

DEEP STATE SLUMMING

Part 1

It was a 5 A. M. wake up, same as always. The fight was loosely scheduled for sometime before noon. Don't ask me how it all started, I don't really know. I'll admit I called Luis, and all his Dominican brethren, puddle monkeys, but I certainly didn't say it to his face. There are some things you don't mention to heavyweight boxers that measure 6'3 and weigh in at two hundred and fifty pounds. But it got back to him nonetheless and when he confronted me about it I couldn't deny it, he repeated my words verbatim.

It should've have been settled with our fists then and there. The guards were close by and it might've been broken up before too much damage could be done. I'd have been happy to do a stint in the hole considering the upcoming alternative. However, Nick Defranco, my fast talking bunkmate from the Bronx, thought a bare knuckle, boxing bout would be a better, and more entertaining, way to settle our differences. With friends like these...

"You hungry, champ?" Nick asked me as we stood in front of our cell awaiting morning inspection. We were two of the sixty sailor and marine prisoners that were incarcerated in the general population wing of the Camp Pendleton, California Brig.

"No."

"You sure? I got some a them protein bars you like stashed away. Been saving them for today."

"Good to know."

"Don't forget to hydrate, champ."

"Smart, Nick. I'll be sure to remember that one."

"So what did you do before a fight when you were on the outside?"

"I kept my mouth shut."

The guards stalked into the cell area, footfalls made by heavy black boots echoed around the concrete and steel room. You probably aware prisons have no carpet, not much furniture, no cushions, nothing soft. What you probably don't realize is how that lack of cover and clutter creates enough noise to drive any brain insane. With nothing to absorb sounds every noise is echoed and amplified. I'd been suffering from chronic headaches since my incarceration began three years ago.

I kept my eyes straight ahead, fixed at a point on the dull, grey wall across from me and over the other inmates' heads. The guards' uniforms were starched stiff and stretched with muscle. They scanned the cells, searching for infractions and, much less likely, escapees. They finished without finding either.

"TWO MINUTES TO MORNING HYGIENE!"

We all scrambled into our cells and stripped. After I was naked I picked up my towel, soap, and shaving gear before exiting the cell and placing my toes on the yellow line that ran the length of the hallway. I stole a quick glance at Luis who stood in front of his cell, at the other end of the cellblock.

Before being sentenced to five years in a military correctional facility I had known Luis "Slaughterhouse" Sepulveda by reputation. He was a southpaw of some repute who possessed a deadly combination of speed and strength. Big guys with his kind of quickness were rare. I took stock of him for the thousandth time since the fight was arranged. His coarse dark hair receded from a bulging forehead and massive skull. His nose had been mashed flat from the collective force of a hundred jabs. His thick neck sat between two large, hunched shoulders, over a hard

protruding stomach. His skin was so dark it looked purple. I could punch him in the face all day and never see it change color. Black hair covered the whole repugnant package. Luis had been a Marine Corps armourer. He was doing seven years for selling M-16s, stolen out of the armory, to MS-13 gangbangers in L.A. I'm sure it seemed like a good idea at the time.

He turned to me and smiled, a dark hole gaped where his front teeth should have been. I winked at him and shifted my eyes back to the wall in front of me.

"Why you look so nervous for? You can take this guy?" Nick stated.

"Easy for you to say."

"You were a great boxer. Your record was better than his."

"I boxed as a light heavy-weight, against limited competition. Luis was a heavyweight in a stacked division." The disparity seemed to be lost on Nick.

"What's the difference?"

"Looking at him now? I'd say about four inches in height, six inches in reach, and sixty pounds. Anymore stupid questions?" He shut his mouth and faced forward.

"PRISONERS, ATTENTION! RIGHT FACE! MARCH!"

We were led into the head, that's the bathroom for you civilians. Five minutes were allotted for supervised gang showers, shaving, and any other hygienic needs you could complete under the fixed time period. The final sixty seconds were counted down, loudly, by one of the guards.

Military incarnation is very different from state or federal prisons. There are more guards and fewer prisoners. Every second of a prisoners day is planned, every minute accounted for. You didn't have the shower rapes and brutal beatings you found in civilian facilities. Supervision was near constant, and insubordination was dealt with swiftly. Normally a bare-knuckle boxing match would be out of the question. However, we had found ourselves in a unique set of circumstances. Our commanding officer was on leave, and the executive officer was a boxing fan, of Luis unfortunately, and a bit of a sadist. Someone had alerted the X.O. of the beef between us and so sometime before noon, we would be marched into the yard where fifty-eight prisoners, twenty guards, and the de facto commanding officer of the Camp Pendleton correctional facility would watch Luis "Slaughterhouse" Sepulveda fight Johnny "El Fuego" Flores.

"PRISONERS! DRESS FOR CHOW!"

We were marched back to our cells. A guard counted down sixty seconds as we dressed in our prison khakis and lined up again. When we finished we were marched to the mess hall. We exited the, low, concrete windowless structure that served as our barracks, and entered into the clean, California morning. Dry, crisp, desert air and fragrant palms mixed with salt from the sea. The bright sun was still hidden behind Palomar Mountain in the east but was making its presence known with a growing, orange glow. It felt good being outside. I wished I could stay out longer and to watch the sun make its journey over the mountain, high into the sky. But then the chow hall was upon us, and before I could observe the morning miracle I was engulfed in the bright, artificial light that illuminated the interior of the building.

Sullen-faced sailors stood in front of trays of slop, ready to sling it onto our plastic plates. I accepted a glass of water and a bowl of oatmeal instead of my usual

runny eggs and weak coffee. I needed food that would fill me up and burn slow, any minute I could be thrown against the monster on the other side of the room.

I looked again for Luis and found him staring at me. I began to visually scan for weaknesses again. I knew some things about him. I knew that flat nose would break with one stiff jab and send a river of blood into his mouth. He also had a lot of scar tissue over his left eye; a few well-placed punches would open that up and blind him with blood. His gut looked soft but was like cast iron, I'd seen many a marine and sailor hammer away at it in the ring with little to no effect. His peripheral vision had looked pretty poor in the fights I'd seen him in, but his quick movements could compensate by keeping me in front of him.

It wasn't a lost cause, but I wasn't brimming with confidence, and it definitely wasn't how I wanted to spend my morning. We continued the stare off. Luis had a full plate of greasy bacon and coffee. Interesting. He picked up the ceramic mug, and drained it before crushing it in his bare hand. I tried not to look scarred as I picked up my spoon and bent the head back with my thumb.

"Wow. I bet that terrified him." Nick said as Luis laughed and shook his head, devoting his attention back to the plastic plate filled with pork.

"We'll see. At least I know his diet is shit."

"YOU'RE DONE IN FIVE! FOUR! THREE!"

We all scrambled to our feet, shoveling in a last morsel of food or taking a final swallow of liquid before the final second was counted down. With the meal over, we reported to our morning duties. Nick and I worked in the scullery, for you civilians that means scrubbing pots and pans in the kitchen. My least favorite guard was overseeing us today.

"Nervous, Johnny-boy?" He asked in mean southern drawl.

"Not yet. Your sisters only a week late."

"Funny. You talking like you *ain't* some kind of faggot. How come you and Luis aint friends? How come you beaners don't stick together like the niggers do?"

"That's a great question. I really don't know, but we all hate each other. Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, Hondurans, and Dominicans, Cubans, and Guatemalans. I guess we each think we're the only right type of Spanish and everyone else is fucked up."

"Your all fucked up you ask me."

"Don't worry, I wont."

"If I didn't know any better, Johnny-boy, I'd say you were as white as me."

"I'm only a half-breed. My daddy was a guerro, just like you."

"Is that so? Your momma likes white dick? Maybe I'll look her up."

"You'll have to look down, like six feet under, she's dead. Don't mention her again, honor will dictate that I kill you."

He opened his mouth to say something, and our eyes locked. His mouth froze open and the words caught in his throat. He thought better of it and shut his mouth,

"Good luck today." He said, as his face turned a bright shade of pink. I smiled at him and he turned and left the room.

"You make friends wherever you go, huh?" Nick observed. I shrugged and went back to scrubbing. I was a man without a heritage; too white to be a Mexican and too Mexican to be white. I could've stopped speaking the Spanish my mother

taught me and embraced my European roots. My hair is a dirty shade of blond, and my eyes hazel. My skin turns golden brown in the sun and never burns. Nobody would ever know my heritage, until I speak in my mother's tongue. Then my countenance betrays Hispanic features. It might have been easier for me to bury half my roots and live as a white man, but the white man that sired me did so by rape. The circumstances of my conception make it hard for me to reconcile with the paternal half of my genetic makeup.

We passed the next hour in silence, scrubbing and scouring large, metal pots. As the minutes crawled by I started to get the jitters. My stomach was fluttering and my hands were flying in and out of the soapy water.

"Take a break, champ." Nick advised. I dried off my hands and threw my apron on the floor. I started to shadow box in the corner. I threw combinations at a quarter-speed, then half-speed. I hadn't boxed competitively in over two years. I'd had a bout just before my arrest on January 20, 2013. I'd won by a unanimous decision. There would be no decision today. Luis wasn't the type to let a fight go the distance. He won by knockout, or got knocked out. It's the kind of fighter he was, the all or nothing kind. That wasn't me. I wasn't into the "Mexican Style" of taking punishment to give punishment. I tried to fight like Mayweather, slipping and countering. The way I saw it, life had given me enough shots, no need to walk through a flurry to take mine.

I upped to three-quarters speed and started to break a sweat. I felt good and loose. My anxiety began to dissipate with my increased action. I wasn't sure I had the punching power to keep Luis at bay. I threw hard, but he had a head like an anvil. With no gloves I'd have to pick my shots carefully, a bad punch would mean a broken hand. I had to concentrate, aim for the jaw, nose, and the scars he wore in place of eyebrows. Above all I needed to stay away from the top and back of his head.

"YOU TWO, REPORT TO THE YARD, NOW!"

"Here we go." Said Nick. I walked out with my chin tucked down, and my shoulders squared. I'd fought fifteen fights on the Marine Corps boxing team, nine wins, five losses, one no decision. Not a great record. His wasn't either. This would be about patience and power. Bare knuckle was a whole other animal. I'd fought plenty of field workers on the farm I grew up on. Tough guys who had boxed in the small gyms of rural Mexico, and the big gyms of the cities. Guys who worked twelve hours in the sun, drank eight hours in the dark, fucked their wives, got a couple hours of sleep, and did it all over again, six days a week, every week of the year, all while looking over their shoulder for I.C.E.

These men had been my teachers. I'm not sure who taught Luis, but as I exited the yard and saw him standing there shirtless, and slick with sweat, smiling his tooth-deficient smile, I was certain they had been tough men too. A circle of shouting prisoners surrounded us. I took off my shirt and tried to hand it to Nick. He was gone, collecting bets and giving odds. I was starting to think he wasn't such a good friend. The yard was a half-acre of dirt surrounded by four, high walls topped with walkways and parapets. The X.O. stood atop the wall looking resplendent and dignified with his short, silver hair and neatly pressed olive and khaki uniform. To his right stood a man I knew well, Colonel Lucas, my previous commanding officer

who had pushed for my five-year sentence. He had an acne scared face, a bulbous nose, and an unrivaled capacity for cruelty. He gave me a big, ugly smile and waved while the two of them looked down at me.

The circle began to close around Luis and I. Our orbits began to intersect as we rotated around each other in the shrinking space. I looked to place my first shot.

"PRIVATE JOHN FLORES!" A voice sounded out from a darkened doorway that led back into the brig. All movement ceased, save for the turning of heads and dropping of jaws. Luis and I stayed in our fighting stances, trained never to take our eyes off an opponent.

"Present!" I answered as our eyes stayed locked.

"REPORT TO THE REAR EXIT!" Called the voice. I backed away from Luis toward the sound of the voice. Luis dropped his hands to his sides, a crestfallen look beginning to fall on that ugly face. I raised my hands and smirked at him before walking quickly towards the doorway, "In here, marine."

A different voice, female, beckoned. I walked into the hallway. A short, clean-shaven man, pale and plain, with a slender build, stood in a black suit next to a dark woman in a navy blue pantsuit. The man had an open folder in his hand, thick with documents. He held up an enlarged version of my military identification card photograph next to my face.

"Looks like him." He said.

"Might not have in another minute or so. Are you John Flores?" The woman asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Follow us, John. You're sentence has just been commuted by the President." She stated matter of fact. I stood there for a moment before asking, "The president of what?"

"The United States," the slight man answered, "Barrack Obama." He offered a congratulatory, well-manicured, hand and I weakly shook it. His skin felt cool and clammy.

"My name is Brett Schumer. I'm a lawyer with the Justice Department." The woman reached out next and I gripped her small, brown palm and short, red-tipped fingers. Her grip was warm and welcoming. She flashed a bright, white smile through dark, burgundy lips.

"This is Ava Fuentes from the Second Chance Society." Brett offered.

"How do you do Mr. Flores?" Our eyes locked and I fell into two deep, dark pools that shimmered from out of her skull.

"What's the second chance society?" I managed to blurt out.

"We are a non-profit that works with the justice department to pardon, reduce, or commute the sentences of non-violent offenders."

I was studying her face it was shaped like a heart, full and cherubic, and topped with cropped black hair. Her breasts hung heavy and fit snug in a tight, black blazer and white blouse. She looked to be in her early forties and carried herself with an assurance only achieved by age and the education it provides. I was vaguely aware I had been caught staring at her tits. I couldn't help it. I hadn't seen a woman in three years. She extricated her hand from mine. I felt my face flush.

"It's nice to finally meet you Mr. Flores."

"I'm afraid it's still Private Ma'am. The corps hasn't quite finished with me yet."

"Actually they are, as of about fifteen minutes ago." Brett produced a singular sheet of paper from the large manila colored folder he was holding. He held it out for me to read. It was a DD-214, or military separation papers for you civilians. They had my name on them. I scanned through them quickly and verified that they were real. Then I looked for the discharge type. It was dishonorable, as expected.

"You'll have to sign for your property," Ava said gently, "We'll walk you over." She took me by the elbow and guided me down the long hallway. My heart was still hammering in my chest. My hands and fingers were tingling with the anticipation of use and abuse. Adrenaline was still coursing through my blood in expectation of upcoming combat.

I was having a hard time switching gears; I couldn't find the downshift. I stole a glance over my shoulder, out into the yard. Luis stood there, mouth shut tight, sparing me a parting glance at that ugly grin. My eyes traveled up to the parapets. The Executive Officer stood there grim and unsmiling. Colonel Lucas was red-faced, screaming and cursing, while gesturing wildly at me.

I stretched my arm in his direction and rendered a final salute, my middle finger, in his direction. I had given him a similar farewell at my sentencing, which he had been sure to attend. In the military courtroom he had smiled at the gesture. This time he ripped his cover off, that's a hat for you civilians, and sent it flying. His threats echoed down the hallway after me, "I aint done with you yet, spic! I'll find you and kill you! Goddamn border hopping, bea-" His impotent rage was cut short as Ava slammed a door behind us.

The enlisted guard at the outtake was frantically reading the documentation Brett had provided him with to someone over the phone. The Lieutenant in charge of the exit process was on another phone with someone from Washington. He said, "Yes ma'am," every few second and not much else. For me, the initial shock was over. The anxiety over the fight, followed by my surprise release, had now manifested into a screaming paranoia. I began to envision this as an elaborate trap set by Colonel Lucas, the architect of my incarceration.

Eventually, they both hung up their phones and handed me my "sea bag", a large green duffel bag I had been issued in boot camp years ago. It was packed with the few possessions I had acquired during my twenty-five years of existence. The guard read off an inventory of the items in the bag in a dry monotone. It was mostly clothes. The government had taken what little money I'd had in the bank, assuming it had all been from illicit drug sales.

The last item he read was the only one I cared about, and this he handed to me separately in a small, sealed, plastic bag. It was a gold medal the size and shape of a quarter, bearing the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. My mother had gifted me the medal on my first communion and, excluding boot camp and incarceration, I'd worn it every day since. I signed the receipt for my property and handed it to the guard. A wire mesh and steel door buzzed open and I walked out into the golden sunshine of a California afternoon.

“Congratulations, Mr. Flores.” Brett said and offered me another dead fish handshake. I started to feel dizzy. The adrenaline that had shot through my bloodstream had leached away in the absence of visible threats.

“Thanks...I...I”

“Are you okay?” Ava asked. I nodded weakly and took a few unsteady steps forward. I wanted to get away from the brig as soon as possible. My guts felt cold and hollow. My mouth was dry.

“Here let us help you to the car.” Brett offered as they each took me by the upper arm and tried to steady me. They were guiding me toward a black Chevy suburban.

“Nice...ride...” I managed to say before pitching forward into the dirt.

I woke up, laid out, in the back seat of the Chevy. It felt like we were traveling fast. I sat up too quick and got a head-rush. Brett, and Ava, turned from the front of the vehicle and smiled at me.

"Feeling better?" Brett asked from behind the steering wheel.

"Yes," The embarrassment evident in my tone, "Believe it or not I'm a little overwhelmed." That produced a chuckle from up front.

"What was going on there? Were you about to fight that man?"

"Yes."

"What about?" Ava asked.

"It's a long story. I think my former Commanding Officer was behind it. He doesn't like me much." Ava flipped through my file.

"Colonel Lucas?"

"That's him. He organized the search where...where they found the drugs in my barracks room."

"Why does he have a problem with you?"

"I was in love with his daughter."

"Did he plant them? The drugs?" Brett asked anxiously, his head whipping around and fixing me with a stare.

"No they were mine...I was...never mind."

I stared out the window and watched the miles roll by in silence. The small green pines and shrubs looked familiar. It was a stretch of interstate eight that cut through the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Your last address on file, 52 South Avenue 8E, Yuma, Arizona." Brett answered.

"Did you want to go somewhere else?" Ava asked when I didn't reply. I thought about her question. No place else came to mind,

"That's fine. I have another question though, why would President Obama commute my sentence?"

"The president believes in giving people a second chance. Yours was just one of many cases we brought to his attention for review." Ava answered.

"Who pays for that?" It sounded a little too good to be true. My suspicious nature was aroused.

"Philanthropists, socially responsible corporations, small donors, private and government grants, lots of people."

"How many people has he pardoned?"

“Around four-hundred, so far.” Brett answered.

“And you work for the justice department?” I asked him.

“Correct. President Obama is very concerned with the outcome of the last presidential election. He is trying to help as many people as he can before he leaves office.” I let that sink in. I hadn’t ever followed politics. I knew next to nothing about the recent election. We reached the apex of the mountain and I watched the desert spread open before us. Seemingly, endless stretches of rocky brown and tan wasteland went as far as the eye could see. The sky was cloudless, brilliant, and blue.

“Something wrong, Mr. Flores?” Brett asked.

“No. Just wishing I would’ve voted for President Obama.” They laughed,

“Don’t worry, I’m sure the opportunity to pay him back will present itself.”
Ave predicted.

“We need gas.”

“There’s a station at the bottom of the mountain. We can stop there.”

A few moments later the station came into view, a lonely outpost at the foot of the mountain. The small structure was covered with decades of dirt and dust, the price of a gallon was displayed by metal signs that banged against their frames in the baking, breeze. A faded, red flag fluttered atop a dingy, white pole, “Make A America Great Again,” it challenged the reader.

“What’s that all about?”

They shared a look before responding,

“Some ugly things have occurred during your incarceration,” Brett replied while clicking the turn signal. He pulled into the dirt lot and stopped by a pump. We all got out and stretched, the urge to piss came on fast and I blurted out,

“Permission to make a head call, sir.” They both looked at me strangely, I grinned pretending I had been joking, and walked off towards the store. It was the first time I hadn’t had to ask permission to use the bathroom in three years. Obviously the habit had stayed with me. The concept of being an, “institutional man” terrified me. I needed to relearn how to be a civilian.

I entered the rundown shop and was greeted with a hostile glance from the proprietor. He was a middle-aged white guy with a fat wad of chew tucked firmly into the corner of his tight set mouth. He spit on the floor when I walked in.

“Ya’ll from the swamp?” He asked squinting with his mean, blue-eyes.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Saw yer plates. Your from D.C. what’s a bunch of swamp rats doing, coming round to my beautiful red county?”

“I just need to use a bathroom, sir. I don’t know anything about a swa-”

“Bathrooms busted.” He said and turned his attention to a book written by someone named Michael Savage. I turned to walkout, glancing at the newspapers on a metal stand as I did. The date caught my eye, December 24, 2016. The realization that it was Christmas Eve stunned me.

I exited the store and walked around the building. I pissed on the back wall, half-hoping the owner would come out and catch me in the act. I wanted an excuse to box his head in. When we got back on the road I told Ava and Brett about the “Swamp” comment.

“That’s a Trumpism,” Ava informed me, “as in drain the swamp.”

"The president-elect likes to refer to Washington D.C. as a swamp." Brett chimed in.

"And he professes to be the one able to clean it up."

"Donald Trump? I saw his picture on the paper. He's going to be president? Didn't he have a TV show?" I had not taking much interest in current affairs since my incarceration began.

"That's him. Before that he made a fortune in real estate. A silver spoon kid that did good investing Daddy's money in Manhattan properties." Brett said. The characterization sounded hollow coming out of his cultured mouth. I thought about pointing it out to him then I remembered he'd just secured my freedom.

"You two don't sound like fans of the future president."

"You wont be either when you hear him speak," said Brett.

"He can't be that bad."

"Let's put it this way, he called all Mexicans rapists during the announcement of his presidential campaign.

"C'mon,"

"I'm afraid so, John," Ave offered. She pronounced it like my mother had, quick, like the o was absent. The remark had obviously upset her. I was sure now that she and I shared some common heritage, "Tu es Mexicana, Ava?"

"Claro, more so than you, guerro. "

I laughed at her reply. Guerro was a moniker I had heard my whole life; it meant light skinned person. Like I said before, too white for the Mexicans and too Mexican for the whites.

"Can we talk about something other than politics?" I asked.

"Sorry," Brett said, " I thought you would be interested, given your ethnic background."

"I am, Brett. Thank you. But right now I'm interested in more immediate things.

"Such as?"

"What do I do now?"

"Don't ask me. I'm dropping you off at home and heading to El Paso. There's a soldier there whose sentence has also been commuted and I've got to the serve the papers on the Commanding Officer."

"Are you going to Texas, too?" I asked Ava.

"No, my office is in Phoenix. Brett will be dropping me off there."

"Oh."

"The foundation has allocated some spending money for you. We'll give it to you when we drop you off."

"Great." I resisted the urge to ask how much. My mother taught me not to be rude, "That will be a big help. I'll need a job, is there much work available?" Brett cleared his throat and pretended to cough, Ava looked back at me, "The service industry is doing well, " she said weakly. I gave her a small smile before she turned back around.

I rested my head against the soft seat cushion, turned to the left, and watched miles of desert fly by. Vast open spaces were a luxury when compared to what I had just come from. I thought about my prospects, when I left home all I had was a GED. I

was returning with a GED and a dishonorable discharge, worse off then when I started. The path to picking fruit seemed imminent, it was the very lifestyle I had sought to escape. Teenage memories of hot days in the field welled up from within. I had wanted to become so much more. A vindictive Colonel and a stupid decision had stolen my future.

Ava was watching me in the rear-view mirror. I pretended not to notice and closed my eyes, trying to tamp down the tears that threatened to flow. As I half-dozed, Brett and Ava listened to talk radio. The conversations oozed into my subconscious. The host and guest were apoplectic. President-elect Trump refused to release his tax returns. He refused to divest his vast business empire. He flouted established norms. The adjective “unprecedented” was used an inordinate amount of times while I drifted off into a fitful sleep.

“We’re here, John.” Ava said, lightly touching my knee. I woke with a start and looked around. The long, familiar, empty road stretched north and south. We were parked on the side of it. Dust kicked up around the car and smothered our view of the evening sunset. I exited and stretched, all my muscles ached; I’d kept up a demanding physical fitness regimen in the brig and had stepped it up in expectation of the, now aborted, fight.

Ava and Brett were by the back of the car. I walked over and glanced into the interior of the trunk. They had a large suitcase stuffed with cash open and were peeling off bills. When they noticed me they closed it and stuffed some bills into an envelope.

“Here you are Mr. Flores,” Brett said with a too bright smile. He was afraid, there was a skittish look in his eye. I think he thought I would rob them. I accepted the envelope,

“Thank you. For everything.” I shook his hand and he seemed to relax a little. What a pussy. I turned to Ava. She looked stunning standing there in the golden twilight,

“Good luck, John.” She said through those thick, pouty lips. I grinned and held my hand out. She took it gently with both of hers and smiled at me. We held the gaze for a second; then she slowly lowered her hands and let them fall away from me. She turned and walked back towards the passenger side of the car.

I watched them pull away and disappear into the darkening evening. Then I turned and faced the dirt road behind me. My mother’s home was about two hundred yards down that twisting, dirt path and nestled among the melon fields. During the long summers the place smelt terrible. The fruit of too poor a quality to be harvested would lay rotting, emitting a sickly, sweet scent while decomposing in the sun.

The winters smelt fresh and clean, and that familiar aroma washed over me while I trudged along the path that had been so well worn in my youth.

Soon the house came into view; a doublewide trailer, painted pale blue with white trim. The windows were shuttered and their glass had been broken. The front door was padlocked. Fruit trees my mother and I had planted when I was younger were all shriveled and dead. The vegetable garden, we had dug together, that once produced a bounty of tomatoes, peppers, and onions was overrun with sharp,

stubborn, desert scrub. I walked to the front door. "ADIOS SPICS!" Was spray-painted on it in large, black print. The letters, "MAGA", were scrawled underneath. I picked up a rock and smashed the padlock.

I walked inside and was relieved to see that the interior had fared better than the exterior. The wide living room/dining area was neat and the furniture intact. I crossed the room and entered the kitchen. Everything was in its proper place. Off the kitchen a hallway led to a bathroom and two bedrooms. Once I determined that the bathroom still functioned I steeled my nerves and entered my mothers room.

Light-brown, wood paneling surrounded me. The floor was still a cream colored linoleum sporting a few cracks. The same pictures hung on the walls and sat atop her dresser. Small, glass figurines stood in various poses throughout the room. All was as I remembered, except the bed. The sheets had been stripped and the mattress lay bare. It was splotted with dark stains, the kind a body makes when it's breaking down. I stared at the bed. My mind began drifting to dark places. The words terminal, tumor, and rot flashed in front of my face. I shook my head and took a picture off the wall. Then I closed the door behind me.

I continued down the hallway to my own room. Only the bed was there. The rest of my possessions were boxed up and packed off somewhere. I lay down and held the picture out in front of me. I was five years old, tanned, blond, and smiling. My mother stared into the camera, her brown comely face, full, and unsmiling. Her chin was slightly up, a pugnacious pose from a fierce woman. Her dark hair was cut short, just below her small ears. When she had been a girl, her mother never allowed her a haircut. The result was a long, thick braid that by the time she was fifteen, trailed behind her when she walked. She left her mothers home that year, and in an act of rebellion that had yielded only a few inches over time, cut her hair nearly to the scalp.

I looked deep into the photograph, into her eyes. They were chocolate brown and warm, but wary. She was holding my hand in the picture and we were walking through the surrounding fields. It was something we had done often. The male workers would occasionally yell comments to my mother, admiring her curvy figure. She had always feigned annoyance, but I could tell the attention made her happy.

She'd been dead eighteen months now. I wondered about the funeral and hoped it had been dignified. I had not been able to attend, and hadn't been informed until a month after she passed. The navy Chaplain that broke the news had been sincere in his apologies. He swore that prisoners, under discreet guard, were often allowed to attend the funerals of siblings, parents, and grandparents. He was stunned and couldn't understand what had gone wrong. I was convinced Colonel Lucas shitcanned the notification.

I put the picture on my chest. The last sliver of sun faded away behind the mountains. Darkness enveloped the room, and for the first time as an adult, I allowed myself a moment of weakness and cried.

The unmistakable rack of a pump shotgun ripped me from my first sound sleep in years. I sat up and saw the lean, unmistakable silhouette of the man whose land I lived on, and who I had been named after: John William Winters.

“That you boy?” Asked the slow raspy voice.

“Its me, sir.”

“Well I...damn...welcome home.”

“Thank you, sir”

“You hungry?”

“Starving.”

“C’mon up to the house. I’ll fix us breakfast.” He placed the barrel of the gun on his shoulder and walked out of the room. I sat in the dark and gathered myself, the urge to piss eventually pulled me from the warmth of my bed and I went outside, towards the back of the trailer. I stared at a fat, overgrown, palm tree that had been there since before my birth. Its rough skin was peeling and its spiked fronds thrust out eagerly in all directions. I emptied the contents of my bladder at the foot of the tree, onto the unmarked grave of my father. I had never met the man and knew him only by reputation. It was enough for me to hate him.

When I finished I went to a rusted water spicket, near the old vegetable garden, and pumped it until water belched out. I dunked my head under the sloppy, frigid spray and after the cold water shocked me out of a sleepy stupor I began the short walk to the main house.

The home stood on a small rise among the flat fields. It was an old two-story Victorian and looked out of place in the middle of the southwest landscape. John Winters’ forbearers hailed from the northeast, and when his ancestors stole this land from my ancestors they decided to transplant their style of home here as well as themselves. It was a well-built structure and had lasted about a hundred years, so far. The wraparound porch was inviting, the wooden clapboards were painted a fresh white, and the one rounded room on the top floor sported a steeple, with a weather vane on top. It was a place that held many happy memories for me.

A lone figure stood to the side of the home, in front of a glowing wood-fired grill. A black sky and a million stars backed him. I looked up in wonder at the clear, brilliant sky that loomed above and felt something was expected from me.

John waved me over. I was just in time to watch him throw two fat, strip steaks onto the iron grill. The meat hissed and threw hot juice when it hit the heat. I licked my lips involuntarily when the scent filled my nostrils.

"I damn sure wasn't expecting to see you today. I thought you still had a couple of years to go?"

"I got pardoned."

"By who?"

"The President."

"Of the United States? Obama?"

"The one and only."

"Figures...he pardons a hundred drug dealers a day. Not that...I don't mean to say...with you it was...different."

"Forget it. I know what you meant, and I know how you feel about him. I never followed politics much, but I'm sure you'll understand that I feel some sense of loyalty towards the man now, so I'd appreciate it if you kept your bashing of him to a minimum."

"Of course, of course. I just...well hell, its great to have you back,"

"Yeah, you sound thrilled." He smiled at me. A small grease fire flared up and illuminated his lined and weathered face. His beard, that had once been jet black, was now snow white. His short hair was the same color. His ice, blue eyes twinkled in the firelight, but there was a new fragility about them. He still looked strong, with a tall and broad frame, and I had no doubt the fresh coat of paint on the house had been applied by him alone, but his shoulders were beginning to stoop, and when he bent over to retrieve a pan that hung on the side of the grill I could tell the effort taxed him. I wondered why he'd let my mothers house fall into such a state of disrepair, but quickly realized he probably couldn't stand going down there with her being gone.

He let the pan heat up, then took a knife from a sheath on his belt and sliced off a hunk of hot fat from one of the sizzling steaks. He threw it into the pan and we watched as it skipped and sputtered along the surface before liquefying. My stomach howled and I chewed my lower lip. John looked at me and smiled. He produced six, large, brown eggs from a small carton he had in his pocket. Then, one by one, he cracked them and let their yokes slip from the shells and into the pan. Drool leaked from the corner of my mouth and I wiped it away with the back of my hand.

"You still take your steak and eggs easy and rare?"

"Yep. Same as my women." He chuckled as my stomach rumbled.

He finished the grillwork as sunlight began to spread along the Gila Mountains. We took our plates up the creaky wooden steps, onto the porch, and then through the front door. Off of the large foyer was a dining room with a table set for twelve. I'd never seen it wholly occupied. All the rooms had brick fireplaces in them, from what I could tell none were lit; the house felt cold and empty.

John brought in two cups of hot, black coffee from the kitchen and I set about the business of devouring my meal. I sliced into the thick steak and watched vibrant red juice gush from the cut; it mixed beautifully with the bright yellow oozing yoke. I ate with a, long dormant, gusto. The flavors were fresh and distinct, so different from the bland and uninspired cuisine I'd been forced to endure during my

incarceration. I ate fast, like a man whose been forced to live his life in tightly timed increments. John ate sparingly and watched me devour my first home cooked meal. I realized I'd never have a meal cooked by my mother again. The thought hit me as I took my last bite. It soured the remainder of the experience.

When I was finished John refilled our coffee mugs, then sat down and began rolling a cigarette.

"Back to smoking?" I observed.

"Yes, it's one of the pleasures I allow myself now that your mother isn't around to nag me about it."

"She was like a daughter to you." He was the toughest man I ever met and he had tears in his eyes. He said nothing about my comment, just finished rolling his cigarette, wet it with his lips, and stuck it in his mouth. He sparked a blue-tipped match head with his thumbnail and lit up, inhaling deeply, and exhaling through his nose.

"I still can't fathom them not letting you out for the funeral."

"Just another fuck you from the Corps," I informed him. He shook his head in disgust. John was a man that believed America was good, the military was filled with noble people, only the guilty went to prison, and when they did they were getting off easy, "Forget about that," I said wanting away from the subject,

"Tell me about my mothers passing. Lie to me if you have to, just tell me it was peaceful."

"I cant, I wont; it wasn't." I sighed, stood up, and began pacing the room. The rich food I'd gorged on wasn't sitting well, and the coffee was making me jittery.

"Your mother and I agreed on the day you were born not to shelter you from hard truths."

"Sometimes," I said looking him in the eyes,

"I wish you would." He shrugged in reply and took a drag on his cigarette. I crossed the room and knelt down in front of the fireplace.

"What are you doing?" He asked as I gathered sticks and old newspapers from a bronze canister then placed them in the hearth.

"I'm making a fire, we always have a fire Christmas day, Grandpa."

"I...I didn't realize what day it was," he said weakly while shaking his head. He suddenly looked very old sitting there hunched at the table, and shrouded in smoke.

We sat in silence and watched the fire grow from a flickering light into a respectable roar. Dawn lit up the surrounding acres outside and he made a statement I had suspected was coming, "I sold off the last of my fields a few months ago." I nodded in reply.

"I kept this house and your mothers house, plus the thirty surrounding acres. I have the deed for your mothers place upstairs. It's yours now. Needs a lot of work though," He said and looked away, embarrassed at the state of the trailer.

"Thanks, I'll take good care of it. Fixing it up will give me something to do."

"Ha! Your not that handy."

"That's true. I'll need a job then to pay somebody to do it. Your obviously too old to help."

He chuckled, "What will you do now?"

"I don't know. I thought I had some time before I got out."

"Want me to talk to the new foreman? I'm sure he could use a man that knows the land. You could do all the upkeep during the off-season and work the fields during harvest."

"Thanks, Grandpa. I may take you up on that." He winced when I addressed him by the familial title. I resolved to try and avoid it in future discussions. My existence has always been a painful reminder for him.

"This isn't where you hoped to end up is it?"

"Hardly."

"Well that's life. It rarely takes us where we expect, or want, to go." He began to roll another cigarette with his large, shaky, brown hands,

"You should see Dolores while your home. She feels terrible about what happened to you. So do I."

"That doesn't matter now. I'll see her another time. I'm sure she wouldn't want me dropping by on Christmas day."

"I'm sure she would. Her husband had to go back to Mexico to find work, and her mother is so afraid Trump's going to deport her that she went back too."

There it was again, that name. I was beginning to realize this past election had not just been politics as usual. It seemed there were negative consequences even before the inauguration.

"I thought you and Dolores spoke often?"

"She wrote me a letter when I was inside, once she started taking care of mom. She never mentioned anything about kids, or a husband. She just keep me updated on mom's condition, talked about old times, and asked to get...well, you know."

"Yeah. I know. I'm so sorry, Johnny. They just weren't prescribing her enough...and she was in so much *pain*..." The tears were coming back into those blue eyes, I couldn't stand to see them so I stood up and put a hand on his shoulder while he buried his face in his palm, "I told you not to worry about it. Things happen for a reason," A favorite musing of my mother coming from me.

I borrowed the keys to an old, ford pick-up and drove the two miles west on interstate eight toward the Buena Vista RV Park. I remembered this place from my youth. Many of my friends had lived here. It was a popular place for migrant workers to house their families. The place would fill up during the Yuma growing season of fall and winter. When the desert heat came on too strong in the spring the men all picked up and went to Salinas to work the fields there. They left the women and children behind. It was a strange dynamic looking back as an adult now, but to us kids it had been normal, and the only thing we knew.

I never expected Dolores to wind up here. She had been my girlfriend for most of high school. Beautiful and driven she abhorred the stereotypical depiction of young Mexican girls, pregnant in high school, mothers of four before thirty. She'd had big plans of attending law school one day. She was full of charisma and could argue any position at anytime. She loved police dramas, and longed for a district attorney job one day. I wanted to get married after high school; she told me she loved me and dumped me on graduation day.

I pulled into the park and looked for her address. It was as I remembered. Winding circular roads cut through the twenty acres. The place was surrounded by a ten-foot concrete wall, it was all that stood between the RV Park and the ever-encroaching desert. The RV's themselves were in various states of disrepair. There were garbage strewn, empty lots that looked recently abandoned. Tire imprints were still visible in the dirt. "Fuck Trump!" and other obscenities referring to the president elect were spray painted all along the perimeter wall.

I stopped in front of a tan and brown single wide on cinder blocks. Children's toys littered the dirt patch in front that constituted a yard. I got out of the truck and knocked on a dirt blurred screen door. She answered quickly looking harried and harassed," John..."

"Hey gorgeous," I said and smiled. The young girl was gone; she stood there looking at me with her hands over her mouth and tears in her tired green eyes. I smiled, happy to see her. She was still a lovely girl, but the blush of youth had gone out of her skin and left her looking a bit sallow. Her thick black hair stuck out wildly and she made a nervous effort to smooth it down. Small wrinkles were cracking the skin around the corners of her eyes and mouth. She wore sweats and a t-shirt that was too tight. I couldn't tell if she was at the beginning of a pregnancy or if her body had just gotten used to it. I pulled her close and hugged her tight. She cried uncontrollably while three children, under the age of four, ran about the small home sowing chaos disproportionate to their size, in their wake.

"When did you get out?" she asked, her head still buried in my chest. I breathed in her familiar scent, it was fresh, clean, stimulating, like a thunderstorm passing over a lemon groove, "Yesterday."

"You told me you had two more years in your last letter,"

"I got a pardon from the president."

"Oh, God bless him." She said,

"He's such a good man...but why you?"

"Beats me, he likes my style I guess." She laughed at this and pulled back, looking at me full on. I could tell I made her self-conscious. Life, kids, and time were taking their toll. I looked a bit older too, but prison is a fantastic way to lose weight and build muscle. It offset the new wrinkles I'd developed on my own face. "How is your grandfather?"

"Old. He misses my mother."

"She kept him young. I miss her too."

"He misses my father as well, and he still blames me for his death, no matter how much he tries to hide it."

"You're the last one who should be blamed, John. You were the result, not the cause."

"I know, but facts don't negate feelings."

"Come sit down," she gestured toward a threadbare sofa and cleared some toys off of it. I sat down. I could feel the springs in my back. She gave me an embarrassed grin and started trying to smooth her hair again, "Can I ... would you like something to..." she was fidgeting with her hands; her eyes darted around towards the running children.

"Dolores, relax, it's only me."

"I'm so embarrassed, Johnny," She confessed in a small voice,
"I was supposed to...I wanted to... things were going so well for me then I..."
"You got knocked up. It happens. You have nothing to be embarrassed about."
"I was so smug in high school. I spent so much time mocking girls like me,"
"They're beautiful kids, Dolores."
"Nino's," she called and the three tornadoes stopped in mid motion,
"Bien para ca" They all ran obediently over to her and stood side-by-side,
"These are my babies, Joswell, Jetzielle, and Ramon." They smiled at mention of their names, "Joswell and Jitzell are twins, almost three now, and Ramon is eighteen months."
"They're lovely,"
"Nino's this is mommy's friend, Tio Johnny." They all shook my hand in turn.
"Now vamonos," Dolores said and the chaos around us resumed.
"Who is their father?"
"Hector Ramirez," she blushed. Hector had graduated high school with us. For what I remembered he was a nice guy, a good wrestler, and a poor student.
"How'd you two get together?"
"Community college, I had a 4.0 just so you know. Then ..." She waved her hand as if the rest of the story was implied. I could figure it out.
"My grandfather told me he had to go back to Mexico for work."
"Hector doesn't have any papers, he was in the dreamer program, but that will get cancelled by Trump now. He hates us. So he decided to look for something in Mexico and apply for a green card from there. It's a long shot but..."
"How are you getting by? Money wise?"
"I was working for your grandfather, taking care of your mom. Now I clean a few houses, Hector sends money when he can, I get some money from the government," Her face was darkening with shame. Without thinking I took the envelop with five-hundred dollars in it and handed it to her.
"I can't, Johnny...after what I asked you to do...it's all my fault," She started crying again.
"No it isn't. There is one person to blame and that's not you, so stop saying that and take the money. I didn't earn it anyway, it was a gift."
"From who?"
"Some advocacy group, the second chance society. Ever heard of them?"
"No."
"It doesn't matter, besides I want something for my money."
"What's that?"
"You still smoke weed?"
"Rarely, but I can get."
"Well make some calls and get a babysitter. I could use a few laughs, so could you." She smiled, bright and wide, I saw my high school sweetheart again. Memories came flooding back, we went telepathic and both blushed,
"I'll see what I can do..."

One of her cousins came by in a tricked out Honda civic; it had the biggest spoiler I'd ever seen. The tints were so dark I wondered how he saw though them. It

was painted a deep, rich gold that matched the rims. He dropped off an eighth of sticky, green bud streaked with bright, red threads. It stunk up the trailer the minute he produced it. He gathered up the kids before chiding Dolores,

“Don’t be late for Christmas dinner. My mother is expecting you to help with the tamales.” He winked at us and left with the kids.

Dolores went through her closet and brought out a glass bong we smoked from all throughout high school. She packed it and lit up. The thick dense smoke flooded the small, cluttered room. We took off our shoes and sat in her bed. She took her sweat pants off and sat there in her black panties and tight t-shirt. We lay in the bed getting stupid and laughing. We talked about old times, old friends, and old parties. We laughed until we had tears in our eyes, I felt like I was in danger of floating off the bed.

I started to kiss her slow and unhurried. She was more than happy to reciprocate. I lifted up her shirt, she wasn’t wearing a bra and I slipped a nipple in my mouth. She moaned, happily, it was so familiar. Time seemed to stand still for a while and then reversed as she reached down and took off my pants. She grabbed my cock, throbbing and hard, and began to stroke it. I climbed on top of her and thrust inside. She was different. I was different. But our eyes hadn’t changed, and we made love looking deep into each other’s. It kept us back in the past, where we both wished we could stay, locked in that time of promise and potential, before the world began to do its work on us. It couldn’t last forever, but we gave it our best shot.

When I finally came we had both sweated up the sheets and she suggested a shower, but I held her close and couldn’t let go, I was clinging to the moment. That’s when we heard Hector walking up the steps.

She jumped off the bed and tried to stop him from walking in the front door. She tripped over a kid’s toy and stumbled, naked to the floor. I couldn’t get my body to react in time. The THC fucked with my impulses and resulted in a delay of my movements. I pulled my pants on just as he walked in. Dolores was on the floor between him and I. He stood there and stared at me through the open bedroom door.

He was shorter, than me and wiry, he sized me up with dark eyes that were quick and fiery. He pulled a long knife out of his pocket and lunged across the room. Dolores reached up to stop him screaming, “Hector, no!” he pushed her aside easily, but lost a little balance from the effort, when he thrust for my heart the knife went wide and he sliced into my shoulder. The pain shot me up with adrenaline that overrode the THC that had been dulling my senses. I parried as he stumbled forward, and let a right cross fly. It caught him on the side of the jaw and dropped him in a heap on the floor. I grabbed my boots and ran out barefoot, trailing blood as I fled, “Bye, hun,” I turned and said to Dolores. She was over by Hector now and he was trying to get back to his feet. She smiled at me, “You better run,”

“Right, thanks for the moment,”

“Anytime, Johnny.”

I ran out the door and started the pickup truck. As I peeled out of the dirt lot the back window shattered and a large rock landed in the rear passenger seat. I checked the mirror and saw Hector running after me, winding up, ready to launch another stone. I exited the park and made for a dirt road off the side of the

interstate. I figured at any minute Hector would wise up and continue his chase in a car. I was bleeding all over. I'd need to get to a hospital soon.

I took a series of back roads to Yuma County General. The parking lot was half empty. I circled around it a few times to make sure Hector wasn't there waiting for me. When I was satisfied he wasn't I went in. Blood was running down my arm and dripping off my fingertips in fat droplets, the bright lights turned them a brilliant shade of red. The receptionist gasped when she saw me come in. I tried a smile but dropped to the floor instead.

I was groggy and stupid from pain meds. Everything looked hazy and dull. I tried to sit up and fell back in the bed, "Relax," a voice advised from a corner in the room. The voice was female and sounded familiar, "Who's there?"

"My, my, how quickly we forget." It was rich and husky. I tried to concentrate, but the effort, and meds were making me nauseous.

"You seem to have a habit of getting into trouble,"

"Ava?"

"That's right, John."

"How... did you find out?"

"The second chance society monitors all our recipients of aid."

"You're spying on me?"

"We prefer to call it monitoring. We have ways of finding out if you have police contact, apply for government assistance, seek emergency medical care for ... suspicious injuries shall we say?"

"Lots of strings attached with my freedom."

"Would you have rejected our assistance had you known?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. So, what happened?"

"I went to visit an old friend."

"Some friend."

"It was her husband."

"You and women..." Ava said shaking her head. I looked at my arm. The stitches looked good. The nurse came in, she was an icy blond and spoke in a detached tone, "How are you feeling, Mr. Flores?" Her tone betrayed the concerned nature of the query.

"Fine."

"That's good. You took 36 stitches. Two detectives are here to discuss your injury."

"I'll speak with them." Ava replied. The nurse turned her steely gaze on Ava "You can take that up with them, in the lobby. Your discharge papers are here, Mr. Flores. They include a prescription for the pain and instructions on how to care for your wound. When you're steady enough on your feet, I'd appreciate it if you left. This bed is needed for other patients, patients that don't court these kinds of injuries." She turned and left the room.

"What's her problem?" I asked Ava.

"She's an ER nurse." She stated as though no further explanation was necessary.

"So?"

"So, when she looks at you, and sees a Spanish last name coupled with a knife wound she assumes you're just some dumb beanie who got sliced up over drugs, or money, or whatever. You come in here, demand treatment, and will never pay the bill."

"Huh."

"You do have the money we gave you to pay the bill don't you?"

“Uh...I uh...”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“I met somebody that needed it more than me.”

“You sure about that?” I looked away from her and she stared at me silently before she continued, “I’m going out to speak to those detectives. Get yourself together, we’ll leave when I’m done.” With that she stood up and gave herself a look in the mirror. She was wearing black slacks and heels. The pants fit her well and showed off the swell of her ass. Her top was white; she undid a button and let a little cleavage peak out. She ran her long, red nails through her short, black hair and then applied a burgundy lipstick to her thick lips. She caught me staring at her in the reflection, “Try and control yourself,” she said gesturing with a head nod towards a section of my blanket that stood higher than the rest, I shifted around embarrassed at my obvious erection. She rolled her eyes and left the room. I heard her heels click all the way down the hall.

We checked out of the ER a short time later. When we got into the parking lot I realized my Grandfathers truck was gone. I pointed this out to Ava, “No shit your truck is gone. You showed up with a knife wound, and blood all over a truck with a smashed out window. Obviously the police are going to take an interest in such an evidence rich object.”

“I didn’t think about that.”

“A running theme in your life.”

“How about you cut me some slack, lady? I just got a surprise release from prison; I have no job, not much family, and not a clue what I’m supposed to do with the rest of my life.”

“We gave you plenty of slack; two years off of your sentence, five hundred dollars, and a ride home. In less than forty-eight hours you managed to get yourself seriously injured, spend all the money, and get your grandfathers truck impounded.”

“I didn’t spend the money, I gave it away.”

“Right.”

“I’m not a liar. What do you think I spent it on? What are you accusing me of?”

“Most ex-cons spend the money on sex, booze, or drugs. You didn’t get any of those in return for that money?”

“It wasn’t like that, I ... Look I just need a job, a little direction, that’s all”

“Fine. There’s a fiberglass plant in El Centro. I know one of the foreman, he can probably get you a job.”

“That would be great.”

“I’ll drive you over now. You can fill out the application and take the drug test. He’ll put you on as soon as your arms healed.”

“I ... “

“Exactly. Get in the car. I’ll drive you home.” I opened my mouth to protest but had nothing to say. She stared at me expectantly, waiting for the reply that eluded me. After a few seconds she gestured to a silver Mercedes Benz E350. I shut my mouth and slipped into the soft, leather seats of the luxury car. She got in and fired the engine, it had a manual transmission and I watched her small, brown hand

work the stick shift skillfully. The car slid in and out of gear smoothly; the speedometer hit a hundred, seconds after we got on the interstate.

“Don’t worry about the truck, our lawyers will have it released within a week.”

“What about the detectives?”

“They have been advised to contact your attorney with any further questions.”

“What if I want to press charges against the guy who did this to me?” She laughed in response to my question.

“We assumed that wouldn’t be the case. Were we wrong?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“Look I want to do good, really, I just need a job... or something.” She didn’t answer me at first, and just kept her dark eyes on the road ahead,

“How about, or something?” She finally asked.

“Like what?”

“Political activism.”

“I’m not too big on politics.”

“That’s surprising given that you were pardoned by a democratic president, and the current republican president elect called our people rapists and wants to deport us all.”

“Fair point. What do you want me to do?”

“I’ll let you know. Rest up and let that arm heal. I’ll be in touch soon.”

I spent a week at home waiting for her call. My arm healed up nicely and I took the bandage off. Thick, black stitches stretched in a horizontal line across my shoulder. I used my time to fix the damage done to my mother's home, replacing broken windows, painting over the graffiti, and giving the interior a deep cleaning.

My grandfather gave me a disappointed look when I told him about the truck. He was even more disappointed when the police dropped it off with the window shattered, and blood stains on the front seat. I promised to fix it when I made some money. He didn't respond.

I had been sitting around, leafing through car magazines I'd collected as a kid, when the phone finally rang at noon, on New Years Eve.

"John,"

"Hello, Ava"

"How are you getting along?"

"Fine. The trucks out of impound. My arms almost healed. I haven't heard from any detectives."

"You shouldn't. They consider the matter closed pending further developments. Will there be any further developments?"

"I don't think so," I hadn't heard from Hector and Dolores hasn't called or come by. I assume no news is good news.

"I have some work for you. Can you hold a sign and yell?"

"I guess,"

"Great. Be at the Yuma Palms mall by ten A.M. tomorrow."

"What happens then?"

"A bus will pick you up and bring you to Phoenix. You'll be part of an anti-hate rally."

"Sounds stupid."

"You going or not?"

"Sure, I'll be there. How much do I get paid?"

"Given that you were released due to the efforts of the group funding this rally, and the politicians it supports, I would think you would be more eager to engage in this sort of event."

"So..."

"You'll find out tomorrow. Wear all black. I'll see you there."

"You're going?" I asked, but she had already hung up. It seemed she was losing patience with me. I couldn't really blame her.

I woke up at dawn and made my way up to the main house. My Grandfather was grilling his morning steak. He put another one on as I approached,

"Your up early today," he observed.

"Gotta catch a bus to Phoenix. Found some work up there for the day."

"Doing what?"

"I'm not sure. I'll be working with the group that got me out of the brig."

"The Second Chance Society?"

"That's right."

"Hmmpff," he grunted and looked down at the steaks.

"You don't approve?"

"I'm thankful they got you out," he fixed me with a stare," but I don't trust anything funded by the globalist cabal."

"The what?"

"George Soros, Michael Bloomberg, you know all those Jewish billionaires funding left-wing activist groups."

"Look, I don't know anything about that. All I know is they said they'd pay me to show up at some rally today. It's an anti-hate demonstration, how bad can that be?"

"They say anti-hate, but its really a rally to fan hatred against everyone they don't agree with."

"They've been pretty good to me so far."

"You'll see what I mean when you get there. These 'peaceful protests' have devolved into riots over the past couple of years. The fact that they have to bus people in, and pay them to attend, I find very telling."

"I want to go, and if they cover my expenses, what's the big deal?"

"Nothing, forget it, you need a ride to bus stop?"

"Actually, I do."

"Fine,"

After breakfast we rode to the mall in silence. I was there two hours early. My grandfather offered some advice before going home, "Be careful," he said, and gave me fifty dollars. I felt pathetic. Twenty-five years old, no car, no money, no prospects, standing in an empty parking lot, wearing a black t-shirt, black jeans, and black boots. I walked over to a coffee shop that was open and sat at small table. I filled out an application as I sipped green tea. When I got to the question that asked if I had ever been a member of the armed services I checked yes. The next question was what kind of discharge I received. I crumpled the paper into a ball and threw the application out. Why would anyone hire somebody with a dishonorable discharge? I thought back to the day I got arrested.

It started with a loud banging on the metal door of my barracks room. Then a squad of military policemen and their snarling, drug sniffing, dogs burst in. My room was 8x10, the only decorations a cot, dresser, small desk and a chair. They ripped the place apart in minutes. Spit shined boots smashed all the furniture. Sharp knives shredded my bed. They found my stash in record time, tucked inside my mattress. It was oxycontin, morphine, and fentanyl I'd smuggled across the border the night before.

As soon as they held the bag up Colonel Lucas strode into the room, smiling as the handcuffs clicked closed around my wrists. It was an ugly smile; all twisted with the rage and dementia breed by missions of revenge,

"Wait outside marines." He ordered the MP's. They turned on their heels and left us there.

"It'll be tough for you to put your dick in my daughter from the brig, Corporal."

"Sir, this isn't what it looks like I--"

"You should have listened to me, spic. My daughter don't date wetbacks. Not even half-breeds as handsome as you," He sat down and lit a large cigar,

"now I warned you to stay away from her. I told you I'd get you if you didn't," he said pointing a fat finger at me.

"We love each other. We want to get married."

"I know it, son. Believe me I do, but it ain't gonna happen. Not when she finds out you're a drug dealer, just like every other Mexican in this country that aint working the field."

"I'm not selling this. It's-"

"For your poor, dear mother whose dying a cancer. Am I right?" The realization that he knew why I had the drugs and didn't care hit me like a wave. My mind raced, I came to the only possible conclusion quickly,

"You've been monitoring my phone..." He winked at me in response. Dolores had been calling me for days, complaining that the doctors weren't giving her enough medication for my mother's pain. I told her I would take care of it. Colonel Lucas had warned me off his daughter three months ago. He promised it would end poorly for me if I pursued the relationship. I'd given him everything he needed to succeed. I tried my ace in the hole,

"She's pregnant with your grandson," I informed him. We'd found out last month, I was going to ask his permission to propose after I'd dropped off the drugs for my mother. He smiled at my statement,

"Don't you think I know that?" He puffed on his cigar then shook his head. He got up and walked over to me. He put his big, acne-scarred face in front of mine and delivered a savage head-butt. I fell back on the bed, blood running down my nose, shooting stars falling in front of my eyes. The next thing I heard was his voice hissing next to my ear,

"Once she finds out what you are, I'll have that baby scrapped out of her so quick it wont even have a chance to whimper. Your going away, and I'm going to make your life hell on the inside. I'm retiring soon, and I got plans on being a powerful person, so you stay the fuck away from my family, and maybe, if your lucky, I'll leave you alone when you finally get out," with that he stomped out of the room. A pair of strong arms hauled me up and dragged me out of the barracks. The judge gave me five years. It could've been worse.

A small group began to gather in the parking lot. They arrived in beat up cars, bicycles, or on foot. They were all white. They wore all black. They talked in loud excited voices, and made animated gestures to punctuate what they must've considered, important points. They were either in their late teens to early twenties, or pushing seventy. All the young ones had tattoos, piercings, and earplugs. I waited until the bus arrived before I approached.

"Are you with us?" A tall, cadaverous man with a receding hairline and a long, grey ponytail asked in a hostile tone.

"I think so. Going to Phoenix?"

"Yes, yes, welcome." He said thrusting one of his long arms forward. He grasped my hand, and shook it vigorously,

"I'm Professor Jared Epstein," He announced by way of introduction.

"Johnny Flores, nice to meet you, professor."

"Flores? Your of Hispanic descent?"

"My mother was Mexican."

"Was?"

"Yes she passed recently."

"You have my condolences, young man. Doubly in fact, first for the loss of your mother, and second for being victimized by the painful rhetoric of the right. But fear not, we will smash the fascists. I have been protesting since I was younger than you. We destroyed Nixon, humiliated W, and we'll make mince meat of Trump."

"You seem pretty confident."

"We have *never* had the ability to organize like we have now. We shall overcome. On the bus now, quickly, quickly." He herded me on and then began rounding up other stragglers. I counted twenty-five of us as the bus lurched forward. I had just closed my eyes when a significant amount of weight thumped down in the seat next to me. I turned and saw a morbidly obese woman with bright, red hair and a nose ring, grinning vacantly at me,

"Hi! I'm Dawn."

"Hello," She smelled like body odor and marijuana.

"Donald Trump can suck my dick!"

"Can he? That's great, I'm sure he'll be thrilled too hear it."

"Oh he'll hear it all right. The whole world is going to hear us! *The people united can never be divided! The people united can never be divided!*" She began chanting. The rest of the bus quickly picked up the mantra. Soon they were all screaming it in unison. They followed it up with, "*Hey hey, ho ho this orange fascist has to go! Hey hey, ho ho this orange fascist has to go!*" It continued until Professor Epstein stood up at the front of the bus and called for quiet,

"Folks I am so proud to be a part of this protest, and am in open admiration of your enthusiasm, but I think we should try and save some of our energy for the event. It's going to be a long day."

"Maybe for you, old man!" Dawn yelled, "but the youth of today has plenty of energy! Stop trying to assert your institutionally gifted, patriarchal dominance over us!"

"Dawn, listen, I am not--"

"Stop patronizing me! I cannot be silenced by your toxic masculinity!"

"Dawn, please, I--" The professor was drowned out as Dawn covered her ears and let loose with an ear-piercing shriek. The older people looked embarrassed, the young people applauded and picked up the chant once Dawn stopped her earsplitting assault. After a few minutes the mantra ran out of momentum and died. Blessed silence settled back on the bus and I tried to get a nap in.

I woke with a start, as I was being pulled and pushed off the bus. When I stepped into the street someone handed me a cardboard sign. It was professionally made on sturdy laminate cardboard. It said, "NOT MY PRESIDENT!" in white lettering, on a blue background. I glanced around and saw there were four other buses discharging passengers, with the same signs, onto the streets of Phoenix.

Professor Epstein raised a bullhorn to his lips and shouted for the gaggle to follow him. We all moved forward. I estimated there were about a hundred and twenty-five of us. I didn't know where we were. I didn't know where we were going. I just started marching. Police in riot gear kept pace on our flanks. Some of the protesters screamed at them, "Murderers! Shame! Fascists!" They didn't respond and marched along with us. I couldn't see their eyes or faces under the helmets, but their stiff movements and rigid posture suggested apprehension. I got the feeling the whole situation could explode at any minute.

When we came to a busy intersection we stopped in the middle. Traffic halted in all four directions. Horns began to blare, the bullhorn led chants, the police bullhorn attempted to drown us out. They were issuing orders to disperse. Drivers were getting out of their cars and hurling backseat garbage. Soda cans, rolled up newspapers, waded up napkins, and loose change washed over us. I looked over and saw Dawn pick up a glass bottle that had been rolling around, Epstein saw it at the same time. Dawn's arm went back for the wind up,

"Dawn! No!" Epstein yelled, waving his arms trying to get her attention. She didn't hear, or didn't listen, and let the bottle fly. It wasn't a hard throw, but it was high. The bottle arched up and over the crowd before gravity gripped it tight, and sent it tumbling down onto a riot cop's helmeted head. The glass shattered and sprayed the four other cops around him. The dam broke.

The police methodically marched forward and unsheathed their sticks. The protestors surged out in all four directions in an attempt to break through. Bodies crashed, people screamed and howled. I stood in the middle trying to keep my composure. Everyone was reading from the same script except me. The police brought big canisters filled with mace forward and blasted the crowd. My nose started to run and my eyes teared up. I began to stumble through the mess, making my way toward an opening. A wall of blurry blue suddenly blocked my way. I discerned uniformed figures through the haze. They had gasmasks where their faces should have been. I put my hands up,

"I just want to leave," I announced between hacking coughs. Something hit me over the head and knocked me out.

I regained consciousness slowly. Beeps and chimes brought me back under a blare of bright lights,

"We gotta stop meeting like this." Ava said from a seat in the corner of the room. I took in my surroundings. It was another hospital and my head was pounding,

"What happened? Am I under arrest?" I asked sitting up in the bed.

"Not anymore. You were arraigned here in the hospital. Your lawyer was present and answered for you. You pled guilty to one count of obstructing vehicular traffic. The additional charges of disturbing the peace and resisting arrest were dropped. You're free to go as soon as the hospital discharges you."

"Resisting arrest? I was standing with my hands up and got pummeled." Ava shrugged and waved a stack of paperwork in her right hand,

"It's all here in the officer's report, if you care to read it."

"Forget it. I'm sure it's very thorough."

"Meticulous. Are you feeling well enough to leave yet? We can grab a bite to eat. My treat."

"Fine, Yeah." I swung my legs off the bed and slowly got to my feet. I was shirtless and in boxers. Ava handed me my clothes that were folded on a side table. I slowly dressed and she watched me. Her observations seemed more clinical than to stem from any sort of desire. I couldn't figure the message she was trying to send, if any. We walked out. Nobody said anything to us. The hospital was filled with people all moving quickly, each going about their separate tasks,

"Don't I need to pay a bill, or something?"

"The second chance society has already taken care of that."

"Un-huh. My lawyer too?"

"Naturally. You're welcome."

"You want a thank you? You people got me into this."

"Oh please. You would've gotten into trouble all on your own. Your what I would affectionately categorize as a shit magnet."

"Thanks."

"Consider it a term of endearment. What do you want to eat?"

"Steak."

"Let's do southwest instead."

"Then what the fuck are you asking me for?" She laughed in reply and brushed my arm with those red-tipped fingers. They felt electric and sent my stomach all a flutter,

"Relax. You'll like this place," We walked through a hissing, glass door that swished open automatically. We exited the hospital and walked into the dry, night air. Her Mercedes was parked directly in front of the exit. She had a hospital staff parking plaque in the dashboard,

"Do you moonlight as a Doctor?"

She laughed as we slid into the soft leather seats of the sedan, "We do a lot of work with the hospital. Many of the administrators and doctors are donors. It's a perk of the job." She started the car and we drove through the dark, city streets. She played the radio,

"Congratulations. You made the news."

A protest turned violent today in Phoenix. About one hundred demonstrators took to the streets and blocked traffic. They were chanting anti-Trump slogans and ignored multiple warnings from police to disperse. Arrests were made after the group began hurling objects at officers and attacking them. We'll have more on this story as it develops.

In other news President-elect Trump took to twitter today to wish his quote "many enemies," a happy New Year.

Some have expressed concern at use of the word enemies rather than opponents or-

She turned the radio off and gripped the steering wheel tightly as she accelerated through a yellow light. After a few more minutes of driving, we were outside the city limits. Ava stopped the car in front of a dimly lit, brightly-colored, one story structure that stood alone in the center of a wide, dirt lot. The facade of the building was decorated with cow skulls, dream catchers, bright suns with smiling faces, and paintings of sunflowers. There was no name above the bright, purple awning,

"You'll like this place," Ava repeated as she pulled into the dirt lot and parked.

"Looks closed."

She laughed before responding,

"This place never closes." We got out of the car and approached a wooden door that had been painted yellow. Ava turned the knob and found it locked. She reached into her pocket and produced a key. She pressed it in and the door opened,

"See." She smiled and winked at me as we walked in. There were fifteen tables that fit snugly into a thousand square feet of space. A bar stood against the left wall. The decor was all Aztec warriors and princesses, bulls, matadors, and grinning skulls.

Ava gestured to a table at the back of the restaurant and we made our way toward it. An old grey man stood behind the bar. He carefully avoided my eyes as I looked over. Two girls sat on barstools in front of him. Neither turned to look at us. One was fat, and the other skinny. They looked young judging by the shine in their dark hair and the unblemished, tight skin that was visible on their lower backs, arms, and legs.

We sat and the thin girl walked toward our table with a notepad in hand. She wore loose, short, cut off jeans and a deep v-neck top that showed her cleavage and rose just above her navel. Her hair was thick and cascaded down and around her thin face and light brown eyes. She looked younger than me, maybe seventeen or eighteen. She greeted Ava with a familiar smile. They spoke in Spanish, exchanging pleasantries until Ava ordered a vodka martini and chicken enchiladas with mole sauce. The waitress turned her attention to me and I asked for ice water and menudo. I didn't have much of an appetite.

"Not hungry?" Ava asked as the waitress sauntered away.

"My head hurts."

"Have a drink."

"I don't drink."

“Why not?”

“My father was a drunk.”

“I see. Was he cruel to you?”

“He was killed before I was born.”

“I’m sorry...”

I shrugged and changed the subject, “When do I get paid? Or do my wages go to offset the cost of the legal and medical bills?” She reached into her pocket and produced an envelope. She then handed it to me. I liked the way it felt. I peaked inside and counted ten, hundred dollar bills.

“Actually, you get a two hundred and fifty dollar bonus for getting arrested, and another two fifty for the injury. The rest is for the day.” I tried to cover my surprise and failed. She smiled,

“Would you be interested in more work like this?”

“I’ll be honest, I find the work pathetic, but the money is enough to keep me coming back.”

“You don’t think it’s a just cause? Protesting a hate-monger.”

“I really don’t know enough about him, and all this protesting seems so juvenile.” She shook her head in the affirmative before replying,

“Maybe if you stay with the organization we can find something more suited to your talents.”

“Like what?”

“We’ll see...you just keep establishing your bona-fides. Which is a good segway for me to gauge your interest in a new opportunity.”

“What’s that?” I asked, pocketing the money.

“Ever been to New York?”

“Negative.”

“Feel like going?”

“For what?”

“More of the same. Just like today, but on a bigger scale, and a bigger stage. There are daily protests in front of Trump tower, and D.C. is just a few hours away by bus or train. Inauguration day will be here soon,” I thought about it. The waitress brought our drinks. Ava smiled at me over her martini.

“Yes.” I said. She passed me another envelope, inside was a one-way ticket to Kennedy airport, in New York City. The flight was leaving out of Phoenix International in three hours.

I took the red-eye and tried to get some shuteye. Ava had given me a name and address in Manhattan. She said I could go there day or night. I’d never been to New York; she told me I’d be fine,

“Big cities are easy to get around,” she claimed. When I stepped off the train I didn’t believe her.

Everything moved too fast. The other passengers pushed forward and I was swept up in the surge. I wound up in a crush by the baggage claim. All I had was the money in my pocket. I asked around about how to get to Manhattan. After some blatant ignore jobs and surly responses I was pointed in the direction of something called the air train. I boarded it and settled in for the ride.

The morning sun shined over an urban sprawl. The streets and buildings looked hard and pale. The people were every shade of color, from black as night to light as day. The clothes were all different; Sikhs in turbans stood next to orthodox Jews in black hats, women in burkas sat next to businessmen in pinstripe suits. The train deposited me in a place called Jamaica. I learned from another passenger this was part of the borough of Queens. It didn't look like any place I wanted to be. Cops with AR-15s and leashed dogs stalked the elevated train platforms. Bums lay scattered about the station, laying on the floor or pacing anxiously, but most people were just passengers who kept their eyes forward, fixed on the next place.

I got on the wrong train and it took me an hour east, into the suburbs. I told the conductor my dilemma and he promised to get me on the right train at the next transfer station. I'd tried to get a little more sleep as the train swayed back and forth along the tracks. By one in the afternoon, I'd finally made it to Manhattan.

Outside of Penn Station, on the corner of Thirty-Fourth street and Eighth Avenue I let the world wash over me. I felt something as I stood there. It pulled at my guts, and buzzed in my head. It was pure energy, an intoxicating elixir of adrenaline and angst. Clearly the first natives that had settled here had been sensitive to this sensation. Same with the Dutch colonizers, and the English imperialists who'd ripped the outpost from their control. It must have also attracted the millions of immigrants who'd been drawn here from all corners of the world, and continued to arrive in daily droves. Standing there in the throng of things I saw what it was all about, and what the big deal was.

I ate two hot dogs, drank a soda, and began walking on Eighth Avenue to find the address I'd been given. After going the wrong way for two blocks I realized my mistake and turned around. When I got to Thirty-Eighth Street I made a left and passed Ninth Avenue. Traffic thinned out, and there were fewer buildings and pedestrians. I noticed vacant lots surrounded by high fences and littered with garbage. I could see there was plenty of new construction taking place, but the area still looked under developed compared to the district I had just left.

As I got closer to my destination a strong scent of piss smacked me in the face. It was a far more pungent odor than all the homeless I had seen so far could create. I saw a crumbling brownstone further down the street. Carriages sat in front and were being hosed down by top-hated drives. Horses were framed in the windows and shuffled about nervously. Just past the make shift stable I found what I had been looking for.

The Blue Wave Bookstore stood alone between two empty spaces that were used as parking lots. The smell from the horses hung heavy in the air. Across the street was a car garage that seemed to rely on the business of livery cars and yellow cabs judging by the vehicles that sat parked in front it. The store had a blue awning with white letters. It was two stories tall, and had a staircase that dropped below the sidewalk and indicated a basement. The storefront windows were all blacked out and shuttered. There were no hours of operation listed. I banged on the front as hard as I could.

Behind me, I heard a car door open and the sound of empty, aluminum cans clang onto the street. I turned around and saw a stocky guy with light, brown hair and a gray goatee stumble out the back of a white van with Illinois plates.

“What the feck is yer problem?” He slurred. He was wearing aviator sunglasses, white briefs with brown stains, and black socks.

“Don’t worry about it pops. Go back to bed.”

“Don’t you fecking tell me what to do!” He staggered closer and raised his fists. He looked to be in his late fifties or early sixties. He had big fists and broad shoulders. He exuded a blue-collar strength that, if wielded by a sober man, could be dangerous.

“Come mer ya little shet,” He swiped at me with both arms. I pivoted away and hit him with a quick jab. He took the shot on the chin and shook it off. I was impressed; he was a tough, old guy. He charged again and I drove an uppercut into his gut. He had a hard stomach, but between his forward momentum and the force of the punch he sank to his knees and retched. I got ready to hit him in the middle of his forehead with a straight right when I heard a female voice yell,

“Stop!” I turned in its direction. A diminutive girl with thick, black hair and thicker, black glasses was standing in front of the bookstore with her hands over her mouth. I dropped my hands to my sides and shook out the sting in my left hand. She ran over and helped the other combatant to his feet,

“Just what the hell do you think your doing?” She asked.

“I’m supposed to meet someone here. I was knocking on the door when this guy came out of that van and attacked me.”

“And who are you supposed to meet?”

“I don’t have a name,” I confessed. She shook her head and helped the older man toward the bookstore. They were about to go inside when I yelled after them,

“Ava Fuentes sent me!” The girl turned and reappraised me,

“Come inside,” she offered, eventually.

The lights were off, but as the girl drew up the metal shutter enough daylight poured in to make the interior visible. Row after row of dark, wooden bookshelves lined the black and white checkered floor space. There was a podium and about thirty folding chairs in the rear of the store. A counter, cash register, and small café was set against the wall to the right of the entrance,

“Wait here.” She commanded and led my challenger to the back of the store. When she had deposited him in one of the chairs she turned her attention back to me,

“Ava didn’t say anything about you coming.”

“I left late last night.”

“From where?”

“Phoenix.”

“And what are you supposed to be doing here?”

“Getting paid to protest Donald Trump.”

“Ha! Another one! In it for the money!”

“Hey, listen-“

“No you listen, this bookshop is staffed by all volunteers, understand? It’s a nerve center for the resistance. We plan protests, acts civil disobedience, and societal disruption to educate the un-, or ill-, informed. This is not a part time job where you punch in and out, and I wont have someone who is not one hundred percent committed to the cause on my team.” The sound of a beer can being opened

punctuated the end of her tirade. We turned and watched as the man in the back chugged a Budweiser. She sighed and shook her head. He finished the beer in five seconds, belched loudly, and scratched his hairy belly.

"James, will you please go back to the van?!"

"Huh? Oh yeah, in a minute. Got anything to eat around here?" He began rummaging around by the café.

"Look, I just spent three years in a military prison. Ava, and the second chance society, were able to get my sentence commuted. Since then I've been to one protest where I got my head caved in by a cop with a big stick," I said pointing to the stitches on my head,

"So cut my some slack will you? I'm all for the revolution, but I gotta eat too, right?"

"Damn right," said the man behind the counter with a mouthful of muffin. The girl's demeanor softened,

"Sorry, I'm just a little sensitive these days, and good help is hard to find," she said and nodded in the direction of the man behind the counter,

"This is James Hodgkinson from Illinois,"

"Hi James,"

"Call me, Tom."

"Weird, but okay. Hi Tom,"

"You hit like a bitch," he said and cracked open another Budweiser.

"Where are you getting those?" The girl yelled at Tom.

"I put some in the fridge last night after the meeting. They get too warm in my van." She sighed at the response before introducing herself,

"I'm Leah, Leah Katz," she offered a small hand and I clasped it gently,

"Nice to meet you Leah, I'm Johnny Flores," I saw her smile for the first time. The transformation was stunning. Her face went from thin and sharp, to soft and warm. Her dark green eyes, formerly filled with fury, let little sparkles loose that twinkled alluringly. She looked like a fiery, college student and although she wasn't the type of girl you'd ever call beautiful, I found her delightful, and hoped to make her smile again soon.

"Flores...are you Spanish?"

"My mother was Mexican."

"Perfect, we'll get you a Mexican flag to wave at the protest today. We've been dying to bring one, but we didn't want to speak on behalf of another culture." She said and paused, seeming rather pleased with herself.

"That's...really nice of you," I stated when it became clear she was waiting for her good taste to be acknowledged.

"Yes it is, here at Blue Wave Books we strive to create an atmosphere of free speech, diversity, and inclusion while maintaining sensitivity towards cultural appropriation, emotional triggers, disabilities, and allergies."

"Sounds exhausting."

"Haha! Well I find if you just let common sense and decency guide your principals it's pretty easy. Why don't you follow me? I'll show you where your room is. Tom, go back to your van please." Tom farted as we walked away.

"He seems nice."

“Tom’s only here for a little while. It may not seem like it right now, but he’s a very effective political organizer. I met him when I was working on Bernie’s campaign in Iowa. His passion for the working class is unmatched. Unfortunately when Bernie lost the primaries, and then endorsed Hillary, Tom took it very hard and has yet to recover.”

“He seems okay to me,”

“It’s not funny, Johnny”

“Okay, sorry. I’m sure he’ll bounce back.” She sighed in reply and didn’t answer at first. We stopped in front of a metal door, which she unlocked with one of the many keys that hung off a large ring.

“No, I don’t think he will, he really believed we would win. When Bernie didn’t even fight after the way Hillary stole that election from him, well, I think he lost hope in the process. But, with every loss comes a new opportunity. It takes disappointment like that to make you reevaluate methods and tactics. He’ll be leaving for Alexandria, Virginia soon. He has...some work to do down there, and it will be much more effective than anything we did in Iowa.”

“Oh yeah? What’s he doing?”

“Don’t worry about it,” she answered curtly, opening the metal door and descending down a narrow staircase.

It was cool and dark in the basement. A faint smell of mildew hung in the air. The concrete, cellar floor and ancient, brick walls stood in stark contrast to a long row of computers, and a large server, they were attached to. There was an electric hum in the room and the clicking of keystrokes echoed all around the cold stone. In the dark corners, I could make out military style cots, separated by blankets and flags that hung from the low ceiling. A small, black woman with a shaved head, and heavily made up face sat basking in the glow of the monitors. She was typing frantically on a keyboard, and nodding her bald head in time with a beat that played loudly from a pair of headphones.

“Jamie!” Leah yelled and the head perked up.

“Hmmm,”

“Take those off, please.” Leah asked miming the motion of removing the headphones with her hands. The girl rolled her big eyes and exhaled loudly,

“Whaaat?” came the reply as the speaker stood up and jutted out her hip.

“I want you to meet someone. This is Johnny, he just flew in from Phoenix-“

“And boy are his arms tired!” Jamie interrupted and began tittering with laughter. Leah sighed as Jamie sauntered forward and approached me with a big grin and fully extended arm,

“Hellllloooo, Johnny” Jamie said loudly. I reached out and took her hand. It was bigger than mine I took another look at the face and saw an adams apple,

“He’s cuuuute.” Jamie declared talking to Leah while looking at me. He grasped my hand tighter. I pulled it away and felt my face get hot,

“Shy too. I like that.” Jamie said and winked at me,

“Welcome to the revolution gorgeous. Leah, you goin do your job now? You know I can’t type and talk with these crazy crackers like you can. I been called the N-word some many times online today I swear my daddy’s on the other end a them computers.”

"I'll take over in a minute, Jamie. I just want to show Johnny around." Jamie sighed loudly and pouted,

"I got to get some rest if I'm a be myself at the service tonight!" Some bulk shifted around in one of the cots in the corner,

"Will you shut that faggot up, Leah? Some of us are still trying to sleep!" A southern drawl shouted from under a blanket.

"Beau! Please control yourself. You know I hate those words."

"I don't mind, Leah. That white boy is still embarrassed that he likes to chase me around whenever he drink too much a that rot gut liquor a his." Jamie taunted. The blankets flew off and a glass bottle came flying from the corner. Jamie ducked it easily and hooted,

"Enough! Please!" Leah begged. A large hulking shape emerged from the shadows.

"Ladies and gentleman! The meanest cracker on bof sides a the Mississipi, Beau Hendrix!" He stood there naked except for a pair of boxer shorts. His craggy face was pink, mean, and still puffed from sleep. His eyes were small, bright-blue, and red-rimmed. He looked about five nine, but was probably taller when his big shoulders weren't slouched. His arms, legs, and chest were a mess of knotty muscles and veins; his big lips were scarred and red. He stood like a bull, readying for a charge, Jamie pirouetted and executed a split leap, gracefully mocking the man. Violence appeared immanent.

"Knock it off you two," A deep female voice stated and entered the fray,

"Nice to meet you Johnny." The new comer said and came into view. She was a tall and square shaped, not fat, but solid. She shook my hand firmly with a grip that was ice cold. Her light, brown hair was close cropped and flecked with grey. She wore a tank top and olive green fatigues,

"I guess were all up now." She observed and began blatantly scratching herself, I'm Peg, Peg O'Neil." She had an eagle globe and anchor tattoo on her impressive right bicep, a rainbow flag on the equally impressive left.

"Nice to meet everybody. I see your one of Uncle Sam's misguided children as well, Peg."

She laughed and replied,

"I was, until my CO got tired of looking at a lesbo all day. I got drummed out when W. was commander in chief."

"You would think that dumb ass had more important things to worry about." I observed.

"Like committing war crimes." Leah chimed in.

"What's your story, Johnny? We're all ex-military here, except for Leah, she's been a commie since she could crawl."

"and proud of it!"

"I got court-martialed for possessing narcotics, with intent to distribute."

"An entrepreneur! Careful Leah, looks like a capitalist in our midst."

"As if you're not a fascist, Beau."

"I was a fascist until I got the boot. Now I'm closer to an anarchist."

"Why did you get kicked out?" I asked Beau.

“Dumbass kept driving drunk and crashing his shitty, red-neck pick-up trucks.”

“Jamie, if you don’t shut the fuck up I’m a twist that ugly burr head clean off a-“

“Beau, that’s enough! I will have you thrown off of this operation if you don’t stop using that kind of language.”

“You can take the whip out of the crackers hand, but you cant take the-“

“You too Jamie! Stop it! Tell us Johnny what happened after your court martial?”

“I did three years in the brig. I was sentenced to five. One day Ava showed up with a guy from the justice department. They told me President Obama commuted my sentence.”

“God bless him.” Said Jamie.

“I love him.” Said Leah.

“A good man.” Peg agreed.

“Fuck him, and fuck you too, Johnny. I’m going to take a shower.” Beau said stalking off to another room. Leah sighed,

“Well, I have work to do,” she sat at a computer, cracked her knuckles one at a time then began frantically typing. Her face fixed with a hard stare and she bit her lower lip in concentration. I heard snoring coming from one of the bunks and looked over to see Jamie fast asleep.

“You hungry, John?” Peg asked me.

“Yeah, sure.”

Come on,” She led me out of the dark room and into a smaller, darker one. There was a small kitchenette set up. Peg opened the fridge and set out a bowl of hard-boiled eggs on a small round table. I started peeling one as she set up a blender and started scooping protein into it,

“This isn’t a bad gig, John. We protest every night, usually at Trump tower, and get paid cash. We get to crash here, which isn’t great but its better than nothing, and you cant beat the location.” She turned on the blender and mixed up a shake. When the noise died down she continued,

“Beau and I got a membership at a gym down the block, wanna join us for our workout?”

“Sure thing,” I popped an egg in my mouth and softly banged another on the edge of the table,

“How many people live down here?”

“Depends. People come and go. Some stay a night, others for weeks. Right now it’s just us. There’s one other guy, Tom, we make him sleep in his van though.”

“I met him. I can see why,” she laughed before replying,

“He’s what we call a useful idiot, know what I mean?”

“I do.”

“What did you do in the Corps?”

“Intelligence,”

“Then you know exactly what I mean,” she winked at me.

“I didn’t do much field work. I got busted soon after my training ended.”

“All that knowledge and no implementation. That’ll change,” she smiled and cracked an egg.

Peg, Beau, and I walked over to a gym on Eleventh Avenue. None of us looked like we belonged there. It was a bright, modern facility with mirrors everywhere. The equipment was all shiny and new. Handsome men and gorgeous women did Yoga and something called crossfit. It looked suspiciously similar to a boot camp workout. Everyone was drinking green sludge at a juice bar. It had something called kale as its main ingredient. Beau and Peg went straight for a flat bench and began loading up a barbell with forty-five pound plates. I looked around for a heavy bag. I saw one, slumped and neglected, in the far corner. The hook for it stuck out of the ceiling above and I hoisted the bag up with considerable effort.

There was an effeminate male seated behind the front desk. His thumbs were thoroughly engaged with a cellphone. I asked for a pair of boxing gloves, hand wraps, and a jump rope. The hand wraps I purchased for ten dollars, and after five minutes of a lethargic search, he produced the jump rope and gloves.

I started skipping rope. I built up a good sweat, shaking off my body's rust. My breathing grew a little more labored and I struggled to keep up the tempo. The slap of the rope against the floor, and the hiss as it passed over my head stirred the competitive instinct that had slumbered for so long inside me. It roused its head like a lazy lion and yawned wide, readying for a roar. I skipped the rope faster. Sweat began to drip down my forehead and into my eyes. It stung like shame.

After a few more minutes I wrapped up my hands. I was breathing heavily as I wound soft cloth around my callused palms and scarred knuckles. The gloves slid on easy and I began to circle the bag. I bounced on my toes and got my head moving. I shifted my hands around. The bag hung there unaware of the hate I began projecting on it. Colonel Lucas came first and earned a few stiff jabs. My father came next and caught a few combos, the Military Policemen that arrested me were leveled, the judge from my court martial got a pair of kidney shots, every guard I'd had in the brig caught one in the teeth. Suddenly Donald Trump thrust himself onto the bag. He began shouting obscenities about my mother out of his big mouth. He called me a wetback and told me to go back to Mexico. He told me to take all my beaner brothers and sisters with me. He shouted, "America is closed!" and gave me the finger.

The chain ripped loose from the ceiling and the bag went flying against the wall shattering the mirror that covered it. The guy behind the counter squealed, all the yoga people stopped and stared, Peg and Beau laughed.

"It was an accident," I said and was politely asked to leave.

I walked back to Blue Wave books alone. Peg and Beau said they were going to finish their workout. It was late in the afternoon and a weak sun was already setting. The wool hat on my head soaked up the sweat that was still pouring out of me. My scalp itched from the stitches I'd acquired back in Phoenix. I began to wonder what I was doing here and thought about the upcoming protest tonight. I hoped I wouldn't get hit over the head again, or arrested, no matter how lucrative it was.

When I was back in the basement Leah was still in front of the computer and typing frantically. I watched her. She seemed not to notice me. Every few minutes she'd snort indignantly, or laugh incredulously. I looked over her shoulder and asked what she was doing,

"I'm Tweeting."

"What's that?"

"You're kidding me," I stared blankly in response,

"You're not kidding me. Pull up a chair, gramps, I'll tell you all about it. Social media dominance, Johnny, is an important part of political warfare. You've heard of facebook, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, twitter is similar, the difference is you can only type a few sentences. Trump used it to great effect during the campaign. He's still using it, even though most people are begging him to stop."

"What does he say?"

"All kind of horribly divisive things. I counter them all the time. I run an army of bots down here."

"Bots?"

"Yes. I create twitter accounts of made up people, or real people whose info I collected online, and program them to argue with right-wingers. They also agree with, and bolster, each others points."

"Seems dishonest."

"The other side does it too. We're just better at it. Big tech is on our side."

"Big tech?"

"Yes, all the social media companies, search engines, you know computer geeks, like me only famous and rich. They block right wingers who engage in hate speech, and make sure more tolerant users gain maximum exposure."

"They pick favorites?"

"Uh-huh. Good for us right?"

"If you say so. What time is the demonstration tonight?"

"You guys should be there by eight. There's a chest full of black clothes in one of the back rooms. Make sure you get changed and grab something to cover your face."

"Are you coming?"

She laughed before replying,

"Not me. I'm more of a behind the scenes coordinator."

"How do I get that job?" I asked while picking at the stitching on my head."

"You don't enjoy engaging in acts of public disobedience?"

"Yelling and screaming like an asshole in public, what's not to like?"

She stopped typing and took her eyes off the screen in front of her. She appraised me before turning back to her work,

"Stick around, Johnny. There may be more for you to do around here in the future, but for now hit the streets.

"Aye, aye Ma'am," I replied saluting, before marching off for my obligatory black attire. I heard her giggling behind me as I left.

We stood on Fifth Avenue in front of the enemy's iconic structure. There were about fifty of us. We were outnumbered by a larger group of seventy-five Trump supporters. The gold, gaudy letters gleamed down at us from behind the shiny, black background. "TRUMP," it seemed to scream in my face like a bellicose bully in a schoolyard daring me to take a swing. I looked across at his supporters; they were mostly old and overweight, pale and pink. They draped themselves in all manner of American flag covered attire. The sight of the stars and strips stretched tight over their outsized bodies began to enrage me. Cops stood in front of metal barricades. They looked bored and cold. Some held Ar-15's, others held dogs, and others were dressed in suits with earpieces stuck in their heads. They all looked like dicks. They had the same faces as those Military Policemen that arrested me. It was a look of smug indifference.

"Hold up that sign, sugar. Let me hear you yell!" Jamie was next to me screaming, "Not my President!" along with the rest of the detractors. They waved their stupid signs. Mine said, "No human is illegal!" I dropped it on the ground and walked through the crowd. I had a headache and my stitches itched. I saw a small café and crossed the street to get a cup of coffee.

"Where you going, jerkoff?" Asked a voice from behind me. I turned and saw two men in hooded sweatshirts and blue jeans. They had badges hanging around their necks.

"Just getting a cup of coffee, Officers."

"Your doing a lot more than that," One declared.

"You just committed multiple violations of the New York City Municipal code," the other informed me.

"Did I? I'm sorry. What exactly were they?"

"Littering,"

"And jaywalking,"

"Also I believe I saw you spit on the ground,"

"Bullshit," I declared.

"Now you are using profane language in a public place,"

"You also obstructed the flow of traffic when you crossed outside of the crosswalk,"

"And to make matters worse now your blocking pedestrian traffic on the sidewalk,"

"What are we going to do about this?"

"You're creating quite the disturbance,"

"And causing quite a few people to become annoyed and alarmed,"

"I'm afraid I'll need some ID," they smirked in unison at me. I found myself at a Crossroad. I could present the ID politely; acquire a few tickets and walk away. Or I could do something else. Something I really wanted to do.

"We don't have all day, jerkoff." I bolted away from them, across the street, and through the crowd. The cops pursued and we all got jostled in the middle of the mob. Something stirred in the group and everyone surged towards the police barricades, I rode the thrust forward letting the tide take me. I reached the front of the throng and stepped on someone's back, then somebody's shoulder, and finally some unfortunate soul's head. It become my springboard and I leaped over the

barrier. I landed in front of the enemy's gates. There was a green trashcan on the sidewalk. I picked it up and hurled it forward toward the black, glazed glass. It smacked against the surface of the building and bounced off. It came flying back at me and smashed into my chest. I landed flat on my back, the wind knocked out of me. The two cops hovered over me as I gasped for breath,

"Nice job, jerkoff," one said. The other laughed before dropping his knee onto my forehead.

I was shackled at the scene and dragged into an ambulance. I heard Jamie yelling that they'd bail me out. I also heard Peg and Beau making fun of me. I barely remember the ride. The EMTs were swabbing the back of my head, the stitches had opened again and I was bleeding all over the place. The hospital stay was kind of hazy. I was stitched up in a hallway; lined up in a row with other patients, mostly homeless people that smelt like piss, stale booze, and dried vomit. The two plainclothes cops that busted me were there the whole time. They were laughing hysterically at my failed charge. Two correction officers brought in a prisoner dressed in an orange jumpsuit, and they all had a good laugh when they heard the story,

"You a dumb white boy," the prisoner observed and they all laughed even harder.

After three hours I was discharged and the cops brought me back to the precinct. I sat in a small cell for an hour until a lawyer from the foundation showed up. I was released on two hundred dollars bail, which was paid by the lawyer. He was a small, grey man on the older side of middle aged. He looked at me with a lazy eye before handing me an envelope filled with cash,

"Keep up the good work, young man. You're showing quite a commitment to the cause." With that he left me in front of the precinct. Leah was standing on the sidewalk. She looked concerned and came over staring at the knot on my forehead.

"For someone that doesn't like to protest you sure make the most of it." She wore the look of concern well,

"It's not so bad," I said and she grew angry,

"We're going to make those fascists pay for this. When Obama was in office they were running scared. Now these pigs think they can act with impunity. First thing we are doing is filing a civilian complainant against the officers who did this. Then we'll have the foundation start to draw up a police brutality lawsuit. I'm going to scour the Internet for video of the incident. I'm sure I can edit it to-

"Leah, I just want to smoke a joint and go to bed."

"Of course. I can help with that too." She said and smiled. Some of the fury faded from her emerald eyes, but not much." We walked back to the bookstore. After two blocks I had hard time keeping my balance and I stumbled into her. She looked up at me, smiled, and took my arm to steady me. The gesture was filled with a gentle kindness I hadn't experienced in years. Her close touch excited me, and as we walked together I began to breath in the sweet scent of her hair and skin. I felt a familiar ache form.

Peg was at the computer when we came in. The blue light from the bank of monitors bathed her face. She waged her cyber war against the right in silence and

barely looked at us. I had expected a snarky comment, but she seemed so caught up in an online argument that she didn't bother.

Leah guided me through the labyrinth like basement until we came to a metal door. She unlocked it with a key and we went inside a room no bigger than eight by six. It was nicer than the other quarters I'd seen. The floor was hard linoleum instead of bare concrete. The harsh brick walls were covered with soft, thick, pink curtains. Her bed was white with a frilled comforter and laced pillows. There was a pair of plush white chairs in the far corners.

"Have a seat," she offered. I sank into one of the chairs and laid my head against the back of it. She dug through a small dresser and produced a plastic bag filled with weed. The skunk smell of it hit me as soon as the seal was broken. She pinched out a few choice buds and packed a small, glass bowl with one. After lighting a match, and inhaling deeply, she passed it my way. I gratefully inhaled and held the smoke for as long as I could. She sat on her bed and took back the pipe. We smoked in silence for a while, enjoying the quiet. My headache went away, the tension eased. I felt that weightless feeling I so often sought, like I would lift out of the chair at any moment.

"I don't smoke much anymore," Leah confessed giggling, "it's a tool of subjugation. Nowhere near as damaging as the opium crises we've unleashed, but destructive nonetheless."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"As the right once flooded neighborhoods of color with heroin and crack, we flooded the suburbs with prescription pills. It takes a lot for a middle class kid to stick a needle in his or her arm. They don't dwell in the desperation of the inner city; therefore they don't seek such extreme escapes. But when you fill their parents medicine cabinets with addictive drugs, prescribed by doctors...well then you can addict the most unassuming of America's youth. The key to change in United States has always been the white middle class. If we can gut the meaty core of this country then we can implement a true restructuring of this unjust society."

"How?"

"Take their jobs, addict and or indoctrinate their children, destroy their health with poisoned food, addle their intellects with alcohol. On a long enough timeline America will extinct itself because of its excess. Donald Trump is the last gasp of a dying class. True socialism will soon take its place. Finally, there will be equality for all." She sat back on her bed and gazed at the wall. A manic look of happiness shone on her face. It was the look of a true believer, one who is completely committed to a cause and harbors no doubts about its justness. It was frightening to behold in repose.

"You're a part of it now, Johnny. You're part of the resistance. You can go as far as you want with us, and I can help you." It sounded good. I always wanted to be a part of something larger than myself. I thought I'd found that in the Marine Corps, until that ended in disaster. I was being offered a second chance. It was more than most people ever got, and more than I deserved.

"I'd like that." I said and dug myself a little deeper.

The next week passed pretty easily, and I settled into the role of a professional protestor without any more injuries from the police. We picketed late into the night, and slept in during the day. When I woke up I went to the gym. After I apologized for breaking the mirror I was able to obtain a membership. Beau and Peg kept their distance, Leah said they stuck together and treated everybody that way,

“A stranger pair I’ve never seen,” she confided in me one night as we sat in her room and passed the pipe back and forth,

“But politics breeds strange bedfellows, and shared experiences make for good alliances. Just think, had they not been alienated by the military they would probably despise one and other. Now they are partners, soldiers in the resistance, like us.”

“I don’t feel like a soldier. Waving that sign around and yelling slogans makes me feel like an idiot.”

“It serves a purpose.”

“I’m not so sure. Do you really believe that? What about all your online squabbling? You think that makes a difference?”

“Of course, it shows dissatisfaction, and breeds resentment. We must foster a sense of general chaos and unrest. The average Trump voter must be made uncomfortable whenever possible. The goal is so they associate their president with the punishment they receive. Eventually, they’ll turn on him.”

“I haven’t seen Tom around lately.” I said, changing the subject.

“People come and go around here. Mr. Hodgkinson has moved on to another operation.”

“That’s pretty vague.”

“Its best to forget the people you meet here.”

“Like you?” I asked and sat next to her on her bed.

“Yeah, like me. I’m bad news, Johnny,” she smiled at me and winked. We’d been flirting all week and I decided now was as good a time as any to go for it,

“I’ll be real careful then,” I said and slowly moved in for a kiss.

“You better be,” She met me halfway and our lips touched for the first time. We kissed slowly, exploring the unfamiliar territory, she tasted sweet, I ran my fingers through her thick, dark hair and pushed her down on the bed. The marijuana altered my perception of time. A moment became an eternity; everything seemed to occur slowly, then repeat, on a loop. I felt her small, full breasts; she grabbed my cock through my jeans. The cycle repeated. Trapped in a moment over and over until I finally pulled off her pants and lifted her shirt over her head. She wore no bra, her cherry, red nipples stood tall. She pulled my jeans down past my waist and guided me in with her small delicate hands. She was tight and I had to work my way

in. She moaned and pulled back, then slid forward. A new loop started, I stayed deep inside her while kissing her nipples, and then, gradually, I began to thrust harder and harder, faster, then slow again, cycling through the loop, her moaning, me grunting, her hands exploring my chest, up over my neck, me pulling up to kiss her and then back down to her breasts, and then finally it happened, suddenly, and violently and her eyes went wide as I gazed deep inside them.

After, we lay next to each other in her small bed. She lit the pipe again and we each took a couple of hits, she followed with a cigarette that I declined to share with her,

“How long are you going to stay here, Johnny?”

“As long as I keep getting paid, I guess. I got nothing else to do.”

“No family to go back to?”

“Just my grandfather. My mother passed away from cancer while I was locked up. My father died...before I was born.”

“I’m sorry. How did he die?”

“Violently.” She stayed silent. Curiosity was gnawing away at her good manners. With visible effort she beat back the follow up questions and got up to dress.

“Where you off to?” I wanted her to stay with me. I hadn’t enjoyed a woman’s comfort since I’d been in Arizona and that had been rudely interrupted.

“I’m on shift at the computers, sorry, but the cyber war rages on.”

“Blow it off. Stay with me.” She grew very serious at the suggestion,

“I can’t do that Johnny, they’d know.”

“Who? The foundation?”

“Them...and others. The Second Chance Society is just a spoke in the wheel. Money to fund these kind of operations comes from lots of people, and those people expect results.”

“Like who?”

“Who do you think? You’re a smart guy. Who got you out of prison?”

“Ava.”

“And?”

“The Justice Department lawyer, Brett something, I don’t remember, I’ve been hit in the head a lot since then.” She smiled,

“Who else?” I shrugged, and then something occurred to me,

“You don’t mean?”

“Of course I do. There is a war going on in this country, the world really. Nations and borders are an antiquated idea. Civilization needs evolve. A unified world government is the only way true progress can continue.”

“That’ll never happen.”

“It is happening. World War Two was the end of empires; the collapse of the Soviet Union sealed the deal. With only one superpower remaining the objective became easy, all that was needed was enough like-minded people in the right places. It starts in the schools, one generation teaches the next, that generation goes on to infect all levels of the system. A bureaucracy of globalists begins to carry out the day-to-day business of the United States government. Elections become inconsequential. The entrenched establishment continues affecting policies, and

implementing change, promoting those loyal to the cause, and black balling the careers of obstructionists. Tax dollars are funneled into loyalists firms. Science and technology become beholden to the cause. Our confederates make fortunes; they purchase media and entertainment conglomerates. Echo chambers are crafted; our version of reality is printed, aired, and becomes entrenched in America's psyche. We control the narrative, we drive the nation."

"Then explain Trump's election," I challenged. She simply shrugged, unperturbed by my observation,

"All that does is slow the slide toward socialism. The bourgeoisie bought another four years at most. The point is, no matter who gets elected, this country, and by extension the world, moves closer and closer toward a single, socialist government. Humanity has learned a valuable lesson from the destruction of the last century. Million of working class men, women, and children slaughtered for the fortunes of a select few. This century's masses are not so stupid. The information age has awakened them, the elite no longer have an exclusive hold on the distribution of knowledge."

"Sounds to me like that's exactly what they have."

"It's not the same, whose side are you on anyway?" she snapped as her emerald eyes flashed with fury.

"Hey, I'm with you." I said raising my arms in surrender. She glared at me from behind her thick, black glasses. An angry zealot had replaced the pleasant, giggling girl I'd shared a bed with,

"You should get dressed. Your service starts soon." With that she walked out leaving me naked and alone in the dark room. I sighed and got dressed in my black clothing. I was getting bored; the only thing that had been keeping me occupied was my time with Leah. She was normally so pleasant to be around and I hoped that my needling hadn't just killed a relationship that had barely begun.

When I walked out into the main room she didn't look up from her bank of computers. Her fingers were slamming the keyboard more violently than usual. I saw Jamie giving me a critical look. I turned to meet his disapproving gaze. He rolled his heavily, massacred eyes and motioned for me to leave with him. We exited the basement and walked into the cold January air.

"Trust me, you don't want to argue politics with that girl, Johnny."

"I just made some observations."

"She ain't like you and me."

"We aint alike." I pointed out.

"Oh really? That what you think?"

"I'm not black, gay, or wearing make-up, so yeah that's what I think."

"Well we both got kicked out of the military."

"True."

"And I bet you was raised by a conservative daddy like me."

"Grandfather,"

"Close enough. And when you joined the Marines it was a way outta nowhere, am I right?"

"You are."

“So see that? And now we both caught up in the resistance. We got a lot more in common than you think. Leah, though, she a whole different story, grew up commie R.E.D., baby. Her granddaddy’s good name got dragged through the mud by the H.U.A.C.”

“The what?”

“House Un-American Activities Committee, you know the red scare? Not ringing any bells?” It wasn’t, so I just shook my head.

“Man, you ignorant. Crack a book every now and then, cracker. Basically, the committee was set up to investigate and expose suspected communists in the United States. It started in the late thirties and was operational until the seventies. Leah’s grandfather was a Hollywood screenwriter who got blacklisted after the committee dragged his name through the mud during the Hollywood Ten hearings.”

“The Hollywood Ten?”

“Damn you stupid! Yes the Hollywood Ten, a group of writers and producers who got convicted by the committee for contempt of congress.”

“Why? What did they do?”

“Well, the committee accused them of spreading communist propaganda through their films. When they showed up to testify they threw some shade, and talked a lot of shit to the committee chairmen.”

“Leah’s grandfather was one of those ten?”

“No, Leah’s grandfather was one of seventy-nine who got subpoenaed, only ten of those actually showed up to testify. They became the Hollywood Ten.”

“What happened to the others?”

“Some got fined, some lost their jobs, and some were blacklisted and never worked again. A few came out unscathed, probably by providing testimony against others.”

“And Leah’s Grandfather?”

“He blew his brains out.”

“I see...”

“Uh-huh, Politics is a blood sport for that baby girl. She grew up marching on May Day and singing the Internationale before supper. Wait until you meet her parents!”

“Why? What’s wrong with them?”

“They just as radical as she is, you’ll see. Now lets get ourselves good and outraged we almost there. You feeling ready to resist?”

“Cant wait, no justice no peace.”

“That’s the spirit, Johnny. Lets go pick up our signs.”

I managed to keep myself from getting arrested and Jamie and I made it back to the bookstore without incident. Leah was still basking in the blue glow of the cyber battlefield,

“Shouldn’t Beau or Peg have relieved you by now?” I asked hoping to get her back into bed,

“They’re out on another operation. They’ll be gone for a few days.” I looked at one of the monitors and saw a facebook profile for James Hodgkinson. He was on a tear, spewing all kinds of threats and hatred about republicans. I noticed Leah was

commenting back under various usernames she had assumed. Some profiles praised the remarks, and others condemned them,

“You’re going to push old Tom over the edge if you keep at him like that.”

“Do you need something, John?”

“Yeah, you.”

“Well I’m busy. A messenger from the society came by with last weeks pay, it’s in an envelope over there.” She said gesturing with her chin towards an empty desk with an idle computer.

“I’m sorry about before. I didn’t mean anything by it.” I said placing my hands on her shoulders. She shrugged them off like I was a sex offender,

“Don’t presume too much, John.”

“Alright, forget it.” I wandered over to the desk and sat down. I picked up a fat envelop with my name on it and put it in my pocket. I started to click around on the computer. I searched the internet for something to catch my eye. Leah encouraged me to check CNN and MSNB at least twice a day to keep current on the day’s plan of attack. I scrolled through the headlines distractedly. I was thinking about Leah and what was between her legs. I wanted her again. She felt me looking at her and fixed me with cold stare,

“You’re making me uncomfortable, John.” She said as though that declaration would stop the crouch in my jeans from stretching.”

“I’m pretty uncomfortable myself now that you mention it,” I smiled and nodded toward the bulge in my pants.

“Classy, John. I do so adore being sexually harassed.”

“Geez, lighten up,”

I sighed and turned back to the computer, my lust threatening to turn to rage.

A headline caught my eye,

“Marine Colonel Retires, Eyes Soon To Be Vacant House Seat,”

“Can’t be,” I said allowed as I clicked on the article. The weathered, pitted face of Colonel Lucas was at the top of the story. He smiled grotesquely, the act betrayed the man and revealed his true nature. Or maybe only I could see it because I’d seen his true smile, the one that came out when he was really enjoying himself, and that only occurred when a helpless quarry was being crushed under his boot. I read on.

The election of President Trump has set off a wave of retirements in the house and senate, and Arizona’s third district is no exception. For weeks speculation has been rampant on who will fill the vacant seat. Last night at the retirement party for one, Colonel Duke Lucas, a big hint was dropped. Outgoing Senator Jeff Flake was on hand for the festivities and during his remarks the Senator suggested that more men of honor were needed in our nations capitol. He went on to say that he heard the Colonel was looking for a new job, before declaring to much (knowing?) applause,

“I hear there’s an opening in the third!”

The Colonel would not confirm or deny that he was seeking a nomination saying only,

“We’ll see what happens. Right now I’m focusing on spending more time with my family.” When asked if he would be moving back to Michigan, where he is originally from, the Colonel said,

“The Third District of Arizona has been our home for three years now and I don’t see us leaving anytime soon.”
Not even for Washington?
“Well, like I said, anything can happen.”
Anything indeed.

I picked up the computer and smashed it against the wall. My vision was going black. I stormed out the door into the dark night. Snow was swirling in the blustery wind. Blood was pounding in my ears and made it hard to hear. I thought I heard Leah yelling after me, but it was so faint it could’ve been my imagination. I was walking without thought or direction. My mind was like a blaring, neon sign; crimson light blasted through my eyeballs and washed the world in brilliant, red blood. I found myself staring down at the Hudson River. It’s churning; frigid waters as deadly as the intentions being birthed in my soul. The idea of revenge reached up from my gut and grabbed me by the throat. It had been there since my incarceration, festering, waiting, and growing, soaking like soap in gasoline, and once lit just as impossible to put out. The thought of the man, who had destroyed my life, acquiring more power now provided necessary resolve. The killing itself would be easy now.

PART 2

He set his campaign office up across the street from the Marine Corps Air Station in Yuma, Arizona. There was no shortage of volunteers to staff it. Both enlisted troops and commissioned officers lined up to suckle on the power teat. The consensus was in, Colonel Lucas was a riser, an easy win congressman with eyes on ailing John McCain's senate seat. Get your name known now or remain in obscurity, because after the senate? Well, who knew what he would do next?

When I had known the Colonel he'd been the Commanding Officer of my unit in Camp Pendleton, California. From what I had read online he'd been transferred to oversee this air station in Yuma, Arizona sometime after my arrest. It seemed serendipitous that he'd been relocated twenty-five miles from the farm I'd grown up on. I dyed my hair jet black and grew a short beard. I got a job bar backing in a jarhead, dive bar.

It was two stores down from his campaign office. I picked up all the good scuttlebutt there. I worried I might run into someone I'd crossed paths with during my time in the Corps, or worse, someone I'd gone to high school with, but with my new look, and feigning a lack of English, I was reasonably sure I'd be safe. Besides, Yuma has always been a town of transients; marines and migrants all come and go. The only things they leave behind are the offspring they spawn, who in turn leave as soon as they're grown.

It was March 15, 2017, about two months since I'd stormed out of New York. I hadn't heard from Leah, Ava, or anyone from the foundation since I'd left. I reluctantly stayed away from Rosa to preserve my anonymity and to avoid further complicating her life and mine. I missed her though, and during sleepless nights I pined for the comfort of an old friend and lover. I had been staying in my mother's trailer, devising plans to get close and kill the Colonel. When I wasn't obsessing over strategy and motivating myself to murder, I went hunting and fishing with my grandfather. One helped with the other. My grandfather questioned me about my new look, I just told him I was trying to make a fresh start. He didn't buy it, but he was polite enough to bit his tongue. He was still sharp and suspected I was up to something. He knew Lucas was in town, and that he had been the driving force behind my incarceration. The candidate had been making national news, largely because he enjoyed engaging in Trumpian rhetoric.

I was sweeping the sidewalk in front of the bar when the Colonel came out. It was my first time seeing him up close since my arrest. He wore a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and navy blue pants. A pale, yellow tie hung loose around his neck, and his shirt collar was unbuttoned. He bit the end off a cigar and spit it where I had just swept. He then gazed west, squinting into the setting sun.

I was unable to tell if he'd spit the refuse toward me on purpose, or if he was that oblivious to those he deemed beneath himself. Neither would have surprised me.

I kept my head down and concentrated on controlling my breathing. I turned away from him and felt his eyes strafe my back. They stayed fixed on me until the door to his office opened and an ambitious aid asked for some clarification on upcoming events. The Colonel, in his customary manner, berated the young climber, waving a cigar in front of his flinching face before snatching the papers and making changes with a gold pen produced from a shirt pocket. I took the opportunity to retreat into my place of employ.

It was cool and dark inside. A few patrons sat scattered along the length of the bar. They were all staring deep into in their own reflections, found either at the bottom of a glass, or the long mirror behind all the bottles. The cocktail tables and chairs opposite the bar were empty. I gave them all a perfunctory wipe down, while slowly making my way across the room towards the kitchen in back. The front door swung open and banged against the wall, shattering the cool and comforting silence the denizens had enjoyed. Everyone but me started at the sound. The loud noise was followed by the smell of cigar smoke and the Colonel's voice, still berating his assistant and calling for a glass of Jameson whiskey. The bartender was about my age and recently discharged,

"Sure thing, Colonel," he said and continued in a timid voice,

"uh, Colonel, sir there's uh no smoking allowed...in...here..." his voice cracked and trailed off. The declaration was met with stony silence. I knew without looking the stare that was being drilled into the bartender. I'd been on the receiving end of it myself.

"In the future, I mean, if you could just...maybe... keep that...in mind." The Colonel sat down and shifted his focus to his drink, ignoring the bartender. He made no move to pay for his whiskey.

I walked into the kitchen as casually as I could manage,

"You look like you seen a ghost, Homes." Ramon Sanchez, the cook, said to me as I put the broom away. I answered in Spanish that I wasn't feeling well. Ramon gave me an appraising look and suggested I go home for the day, rationalizing that it would be dead for the rest of the night. He was probably right, the bar catered to a lunchtime and late afternoon crowd. I took off my apron, thanked him, and went out to my car. It was a beat up ninety-eight, Toyota Corolla. I had bought it for five hundred cash, and aside from the fact that it had no air-conditioning and leaked a quart of oil a week it was a good car.

I got in and reclined the seat. I closed my eyes and waited. I began to doze, fitfully. An hour passed, and then a half hour, finally I heard a familiar stomping tread echo across the parking lot. A few seconds later the recognizable rumble of Colonel Lucas' black Ford Raptor ripped through the dark, desert evening. His tires spun on the asphalt and left the stink of burning rubber when he peeled away, leaving smoke plumes and exhaust fumes in his wake. I waited ninety seconds and followed. He kept to his usual route, south past the orange groves, through the small neighborhoods, to his home, a large two storied, stone and stucco structure. It was surrounded by a ten-foot concrete wall and backed up against encroaching desert. A public records search revealed he owned the adjoining sixty acres. It appeared he

had no intention of developing it. The land laid fallow, nothing but a buffer between his insanity and the society that deemed it unacceptable.

His true face was hidden well. Those that knew his dark side were too afraid to expose him. The force of his personality, and the extent of his service, cowed those around him. America's love of the strong man was becoming mainstream, a phenomenon evinced by the election of the current president, and all the imitators taking shape to follow. I slowly passed by the house, and scanned the windows on the second floor. One familiar silhouette was reposed in the window. It had to be my Abby.

Abigail Olivia Lucas was the Colonel's only child, and twenty years old by now. She was blond, lithe, and beautiful. I'd recognize her figure anywhere. I thought back to the first time I saw her. She'd been seventeen, and I had been twenty.

We met on a beach near Camp Pendleton. I stood alone, on the sand, watching her surf with a group of friends. She'd been clad in a short, black wetsuit that covered her arms and left her shapely legs exposed. Her long, yellow hair clung to the dark material. Her smile was a brilliant white. It matched the clean spray of the cresting waves, and was as soothing as the sound of breaking surf.

She rode toward the shore, gracefully maneuvering through the break, all the way to the sand. Her eyes met mine as she nimbly stepped off her board.

"I know you." She declared and had me at a loss. I stammered in way of a reply, trying to comprehend meeting this enchanting creature and forgetting her. It didn't seem possible. I told her as much.

"You work for my father. I saw you at the change of command ceremony." One-week prior our new Commanding Officer had arrived. I had stood in formation with the rest of the unit, welcoming him, and bidding the old C.O. farewell. A young girl in a long, plain, brown dress and thick, dark glasses had stood at Colonel Lucas' side, between him and his attractive, but vacuous looking, wife. She had seemed so tame and subdued, the juxtaposition to this unruly teenager before me was startling.

"I'm Abby, Abby Lucas, and I never forget a handsome face." She winked at me and I blushed. She laughed.

"You seem to be fitting into the California lifestyle very well, Abby."

"We lived here when I was younger, but for the past eight years we've been in Australia. I surfed a lot here, and there. Less sharks here." She observed looking out at the breakers.

"What a relief."

"They never bothered me. One time a girl next to me got her leg bit clean off though. Do you surf?" She asked with slight, Australian accent bleeding through. The effect was adorable.

"I couldn't even swim until I was taught in bootcamp." She laughed then caught herself,

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to make fun."

"I don't mind. You have a wonderful laugh."

"Thanks," she smiled and ran her hand through her golden hair, picking out a bit of emerald seaweed and flicking it away,

"How come you never learned?"

"I never even saw the ocean till I moved out here."

"Where'd you grow up?"

"A little town, about three hours east of here, called Yuma. Lots of sand, not much water."

"You want to learn to surf?"

"I do now."

"If only you had someone to teach you..."

"Yes, if only..."

"Well nice meeting you. Good luck!" With that she turned, and skipped through the shallow water before thrusting her board forward, landing on top of it, and paddling through the chop. When she made it past the breakers she sat up, legs dangling to either side. She turned her sky, blue eyes to the horizon, searching for the next wave. I stood there for another minute before walking away, and feeling thoroughly dejected. The impetuous, young girl had mercilessly crushed my ego. She had emotionally gutted me with a few inquisitive words, some laughter, and a flip or two of her hair. I marveled at the power women held over me.

I drove past the house and left her silhouette in the window, undisturbed. I pulled the car over a few miles down the road. There was an abandoned house with a partially collapsed roof. It sat silently, slowly being consumed by the surrounding sand. I got out and inspected it. A kid I'd befriended in my youth had once lived here. It had been him, six siblings, and his parents. The father got deported when we were ten. The kid, and the rest of the family, hung around until they were evicted. Once they were gone the bank had let the home rot. I wondered where they all were now, as I entered into the archway and stood around. I couldn't remember any of their names. There were still a few plastic toys, impervious to the effects of age, scattered about the interior. A couch had been torched in one corner of the room. A pile of shit collected flies in another.

I heard the sound of a vehicle approaching from the east. A white compact drove by at a responsible rate of speed. I caught a glimpse of Abby's blond hair in the driver's side window. It looked dull. It used to shine so brightly in the sun it would blind. I closed my eyes and counted to ten before exiting the old home, and starting my car. I caught up to her quickly and hung back. She turned north. Traffic started to thicken, as we got closer to town. She took an on-ramp, east, onto the interstate and I followed closer.

I was contrasting the bland vehicle, steady pace, and responsible driving habits with the reckless girl I had known in California. When I thought of Abby, I pictured a topless girl in a topless jeep, hurtling down the freeway, weaving through traffic, Northbound to nowhere. The image made me smile.

The first time she took me surfing I almost drowned. Before we started dating, I made it a habit to hang around the beaches she frequented. One evening, around sundown, I walked along the shore searching for her. A thick cloud of marijuana wafted toward me. I looked for the source and saw her smiling at me. I waved and she gestured for me to come sit with her.

"Have a pull. I promise not to tell daddy."

“No thanks. Daddy’s ordered more piss tests in his first month than his predecessor did in four years.”

“Now how could you know that? There’s no way you’ve been here that long.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I’ve been a Marine brat my whole life. I know the look of a one-enlistment man. You’ve got ‘four years and out’ stamped on your forehead.”

“What gives it away?”

“Your aimless wandering on the beach is a clue. I deduce you were looking for a purpose when you joined the military. You haven’t found one, so you’re still searching.”

I stayed silent, contemplating the observation. It was certainly astute.

“Got any ideas?” I finally asked.

“Grab my board.” I did as I was told and we went into the shallow water. The sun was getting low and she pointed out that we were short on time.

“I’ll give you a quick tutorial and then your going to try and catch a wave.”

“Just like that?”

“Yeah, just like that.” She had me lay flat on the board and paddle around for a few minutes, “Close enough, now once you feel the wave taking you, arch your upper body, push down with your arms, then spring up. Land with your left foot in front of your right.” I practiced a few times, in waist length water, until she grew impatient,

“That’s enough let’s go.” She made me paddle out past the breakers. I could barely stay on the board. Every wave that washed over me threatened to knock me off. Eventually, she had to bring the board out, ducking under the breaking waves, and paddling smoothly through their wake. I climbed back on once we were far enough out. We waited for a wave,

“Just lay on it like before. That’s it. I’ll tell you when to go, and give you a push. Here comes one. Ready? Paddle!” I started to dig through the water as I felt her shove the board. The wave began to pick me up, it grew higher and higher, I felt the back of the board lift up and watched the nose drop. It kept going until that way until I flipped over. The edge of the board smacked me on the head, the wave crashed on top of me. I was dragged, pulled, and finally, slammed to the ocean’s floor. I clawed my way back to the surface, broke through, and gasped for air. I opened my mouth just before another wave broke over my head. I sucked in at least a gallon of saltwater and saw black.

The next thing I remember was retching it back up, onto the sand. Abby was clapping me on the back saying, “Suck it up Marine, there you go.”

“Abby,”

“Yeah, Johnny?”

“I don’t think surfing is my purpose.” She laughed and wiped my face with her towel. Then she clasped my cheeks and looked me full on, with those sparkling blue eyes, “We’ll just have to find you something else then, Johnny.”

I continued following here east on the interstate. There was a sinking feeling in my gut as I discerned her destination. A few miles later my conclusion was verified. She took the exit for, “Arizona Western College Community College,” I

watched with dismay, as she parked and got out of the car with an armload of books. She walked quickly towards one of the bland, beige buildings on campus. Her head was down. Her shoulders slouched.

I followed on foot. I had a hard time believing this was really Abby. She used to bounce when she walked, her hair bobbing with the bubbling rhythm of her gait. Her chin would jut, her smile would be ready to engage, her eager breasts out in front. She walked into the building. I waited five seconds before entering. I came in just as she went into a classroom. I walked past, slowly. She was the only student there. Her eyes cast down in a book. I looked at the schedule posted on the door. She was fifteen minutes early. I thought back to a conversation we'd had, a month after we started dating. I'd taken her for a hike in the mountains, not far from the base. We followed the trails, until she claimed she'd found a better way,

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"I want to find a mountain lion."

"What?"

"A cougar, catamount, panther, puma, a goddamn North American mountain lion!"

"Are you crazy?"

"Maybe, but they're beautiful."

"And dangerous."

"Damn right. A jogger was killed around here last week."

"What are you going to do if we find one?" She stopped and gestured for me to come close, then, she took off her knapsack and opened it. A large-caliber, chrome revolver lay in the bottom of the bag,

"What are you going to do with that?"

"Nothing ... unless we're attacked." We kept walking. The brush got thicker. Every so often she'd bend low and inspect a print in the dry dirt.

"He's around here somewhere." She'd mutter before rising and surveying the increasingly hostile landscape,

"Look at this!" she exclaimed when she finally found some evidence. I stood next to her while she reached out and pulled a blond, tuft of hair from a cluster of thorns.

"Great," I said looking around nervously, "maybe you better give me that gun?"

"No way, Johnny. It's mine."

"Your dad's you mean?"

"It *may* have come out of his gun safe, but it's in my possession now. Here's a good place to wait." We were at the crest of a hill. We had a clear view our surroundings below us, and a cluster of dry bushes to provide us with cover. I admired the tactical soundness of the location. She dropped her pack and spread a camouflage blanket on the floor. She rummaged around in her bag until she produced a fat and bloody cut of beef.

"Now we're baiting this thing! Do you realize what will happen if we get caught!"

"Relax, daddy will take care of it."

“Take care of you maybe.”

“I’ll just tell him we’re in love.” She said grabbing me by the collar and pulling me in for a long kiss. She tasted clean, and fresh, like rays of the sunrise, filtered through ocean spray. She flung the steak onto a clear patch of dirt below us, and we settled in behind the bush. She sat against my chest, cradling the large pistol in her tiny hands, syrupy brown, from all the long days in the California sun.

“Did you mean that?” I asked.

“Mean what?”

“You know... what you said? That you love me.” She turned back to me and stared into my eyes,

“Of course I meant it. Are you surprised?”

“Yes,”

“Why? Don’t you love me?”

“Yes.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I just assumed after the summer you’d be going away to college, or something.”

“Ha! Try ‘or something’ I despise school. I’ll wait around here until your discharged, then we’re off!”

“Off to where?”

“You leave that to me, Johnny. I’ll find you a purpose.”

“I already found it...”

“Well, then the rest will take care of itself.” We kissed again, for how long I couldn’t say, but it seemed like hours, and the act, by itself, was enough to consume all our attention. The fire that flew between us, as we were wrapped in each other’s arms, was unequal to anything I’d ever felt. We might still be locked in that embrace today if not for a low cough I heard somewhere behind us. She heard it too, and it shattered the moment like an ice fissure across a frozen plain.

We pulled apart and stared deep into the fierce creature’s liquid, amber eyes. Its muscles flexed and rippled as it began to circle us. Its large paws padded silently on the ground. We began to untangle ourselves. The cat snarled, bearing its white fangs that stuck out of its oily, black mouth. It struck without warning, in mid step, just as our heads couldn’t twist to follow it any further. Pure reflex caused me to lift my forearm, in front of Abby’s throat, and the animal clamped down on the alternate target I offered it. I gritted my teeth and stifled a scream. The sound of the revolver blasted through the hills. The predator’s body shook as bullets, bigger than my thumb, ripped through its insides. It twisted and snarled with each impact, but refused to give up my arm. Abby slid out from under its weakening body. I leaned forward with all my weight, into the writhing mass of muscle. My arm was still caught in its mouth. I rose up to my full height. I locked eyes with the animal. WE pushed against one and other. The bright, tawny orbs began to dim. The grip on my arm loosened. Abby pressed the gun’s barrel to the beast, where the skull and the spine intertwined. She pulled the trigger. It dropped to the ground.

We stared at each other, covered in blood. It stained her blond hair pink, it leaked out of my arm. I grabbed her and took her down to the ground. She smothered my face with kisses as I ripped off her clothes. She pulled down my jeans

and I forced my pulsing cock inside her tight, wet space, and broke her virgin seal. Like an ancient ritual, our first joining took place there, under the moonlight, commingling one and other's blood with that of the panther's. The memory flashed brightly across my conscious and then faded away, leaving me breathless.

I walked back to the parking lot, stunned. I wondered how Abby's beautiful soul could be snuffed out, and if there was a way I could restore it. I sat in my car. I watched hers. The hours crawled by. The sun made its journey westward, across a cloudless, blue expanse. Students, my age and younger, came and went. Some were alone, others, in groups. They laughed and talked. They wore smiles of contentment, or grimaces of concern. Some faces were blank, or neutral. No one looked harried. I wondered how they did it.

The thought of sitting and listening to some ivory tower academic, pontificate on his or her favorite topic, made me sick. I hated school as a rule. I sympathized with the shooters. A cruel twist of evolution had landed us here. Our young lives stifled, and wasted, on fruitless, scholastic endeavors. I longed for the active life of a hunter, or rewarding days of field labor, on a farm of my own. I thought of Leah behind her computer, commanding thousands of phony profiles, spewing invective, and pushing policies. The meek had inherited the earth. Where was my place in it? Abby had once been my purpose. She had told me we would figure out the rest. Her father had destroyed us, our unborn child, and had tried to destroy my life. The Second Chance Society, and President Obama, had given me freedom but no direction. I couldn't decide what to do next.

I had travelled back to Arizona with a head full of rage, hell-bent on killing the Colonel, preferably, with my bare hands. The sight of his daughter, my lost love, brought all kinds of awful, wonderful emotions boiling up to the surface. These feelings smothered my rage and clouded my judgment.

The sky grew dark. The parking lot emptied out. Abby's and mine were the last two. I got out and stretched before leaning against my driver's side door. The school would be closing soon. I thought about what I should say. The racking of a shotgun, behind me, broke my reverie.

"Long time no see, Corporal."

"Good evening, Colonel."

"Is my daughter's pussy so good that you would risk your new lease on life coming back here?" I didn't answer, or turnaround. My stomach froze to an icy pit of fear.

"Look at me, boy." I turned and faced him. The ugly, squat soldier held a sawed-off shotgun by a pistol grip. It was incredibly lethal and could fit snugly into a pocket of the long, black coat he wore against the coming desert cold. He leered at me, plainly pleased he had gotten the drop on me.

"I warned you off her and had you thrown in prison."

"You did."

"I told you what would happen if you came back."

"That's true."

“Did you think that half-ass disguise would fool me? You look like even more of a dirty spic now. I’d recognize you under any circumstances, son. Why have you been lurking around my campaign office? What was the plan? To steal her away? To kill me? Both, perhaps?”

I stayed silent and thought about it before answering,

“I hadn’t made up my mind.” I responded, truthfully. He shook his head,

“What am I going to do with you now?”

“How is Abby?” I asked ignoring his question. He kept the shotgun pointed on me with one hand, and scratched his chin thoughtfully before responding.

“Abby is...subdued. Which, as you know, is no easy task.”

“How did you break her?”

“Pharmaceutically, and psychiatrically. I have a team of doctors to ensure she no longer embarrasses the family. I assume you’ve heard, I’m quite the riser in the Republican Party. I’m not the first candidate to have a ...spirited child. The party has a team of professionals, on retainer. They’ve gotten very good at suppressing recalcitrant spawns and spouses.”

“No kidding.”

“You ever know me to kid about anything, Corporal?”

“Not yet.”

“Not ever. I’m putting you in the ground tonight.”

A pair of headlights swept across us and cut our conversation. The shotgun disappeared into his pocket,

“I still got you covered, boy. Don’t say a word.” The vehicle came closer. A pair of red and blue strobe lights suddenly blazed from behind the front grill. The colonel smiled,

“Perhaps you get a reprieve tonight.”

“Sorry to let you down, boss.”

“Oh don’t worry, you’ll be in jail as a consolation prize.”

“Think so? I’m not the one with an illegally, modified firearm in his pocket. Say goodbye to politics.”

“No, you’re the one with a restraining order in effect. It clearly states that you must stay away from Abby Lucas, who is right inside that building. Studying, like the good girl she is.”

“I never got served with any order.”

“On paper you did. The cops around here love me. Hell, half of them volunteer on my campaign. I bet I know these two by name.” He smirked as the vehicle came to a stop about thirty feet in front of us. The colonel waved to the three shadows that exited the vehicle and emerged from behind the headlights.

“Evening, Colonel,” A deep, female voice said as she approached us. She was accompanied by a larger, and taller, male officer who remained silent. The third occupant of the vehicle remained shaded behind the headlights glare.

“What brings you out to campus?”

“Good of you to ask officer, it just so happens that this man here-“ He was interrupted by a bright light and sharp crackle. The female cop thrust a flashing object against his throat. The male officer wrapped the colonel in a bear-hug until his jerking body went limp. The pair went to work quickly. First, removing the

shotgun, then binding his hands and feet with zipties. As they were dragging him toward the open trunk of the police car, I felt someone staring at me. I turned around and saw Ava Fuentes smiling at me in a matronly manner.

“You and women, Johnny...” She said, shaking her head, and stepping towards me.

“Ava? I ...don’t know what ...” She stopped me with a kiss. Stunned, I did nothing at first, and then, as I felt her hands caressing my neck, I brought my arms up to her hips and surrendered to the moment. Then, I felt a sharp pinch on my throat. She pulled away and pushed my hands away from her. I stared in shock.

“What are we going to do with you, Johnny?” I opened my mouth to speak, but found I couldn’t form words. My tongue felt too fat and lolled around in my mouth. I got dizzy. Flashes of light began to dance in front of my face. I found myself on my knees. My hands instinctively went up to my throat. I heard the Colonel groaning from somewhere far away. Ava began to whisper in my ear.

“We got you now, Johnny. You’re in for life.” My body melted into the pavement. The world faded away.

Red, flashing, flesh-tearing, teeth-gritting, screaming, clawing. Blood-splatters on white walls, shattered mirrors, and holes in doors. The pounding. My head pounding, my heart pounding, my pulse pounding. Racing for an end that won't come. Fighting for a life that's lost, and refuses to be won. Synapses firing at preternatural speed as the slashing and stabbing and skinning and slaughtering stretches on and on into an endless and eternal red eon.

I woke up, naked and alone in my bed, inside my mothers trailer. It was late in the morning. The violent, blood-filled dream refused to die in my brain. It continued to haunt me as I got up to take a much-needed piss. My muscles were all sore, and my head felt groggy. I set about the task of making coffee. When I smelled the strong odor, wafting off the rinds, my encounter with the Colonel broke to the surface of my conscious. Ava...what had she been doing there? The cops had looked familiar, Beau and Peg from New York. Why? What had they done with Colonel Lucas?

The coffee began to percolate. I stared out the dust-covered window, towards the palm tree that stood over my father's unmarked grave. When the coffee finished brewing I poured a cup and sat at the kitchen table. A black, electronic tablet I had never seen before was in the center. A video was queued up, begging to be viewed. I hit play.

The setting was the interior of cheap, mirror-filled, motel room. I was naked and so was the Colonel. I had a small, folding knife and was hacking with a fury I had never felt in myself. We fought ferociously for the first thirty seconds. Then the accumulation of stab wounds wore the older man down. It was work to kill a large man with such a small blade. He began to beg and whimper. I hit him harder and faster. I jumped around laughing like a maniac. My eyes blazed and bulged out of my head. I had an erection throughout the entire slaughter. The Colonel gave on last gasp and gave up the ghost. I began to skin the flesh off his face.

I threw the tablet across the room and the screen shattered. I started to shiver uncontrollably. That's when I heard a knock at the door.

"Johnny? You awake yet? C'mon Johnny its late and you've got a guest!" My Grandfather yelled from behind the thin, exterior door. My mind made rapid-fire guesses as to who the guests could be. Military police, Yuma County Sheriffs', Arizona Highway Patrol, all possible contenders. The law enforcement agency possibilities seemed endless. I pulled on a pair of jeans and opened the door, unsure of what I would do or say. Ava stood next to my grandfather, beaming up at me. The old mans face was lit up too. He seemed just as smitten with Ava as I was.

"Quite a friend you have here, John."

"Oh you are such a charmer, Willy. Would you mind giving us some time? Johnny and I need to discuss some of the more mundane aspects of the job."

"Why sure thing, young lady." They leaned into each other and Ava warmly kissed his cheeks in turn, Latina style, the same way my mother would have.

"Behave yourself, Johnny."

"Sure thing, Willy" He blushed at my obvious impertinence and made his way back to the main house. Ava and I stood silently, regarding each other. She gestured toward the broken tablet on the floor,

"So, what did you think?"

"I think your framing me for murdering Colonel Lucas. To what end I can't imagine."

"I don't think 'framed' is the appropriate word in this instance. After all, you did kill him."

"How?"

"With a knife! *Menso! Has mirado los videos?*

"Yes I watched it! I know it was with a knife! Stop fucking with me! What I mean is, how, how did you make me do that?"

"*Calme te, mijo. Siente se,*" I did as I was told. The shaking started again, and I buried my head in my hands, on the verge of helpless tears. Ava stood beside me and placed her soft, brown hands on my head, her dark, red nails stroked my hair.

"Shhh, you'll be alright, *toda esta bien.* Now you can do some real work for us."

"I don't want anything to do with you, or the people you work for."

"*Pobrecito,* you don't have a choice anymore." I looked up into her hard, black eyes. A bright shine lit them like eight balls under hot lights.

"We own you now."

"What kind of a fucked up charity organization is this?"

"The kind that isn't."

"Who do you work for?"

"Complicated question. I work for different agencies, for different reasons, but my sole allegiance is to the one true agency."

"Are you telling me the C.I.A. has been running this?" She didn't answer. She kept that little smile in place and gave me a sly wink,

"One never knows, but I wouldn't go around spreading crazy rumors. As far as you know, I'm Ava Fuentes with the Second Chance Society. You say anything to the contrary and you, and the Colonels love affair gone awry, goes viral. I'm sure little Abby would love to see that."

"Where is she?" Ava shrugged before she replied,

"How should I know? But I'll tell you this; you better leave that girl alone, Johnny. You're the companies now. If we want you to get any *concha*, we'll issue it to you. That *pinga* of yours has gotten you into enough trouble as it is. You need to start keeping a low profile."

"Where am I supposed to go? What am I supposed to do?"

"You'll know that when your ride gets here. In the meantime here's some spending money," She dropped a fat envelope on the floor, at my feet.

"Don't try to run or we'll kill you. *Ciao,*" With that she wiggled her fingers at me, spun on her heel, and left. I sat in the chair, staring at the envelope on the floor. Later, when the sun was down and darkness shrouded me, I bent down and retrieved. In it, I found an I-Phone. A note on yellow paper was attached,

"*Keep this phone charged, and on you at all times. We are monitoring you.*"

Good to know. There was also five thousand cash, in assorted denominations. The bills were crinkled and worn, the kind of cash you dig out of a drunk's pocket at the end of his bender. I turned on the phone. A text message instantly appeared,

"*I'll pick you up late tomorrow night. Rest up and pack for a long stay.*"

"*Who is this?*" I typed in return. There was no reply at first. I waited.

"*Aww sugar, how could you forget me so soon?*" The message ended with a winking, smiling face. I put the phone down and laughed in spite of the

circumstances. It would be good to see an old friend. For me they were in short supply.

I went outside and saw the lights on in my grandfather's house. I decided to walk up and tell him I'd be leaving again. Smoke came from the chimney. The smell of burning wood wafted through the air. The door was unlocked and I entered. He sat staring at the fire, a small glass of whiskey in his hand.

"Drink?" He offered.

"Never," he nodded at my reply and began to roll a cigarette in his large, callused hands,

"Perhaps it skips a generation."

"It's a chance I won't take."

"You not like him, Johnny. Not at all."

"You sure? Booze changes a man. At least that's what my mother used to say."

"You mother knew him briefly and, aside from the day you were conceived, mostly from afar. He always had a mean streak. The whiskey may have exacerbated it, but his dark side was always evident. I knew what had to be done. Knew it long before your mother came along. Unfortunately, her tragedy was the source of my strength."

"You couldn't stop it," it was a lie, of course he could have.

"If I did, there would be no you," he looked up and smiled at me before striking a match on the wooden arm of his chair. He lit the thin cigarette pressed between his lips. We regarded each other silently. The fire cracked and popped. Flames danced and threw shadows around the room.

"Maybe we all would've been better off," I suggested, half kidding.

"You have a lot of years ahead of you. I know things haven't worked out the way you wanted. Life can be that way, unfortunately. But, you seem to have a real opportunity working for Ava. I'm still not sure exactly what she does, but it sounds like you'll be busy. Your young enough, you deserve a second chance."

"That's what they promised."

"I'd be wary though. For all her charm, I think there is more to that woman than meets the eye." I stifled a snicker before replying.

"I'll keep that in mind, Grandpa."

"She thinks very highly of you."

"Does she?"

"She spoke at great length about how smart, strong, and capable you are. Things I am well aware of."

"Naturally,"

"Those traits don't come from nowhere," he said flexing his right arm and tapping his gray temple with his left, index finger." It earned a laugh from me.

"She seems to think you have the ability to go very far in her organization, if you apply yourself and stay focused."

"Always been my problem. I'm leaving tomorrow night. Not sure how long I'll be gone, but I'll keep in touch."

"Please do, Johnny. You and I are all that's left of the Williams' clan. We need to stick together."

"Will do."

“And try not to be too hard on our new President. He thinks he’s doing the right thing, and I firmly believe his intentions are good.”

“That’s what makes him so dangerous,” he opened his mouth to reply but stopped and turned his attention back to the fire instead.

The next night I waited outside, sitting on the steps of my mothers trailer. My Marine Corps issue, green, sea-bag lay stuffed, at my feet, with the things I would need on the road. It was difficult to pack for an unknown locale, and undetermined amount of time. However, I didn’t own much in this world. It simplified the process.

I heard the car before I saw it. A loud engine cut through the desert night, bass bumped across an empty landscape, the squeal of tires sounded, as the vehicle left the asphalt and dug into the dirt road before me. The car spun around in front of the trailer, kicked up a cloud of dust, sprayed me with sand, and surrounded me with the shrill sound of dance music that blasted through the speakers.

“Heelllooo, gorgeous!” Jamie bounded from the drivers seat of a cherry, red challenger. The windows had dark tints. The wheels had black rims. He wore a small, black shirt that exposed a pierced navel. His jeans were offensively tight, and his face was painted with make-up. The headlights made his baldhead shine, and his wide, smile bright. I hoped my grandfather would sleep through the entrance.

“Hey, Jamie.” I said and got up to meet him. I extended my hand, but he pulled me in for a bear hug more powerful than his short, slender frame suggested,

“I heard they gotcha. I’m sorry, baby,” he said genuinely.

“They got me. Got me real good,” I said breaking off the embrace, which was becoming a bit awkward as his hand grabbed my ass.

“I’m sorry. I wanted to warn you, but they got me too. Congratulations, you graduated from the resistance. Your working for the deep state now.”

“What do they want us to do?”

“First we going to Nevada. Gotta meet our contact. I dealt with him a few times. Creepy old, white dude. Names Stephen something or other. Lord he looves to gamble, watch your wallet around that man. You ready?” I nodded.

“Then let’s hit the road,” I looked in the direction of my Grandfathers home. We’d said our goodbyes last night, no need to prolong the departure.

“Let’s go,”

“Alright!” Jamie clapped his hands and opened the trunk. I threw my bag in and we got in the car. The music resumed at maximum volume, and Jamie sped onto the highway at maximum speed. He had a twenty-four ounce, can of miller high life in the cup holder and he took a long swill from it.

“Want one?” He offered, “ I got a cooler full in the back seat.”

“ I don’t drink,” I replied.

“Thas right I forgot. Lets smoke then. I got a bowl in the glove box, pack it up.” I reached in and retrieved a small glass pipe. There was a small, mason jar half full of sticky, marijuana buds. It stunk up the whole car.

“Jesus, this is strong. If we get pulled over the cops will smell this for sure.”

“Don’t worry about that. We got friends in all the right places, high and low.”

“If you say so. Can we change the music?” I asked selecting a choice bud and stuffing it into the pipe.

"Let me think about it...no."

"Can we lower the music?"

"Hmmm let me check...no." I sighed and lit the pipe, inhaling deeply. It was potent and powerful. I held the smoke as long as I could, and then exhaled sharply. The world began to slow.

"Two rules in this car, Johnny. Rule one: only Lady Gaga will be played. Rule two: Lady Gaga will be played at maximum volume at all times."

"What the fuck is a Lady Gaga?" I asked taking another pull.

"Not what, who, and she happens to be the most talented musical artist of all time."

"I've always been more of a Kid Rock kind of guy."

"Johnny, do not make me kick you out of this car. Now hush up and pass the pipe, I love this song." He then began to sing a track he informed me was called *A million reasons*, at the top of his lungs. He had beautiful singing voice.

I sat silently while the music blared. It made conversation difficult. We were a brilliant, blazing, red streak of light and sound, shooting through the dead, black night laid out along route ninety-five. We streaked north towards Nevada on a still unknown errand.

The marijuana made me introspective. I began to reflect on the fact that I had killed my long time nemesis. It felt strange, but satisfying. I suppose the circumstances had a lot to do with it. I didn't feel like I earned it. I had been under the influence of ...something and remembered very little of the encounter. The catholic in me wondered if it absolved me of any guilt.

"Jamie!" I shouted over the music.

"Yes?"

"Do you know what they have on me?" He nodded his head in the affirmative,

"I know they have you on video, killing a man you had good reasons to kill."

"I didn't do it though, I mean I did, but they made me...they gave me something."

"Let me ask you a question...that night you stormed out of the bookstore, in New York, were you headed back here to kill him?"

"Yes...no...I don't...I don't know. I don't know if I could've have done it."

"So they did you a favor?"

"Maybe."

"Think about it, would that man have tried to get back at you again? What would he do to you if he became a congressman, or senator, or someone even more powerful?" His rationale was beginning to sway me. Maybe they had done me a favor,

"But how? How did they make me do it?"

"Serum number six,"

"What is it? A drug?"

"Oh yeah baby. One part LSD, two parts crystal meth, three parts Viagra. Its like nitroglycerin in your veins, make you wanna kill someone by skull fucking them to death."

"That's about right,"

“It’s a little something the Deep State cooked up to induce violent or disturbed people to commit mass shootings, suicide bombings, that sort of thing.”

“Which am I? Violent or disturbed?”

“You tell me, baby. It was your hand holding the knife. You know that murder was in your heart long before they juiced up your head.” He was right about that. Still, I hadn’t gone through with it, and maybe I never would have, but I didn’t argue. There was no point. It had been done, I had done it, and the evidence was documented.

“So what do they have on you?”

“Ha! My case is different...I’ll tell you another time.” His normally animated face grew still and sad. After a few seconds he took a sip of his beer, swallowed and tried to match Gaga on a high note. He did a good job. I laid my head back and tried to sleep.

Somewhere north of Yuma, and south of Vegas, there is a sign for an exit advertising a gas station. It is unremarkable in every way, one of many along the large, empty swaths of American landscape. Jamie snapped off the music and took the exit. We drove down a dirt road toward a dust-covered structure. Metal signs advertising prices swayed and creaked in the warm, desert breeze. Jamie pulled the car along side an old pair of pumps. A bell rang as we drove up to it. The sun was making its way toward the center of the sky. It was just about noon and getting hot.

Nobody came out to offer service. Jamie switched off the engine and looked around. "What are we waiting for?" he shushed me and cocked his head, listening. After a few more minutes he left the car and lifted the fuel nozzle. I saw him pocket a piece of paper that had been attached to the handle. When the tank was full he took a crudely drawn map out of his pocket. It was printed in brightly colored crayon, "You gotta be kidding me," I rolled my eyes.

"You aint seen nothing yet," he sighed, started the engine and put the car in drive. We traveled away from route 95 along a dirt road. It began a gradual descent that suddenly became a steep drop that ended in a long, lazy turn that brought us to the bottom of a valley. The gultch before us was littered with old wooden train cars and small structures. They were painted garish colors that had likely once burned bright. Now faded from the savage sun, they still bore designs that were decipherable. Strongmen hoisted barbells and bearded ladies showed some leg, dwarves were dressed like jesters and dark-skinned savages had chicken bones stuck through their noses. Tattooed men flaunted their ink, a sorcerer winked from under his turban and behind a crystal ball. The freak-show lay fallow. Its talent was long gone. Only their trappings remained. We stepped out of the car and into the anachronism.

"I am considering purchasing the entire lot." An excited voice informed us. It came from within the darkened doorway of the house of reptiles.

"Steve come out here!" Jamie yelled, "crazy motherfucker," he muttered softly, under his breath. A tall, stooped man emerged. His hairline receded to almost the top of his skull, what remained shot upwards and out, a wild, brown mess. He wore glasses and squinted at the two of us with wild eyes that darted incessantly in all directions. He had long arms and legs, a potbelly, and a jerky walk. His head swayed from side to side as he quickly approached us. A restless, energized angst exuded from the man,

"I said, I am considering buying this property,"

"Great," I said trying to be helpful. Jamie seemed uncomfortable around this strange desert dweller.

"I was not addressing you, sir. I have not been acquainted with you and therefore we shall not yet speak. Jamie, do you have an opinion on this venture I am pursuing?"

"Nah, brah. Do you."

"Ha! A foolish response as expected! Jamie, how many times must I state to you; owning property is the surest way to building wealth. You simply *must* begin

investing in real estate.” He then sighed and swung his hunched head in my direction. After a quick study of me he thrust out a vein-lined hand,

“I am Stephen Paddock. Who are you?”

“Johnny Flores,”

“An exceptional moniker. You could be a rock and roll deity with a name like that. Why are you here with this homo?”

“We’re working together,”

“That is sensational. Jamie and I have been on numerous assignments in the past. However, he does not enjoy my good-natured ribbing concerning his proclivity for penis, and his tendency to confuse traditional gender norms.”

“I can see where that would be a problem,”

“You are of a younger age than my fifty-seven years. You, Johnny Flores, belong to a new age of tolerance and acceptance. My world was much less accepting, far more judgmental. But, the world is changing, I do not know if it is for the better, but change is inevitable so I don’t suppose it matters. Do you own property, Johnny?”

“I recently inherited my mother’s trailer.”

“Fantastic. I myself purchased a doublewide when I was about your age. At the time I was a young postal carrier. Those days were wonderfully simple. It was before they discovered my true talents and exploited them.”

“Enough already, Stephen! How long you gonna keep us out here? This place is nasty.”

“I disagree. I think it is to be venerated. It is a monument to the past, same as the pyramids of Giza, or Angkor Wat. These structures, and what they represent, may not be as ancient, but they are from an age that has passed. Like the others, that makes them sacred, and part of the human story.”

He turned his head and paused, seemingly to admire the dilapidated surroundings.

“In another generation perhaps it will be me, and those like me, caged and gawked at.” He turned his attention back to Jamie, who was rolling his eyes, “you and your non-traditional family unit may visit me in my confines, Jamie. You may jeer and exclaim to your strange brood, there, do you see? That is the straight, white male. Long gone from these parts now, he once had dominion over all this land. Do you know how they are destroying us, Johnny?” I shook my head in the negative. “It’s the Wi-Fi. It lowers the sperm count and causes chemical imbalances in Caucasians.”

“I’m half Mexican and Comanche,”

“AHH, so that’s how you weather it so well. Out here I only slightly feel the effects. In more urban environments I can become quite insane.”

“That’s good to know, Stephen.”

“Yeah, Stephen real cool. Now just tell us the plan already.” Stephen spun around and walked into the elephant man’s long abandoned quarters. When he returned he was struggling with a cardboard box in his hands. It bore the emblem of the California Highway patrol on its side. He dropped the box at our feet. A pink tube rolled out with a plastic cap on one end.

“Are those-“ Jamie started to ask,

“Road flares,” I finished.

Stephen applauded, “That is correct, gentlemen,”

“What are we directing traffic or something?” Jamie quipped,

“Not quite,” He dug into his pocket and produced a ball of crumpled paper. He then knelt down and smoothed it out on the box. It was a computer-generated map of California. The map said “Property of NASA,” on the bottom right corner.

“Welcome to operation inferno, gentlemen.” Stephen smiled at us from over the map. Jamie yawned.

Night fires blazed and trees turned to ash. The golden state was all red death and billowing smoke. California chaos. We traversed the countryside, strung out on serum 6 and blasting Gaga's greatest hits. Jamie's soundtrack of insanity grew on me. We followed the NASA map provided by Stephen Paddock. It detailed the areas with the driest conditions. We waited for windy days and tossed road flares into thick brush.

Weeks went by. It grew hotter, drier. I reflected on societies vulnerabilities. I found it amazing that two kids in there twenties could create some much carnage. We were armed with a car, a box of flares, a map generated by a space agency, and a drug developed by the CIA to induce psychosis. We were further assisted by mankind's insatiable urge to overdevelop, and mother nature's ongoing attempts to stifle humanity's sprawl.

"We are doing these people a favor," Jamie rationalized one evening, during our downtime. We were sitting on the hood of his car, parked in our current motel's lot.

"How so?" I asked lighting a fat joint I'd just finished rolling.

"These homes would have burned eventually, or been washed away in a flood, or swallowed by a sink hole, or covered in a mudslide, maybe eaten by an earthquake, but they would have gone away, and the people with them."

"We are only accelerating the process, is that it?"

"Yeep," Jamie took a long pull and held in the smoke. The smell of burning marijuana mixed with the smell of burning rubber, plastic, and other smoldering synthetics. The sun was coming up; we'd been dropping flares all night. The brilliant California daylight was obscured by smoke. Sirens wailed in the distance.

"We also doing it at an opportune time. People must forever associate this presidency with catastrophe."

"At a time like this, Leah would say, never let a good crisis go to waste."

"Yes, she would. Leah is quite fond of Saul Alinsky's writings. You ever call her?"

"Saul Alinsky?"

"No, dumb-ass, Leah! Saul Alinsky's a dude, and he's dead. He was a great thinker though. You should be reading his book,

"What book is that?"

"*Rules for Radicals*. It's practically the Deep State bible."

"Let's swing by the library. I'll pick up a copy."

"I think we burned it down,"

"Huh, well maybe in the next town."

"You avoiding the question. What about, Leah? What happened with you two?"

"Nothing really, she was mad while I was still New York. I left without saying goodbye, and we haven't spoken since."

"So that's it? You just break that little girls heart and move on? You a real player, Johnny Flores,"

“She wasn’t too pleased with me last time I saw her. I doubt she’s crying herself to sleep. Besides Ava made a good point the other day, about me and women.”

“What’d she say?”

“It wasn’t really what she said, it was the implication.”

“Which was?”

“I just get myself in trouble with them.”

“Maybe it s time for a change?” He winked a heavily, mascara-covered eye at me.

“It ain’t that bad.” I countered. We laughed and then sat silently, smoking and listening to sirens blare.

“Why you doing this, Jamie? What do they got on you?”

“Shoot! You wouldn’t get it, Johnny. It ain’t nothing like that mess you got yourself caught up in.”

“So what was it then?” I pinched off the joint, burning my fingertips. I set it off to the side. Jamie sat quietly while the seconds ticked by. I almost gave up on getting an answer, but then he began,

“My daddy’s a preacher, the small town, fire and brimstone, wrath of god fearing kind of man. He wouldn’t tolerate no gay son. When I was twelve he suspected my sexuality. I never said nothing to that man about it and I tried as best I could to hide it, but we are who we are, and he knew who I was. Somehow, the old man sniffed it out.

In Meridian, Mississippi, out in the swamps and away from town, they got a special kind of place for boys like me. They call it the conversion camp. Man named Edward Covey ran it, maybe still runs it. He’s a mean, squinty-eyed son of a bitch. He and his family all out there together, a bunch of in-bred, half-breed, holy rollers that been back in them swamps for centuries. They used to break slaves in that camp, on an ugly, little farm. After emancipation, they all muddled together in the backwoods, freed-folk and former masters, making babies and raising broods. They changed their target and kept their practice alive.

My daddy dropped me off on a hot, June morning the day after school ended that year. The Covey’s were waiting for me. All lined up outside their ramshackle houses in the wilds. Daddy handed old man Covey an envelope filled with cash and walked away. I spent the whole summer there,” He lapsed back into silence. I could see long buried recollections, battering around in his consciousness like tethered ships in a stormy harbor. He fought to keep his composure. He hated to ruin his make-up. I didn’t want to pry, but I was curious. I stifled my impulse to prod. Eventually, he continued on his own,

“The first day they welcomed me. Showed me to my room in a little shotgun shack with three other boys. Then we all went to a crudely built chapel at the edge of a swamp. We sang hymns and read scripture. At the end we all stood in a circle, held hands, and prayed for strength and the courage to follow God’s will. I thought it wouldn’t be so bad. Then came the night.

We were made to strip naked and lay down on our backs in bed. They tied us down to prevent immoral nocturnal acts. In the morning, Coveys daughters would wake us at dawn. They came in silent as wraiths and if we had morning wood, which

every young boy does, they would hitch up their skirts and climb on top. If we got soft they beat us with a switch, if not they rode us until we finished.

The days were spent working around the farm, splitting wood, hauling hay, picking crops, and planting seeds. It was run like a nineteenth century farm. We were the slaves. Covey and his sons would do what they called spot checks. You could be in the middle of your chores and they'd just come up and grab you. If you got hard you got beat. If one of his daughters came up and grabbed you, and you didn't get hard you got beat. It went on like that all summer.

Labor day weekend my daddy and the other boy's fathers came to get us. We all were pronounced cured by Mr. Covey and they all shook hands and slapped each other on the back, "Now remember," Covey told them, "You have anymore problems with these boys Ya'll bring em right back here and we'll straighten em out."

"After that I never let on anything. The day I turned eighteen I joined the army and got as far from there as possible. Now, when I go home I stay one day and leave before nightfall. I wear my uniform, kiss my momma and am cordial with my father. Then I'm long gone and my daddy aint none the wiser."

"He still thinks you're in the army?"

"Damn right. I even gave myself a commission and made me a Major."

"He must be proud,"

"He is. The truth would kill him,"

"So the that's what they blackmail you with?"

"Yeah. Truth is though, I don't mind advancing a progressive agenda. I seen the right wing and felt its wrath. I don't want them getting the power to put people like me in camps."

"I see your point. But this is getting kind of old. How much longer you think we'll be at this?"

"No telling. We just do until we told otherwise."

"We're almost out of flares."

"Hell Johnny, it's June! This brush is dry enough now a cigarette butt will light these towns up."

"I guess," Jamie's phone began to buzz in his pocket. He dug it out and looked at it, "Speak of the devil."

"Who is it?"

"Leah,"

"What does she want?"

"You, at an airport."

"What for?"

"You got me, Johnny, but we gotta go. Now." I shrugged and slid down off the car's hood, Jamie was already in the drivers seat revving the engine. He reached over and dug a road map out of the glove box.

"Where we headed?"

"Fresno Airport. There is an open ticket waiting for you there."

"How'd Leah know we were near Fresno?" Jamie responded with a withering look, "C'mon, Johnny."

"What?"

“They been tracking us the whole time. They always track the operatives.” The thought was a little unsettling, but I suppose it was rather obvious. I considered the matter as Jamie sped through the burning back roads of California. He averted all the areas we made impassable by the destruction we had so easily sown. We reached Fresno in two and a half hours. As promised, a ticket was waiting for me at the airline counter. Jamie gave me a hug and wished me well before I went through security, “be careful, Johnny. These people we work for play for keeps and they want results. When you work for the deep state you gotta remember a few things. One, the ends will justify the means because we are on the side of the angels. Two, morality is flexible; there is nothing all right or all wrong. Three, and above all else, you gotta be useful; the deep state hates a slacker.”

The plane lifted off into the sky. I stared down at the smoke plumes scattered across the countryside. It had been about two months since I’d had any significant amount of time to myself. The plane was headed for Maryland, with a six-hour layover in El Paso. I was too wired to sleep. Jamie had kept us on a steady diet of serum six during our tear across the west coast. The effects of all those chemicals on my brain were significant. It caused me many sleepless nights and countless hallucinations. I was happy for the reprieve. The plane was about half full. I wondered if anyone else aboard was deep state. Maybe everyone was. It could be a plane full of operatives making their way around the country, seeding crises and causing chaos. I thought of Leah back at her computer in New York: the consummate tech warrior, bullying and bantering along in the endless expanse of cyberspace. How many voices were emanating from her keyboard? Could it be in the dozens, or hundreds, perhaps even thousands? I didn’t know. That wasn’t my end of things. “Keep yourself useful”, Jamie had said. The, “or else” was implied.

I didn’t leave the airport when we arrived in El Paso. There wasn’t enough time during the six-hour layover. Even if there had been I’d be hard pressed to think of anything worth seeing in El Paso. I sat at the airport bar and ordered a club soda. CNN played on all the mounted televisions. They were broadcasting images of the California wildfires on a loop. Ava slid onto the stool next to me before my drink had arrived. I smiled and looked down at the bar.

“How’s life, Johnny?”

“Not sure. I’m not exactly in charge of my destiny these days. I’m on my way to Maryland. I guess I’ll find out when I get there.”

“You weren’t in charge of your destiny when we first met either. If it wasn’t for us you’d still be in the brig, unless of course Luis Sepulveda killed you first.”

“That’s quite a memory you have, Ava.”

“It’s all in your file.”

“Been reading my file have you?”

“Reading it, and writing it. And on the subject of files, I have some for you.” She produced a yellow envelope. I accepted and opened it. Photos of white guys wearing swatistikas, white guys wearing stars and bars, white guys dressed in confederate gray, white guys wearing white sheets, skin heads, meth heads, deaths heads, white power, white laces, red suspenders. There were a lot of raised fists, and

tatted chests, raised banners and branded arms. The men in the photos let their allegiances be known; League of the South, United Front, The American Front, Vanguard America, the list went on. Buried under all the paper was a smartphone.

"Keep it on, and keep it charged. We need to be able to reach you at all times. Are we clear?"

"Clear. Except, I'm actually not clear on anything. What am I supposed to do with all this shit?"

"When you land in Maryland travel by bus to Charlottesville, Virginia."

"Why?"

"It is rapidly becoming an epicenter of racial and cultural struggle."

"Wonderful. What am I supposed to do about it?"

"First, cut your hair. I want you looking like a gringo for this op. Next learn the lingo. Study everything in that folder. If you feel lost draw some inspiration from some of the rednecks you served with in the Marine Corps."

"For what purpose?"

"I can't say yet."

"This is bullshit,"

"I can't say, because I don't know. The situation is fluid. We know the alt-right is feeling strong now. We think a massive protest is coming. We want to ensure it has disastrous consequences, and crush the momentum being gained by these groups. Counter-protests will be organized, but I want you to hang around and influence actions. See if you can incite the right. Here," she reached out and handed me a pack of previously opened cigarettes.

"I don't smoke,"

"Good for you. Open it," I flipped open the package. White powder was packed tightly in wrapped plastic. I stuck the cigarette pack in my pocket,

"Serum six?"

"Exactly. Get things moving in the *right* direction,"

"Clever,"

"Not really. That was actually rather lame," she sighed, "oh well, now Johnny if you have trouble call me, or Leah."

"I don't think she wants to hear from me."

"Don't flatter yourself, lover boy. She's over you. Said you weren't that great a fuck anyway. Which I was sorry to hear." She winked at me and tsked.

"Now I know your lying,"

She smiled and slid off her stool. She left without saying goodbye. I watched her glide into the busy throng of travelers. I admired her ability to flow in and out of the world. She moved so gracefully it seemed effortless. Her sleek form cut quite a figure as she breezed in and out of peoples lives, complicating, compromising, and co-opting. I was getting the impression that, eventually, she ended some of those lives as well. Sometimes her mask slipped and the warm glow in her brown eyes would fade and then fail. Suddenly, you were staring into a cold pair of flat, black eyes that showed you how insignificant you were. I decided to stay useful, and read up on the alt-right while I waited for my flight.

I was deep into the file when I realized everyone was stopped and gazing at the televisions mounted around the airport. They all stared stupidly, mouths slightly agape, eyes glazed over. I joined the herd and turned my attention to the nearest screen. I recognized the face displayed on it. I struggled to remember the name. CNN saved me the trouble and it scrawled across the television, James Hodgkinson, sixty-six years old, "Call me, Tom." He'd said months ago back in New York. It was Leah's old friend from crazy Bernie's failed presidential campaign, the dipshit drunk living out of his van. The news said he shot up a bunch of republican congressmen. I took out my new phone and looked for Leah's number. Of course it had been pre-programmed in. I hit the send button and waited several rings before she answered with a curt, "What?"

"Are you seeing the news?" She laughed wickedly before replying,

"Honey, I made that news," The phone went dead. I gathered up my papers and walked towards my connecting flight. I had a couple of more hours to kill, but I suddenly didn't want to chance missing the plane.

I slept on the flight. I passed out in the middle of the history of the Aryan Brotherhood. When I woke up the plane was already at the gate and passengers were exiting. I got dirty looks from the stewardess who must have caught a glance at my reading material.

“It’s for a project,” I tried,

“Love trumps hate,”

“Whatever,” I rolled my eyes and got off the plane. The thought of a bus ride made me sick. When I’d been in the Marine Corps I’d been bused from base to base. It was the Corps preferred method of moving marines around the country. I bought a ticket and settled in. My seat smelled like a million accumulated farts. The guy next to me sucked brown liquor out of a clear bottle. Small children were yelling. I considered buying a plane ticket with money from my own pocket. I thought about Jamie, what would he advise me in this dilemma? Better to follow instructions, he would undoubtedly say.

That’s what I did. The bus began to roll along, driving us deeper into America. We passed the nation’s Capitol. Cops were out everywhere. Black SUVs hummed along the highway. You could feel the tension. Congressmen were being shot, and the president was doing his own snipping via twitter. Collusion! Obstruction! Spying! Lying! Instigation! Assassination! A tumultuous undercurrent flowed around the place. Uncertainty was stamped on every forehead. We made it through and kept going south.

The commonwealth of Virginia was on limited display from my scratched and dirty window. The soil began to take on a sandy color. The trees were large and green. It looked hot out. Not like the clean heat of the desert that my indigenous skin adored, this was a heavy, hazy, hanging type of heat. It was written in the fat, lazy clouds that crept across the cramped blue sky that was hemmed in by mountains, trees, and hills. Gone was the wide expanse of the west. It had been replaced by that familiar east coast crush and even though I was miles from any type of city, I still began to feel claustrophobic. The bus ride didn’t help. My fellow passengers were becoming intolerable. By the time we reached Charlottesville, I was ready to stage a one-man riot.

The town didn’t improve my mood. I’d never been to Virginia, but the Marine Corps made sure I had seen my fair share of the south. They had bases all over Dixieland, and they had sent me to both, North and South Carolina, before I landed out west. I’d taken the bus then too.

The people bothered me; the men were hostile and sniffed out my Mexican blood like old hounds out on a lynch. The women wore disingenuous smiles that were too wide. Their attitudes were a sickly sweet that mirrored the taste of the tea they swilled. The food was all fatty and fried, then smothered with some form of

sticky, sugar sauce. The white ruling class still asserted its dominance by erecting statues of long dead, slave owning, insurrectionist wherever it saw fit. The stars and bars flew proudly over many a lawn, school, and statehouse.

I knew right away that the upcoming demonstrations would be different than New York, or Phoenix. This was a sharply divided state, and a battle for political supremacy was unfolding. There was an electricity in the air, the atmosphere felt supercharged. MAGA hats marched hand and hand with swastikas, black lives matter shirts mixed with pussy hats. An assemblage of the fringe was forming. All moderates beware, you're with us or against us was the prevailing mantra.

I checked into the cheapest motel I could find, an Econo lodge just off of highway 250. The university of Virginia was a few miles down the road and I was hoping to go out and find a nice, college girl to kill some time with. When the phone in my room rang though, I realized my plans were probably about to be changed.

"Hello?"

"All settled in, Johnny?" Came Leah's voice through the receiver.

"I'm getting there,"

"That's good. We want you to lay low for a few days and study your files. There will be an influx of white supremacist into the area over the next few weeks. We will be emailing their online profiles, posts, and pictures directly to your smartphone."

"Great,"

"You're going to approach them, as a friend, in any public places you see them. You will attempt to generate violent altercations with other individuals, particularly women or minorities."

"Won't that be happening organically?"

"We can't risk a moment like this to chance. We must maximize the negative optics. It will create a much more compelling picture."

"Picture of what?"

"The future, under a Trump presidency."

"Okay,"

"How did you feel when you saw James had shot those congressmen?"

"I was shocked that I had met someone who could act like that."

"Then forget you met him,"

"Met who?"

"Exactly. I hear anything about you even whispering his name and your life will be forfeit."

"I won't say anything,"

"Don't think this is a death threat. You're not worth the trouble. I can ruin your life easily enough without killing you."

"Jesus, Leah-"

"We'll just have the FBI throw you in a federal prison for the rest of your life. Would you like that, Johnny? You thought the Brig was bad? Ha! I could have you sharing a cell with the worst this country has to offer. The directors don't like security risks."

"Who are the directors?"

“Aren’t you the nosy one! Better be careful, you know what curiosity did to the cat, don’t you?”

“Leah, I-“

“Shave your head, read your files, by a MAGA hat, and stay close to your room, got that, kitty?”

The phone clicked and went dead. Hell hath no fury, as they say. I took stock of my circumstances; I was being blackmailed for murder and had incurred the wrath of a crazy, commie femanazi. I decided to be useful and did my homework.

The days were boring, but peaceful. I got a good exercise routine going. Every morning at five I woke up and went for a three to five mile run. I ran along the highway and off onto dirt roads. Running the land always gets me a good feel for a neighborhood, and in the early morning stillness I could sense that under all the craziness that was bubbling to the surface most of the residents just wanted to live a quiet life. But everyday more and more buses arrived and unloaded. Shuttle vans showed up and spit passengers out onto the street.

My smartphone buzzed with the arrivals. Forwarded Facebook pages and twitter feeds filled my screen. Everything I would need to know about a potential target had been posted by the target themselves. I couldn’t help but chuckle at the irony and be awestruck by the primal need people seem to possess to make their opinions forcefully known. Social media profiles are like bumper stickers on steroids.

The targets themselves were a sad lot. Sallow faced, and acne scarred. They looked like they had been cheated of some crucial element at birth. The knowledge of this theft lurked behind their dull eyes and longed for a reckoning with the world. I gave up trying to memorize names, they were all too similar: Fields, Rivers, Smith, Johnson, Mc-something, or Mac-something, on and on. I attempted to commit faces to memory and track the common themes in their lives.

They came from broken homes and had little education. They self medicated with booze and pot. They had taken one shot on something and failed miserably. It was usually related to law enforcement, or military service. That particular trait hit a little too close to home. They worked shitty jobs or none at all. Strike two. It didn’t look like any of them got any pussy; at least I had that going for me. Although, it had been awhile...

By the time early August came I had new marching orders. I had just finished a run and was doing some pushups in my air-conditioned room when the phone rang,

“Time to get out there and mingle, Johnny.”

“Sounds good,”

“Are you satisfactorily versed in the cannons of white supremacy?”

“I think so.”

“What is Adolf Hitler’s birthday?”

“I forgot,”

“April 20. You must know facts like these. They are common topics of conversation among the right wing.”

“Your telling me that 4/20 is Hitler’s birthday?”

“Correct. It’s in your file if you don’t believe me.”

“So every time we smoke weed on, or at, 4/20 its like a secret salute to Hitler?”

“Never underestimate the ability of hate groups to influence culture.”

“Crazy,”

“Hit the bars tonight, walk the streets, make some friends, and hand out some serum six. There will be more to follow once you run out.”

“Will do,” She didn’t say goodbye, but I suppose it was better than threats of incarceration. If it weren’t for small victories I wouldn’t have any.

I hit the streets after dark. A fat, full moon illuminated the dripping-warm, southern night. I started to sweat after walking two blocks. It was a Friday and the crowds couldn't decide if they were spilling into the streets, or being poured into the bars. That was the kind of mood around the whole city, push and pull, bend on the verge of break. I sipped club soda in loud places. I mimed hits of serum six and caught curious looks,

"Heeey Whatcha got?"

"Yooo, lemme get some..."

"Am sayin, I hit dat?"

"My man!"

"Shoooot,"

I played Santa Claus and let willing participants play in the snow. I knew what they were feeling and was jealous. The beginnings of the brilliant formulas effects were wonderful; a gentle caress of euphoria across your face, a slight rev to your soul, and a quick bulge to your dick. If you knew what came next you stopped there. If you got greedy the wheels came off. I followed orders and spread cheer. Now was the happy time, the calm before the storm. According to Leah they would be moving bricks of this stuff into the city all week and getting it into the hands of various protest and counter protest leaders. I was one of those conduits and currently engaged in what was termed the "pioneering portion," of the operation.

I kept my appearance neutral to drift in and out of different circles. I introduced myself under numerous aliases. I never stayed in the same place for more than an hour. I kept up the routine all weekend. Monday morning there was a knock on my door. I spied Beau and Peg through the keyhole before opening up. They were dressed as Virginia State Troopers clad in grey uniforms and Stetson hats were pulled low on their heads. Posing as cops seemed to be there M.O.

"Miss us, Johnny?" Peg asked.

"Not particularly."

"Last time we saw you was when you hacked up the Colonel." Beau pointed out.

"Has it been that long?"

"Yes it has," They imperiously strode into the motel room. Beau placed a knapsack he had been carrying on the small round table in the center of the room.

"This is for the masses consumption, not your personal use. Got that, Johnny?"

"I wouldn't dream of it."

"Ha! You and Jamie were going through this stuff by the pound in California."

"Yeah but they did a hell of a job over there, Peg. Fires are still burning in some places. The directors were very pleased from what I understand."

"Well that's all that matters."

"There is going to be a lot of action this weekend, Johnny. The rally is set for Saturday morning in Emancipation Park."

"I know where it is."

"That's good. Friday night expect some sort of organized demonstration from the right. We aren't sure what form it's going to take yet. There will be counter-protesters all over the city from now on so steer clear of them. We have other operatives feeding them serum six, you focus on the alt right from now on."

"Got it, Peg."

"Am I forgettin to tell him anything, Beau?"

"Yeah, stay outta the sun for the next few days, you look too much like a spic."

"I'm getting tired of your mouth, redneck."

"Is that right?" Beau took two steps in my direction. I took three steps towards him. Peg put herself in the center of the room and held up her hands,

"Save it for the weekend, boys" Beau winked at me and stomped out of the room.

"He's not wrong, Johnny. You're looking a little dark. Stay in until Friday. That night hit the streets and hand this stuff out. By Saturday morning I want those crackers hopped up and full of hate."

"From what I been hearing around town that wont be a problem."

"No, but we need more than just hate, we need them to act. Bodies must be left behind if this is going to make any difference."

"I'll do what I can."

"You better," with that she turned and left. I dead-bolted the door behind her and opened the bag on the table. A brick of the serum was tightly packed inside. I took out some small plastic bags and began the tedious work of sorting for distribution.

Friday night I stood alone on a sidewalk watching the glow from the torches grow brighter. The march was coming closer. I heard the chants get louder, "You will not replace us! You will not replace us! You will not replace us!" The head of the mob turned the corner, the rest of the snake slithered in behind. They carried shields and wore helmets. They brandished clubs and rifles alongside signs and symbols. They came closer and I got a look at their eyes. They were wide and frenzied, filled with hate.

I scoped out the counter protesters. They were beginning to filter out of community centers and churches. They were clad in brightly colored dashikis, and clergy garb festooned with rainbow cloth.

I jumped in with the alt-right and began chanting with the rest of them. We switched up, "Blood and soil!" was the new shout. I passed out bags of serum six. The contents disappeared up the noses of my fellow marchers. I was handed a torch, a sign with a swastika, and a large folding knife.

The counter protesters began probing our column, looking for weak spots. They were quickly rebuffed. Both sides deployed Mace and pepper spray, I caught a

face full and almost went down. The march went on, the chanting went on. Somebody passed me a gallon of milk to dump on my face. It cooled the effects of the oleoresin slightly. I saw through my clouded vision that we were headed towards the University of Virginia Campus.

Cunty, college kids joined the counter protesters. They screamed in our faces. We screamed back. The hate was infectious. A girl rushed into our ranks and spit on me. I knocked her teeth out with a right cross and left her bleeding on the side of the road. I received accolades from those around me. When in Rome...

The march halted at a rotunda that was packed with more counter protesters and college students. It turned to a standoff. We started with insults and slogans. More mace came out. Torches started flying. Then the dam broke. Groups crashed into one and other, fists flew, clubs clubbed, feet stomped. We battled for supremacy, each assemblage sought to control the streets.

A third party arrived, riot-control garbed Virginia State Troopers. They came in swinging and shoving. It was all the incentive we needed to split. The groups separated and splintered into factions. I tried to slip away down a quiet street. I turned a corner and slammed smack into a group of five counter protesters.

"GET THE FASCIST!"

"Easy, guys. Would you believe I'm with the resistance?"

"Love Trumps Hate!" A pudgy, white guy with a beard screamed while swinging a chain with a pad lock. I ducked, charged, and slammed into his ample midsection. He let out an, "oomppff!" and we crashed to the ground. I rolled off of him and sprang to my feet as a thin, black guy with an afro and, "black lives matter" shirt chased after me, spraying mace. I was in no mood for more of that and ran down the street as he and the rest of his group ran after me. We reached an intersection and a Virginia state police car roared in between my pursuers and me. The group skidded to a halt. Beau and Peg got out and brandished nightsticks.

"Officers there's a Nazi over there, help us!"

"No problem," Peg said as they approached the group.

"What are you doing? He's over there!" A fat, black woman in clergy garb bellowed. Beau smashed her in the face. Peg laced into the kid with the afro, hacking with her nightstick like it was a machete. They tore through the group in seconds and left the five of them moaning in one bloody heap. It was an impressive display.

"Get in the car, pussy." Beau ordered. I did as I was told and we sped off, lights and sirens blaring through the darkness.

The streets were starting to clear. Discarded torches were beginning to flicker out. The absence of the flames gave the night a less ominous feel. Peg broke the silence in the car.

"You get rid of all that serum?"

"Sure did."

"Alright. We got another bag for you. Tomorrows the big day, be at Emancipation Park by eight A. M. The Governor will declare a state of emergency in the morning. The State Police will announce that the demonstration is an unlawful assembly soon after."

"How do you know?"

“Because that hack Governor McAuliffe does what he’s told. The directors want this to be bloody and chaotic. After the assembly is declared unlawful its open season on the Nazis. Cops and counter-protestors alike will be able to feast on fascists. It’ll be chaos.”

“Sounds great.”

“You don’t sound like you’ve attained the proper level of enthusiasm for this operation. Do you need some additional motivation?” Beau asked while glaring at me through the rearview mirror.”

“Bring it on fuckface, I’ll crack your fucking jaw.” He slammed the brakes and the car skidded to a stop.

“Not now, Beau!” Peg yelled and placed her meaty hand on his forearm,

“We got more important shit to do, boy. Just write it up and report it to Ava. She’ll handle it.”

“No snitching, Beau,” I chided. We stared at each other in the mirror. He looked away first and started driving. I kept my mouth shut not wanting to press my luck. I wasn’t sure I could take Beau in a fair fight. He had me by a few inches and pounds that were all muscle. Still, I wasn’t afraid, I couldn’t be. If he sensed any apprehension he’d eat me alive.

A few minutes later they dropped me at the motel with a new bag of serum to sort,

“See ya tomorrow, shithead,” Beau offered by way of farewell. I walked towards my room and unlocked the door. I threw the bag onto the table and pulled out a chair to sit down. The bed caught the corner of my eye,

“Fuck this,” I said and collapsed onto the mattress.

I woke gradually and became aware of another presence in the room. I smelt cigarette smoke and perfume. I rolled over and saw a figure in the dim light, seated at the table. Her legs were crossed high and pair of stilettos dangled off the ends of them. She wore a short, black skirt and a low, black top. She was staring at me with a slight smile on wine-stained lips. The bottle stood on the table, next to an empty, lipstick smeared, stem-glass. A cigarette burned between Ava’s red nails. Her dark eyes were glaring and hungry.

“You want me. Don’t you, Johnny?”

“Yes,” I said sitting up in the bed.

“Even after everything I’ve done to you, you still stare at me like a stupid, little, lovesick boy,” she sighed. I looked down, embarrassed at her power over me.

“What are we going to do about this?” She mused, shaking her head and inhaling smoke from her mouth into her nose. I stayed silent, unsure what to reply. She focused those dark eyes on me and exhaled,

“Come over here,” she said in a gentle tone of resignation. I rose from the bed and stood in front of her. I’d fallen asleep in my clothes. She stared at the bulge in my jeans,

“Mmm that looks like it hurts,” she said reaching out and stroking me through the denim with her small, brown fingers. My eyes rolled back in my head and I let out a groan of pleasure, she laughed softly,

"You and women, Johnny...you just get yourself in deeper and deeper, don't you?" She undid the button on my jeans, drew down the zipper, and pulled out my throbbing cock.

"No wonder Leah was so upset, I'd miss this too," She pinched the head with her thumb and forefinger, I inhaled sharply,

"Take of your shirt," I did as I was told and looked down at her. She was still seated, her legs were open now, and she stared into my eyes, stroking and rubbing me with both hands,

"I bet you want me to put this in my mouth, don't you?" I nodded and moaned,

"Yes that's what all you boys want. Unfortunately for you, its not about what you want," She smiled wickedly and squeezed,

"Get on your knees," She let go of my dick and cupped my balls, then she applied just enough pressure to make me wince. She pulled me down by them and I sank to my knees, just the way she wanted. She was looking down at me now and beckoned me forward with her finger. Her legs opened wide, she wasn't wearing any panties. I saw her pink, pussy blossom in front of my face. It was shaved clean. Her knees squeezed my torso, the heels of her feet dug into my lower back. Her hands caressed me under my chin and stroked my hair. She gazed tenderly at me for a long time, holding me in some kind of trance. I was lost in the warm glow of her brown eyes, then, without warning her grip on my hair tightened and her hips arched up, hiking the skirt past her thighs. She pulled my face up to her warm, wet space and I began to kiss and lick it. She purred and moaned thrusting up to meet my mouth, I brought my hands up and grabbed her ass, her flesh burning at my touch. She tasted sweet, her scent was floral, I was lost in the moment, consumed by the act, I had no conscious thought, just an impulse to shift and follow in the direction her grasping hands, and thrusting hips.

She was a woman who knew what she wanted and how to draw it from a lover, as easy as pulling water from a well. Her body shook with convulsions of pleasure. I looked up at her eyes while continuing to kiss her below. She stared down at me, meeting my gaze. Sweat was beading on her forehead, her tongue darted over her lips, her large breasts were freed from her dress and heaved with her movements, I brought my hands up, covering and caressing them, stroking her large brown nipples, and gently rolling them in my fingers. She stroked my hair and whispered, "That's it, that's my good boy, kiss it now, yes...yes...aye si! Si!" She gasped and came; it went on and on until, eventually, she began to retreat from my touch and tongue, her pink flesh having grown too tender.

I had drawn all her power out of her and gained the upper hand. She was limp, sweaty, and spent. I rose to my feet and looked down at her, she was still seated and breathing heavily. Her eyes were drowsy slits that looked up at me with satisfaction.

I grabbed a handful of her hair and threw her to the floor. She landed on her stomach, breasts pressed flat against the ground. I got down and pulled her up on all fours, she tried to crawl away but I grabbed her around the waist brought her in tight. I thrust up, deep inside her, she yelped and I began to pound away, slamming up against her ass that bounced and jiggled with each push. I switched up the depth

and tempo of each plunge, she moaned and screamed. I felt myself approaching climax and pulled out. She gasped and I inhaled sharply, struggling to maintain control. When the moment passed I pushed her flat on her belly and climbed on top of her. I pushed apart her cheeks and brought my cock, wet and slick with her juices, up against her asshole. She tried to wiggle out from under me, but I lay atop her with all my weight and the more she struggled the deeper I penetrated her. She was breathing hard and squealing softly. Slowly, I inched myself all the way inside her. Once she was full I began to shift back and forth very slightly. Her eyes were shut tight, she was whimpering with pleasure and embarrassment at her submission and the obvious pleasure she derived from it. I pressed my lips against her ear,

“You thought you could come in here and treat me like a kid didn’t you?”

“Yes,”

“Things didn’t go as planned did they?”

“No,”

“Your trapped now, and you like it don’t you?”

“Si,”

“Tell me you want me to do it,” I said and began to lengthen my strokes as she relaxed and loosened.

“I want you to do it,”

“Say it, be specific,” I began to thrust harder; her eyes opened wide.

“No!”

“Say it, I already know, but I want to hear it,” I went almost all the way out then pushed all the way back in, deep inside her.

“No!” She gasped and moaned, I went faster, delivering long deliberate strokes so she would feel every inch, “No, no, no, no, no, no”

“Say it!” I pounded her into the floor, into acceptance, rising up and slamming down, until she finally relented and gave me my victory,

“Do it! Yes do it!, cum inside me, cum inside my ass!” I blew with the last word, grunting and moaning as she tightened and drew every drop out of me and into her. The moment shook us and left us panting, sweat-soaked, messy and ashamed. I looked at her. Gone was the self assured and powerful woman who had been manipulating me from the moment we met. She looked fulfilled and dejected at the same time, unsure where she stood with this sudden shift in our relationship.

“I should go,” she said rising and walking towards the bathroom,

“Please don’t,” she stopped in her tracks and turned to me, still naked. Her hair was wild, mascara streaked down her cheeks, and my seed streamed out of her, “Why?”

“Cause, maybe, I’m still just a lovesick, boy,”

“All men are,” That said she walked back to me. She held out her hand and I took it. We walked to the bed and crawled under the covers together. I rested my head between her breasts and she caressed my hair with her fingers. We lay in the dark, the awkwardness of the encounter fading. She lit a cigarette and asked me something I’d never been asked before,

“What happened to your father?”

“He died before I was born. On the day I was conceived to be exact. He was a mean drunk, meaner than he should’ve been for a twenty year old. My mother caught his eye. She was a warehouse worker on my grandfather’s farm. Her and the other women packed fruit in a shed, while the men worked in the fields. He watched her. For months he lingered around her. She saw him. They never spoke.

A week after my grandmother passed, he followed her when she was on her way to the bathroom, a portable toilet on a small, barren plot. He grabbed her and dragged her up to the main house. My grandfather was mourning and chose to throw himself into work. He was out that whole day, harvesting alongside his workers. He came home at sundown and went upstairs, ready to shower, eat, and enjoy the deep and deserved rest that results after a day of hard labor. He heard my mother crying through the closed door of my father’s bedroom. It stopped him cold. He approached the door; a pit of angst grew in his guts. The door opened easily, creaking on its hinges.

The small, brown body of my mother was curled up on the floor. Her long, shiny, black hair splashed like an ink stain, across the wooden floor. She had been violated repeatedly, as evinced by blood leaking from her intimate orifices. She sobbed hoarsely, the action causing her obvious pain.

My father sat on the bed, drinking from a blood-smeared whiskey bottle. He tottered drunkenly as though swaying in a strong breeze. He muttered to himself, unaware of my grandfather’s presence. My grandfather crossed the room, grabbed him by the throat, and threw him out the second story window. My dad broke his neck and died.”

“How do you know that’s how it happened?”

“My grandfather told me.”

“When?”

“My birthday,”

“Which one?”

“All of them. He referred to it as a cautionary tale. ”

“What happened to your mother?”

“My grandfather picked her up and carried her into the bathroom. He called the woman who supervised the warehouse and together they cleaned her up. He refused to bring her to the hospital and he never reported my father’s death. That night, he buried him out in the field.

The next morning, when my mother had regained her senses he offered her a home and a permanent job on the farm in exchange for her silence. My mother was

alone. Her own father was a drunken Navajo who had abandoned her when she was too young to remember. Her mother had died when she was twelve. She'd been working ever since, following the seasons, relying on the kindness of her fellow workers for transport and shelter."

"How old was she? When the ...attack happened?"

"Eighteen,"

"So young..."

"Yeah,"

"Your Grandfather is quite a man. Good and decent, like you, Johnny. How did your father stray so far?"

"Grandpa says it skips a generation."

"What does?"

"Whatever it is that drives men to drink and rape. Grandpa said that some men drink to relax or enjoy themselves. Others drink to fill a void, an emptiness that needs attention. The spirits get inside. It activates and animates all a persons dark qualities while drowning out the good ones."

"Is that how you feel?"

"I don't drink."

"I forgot. Your mother stayed with him then?"

"Yes, until the day she died. When I was five, Grandpa bought that trailer and cleared a plot of land for us to stay in. My mother didn't want to leave the main house, but my grandpa thought she should have some privacy. I think he hoped she would find a husband, but she never did. She wasn't interested. Her world became my grandfather and me."

"She loved him."

"Like a father, maybe more...and he loved her. He hasn't been the same since she passed."

"It's good he still has you. You should take some time when this is over. Go visit him."

"If you'll let me."

"We'll see how things go tomorrow,"

"You could come with me," She didn't answer my offer at first, instead she sighed and lit a cigarette. Her eyes grew watery, and she tried to pass it off as smoke irritation. The change in her demeanor since we'd had sex was startling. The ice-cold vixen that'd stalked my every move had been shaken, her armor had been pierced allowing messy emotions to leak out.

"We'll see, Johnny. There's much to be done."

"What do they have on you, Ava?"

"They have my loyalty and they know it's unwavering."

"That can be dangerous,"

"It is. Let's sleep now, mijo. Tomorrow will be a long day," she put my head back between her breasts and stroked my hair. Her nails gently scrapped my scalp. I dropped off into a deep and dreamless sleep, the best I'd had in years.

When I woke she was gone. As flashes of our night together flared up in my consciousness I began to question whether the event had taken place, or if I'd

dreamt it. The wine bottle and glass were gone. She'd left nothing behind that would indicate she'd been in the room. However, the brick of serum had been broken down for distribution and the smell of cigarette smoke still lingered in the air.

I showered and dressed quickly. I could already hear sirens outside. As I walked towards Emancipation Park I began to notice a difference in the counter-protesters today. They were younger and angrier. They were being disgorged from buses and vans all over the city. I got pelted with a water bottle filled with piss. I turned around and saw a group of shirtless black guys charging at me. A van of white guys pulled up and came to my rescue. A quick skirmish started in the street, a flurry of kicks, punches, and pepper spray erupted. I smashed a nose and got slammed in the ear. I felt something pop and blood leak out. Cop cars came squealing up and made a modest attempt at separating us. Both groups took the excuse to step back, lick their wounds, and walk away while exchanging insults.

"Get in the van with us," One of my rescuers offered. It didn't sound like a suggestion. We all piled in, the smell of sweat and body odor stunk up the interior.

"Where you from, bro?"

"Arizona, Yuma County."

"Spics overrun your town yet?"

"Spics overrun my state, man." I said trying hard to redirect my hate at myself and away from my interrogators.

"Them niggers almost had you, boy." The driver, a grizzled man who looked to be in his sixties said from behind a bushy, gray beard.

"They certainly did. How about a token of appreciation, fellas?" I reached into my backpack and handed out a few bags of serum six. The front passenger took them and eyed them suspiciously.

"What is it?" He had a big, baldhead and the body of a weightlifter. His eyes darted constantly. There was intensity that seemed to ripple through him and he posed his questions with the obvious authority of a leader. The others stopped examining the contents of the bags I'd handed them, waiting for his pronouncement on the substance.

"We make it out west. Call it one part LSD, two parts crystal meth, three parts Viagra."

"Lighten up, Cantwell. We could use a little lift. I'm so fucking hangover I could cry," The driver said before the powder disappeared up his nose.

The man he called Cantwell let the challenge slide and nodded at the others. They all inhaled their powder. Cantwell kept his eyes on me,

"Aint you having any?"

"I did a few bumps before,"

"Where your ancestors from?"

"Romania," I lied.

"You got gypsy blood or something?"

"How the fuck should I know? My grandparents didn't grab the family tree when they had to flee under the communists."

"Goddamn Commies!" Yelled the driver, "Don't worry, boy, you'll get your shot at a few of them today."

“Damn right!” Came the chorus from the back. Cantwell pocketed the packet containing the drugs and turned back to the front,

“We’re here boys,” We piled out of the van into the park. Small fights like the one we’d had on the way over broke out all around us. It was all hit and run stuff. Mace filled the air again, more piss bottles arched overhead. We got close to a monument of Robert E. Lee. There were supporters and protesters all around it. We joined in the ring that encircled it. I took a minute to study the object of so much simultaneous admiration and ire.

General Lee sat atop his horse, Traveler, his bronzed countenance sternly observing the chaos caused by his effigy. I wondered if he ever envisioned such a spectacle over the presence of his personage. I realized after what he’d been through he’d probably find our little affair quaint.

I remembered it wasn’t really about the statue. This was just one of the many fights that would define the future of this country’s accepted sensibility. The effort to purge the past was in full effect and I was one of the foot soldiers. I tried to come to terms with my own feelings about the statue, I wasn’t sure if I felt offended. The past was the past, but did we need to be reminded of it with monuments like these? Then again if we don’t know the past doesn’t that doom us to repeat it? A mouthful of mace interrupted my musings and I turned away from the monument, coughing and snotting.

“Heads up, boy! These commies will kill you!”

“Fight back!”

“White power!” My eyes burned, somebody handed me a gallon of milk and I dosed it over my face. A P.A. system began to blare a static laced warning,

“The park is closed! This assembly has been declared unlawful! Please move to the nearest exit!” The warning repeated in the same monotone, a direct contrast to the frenzied pitch of the escalating conflict. The police had vanished. It was becoming a free for all. I tried to stay with the mass of white that fought its way out of the park. I could barely see and lashed out whenever I saw the blurry figures in front of me become aggressive. I broke my left hand on somebody’s helmet. I punched out with my right. Something dug into my knuckle. I pulled my hand back and made an inspection. Two teeth were dug in. I pulled them out and we pressed on.

“McIntire Park! Head to McIntire Park!” Came shouts from all around me. I moved with the mob, still blinded, I flowed with the current, letting it take me. We were in the street now and I heard car doors open. I tripped over something and fell to the ground. I few boots kicked at me and I rolled away, sprang to my feet and stumbled away. Brakes squealed in front of me and a horn blared,

“Move it, Nazi!” I staggered into an alley. I could make out a dumpster and I slid in behind it and sat against the wall. I smelt garbage, sweat, mace, and sour milk. I heard shouts, screams, and sirens all around me. I had lost the backpack of serum six somewhere in the fracas. My face and neck were on fire.

I sat there for two hours, blinking my eyes, spitting and snotting. I stayed quiet whenever someone passed and remained undetected. Eventually, I could see well enough to get up and risk wading back out into the melee. I heard a car rumbling behind me. A dark-colored, dodge challenger was slowly creeping my way.

I put my back against the wall, giving it room to pass. The car stopped alongside me, the window rolled down and a pale, round, youthful face stared up at me from behind a pair of dark glasses.

“What are you doing back here, brother? The actions this way.”

“I got blasted with mace, I was useless out there. I’m just licking my wounds.”

“Oh. Want a ride?” He seemed a little simple and had a vacant look about him.

“Where ya headed?”

“Just going to cruise for a bit. Rally got shut down. I’m just waiting to see what’s going to happen. It’s pretty crazy out there right now.”

“I guess everybody’s just waiting for the spark,”

“What do you mean?” He asked, not quite grasping the metaphor.

“You know? A spark to start the fire,”

“There’s going to be a fire?”

“What I mean is, people are waiting on someone to make the first move and then they will riot.”

“Oh...and start a fire, maybe?”

“I guess,” I rolled my eyes, the conversation growing increasingly vexing. I put my hands in my pocket and felt a small bag of the serum, the last one I had. If there was ever a candidate for stimulation here he was.

“I appreciate your offer...”

“James...James Fields Jr.” He stuck his hand out the window for a shake. I palmed the small bag and passed it to him discreetly. Not one for subtlety his features erupted in surprise,

“What’s *this*?”

“Drugs, you snort them and feel amazing. Enjoy, James.” I said and walked out of the alley leaving the simpleton to himself. I got about a half-block before I heard the engine rev and tires squeal. The dodge came flying out of the alley and blew past me at seventy. It took a corner on two wheels. I heard the screams a few seconds later.

PART 3

The humid, Virginia night smothered and enveloped me in darkness. The muggy grip of summer was still present in the late September air. I stood alone in front of a tall and sprawling house on the outskirts of Washington D. C. The home had a stone façade and a blue, slate roof. Terraces surrounded the outskirts before giving way to grassy meadows that rolled away until they reached the high, foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. In the quiet dark I could faintly hear a river gushing from behind the country manor.

I did not know who the homeowner was and I didn't ask. Ava had taken me along and instructed me to wait outside for her. Dark SUVs ringed the circular gravel driveway and a line down the drive, back a dirt road. I estimated that there were around one hundred people inside. There was no indication from the house that such a large gathering was occurring. No loud conversations or music emanated from the tall, stone structure. I ran a finger along one of the wide, glass windowpanes and realized the glass was probably sound dampening and bulletproof.

Ever since Charlottesville, Ava had kept me close. I wore a black suit and dark glasses most days. I had a studio apartment in Georgetown, in the same building as her. We went to dinner together, went out together, and made love often. Call me a kept man. It almost felt like a normal relationship but, work was its basis and omnipresent. Days of indolent pleasure would be cut short with a frantic phone call necessitating an immediate response from Ava, and now, by extension, me. I'd drive her wherever she told me, or fly with her wherever she needed to go.

I was always armed. A Glock .45 hung heavy in a shoulder holster on my left side, and two loaded magazines hung off my right. I carried credentials that identified me as a federal contractor employed by the Department of Health and Human Services. Those credentials allowed me, and my weapon, access to anywhere Ava told me to go.

A lot of my time was spent just like this, standing around, waiting for her. There were always other drivers and bodyguards around with me. We always stood, silently, obediently, waiting for our charges to emerge from whatever they were engaged in. Our function was clear,

"Stay here. Keep your eyes open," The keep your mouth shut was implied and understood. I recognized a few of the faces from time to time. We were all in our early to mid-twenties, military or law enforcement training was apparent in shared

mannerisms and posture. I wondered if they all had a fall from grace similar to mine. Victims of a weak moment that resulted in being cast out from government employ. All that training and investment gone to rot, where does a military man go if not the military? The deep state came and scooped you up. You got a second chance, but stay useful, because if I've learned anything these past few months it's that there are no third chances and life is cheap.

The front door opened and guests began to emerge. They were laughing and glad-handing. I recognized some of the faces. There were members of both houses of congress, television hosts and network executives, former officials from Obama's administration and well-known philanthropists. They all left looking optimistic. Ava came out accompanied by a tall, white guy.

"Johnny, I'd like you to meet Director James Comey, formerly of the FBI."

"Nice to meet you, Johnny. That was some fine work you did down in Charlottesville. We've got a great narrative to run with now and everyone here appreciates all the hard work you've done on the ground." He was smiling down at me. He looked soft and doughy, the kind of man who spent his life in an office, inundated with artificial light, dithering over the minutia of acts and deeds then twisting them into violations of broad statutes. It was the face of a true coward, empowered by a bureaucracy and sense of entitlement an unlimited budget brings and unsupervised action breeds.

"Nice to meet you, Director," I said with a neutral expression. He extended a soft, manicured hand and I gave his dead-fish an aggressive squeeze.

"Ouch!" He exclaimed and pulled his hands away,

"That's quite a grip, anyone ever tell you have heavy hands?"

"Johnny boxed in the Marine Corps, Director. He can't help it."

"Well then, Semper-Fi, son. Keep up the good work." He strode off on his long legs; chin held high, he managed to look hapless and pompous concurrently.

"What a douche bag."

"I agree, but keep that quiet. This whole place is wired and he listens to the tapes."

"Yes Ma'am. We going home?"

"Absolutely not!" A gruff voice answered me. Ava rolled her eyes before turning to face the person who had responded to my query.

"Hello, Director Brennan."

"Ava, we have a situation over in Nevada and I want you on the ground handling it." My presence was ignored completely by the new arrival. He was red-faced and swaying slightly. I smelt the sweet odor of alcohol emanating from his pores and wafting off his breath. His white hair was cut close and his square jaw hung slack when not barking out orders. I recognized him from cable news, Director John O. Brennan, President Obama's CIA director.

"What seems to be the problem?"

"We got an AWOL operative off the reservation and loaded for bear."

"Who is it?"

"Speculator." The name was pronounced ominously. Ava's face fell at the mention,

"He was slated for..."

"That's correct, and that little homo in your cell already delivered the cache."

"Jamie? Why wasn't I informed?"

"You're informed now. Get out of here! Rendezvous with the fag, then get Speculator back on track. His last known location was Mesquite, Nevada. He also has an address in Reno. Find him and if you can't control him..." He left the sentence unfinished and thrust his chin in my direction.

"I can handle him," Ava declared.

"I know you can, but we need you. This one's expendable," He said jerking a thumb in my direction before stumbling off towards a waiting limousine.

"He's a real charmer."

"That's-"

"I know who he is. He comes off as an even bigger asshole in person. I didn't think that was possible having seen him on television."

"He is a crass individual and product of white privilege, no question. But he's still in charge. We better get to Dulles." We headed towards our car. It was parked by the main road, further from the estate than most of the other vehicles. Everything has a pecking order, especially parking. It was clear where Ava stood among all these heavyweights, but given enough time she was certainly ambitious enough to supplant a few of them from their places. I walked slightly behind her and watched her ass wiggle against her tight, black pants. I was impressed with the way she deftly strode through the gravel in her spiked heels. I wanted her right there. She must've felt my eyes boring into her,

"Stop staring at my ass, John."

"I can't help it. You look so good,"

"We don't have time for this."

"It won't take long,"

"Then I'm not interested."

"Harsh," We continued our walk in silence. It was a strange dynamic between us to say the least. I'd heard that workplace relationships were messy, especially when one party is subordinate to the other, but this was a whole new level of complicated. We approached the car and she headed for the front passenger seat. I followed her without her noticing. She was obviously preoccupied. As she climbed into the seat I jumped on top of her and reclined it. She pushed the barrel of a short revolver into my jaw.

"I'm not playing, Johnny, get off."

"You going to have to kill me."

"I repeat: we don't have time for this,"

"Of course we do," I said undoing her zipper and pulling down her pants.

"Get off me," she said and cocked back the hammer of the gun.

"No," I pulled out my throbbing dick.

"You heard him, you're expendable,"

"Everyone is," I said and pushed the gun away. She let it go and I flipped her over, taking her from behind. She was wet and backed into me as I worked inside her. Her scent rose up and drove me wild. I gripped her ass and plunged away. She moaned through gritted teeth. We came together in a brief explosion. She shuddered

and I swear the ground shook underneath us. I collapsed on top of her and we lay there, savoring the moment. Loud banging on the window brought us back to earth,

"Let's go already!" The red face of director Brennan bellowed. I climbed off of Ava and saluted him from the driver seat. Then I started the engine and sped off, showering him with a spray of gravel. We laughed as we heard him cursing in the distance while trying to dodge the rocks.

Our seats were in first class. Ava ordered a glass of merlot. I loved watching the purple stain her already burgundy lips an even darker, richer color. She was busy on her tablet, reviewing a file she had just received.

"How lovely..." she sighed.

"What?"

"Director Brennan just sent me a dick pic in place of the file I requested." I peaked over a stole a look,

"Huh. You'd think he'd be embarrassed."

"The man is shameless. I'll add it to the collection."

"Get a lot of these do you?"

"It's not easy being a woman in this business, or any other. Here's the file we've been waiting for."

"I know him,"

"Yeah?"

"Jamie, and I met him out in the desert. He gave us the map and road-flares for operation inferno."

"What was your impression?"

"He was one of the strangest people I've ever encountered. His name was Stephen...something, I can't remember."

"Stephen Paddock, sixty-four years old. Long time CIA operative and future patsy."

"Patsy?"

"You're familiar with the term, aren't you?"

"No, not really."

"A patsy is a fall guy. Somebody too take the blame. "

"For what?"

"In this case-" she was interrupted by her buzzing cellphone and answered it,

"Peg, thanks for getting back to me. We have a situation. Speculators gone AWOL. Where are you two? Okay, you need to head down to Melbourne, Florida and check an address. It's a couple of years old, but its possible he's in the area. Check in with his mother. She's at a nursing home in Orlando. Ninety. She may be senile. How should I know? Call Leah, have her try and hack the nursing homes records. Maybe he left some next of kin info we don't have. I know it's a long shot. Why don't you stop arguing with me, and start driving to Florida? Thank you. I'll send you the addresses and his file." She hung up and inhaled sharply,

"Johnny, your greatest talent is the ability to shut the fuck up and follow simple instructions. You have no idea how rare that is."

"Thanks," I decided against further inquiry into Mr. Paddock's planned mission. Obviously, she'd tell me if she wanted me to know.

“Do you remember where you and Jamie encountered Speculator?”

“Not really. It was after he picked me up in Yuma. We went north, but I’m not sure if it was Arizona or Nevada. We’d been driving awhile and it really was in the middle of nowhere.”

“Should be easy enough to find out.”

“How?”

“Well we know when Jamie picked you up. We’ll look at the GPS history and see where you two stopped.”

“Can’t you just do that for Speculator?”

“No. He’s too savvy for that. The agency recruited him back in the seventies. He knows all the tricks and he’s extremely paranoid.”

“He claimed Wi-Fi makes him crazy.”

“He was telling the truth. The negative effects of Wi-fi on certain segments of the population are intentional and well documented. Try and sleep now. I have to do some research and email orders to Leah and Jamie, if we’re going to find this guy.”

“Will do,” I put the seat back and stole a glance at Ava before closing my eyes. She was peering into the tablet, her eyes soaking up all the knowledge that spilled out of it. Her brow was furrowed and she bit down on her lower lip. She caught me gazing at her and smiled,

“Ve a dormir, mijo.” She rested her hand on top of my head, slowly caressing my short hair with her fingers. I dropped off into peaceful oblivion.

We arrived at McCarran International airport with the sunrise. The sleeping city of Las Vegas was bathed in brilliant, early morning sunshine. The casinos on the strip looked tired, all the neon luster and steel shine paled when paired against a bright, desert dawn.

We landed and de-planned separately from the rest of the passengers. A black, Chevy Tahoe stood idling on the tarmac. The front doors were open and ready to receive us. Whoever had delivered it didn't stay around to greet us.

"You drive," Ava said as she wearily climbed into the passenger seat.

"Where to?"

"1372 Babbling Brook Court, Mesquite Nevada." I punched the address into the car's GPS system. It would take us about an hour and a half to get there.

"John, I need some sleep. You man the phone. Wake me if it's important, use your judgement. Definitely wake me if Jamie calls."

"Why? Is he close to finding him?"

"I don't know. Jamie was scheduled to deliver some ammunition to Speculator. No one had heard from either of them since."

"How long ago was that?"

"Five days ago, September twenty-fifth."

"What about Jamie's GPS?"

"Went dead along with his phone, five hours before the meet."

"Why are we just learning about this now?"

"They're both deep cover operatives. Sometimes they operate in the darkness, without oversight. Still Jamie should have checked in with someone. My guess is something big was in the works and *they* didn't want it compromised."

"What do you think it was?"

"Probably the big job."

“What’s that?”

“Lets just try and find him, and Jamie. Then we can figure out what’s going on.”

I had a feeling Ava already knew what was going on. Or, at least had a strong suspicion. I began to grow worried. My brief encounter with Stephen had been unsettling to say the least and Jamie had been more uncomfortable than me. I sped along the tarmac and exited the airport, tearing through the Vegas strip and shooting out to the open desert. Ava was snoring softly at my side. I thought of the conversation we’d had on the plane. She’d called him a “patsy,” and a “fall guy,” for what though? Curiosity was gnawing at my guts, but I kept it to myself and let Ava sleep. The phone stayed silent and I kept the car at a steady hundred miles per hour.

We reached our destination just before nine A.M. A one-story, ochre-colored, ranch sat quietly at the end of a cul-de-sac, wrapped in stucco. There was no activity on the block. I pulled into the cars driveway and stopped. Ava woke up with a start and blinked rapidly, clearing sleep from her eyes.

“This it?”

“I guess. How do you want to do this?”

“We start by knocking.” We exited the vehicle and approached the front door. A warm breeze kicked up sand and it smacked against the house. Ava rapped on the door, the sound shattering the surrounding silence,

“Check around back,” I did as I was told. The wide, gravel lot opened up to a beautiful view of open sky and desert. I looked around and so no evidence of recent habitation. I peered in the windows. The place looked empty. Ava knocked a second time, louder than the first. I tried the back door and found it locked as well. I returned to the front of the house. Ava produced a small, black bundle from her purse and extracted small, steel pins from it. She caught me staring and answered my unspoken question with a smile,

“Lock picks. Give me a few seconds and I’ll have this door open,” As promised, after switching to a different set of picks, the door clicked open.

“Can you show me that some time?”

“Sure, Johnny,” She smiled, “but lets get through this first.” We drew our guns and entered the house. We started off in a wide, airy room. It was light colored and bright and led to a spotless, stainless-steel kitchen. The sofas looked unused, the carpet was plush and clean. We checked the two bedrooms and saw no evidence of the beds being slept in. A few articles of clothing were neatly folded in dressers, or hung in the closet. There were no shoes, no toiletries, no books or magazines, no photos on the walls or in drawers, no food in the refrigerator. It looked like a model home built to showcase a development.

Ava had on a pair of latex gloves and was rifling through drawers. I went to help and was scolded,

“Don’t touch anything. I have a system.” I backed off and watched her work. She broke the room into quadrants, and then searched each one from floor to ceiling. Several times she lit up as some concealed compartment would be discovered, then her face would fall in despair when she realized the compartment was empty. The search took her hours; night was falling by the time she finished,

“Nothing,” She finally proclaimed after searching the empty garage, “place is wiped clean. We proceed to the next location.”

“Where is that?”

“Reno. I’ll get you the address in the car.”

We left the house locked and got back on the road. Ava dropped off to sleep as soon as the car began moving. By my calculation the hour she had slept on the way here was the only rest she’d had over the past forty-eight hours. The GPS said the house in Reno was about eight hours away. I revved the engine to a hundred and twenty miles per hour. I was worried about Jamie.

I drove through the night, a flash in the dead, empty desert. The world made way for me. I was on a mission. Around four A.M. Ava’s phone began to vibrate, Beau was calling and I answered, as she had instructed,

“Put her on the phone,”

“She’s sleeping, which is something she hasn’t done in forty-eight hours.”

“I aint talking to no boy toy,”

“Why don’t you just tell me what you found out shit-bird? I’ll decided if it’s worth passing on,”

“Fuck you, Johnny,”

“What do you got against me, Beau?”

“Same thing I got against everyone else, you’re a person, and I hate people.”

“Great. You find out anything useful?”

“He aint here. House was sold to some old couple back in 2016. We dropped in on his mom. She was no help, barely even knew who we were talking about. She barely even knew who she was. The staff at the nursing home hasn’t heard from him either. Got a next of kin listed as Bruce Paddock, son. Current whereabouts are somewhere in the Los Angeles area. We got a phone number, but there was no address on file.” I could hear Ava snoring softly. I thought about waking her, then decided against it.

“Did you try the phone number?”

“Yeah, dip shit, it went to voicemail. I didn’t leave a message. Now wake her up, ask her what we should do next.”

“I know what you should do next, get on a plane and get your ass to L.A.”

“You don’t make those decisions,”

“It’s what she’d want. You know it as well as I do. You’re just too chicken shit to take the initiative. That’s the difference between you and me,”

“Next time I see you-“

“You’ll run your mouth and do nothing. Now get on a fucking plane.” I hung up feeling pleased with myself,

“I knew you’d be a good fit for command.” Ava sat up and stretched.

“How long were you listening?”

“From the second you picked up the phone. I heard the whole conversation. Your instincts are spot on.”

“L.A. seems to be the only course to follow.”

“Correct. They need to run that down. How far are we from Reno?”

“Forty-five minutes.”

It was still dark when we arrived on the quiet street. The house sat like the others, silent and still. A bright moon lit up the rocky hills and short evergreen trees that surrounded the sleeping neighborhood. We got out of the car and heard coyotes howling close by. A two-car garage prominently jutted out in front of the rest of the home. The front door was recessed and on the left side of the house. Ava motioned for me to check the perimeter. I cautiously made my way around the house. The windows and doors were locked. I peered through the glass. The place looked cleaned out.

I walked back to the front of the house. Ava was busy with her picks. After a few seconds the lock gave and we went inside. The layout was similar to the last residence; an open floor plan and two bedrooms; both clean and empty.

“You remember how I searched the last place?” Ava asked me.

“Yes,”

“You take the garage then. Be careful though, it’s not his specialty, but he has at least a rudimentary knowledge of booby traps and explosives.”

“What is his specialty?”

“Don’t worry about that now, just clear the garage.” She went to work, mentally separating the room into quadrants. I walked over to an interior door that led to the garage. I visually scanned for wires, or recent patchwork around the wall and doorframe. I ran my hands along the molding and sheetrock. I got on my stomach and peered under the door. Satisfied, I turned the knob and entered the garage.

Jamie was naked and nailed to a cross, bolted against the far wall. Bare lamps were placed on either side of him, illuminating the bloody spectacle. Beneath his impaled feet, on the floor and written in blood, were the words, “Behold America, Your New Savior Has Arrived!” My eyes automatically began to avert from the bloody spectacle, but everywhere they traveled a new horror greeted them. Mason jars, filled with urine were stacked neatly in one corner, a pile of skulls grinned at me from another, graffiti covered the garage from floor to ceiling, I peered closely at a section and began to read, “from the ashes of the second civil war a new nation will emerge with a clear and united vision. Gone will be the fractious assemblage of states aligning against one and other, seeking to impose their will on each other. The modern America will have clarity of course, drive, and purpose unparalleled since the Second World War. The nature of this nation will depend on the victor, however a victory by either the left or right will be preferable to the current chaos that confounds a national agenda and thwarts our rightful-“

“Were you going to tell me about this?” Ava asked from the doorway. I turned to her and tried to speak. My mouth moved but no sounds came out. I watched her clinically observing the scene. Her brow furrowed in concentration, she tried to coldly assess the situation and uncover clues. As I looked deeper I saw her composure barely held up. She was on the verge of breaking down, I already had.

Jamie suddenly inhaled and lifted his head groaning,

“He’s alive!” We ran forward to him. I inspected the ruined hands and feet. Iron, railroad spikes had been pounded through them; a bloody sledgehammer was

rested against the wall. There was a hole in his side leaking blood, another replication of Christ's wounds.

"What happened, Jamie?" Ava asked stroking his face.

"I made the drop, he's got enough guns and ammo to kill half the state. Then he...he turned on me...outta nowhere-" he paused his narrative to cough weakly and spit up some blood

"Where is he going, Jamie? Is he going to D.C.?" Jamie shook his head and shuddered. I was still frantically thinking of a way to get him down. My eyes darted back and forth between his ruined feet and hands.

"Why don't you get a wet rag, Johnny?" Ava suggested breaking my trance. I hurried to comply and went to the kitchen. When I came back I handed it to Ava who tenderly stroked Jamie's brow while whispering her questions like she was administering last rights.

"He told me...He was gonna bath the strip in blood...said he was gonna make MAGA lovers bleed and spark the great war for the nations soul. He said I would be a symbol of the new America, a new savior of the American left. He never stopped talking...as he was swinging the hammer...he just kept talking." He inhaled sharply and his eyes rolled back, "Stay with me, Jamie tell me where he's going."

"Vegas...the strip...I don't know where exactly..."

"Why didn't he do what he was told?"

"He said wouldn't do it...said the world needed Trump, claimed his continued presence is necessary for internecine strife-Agghhh!"

"Shhhh, it's okay. We're going to take care of you."

"Johnny...kill me, man. Kill me and cut me down."

"Just be still. We'll get you help."

"Ava, you make sure they give me a full honors burial...make sure my daddy don't know...make him believe I-" There was more hacking and coughing, followed by gurgling. After that, Jamie was gone.

"We have to get to Vegas." Ava said before quickly walking out the door.

"What about, Jamie!"

"We'll call it in and get a clean up crew over here." I glanced back at him, once so animated and energetic, now hanging there, bloody and still. It snapped me out of my stupor and got me moving, anger motivating my leaden limbs. I got into the drivers seat and fired up the engine. Ava was already on the phone with Leah. She calmly dictated direction,

"Hack into the casinos on the strip and run some facial recognition tech. Absolutely not. Because we cant risk law enforcement taking him alive. We need to grab him ourselves or put him down ourselves. You do it. Tell them to get into Vegas ASAP and walk the strip. Anyone else that can be trusted as well." She hung up the phone and stared straight ahead. I knew she wasn't seeing the scenery in front of her. She was making internal predictions about our missing subject. Her mind was planning for all plausible possibilities and charting numerous courses of action.

I kept my eyes on the road ahead and behind. I was worried about an ambush. I wanted to know more. We'd be on the road all day. Vegas to Reno was at least a seven-hour drive without traffic. I let her sit silently for about an hour before my curiosity finally got the better of me.

"Tell me about him."

"I liked you better when you kept your mouth shut, John."

"We're past that now. I think I already know what the *big job* is, but I want you to say it."

"Say what?"

"You used the term patsy to describe, Stephen, or Speculator, or whatever you call him. Why?"

"Patsy normally applies to who, John? Who is America's most famous patsy?"

"Oswald."

"That's right. Lee Harvey Oswald, Jack Ruby, Sir Han Sir Han, James Earl Ray. All patsy's, all set in motion by the agency. And those are only the most recognized ones."

"You were going to use Paddock to assassinate President Trump."

"Well, he would at least take the fall. Whether or not it would actually be his bullet...events like assassinations are fluid, as long as the target is terminated, what does it matter who pulled the trigger?"

"And now he's AWOL."

"And heavily armed."

"How could you arm a maniac like that?"

"Do not overstep, John. Do not begin to cast judgment on the directors, or me. It was a last resort. Most individuals in today's America are destroyed by character assassination. Sometimes we couple the media frenzy with federal investigations. That combination is enough to destroy 99.9% of the population, but not Trump. He's that .1%. He has the money, fame, resources and balls to fend off any attack."

"He's one in a million."

"More like one in 325 million."

"Whatever, Paddock is clearly insane. I had a five-minute conversation with him, and I wouldn't arm him with a nerf gun."

"He is a long time operative. He has performed competently and obediently in the past. Unfortunately, the company's methods of persuasion sometimes cause degenerative brain damage. Obviously, Mr. Paddock should've been pulled from field work sooner."

"Obviously."

"It's not too late."

"It is for Jamie." That gave her pause and she stayed silent. At least fifteen miles had passed before she replied,

"He'll be treated well in death. Much better than he had been in life."

"That won't bring him back."

"Nothing will. But, in accordance with Jamie's wishes, I will ensure that his sadistic father never learns the truth about his son. I will craft a compelling death narrative myself. Jamie will be remembered as a hero, who fell defeating ISIS in Afghanistan. I may even get him the Congressional Medal of Honor, if I can swing it. Lord knows he deserves it."

"It'll just be a lie."

“Wrong. It will be the official record. It will become history and that will make it the neatly documented and easily verifiable truth. Besides, who is there to question it?”

“Speculator.”

“Not for long.”

The strip greeted us in all its glory. Neon blared and slot machines sang. The opulence was overwhelming my senses. Aside from our flight in yesterday, I had never been to Vegas. Seeing the spectacle for the first time at night was breathtaking and I had difficulty focusing on the task at hand. Ava stayed at my side, her attention on the faces in the crowd. She caught my eyes following the fountain display at the Bellagio.

"This isn't a vacation, John. Pay attention to the crowd, he's here somewhere."

"What do you think he's going to do?" She bit her lower lip and shook her head. That was her only reply and it left me unsettled. My phone vibrated in my pocket and I answered it.

"Johnny, it's Peg. Where are you guys?"

"Just coming up on New York, New York." She said something in reply I couldn't make out, there was too much background noise.

"I can't hear you, Peg. Text me your location we'll figure out a place to meet." I hung up and waited for her message.

"That was Peg," I told Ava, "I couldn't hear her. It sounds like she's at a concert or something. She's going to text us where she and Beau are." Ava nodded her head still roaming from side to side, eyes strafing the crowd. My phone buzzed again and I looked down to read the message,

"Vegas Blvd and W. Reno Ave, South west corner." We quickly walked in that direction.

Beau and Peg stood on the corner silently scanning the crowd.

"What's the plan, boss?" Beau asked Ava.

"For now we just walk the strip, and search the casinos. Johnny and I will take the street. You two check the insides. Only search the gambling floors. Start with the closest, Mandalay Bay, and work your way north." The four of us began to walk south.

"No word from Leah?" Peg asked,

"Nothing. She has to sift through thousand of hours of security camera footage, after she hacks into the casinos security systems. It's slow going."

"Don't we have any friendly's in the Police Department?"

"Negative, Beau. We're on our own. Lets head over to that concert, Johnny. You two get in there and search the casino. He's a blackjack guy so special attention to those tables."

"Got it," They walked briskly towards the hotel. It was hard to see where these massive buildings began and ended. I counted forty-three floors. The structure flared out in three directions. It was all gold-tinged glass and shining steel.

"Johnny! Pay attention!" Ava yelled over the crappy, country music blaring over the, all white, singing and clapping crowd. I reigned in my wandering mind and tried to focus as instructed. I gazed at the gathering. Smiling pale faces, blond hair bouncing over blue eyes and bright smiles, lots of red and white MAGA hats, laughing girls in cowboy boots and cut off jeans, everyone covered in American flag

patterned apparel, ten gallon hats and flannel shirts, camouflage t-shirts emblazoned with vows to defend the second amendment, thin blue-line and don't tread on me t-shirts. Everybody was happily dancing to the music and reinforcing each other's bullshit.

Ava waded into the mob and was swallowed up. A sudden remembrance struck me. What was it Jamie had said before he died? Paddock had promised to, "bath the strip in blood...said he was gonna make MAGA lovers bleed and spark the great war for the nations soul,"

"Ava!" I screamed, but she was gone. My voice was drowned out by the shitty music. I began to push my way through the mass, suddenly very sure that I was in the middle of Speculators intended target. There could be no doubt that these were Trump supporters and I didn't think a higher concentration of them could be found outside of one of his racist rallies. I was jostled and shoved as my attempts to find Ava got more aggressive,

"What fuck is your problem?"

"Watch it!"

"Get out of here!" I caught a fist to the face and swung back. I got pushed backward and was shoved to the outskirts of the crowd. I tried to charge back in, but was sucker punched on the side of my skull. I fell over, brain ringing. My whole body was vibrating from the impact. I tried to clear my mind and search for the assailant, but he was long gone. I sat there on the curb, trying to collect myself when I suddenly realized my phone was vibrating in my pocket. The number was restricted,

"Hello?"

"Johnny Flores! Man of tomorrow! Are you here to assist me, or is this an attempt to thwart my plans?"

"Stephen?"

"That is correct."

"I'm not sure. Why don't you tell me where you are? That way you can explain your plan to me."

"I don't think so, Johnny. You have tracked me this far, how is it you don't already know?"

"Jamie told us you were coming to Vegas. It's your intent he was unclear on."

"I intend to start the inevitable,"

"A civil war?"

"Of course. We are too diametrically opposed to continue as one nation. A blood letting is essential."

"I thought you had another mission? I was told you were in line for the big job."

"A fools errand. They would have me attempt an assassination the most heavily guarded man in America. Even with inside help it would never work, and the division in the country would still exist. My way is better. I will guarantee full participation in the coming conflict from all citizens."

"How can you know that?"

"Once I am linked to the deep state and the true extent of our operations are revealed, the nation will feast upon itself. A coup is already underway. It needs to be brought into the open. The only way the nation survives is if it is allowed to move

forward with a singular purpose. One school of thought must annihilate the other. This division cannot stand!"

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Loud popping filled the phone and flooded my ear. I pocketed the phone and heard sharp cracks in the distance. The music stopped. The stage went dark.

"What's that?"

"Are those fireworks?"

"They sounded like gunshots,"

"Probably part of the show,"

"I don't know..."

People were looking nervously around trying to convince one and other they hadn't heard what they'd just heard. I was scanning the surrounding buildings when the next series of shoots rang out in rapid succession. Screams started to fill the air. Panic started to spread as bullets began to find marks. I was being pushed as herd mentality set in and the stampede began. I waded in against the tide, searching for the shooter, searching for Ava,

RATATATATATATATATATATATATATATATATATATTATATATATATAATTATATATAT

A head popped in front of me and I was showered in brains and blood. A woman next to me went down in mid-stride as a series of shots shredded her knees. Sirens were wailing along with the wounded. Flashing, emergency lights competed with the casinos neon glare. I kept fighting my way through the crowd searching for Ava.

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Bullets bounced and ricocheted all around me. Blood splattered and bones shattered. Rounds burrowed into fleeing bodies. People threw themselves on top of others, turning themselves into protective shields. Some were bent over the wounded, staunching open wounds with slogan-filled, tee shirts. Some trampled the dead and injured while running away. Some people stood around dazed, unsure on a course of action. The myriad of human reaction during a crisis was on full display as the slaughter continued.

RATATATATATATATATATATATATATATATATATATTATATATATATAATTATATATAT

A teenage girl in a red "Trump Country" tee shirt staggered in front of me. I grabbed her shoulder, ready to shove her out of my way when I noticed a bloody stump where her left hand should have been. It stopped me cold.

"It ...it came off..." she said it like she was embarrassed, as though she had been to blame. Blood colored her blond hair pink. Her blue eyes were glazed and screamed shock. The stump pumped blood intermittently, like a garden hose with a kink.

"It's okay." I told her and gently helped her sit on the ground.

"I ...can't find it...I looked around but, I...I think it got kicked away." I ripped off my shirt and tied off a tourniquet below her elbow. The blood stopped squirting.

"I wasn't supposed to go out tonight. Do you think my parents will ground me?" She started to fall backwards and I gently lowered her to the ground.

"You're going to be fine."

RATATATATATATATATATATATATATATATATATATTATATATATATAATTATATATAT

"When is that shooting going to stop?" she began to fade away, her eyes fluttering in her head like a dimming light. I shook her back to consciousness.

"Soon, he'll stop soon, ok? The police are going to get him. They know where he is now. I need you to stay awake. Can you do that?"

"I don't want to...I'm so tired,"

"I know, but you may never wake up again, sweetheart."

"That wouldn't be so bad. I hate it here..." She started to drift away again. It felt like she was melting in my arms, her muscles and limbs grew increasingly slack. I thought back to my boot camp CPR training and started chest compressions. I felt her ribs give way under my hands as I frantically pumped in an effort to start her young heart again. I pinched her nose and gave her two long breaths before beginning compressions again.

RATATATATATATATATATATATATATATATATATATTATATATATATAATTATATATAT

I didn't think about the shots. Not even when the bullets whizzed past my ear and struck the pavement next to me. I just kept pumping and breathing. I didn't think about the people getting shot around me, running past me, trying to pull me off a girl they all thought couldn't be saved. I just thought about the girl in front of me, the beautiful girl with long, bloodstained hair, and clear, cobalt eyes staring sightlessly into the starry Nevada night.