freely quote you, we could have a great article that would help you get your ideas across.”

“All I want is to publish my work and have serious people seriously

consider my professional recommendations. After that, they can do as they please. But they're going to twist this out of all proportion, aren't they? Even here on campus, people think I'm some kind of vigilante."

"Aren't you? An academic Robin Hood?"

"It's not really like that."

"Talk to me. I'll tell your story. That's what I'm good at."

He eyed her while she studied his face. "I'll bet you're good at a lot of things besides storytelling."

She grinned and shook her head. "You'll never know unless you let me interview you."

He stopped walking. They'd arrived at their destination. "First say hi to Sully." They stood before a polished bronze statue of a man in Civil War-era attire. "Hi, Sully," Jackie said. He looked at her. Nudged her with his elbow. It felt good to touch her.

"Hi, Sully," she murmured.

He grinned. Could he trust this woman? A reporter? Absolutely not. But he could strut a little with her. It felt good. He wondered what she would do if he took her arm. What would make a woman like her interested in more than her job?

"Okay," he said, turning back toward his office building. "You have a deal. But it might take a while. I'm kind of slow to warm up to people."

"I can tell."

Two students in khaki walked by and one of them said, "Howdy, Doctor Key."

He nodded. "Howdy."

"This is a strange place," Maura said. "And what do you mean, 'okay.' What kind of deal?"

"Wait until you hear them whoop."

"Whoop?"

"I mean I'll cooperate."

She blinked and took a deep breath. "Voice recorder and all?"

"Do you really go back and listen to all that? Transcribe it and everything?"

She laughed and walked in slow lockstep beside him. Campus had cleared, most students back in class. Final exams were this week. A few lounged under big oak trees studying, a touch football game replaced the

flying disc throwers. A girl dropped her bag and books spilled over the sidewalk. The football players, huddled between plays, whooped high and loud at the girl, their arms raised.

“Is that your whoop?” she asked.

He shook his head. “That’s *their* whoop.”

They strolled a few more steps and he wished she would put her arm through his. But that was ridiculous. They’d only just met.

“No,” she said. “Recording and listening back, transcribing, that’s so inefficient it’s not worth doing. I take lots of notes. Sometimes, when it’s confusing and I’m not sure I understand, I’ll write a time stamp into my notes and go back, listen to that part. But mostly, it’s, you know, CYA.”

He nodded. “You turn it over to your lawyers if I sue you.”

“Exactly.”

“Or your editors if something becomes hot. To prove you’re no Judith Miller.”

“We don’t speak her name.”

“She certainly made your paper look bad after nine-eleven.” Jackie had no inside knowledge, but even he figured out from reading the work of other journalists from around the world that the Pentagon and the White House fed Judith Miller pure spin prior to the invasion of Iraq, and she swallowed it whole. Worse, her editors did, too. “I stopped reading the *Times* after that. Except for Paul Krugman.”

“It’s been harder since that happened. But that’s not necessarily bad. We’re a better paper because of it. A lot of heads rolled that needed to roll.”

He shook his head. “Back to the guillotine metaphor.”

She laughed. “I guess that really is where that saying came from, isn’t it?”

“Guillotines do tend to result in rolling heads, I believe.”

They reached the front steps of his building. “This will be a hard one,” she said. “They’ll want everything scrubbed, every trail followed. So I’d like to get started.”

Jackie nodded and looked around. Sometimes he felt people watched him. Probably because they did. As he’d already told Maura, there were certain people there who didn’t like him or his work. Like his nemesis, Doctor Humboldt, a sellout of an economics professor, puppet for the

corporate right. Some day he would pay the real price, but until then he reaped rewards commensurate with his intellectual dishonesty.

“Up in my office, I guess,” he said as his cell phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID. Ginger Morris, his department head. One of the few allies he had on campus.

“Doctor Morris,” he answered. It was a code they used. When he was in private and could speak freely, he answered with “Ginger.”

“You’re with that New York reporter, aren’t you?” Doctor Morris asked.

“Yes,” he said, fighting the urge to glance at Maura.

They passed the restroom and Maura pointed that she wanted to go in. Jackie nodded and hurried into his outer office. “Hold on,” he said to Ginger and spoke to Janice. “Give me a few minutes in my office before you let her in, okay?”

Janice nodded and pointed to a pile of call sheets as tall as three packs of playing cards. “Just today,” she whispered. The most he’d ever seen her collect before was three or four when he’d been out a week. He gave her a horrified look, which made her smile and shake her head. He went into his office, closed the door. “Okay,” he said to Ginger. “I’m alone for a few minutes.”

“She’s in your office?”

“The restroom.”

“What do you know about her?”

“She’s James M. Booker’s great niece. And she’s reasonably remorseful about the Judith Miller debacle. And she looks, well....”

“I’m coming down. Don’t say a word on the record until I get there.” She ended the call.

Jackie paced his room. Glanced at the final proof of the article. It was ready to go. He didn’t need to do anything more to it, which made him feel oddly lost. He was about to be free. Like a man fired from a human cannon into outer space. He knew that. Ginger knew it. Even Maura Booker knew it. He almost didn’t care what happened. After decades of tedious, complex work, he’d finally found the silver bullet, the rational justification for what he and Jimmy did to Mr. Willoughby. No one would ever know that part of it. Only Jimmy knew, and Jimmy had gone into the land of no return, wherever spooks went to die. He hadn’t seen or heard from him since the

day it all happened. All Jackie had to do now was tell the truth as he knew it about everything but that, and let everything else fall where it did. Just like when that Detective Santos interviewed him after his mother's death. After Mr. Willoughby bled out on his white bedroom carpet.

A knock came at the door, the soft, tentative one that Janice used.

"Yes?" he called.

Janice opened the door and put her head in. "Can I let her in now?"

He nodded. "And Doctor Morris is coming down. When she arrives, send her straight in."

Maura smiled at him as she slinked in. "You're worked up again," she said. "You relaxed for a little. Thanks to Sully." She pulled her notepad and cell phone from her bag.

"My department head is about to join us," he said.

She arched her eyebrows. "The phone call. Doctor Morris?"

"The same."

"He doesn't want me talking to you, is that it?"

"I think *she* probably thinks it's a mistake. A needless escalation." He walked behind his desk, a barrier between him and the reporter. "She may be right."

"So," Maura said, putting her phone back into her bag. "Now I have to convince her, too. And you all over again, it seems."

He nodded. "Ginger, uh, Doctor Morris, will be the one to convince, but she's got a great brain, is reasonable and fair, always willing to consider another angle. Your uncle would've liked her."

"Which uncle?"

"Both of them, probably. You'll see. Especially if she gets going."

Maura took a few steps away, and turned to face Jackie. "Does she have the power to stop us?" She moved her finger from her to him and back. He liked the idea of that movement. But he also wondered if she simply knew how to play a man like him.

"Officially."

"But not unofficially?"

He shrugged as Janice announced the arrival of Doctor Morris. Jackie felt crowded. He usually worked alone. Now with two women in the closed room with him, one gorgeous all over, the other gorgeous for her mind—tall and intimidating, a curly red mop of hair, aging porcelain skin cracked

into an endless web—he felt hot and prickly. Bright red lipstick smeared her big front teeth, and her flat shoes didn't match. She clutched a satchel spilling with papers and notebooks. She smiled, sat on the arm of a chair, and pushed a corkscrew of hair away from her face.

Maura reached to shake hands with Doctor Morris, who seemed baffled a moment, and then grasped the offered hand. Maura glanced at Jackie and took a seat. He stood behind his desk.

“Yes, now. Let's start. No time for pleasantries, I'm afraid. Now, tell me, how did you come to first inquire about Doctor Key, here?” Doctor Morris asked.

Maura smiled, looked both of them in the eyes, starting and finishing with Doctor Morris. “I've been nominated for three Pulitzer Prizes,” she said, nodding. “Not that I care overly much about that. It would be lovely to win, but I'm proud to my core of what I reported to get those nominations. I covered poverty in a city, a whole country, that shuns poverty, is blind to it, even actively makes it worse most of the time. I started with the human suffering. But the more I looked, the more I saw that it was a problem of economics and policy and finance more than poverty. So I began asking questions, I don't know, for the past few years. Having background lunches with bank leaders and economists and futurists, people who dislike being quoted. I've interviewed a lot of academics. Then a few weeks ago, a New York University professor mentioned Doctor Key's work on income inequality, I lobbied my editors to do a special report on the topic, and that's when I began seeking him for an interview.”

“I know a few NYU professors. Who was it?” asked Doctor Morris.

“I don't reveal names of people I interview off the record.”

Jackie raised his eyebrows and wanted to challenge Maura. Didn't the good NYU professor know he was talking to a reporter, and therefore gave tacit agreement to be on the record?

“Did they mention his line of research?” asked Doctor Morris.

“It wasn't clear to me at first.” Maura looked at Jackie. “When I couldn't get through to Doctor Key, I asked another source, and he suggested I look up your PhD thesis. I've read everything about Doctor Key I can find online. And I've read his applications for federal research dollars, few though they were.”

“All denied,” added Jackie.

Maura nodded and continued. “And your scant press trail. I still don’t know who Jasper Karsten is. I’ve heard rumors that I can’t substantiate. He doesn’t seem to exist in any records I’ve been able to find.”

Doctor Morris blinked and looked at Doctor Key, who thanked his stars she didn’t know about his correspondence with Jasper Karsten—the only person with whom he collaborated on his work. They’d never met or spoken, only exchanged packets through a common courier, and Jackie agreed to keep their relationship private in exchange for the tenured chair in Karsten’s name he occupied for the last fifteen years.

“Neither do we,” said Doctor Morris. “It’s been a mystery since they created the chair. Nobody knows.” She chuckled. “I think it’s an old rich man hidden far away somewhere who likes to invest in a little trouble.”

“Is Doctor Key’s work likely to cause a little trouble?” asked Maura.

Doctor Morris laughed. “Oh, I think you know that, Ms. Booker, especially with all the off-the-record lunches with nameless people you’ve had. In fact, I wager that’s why you’re really here. Big flaming controversies always attract people like you.” She pointed her thumb at Doctor Key. “He’s going to have a hard enough time with all this even if it doesn’t make a public splash. If you megaphone it to your readers, it could get really ugly for a lot of people. So no, in my official position with the university and this department, I don’t see how I can allow you to speak with Doctor Key about his work or any possible publication thereof, which, in fact, may not even happen.”

“What?” asked Jackie.

Doctor Morris raised a finger at Jackie and kept her eyes on Maura. “We’ll discuss that later.”

Maura stood, reached for her bag as if to go, and faced them. Jackie couldn’t believe she would give up so easily. It must be some reporter’s tactic. Make the source beg her to come back. If she walked out now, maybe he would.

“I don’t disagree with your logic,” Maura said. “It’s impeccable in the short term. But this is already on the verge of getting out. Parts of it already have. There have been a few segments on the news channels raking Doctor Key for his hit list diagram that’s spreading over the Internet. Even if I ignore everything I’ve seen and heard here, I have enough to write a

story, and I will. So there's really no doubt, academic splash or not, there will be a public splash. It's already begun. You can help me add truth to that. Or I'll do the best I can on my own."

Doctor Morris leaned her head back and stared at Maura. "She's threatening us, Doctor Key. What should we do about that do you think?"

He didn't know. His cortex spun on how his work might not publish. They *couldn't* stop it so close to publication. He was about to send them his final corrected manuscript. They were about to finish their production work. It had to be too late. "How can they not publish it?" he blurted.

Doctor Morris kept her head steady and turned her eyes to Doctor Key, and back to Maura. "He's not very good at following my lead, I suppose you've noticed."

"Or at answering my questions," said Maura.

"Well, Doctor Key, what's that old saying? Sun Tzu, I believe. About keeping friends close and enemies closer? What we don't know, Ms. Booker, is which one you are."

"I'm neither."

Doctor Morris nodded. "The neutral press. Call it as you see it. Everything balanced and buttoned up. And then you drop a bombshell on poor Doctor Key here because you're looking for a sensational story to bolster your flagging career. Don't tell me covering poverty is the top of your assignment chain, Ms. Booker." Doctor Morris's eyes twinkled. "Your uncle, I understand, was the renowned economist James M. Booker, is that correct?"

"Great uncle," Maura said.

Doctor Morris laughed. "He is said to have been a man who revered framework law at the highest constitutional level, but who detested attorneys and the political pawns they inevitably become. I once heard him say he considered his word *more* binding than a legal contract."

"I remember him saying that, yes."

"Is your word just as binding, Ms. Booker? What can you offer me and this university? Will you allow us to review your stories before they go to press?"

"No, I cannot and would not do that."

Doctor Morris thrummed her fingers on the back of her chair.

"But I will," said Maura, "give you my word, in the name of my great

uncle, that I will be fair and above-board, that I will not cast you in a bad light if you do not deserve it, and that I will check my facts with you.”

“I don’t know, Jackie,” Doctor Morris said. “Seems pretty flimsy.”

Jackie found himself wanting to defend Maura from Ginger. “The word of the grand-niece of James M. Booker is good enough for me.”

“Humph,” said Doctor Morris. “You don’t really give us much. But I’ll buy it because as much as I hate to say it, we probably need you. It’s better to have someone in our camp who can tell the story, I think, than not. Just know, Ms. Booker, that we interpret this as, what do the bankruptcy courts call it? Preferred status. If things go to hell, you go to hell with us.”

Maura opened her mouth, but no sound emerged.

“Well, we’re done here, then. Watch her, Doctor Key. She’s a harbinger of trouble, though trouble’s coming with or without her. She’s right about that.” Doctor Morris stood from the arm of the chair with such a sudden motion that it scooted across the floor, nearly sending her off balance, but she recovered, knees akimbo, waved a hand, opened the door, and walked out as if she intended it as sober slapstick.

Jackie smiled at Maura, who still stood holding her briefcase. “See what I mean?”

“She’s definitely a little...,” she started.

“Brilliant people are often that way.”

“What way?”

“I don’t know, clumsy. Gawky. They look like one thing but are something completely different.”

“Like you?”

“Am I clumsy?”

“I have a feeling you’re something completely different than you seem.”

He grinned at her. “You mean I’m not just a source for a story?”

“I mean you might drive me crazy trying to interview you.”

“Well, I’ll try to restrain my clumsiness. There’s one thing I don’t understand, though. You didn’t tell her about Alan Binder’s murder. That would have been a clincher of an argument to keep you close.” He imagined hugging her. *That* close.

She shrugged. “There are some things our bosses just don’t need to know.” Followed by one of those smiles that mesmerized him.



JACKIE CALLED THE *American Economics Review*'s editor. He invited Maura to sit and listen, put it on speakerphone so she could hear, and offered no objection when she started her phone recorder.

"I'm sending over my final corrections this afternoon," he said, putting the editor in the position of having to explain if things had been put to a halt. "Are you ready for it? Everything on track?"

"Ah, well, we probably may still be able to fit it into this one, but there's always the possibility of a last-minute space issue, you know."

"This is your cover article," said Jackie, "how can that be a last-minute space issue?"

"Well, you know, we have other cover art, contingency, just in case."

"In case of what?"

"Come on, Doctor Key, you know in case of what. If our advisory board changes their mind, then there's nothing I can do about it but get another cover story ready."

Jackie looked at Maura, who watched his face. "Do you think the board might do that?"

"It's not really my place to say, Doctor Key. There's some rumors about it, yes, but I can't repeat any of them."

His cell phone rang. Ginger's name came up. He thanked the editor and got off the line. "Yes, Doctor Morris," he said.

"Is she there?"

"Yes," he said, looking at the ceiling. "I've just been on the other line with the *American Economics Review* editor. He said..."

"Put me on speaker so she can hear. We've cracked her open this far, we may as well go all in."

Jackie eyed Maura, put his cell on speaker, and laid it on his desk. "Go ahead," he said. "And so you know, she's recording."

"I don't give a damn about that. Are you still with us, Ms. Booker? Not changed your mind?"

"Yes, I am."

“Good. Now, this is going to make you angry, Doctor Key. Doctor Humboldt has filed charges of ethics violations against you with the dean. Under your tenure agreement, you must withdraw your paper from potential publication pending the outcome of your hearing.”

Jackie leaned back in his desk chair. Doctor Humboldt, the old bat. He took enormous grants from financial corporations and cranked out study after study, little more than unfounded opinion pieces really, that advocated a no-regulation free-market point of view on virtually every topic of economics, even of proven dangerous monopoly behavior. He lived in the most excessively grand house of any university professor Jackie had ever met. *His* ethics were the ones that should be challenged, not Jackie’s. “So, if I file a counter ethics charge, will all his publications also be put on hold?” He asked it evenly, with no emotion or raised voice.

Doctor Morris started laughing. “I thought you’d blow your top. But you’re right. You could stop his little capitalist misinformation machine dead in its tracks. I’ve wanted to get rid of him for years.”

“I’ll put something together. Should it go through you?” He asked because he assumed Doctor Humboldt had bypassed his department chair. Of course he would.

“Hell yes, I’m your commander in chief, even if Humboldt doesn’t act like it. I’ll add my few-dozen cents and pass it up to the dean. Darned good idea, Jackie. Humboldt should know to keep his nose out of our business. Ha!” She disconnected.

Jackie pulled up a complaint he’d written and rewritten several times against old Humboldt, scanned it, printed a copy, and emailed it to Ginger. “There. Sent.”

“Already?” Maura asked.

He explained Doctor Humboldt’s scheme, and Maura nodded in understanding. “Had a complaint sitting and waiting. Been wanting to tie that old bastard up for years. He’ll see he can’t mess with me.”

“Or you’ll what?”

Jackie steepled his fingers. “Or I’ll send another complaint.”

“Why not make him swear on one of his dead ancestors?”

Jackie laughed. He enjoyed Doctor Morris, but rarely genuinely laughed with her. This Maura woman made him want to laugh often. He looked at her with amazement. “We were, you know, just kind of kidding

about that making you give your word thing.”

“You may have been. I don’t think your redheaded master was.”

“Now you’re overestimating her. She’s not the master of anything. And my counter-complaint against Humboldt? The dean can throw out anything he wants.”

“Which would be news. Dean allows unethical professor to level ethics charge at ethical professor, but does not allow ethical professor’s case to be heard. People love that kind of story. But you know, I’m surprised your Doctor Morris hasn’t connected the murder of Alan Binder to your paper. I mean, he was on your list, right?” She crossed her legs and balanced her notepad on her knee. He forced himself to look away and not think about her legs, which made him think about her legs.

“Five hundred people are on my core list, thirty on the thing the art department leaked,” he said, glancing at the shape of her calves through her slacks. His throat tightened. “I’m sure one of you reporter types will throw it at her sooner or later.” He ran his fingers through his hair. He felt exhausted. “Man, what a strange day. I thought I might squeak it in under the wire. Get it published through the right channels before it broke open.”

“I don’t represent the right channels?” She smiled at him so sweetly he felt like a boy staring at a teacher he had a crush on.

“I don’t think the academic world would think so.”

“But since you didn’t make it under the wire, may I read your final draft now?”

“What? Well, I suppose. Why not? But that doesn’t mean I’m giving your paper copyright permission or anything.”

“I know that, Doctor Key. I’ve already given my word. I’m not here to torpedo you.”

He looked around, blinking. Now he’d made her angry. People mystified and frustrated him. He did much better working alone with his formulas and research data. “Final is about forty pages. It’s hard to cut things out. They wanted it shorter. So I consented to some charts.”

“Do you have those?”

“Yes.” He tapped the copy he’d made his final marks on. Just one mark, actually. A typo. He didn’t find anything else to change.

“Are you going to make me ask for it again?”

“Electronic or hard copy?” His face flushed when he said *hard*. He

cleared his throat. “Here or to go?”

“Hard copy to go, please. I’d rather take my time with it at my hotel if you don’t mind. Maybe we could start again in the morning?”

He agreed and they exchanged cell phone numbers.

As she stood, she asked, “Nine o’clock? Here?”

Jackie rose with her and nodded. Bent to his computer, found the latest version, and sent it to the printer in the corner. “There’s one unmarked typo in it.” He handed it to her.

“That’s good enough. Thank you.”

“So. I guess I’ll see you in the morning?”

She smiled sweetly and confirmed the time, and he held the door for her to leave, which sucked all the life from the room. His office had never felt so dead. He paced, thinking about Maura’s smile, her smell, the way her body moved.

With great force of will, he turned his mind to the logic and evidence of his paper and Humboldt’s complaint—he hadn’t seen it. He supposed he needed to formally retract his paper from the journal, though he had received no official notice of the charges leveled by Doctor Humboldt. The dean should at least notify him.

Doctor Morris blind copied him moments later on her email, with his complaint attached, to the dean. She said it succinctly: “The ethics of the study of economics must not be defined or challenged by a man whose livelihood depends upon payments from institutions with financial interests riding on the outcome of his work. On the contrary, only those who use the science of economics to promulgate the greater good for the greatest number of people with little if any expected compensation as a direct result can rightfully carry the mantle of ethical behavior. Please accept this filing of ethical complaints against Doctor Humboldt by Doctor Key with my complete support for Doctor Key’s position, and my recommendation that the complaints by Doctor Humboldt against Doctor Key be summarily dismissed.”

Good old Ginger. She didn’t shrink from anything.

A few minutes later, he received a short email from the publisher of the *American Economics Review*. The board rejected his paper at the last moment, citing ethical concerns.

That saved him from having to withdraw his paper. He typed a short

reply, a study in understatement, and copied Ginger: “I regret this decision, but thank you for your timely notification. I will deeply consider the implications of the *AER*’s ethical stance on my studies of macroeconomics in the context of the very rich people who provide your financial backing.”

Jackie couldn’t sleep that night. For twenty-five years he worked sixty to eighty hours a week to discover, define, characterize, model, and ultimately predict the effects on the larger economy when a member of the richest of the rich, the top several hundred people, liquidated their estates. Beginning with old man Willoughby. If he was right, and he knew he was, then government and voters couldn’t help but agree with him and do something about the extreme braking effect on the economy of allowing the ultra-rich to exist—change laws, adopt a new constitutional amendment, certainly not allow the country to be transformed into a nation of economic zombies by unproductive and monopolistic wealth hoarding.

It was a personal mission for him. Do it for the public good. He *had* to publish his work. He *had* to help neutralize the ultra-rich before they destroyed the middle class that American-style democracy depended upon. Which meant he *had* to work with reporters like Maura Booker to get the popular message out, now that academic channels were closed to him. Not that he minded working with Maura Booker. She sparked in him the feeling that he could do things he never thought possible.

He finally fell asleep imagining himself as a Ralph Nader of economics reform, a righteous man with a righteous cause that bleached the red stain on his character.

BEFORE MAURA ARRIVED at his office the next morning, he checked his email. Nothing from the dean or Ginger. But his inbox was full of hate mail. Nearly a thousand of them. He clicked through, glancing at each. Most were obvious form letters that used the same language to blame him for the death of Alan Binder and his attack on the American dream.

He sat back and sighed. Maura was right. The campaign against his work had begun. The rich and powerful had already proven their prowess at manipulating the lower classes to think and vote in ways that were diametrically opposed to their own best interests. Perhaps that had become the defining characteristic of American politics over the last thirty years.

Maybe longer.

Thirty-two emails contained explicit threats of violence, and he saved them into a new folder. He would ask Ginger what to do about those.

Janice knocked on his door and asked if he expected Maura.

“Of course, send her in.”

When she walked in, his black-and-white world became full color. Today her calf-length turquoise skirt, leather boots, and belted white blouse emphasized her hourglass figure. The same essential oil smell reached his nostrils.

“Good morning,” she said.

“What is that smell?” he asked.

She raised one side of her mouth and one eyebrow. “Do I smell?”

“No, I mean, scent. Good scent. Lovely scent. I just can’t, I don’t know what it is.” He felt as pathetically awkward as a boy-child.

Her dark eyes gleamed. “Lavender. It relaxes people. Most people.”

“Oh,” he nodded, the air thick with lavender. “It’s, uh, really nice.”

“Thank you.” She pulled out his folded manuscript and he noticed handwritten notes all over it. He wanted to spread them on a table and go through, see what she’d highlighted, read her margin notes. “This,” she said, “is explosive. And here. This is the line that gets it. Way back here two paragraphs before your source list.” She turned to the page and Jackie leaned forward, close to her, his head in her lavender cloud.

“Right here: ‘If the wealth of the 400 richest Americans as identified by *Forbes* magazine were to be efficiently dispersed into a free market system devoid of inefficient wealth hoarding and rent-seeking, according to this proposed model, US GDP would double in as little as three years.’” She raised her eyes and looked at him. “Are you certain about that?”

He swallowed, the lavender making his head spin. “My model says so.”

“And how sure are you of your model?”

“It might take five years to double it. Maybe seven. There’s some margin of error. And like with any financial model—you know, you have a finance degree—tiny changes in the assumptions can make the results swing wildly.”

“So how good are your assumptions?”

He shrugged. “As good as historical evidence can make them.”

“Doubling? That’s huge. You’re sure of that, too?”

He shrugged again. “It’s what the model says using really conservative assumptions.”

The gleam in her eye had a hardness to it. “So if we were a rational society, we would, as you say, dissolve the assets of the rich. What would that do for the rest of us?”

“If you do it right, unemployment would go way down, salaries and hourly wages would go up, consumption of goods and services would go way up. We’d all get richer. In aggregate, of course. But this model doesn’t project by how much, though I’m sure you could estimate that.”

“Do you know how many households would benefit directly?”

He shook his head. “The model doesn’t calculate that, either. But it would be on the order of, I don’t know, everybody. If activity picks up that much, everyone benefits. At least from a large-scale economics kind of perspective. The most important factor is that the wealth would be released into the market to fund more sustainable economic activity. Right now, most of the world’s richest people and mega-corporations hoard money and rent it out in ways that concentrates wealth without creating it.”

“Making poverty worse.”

He nodded. “That’s what I just said. To an inverse degree of what my model shows. So it holds down GDP by as much as dispersing their wealth would raise it, but it affects more people. It’s like an iceberg—nearly all of it is underwater. To support one ultra-rich person takes millions of people in relative poverty. So maybe your business card isn’t so wrong after all.”

She smiled, her fingers tapping his hit list. “Peer review. What did they say?”

“All arguments and objections so far have been over my input assumptions, not over the model itself. And even using their assumptions, which I do even though I think they’re too conservative, well, that’s when you get five-to-seven years to double growth instead of three.”

She pulled out a diagram. He recognized it instantly. His so-called hit list. “And this,” she said, “is the smoking gun.” She tapped the paper with the diagram.

“I’m not much of a gun guy.”

“This is what’s going viral. You know what that means, right?”

“Means the masses are focusing on entirely the wrong part of my findings,” he said. “That’s exactly why we’re in the macroeconomic bind

we're in—a majority of voters with the brains of cows.”

She flattened her lips and stared at him. “Do you really want to insult the voters? That’s like blaming a rape victim.”

“If the rape victim walks naked and sober into a biker bar, then yeah, I kinda do.”

“You’re angry about something,” she said. “And it’s not the lowing herd of American voters.” She waved his list. “You don’t like these people.”

He grimaced and shook his head. “Yeah, well, the more you find out about these really rich bastards, the more you find out how worthless they....”

Jackie’s cell phone rang and saved him. He glanced at the ID with a release of breath and answered, “Yes, Doctor Morris.”

“She there?”

“Yes.”

“Anybody else?”

“No.”

“Lock your door. Now. And put me on speaker.”

He laid the phone on his desk, put it on speaker, and locked his door while Maura watched him.

“Good morning, Ms. Booker. Any second thoughts yet?”

“I read Doctor Key’s manuscript last night.”

“Did it make you sleep or keep you awake?”

“Kept me awake. This is incendiary.”

“Not it’s not,” said Jackie. “Not necessarily. Only if you....”

“Stop it, Jackie,” said Ginger. “We’re the choir. Stop preaching. I’ve got something to tell you and I could lose my job for disclosing it, but damn the bastards. The dean is putting you on unpaid suspension under investigation with extreme prejudice—I love his term for that—for what he calls gross violation of your ethical obligations to this university. Humboldt and his supporters got to him. But it’s even bigger than that.”

“What about my counter claim?”

“Dismissed for lack of evidence.”

“Lack of evidence!”

“I know, I know. But get ready for the campus police to show up at any minute. They’ll confiscate everything in your office, including your

computer. I hope you have backup.”

Jackie leaned to his computer, tapped some keys to save a few recent files, and pulled a thumb drive from a USB port. He kept it updated every day to carry back and forth from home. “I do now,” he said.

“I suggest you get off campus. Now. Go somewhere. Very quickly and quietly. To a different country, even, because this could get huge. But don’t tell me anything. And Ms. Booker? You need to leave campus immediately, too. The press officer is going apoplectic that you slipped in without her knowledge.”

Maura looked at Jackie. “So this esteemed university is quashing Doctor Key’s work?” she asked.

“I never said that. But hell yes. Jackie, you should take it to a European journal. The Swedes love this kind of stuff. Especially when they can make fun of us over here in freedom-of-speech land.” She paused. “This is the most disproportionate thing I’ve ever seen in my professional life. And Jackie.”

“Yes.”

“Hurry the hell up.” She disconnected.

Jackie looked around his office, found a box full of papers he intended to read but couldn’t possibly get to now, dumped them onto the floor, and began looking for things to throw into it.

“Want me to help?” Maura asked. She picked up the bowling trophy on the coffee table.

“Uh, no.” He kept his office sparse. His whole life. He had very few personal items he cared about. Did that make him strong, or merely abnormal? “I don’t know what to take.” He shrugged.

“Pictures? Anything in your desk?” she suggested.

He shook his head and checked: cell phone, thumb drive, money clip, car keys.

She raised an eyebrow. “Maybe the thumb drive is enough?”

“Maybe so. To hell with it.” He locked his desk, pocketed the key along with the thumb drive. He pulled out his cell phone and looked at it. “This is a problem, isn’t it? They can track me?”

Maura shrugged. “The NSA...well, you know. But I don’t think *they’ll* be involved. Do you?”

He stared at the phone. “Not yet, I guess.” He slipped it into his pocket

and walked out his office door behind Maura.

Janice had her hand to her mouth and her eyes were big and moist. “The dean is on his way over. He told me not to let you leave.”

Jackie shook his head. Went to Janice and gave her a hug. “You’ve been great. Don’t let them take you down, Janice. It’s me they’re after, not you. Give them anything they want. Everything. I took nothing from inside. I just don’t want to deal with them, this is so absurd. So tell them the truth. Don’t hide anything. We’ve done nothing wrong. Eventually reason will prevail, and everything will be fine.”

Tears appeared in Janice’s eyes and she sniffed. “Where will you go?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ll find a way to let you know.”

She nodded. “Okay. You have my number. Call any time. Wake me up, I don’t care.”

“I know. Thanks.” He pulled her into another quick hug, and then he took Maura’s arm and hurried to the back stairwell. Touching Janice made his eyes moist, but touching Maura made his heart pound. He gave her arm a little squeeze, and then worried he’d gone too far. They exited the north entrance, and when they looked around the corner of the building, they saw the dean climbing the front steps, followed by Doctor Humboldt, the university’s press officer, and the head of campus police with two officers. Maura took video with her cell phone.

“My car’s back here,” he said. They fast-walked to the staff parking lot, and he pulled away just before a campus police cart blocked the entrance. The officer noticed them and raised a walkie-talkie to his lips. Jackie screeched around a corner and ran a stop sign to get off campus. He drove erratically for a few minutes, not sure where to go, and then remembered Old Reliance Road. It turned to gravel and went out into middle-of-nowhere East Texas. Sometimes, to clear his head, he drove out there on nights with big moons, his headlights off. He once saw a field of ghostly deer grazing like cattle in the moonlight. Another time three rattlesnakes crossed the road in front of his car while he sat idling. It was a good way to get away fast.

“Is this the first time you’ve run from campus police?” Maura asked.

Jackie laughed, his vocal chords tight, and he consciously slowed the car. He glanced in the rearview mirror. Saw nothing suspicious. Tried to relax. “No, I’m afraid it isn’t. But it’s been a very long time. How about

you?”

“Only once. For smoking an illegal substance in public. The officer, a big guy, said he would let me go if I paid up with a blow job.”

Jackie glanced hard at her. He couldn't imagine her going along with that. “Did you?”

“I said, sure, and kept puffing the joint. When he unzipped and pulled it out, I snuffed the cherry right on the tip of it.”

Jackie cringed. “Oh!” Like a punch to the gut.

“That's what he said.”

“Oh, man.”

“It got pretty awful. He claimed I scarred him for life. I wrote about it for the school newspaper, but they wouldn't publish it. My first run-in with censorship. I filed charges against him, but the presence of the illegal substance got in the way, and I dropped them. That's when I moved to California.”

Jackie took a deep breath. He saw what she did. Made conversation to slow the pace, force him to relax. It worked. Especially the part about the blow job. “Remind me to never unzip my pants around you.” He laughed, and then realized how inappropriate that was. “I mean, not that I would even come close to doing something like that. I don't, wouldn't, do anything like, you know, that.”

She smiled and let him off his own hook. “So what'd you run from the campus cops for?”

“I don't really have anything to compare to branding a man's male part. I mean, the worst I did was steal some accelerant one time.”

“Accelerant?”

He nodded. “You know, fire starter.”

“Like gasoline? You stole gasoline?”

“No. Not gas. But it was flammable something. Said so on the label.”

“Where did you steal it from?”

“Chemistry building. We wanted to have a bonfire out on the golf course. We'd been drinking a little.”

“What did you burn up?”

“It didn't hurt anybody, no one was injured, we made sure of that. But it did make a bigger fireball than we expected. It pretty much ruined the eleventh green.”

“Did they catch you?”

He shook his head. “Hell no. After that fireball singed my eyebrows, I ran like hell.”

“They never suspected you?”

“One guy chased me for a while. But I lost him.”

“Did you go back to the scene of the crime?”

“I wanted to. But I was too scared.”

“Are you going to be too scared to go back this time?”

He looked at her. “I don’t know. Seems more silly than serious at the moment, I guess. As soon as I publish my paper, it won’t really matter anymore, will it?”

“No telling who you’ll be running from then.”

He laughed. She unzipped and pulled off her right boot and folded the leg under her. He caught a glimpse of flesh and it felt like junior high school. How could a woman like her be a poverty correspondent? He wished they could hide for a few days or weeks or months. Like Bonnie and Clyde. Without the bank robbing. Or the guns. Or the bad ending.

They rolled across a rickety plank bridge where it spanned a triple junction of creeks that flowed into the Navasota River. At least that’s what he remembered from his map-gazing. The tree cover became dense, the road a tunnel through their outstretched arms, and he crept up a long climb out of the creek bottom, the sunlight green and dim. He parked at the top in a pull-off beneath an ancient spreading live oak, the shade deep. He put down the windows and cut the engine. A long driveway snaked away from the road and a faded sign advertised a house for rent. A shack, more than likely.

He leaned forward to look up into the twisted mass of branches above them. “You think birds’ll poop the windshield?” he asked.

“I’ve never been to Texas before, Doctor Key, but I believe bird poop is as inevitable here as anywhere else.”

He laughed and sank into the seat, the sudden quiet unnerving. His ears rang. They wouldn’t pop. He realized two black cows lay in the shade on the other side of the tree, barbed-wire draped from the nearest post to the wide trunk, and then out along the road to the next post. Pasture lay on the other side. “Cows,” he said.

“Where?”

He pointed until she saw them. “Oh, they’re so cute. Real cows!”

Jackie hoped she was joking.

“Oh, look at their wet pink noses! And their long eyelashes!”

“And snot drooling out of their nostrils,” he said, with a hint of mock in his voice. “And look at that, dried cow shit on their butts. Really cute.”

She looked at him and slumped her shoulders. “I haven’t seen a cow this close in a long time, okay? Doctor Sourpuss. Hey, I have a question.”

He nodded. “That seems to be a common occurrence with you.”

“While we’re sitting here watching shit dry on these two cows, how about you tell me what this model of yours means.”

“You want to interview me.”

She raised her hands. “That’s what I’ve been trying to do since I got here.”

“I suppose. We’ve got nothing else to do.” He imagined under what conditions she would consent to giving him a kiss.

She looked at him, her eyes going over his face. “Can I take a picture of you?” She raised her phone.

“What for?”

“Documentation. And you look better with a pasture behind you than in your office.”

“Don’t I need a hat on or something?”

She snapped two pictures and then looked at them on her screen. “You’re kind of handsome in an absent-minded professor sort of way.”

Jackie frowned at her, rusty parts of his brain starting to spin. She called him *handsome*! “Well, I,” he stammered, “don’t know what that....”

“A simple thanks will do. Can I ask my questions now?”

He looked up at the limbs above the windshield. Still no birds. “We probably can’t stay here too long.”

“Fear of bird poop? Or of the campus police going off campus?”

“I’ve never been on the run before. Feels kind of strange. Like we’re leaving a trail and somebody is following it and we may have to escape again at any minute. Do you feel that?” He looked down the road toward the creek expecting to see a police car.

“So talk fast while we’re sitting here,” she said. “I need some on-the-record interview from you.”

“Okay. Turn on your phone.”

“You don’t mind?”

He shook his head. If they were going to censor and persecute him, then he may as well speak his mind. Birds landed above them. He could hear them cawing. Big black ones. Crows. He expected a splat on the hood or windshield before he even began going on the record.

“Okay,” she said, her phone in her hand between them. “Talk about what your model means. I’ll ask questions. We’ll get this over with.”

He nodded. “Yeah. Okay. As sound-bitey as I can get it. The way you people like it.”

“At this point, a person like me would take monosyllabic grunts.” She smiled and raised her eyebrows. Sweet? Or not sweet? Both, he decided.

He thought about where to start. “How about this? You know we had those huge monopolies in this country, a hundred years ago or so? They got so big and behaved so badly, the government broke them up. Standard Oil became nearly every gasoline company you’ve ever heard of. Ma Bell turned into most of our phone companies. And as a result, more wealth was generated and shared among more people over the next four or five decades than at any other time in history. The rich got richer, but so did the middle class and the poor. But not anymore.”

Jackie smacked his lips. He sounded like the economics professor he’d become. Every time he talked, it became a lecture. But he didn’t know any other way to tell it.

“What happened?” Maura prompted.

“Do I sound like I’m lecturing too much? Like a professor?”

“No, you’re doing great. What happened?”

He sat for a few moments. “I’m not sure I really know the answer to that. It’s popular to blame it on Ronald Reagan and his race to cut taxes on the rich and reduce regulation on everything, particularly financial institutions, which was a profoundly stupid thing to do. But problems began long before that. I think it’s perhaps inevitable that when a rich and privileged class develops, it will use its riches to influence public policy, and that’s what began happening in an increasingly sophisticated way back as far as the Sixties. Barry Goldwater turned the Republican Party into the pro-big-business, anti-government party, corporations began earning ever-larger profits, and CEOs started looking for ways to influence government to work in their favor while astronomically boosting their own income.

You know how many lobbyists there were in Washington, DC, back during, say, Jimmy Carter's administration?"

She shrugged. "A few hundred?"

"I don't know the exact number, but it was maybe a few dozen defense contractors, and lobbying consisted of explaining to elected officials who didn't know military ordinance from a legal ordinance what they could realistically supply to the military. At great profit to them, I might add. So there were a small handful of what we might now call lobbyists' offices, spending maybe a million or so dollars. How many do you think are there now?"

"Thousands."

"Yeah. Last I saw, 3,500 companies had paid lobbyists in DC, spending nearly four billion dollars a year. You need to fact-check that, by the way," he said. She nodded. "So what do you think they lobby for?"

She played along with him. "It's not higher minimum wage."

He chuckled. "No, it's not, even though that would boost their profits because of higher aggregate demand. What they demanded was less regulation, lower corporate taxation with more loopholes, looser financial rules, less monitoring and reporting of any kind. And they've been very, very successful. Worse, perhaps, the rich and powerful have convinced a majority of voting Americans that government is bad and unfettered free enterprise is good."

"Isn't it?"

"Hell no. That's like saying the moon is good but the sun is bad. Remember that famous quote from Reagan? 'Government isn't the solution to the problem. Government *is* the problem.' Something like that."

Maura nodded.

"Pure big-business, rich-people propaganda. Bad government is bad. Good government is good. Good free enterprise is good. Bad free enterprise is bad. But Reagan created a myth middle Americans seem to love, especially after the Australian Rupert Murdoch became their main source of news, and so they keep electing leaders who kowtow to the rich while selling middle-class taxpayers down the river."

"That's what your research found? That we blame it on voters being so gullible?"

"Well, no. That's just historical context."

“Good. I was beginning to worry we would lose readers. So what did you find in your actual research? Anything interesting?”

He grinned and raised his eyebrows at her. “Hey, it’s your job to make it interesting. All I have to do is talk until you tell me to shut up. Isn’t that what a source does?”

She nodded. “Then by all means, talk until the NSA zeroes in on our location.”

He tightened and sat straight. “You think so?” He pulled his cell phone and looked at it.

“No, I don’t really think that. I was being sarcastic.” She grinned and closed her eyes.

“So you don’t think we need to move? Throw away our cell phones? Ditch the car?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No, I think we’re fine here at the moment. So please, if you will, tell me what in the hell your research says.”

Jackie liked her. Sarcasm and all. And she asked for it, so he would just preach economics for a while. It had to come out of his system one way or another.

“Okay,” he said, “what I did was create an economic, no, a macroeconomic—meaning aggregate, big picture—mathematical model that predicts what happens when you liberate the less-productive assets that most ultra-rich people hoard—usually financial instruments not tied to real economic growth—when you release those assets back into the kind of free enterprise that drives true wealth-generating activities, like helping a small business improve something like healthcare technology or manufacture more efficient ball bearings, then the whole system starts generating more wealth for everyone.”

“I thought that’s what rich people and big corporations invested in already. New business ideas. What’s the difference?”

Jackie thrummed his fingers on the steering wheel as another bird landed on the live oak limbs above them. He didn’t know which to worry about more—bird poop or an NSA satellite. “Okay, how about this. When you buy groceries and pay with a credit card, who do you think makes more money? The local grocer or the credit card company?” He looked at her.

“Uh, the grocer should. But the way you’re looking at me....”

“Yep. The credit card company makes more on average. And for what? The transaction is automated. No humans—no employees earning a salary—involved. Computers do all the work. And lobbyists hired by the credit card companies make sure financial laws and regulations let them keep prices high, competition low, and disclosure minimal at best. That means they make money without creating any new real wealth or creating jobs or tolerating any new competition that might lower prices and create jobs.”

He sent his hand up like a rocket. “Capital accumulates up to the very top from millions of transactions by the middle and lower classes. If you don’t pay your credit card bill in full every month, but let it roll instead, then even more money transfers from the bottom ninety-nine-point-nine percent to the top point-one percent. None, if any, of those ultra-rich people invest in grocery stores, which serve a true need in the country. But all of them invest in financial services, like credit card companies.”

“That doesn’t exactly sound criminal.”

“It’s not. They’ve paid enormous sums of money over decades to ensure that it’s very legal.”

“But it doesn’t sound immoral or shady, either. I mean, you know your credit card comes with fees.”

“You sure do. But do you know all of them? And do you know how much they actually cost you? Most people don’t because the rules and regulations of the game don’t require financial companies to tell their customers in a way they can understand. Here’s another one. Where do the big financial companies get the money to lend to you for high-interest credit card purchases?”

“Uh, investors? Other banks?”

“They’ll claim that. But really, beneath it all, it’s the government. We give big banks government money at nearly zero percent interest—rates set by the Federal Reserve, which the banks control—and then they lend it to the lower ninety-nine percent at much higher interest rates, often double-digit interest rates on credit cards. Finance people like to think they’re the smartest people in the room because they make so much money, but the dumbest kid in the fifth grade could become a billionaire with a playing field tilted like that.”

“Why doesn’t the government give money directly to citizens like that?”

Jackie nodded. “Why indeed don’t they? Because the rich bankers and their lawyers spend a significant portion of their easy money influencing politicians to keep their gravy train flowing. Net result: You and I can’t get cheap money from the Fed, but the big banks can. Not only that, we bail them out with taxpayer money when they screw up—and it takes massive, impressively unimaginable stupidity and incompetence to screw up a system that so greatly favors the finance and banking guys. And we let them amass their billions and trillions of dollars without paying much, if any, income taxes, because their lobbyists write laws that our politicians adopt without much question to do things such as hide their wealth overseas. It’s an obscenely sweet deal for the people at the top.”

He considered winking at her, but decided not to risk it.

“If all we did was bust up rich people and spread their wealth to average taxpayers and level the field—a tall order, I admit—our deficit would disappear, the middle class would stop declining, and we could start to become the country most people think we already are.”

“You’re passionate about this. Why?”

Jackie grinned. He liked Maura seeing some his passion. “Every American, every citizen of the world, should be passionate about this. If they care at all about full employment, wages going up, a fair and sustainable society, and everything that means to a civil society.”

“Sounds like the rich people, the ones at the top of your list, are preventing a sort of utopia. Do you really believe that?”

“That’s one of the things that makes this a difficult issue. As individual action, the rich do little that is horribly wrong. It’s only in aggregate, all the actions of the rich people of the world combined, and how they influence government—*that* breaks our economy.”

“So they’ve broken our economic system?”

“It’s not broken yet, but it’s sputtering and coughing.”

“And that makes you angry?”

She kept asking about anger. Did his passion come out as anger? It must. He wondered what made her angry. “Of course it does. It makes collective humanity look pretty stupid.”

“Angry enough to kill them? The rich people on your list?”

He stared at her, his eyes steady. “Wouldn’t break my heart if that happened, I admit.” He probably shouldn’t have said that. Especially with

her voice recorder running. “But it’s not the best way.”

“What’s the best way?”

He was tired of sitting still, antsy to get moving. A feeling of impending doom settled on him from above. He scanned the sky beyond the live oak branches and saw nothing but a buzzard, and then craned his neck to see the road in the direction they hadn’t yet been. “Probably that way.”

“What?”

“You know, I didn’t see a single restaurant or little grocery out here. Did you?” He felt hungry. Or maybe just nervous.

“It’s eleven o’clock in the morning.”

He nodded. “Doesn’t this stuff just bore you to death? Economics and everything?”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. “I have an MBA, remember? A great uncle with a Nobel Prize in Economics? I love this kind of boring stuff.”

“Okay.” He wondered if they met under other circumstances, she might go out with him. He’d never wondered that about a woman before, not since his first wife. But yes, he would lecture her a little more. He pulled from one of his good lectures when students actually listened.

“So, here’s another angle. When you’re an economist watching out for monopolies, potential monopolies,” he said, “you notice when a company has a third of a market. And begin to worry when they near half. And anything that trends toward two-thirds is grounds for government action.”

She nodded, encouraging him.

“So, in that context, think about these statistics. In this country, the top one percent reaps more than ninety percent of the new income created each year. Thirty years ago, that number was closer to ten percent. The same richest one percent owns more than a third of the nation’s total wealth. Worldwide, just eighty-five individuals control as much wealth as the three-point-five billion poorest souls—that’s half the global population. And each of those trends is getting worse, not better.”

Her eyes widened and she kept nodding.

“We’re dangerously close to living under wealth monopolies that make a few hundred people astronomically rich, while nearly everybody else gets poorer. As a country, as a world, it’s time to start busting up those hoards

of wealth, private and corporate. They're simply too big to exist if we want democracy and free enterprise to work."

"What happens if we do what you suggest?"

"The rich will stay rich, just not become as rich, and almost everybody else will get richer. If, that is, we do it right." He grinned at her.

"How do we do it?"

"I'm merely a macroeconomist. I provide reason and direction. It's up to our elected representatives to figure out the details. But I have some ideas."

"Good. Give me your top three."

He frowned at her a moment and then smiled. "Three? Okay. Number one: a good constitutional amendment. If it's not that high of a level, the supreme court will ruin it. Number two: high taxes on accumulated unproductive wealth. And number three: elevate to the crime of treason elected officials who are influenced by lobbyists and campaign donations, and restrict those to reasonable levels."

"What should the constitutional amendment say?"

He shook his head. "It's a hard thing to put into the right language. Especially without sounding like a lawyer. Or Thomas Jefferson. But it should mean that we the people are mad as hell that a few exceptionally rich people and companies are ruining our economy for everyone but themselves, and we therefore demand a separation of state and finance like the founders tried to separate church and state."

She stared at him for a few moments while the wind shook the tree and brought the sound of distant lowing cows. A blue jay perched on a low branch and seemed to contemplate Jackie through the glass. Jackie's thoughts drifted to where he would sleep that night. Could he go home? He didn't have enough cash on him if they needed to rent a cheap hotel overnight. His skin prickled at the thought of sharing room with Maura. He pushed it out of his mind.

He sat up and started the car. "We're going into town. I need some things."

"I still have questions," she said.

"Ask them." He turned the car around and looked both ways.

"Which way are we going?"

"Not the way we came. The other way. I'm thinking that goes to

Navasota.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Don’t get out much, do you?” He left his window down. The air felt good. She left hers down too.

“Why do you think you’re getting such a big reaction to a paper not even published yet? Is it just because of the hit list that makes it look like you’ve calculated a price on the head of each person on your list?”

He shook his head to emphasize the wrong. “It seems so absurd. It’s just a calculation derived from a widely used economic multiplier equation. Businesses and governments use it all the time. *Forbes* magazine gives a ranking of the wealthiest people once a year, and that doesn’t incite riots.”

“So you accept no responsibility for Alan Binder’s murder? Even when your name is attached as a motivating reason?”

“Do people usually answer loaded questions like that?”

She glared at him. “Yes. Usually.”

“Okay, let’s think about it. Something like killing an individual rich person and expecting to earn some kind of financial reward in return because of an economic multiplier effect is beyond anyone’s idea of good sense, much less moral conduct. It’s only good in aggregate, meaning big picture, meaning if we all collectively decide to do it. Not kill them, necessarily, but redistribute their ill-gotten gains.” He closed his eyes for a moment, before he realized he was driving. He sounded like a deranged Robin Hood. Steal from the rich, give to the poor. But what he talked about made good macroeconomic sense. It wasn’t a game, and it wasn’t stealing from the rich. It was simply applying rational economic reasoning to improve the rules of the economy.

“But it happened to you.”

“What?” he asked, squinting at her.

“I read that you got a scholarship from a rich man named Willoughby after he was murdered.”

He felt a stab in his chest. How did she find out? “You know that,” he said, his voice husky.

“The same night your mother died.”

He nodded and didn’t speak for a few moments. “How did you know all that?” He thought his voice sounded fairly normal, but she studied him as

if he'd transformed.

"There are records. News reports. I put them together. It's what I do."

He had to pick a part to play. To get around this. Be genuine. Stick as close to the truth as possible. "I've always been embarrassed and ashamed by what happened. The cook getting all the blame, and me getting a little reward. It just never seemed right."

"But you took it." She still held the voice-recording phone in her hand and she pushed it toward him.

"Sure, I took it. I wanted to learn. I wanted to study."

"You wanted to study Mr. Willoughby's wealth. The breakup of his billion dollars was your master's thesis and a major part of your PhD work."

He nodded, a little more easy now. He realized she only knew what was in published records. There was no record of the bad thing Jackie and his brother had done. She couldn't possibly know. "That's where I got the idea. I asked for access to the dispersal of his wealth after his death for ten years, and his executor granted it to me without strings. It surprised me, frankly."

"What kind of economic multiplier did he have?"

"Even with full access, we could only directly measure the first few ripples. We directly observed more than a doubling. Our best projections of total outcomes is beyond a factor of ten, maybe as high as fourteen."

"You say 'we' and 'our.' Are others involved in your work?" She smiled.

Why did she smile at that question? "No. Just me. I say that because, well, it sounds all so, too much, about me."

"So what does all this mean for families in the lower third?"

She zeroed back to her poverty beat. "Well, hard to say. The middle class is much more prone to trickle-down economics than the upper class—those people learn how to keep it and hoard it. The middle class just spends it, and that means poorer people will get more of it. Statistically speaking. And poor people spend all the new money they get because they so desperately need it."

"Nothing hard to give me?"

He had to blink to keep from taking the redneck bait on that one: *Oh, I'll give you something hard, baby.* No. He pushed those thoughts aside.

“My guess is about half of the working poor population would feel it just from, say, the top five being dissolved. But it certainly wouldn’t turn their lives around for the most part. At least not right away. But if we did the entire list, then everyone would feel it.”

She breathed deep, and looked at her phone. Tapped on the screen.

He sighed. Interview over. If it ever really was with her. “Let me get cash,” he said. “And we should have lunch. Do you think I should buy a wig?”

“Wig?”

“A disguise. So they won’t recognize me? Maybe I could swap this car at a used lot.”

“Doctor Key,” she said.

He looked at her. He felt as if he’d known her for a long time. “Call me Jackie.”

“Jackie, it’s only the dean and the campus police and a temporary news cycle. They’re not going to kidnap you or shoot you.”

“You don’t think so?”

Maura shook her head. Maybe she was right. He ran his fingers through his hair and felt sweat on his scalp. Paranoia grabbed hard. Even level-headed Ginger urged him to lie low for a while. He’d been focused on completing his research, testing the model, writing it up as clearly as he could, and getting it published. Having it cut off so close to completion spooked him. He imagined moneyed interests doing all they could to stop him, barring no expense. He felt people watching. Even Maura watched him. He had to be careful.

“I’m still going to get cash,” he said. “I’m broke. Have you seen an ATM?” If he could get back to his house, he kept his life’s savings in cash wrapped in foil and plastic, labeled *lamb*, in his freezer. He hated lamb.

She pulled out her phone and looked at it. “Where did you say we are?”

“Somewhere around Navasota.”

“You’re the one who doesn’t get out much. This says we’re coming into Huntsville.”

“Huntsville? I thought we looped back around to the south? That would put us....”

“When we get to I-35 into downtown, there are ATMs all over the place. And then it’s about an hour back on Texas 30. We’re coming up to

it.” She looked at him. “These things are pretty handy.” She held up her smartphone. He hated that term. From what he saw watching students, it made them more stupid than smart. Even though he had one, and, he had to admit, it came in handy quite often.

“There’s a bank,” she said.

He drove to a short line at the drive-up ATM and while they waited he glanced at his phone. “Holy crap,” he said. “Twenty-seven missed calls. I don’t get that in six months.”

“From who?”

“Six from Ginger. Rest are unknown.”

“Voicemail?”

“Nothing’s come up yet.”

“Any text messages?”

He stabbed at his phone. “Yep. Jeez, the dean himself summons me to his office. The press officer forbids me to talk to you. Even the captain of the campus police wants me to come in and turn in my credentials. And a bunch of others I don’t know. Listen to this one: ‘I will kill your mother, kill your sister, kill your brother, kill your wife, you piece of anti-American slime.’ Is that a death threat?” He released the brake to roll ahead in the ATM line.

“Sounds like it.”

“Should I turn it over to the FBI?”

“Definitely.”

“So then they can find me more easily.”

She looked in all directions. Even into the sky. “No military or police guys storming us. Why don’t you drive us back. Call Ginger on the way. We can eat lunch there.”

“Why do you want to get back so badly?”

She turned to him, one eye half-shut from the glare of the sun. “I want to make some calls and write up a few things.”

“Like what?”

“Like how they’re trying to censor your research and how you’re not really advocating assassinating rich people. And how you’re a pain-in-the-ass interview. But I’ll make it interesting.”

He winced. She just called him uninteresting. Boring. As square as a professor of economics. At the ATM, he slid in his card and waited...and

waited. He reached out and tapped the screen. “Just abort,” he said.

Maura looked up from her phone. “What?”

“It’s taking too long.”

Through the glass where the tellers served drive-through customers, he saw a woman pointing him out to a man.

“Screw this,” he said, and left.

“You didn’t get your card,” Maura said.

“They were pointing at me from inside the bank. Now think I should buy a wig?”

“What was the name of that bank?” Maura asked, making a note in her pad.

“I don’t know.” He drove along the two-lane blacktop back toward home, his panic rising. He needed to do something. “Ginger said to try a European journal,” he said. “A Swedish journal.” If he got his paper published, then it wouldn’t matter so much what happened to him.

“You were going to call her.”

He picked up his phone and dialed her number, wondering if this little ribbon of road warranted enough towers to keep it alive with cell-phone coverage. It did.

“Hello?” Ginger answered.

“Ginger, it’s me,” Jackie said.

“Where the hell are you?” she whispered. “I’ve been trying to call.”

“We kind of slipped out the back and then we drove to Navasota. Except it turned out to be Huntsville. And I didn’t hear my phone go off. Worse, they just took my debit card.”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, but it might have something to do with this: The state’s involved now. I’ve never seen anything so disgraceful. The dean should have his head examined. I don’t care if they can hear me. Is that reporter woman still there?”

“Maybe.” What did she mean by *if they can hear me*? He didn’t want to say anything.

“You still trust her?”

“I don’t know. I don’t trust anybody. You think they’re listening to you?”

“There’s a van parked across the street. So hell, yeah, I think the bloody worthless bastards are listening.” She raised her voice in challenge.

And then continued more quietly. “But only me. I think. Can she hear what I’m saying?”

“No. I’m driving.”

“Well, hell, put me on speakerphone so she can. I got a call from an assistant state attorney general.”

He pulled the phone away from his ear and handed it to Maura. “Can you put it on speaker? She wants to tell you, us, something.”

Maura pressed the screen. “Is that it?”

“Can you hear me?” Ginger asked.

“Yes. Hi, Doctor Morris.”

“Call me Ginger, dammit. The kind of shenanigans they’re pulling trump all academic titles and even ethics right now as far as I’m concerned. I’m thinking about retiring to a South Sea island. Did Jackie tell you I got a call from the attorney general?”

Maura cut her eyes to Jackie. “No, he didn’t.”

“Well, an assistant AG, state level. They’re filing an injunction against Jackie to keep him from publishing or speaking about his work inside or outside the country.”

“Can they do that?” Maura asked.

“I doubt it,” said Ginger. “Couldn’t possibly pass scrutiny by a higher court. But it seems a list Jackie made leaked. They’re calling it a hit list with a price on the heads of the rich and powerful. And you know what the rich and powerful do when you threaten them.”

“Everybody suffers,” said Jackie, seething about the theft of his bank card and reliving the anger he felt by the death of his mother at the hands of a rich bastard. He kept eying his rearview mirror. They could be anywhere.

“Exactly. And you’ve riled them up. Lord knows why a simple academic list is causing so much chaos, though the art they made at that journal doesn’t help one bit. The news reports say a rich man has been killed, assassinated, they say, and I looked: number twenty-four on your list, Jackie. Alan Binder. Remember him?”

“Yes,” said Jackie.

“I don’t know if it has anything to do with what’s going on, but it sure as hell doesn’t help.”

“This is all so stupid and crazy,” said Jackie. He expected trouble. But

the response was fast and extremely disproportionate.

“Only one reason I can think of,” said Ginger. “They must believe people are so fed up, your paper might spark a wildfire.”

“You think I should turn myself in?” He looked at Maura, who shook her head.

“Hell no. This thing is screwy and getting screwier. There’s no way you’d get a fair shake. So watch yourselves. Don’t come back on campus. And there’s probably a van parked in front of your house, too. Go to a hotel or something. Why don’t you just stay in Navasota?”

“Huntsville,” he corrected, thinking they were closer to home by now than Huntsville. If people were listening, he needed to mislead them. “Yeah, okay. That’s a good idea. We’re turning around. We’ll find a hotel in Navasota.” He paused. “I mean Huntsville. One or the other.”

Maura asked for the name of the assistant AG who called Ginger, and made notes from her answer.

“You need to disappear for a while,” said Ginger. “And stop using your cell phone, for crissakes. They can track those things. You need me to try to get you some cash or anything?”

“No,” said Jackie, not wanting her to dig herself in any deeper than she already had. “We’re good.”

“You’ve stirred up a hornet’s nest. Go off grid for a while. You know, like a spy. I won’t call again. Use a pay phone or somebody’s landline if you call me. Good luck!” She disconnected.

A spy. The word rolled around inside his head like a marble. His brother the spy. He went off grid the day after their mother died. After Mr. Willoughby. And he’d been off grid ever since. Probably permanently. Meaning dead. Or he would have heard something in twenty-five years. “I could use you now, Jimmy,” he muttered.

“Who’s Jimmy?” Maura asked.

“My brother.”

“Jameson,” she said. “I tried to track him down.”

“What did you find?”

“Not a trace.”

Jackie nodded. “That’s what I thought.”

“What happened to him?”

“I don’t know. He just disappeared.”

“Were you close?”

He remembered that night when, in fact, they were. But not for good reasons. “No,” he said. He remembered something Ginger said. “Hey, will you take the battery out of my cell phone?”

“Ah, the paranoia strikes deep.” Maura fumbled with his phone and pried the battery out with her fingernail. Her phone rang and she looked at it. “My editor. I should take it.” She put the phone to her ear. “Hi, Jason.”

Jackie couldn’t hear what Jason had to say, like the people in the van probably listened only to Ginger, but Maura looked at him in alarm. “What did he say?”

Jackie concentrated on driving. He couldn’t tell if Maura got the scoop on some office trivia, or if it was something about his situation. He tried to relax. Let the paranoia go. He felt excruciatingly hungry. Or was it worry? But why worry? He’d done his best. Compiled his data, analyzed it, built a model to explain and predict it, pleased the man who funded his chair at the university, sent it for adequate peer review, and it was all but published. If the rich and powerful wanted to squash the message, and the messenger (that included Maura now), then what could he do about it? He was as powerless as his drunken father and his cancer-riddled mother against Mr. Willoughby. For that, it took an unexpected assassin.

“Yes, I’m with him now,” said Maura. Her eyes looked like glistening-wet dark-chocolate M&Ms. But Jackie couldn’t let that distract him now. Shouldn’t, anyway. “We’re going back to the college town.”

He couldn’t help but wonder what Jason told her, or if anyone listened in. Meaning they could be driving into a trap. Things must be getting worse out there. He tensed and fought it by breathing deep and looking out over the Central Texas landscape along the highway, cows grazing, rusting farm implements surrounded by weeds, old plank houses and barns sagging into the earth. He sensed doom in all directions. But the center was peaceful. Like the eye of a hurricane he rode out once near Houston.

“Okay,” said Maura to Jason, glancing sideways at Jackie, “here’s what I have. They’re obviously wasting no time in trying to throw a wet blanket over Doctor Key’s work. I’ve read it and interviewed him, and it’s not at all what they’re saying. He compares the concentration of wealth by the top few hundred Americans to the monopolies of Standard Oil around the turn of the last century and Ma Bell after that, both busted under the

Sherman Antitrust Act. What year was that law enacted, Jackie?"

"The year my grandfather was born: 1890."

"The act was passed in 1890. Doctor Key analyzed what happens after the death of the ultra-rich, how their wealth is dispersed and broken up, and calculates that it has a surprisingly large economic multiplier effect, much like the breakups of Standard Oil and Ma Bell. He proposes constitutional-level controls on finance and banking, a restoration of some of Roosevelt's New Deal controls, limits on corporate political lobbying, that sort of thing."

She interpreted what he preached very well. "No, he's *not* in favor of killing anyone. It's not a hit list. That's just how the journal's art department slugged the file. He's just a regular economics professor doing his job. So far, everything seems like an overreaction to a compelling, but not scathing, academic paper. The reaction is more interesting than what they're reacting to."

Jackie drove, letting his mind wander, trying not to panic. She was right. The reaction flagged this as news more than anything he'd actually done or written.

Maura looked at him. "He's not going to believe that." She listened again for a moment. Turned her head away. "Are you sure? I think I could cover it a lot better from here." She listened. Shook her head. "I don't know, I'll make some calls and write up what I have. And then I'll decide and let you know." She disconnected and lowered the phone from her ear.

"Don't tell me," Jackie said. "There's a price on *my* head now."

"Almost. The US attorney general's office called my publisher, who called Jason. They said if we so much as interview you, they'll be compelled to press charges against us."

"For what?"

"That's the unbelievable part." She took a deep breath. "Conspiracy to solicit murder."

"What!"

"They say your list constitutes solicitation for Binder's murder."

"Shit," he said. He couldn't believe it.

"And it's getting worse."

"How can it get worse?"

"Number seventeen is missing."

“Number seventeen?” He looked at Maura. Ellis Saunders. From his list. “Just missing?”

She nodded. “Local police have been inundated with tips implicating you and your list.”

“How?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Public relations? To make me look bad?”

“Maybe.”

Stunned, Jackie drove in silence while Maura made calls to the US and state attorneys general offices, and he could tell she was stonewalled at every turn. She finally got someone more talkative as they entered the outskirts of College Station, and she listened and made notes.

Jackie thought about how the attorney general for the United States could become a tool in all this. Or maybe he truly believed Jackie’s work constituted a solicitation of murder. All because an academic list with a stupid headline was leaked by a journal’s art department and went viral. Which, if it meant what he thought it did, meant anyone in the electronic world could find it quickly and easily.

He looked at Maura when she got off the phone. “You saw my list before I gave you my paper yesterday, didn’t you?”

She gave him a new smile. A hint of smug in it? “Yes. It’s not hard to find. It just came across my Twitter feed. Anyone who wants it now has it.”

“So are you really writing a series on income inequality and how it drives poverty? Or are you just trying to find the juicy story behind the crazy professor’s viral hit list?”

“Both,” she said. “I didn’t lie to you.”

“And you really talked to Alan Binder’s murderer? I’m surprised they let your call go through.”

“He called me instead of an attorney, which was stupid.”

“Do they listen in to those calls?”

“They’re not supposed to. But yes, they probably do.”

“So that’s probably how they found out about his connection to my list.”

She nodded, her lips pressed together. “Maybe. He might’ve talked.”

“But you didn’t tell Jason. Why not?”

“That’s complicated.”

“I like complicated.”

“I’m not sure I want to work there anymore. I want to write a book. Maybe several books. So I was kind of holding that information. I thought maybe it wouldn’t get out.”

“I assume that would piss off Jason and his bosses.”

She nodded.

He drove, wondering where exactly to go. “But everything’s changed now. Everybody knows, or is about to know, that Alan Binder was assassinated because of me. And Ellis Saunders is missing. Yet, your paper is not running a story. So does that mean you’ve been pulled off? You leave now? Kowtow to the rich and powerful?”

“How do you know we’re not running a story?” she asked.

He glanced at her. “That answer convinces me, for one. But it’s common sense. What will the paper’s attorney advise? At least a slowdown, a risk-assessment phase. I’ve seen them work. There’s a method, almost a science behind it. The only logical conclusion is you’re not running a story about me or my work anytime soon.” If Maura went away, then the only one left on his side would be Ginger. He might get a few favors from his best graduate students. But other than that, he was on his own.

Maura didn’t say anything. He drove through light traffic to the mall and parked in the crowded lot to think and talk. “Where are we going?”

“Back to my hotel?”

He stared at her. Did she raise her eyebrows? What did that mean?

“You don’t think they’ll be watching?”

“I don’t know, but so what if they are? Let’s go to the hotel, park away from the front, and watch for a while. How’s that?”

Sounded reasonable. He drove and at her hotel, they sat far enough away to watch the entrance.

“You’re right,” she said after he cut off the engine. “They want me to go back. They booked a flight out for me tomorrow morning.”

Wow. Okay. He couldn’t go back to his office. Couldn’t go back on campus. He wondered if he could get back into his house. That’s what he wanted to do. Watch Maura get inside her hotel without trouble, and then he would drive to his house. Park a few blocks away. Walk toward it from the street behind. Climb into the back yard. Go inside and get his frozen

cash. He would be okay. He didn't need a reporter around all the time.

He tapped the steering wheel with both hands, and turned to look at her. She seemed sad. He smiled at that. "I've enjoyed, you know, meeting you. And doing whatever it is we're doing. I'm doing. You know what you're doing. I'm the one on the run."

She smiled and touched his face. He couldn't believe she did that. It felt like a flash of lightning followed by expectant silence. "I wish," she whispered.

"What?" he asked.

She took her hand away and blinked. "I don't normally do this."

"Do what?"

"You need a place to stay, right?"

He shrugged. "I don't know where I can go."

She shook her head as if she did something against her better judgment. Pulled out a business card and pen. Wrote on the back. "There are two men watching the front. From that car on the corner. See them?"

"Yep." He hadn't really noticed them, but he did now.

"So don't go in that way." She laid the card on the dashboard and tapped it, gave him a deep look, and then got out. She didn't look back as she walked to the entrance. Jackie watched her. She had a lovely curve to her. A voluptuousness that younger women didn't have, or didn't know how to carry.

He looked at the back of her card. S18? No, 518. Her room number. She invited him to her room.

His heart raced. He swallowed hard and drove away from the hotel, turned into a neighborhood and drove randomly, as much out of inability to think straight as intent to lose a tail. He got lost, but found himself again when he saw the high-rise of the hotel, and he parked on a neighborhood side street. Locked the car. Walked along a sidewalk between two houses to a parking lot at the back of the hotel, past the stench of dumpsters. A back door stood propped open. Jackie went inside without hesitation. He entered a service area that reeked of harsh cleaning chemicals. He saw a door and went through it. A dingy white hallway with flickering fluorescent lights ended in a door marked *Stairwell*.

He bounded up the stairs to the fifth floor. Found number five-eighteen, and knocked. His heart pounded. His head felt light. The chain rattled on

the door. He held his breath. The door opened and a man's face appeared.

"What?" asked the man.

"Is this five-eighteen?" asked Jackie.

The man opened the door a little wider and looked at the number on it: 518.

"Is, uh, Maura here?" He hoped to God she wasn't.

"You got the wrong room, buddy. Only me here, and I ain't Maura." He closed the door.

He stood in the hallway. Why would Maura do that to him? Was this some kind of cruel joke? Up in the corners of the hallway he noticed video cameras. Somewhere there would be a record. He held his head down until he stood beneath a camera. He looked for others that might cover the blind spot, but he didn't see any. What if those men outside were watching for Maura? Of course, they were. And they saw her walk right past. If they paid off the front clerk—or just followed her—they would know her room number. Is that why she gave him the wrong number? Because she thought they would follow him?

In his pocket, he found the card and held it up. Five-eighteen. That's what she wrote. Then it hit him. He turned it. The two loops on her eight were so similar in size, it could go either way. And the five looked more like a backward S. He hurried to the stairwell and jogged up to the eighth floor. Found 815 and tapped on the door, ready to be heartbroken. Or ambushed. The door cracked open and he saw Maura's M&M eyes.

"Took you long enough," she said, pulling him inside.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JEFF POSEY WRITES historical, contemporary, and near-future novels inspired and informed by his research and interest in cultures that collapse, particularly the Anasazi of a thousand years ago in southwestern Colorado and northwestern New Mexico.



“Cultures that have dramatically collapsed,” he says, “should at least compel us to dream up stories about how such things can happen again.”

He does not believe rich people should be assassinated or harmed in any physical way. But he does believe something as dramatic as a constitutional amendment is necessary to restore the “free” part to “free enterprise.” Excessively rich individuals and multinational corporations are destroying the American dream. Greed at a microeconomic level is essential. But when it usurps fairness at a macroeconomic level, the whole system becomes out of balance and we all (the ninety-nine-point-nine percent) suffer mightily for allowing it to happen. Good government must be part of the solution.

FIND OUT MORE at <http://jeffposey.net/>.

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I THANK AUTHOR Jason A. Myers for allowing me to tailgate on his novel, *mayhem inc.*, and use a few of his characters (specifically Jasper Karsten and Archer Quinn). His novel occurs earlier in time than *Price on Their Heads*, so read his first if you want them in order.

I also want to give my deepest thanks to my “red pen brigade” of early readers. They helped me realize the need to turn the story more toward drama of the characters and less toward macroeconomics: Jason A. Myers, Michelle O’Neal, Mike Coucke, Connor Posey, and Danielle Posey.

These are the two books I relied on most for this story, which I highly recommend to anyone interested in understanding how the economy and American politics affect their own pocketbooks:

The Price of Inequality: How Today’s Divided Society Endangers Our Future by Joseph E. Stiglitz

The Great Divergence: America’s Growing Inequality Crisis and What We Can Do about It by Timothy Noah

I also consumed countless articles online, and I therefore thank the generous spirit and nature of knowledge that exists on the Internet. For a novelist, the Internet is a perpetual gold mine, especially such things as Google Maps and Wikipedia.

I want to thank the people and town of Pagosa Springs, Colorado, which features in most of my work. In my younger years, I solo backpacked nearly every trail in the nearby wilderness, and my wife and I own a small property there we hope to one day occupy. It’s a setting that compels daydreams.

The particular house described in this story, between Pagosa Springs and Wolf Creek Pass, does not exist. There is a hillside meadow on the spot where hay is cut and horses graze, but no house or driveway.

TITLES BY JEFF POSEY

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EXCERPT FROM

1.

But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult!

—Kate Chopin

HE HATED KILLING people right before Christmas.

It wasn't because he loved the holidays or anything as rudimentary as that. He put up his Christmas tree and hung lights just like everyone else (to the chagrin of his mother, who frowned upon his immersion into what she deemed the "Hedonistic ways of the West"). People needed the holidays. They craved a reason to be nice to others.

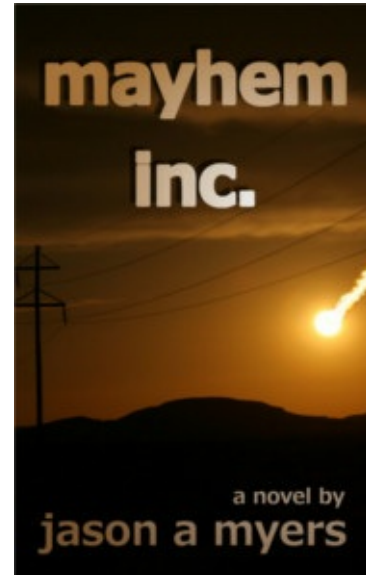
The woman's shadow fell across the ajar pantry door. She hummed "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree." His favorite holiday song.

Maybe it was some intrinsic desire to give unto others during this time of year. Taking things did not follow the spirit of the season. He wasn't a thief, but by killing her he took something from her family. They would always remember Christmas as a time of pain, not of joy.

He heard the oven open and close. The smell of baking cookies clawed his nostrils like guilt.

Society viewed Christmas, or Hanukah, or Kwanza, or whatever reason people celebrated this time of year, as a reason for fellowship (although he believed most were in love with the *idea* of the holidays more than the vexing reality). People volunteered their time, they gave money to foundations, and bought toys for children in need.

He tensed in preparation as he heard the woman near the pantry door. She passed by, still humming. He loosened his grip on the massive knife. The handle had been crafted to perfectly fit his grasp. His boss insisted on



it.

His belief in the holidays was ethereal, and yet substantive at the same time. In his mind's eye, he viewed a cottage on a dark night, white snow on the ground. Friendly yellow light glowing from the windows of the cottage. Smoke plumed from the chimney giving a sense that inside it was warm and comfortable. Commercialization did not tarnish this visual. There were no greeting card moments, no mushy music. Just quiet. Just peace.

He heard the sound of a drawer sliding open and then metallic shuffling as the woman searched for something.

The drawer closed.

Now.

Her family was due to arrive in a few hours to celebrate. What they would find would be, without question, horrible. That was no way to celebrate Christmas. They were having a turkey dinner with rolls and green bean casserole. He had inspected her shopping list before she left for the market.

The warmth from the kitchen greeted him as he opened the pantry door. The woman's back was to him as he crept behind her. She still hummed the song merrily as she lifted the cookies from the cookie sheet and placed them on the green Christmas plate. She looked the grandmotherly part, wide waist, heavy breasts. A crimson bow pulled up her graying hair. Her bright red Christmas sweater rode a little too snug.

He stepped closer, taking in her scent. She smelled clean, like soap. He felt himself becoming aroused. That always happened when he killed someone.

He lifted the blade against her neck while simultaneously striking out his other hand, holding her to him. Her humming lurched to a stop in her throat. His hand squished into her massive breast, as he held her tight. He couldn't have her jerk against the blade and die before he told her his name.

Her hair and ribbon met his chin. He took another whiff. Clean.

"My name is Ghovinder Pradham and today is the day you die."

With a resigned sigh, he tugged the razor-sharp blade across her throat, launching blood over the freshly baked Christmas cookies.

Out of chaos God made a world, and out of high passions comes a people.

—Lord Byron

THE WIND CHARGED over the top of the ice, slapping him across the face. Archer Quinn pulled the balaclava tighter around his goggles. He had been through worse.

He wiped the accumulated snow from his lenses then tugged the throttle on the snowmobile. He hadn't been late once in five years, and he wouldn't be today—blizzard be damned. He felt like Saint Nick, sans the reindeer, as he jetted across the tundra. Unlike Santa, however, he had only one package and no idea if the person was naughty or nice. His first guess was naughty. No one up to any good secluded themselves in a place like this.

The snowmobile careened down the side of a particularly steep slope and he leaned back to keep from flying over the handlebars.

He had never experienced the winter in northern Alaska. In the twenty-four hours he had been here, the sun had only caused the clouds to glow for a short spell. He wondered how the locals handled the days and days of nights.

The increasing isolation begged for a gun, but some well-intentioned TSA employee had confiscated his. He had left it in the required hard shell covering, but somehow, during transport, the lock was damaged and opened, and the gun, shell, and everything else was put to the side and he would have to jump through hoops to get it back.

He never travelled without his weapon and felt ill-prepared not having it.

He attempted to find a gun in town, but the three places he had tried were closed because of the impending weather.

When he informed the locals he wasn't armed and planned on going out into the wild, they gave him looks as if he were crazy. Maybe he was. He heard polar bears were quite active in this area, and not having a gun could be a death sentence. Regardless, he had never been late on a delivery.

With the storm approaching, Archer had bribed a man in Fairbanks to fly him into the Wiley Post-Will Rogers Memorial Airport. He then bought an old Chevy 4x4 to get him to Atqasuk. The man he'd gotten the truck

from wouldn't sell him a gun either. If anywhere in the world he could get a weapon, he would have thought it would have been Alaska. He glanced at the GPS on his wrist. He was now about ten miles east of Atkasuk, so he should be close to his destination. The emptiness out here toyed with his emotions. A sense of foreboding overwhelmed him.

His GPS was pinpoint accurate, but in this snow, he could just as easily fall off a cliff as find his destination.

Archer spotted a vague form ahead to his left.

It was a small clay-colored building with a black roof, tucked against a hill of snow. Darkness waited in the lone window, adding to the inhospitable look of the structure. It looked like a house, but could just as easily be a bunker. Archer sighed. Crazy people lived in bunkers.

A large antenna on the house poked into the darkened sky.

Six biscuits crow hydrant! Archer squashed the unbidden thought. He didn't have time for that now. He slowly counted from one to ten as his doctor had instructed.

As he pulled his snowmobile to a stop, a makeshift streetlight attached to a wooden post tinked a few times and then buzzed on, illuminating the area, dimming the skies even more. Archer cut the engine and prayed it would start again.

He opened the storage compartment on the side of the snowmobile and pulled out the black rucksack, slinging it over his shoulder. The wind slammed the compartment shut, almost catching his fingers. He paused for a moment and slid the strap to the exact length between his shoulder and neck, using his thumb as a guide. Snow swirled about him in a violent dance.

He faced the building and wondered if anyone had heard him pull up. The irascible wind howled at him, letting him know he was a stranger here—unwanted. Something about this delivery caused his hackles to rise. He knew better than most to trust that basic instinct. It had saved his life many times in a multitude of situations. Writers and artists talked about their “muse.” His muse was a cautious voice telling him to watch his ass.

The door was cold metal, weathered and rusted. He banged on it three times. He checked his GPS and then his watch. He had five minutes to spare and this was the place.

He heard the release of a thick latch inside and then the door creaked

outward like a submarine hatch. Dingy jaundiced light emerged, marring the ground as if it could melt the snow.

The shadow of a man stood in the doorway.

He was burly and fat, as if he had once been in shape but had eaten his way to obesity. His bulbous veined nose sat over a wiry black mustache and beard. He wore a threadbare trooper hat with flops covering his ears. His eyes were like black bullets. Archer didn't sense insanity in that stare, but there was something not right about him all the same.

"What are you doing here?" the man asked.

"I have a delivery," Archer said, patting his rucksack, "for Mister Cooper."

The man pondered that for a moment. "A delivery, huh?"

"You're Mister Cooper?"

The man stared at Archer for a moment. "Come in."

Archer stepped into what appeared to be the man's living room. Two mismatched couches were together in a makeshift pit. An old rusty TV tray sat in the middle like a poor man's coffee table. Some high-tech electronic equipment hunkered in the opposite corner, with a computer monitor as the centerpiece. A disgusting keyboard and mouse covered in grime waited before it. The screensaver was on. Crimson words: HACKERS DO IT IN THE BACK DOOR! ambled across the indigo background.

Real nice guy, Archer thought. Crude, but expected.

The man closed the door and flipped the huge latch closed. The metal whined as the latch fell home. The man pushed Archer aside as he moved around him. An unmistakable odor of piss, sour milk, and cigarettes assailed Archer's nostrils. He'd probably smoke inside if he lived up here too. Mr. Cooper obviously hadn't washed in a few days. Why should he? It wasn't like he had dinner parties here or even friends over to watch a football game.

Archer removed his goggles, feeling the tepid air of the room on his cheeks. He pulled his balaclava away from his face and let it slide down the back of his neck.

The room had the tangible feeling of something interrupted.

"You some kind of surfer?" Cooper asked.

"What?"

"You look like a surfer."

“I don’t surf.”

The man reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, shook one out, and lit it with a Zippo. The sweet smell of smoke wafted toward Archer. Cooper didn’t offer one to Archer, for which he was thankful. He had quit smoking two years before, but the allure never completely abated.

The man eyed Archer. “So what do you have for me?” His voice was tired, unused.

Archer unbuckled the flap on the rucksack and retrieved the package: a cardboard box about the size of a hardcover edition of *War and Peace*.

He handed it to the man and stepped back. The man turned away and started opening the package. Archer wanted nothing to do with the contents of the box. It wasn’t part of the agreement. He was a courier—and that was it. Too often people wanted him to wait around while they opened their package.

Archer checked his watch and started pulling his balaclava back up. Time to go before that feeling in the pit of his stomach grew hair and teeth, blood and bone.

The man made a strange sound and coughed. Archer ignored him.

Just as he started pulling his goggles on, the man spun toward him with white sheets of paper clutched in his hand. The paper looked exquisitely clean compared to the grubby bastard who held it.

The man mumbled as he read the documents. His eyebrows furrowed. A tendril of smoke rose next to his face.

Archer stretched the band on his goggles, ready to go. The goggles fogged up. He pulled them off and wiped them, moving toward the door.

“Excuse me,” Cooper said.

Archer didn’t want to turn around, but he did.

Cooper aimed a gun at him.

3.

What we imagine is order is merely the prevailing form of chaos.

—Kerry Thornley

BOBBY CORBETT SAT in Hoots, a bar in Cleburne, Texas. It was a dive, but

most folks kept their attitudes in check. He'd only seen a few fights, and those usually occurred on "Live Band" Friday after payday, when the locals were feeling a little saucy. Oddly enough, when the jukebox played, the locals were relatively docile. He aimed to fix that this afternoon.

Being just under six-foot tall and weighing around one-eighty, Bobby wasn't in great shape, but neither was he fat. The physicality of his job fought a constant war with his daily dose of Tex-Mex and the beer he drank almost every night. He reached under his dingy blue ball cap and scratched his thinning hair. It was warm in Hoots this afternoon. He should have left his flannel shirt in the truck.

Bobby had just finished his tour of duty for the day, cutting out a little early to have a drink. He worked for the State of Texas on a subcontract for the United States Geological Survey team, performing field studies concerning water, energy, mineral, and land resources. He worked up reports for his boss who passed it up the line until they got to someone who cared. He had been stationed around Cleburne for the past four years and gotten to know the locals a bit. At least the ones who frequented the same bars he did.

The waitress, Angel, came by his table and asked if he wanted another beer. He raised his glass in assent. Angel was a little thin for his tastes. She had the dull look of a person who knew this was it for her life. The childhood fantasies about being a doctor, or lawyer, or the first woman president, were dead. She was probably correct, but today she would be very useful to him.

Bobby knew for a fact she was sleeping with Earl, a local plumber of some renown. Earl had even fixed Bobby's plumbing in his trailer (paid for by the State of Texas, thank you very much). There were only two problems with Angel and Earl's tryst. Their names were Gladys and Andy. Gladys was Earl's wife, and Andy, Angel's boyfriend. Bobby's plans didn't include Gladys. They might later, but for now, all he had was Andy.

Andy would do.

Earl walked into Hoots about thirty minutes later. Bobby knew Earl would feel a little handsy tonight because Andy worked the evening shift at the Gas N Sip on the other side of town. Most folks had some idea Earl and Angel were getting it on, and Earl was none too bashful about it. Earl was a callous bastard, ill-refined and damn proud of it.

Earl took a spot at the bar and ordered a drink from the bartender. He lit a smoke, flicking his lighter closed with a pop, and turned to look for Angel. Bobby recognized that hungry look in Earl's eye. He had seen it plenty of times before. When a man dipped his biscuit in another man's gravy, he had that glint in his eye. To Bobby, it was a haughty, lustful thing—a look of power. He knew it should really be a shameful, hidden look. Earl was in no position of power. He had given that up to his loins.

Angel moseyed up to Earl with a smile, all friendly like and just being a waitress.

Bobby shook his head. Their circumspection was terrible at best. Bobby had picked an out-of-the-way table so he could watch the mayhem without being a part of it. He liked his chaos and mayhem, but not up close. He checked his watch. Andy should be arriving any—

Andy charged into Hoots, looking for blood.

Bobby's face fell to passive innocence. Inside he felt that growing sense of excitement and sickness he always did when a plan came together. If a man could giggle silently, Bobby was giggling himself into a fit. His stomach churned.

Earl and Angel were nearly making out on the barstool. Andy's gaze landed on them. Bobby's foot started to bounce in a fast rhythm. He had to put his beer down for fear of spilling it. Bobby kept his passions under wraps. At least that's what he told himself.

Earl had the thick fingers and arms of a plumber, and the girth to go with it. Andy was reed-like and full of a thin man's wiry strength.

Andy jerked Angel back by her shoulder. "What in the hell do you think you're doing?"

The rest of the bar grew quiet. Patrons backed into dark corners. The jukebox played some country song about riding in a truck. Earl's face had the flush of interruption—like someone who had his hand in the cookie jar. It only lasted for a second, however. The red of anger quickly replaced it.

Bobby chewed the side of his mouth. That was *exactly* what he wanted from Earl. The man was as simple as he was predictable.

Earl threw the first punch, obviously thinking to end it then and there. Andy was too fast and ducked. The fight was on.

They stumbled about the bar, falling over other patrons. A few of them were bikers who only came in on Wednesdays—the precise reason Bobby

had planted the information in Andy's car today. Bikers don't like getting pushed around.

Soon enough, the entire bar participated in the brawl. Bobby had to pull his beer back when the fights got too close. The only other person not fighting was a businessman in a charcoal gray suit. He sat in a booth, firmly protected from the ensuing mayhem.

Bobby watched for a few minutes more, but decided some discretion was in order. That and he needed to leave before the cops arrived. Never be around when the cops arrive. They see you too often at scenes like this, and they start asking uncomfortable questions.

Bobby moved about the edge of the room and got to the exit. The sick feeling in the pit of his stomach always bugged him. Was it his conscience trying to tell him something? Was it just the excitement? Maybe it was just the Mexican food he ate every day. He always had to drop some antacid after a gig. Someday he'd figure out why.

Refreshingly chilly air greeted him as he exited the bar. A cold front had come in with the oncoming darkness and had blown away the afternoon heat. It was an oddly warm December in Texas.

He stepped off the wooden porch and crunched onto the gravel parking lot. He looked back toward Hoots. With the door shut, the bar looked normal. He nodded and turned toward his truck. He needed to get to those Tums and quick. Hot acid filled his stomach.

A gray-haired old man leaned against the front of Bobby's truck.

"Can I help you, friend?" Bobby asked.

"Mr. Corbett," the man nodded in greeting.

Bobby folded his arms and stood still. His stomach burned coldly. "And you are?"

"I am Thaddeus Sinclair," the man said, tossing Bobby a roll of Tums, "and I have a proposition for you."

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EXCERPT FROM

1

HE DIDN'T MEAN to kill his wife. It didn't even feel like he killed her. Certainly didn't feel like murder. But it looked like murder. So he ran.

He'd done it before. Not murder, but running. Long ago when he'd been his original self he ran away and changed identity. It worked. For twenty years it insulated him from a horrible past, made him wealthy even. Brought him a rich wife. Who cheated on him, pregnant by another man, his next-door neighbor. And now this.

His eyes wheeled around the room. Morning coffee steamed in their cups. The newspaper spread open. Her body on the floor, the heavy bookend in her hand. His bloody handprint on her back, both his hands dripping. So much blood so fast. He wanted to help her, but nothing he could do. Nothing anybody could do. The corner of the coffee table had killed her. All he wanted was for her to stop, and then she fell and he fell with her, the bookend finishing what the coffee table started. He stared at her. It could be him lying there. Why? He knew she didn't love him. But why this?

Be calm and think, he told himself. He slipped out of his shoes and left them, blood spatter radiating around him, and backed away on socks. In the bathroom, he washed her blood from his hands, took a quick scalding shower. Packed a small bag with clothes and toiletries and a hair clipper for later. He kept basic identification only. A nearly clean man.

He cut through the wild greenbelt that ran behind the mini-estates of his neighborhood, remnant cow pasture grown up in maturing scrub with strands of rusty barbed wire rising weakly from the soil in places. The walk braced him and slowed his racing thoughts. He planned his escape. He couldn't be caught. Wouldn't be. He would rather die. But there were



holes. Where would he go? Who would he become this time? Could he forget what it felt like to fall onto his wife as she died, her last breath escaping her lips, the final beat of her heart, the last twitch in her muscles? She hated him so badly she wanted to do to him what he accidentally did to her. Did she so prefer the other man? Had he become that unbearable?

At a convenience store that had been an old tumble-down country bait shop when they bought the house, he called a cab.

Twenty minutes later, after a cup of burnt coffee and a honey bun, he directed the cab driver to his bank.

“You ain’t robbin’ it are you?” asked the grizzled-hippie driver.

“No. I leave the robbing of people’s bank accounts to banks.”

The driver laughed and launched into a steady criticism of Wall Street bankers and Washington politicians.

He ignored the driver. JAB, he thought like a flashbulb. JAB like his initials used to be. *Punch, stomp, JAB—that’s me!* It became a mental mantra that kept him sane during the bad times. *Punch, stomp, JAB, run away—that’s me.* He smirked. The run is the rebirth. Should be the fun part. He sighed. He’d chosen to be reborn last time, but this time...this time he had no choice. He didn’t mean to kill her. He didn’t want to kill her. He just wanted her to stop. Then she fell. Just after he defended himself from the clubbing bookend in her hand, and he fell with her, on top of her, the blood soaking his hands. He pushed himself up and off of her. That bloody handprint. On the back of her white nightshirt.

It looked bad. He imagined a forensics team detailing the scene. They would see everything. But would they understand what happened? Would they realize what the bookend meant? Did he?

He glanced at the dashboard clock. Nearly nine o’clock. He’d be at the bank just as it opened.

What if they knew already? What if they stopped him? No. No, they hadn’t found her yet. Her boyfriend, Reeves, would find her, that neighbor of his, the sycophantic minion of Pam’s father. What time did he come to her? In the mornings? Afternoons? All day? Would he call the police? Yeah. Yeah, of course he would. Would they suspect the boyfriend? No. No, they wouldn’t. Not with the evidence he left. His shoes right there.

But what if...what if Reeves planned it with her? But why? Pam had family money. She could have divorced him. Why try to cave his head in?

The cab stopped and he asked the driver to wait. Inside the bank he was the first customer. He took most of every liquid account he could access and asked for it in cashier's checks of one thousand dollars each made "to bearer." The teller examined him closely against his picture identification. Her eyes showed suspicion. She would remember him.

"Surprise for my wife," he said with a shrug. "We're running away to the South Pacific for six months." He attempted a smile. It's a happy thing, he told himself. Be happy.

The woman nodded without a mirroring smile, consulted her manager who made a phone call, and then she finally began preparing seventy-two cashier's checks.

"Thank you, Mr. Oley," she said, handing him the checks.

"Yes, yes," he said, taking them. Oley. Tom Oley. That's who he had been since he turned eighteen. When he escaped JAB. As Tom Oley he'd done well. College. Business. Trophy house. Trophy wife. His company just started drilling the most expensive, deepest exploratory well in Texas history, the culmination of his life's professional work. All gone because his stupid wife tried to bounce a bookend off his head. After nearly twenty years of being Tom Oley, he walked away with \$72,000 in seed money for a new life. The shock of change hadn't yet fully hit him.

"You richer or poorer after that?" asked the cab driver.

"Some of both," the former Tom Oley said.

He directed the driver to a different bank in downtown Dallas where he kept a safety deposit box secured with a password, no key. From it, he took everything left from his original life: birth certificate, a few photos, a folder stuffed with legal documents.

He hailed a different taxi to a bustling truck stop on Interstate 20, paid the driver, tipped him a twenty.

Inside, he went into the men's locker room, full of steam from showering truckers, and shed himself of the last vestiges of Tom Oley. In a stall, he used the clippers to cut his hair as close to the scalp as he could, saving the clippings in a plastic bag, along with his identification cut into tiny bits with a nail snip. They wouldn't know he'd cut his hair and they would never find the hair clippings or his ID remnants, pitched out along whatever route he was about to take. He counted his cash: \$373. That would get him there, wherever there turned out to be. He opened his birth

certificate. The paper seemed faded and brittle, but it opened without cracking. Jedediah Aberdene Baxter. JAB. *That's me.*

Born in Pagosa Springs, Colorado, in the old family house on Hermosa Street. He'd never known his mother. And his father only those two last miserable years in that house. But he remembered his grandfather. Also JAB. All the way back to his great-great-grandfather. A line of JABs with the same ludicrous first and middle names. What did that make him? The fifth? His mind drifted back to the house. Before his grandfather died and his father arrived. Before things became unbearable.

He remembered a room. With unfinished walls. Must have been the attic. And a leather book with JAB burned black into the cover. His grandfather, smiling to him, showing him where it stayed hidden behind a board that looked like every other board. As a child he searched for it but never found it. His grandfather said it contained a family secret, a treasure he called it, but the clues made no sense and he couldn't figure it out. No one in the family had been able to figure it out.

Maybe it's time to go back, he thought. Put his old skin back on. Look for that leather journal. Figure out the riddle. Maybe it would tell him who he really was. Maybe it would save him and hide him until the death of Tom Oley's wife blew over. But before he could disappear into his own abandoned past, he had to clear the seventy-two grand.

He bought shaving cream and disposable blades at the truck stop store and lathered his face and head in front of a mirror. He wanted to be cleanly shaven. It amazed him how unlike himself it made him look. His scalp pale against his tanned face. Like a chemotherapy patient.

A burly fellow with a towel around his waist joined him to shave.

"Missed your eyebrows," the man said.

Baxter grinned. "I leave that kind of detailed work to the girlie men."

The man scowled. "You're not one of those, are you?"

"I don't think they let heteros into the club. Unless they hold you down."

"They better not try that with me."

"Where you headed?"

"Cincinnati. Straight shot, not stopping."

"Conversation keep you awake or put you to sleep?"

In the mirror, the burly man looked him in the eyes. "What're you

running from?”

“My wife.”

The driver laughed. Dragged his razor over the rough stubble on his cheeks. “I’m not supposed to. But yeah, if you want to go to Cincinnati and you’ll help keep me awake.” He extended a moist hand. “Packer,” he said.

“Fitzsimmons,” said Baxter, shaking the hand. “Fitz to most.” He smiled at his joke. He liked making those who pursued him have fits.

PACKER DID MOST of the talking, and they parted like old friends. In Cincinnati Baxter took a series of taxicabs to twenty banks and cashed twenty checks. It took him all day. He bought a red-eye bus ticket to Atlanta, where he cashed thirty-three checks the next day. Another overnight bus to New York, where he converted the rest and bought a nice, well-fitting money belt. More vest than belt, it literally surrounded him with cash. He took another low-rent overnight bus to Detroit. There he saw the fragment of a TV news item: “Millionaire’s Daughter Murdered.” A picture of Pam and her father, Trevor Williams, followed by a picture of Baxter with the caption: “Wanted.” It almost unnerved him. He walked twice around the block, then zigzagged through town until he stopped at a diner, exhausted. Amazingly, he met a man willing to give him a ride to St. Louis.

From there he spent four slow days hitchhiking back to Dallas wondering how close the police were to his tail. But he figured hitchhiking made him far less visible than buying tickets for any kind of public transportation, or renting a car. And nobody would suspect he would go back to Dallas. He hoped. Once there, he needed wheels, so he got mildly drunk in a bar and bought an old pickup truck from a Mexican laborer. The man handed Baxter the signed title, the buyer information empty. Baxter gave him \$700 cash. Made the man so happy, Baxter thought he would pass out. He drove the truck straight to a mechanic he knew by reputation on the south side of the river. Bad part of town.

“What do you want?” the mechanic asked, avoiding eye contact, wiping his hands with a greasy rag.

“I want it to look just like it does now. But I want all the mechanical parts to be in top shape.”

The mechanic nodded. “So you want it to look like crap on the outside but not be crap on the inside.”

“Exactly,” Baxter said.

“How much money you got?”

Baxter didn’t know how much to spend. Didn’t care. He just wanted transportation that wouldn’t attract attention and wouldn’t break down. “Two grand?” he asked.

The mechanic shrugged. He examined the truck for ten minutes then shook his head. “Four or five grand. It needs a lot.” He cited a long list.

Baxter nodded without listening. He felt awful. Strung out from the road, from drinking at the bar, from replaying over and over in his mind what happened with his wife. Constantly worried about the cops. He refused to be caught. Baxter interrupted the mechanic. “Just do it,” he said, giving him a thousand as down payment. He just wanted to drive away. Back to JAB. Back to Pagosa Springs.

As the mechanic did his magic, Baxter crashed in a nearby no-tell motel. He bought newspapers and watched local television news, but he didn’t see anything. No mention of Pam’s death. Or any manhunt for Tom Oley. Had they stopped looking for him? Or was it so routine it didn’t warrant making the news? It didn’t matter. He left evidence all over what appeared to be a murder scene. No way they would let him go without a chase. He had no choice. He had to evaporate.

Three nerve-wracking days later and another four thousand dollars poorer, he drove his mechanically sound but still ugly blue GM pickup truck across the staked plains of Texas and the northeast corner of New Mexico into Pagosa Springs, Colorado. Beyond exhausted, his mind as sour as his mouth and armpits, he turned left just across the river and coasted down Hermosa Street. To the big house on a triple lot, the river sluicing through the back yard. The old Baxter house, a historical marker out front that said so. He remembered it with a sudden shiver. The memory of his grandfather still filled it. And an old woman. His grandmother? That didn’t seem right. Great-aunt, maybe. They weren’t mean to him, though she was a stern, unhappy woman and he never felt good enough around her. But the old man laughed a lot. Let Baxter play in the river. Caught trout big enough to feed them all. Said that’s how you measure a rich man—the fish you can catch from your own back yard.

But the old man died. He remembered the funeral. The graveyard not far from town. And the old woman, she couldn't deal with Baxter as a boy and made him stay in his room. Then his father came back. Without his mother, who he never knew. His father yelled a lot. Drank a lot. Locked Baxter in the basement a lot. Visited Baxter with his leather belt doubled in his hand a lot. Baxter did everything he could think of to get out of that basement and away from his father, from Pagosa Springs, from his life. Spent hours gouging a hole through concrete. Wore the nails off his fingers. Made mud of the dust with his blood. He hated being trapped. That's why he wouldn't stay and face the police after his wife's death. He would never be trapped like that again. He thought he would die alone in that basement. After the authorities showed up, he spent the rest of his life as a Baxter in foster homes, never good ones, just run-down people living in run-down houses who needed the foster money.

The only thing that saved him were daydreams of becoming someone else. Graveyards and obituaries fascinated him. He would read them and imagine he became the people who had died, only he would keep living for them. Take their lives and leave his miserable life behind. Bury Baxter and everything about it in a deep, dark basement and never let it out again.

He began planning a way out during his freshman year in high school. Studied everything having to do with legal identity and how to change it. Found the name of a boy born on his birthday who died young in a dwindling family line of rich Texas merchants and the day after he graduated from high school he took the boy's name, Tom Oley, and with it a scholarship to any Texas university. He never looked back. Almost never. Sometimes he would think about the journal and want to go back for it. Before someone else found it. But his father lived in the house for a decade after he disappeared into the ghost of Tom Oley. He started doing well in business and met Pam's father who pressured them into marriage. He became trapped in a more subtle way. And never went back to look for the journal.

Now he sat idling outside the big abandoned house, looming brown and weather-stained behind tall blue spruce trees, a weather-beaten for-sale sign leaning in the front yard. He'd looked it up a year ago, thought about buying the place, but the owners were shockingly proud of it: \$3.5 million. Laughable. That's why it stood derelict. It made him grin, though. His

father had sold it for a mere \$72,000 before he died, the same amount of cash Baxter had to reenter his old identity.

At the moment, he couldn't do anything. Too early. People walked the street. And he was beat. After a few hours' sleep, he would come back. Take a look inside. See if he could find that secret place behind the boards in the attic. Maybe his grandfather had left the JAB journal there. Maybe he could piece something together from it and find the original JAB's secret, his family treasure. Visit the history museum. Maybe the graveyard. Anything, he thought, to reconstruct himself. His original self. To find something real he could hold onto. Everything about Tom Oley had been a lie. He had built for himself a different kind of basement. It was time to claw his way out again.

He took a room at the old San Juan Motel east of the river and tried to sleep, but his grainy eyes kept opening and staring at the ceiling. After midnight he took a flashlight and a few tools—hammer, big flat-head screwdriver, his knife—and walked to Hermosa Street. It seemed quiet. So he ducked to the back of the old house and leaned his shoulder into the back door, bile creeping up his throat from his stomach. The roots of the place haunted him, a feeling of dread emanated from the basement.

Breaking in was easy. Too easy. Others had obviously been first. He shined the flashlight around, taking care not to cross windows in case a stray set of eyeballs became suspicious and reported him. He crept through every room except the basement. He would not go down there. Imagined filling it with dirt and rocks, or concrete. Or burning the house, embers and ashes caving into the hole. He hated that basement.

His grandfather's room still had the faint smell of cigars, and he flashed a memory of his grandfather smoking on the back porch, grinning over a platter with a single gutted trout on it. He made his way to the attic, which baffled him. He didn't remember it well. The slanting walls, the wooden slates. It had been cleaned out. Nothing but decaying, empty cardboard boxes. He tried various places that looked vaguely as he remembered where his grandfather slid away a board and hid the journal. But nothing.

After a while, he calmed himself and sat in the darkness, dim moonlight spilling in through dirt-filmed windows and he remembered. His grandfather reaching into a black opening, a window to his left. There

were three windows. Baxter tried the first two. Nothing. Then on the third, the wood sounded different when he rapped his knuckles against it. He tapped it with his hammer. Found a crack and put in his flathead screwdriver, then hammered it like a chisel. A board fell away with a clatter that made his heart leap into his acid-burned throat. Behind the board he saw a small opening. He shined the light and craned his head, and there at the bottom it sat. He reached in and pulled it out. JAB burned black on the cracked leather. The pages as brittle as his birth certificate, but intact. Behind the front cover, he found a hand-scrawled note. "Glad you found it, Jabber." That's what his grandfather called him. He'd forgotten. Jabber. *That's me.*

For the first time in decades, he smiled as a Baxter.

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