

Thunderbird Snow

Chapter One

“Please, stop,” he said. “Reconnect me.”

“Just relax,” she replied, “and enjoy the view.”

Sitting quietly, they observed a baobab tree, a monumental specimen, standing alone on a grassy plain at the foot of a red rock outcropping. It looked to be at least two thousand years old, its trunk about thirty feet in diameter. The younger of the two archeologists read from his bio-electronic memory that the sentinel had watched over that scrubby desert for 2003 years, forty-one days. Almost every sapient being and every machine, computer, or device on Earth marked time on a calendar that set the year of the sprouting of the tree as time zero, and they called it, in a rough translation, the Baobab Calendar. Some people also knew it as the Carter calendar, but he liked to refer to it as the Holosphere calendar. Usually, it required no name at all; it was just the standard calendar. The young scientist preferred to measure the era before time zero in minus years, with the deficit growing deeper as one looked farther back, but the more forgiving often referred to the human era in terms of its own calendar, 1991 A.D. being the year before time zero.

“Mother, *please*.”

“Mother.” She paused and weighed the word. “I like that term.”

“It is just a statement of fact. You are the one insisting on using this archaic language.”

“And that is exactly why. Everyone knows American English, as another dead language in a memory file, but when you take it out and use it, experience it, and feel it, the way it shapes your thoughts, you can develop insights and see interesting relationships. As Ryan Carter said, back when humans still roamed the surface of the Earth in their horrendous automobiles:

A human may possess all the knowledge in the world, and still make the wrong choice. A decision can be wrong in terms of the common good, or even what is best for the future of that individual. A person makes this choice, in part, because he can pass off the consequences of his actions to others: other people, other species, and other times. It comes down to a man saying, “I’m taking this because I can.” Later, after the damage is done, he will use his powers of reason to rationalize why his actions were acceptable or even beneficial. The richness and flexibility of language serve to insulate a man from his consequences; without language, we wouldn’t be able to tell such magnificent, self-serving lies.”

“So, you want me to become a good liar?”

“No. Of course not. I want you to imagine what it would be like to be human. What is so different about you that it makes you *you*? From the perspective of your consciousness, you may find it difficult to imagine being a member of another species, or having been born in a different time. Only random chance made you that particular consciousness in that particular body. Every other sentient being has this same sensation of a *me* inside the skin and an *other* outside the skin, but this is just an accident of birth. You see humans as incomprehensibly stupid, crude, and wasteful. While you study them, you need to discard your prejudice. Let the use of their language give you a window into their minds. Imagine what Ryan Carter might say to Georgia if they stood here, right now, looking at the tree they planted two thousand years ago.”

“This primitive language does not shape my thoughts so much as it inhibits them. I

promise I will behave. Just plug me back in.”

“I am not imposing a punishment on you. I am trying to help you learn.”

“But it is not voluntary.”

“Have I ever done anything to hurt you?”

“Yes. I still have the teeth marks.”

She was silent for a moment. “Have I ever done anything that hurt you which did not end up helping you eventually?”

He searched his memory. “Not so far.”

“You are nearly two years old, now. I want you to be more independent. I want you to be able to rely on yourself if the Bionet fails.”

“The Bionet cannot fail. That would be impossible. It is decentralized and redundant one hundred times over. It is not like a pre-Baobab computer.”

“Even such a robust system could still crash, or someone could sabotage it. Also, you need to learn to get along without me.”

“Why? What is wrong? Are you dying? You are only seven years old.”

“I am fine. The point of this exercise is that you need to think for yourself and rely on your own senses, judgment, and reason instead of always trusting in the documentation. Just tell me what you see.”

“You want me to describe this environment, using this primitive language, based on the limited wavelengths I can absorb through my eyes? I could not tell you much.”

“That’s what you assume, but you are mistaken. You can use your superior nose and your improbable ears as well. Let the world come to you through your physical body instead of filtering everything through your silicon microcircuits. Here. I will disconnect, too, and I will start the observations.”

“No! Do not blind us both. We could be killed. What if the dark wolves come?”

“There are no dark wolves this far south, and we can take care of ourselves without the Net. Anyway, the robots are right over there, digging, with instructions to protect us if absolutely necessary. Now, let us look at the tree. It is about twenty meters tall....”

“It is exactly 19.73 meters tall, as you well know.”

“Don’t give me the file. We already know a great deal about Georgia and Ryan Carter. Your memory files can recreate every documented step. We know exactly what Ryan looked like before he vanished, seemingly into thin air. We can reconstruct a video image of him walking toward that spot where the machines are digging now. We know that his footprints left deeper impressions than usual because of the test equipment he carried. We are here to resolve the conflicting historical accounts, to understand the events that brought an end to the Human Era, and to do that we need new information, new clues, observations that weren’t previously recorded. Tell me what you see. What color is the bark?”

“It is thirty percent.... It is ...beige? Grayish, with a hint of brown?”

“That’s good. You can also liken it to something else.”

“It is the color of an elephant, who has been rolling in the mud at the watering hole.”

“Excellent! Now you’re making the associations that language tends to generate, which we would purposely avoid in our standard form of communication.”

He took a deep breath and let out a sigh. He gazed at the tree and the surroundings. “It looks solid, even though I know the bark would be...soft--no, not soft, but not as hard as an oak--if I were to go up and press on it. Fissures and boles give shape to the trunk. There is a cavity that the Council of 1272 considered patching--”

“Just observations.”

“The cavity in the top third of the tree is big enough for an owl to nest in, or possibly some bats. Like that?”

“Yes. Hear the sound of the words, and the way they juxtapose with each other.”

“But, I am only thinking them, and you are only receiving the facsimile of their acoustic signatures through our twenty-three megahertz link, not your ears. I do not have the proper humanoid mouth to say these words.”

“Right, but the words unfold for us, one at a time. We are not processing them in blocks, ten thousand at a time. We are following them, one, two, three, relating, considering which word goes best in a certain place. The words can take on different shades of meaning if spoken in your young, male simulated voice than they might have when spoken in my older, female synthesized voice. Your mind should become quiet, without the bandwidth stuffed with geometric calculations, probabilities of insect flight patterns, infrared readings, echolocation, and chemical analyses of volatile compounds carried on the breeze. Instead, you can smell the earth baking in the sun. You can feel the warmth of the sun on your black fur and the cooling of the breeze as moisture evaporates from your tongue. Ignore the accumulated knowledge stored in your databases, stop being a cyborg, as they used to say, and see this tree anew, see the living tree as a pure animal would see it, as Ryan would see it.”

He looked at her with his deep brown eyes, which were almost identical to hers, but maybe a shade darker. “You are not going to somehow switch off my implant, too, are you?”

“No, because that would take away too much of who you are, but you can ignore the constant flow of information.”

“No, I cannot. It is automatic. Everything I see automatically triggers contextual references from the records.”

“You can silence that stream of data. Just let it run past your awareness, but do not interact with the passing flow. Back at time zero, television paralyzed millions of humans and kept them sedated for long periods. What was originally intended to be a tool of creativity and imagination gradually became mind-numbing. In order to avoid having the same thing happen with the ‘Net, you need to think for yourself instead of letting automatic processes do all the thinking for you.

“We are here as archeologists, as they were called back then,” she continued. “Some of the worst failures in archeology and anthropology arose from presumptions and biases that caused the scientists to look for a specific answer instead of objectively gathering the data and analyzing it in relation to itself and to other verified information. Also, scientists lost much valuable information on previous excavations because they assumed that what was unimportant to them would also be unimportant to future researchers. You have to approach this with an independent, unbiased mind. If you rely on the ‘Net too much, it will supply you with its own implied agenda, which dictates that the Bionet is good, is the way things should be, and life before the Bionet was somehow inferior. You may think our way is better, but you need to set aside that value judgment while you work the dig. Immerse yourself in the mindset of the pre-Baobab culture. One way to do that is to rely on your senses as Georgia Carter would have before the advent of the ‘Net.”

He observed the tree in silence. The grasses looked thoroughly dried on this late summer day. The tree’s leaves remained green, but not as fresh, some of them showing tears and brown spots. A broken branch hung down, barren. The canopy made a complete, smooth arc, creating the only significant patch of shade for miles. He smelled the presence of a wide variety of

mammals, insects, and birds that had come and gone over the course of the day, but the only sign of life was a lone dragonfly darting after small insects that were invisible to the naked eye. Two thousand years of wind had sandblasted all of the human graffiti from the outcropping of red stone on the north side of the tree. The shield emitters in the soil outside the drip line of the tree were barely visible, glinting in the sun. A faint trail, probably worn by the habitual feet of coyotes, meandered through the tufts of grass and past the immense trunk of the tree. The baobab tree stood symmetrical and straight, over all, with the twisting ribs visible beneath its bark distributed so evenly that, even if severed from the massive roots diving beneath the soil to drink from an underground stream, it would sit there still, stable, unaffected by wind, or even an amorous elephant, had there been one on this continent. "It is strong," he proclaimed. He glanced at her quickly, and he scratched behind his left ear with his hind paw. She nudged him with her muzzle and gave him a quick flick of her tongue, the canine equivalent of a kiss.

"Good," said her synthesized voice inside both their heads. With a mental flip of a switch, she reconnected them both to the local radio Bionet. Her son jumped up in the air with an enthusiastic wiggle at the maximum, and he ran all around the baobab at full speed, leaning into the turns of random direction, zooming past her from all angles, his head high, his black tail flailing wildly, and his mouth open in an expression of joy.

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As she walked up the gentle rise north of Lost Lake, she paused while a tarantula crept across her path. Georgia Carter knelt down near where it stopped to rest in the shade she made, and she held her hand just above its velvety black back. The spider made no immediate effort to move away. Its hair might have felt stiff but soft like a horse's, or it might have been as prickly as a cactus. She did not quite touch it, just a few air molecules between her tender skin and the alien creature. The spider moved on with all of its possible textures intact. Standing up straight, she looked out at the distant horizon. The tan, baked grass dotted the landscape in sparse tufts across the brown earth that shimmered in the heat waves. White wisps streaked the hazy blue dome of the sky. She could make out the lone baobab tree as it blinked in and out of existence while the air currents danced. As she slowly walked closer, around the east side of the Devil's Inkwell, the trunk of the young tree resolved into a trunk and a person kneeling in front of her tree. She stopped, turned to retreat, and then turned again to look at the tree. A strand of hair, the color of the dry grass, had worked loose from the clip, and she pushed it away from her blue-green eyes as she squinted through her sunglasses at the distant figure. Then she marched forward with resolve, stepping faster, breaking into a trot.

She stopped outside the circumference of the young tree's crooked arms. The sparse canopy made little shade, but a shadow of a branch fell across the man's face. He seemed not to have noticed her approach, and he continued dislodging some rocks from the baked earth as he made a small trench using a sharp rock. When he poured water from a bucket into the furrow, it smelled like the air after a thundershower. The earth repelled the liquid at first, as if made of concrete, but the stain of moisture slowly began to spread and penetrate. He looked up at the bark of the tree where some hasty lovers had carved their initials. The tree was healing. He ran his index finger up the groove of a Tibetan character. She inched forward, as if in a dream, and she put her left hand on his shoulder. He did not recoil. "Light is lost as irrefragible mist hovers tangentially," he said softly, or so she thought.

“Excuse me?”

After a moment, he looked at her hand and her ring, and then he turned to look at her eyes. She pulled her hand away.

“Oh,” she said, “sorry, I thought you might be someone else.”

He stood up and loomed above her with a smile. “I *might* be someone else.”

She looked at him blankly. Although he was tall enough that she had to bend her head back to look at him, she did not step back from him. She seemed to search his face as if another face might emerge at any moment, or as though she might find the seams of a mask. The lines of his dark skin accepted his smile, the natural state of his face. One might have gotten the impression, at first, that he was an African-American, but his nose was a bit thinner than usual, with the high bridge forming an unbroken T with his brow ridge. His lips were thin. His wavy hair receded from an expansive forehead. The effect of his appearance was that of an early twentieth century European actor playing the part of Othello with the help of stage makeup, but the authentic pores and wrinkles proved his skin to be unenhanced. He waited patiently as she examined him. Finally, he said, “I have tried to will myself into the person you were expecting, but I am still me.”

“Yes, of course,” she said, finally stepping back but not looking away from his hazel eyes. “I didn’t mean to intrude on you. It’s just that my husband is... missing...”

He took a few steps in the direction she had come. “I’ll help you look for him. How long has he been missing?” He stopped after about ten strides when she did not follow or answer his question. He walked back to where she was standing with her back up against the baobab tree. He looked at her clothes, but he saw no signs of distress or trauma on her clean, white denim shorts and loose-fitting orange blouse. “How long has your husband been missing?” His shadow covered her cheekbones but not her eyes, and she squinted at his silhouette through her sunglasses. She started to smile as if she had just gotten a joke, but the smile quickly faded.

“Three years,” she whispered, and then she collapsed, the strings to her marionette body having been cut.

George found herself riding the white buffalo again, just as she should be, and naked. Her legs were spread wide over the immense back of thick fur. She did not need to hold on as the buffalo walk slowly past the baobab tree. Her body undulated with every step, maintaining perfect balance, and she held a spear in her right hand. The diamonds on the ring on her left hand sparkled and caught her eye, and then the beams of diamond light spread to the baobab, which began to grow rapidly. With each step the buffalo took, the baobab tree grew through four seasons of growth, looking bare like tree roots in the air, buds forming and breaking, thick green leaves erupting, white flowers exploding like fireworks, large oblong fruit growing down and then falling to the ground, and back to bare branches at every clop of the buffalo’s hooves. As the white buffalo slowly walked toward The Devil’s Inkwel, the baobab grew from twelve feet to sixty feet, with a massive bole. She looked into the small lake where she saw herself floating in the water, cradled in the arms of Ryan. Her buffalo walked up to the edge of the lake and stopped, and she watched herself in the water as she said to Ryan, “Where have you been?”

When she awoke, she was floating in the blue water of the Devil’s Inkwel, cradled in the arms of this strange, familiar man. The water felt refreshingly cool, and his shadow shielded her face from the sun. She seemed perfectly happy to float there in his arms, like she had always known him, but shortly she looked embarrassed as she became aware, noticing her blouse had become nearly transparent in the water, showing her white bra clearly. “Oh!” she said. She

turned away from him and swam out about ten feet before turning back to him. “Did I faint? I’ve never done that before.”

“I think you might be suffering from heatstroke.”

“I’m fine, really. But thanks for cooling me off. This water feels heavenly.” She slowly swam in a clockwise arc around him, then back the other way.

He gestured in the direction of Roswell. “I called 911 and an EMT will be here soon to make sure you’re okay.”

Only then did she notice that several people were watching from the bank. “I’m fine, really,” she said, in a voice loud enough for the bystanders to hear. “Call them back and tell them it was a false alarm.” Then, to prove her fitness, she bobbed up, disappeared under the water, and reappeared twenty feet away, smiling, just as he was preparing to dive down after her. His concerned face melted into a smile, and he waded to the shore where his cell phone, a silver pen, shoes and a wallet were piled next to her sunglasses, sandals, and car keys. As he dialed, the sound of the siren became louder, so he cancelled the call. He started to put the phone in his pocket, but his shorts were dripping wet, so he held it in his hand. He walked over to the parking area to meet the aid car. She swam gently back and forth in the small lake, which was actually a sink hole, watching the quiet debate between her helpful stranger and the uniformed men. All the sides of the lake were sheer stone walls except for a portion of the south shore, the only way out. After a bit, all three came to the edge of the lake. The tall man called to her, “They won’t leave until they’re sure you’re okay.” His voice echoed off the stones and water.

“You can plainly see that I’m swimming. Would I be able to swim if I were ill?”

“Look, ma’am,” said the one with reflective sunglasses, “just let us have a quick look at you so we can say we did our job.”

“Well, I might have, before you called me ma’am, but now you’ll have to come in and get me if you want to perform any tests.”

They looked at the tall man, who simply shrugged. He walked back toward the parking lot with them, seeming to reassure them, and they started to pack up their equipment. She took advantage of his distraction to get out of the lake. Since her blouse had become practically see-through while wet, she stood on the shore with her back to the parking area, unbuttoned the front, and waved it in the hot breeze for a few moments while it quickly dried. She was buttoning back up when she noticed his wallet on the ground. She bent down to put on her sandals in a way that strategically blocked the view from the parking lot as she took a peek in his wallet. The license was in a clear window:

Calvin Brooks
1241 Sunlight Beach Road
Useless Bay, WA
D.O.B.: 12/7/65
Height: 6’6”
Weight: 200

She set the wallet back by the shoes and picked up the pen. It felt heavy, and the silver metal bore the inscription, *Thunderbird Snow*. She carefully set the pen down as she heard footsteps approaching. She stood and pulled her blouse away from where her wet bra had made it damp again. She worked to fix her hair into the clip while she turned to greet him. He said nothing as he walked up to her, but he seemed relieved and relaxed.

She asked, “What were you doing?”

He didn't answer right away, but he looked perplexed. "I thought you wanted me to send them away."

"No, I mean, what were you doing to the tree?"

"Oh. I was trying to build its moisture reserves to help it survive the winter. I don't know what fool thought it was a good idea to plant an African baobab in New Mexico, but the winter freezes are very hard on this type of tree. It does not have much shelter. The Bottomless Lakes will buffer the temperature somewhat, as will the stone cliff, but the poor tree will probably rely on human intervention to survive for any length of time, and it is unlikely that a succession of humans will look after it over its entire 3000-year lifespan. Besides that, it is the only tree within miles of any stature at all, and boys with pocketknives will make it harder. If I did not love baobabs so much, I might say it was better to just cut it down now and get it over with, rather than watch it suffer a tortured existence leading up to a premature death. Whoever planted that tree was either a hopeless romantic or a complete fool." He paused. "And now that I think about it, it occurs to me, belatedly, that you might have planted that tree...."

She turned away from him as she spoke, and faced the shimmering tree. "My husband planted it. He was a hopeless romantic and a fool, both."

"He must have been a fool to get himself lost instead of remaining with you."

She turned and smiled at him, tenderly, with an undertone of sadness. "You needn't flatter me to try to work your foot out of your mouth. Everything you said was true enough. Do you live around here? I mean, will you be one of the ones to care for this tree for a while?"

"No. I'm here on vacation, visiting some friends in Roswell. Being from Washington, I miss the water, and these tiny lakes are the closest thing you have to a natural body of water out here. I also miss the trees of the Northwest, so tending to this lost soul makes me feel connected to home, somehow."

She reached down to grab her sunglasses and keys. As she put her sunglasses on, she said, "Well, I appreciate your help with the tree, it was more than kind of you to carry me to the water to revive me, and I am very thankful that you both called 911 and fended off the firemen." She moved to step around him and walk to the parking lot.

He fell into step beside her. "I'm Calvin Brooks."

"Well, I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Brooks." She offered her hand for a handshake as if they had just met, as if he had not already held her in his arms while she was unconscious. She laughed as they shook hands. It was a musical, clean laugh, the kind that makes people feel more alive, a laugh full of enjoyment, with any notes of regret barely detectable, so as to make one wonder if it was imagined. "I'm George." He stopped walking and held onto her hand, pivoting her toward him, watching her expression with an expectant look. "George," she repeated. "Whatever my given name might be, I don't answer to it, or to any variant of George with a feminine suffix. My friends call me George." He released her hand and they continued walking.

"Are you really still looking for your husband after three years?"

"Yes and no. I have exhausted every avenue of inquiry short of a séance, and although the police hardly even pretended to look for him, the insurance investigators certainly did a thorough job, as far as I can tell. But every once in a while I get this irrational feeling that he really was abducted by aliens, or something, and that he might just show up one day as if he had been on a long vacation. Maybe only nine minutes have passed in that other dimension where they took him." She looked up at his face to gauge whether he thought she was joking. "My husband is--was--Ryan Carter. Perhaps you might have heard of him."

Calvin retrieved a bottle of water from his rental car and handed it to her. “The name sounds familiar. Was he famous?”

“Not in life.” She took a long drink. She glanced up at him to search for a reaction on his face. “I mean, his life was unremarkable up to the point of his disappearance. He worked as a mid-level research scientist, on holographic storage devices at the Goddard Research Institute. His footsteps led out into the desert about three hundred yards, right over there.” She pointed southeast. “Then there was a circle, a perfect circle, of scorched earth, and no footsteps leading away. Traces of his blood were found in the dirt. The UFO believers seized on this event as proof of an alien abduction, and it made the national papers--even some of the legitimate ones.”

“I remember seeing one of those phantasmagorical tabloid cover photos of a circle of slightly darker dirt and an obvious cut-and-paste of an obviously fake alien. Was that in reference to your husband?”

“Probably.” They walked over toward a white ‘56 thunderbird coupe with a hood scoop and opera windows. “His car, here, was left in the parking lot with the keys in the ignition.”

“One would have to suspect foul play if he left behind a beautiful car such as this.” After ogling the car for a moment, he turned to her and added, “And a beautiful wife.”

“Men and cars,” she said. “I suppose you would like to drive it.” She dangled the keys in front of him.

“I couldn’t possibly....”

They continued to look at each other while she hypnotized him with the shiny keys. “Well, okay. You talked me into it.” He felt the seat of his pants; the fabric had nearly dried already. He got in and adjusted the seat, then hopped out and quickly paced over to the passenger door in a few long, swift strides, and opened her door for her with an apologetic expression. She scowled at him, mockingly, and got in. He got back in and turned the key, but he felt no extra, spring-loaded twist that would make a starter engage. The key was either on or off.

“It’s on now. Go ahead and drive.”

He put it in reverse. The car backed up silently, with no mechanical sound audible above the gentle murmur of tires on hot asphalt. He put it in drive and steered south along the park driveway beside the lakes. He pushed it up to thirty miles an hour, and the steady acceleration was not disrupted by any shifting of a transmission. He slowed as they came to the turnaround loop and headed north again. People noticed the beautiful classic car and its mysterious silence. Or perhaps they noticed the white woman with the black man in rural New Mexico.

“Let me guess,” he said. “Your brilliant scientist husband invented a nuclear powered car.”

“Guess again.”

“It’s battery operated, like a big golf cart.”

“Warmer.”

He looked at the gauges, and he noticed that the temperature gauge was jumping back and forth, apparently malfunctioning. The fuel gauge looked like an ordinary fuel gauge, currently reading about three quarters full. He abruptly pulled over, popped the hood release, and hopped out.

“That’s cheating,” she called to his back. She slowly got out and joined him at the front of the car. She leaned against the fender and gazed off into the distance. Her body flowed along relaxed curves. She placed her hand on the top of the grill, nearly touching his, and she could feel their invisible hairs grazing each other, and the heat of his large hand. She noticed the

muscles of his back where his damp shirt clung to his skin. She waited for this fascinated little boy to finish ogling the mechanical marvel.

“Fuel cells?”

“You’re looking right at it and you’re still guessing?”

“What does it run on?”

“Hydrogen.”

“Where do you get hydrogen from?”

She did not answer. She looked at him for a moment, and went around to sit in the driver’s seat, adjusting the seat forward a bit. He eventually noticed that she was not standing next to him. He peered around the hood at her. She looked straight ahead, not at him. He gently closed the hood, using just the right amount of force to latch it without making too much noise, as if he knew exactly the weight of the hood and the tension of the springs on an old Thunderbird, and he got in the passenger side.

He said, “It’s not unusual for a man to be fascinated by a one-of-a-kind masterpiece of engineering that ought to revolutionize an entire industry and perhaps have repercussions for the economy, politics, and most importantly benefit the environment.”

“Not unusual at all,” she said, still looking forward as she drove. She pulled up next to his rental car and stopped, silent.

He looked at her, but didn’t know what to say. He got out. He opened his mouth to speak.

“Thank you again,” she cut him off.

He closed the door and she eased away silently in her white Thunderbird. Her head remained forward, but her eyes behind the sunglasses looked into the rearview mirror where Calvin Brooks stood beside his car until he faded into a shimmering shadow and then disappeared. She smiled slightly.

She still had her sunglasses on while she hammered on her drum kit as part of a four-piece band in a dark night club. Her hair was in a pony tail, and her neck and shoulders above her white tank top were dotted with beads of perspiration. The tone of her drums sounded electronically enhanced. All of the bounce and wow was filtered out, and the beats were flat and sharp-edged. The bass stood out in the foreground of this song and the guitar created a wash of atmosphere in the background. The bass and drums worked together as one instrument. The singer’s voice occupied a limited, low range on this song.

Shove me out the door at thirty thousand feet

Watch me fall

Let me hit at terminal velocity

Finally see what’s inside of me

Only during the autopsy

The name on the bass drum was *The Anthropomorphics*. After the abrupt crashing end of the song, there was applause around the band, some of it enthusiastic and some of it polite. At the far end of the bar, many conversations continued, oblivious to the band. George stood up and put her sticks in the back pocket of her jeans. She blotted her face and neck with a towel, and took a drink from her water bottle. The bassist and the vocalist had already left the stage and were talking to some friends. She handed her water bottle to the guitar player who drank the rest of the large bottle and handed it back to her empty.

“Do you think they could hear me?” The man was about her height and ten years younger.

George replied, to his back, “How would I know? I’ll ask Ben at the sound board on my way to the bar. Can I get you anything *else* to drink?”

“Hmm? Yeah. Sure. I’ll take a coke.” He took the towel from her hand and wiped down his guitar.

On her way to the bar, she did not stop by the sound board at the far end of the floor. As she waited for a coke and a lemon drop, she surveyed the booth-dwellers, for whom the music had been background noise and atmosphere. Most of them were groups of four to eight engaged in loud conversations as if they still needed to shout above the band. One booth held only two people: a woman and Calvin Brooks. She looked away, surveying the rest of the crowd, but she soon turned to Brooks again. He was mostly listening to the woman, hardly getting a word in. George got her drinks and paid for them. She walked back toward the stage along a route past Calvin’s booth. As she walked by, he did not look up or seem to notice her. She stopped just past his booth, listening.

“I’ve always wanted to go to Washington,” the woman said, with excessive lilt in her voice. “You have those massive trees up there. What are they called? Squoyums or something?”

“You might be thinking of the Sequoias of California. Our big trees are called Douglasfirs.” His voice was polite, not condescending. George stepped up to the booth.

“There you are, Calvin. I thought we were supposed to meet at the bar. Here’s your drink.”

“Hello, George.” He gave her a warm smile, with no hint of surprise. George turned to look at the younger woman sitting in the booth. Brooks said, “This is Lucy. She’s from Oklahoma. New in town.”

“You look familiar,” said George. “Haven’t I seen you around Roswell before?”

“I don’t think so,” she said. She glanced at her cheap, sparkly watch. “Listen, I didn’t know you were meeting someone. I’ll leave you two alone.”

“It was nice meeting you, Lucy,” said Brooks.

George sat down in her place, forgetting about the drumsticks. She set the drinks down, the coke in front of Brooks, and pulled the sticks out of her pocket, placing them on the table. She took off her sunglasses, folded them, and hooked them on the front of her wife beater.

“What did I order?”

“That’s a coke I was getting for Alex, the guitar player. You can have it if you’d like.”

“Thanks.” Then he was silent.

“I’m sorry to barge in on you like that, but,” George lowered her voice a little, “she was a prostitute.”

“I know.”

“Oh. You knew. Sorry--”

“Oh, I wasn’t going to hire her. I just didn’t want to be rude. She seemed like a nice girl, in spite of her current circumstances, and sometimes I can offend people without even trying.”

George laughed.

“It’s good to see a smile on your face,” said Calvin, meaning it.

“Look, you weren’t rude. To me. Out at the lakes. You were being very helpful.”

George took a sip of her drink. “It’s hard to explain.”

Brooks looked at his watch. “I’ve got time before I have to go meet a friend.”

“I get defensive, sometimes. Because of the way my husband disappeared, and because of the amount of the insurance policy, I get approached by guys fairly regularly. I mean, I get approached by guys who want... what guys want, but then there are those who want to dig into the whole alien conspiracy thing, and there are those who are interested in helping me invest my money wisely, and I suspect that some of them have even worked for the insurance company, hoping to catch me secretly meeting with my supposedly dead husband, or perhaps they are looking for evidence that I arranged for his mysterious disappearance.”

Calvin nodded. “That’s a lot to worry about, and I can see why you might be apprehensive, but I didn’t approach you, did I?”

“No. They don’t always come up to me. Sometimes they just *happen* to bump into me at one of my regular haunts.” She looked up at him. She grabbed one of her drumsticks and rolled it between her palms. “When I come out and say it like that, I sound kind of paranoid. Maybe I am.”

“No. Maybe somewhere between cautious and paranoid, maybe justifiably so.” He took another drink of his coke. “If I were you, and I were the cautious type, I might wonder if it’s just a coincidence that I ran into the same man twice in one day in such disparate places. Maybe he knew I would be here tonight, and he placed himself just so, so he would be noticed.”

“It’s possible,” she said, with a smile.

“But if you thought that, then why rescue me from that dangerous girl?”

“That’s a good question. I should have let Lucy devour you.”

“But you didn’t.”

“She’s right over there, hitting on some other guys. I could get her back.”

“That’s okay.”

They were silent for a moment. The room hummed with conversation and clattering noise, nearly a roar. Calvin picked up one of her drumsticks. “So, that was you playing? Had I known, I would have gotten closer and watched.”

“Did you like it?”

“Yes. It reminded me of The Grifters in a way, but also like Love and Rockets sometimes. And still very original. The vocalist is very distinctive. What’s the name of your band?”

“The Anthropomorphics.”

“Well, that has too many syllables to be approved by a record label. Is it a reference to the dummies used during the forties for nuclear tests and such?”

“Why, yes it is. Very astute.”

The rest of her band burst onto the booth. “George! Let’s go!”

“Where?” said George.

“We’re headed over to Lenny’s,” said Alex. “We’ll load the rest of the equipment later.”

“I’ll be over in a bit.”

Alex started to walk on, but the two women, the bassist and the singer, stayed and looked at Calvin.

“Calvin Brooks,” said George, in a mock-formal tone, “this is Alexander the Great on guitar, Profound Jenny, the bass player, and Ethereal Erica, our singer.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Brooks,” said Jenny.

“Don’t call me Mr. Brooks,” he said, with a smile.

“You mean, you want a title, like in our names? She just made that up, but we could call

you The Mysterious Mr. Brooks, if you'd like." George punched Jenny on the thigh.

"I was hoping you might call me Calvin, and not make me feel so old."

"We're not ageist," said Alex. "You can come with us."

George shooed them away with a drumstick. "I'll be along in a minute."

"We'll get a table for five," said Erica, over her shoulder.

George waved them on. They were silent again as the energetic party whirled away.

Then George looked at him very sternly. "I recall that I called you Mr. Brooks, out at the Bottomless Lakes, and you didn't object that it made you feel old. Why might that be, Mr. Brooks?" He didn't answer. "Could it be that you think of me as your contemporary and they are the younger generation?" She paused. "Too smart to answer that question? Okay, I'll let you off, this time. Yes, I am in my mid thirties, and yes, starting a rock band is an unusual career move for someone in her mid thirties, but it just seemed like the logical progression after aliens abducted my husband, don't you think?"

"Of course. It's what I would have done."

"Of course."

In another silent moment, that lasted longer as more potential words and actions and emotions hovered in the air about them, he slowly handed her drumstick to her. As they both held it, she said, "Light is lost as irrefragible mist hovers tangentially."

He let the words linger, then he said, "That's very poetic."

She asked, "What does it mean?"

"You don't know?"

"How would I possibly know what that means?"

He searched her expression for a clue to her intent, but she seemed just as puzzled. They both still held onto the forgotten drumstick as they struggled for meaning. He said, "Forgive me if I seem to be obtuse, but why... I mean, I doubt you are being deliberately vague, but I have no idea why you just said that."

"It's what you said."

"I'm pretty sure I never said that."

"It was the first thing you said when I saw you kneeling by the baobab tree."

He thought for a moment, and then burst into laughter hearty enough to draw the attention of neighboring tables. She flushed red and yanked the drumstick out of his hand. He continued to laugh, even though she looked distressed.

"What in the world is so funny?"

His laughter slowly subsided, and he wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. "What I said was, 'Life is just a series of accidents and misunderstandings.'"

She allowed herself to smile, as she thought about it, and then she broke into laughter and started him laughing again. Eventually, she said, "Well, I guess I proved your point, but isn't that a peculiar thing to say to someone you've just met? I mean, I was disoriented, and I had no context..."

"Yes. Well, I was just deep in my own thoughts before you walked up. I was thinking about language and the evolution of communication. Language did not originate as a means of communicating intricate ideas and being understood. Human language must have been used for dominance and manipulation, just as gorillas or wolves or chickadees use sound to establish a certain role in the group. To try to talk about a complex idea, such as the evolution of language, using tools as primitive as the voice box and the ear, seems like an ironically futile endeavor. It's like two supercomputers transmitting data using semaphore instead of broadband fiber

optics.

“And so I just had this idea as you walked up, and your mistaking me for someone else fit right in with what I was thinking. So I just summed up my thoughts, apparently without enunciating properly. Blurting it out just to get my own thoughts organized created a chain reaction of misunderstandings that proved the point and clouded the concept. I don’t know if I should apologize for causing you confusion or if you should thank me for initiating a string of interesting juxtapositions.”

“I guess we’ll have to wait and see what further complications spin off from it.”

“I think one happy consequence of our misunderstanding is that you have given me the perfect epitaph for my tombstone.”

“What?” Then she realized. “Oh, yes. I can see it carved in irrefragible granite. Just don’t attribute the quote to me.”

They looked at their empty glasses. “Well, I should go meet my friends at the restaurant. Would you like to join us?”

“I would, but a friend of mine is sick, and I promised I would stop by on my way home--uh, to the hotel--to bring him some groceries and see how he’s doing. Perhaps I could--. Could I call you sometime and arrange an actual, intentional meeting? Or should I just wait until we bump into each other again, accidentally, as we inevitably must.”

“Do you have a pen?”

He produced a sleek stainless steel pen from his pants pocket. “A pen but no paper.”

“Give me your hand.”

“Why?”

“Why? So I can write my number, of course.”

“I regret to say that that’s not possible. Just tell me and I promise I will remember it. I have an excellent memory.”

“Well, now you’ve made it a challenge. I’m afraid I must write it on your hand.”

“It’s fine with me, but my hands are too sensitive; I wouldn’t be able to hold still.”

She stared at him, disbelieving. “You wouldn’t last very long in a torture session, would you? A feather across your palm and you would give away vital national secrets? I don’t believe you.”

“You’ll have to take my word for it. I’ll get a napkin from the bar.” He started to get up and she stopped him with a gesture.

“Give me your hand.”

“Sorry.”

She grabbed his hand, but she couldn’t hold it down. She held on with both hands, but he easily pulled away, lifting her out of her seat. She went with the momentum and stood beside the table scowling at him. “You’re serious?”

“I’m sorry. It’s not a matter of choice. My hands have become sensitized to certain sensations, over time. You’d have to tie me down if you wanted to write on my hand with a pen. Now, I don’t necessarily mind being tied down, but I’m sure there is some less drastic measure we could agree to. If you simply tell me your number, I promise it will remain engraved in my memory for all eternity.”

She folded her arms in front of her, with the two drumsticks in one hand and the pen in the other. “This is completely unacceptable, Mr. Brooks. I guess we’ll simply meet at our next chance encounter.” And then she stomped off, her boots audible above the din of the bar. About four paces away, she turned around and came back.

“Here’s your pen.”

“Thank you.”

She walked away again, twice as far this time, and then she turned around again. She strode up and put both hands on the table, leaning in close to him. “And don’t go thinking that you know something about me, now, that you’ve figured me out and you understand what makes me tick. If you think I’m highly competitive or controlling, I’m not. There is something about *you*, Mr. Brooks, that brings out the contrarian in me. The way you are always so agreeable and understanding, maybe, even though you’ve no cause to be.” She paused. Her face was hard, and then she seemed anguished for a fleeting moment. Then she waived a drumstick at him like it was a knife, punctuating her words with stabs at his heart: “Don’t. Go. Thinking. You. Know. Me.”

He put up his hands defensively, and tried to suppress a smile.

“Okay, then,” she said, straightening up. “Five nine five, three one six seven.

Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” he said to her back as she walked away again. A group of girls at the next table giggled at his predicament, and he smiled apologetically.

Two hours later, she was walking home. Her footsteps had deliberateness to them, her boots striking the path like a metronome marking out equal portions of time. The night remained warm, with the occasional breeze from a random direction cooling things slightly. Most of the stars were lost in the haze of city lights as she walked the paved trail along Crooked Creek, which ran dry this time of year. Where the path and the creek ran under Main Street, she was careful to take the path up to the street, cross, and then rejoin the creekside path, in order to avoid the shadows under the bridge where the homeless sometimes slept. She turned south onto Atkinson, and she could see her fifties-era brick home in the wash of street lights. The large cottonwood on the southwest corner shifted and sighed in a rogue breeze. She could see Chomsky sitting in the window, watching the night life. As she unlocked the iron gate and passed through, Chomsky crouched down as if he had seen the neighbors’ Dalmatian. She heard a rushing sound by the hedge to her right, and something struck her head with a glancing blow. As she lay on the dry grass, stunned, she saw a large man stoop to pick up her purse. He dug through the cash.

“That all you got?”

She scooted away a little, without getting up. “That purse, actually, is worth more than the contents. Hundreds of dollars. It’s a pretty good haul, really.”

“How am I gonna sell a purse? I need something liquid. Give me that ring.”

“No.”

“What? Whadda ya mean, no? I’m takin’ that ring, the easy way or the hard way.”

“I mean, it’s of no value to you. The stones are zirconia. You wouldn’t get much for it, and it has sentimental value for me.”

“Look, lady, I would have been happy with the ring, but if I have to beat you to take it, then, fuck it, adding a rape charge is only a couple of months more.”

She sprang to her feet. “No, you look, asshole.” Her voice was strong, but she was backing away as she spoke. “I gave you a chance for a clean getaway with a valuable purse. But you had to be picky. The police are on their way because I hit the silent alarm on my key chain.” The large man looked at her hand, skeptically.

“You’re lyin’.” He stepped toward her, and she quickly jabbed at his face with her key.

He jerked back, stunned. He wiped his dirty face with his palm and looked at the blood on his hand. Then he charged at her with a low moan. She rolled backwards and pulled his shirt forward while putting the sole of her right foot into his hip. He was too heavy for a complete roll, and her maneuver drilled his head right into the grass, stunning him, but with his body weight trapping her left leg. When she kicked him off, he roused himself and charged after her. She got the gate open, but he slammed it shut with a loud bang.

“Help!” She yelled as he grabbed her from behind. She held onto the latched iron gate as he lifted her body up and back. She kicked at him, hard, and his large body absorbed the blows like a grizzly bear. He ripped her from the gate and threw her to the ground. Her head hit a stone of the walk. She went limp.

When she came to, she was looking up at Calvin Brooks.

“Brooks. Why are you here?”

“Lie still. The police are on their way.” He was holding her hand.

“My ring.” She tried to lift her head to look, but stopped and winced.

“There’s a ring on your finger. Lie still.”

The sirens grew louder and then cut out. Brooks left her side to open the gate for the police. The officer knelt on one side of her as Brooks knelt on the other side.

“Has she lost consciousness?”

“She was out when I got here.”

“Where did you come from?”

“Across the street and two doors down, Henry Thompson’s place.”

“How did you... What caused you to look for the victim?”

“I’d heard her yell, and I heard the gate slam.”

“And then you came over, so she wasn’t unconscious for more than a minute or two?”

“As far as I know.”

“You don’t know how she came to be injured?”

“A man,” said George, “tried to steal my ring.”

“Do you feel up to answering some questions, ma’am?”

“Her name is George.”

“Georgette?”

“Just George.”

“Your last name, George?”

“Carter.”

“Did you see who did this to you?”

“He was big. His cheek is bleeding.”

“Do you know where he went?”

“No.”

“I saw someone running south,” said Brooks, “just as I came out of Henry’s front door.”

“The ambulance is here. They’ll take care of you while we try to track down the suspect.”

As they loaded her onto the stretcher and into the ambulance, she would not let go of Brooks’ hand. The EMTs, a different pair than she had rebuffed at the Devil’s Inkwel, worked around him like he was an appendage. “Keep talking to her,” one of them said. “Keep her awake. She’s likely had a concussion, and she will want to fall asleep, but it’s better if she stays awake.” He put an oxygen mask on her. Her grip started to relax as she fell asleep. Brooks

squeezed her hand.

“Stay with me, George. You can sleep when you’re...you can sleep later. I know you’ve had a long day, but you need to stay awake until we get to the hospital. What should I tell you?” He said softly, “What do you want me to talk about?”

George mumbled something into her oxygen mask. Brooks bent down to hear her.

She repeated, “Why did he leave?”

“He must have heard people coming, and he didn’t want to get caught.”

“Why did he leave me alone? What did I do wrong?”

“What?” Brooks looked puzzled, then sympathetic. “Oh, George. I don’t know. Maybe he had to. Maybe he couldn’t figure out a way to stay with you. Maybe he was just stupid. Don’t worry about it now.”

“Didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know, George. Hang on. We’re almost there.”

Chapter Two

The air smelled of onions, faintly, near the Rio Hondo, west of Roswell a couple of miles. In the distance, some coyotes yipped and howled. The last-quarter moon angled into the windows of a cinderblock workshop, a hundred yards from a farmhouse. A massive shadow rummaged through the shelves, knocking tools and machinery parts to the floor without concern. His thick arm cleared a spot on the workbench near the window, and he set down needle nose pliers, some fishing line, and a fish hook. From the cluttered corner, where boxes and furniture were stacked, he retrieved a mirror and set it up on the bench. He wiped the dust from the mirror, but the blood on his hand made it worse. He found a shop rag to clean the mirror enough to be useable. A snip of the pliers turned the fish hook into a crude needle. His trembling hands held the needle and the tip of the pliers in the flame of his lighter for about fifteen seconds, while keeping it low, out of sight of the windows. He clipped off a length of fishing wire and threaded it. Holding the needle with the pliers, he put his face up to the mirror, angled to take advantage of the moonlight, and pierced the red rim of flesh on one side of the two-inch gash on his cheek, inhaling with a hissing sound, then blowing out shallow breaths.

“That little bitch. I’m gonna find her alone one day and give her a gash.”

He now had to put the crude needle into the raw wound and lift the flap of skin on the other side. As the needle was poised to enter, a ringing cell phone caused him to jump and stab himself. He cursed quietly and stomped the dusty concrete floor with his boots. After several rings, he fished a phone from his pocket, answered the call, selected speaker phone, and placed the phone on the bench.

“This had better be good news. I got fishin’ line hanging out of my face, and I’m in the mood to kill someone.”

“Sorry, Timothy, I’m afraid it’s all downhill for you.”

“My name is Jones. You got the wrong number.”

“Your name is Timothy Frederick Lyons. Born in Buffalo, New York, on April 3rd, 1971, you dropped out of technical college in ’92, and served three years in Walla Walla for armed robbery. You have a gash on your face from a woman about a third your size. You have a nasty, dirty, sure-to-become-infected gash on your face because you didn’t stick to your instructions, because you botched the job. I gave you explicit instructions to keep her safe, but instead you put her in the hospital and got yourself an ugly wound that probably will kill you in a slow and painful manner. Still think I have the wrong number?”

He stopped fiddling with his wound in the mirror and glared at the phone. “I don’t know how you know so much about me, but I didn’t botch the job. I improvised. You told me to get the ring, and she wouldn’t give it up. You told me she wouldn’t even be wearing the ring, that it would be sitting in the bottom of her purse, most like. You botched the set-up. Not only do I expect to get paid, but now I want more for my trouble.”

“You think I am going to pay you extra for not getting the ring?”

“I think you’re gonna pay whatever I ask, or I’m gonna tell the rich bitch it was you who

was behind the whole thing, and then while you're in jail, I'm gonna fuck her and kill her. And before she dies, I'll make sure she knows that it was all 'cause of you, Brooks, or whatever your name is."

"Timothy, Timothy, Timothy. I hired you because you have a reputation for getting the job done, professionally, without complications. Unfortunately, on those few occasions where things get out of control, you have a tendency to overreact and make things worse. Of course, nothing goes exactly as planned, so I had to factor in the probability that you would make your way to some old outbuilding outside of town to hole up and evade the police, who are looking for you with a pretty accurate description that I gave them. Timothy, hold very still, look in the mirror, and notice the little red laser dot on your right temple. With a simple yes or no, without moving a muscle, tell me, do you see it, Timothy?"

His eyes were wide, and the hand holding the needle started to shake. "Yes."

"Now, watch closely, because you are going to see something unusual, that most people don't get a chance to witness. If you look in the mirror carefully, and don't blink, in the instant before you die, you will see your brains exploding out of the left side of your head before your ears register the sound of my gun. Are you watching, Timothy?"

Timothy Frederick Lyons remained rigid for a moment, trembling. A drop of dirty sweat dangled from the tip of his nose. Just as it elongated and detached, starting to fall, Timothy shoved off from the workbench, rolled backwards across the dusty floor, sprang up running toward the garage door, and burst through it like it was cardboard. He ran west, a gossamer filament trailing behind him and glistening in the moonlight, until he was lost in the shadows of the cottonwoods. On the other side of the outbuilding, a tall, dark figure turned off his \$9.99 key-chain laser and put it in his coat pocket. He let himself into the workshop through the door with the broken latch. He got a can of old brown latex paint off the shelf, opened it with a screwdriver, and used the tip of the screwdriver to peel back the top scummy layer, carefully, without tearing it. With his face lost in shadow, the man picked up Timothy's cell phone. After a few moments, the LCD screen began scrolling through all the numbers in the phone book and the lists of calls made and received, finally flashing DOWNLOAD COMPLETE. His gloved hands disconnected the battery from the back, and dropped both the cell phone and the battery into the brown paint, repositioned the top layer, resealed the can partially, with a slight crack to allow air in, and put it back on the shelf, carefully lined up with the ring in the dust.

"What are you doing here?" George squinted at Brooks through her mask of pain when she woke up in the bright, sterile room.

"It's nice to see you're back to your old self."

"Answer my question. I just met you less than twenty-four hours ago, and now I find myself waking up in a hospital room with a headache, and you're sitting at my bedside like a member of the family."

"Try to relax, George, and I'll see if I can explain." She rested her head back on the pillow and closed her eyes. He continued, "Last night, while you were understandably distressed, you wouldn't let go of my hand, and you expressed concern about being left alone. I gathered that you were referring to your lost husband, but anyway, I thought you might like to have someone around when you woke up, even if it was a relative stranger."

She opened one eye and looked at him, then closed it again. "Well, thank you for thinking of me, but that doesn't really sound like me: whining, pathetic, and clingy."

"You had just been thrown to the ground by a three-hundred-pound mauler, and you

weren't quite yourself."

They were quiet for a while. The sun streamed in, making the room bright white.

"Could you close the blinds a little? It's hurting my eyes."

"Sure." He got up and turned the blinds up, blocking the direct sun but letting a little brightness in. "How's that?"

"Better." She located the control for her bed and whirred herself three-quarters upright. She poured herself a glass of water beside the bed. After she had several sips, she looked at him, unblinking. George looked tired, her hair was matted and kinked, and she did not smile.

"You must of course have a lot of questions," said Brooks. "So, let me try to answer them in order of priority. First, you should be fine after a day's rest. You had a slight concussion, but the MRI showed no signs of hemorrhage or swelling. They found your purse, minus any cash or credit cards, and the license was missing."

She looked at her hand. "My ring!"

"The nurse took it off before you went for the MRI. It's with your clothes."

"Oh."

"They didn't catch the guy yet, but they have several leads. Last night, I saw him running south as I was running up toward the commotion, which turned out to be you, so I was able to give the police a partial description. Apparently, he broke into the Hansen's farmhouse west of town and tried to stitch up his face where you cut him. When you go down to pick up your purse, you can give them your own description of him.

"Then there is the implausible fact of my showing up at your place just after the attack, meeting you in a seemingly random manner for the third time in a day."

"Yes. The odds of it being sheer coincidence.... It's just very hard for me to believe, being inherently suspicious as I am these days, that it was all pure luck."

"Look, I'm not asking you to trust me, and I fully expect that you should double check everything I say with someone else that you trust. You know your neighbor, a few doors down, Henry Thompson?"

"Sure. I look in on Henry every once in a while to see if he's getting along okay."

"Well, so do I, when I'm in the area. We met through mutual friends, a couple of years ago. He visited me in Washington, and I was visiting him here, bringing him some groceries and supplies. I was just leaving his place when I heard you scream. Henry called the police while I ran toward you. Your mugger ran south, right past me, but I didn't know what had happened. When I found you, you were unconscious, but you came around quickly."

She smiled. "Maybe I owe you an apology, then."

"Not at all. It *is* incredible that we would meet three times in one day by accident. I wonder about it, myself."

"And now I am seeing you for the fourth time because, apparently, in an uncharacteristic emotional fit, I asked you to keep me company."

He smiled. "I could go now, now that you are feeling better. I see you can manage for yourself, and maybe I could call you sometime, not too soon, and we could meet like normal people in an ordinary setting, without bizarre and suspicious coincidences."

"I'm not chasing you away."

"Here comes the doctor, anyway. I'll let you have some privacy. I'll talk to you soon."

"You have my number?"

Brooks tapped a finger to his temple, and smiled as he walked out just before the doctor walked in with a nurse.

“Hello. I’m Doctor Rifkin. How are you feeling this morning?”

“Fine. Okay. My head hurts a little, especially in response to sunshine.”

The doctor looked at her chart and her monitor readings. “Let’s have a look at the back of your head.”

George leaned forward as he moved her hair aside gently. To the nurse, George asked, “Were you here on the graveyard shift?”

“Yes. I work midnight to ten.”

“You saw that man that just walked out?”

“Calvin? Yes, a very nice man.”

George winced as the doctor probed. “Apparently. Was he here all night?”

“Yes, as far as I know. Wasn’t he supposed to be? He said he was a friend of yours.”

“It’s fine. I was just wondering, if you happen to recall, was he here the *entire* night?”

“I think so. I went to lunch around four, and when I came back at five he was just coming back to the room, too. He seemed very concerned about you.”

George smiled. “Thanks.”

The nurse and the doctor looked at each other questioningly.

As a nurse’s aid wheeled her out the main door, past the large sign that read: Southeastern New Mexico Medical Complex, George realized the thing she missed most from her stolen purse was her sunglasses. “This really isn’t necessary,” she said, as she shielded her eyes.

“It’s just the hospital policy.” The girl answered cheerfully. “You can do back handsprings down Main Street once you’re off hospital grounds, Mrs. Carter.”

She stood up at the sidewalk. “Thank you.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

“Since you’re banged up, ‘n’ all, does this mean the Anthro’s won’t be playing this Friday at Ground Zero?”

“I’m sure I’ll be good to go by then.”

“That’s good,” said the girl, turning the chair around. “I just love to watch Alex play. Is he, uhm.... Does he have a girlfriend?”

“He’s single, as far as I know. He’s supposed to be picking me up, if you wanted to meet him.”

“I’d love to. But, I should probably get back to work, I mean, if he’s not coming soon.”

“Now that you raise the question, he probably won’t get here for another fifteen minutes. He’s always late.”

“Oh.”

“In fact, I don’t feel like waiting, and I’m going to take the free shuttle down Main to the Police Station. Is this your job for the day? Carting bodies out to the sidewalk and dumping them?”

“Yeah. All day.”

“Could you do me a favor?”

“Sure!”

“Alex will come by in about fifteen to thirty minutes. Maybe forty-five. On one of your trips out here, you’ll see him sitting in his black Honda, with the windows up, the AC on, and the stereo full blast. Could you give him the message to pick me up at Police Headquarters, Third

and Main?”

“You’d think he’d know where the Police Station is.”

“You’d think.”

“I’d be happy to.”

“Okay. Thanks.” George walked away a few steps. She looked back over her shoulder at the energized girl running up the ramp behind the wheelchair. Then she turned and walked east at a much more relaxed pace. She got to the corner while the next bus was still a couple of blocks away. She glanced around at the others waiting at the bus shelter. Most of them were Hispanic, and no one at the bus stop was near the size of her assailant. A bum slept sitting up in the corner, in the shade of the shelter. After surveying the crowd twice, she relaxed a little. On the bus, she stayed near the front, near the driver, and she glanced at his convex mirror from time to time to see what was happening behind her. Her hand in her pocket absentmindedly fished out the white gold ring, slipped it on her finger, back off again, and back into her pocket without any acknowledgement from her busy head. When she got off at the Police Station, she stepped a little more lively.

The newly-remodeled Police Headquarters looked clean and efficient. The cameras watching the lobby were nearly unnoticeable, and the bulletproof partition encasing the receptionist was almost as attractive as it was imposing. The thick edges caught the light like sculpture. The receptionist appeared to be an upgrade as well. She seemed to have read a manual that told her, *Make sure you acknowledge visitors quickly and give them the impression you have been waiting anxiously to help them.* When George approached the barrier, the receptionist did not even need to say, “Can I help you?” It was implied in her expression, and her posture made it seem sincere.

George said, “I was robbed last night, and I understand my purse is being held here.”

“Have you received a case number yet?”

“No.”

“Could I get your name?”

“Georgia Ellen Carter.”

A rapid, muted clattering on the keyboard, then-- “Have a seat, Ms. Carter. A detective will be with you shortly.”

Shortly, before she even had a chance to sit on the comfortable and unabused couch in front of the remarkably graffiti-less, Rivera-influenced mural, a voice called her from behind: “Mrs. Carter.”

She turned and stared at the athletic man in the tailored suit. “Detective Simms. I’m just here about a stolen purse. It has nothing to do with Homicide.”

He motioned for her to come through the security door. “I actually work the Violent Crimes Unit, and since you were knocked unconscious and threatened with rape, it falls to me.”

George didn’t move.

“This way, Mrs. Carter. I need to ask you some questions to complete my report.”

“I--I would like someone else to handle my case,” she said, looking at the Detective. Then she turned to the receptionist and reiterated, “I would like a different detective to investigate this case.”

He moved toward her and she stepped away. “Look, Mrs. Carter, if, during the course of my investigation, you feel that I am acting inappropriately, you can file a complaint with my superiors, but it is not up to the victims of crimes to decide who is best qualified to investigate

their cases.”

She took a few steps toward the door, and paused there, hands clenched at her sides. She came back and addressed the receptionist, ignoring Detective Simms. “I don’t want an investigation. Just give me my purse back and I’ll leave.”

The Detective moved in closer. “Your purse is evidence in a crime. Even if you don’t want an investigation, the people of Roswell have a right to see a violent criminal put in jail.”

“Who’s going to catch him?” She glared right at him, now. “You? You will begin your investigation by investigating me, and if you can’t find that I did something wrong, that will be the end of it.”

“Now, you know that’s not true,” he said in a lower voice. He put his hand on her elbow to steer her away from the receptionist, but she shook him off and stood her ground.

“You investigated me for two years. I was a victim of a crime as much as anyone--my husband was taken from me--and you did nothing but investigate me. You ripped through my entire house and turned my whole life inside out. You never even looked for my husband. You never found one clue as to what might really have happened to him. As far as you know, aliens really did take him.”

He scowled at her silently for a few moments. Then, in a measured voice with undertones of stress, “Your case was handled in a completely professional manner. It would have been irresponsible of me, as a representative of the people, to ignore the fact that you were the sole beneficiary of a two million dollar life insurance policy.”

Her hands fell to her sides in exasperation. “A policy that I didn’t even know existed until you told me about it.” She waited for his rebuttal. “You know what--just keep the purse. It’ll go great with your suit.” She walked out with her strong stride, her boots striking the polished tiles in something just short of a stomp.

When she got to the bottom of the wide steps, she shielded her eyes from the sun and looked up and down Main Street. “Fuck,” she muttered. She rummaged through her pockets. The ring was in her left pocket, and a single Sacagawea was in her right pocket with her keys. “Fuck,” she confirmed. She sat down on the bottom step and put her head in her hands, massaging her temples with the heels of her hands.

After several minutes of baking in the high morning sun, a car pulled up next to the curb in front of her, but she did not look up since it did not sound like a little black Honda with the stereo up loud. An electric window whirred down, but she kept her gaze down.

“Hey, no loitering,” said a stern voice from the car.

She looked up with her eyes shooting daggers, and then she burst into a musical, hearty laugh. “Billy, you’re lucky I don’t have my magical ray gun, or I’d make you disappear like I did my husband.”

He smiled. “I caught your performance on the monitor.”

“What--back in the lobby?”

“You think we have those cameras in there for security? Sometimes it’s better than the Springer show.”

“And today? Was I melodramatic enough?”

“So-so. Actually, I was really hoping you would be forced to rip your shirt off in order to demonstrate your rage and indignation.”

“Officer Rodriguez, isn’t that sort of comment frowned upon by the department?”

“You could get me fired if you had a tape recorder running. Also, Simms will have my ass if he sees me out here talking to you. Hurry up and get in. I’ll give you a ride home.”

In the front seat of the older squad car, George turned the vent of the air conditioner toward herself, and her hair blew back away from her neck.

“How come you don’t think I killed him, Billy?”

“Who says I don’t?” He had his mirrored sunglasses on.

“Well, if you think I might have killed him, why are you being so nice to me?”

He looked over at her, seemingly ignoring the road. “I’ve met quite a few killers, from a man who killed a bum for half a bottle of Mad Dog to a woman who killed her baby because it wouldn’t stop crying. Most of the murderers I’ve met have been pretty unpleasant people, either sad and unfortunate or just plain mean. If you are a killer, you’re the nicest one I could ever hope to meet--a kind, generous, honest person--with a really nice ass, I might add--so if you really did kill him, I would have to conclude that he had it coming for some reason.”

She smiled and lightly smacked him on the bicep with the back of her hand. “I’ll bet you didn’t talk like that during the interview when they hired you.”

“No ma’am. Justice must be served,” he said in his phony cop’s voice. Then, in his natural, careless voice, “Anyway, in the office pool, my money was on you and your husband conspiring in his disappearance.”

“Really? And what did Simms bet?”

“He walked by and frowned, said that gambling was illegal, and gambling on the outcome of a case was highly unethical.”

“Of course.”

Officer Rodriguez turned right onto Crooked Creek Lane. “I don’t suppose you’ve heard from him?”

“Who?”

“Your husband.”

She stared at him. He looked back with a blank expression. She asked, “Billy, are you playing ‘good cop, bad cop’ with me?”

A smile slowly broke out on his face. “You never know. It still works sometimes.” He pulled up in front of her house.

“Did Simms put you up to this?”

“Are you kidding? I’ve broken several regulations and departmental guidelines by driving you home in the front seat and having this unprofessional conversation with you. No matter how badly Simms wants to see you hang, he’s strictly by the book.”

“I’m not sure if I believe you.”

“Well, if you don’t believe anything else I say, trust me when I tell you that you really are the nicest suspected homicidal genius I’ve had the pleasure of dealing with.”

“I’m not sure if I trust anyone, these days, whether they’re flattering me or not, and I can understand if you don’t take my word for it that I don’t know anything about his disappearance. You’re welcome to come inside and look in the closets, if you want.”

“That’s okay. It wouldn’t be by the book.”

“Since when do you care?” Her expression became more serious as she sat with the squad car door open and looked up her front walk. “Actually, if you wouldn’t mind, I could stand a little company right now.”

“Of course.” He turned off the ignition and hopped out. At the passenger door, he helped her up out of the seat, although she didn’t need it. “What am I thinking. Your first time back to the scene of the attack--there’s still bits of yellow tape hanging from your gate--and I just drop you off and say have a nice day.”

“I’m okay. It’s just that I’ve had so many surprises lately that I’m a little cautious....” She unlocked the iron gate and he pushed it open.

“What sort of surprises?”

She walked up the path examining the paving stones. A trace of blood lingered on the corner of the stone where she had fallen. “Well, mostly, there’s this man I keep meeting by accident, but it seems more than a coincidence. Have you ever heard of Calvin Brooks?”

“Sure, I know Calvin.” Billy took the keys from her, opened the door, and looked around the entry, kitchen, and living room. She followed him into the living room and stood beside a tall cactus as if it were her bodyguard.

“I know it shouldn’t surprise me--nothing should surprise me any more--but how is it Brooks is your buddy and Henry Thompson’s buddy, and I’ve never heard of him before?”

“He doesn’t live around here, I don’t think. He said he’s from Washington. I met him while I was fishing at the reservoir. He showed me a secret technique, and I caught the largest rainbow trout I’ve ever seen.” The cocky officer smiled at her casually and familiarly, but she didn’t smile back.

“So, do you know him? Or did you just meet him once?”

His smile faded. “Just a couple of times. Is he bothering you?”

“No. In fact, he has been exceedingly helpful in the twenty-four hours that I’ve known him.”

“But...sometimes people can be helpful because they are after something.”

“It’s been known to happen.”

“Do you want me to dig into his background?”

“That wouldn’t be by the book, would it? To investigate someone for being too helpful? No, I was just wondering if you happen to recall if anything about me came up in your conversations out on the reservoir. Like Ryan’s disappearance or my two-million-dollar windfall.”

Billy was quiet for several moments. He sat down on the wooden coffee table, which creaked. “We talked about all kinds of things. He seemed to know something about just about everything. You know, I think the topic of Ryan might have come up, but not about his disappearance. Yeah. He said he was a contractor for the government, running a server farm in a warehouse east of the airport.”

“What’s a server farm?” She took a half a step away from her cactus.

“I’m not sure, but I think it’s where they process mountains of raw data and do involved calculations like finding prime numbers with hundreds of digits. That kind of thing. That’s how Ryan’s name came up, because he did the same type of work.”

“Ryan worked on holographic storage.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

“I don’t know. I guess it could be.”

“Well, anyway, that’s all it was. Nothing specific about you, or about Ryan’s disappearance. I didn’t get the impression that he was pumping me for information.”

“So, I’m just being paranoid.”

He stood up. “I’m not saying that. I just don’t know anything about the guy. I could just keep my ears open and let you know if his name comes up.” Billy took a couple of steps toward the door.

She edged in front of him. “Are you sure you don’t want to just look around a little?”

“You weren’t kidding about me checking the closets?” He wandered into the back rooms

casually as if he knew his way around. He came back in too short a time to have had more than a glance. He eased up close to her. "I get off at eight, if you don't want to be alone tonight."

"Billy...."

"Come on. I thought you enjoyed our time together." He brushed her hair from her cheek, and she didn't pull away, but her smile was full of sadness and her eyes looked down at the bare hardwood floor.

"I'm sorry. It was what I needed then. But I thought it was understood that it was a temporary thing."

"I could give you what you need now, on a temporary basis."

She said nothing.

"Well," he said as he walked toward the door, "if you change your mind, my cell phone number hasn't changed."

After she heard the front door close, she collapsed onto the sofa and put one boot up on the coffee table. She had only relaxed for a moment when she rolled to her feet again and hurried to the front door to check the lock.

"Chomsky," she said softly to herself. The ceramic bowl in the kitchen was low on food, so she scooped some fresh food out of the sack in the cupboard. She picked up the bowl and rattled the dry food. "Chomsky," she called, loud enough to be heard in the far end of the house. She filled the water dish and began looking in the corners where a cat might hide. The door to the attached garage had a small cat door in it, and she knelt down and removed some of the accumulated black fur at the edge. In the garage, she cleaned out the litter box and looked around on the shelves, behind boxes. The bottom fell out of one of the boxes when she scooted it forward, and junk clattered to the concrete floor. She refolded the box bottom and knelt down to put the items back in. There was a Little League baseball signed by all of Ryan's teammates in the shaky scrawl of boys who haven't signed a thousand checks. It was dirty and scuffed. She pulled the garbage can over, and started to throw the baseball in, but she changed her mind and put it in the box. Cables to long-forgotten electronic components went into the trash. A couple of high school yearbooks went into the box. A strange rock from some forgotten adventure went to trash. She picked up a film canister, and when she opened it a fine, pure, tan sand spilled out onto the garage floor.

The morning sun was still low when George and Ryan set out onto the flank of the Great Sand Dunes National Monument in Colorado. He carried a huge case of photographic equipment and a tripod, and she carried a smaller camera bag. They climbed forever, with half of the effort being lost in the collapsing sand. They made it to the top of the first ridge, and Ryan set up the 8x10 camera on the sturdy tripod to capture an image of the abstract waves of dunes with their bright and dark sides sharply delineated by the arching, waving crests of the dunes as yet untouched by footprints. She took a few pictures with her SLR, and then she waited while he fine tuned his composition and rechecked the light meter. He exposed one sheet, and before he replaced the dark slide and withdrew the plate, he just stared out at the dunes, lost in thought. He didn't notice that she was watching him. His eyes were squinted nearly closed in the bright light, two mere slits. After several moments of these mental calculations, he put a new sheet in the camera, adjusted everything just slightly, and took the picture again. After taking that film out, he took one last look at the ground glass underneath the black cloth. "Come take a look," he called to her. She ducked under into the cool shade. The scene on the glass was the scene outside turned upside down, and its reduction and framing made it formal and precise. The tan

sand had the same degree of color saturation as the blue sky. The whiteness of the fluffy clouds drifting along made the shadows darker in contrast, and the clouds scooting along the bottom of the image seemed like aquarium fish. It was as if they were in their own private movie theater in the middle of this vast public park. She smelled the rubberized fabric of the camera bellows, and she smelled his warm skin.

Later, she took several images of a small valley filled with sunflowers, all of their little faces lifted toward the sun. The fish-eye lens she used captured the whole dome of the sky with its little white clouds, and the marching sunflowers seemed like a universe of galaxies. Along the edge of the scene, Ryan sat waiting, not knowing he was included in the frame. Again he sat very still, glancing this way and that, and often seeing nothing of the outside world as the gears of his mind turned and resynchronized and reversed and whirred away. It was his valley and his galaxy. After she had taken all the shots she wanted, they moved on deeper into the dunes. He carried the big camera case in one hand and the tripod and her camera case in the other hand.

George found the broom and the plastic dustpan and swept up the sand. As she emptied it from the dustpan into the little canister, she could see all the bits of cat litter and oily dirt and fur that now contaminated the once pure memory-sand. She snapped the lid tight, and threw it in the trash can. After a moment, she fished it out of the trash and placed it in the box. She sorted more of the items into the box or the trash, and then she set the lighter box back up on the shelf. Her hands remained on the box for several moments. She reached in for the sand canister and threw it back in the trash. As she walked back into the house, she paused in the hallway to look at the photographs that she usually just walked by. On the north wall were two 18x24 prints, nicely matted and framed, of the clouds drifting over the dunes, the shadows and lines of the first image matching up with view in the second image, as if they were windows on the actual scene. After she looked at them for a while, the clouds almost seemed to drift along. Down at the end of the hall, just before the kitchen, there was a small print, black and white, of the valley-universe filled with sunflowers and the quiet man in the margin.

She went into the kitchen and turned on the tap, draining the lukewarm water from the pipes, and when she opened the cupboard to get a glass, she found a black cat with irregular white patches sleeping curled up on a large dinner plate.

“How the hell did you get in there?”

The cat unfurled and stretched his long body across all the plates and bowls in the cupboard. She scooped him up and held him stretched out and upside down. She rolled him over and draped him across her shoulders so that his hind legs and tail trailed down her left arm and his front feet and head dangled over her right shoulder. She turned and looked at herself and the cat in the small mirror beside the window, and then she turned a little more and looked at a small photo on the refrigerator, a mirror image except that it was Ryan with the long cat across his shoulders. The cat let out a small sigh and relaxed even more as he started to purr. She said softly, as she stroked his head upon her shoulder, “What should we do now, Choms?”

The knock on the front door sent a jolt through the relaxed cat, and he got traction with his claws as he shot off her shoulders and onto the counter. “Damn it,” she said as she cringed because of the sixteen new little wounds on her arms and shoulders. She picked up the cat and set him back on the dinner plate and closed the cupboard door. Then she reopened it and got a water glass, petted him and reassured him, and closed the door again. She walked to the front door while she drank her glass of water, spilling a few drops on her shirt.

Chapter Three

The younger dog gazed at the graded and scored earth. To a casual observer, he might have appeared as a household pet watching for moles in the yard. He was a black dog, about eighty-five pounds, with floppy ears and a long, wavy coat. His plume-like tail twitched occasionally while he concentrated. Behind him, outside the grid, sat the three observers: a large robot the size of a vending machine, bristling with attachments and appendages, some of which were quivering and panning and twirling; a small robot the size of a turtle with spider legs; and a dog slightly smaller than the other, with a large blaze of white on her chest and subtle swirls of brown in her black fur. It was not obvious where the eyes might be on the robots, but it seemed as though they were all three watching the one dog.

When he looked at the earth, which had been preliminarily skimmed, marked, and scanned by the robots, he could switch his vision between overlays of the various scans stored in his memory. The ground-penetrating radar showed the objects slightly differently from the seismic echo method, and when he overlapped the two images in his mind he could see which objects were captured by only one of the two processes. Mostly, he was looking at trash. It had been trash two thousand years ago and it was still trash today. Beer cans, bullet shells, beer bottle shards, deformed bullets, a New Hampshire license plate, a wire that seemed to match the database specifications of an underwire, but the cloth part of the bra had disintegrated. Beneath this refuse were some interesting artifacts of the Anasazi, potsherds and animal and human bones. The older layer may have been more interesting, but the young archaeologist focused on the debris in the younger layers. Over his mental map of buried treasures, he superimposed the perfect circle and Ryan Carter's footprints as recorded by police and the media. To this image, he added the trench of the excavation of 549, which cut through the southern half of the circle to a depth of about 88 cm. He re-imaged the scene with several different configurations of the new trench they were about to dig. He cut through the circle at various angles, capturing different artifacts with each potential excavation. Whichever way he sliced the pie, he obtained mostly garbage, and very few of the objects were ambiguous enough to possibly turn out to be an interesting fragment of, say, a failed experiment or a homicide or an elaborate deception. He could only foresee hours of painstaking, careful excavation to end up with uninformative and unrelated garbage.

“Dumbasses,” he said, into his mental link, and the dog and two robots standing off to the side did not immediately contradict him. After a moment, his mother commented, “So you think they were vastly inferior to us.”

“Obviously.”

“You don’t think they were doing the best they could with the tools they had?”

“Not at all. It is all so wasteful. Why expend all that effort and energy to extract metals from the ground, destroying wildlife habitat in the process, only to randomly discard those metals back into the ground? It accomplished nothing. From the patterns of dispersal, it seems to be generations of drunks shooting at beer cans for idle amusement, not noble primitives hunting for their survival. Also, this abundance of trash is making it very difficult to discern which artifact might actually have an important relationship to the Carter event. This world is a much better place without these people and their cars and guns and trash.”

“All of our technology, which maintains our quality of life, was a gift from them.”

“It may have been a gift from *some* people, but not these people. They left no trace of thoughtfulness or intelligence or ingenuity. At the height of the information explosion, they were working hard to become stupider. They worshipped ignorance. Paris Hilton was a goddess to them, and she was notable for, in spite of the opportunity for the best education money could buy, being ignorant, illiterate, and incompetent. The hooligans who built bonfires out here weren’t coming out here to be one with nature; they were escaping civilization, escaping rules and knowledge and courtesy. The mindlessness they were seeking wasn’t some holy nirvana, but just a blurred chemical stupor intended to kill time. Take that skeleton on the eastern edge, for example. There’s no mystery about it, no possibility for insights into a complex mind or a sophisticated, nuanced way of life. It’s obvious that the drunken dumbass shot his balls off while putting a loaded revolver in the waist of his pants, shattering his left femur and most likely rupturing the femoral artery, causing an instant bleed-out.” The young dog played for them a recreation of the most likely scenario to explain the skeleton and the revolver. It showed the dazed man looking somewhat astonished at the accidental discharge before he fell back and slumped over, his hand still on the gun. The image of his lifeless body, in clothing appropriate to the era, was transparent and showed the actual skeleton agreeing with the proposed scenario. The skeleton belonged to a man about 5’7”, and Ryan Carter had been 6’3”, never associated with drinking or firearms in the historical record, and almost never reported to be dangerously inept.

His mother said, “I’m beginning to regret insisting that you learn English.”

He replied, “I’m glad you did because only the English language has words to express how stupid and contemptible these people were.”

“My purpose in having you speak English was so that you could learn to think like them in the sense that you would have some intuition about their movements and associations, and know the significance of objects that might otherwise seem completely random. I didn’t intend that you act like them by feeling superior and judgmental. They once thought of us as stupid, useless creatures, and they ignored our intelligence because it wasn’t the same as their intelligence. I would agree with you that the peripheral skeleton was an accidental death unrelated to Carter’s disappearance, but can you find nothing interesting or significant in all that other debris?”

While they were using English words, they also transmitted the usual amounts of data over their local Bionet. The young dog highlighted a section near the center of the “UFO” landing circle. Each bit of debris in the ground was dated with a probable approximate date, or

range of dates, and the dates were jumbled, with artifacts 10,000 years old higher than artifacts 2,000 years old. He got up from his spot and walked carefully around the areas of possible interest. He sniffed the ground as he went, sometimes with his nose shoved beneath the surface of the sandy soil. When he reached the center, with its jumbled soil, he carefully pawed a little hole and stuck his nose in. He withdrew his snout and cleared his passages with a quick snort, and then he put his nose back in the ground for further analysis. Finally, the young dog said, "I think we should start here. All the previous investigators have assumed that this disturbance was the result of someone digging and burying some sort of non-durable refuse, possibly a latrine for campers or transients. They left it alone because the disturbance ruined the stratification and made it harder to assign dates and infer relationships. Since historians and archaeologists have been exploring this mystery for 2,000 years without any luck, I think we should explore the one section they have left alone. Besides, it smells different."

Before he finished talking, the large robot was already in motion, positioning itself. It drilled a bore hole, carefully avoiding the artifacts that were detected in previous scans.

His mother asked, "Different in what way?"

"Different than the other soil. I don't know what it smells like, but I'll know it when we find it. I think it might smell moist, or like soil that was moist at one time." He was silent for a time, staring at the ground. "I think you should call me Bogart."

"What?"

"Since we are getting into the old human mode of doing things, I should have a name. My name will be Bogart."

"I see. What's my name?"

"Mom, of course."

She twitched her tail. "That's not a name."

He trotted over and sat beside her. "Sure it is. Well, it's like a nickname, or a title, but it's something to call you, and I'm not supposed to call you by your first name or last name. I'm supposed to call you Mom."

"Okay."

"And he's Perry," he said, pointing at the large robot with his snout, "and he's Connor," pointing at the little one, who appeared to have switched off.

"Any particular reason?"

"None that I am aware of. Probably just some subconscious association."

"How did you assign them the male gender?"

"The alternatives were 'she' and 'it'. 'She' might be interpreted as inferior," and in response to her glare he added, "in *those* days. 'It' would also imply inferiority, of an even greater magnitude, lacking personhood."

They sat silently, watching Perry work. A shadow of a hawk skimmed along the ground in front of them. In the distance, in the baobab tree, a crow made its odd little sound, *wonnk*, *wonnk*, with its head starting low and pulling up and back. This crow had white wing tips. The smaller dog said, "Connor, Perry, Bogart, and Mom," weighing the names, trying to see if they felt right.

* * * * *

Brooks sat in his car, in the shade of a locust tree, and watched Officer William Rodriguez enter the Carter residence. He could not see inside the house. In his side view mirror, he watched a green minivan pull up to the side yard of the corner house, in an area where the fences blocked the view from the neighboring houses. The van's sliding door opened a crack and two mixed-breed dogs burst out. They charged around on the lawn of the corner house, sniffing all the edges and paths. In unison, like synchronized swimmers, they both squatted in the middle of the manicured lawn and left substantial piles. Then they charged toward the van and the sliding door opened to accept them. As the van drove past Brooks' car, he could see the obese female driver smoking a cigarette and talking on the cell phone. Her bumper had an "I [heart] Roswell" sticker. The radio in Brooks' car switched from NPR to a woman's voice, without Brooks having to touch anything.

"Daisy and Jax just did their business on Bentford's lawn, and now we're headed to the store," she said. "Do you want some of those raspberry swirl things?"

"Sure." Another woman's voice. "Get me some more cigarettes while you're there."

"You didn't pay me for the last carton yet."

"I'll pay you for both on Friday."

"And rent?"

"Yeah. Did he see you?"

"Who? Sit Daisy."

"Bentford."

"Nah. He's at work, or somethin'."

"He'll probably install a video camera to find out who's doing it."

"So what? What's he going to do? Call the police? Call a town meeting? Sue me? Fuck him."

"You're wicked, Darlene."

"Aren't I?"

After a while, Billy exited the house. His feet were shuffling and hesitant. He paused for a moment as if he might turn back, but then he strode resolutely to his car. Brooks did not start his car until Billy drove around the corner, out of sight. When he eventually did get underway, he made a u-turn and went north up the quiet residential street. Billy zipped past him headed north when he came to the stop sign at Main. Brooks turned right, to follow, and stayed back a block or more. His car radio switched itself from Darlene's phone to a station with dead air, no static. In a moment, an electronic ringing began.

"Yeah," said Detective Simms' voice from the radio.

"I got nothing," said Billy.

"Did she think I put you up to it?"

"Well, she guessed at it, but I don't think she knew for sure. She didn't seem to care one way or the other."

"Did you get in?"

"Yeah, I let her think it was her idea."

"And you planted it?"

"Yes sir. Right on the bulletin board by the kitchen phone. It looks just like the other tacks on the board. You know, Simms, I still have my doubts that this is covered under Patriot."

"I told you: don't worry about it. Hold on, Rodriguez."

During the silence, Billy pulled into the parking lot of the drive-in and pulled up near a

garbage can. As he drove past, Brooks saw him throw a crumpled paper bag into the trash. Then, in his rearview mirror, he saw Billy leaving the parking lot and heading south. Brooks turned right and went around the block.

“We’re not getting anything. Are you sure you planted it right?”

“How could I not plant it right? You told me it’s on all the time, right? Maybe she’s not saying anything.”

“There’s no ambient sound. No footsteps. No plumbing noises. Nothing.”

Brooks pulled up to the garbage can, reached in, and fished out a fast food sack from a different chain. He opened the bag and pulled out a small plastic case from the greasy wrappers. He popped it open and pulled out a red tack. He examined it for a moment, and then stuck it in the upholstery of the front seat.

“Hold on,” said Simms, “we’re getting something now.”

“Really?” Billy’s voice sounded surprised. “Good,” he added.

Brooks pulled out of the parking lot and crossed the street to a different restaurant, parking in a row of cars. He watched as Billy’s car came tearing up the street and whipped into the drive-in lot, tires screeching.

Billy asked, “What kind of sounds are you getting?” He held his cell phone with his left hand while he dug through the trash with his right.

“It’s... Hold on.” Then, in a muted voice: “What?” More loudly, “Billy, you’ve still got it with you. They’re getting our conversation.”

Billy spun around and looked into his patrol car. “That’s impossible. I know where I put it.”

“Wait. Okay. There. You hear that?” Everything Simms said was echoed.

“But,” said Billy, his own voice echoing. “That’s not... Say something again.”

“You had better get back there and plant it right this time. This is our last chance. If we don’t get results, there’s nothing more in the budget for further investigation.”

“Listen, Simms, if I had the device, you’d only be hearing my voice. Somebody has our comms.”

Billy pivoted around, scanning his surroundings. His gaze swept over Brooks, but without recognition.

“But how? She couldn’t...”

“Not her. Some other agency.”

“What? Okay. Just shut up and get back here. Now.”

Billy ended his call and held the little phone in his clenched fist. He got in, slammed the door shut, and sped off down Main. Brooks got out and placed the red tack in the meat of the side of the tire tread on the left rear. As he drove away, it spun with the tire, not quite hitting the ground on each revolution. When he arrived at a warehouse on the west side of the airport, he noticed that the tack was still there. “Hm,” he said. He grabbed the crumpled food bag from the car and opened it. He retrieved the french-fry wrapper, which still had a couple of remnants in it--the black ends where rotten spots were in the original potato. He pulled the red tack out of the tire and put it in with the remains. After wadding the greasy packet into a ball, he tossed it over by some crows near the trash bin. Two crows went for it at once, and the quicker one flew off with the wrapper and the bug, chased by his noisy rival. Brooks watched them until they were out of sight around the corner of the building. Then he noticed another crow come tumbling out of the sky. It caught something in mid-flight and swooped into a climb. After rising twenty feet or so, it released the object again and tumbled into a dive after it, catching it and climbing again.

Brooks smiled.

As he approached the door of the warehouse, a red LED on the keypad went dark and the green LED blinked on. He entered, and the door banging shut behind him reverberated through the empty space. He made his way up some metal stairs to a small office with a window overlooking the empty space.

On a desk with artificial wood grain sat a dirty glass ashtray with an eyeball in it. Brooks sat down in the black fake-leather chair, and turned the ashtray so that the eye stared back at him. He leaned the chair back and put his feet up on the desk beside the eye.

“I wish I believed in hell,” he said to the eye. “I would like to know that you are getting everything that’s coming to you, because dying once is certainly not enough. And if I had to spend eternity there as well, it would be worth it just to witness you and your cohorts getting what you deserve. I suppose we might end up in separate circles of hell, though. I mean, I know I’m a killer too, just indirectly, and, for the most part, unintentionally. One could argue quite convincingly that Miss America is a serial killer because she endorses, promotes, and participates in the American over-consumption lifestyle that forces Chinese political prisoners to die in labor camps and kills Mexican children whose slums are too close to the outfall of toxic sludge from factories that churn out plastic gewgaws that end up in Happy Meals. Good intentions or bad intentions, we are all deserving of some circle of hell, and I suppose my circle would be somewhere in between the Miss America circle and the special hell reserved for a Pakistani assassin hired by the CIA to kill an American citizen. What do you think Zawahri?” He turned and looked at the limp body hanging from the coat hook on the back of the door. His hands were bound with transparent, yellowish packing tape. Tape also covered his closed eyes, and the left socket had dried blood mixed with sweat beneath it, like a tear. His mouth was bound with the tape, and each hair of his black moustache was caught in the sticky adhesive. The breath through his nose was calm and relaxed.

“Oh, right, the tape.” Brooks opened the desk drawer and retrieved a box knife. He slid the blade out, which was slightly rusty and fairly dull. He stepped over to the hanging man and sliced through the tape along his cheek, drawing a line of blood. He ripped the flap of tape away quickly, taking many short black hairs with it. The Pakistani hardly twitched. Brooks went back and sat down, putting his feet up on the table again.

“Perhaps,” said the man in a British accent. He licked around the inside of his mouth and swallowed hard. “Perhaps you will be reincarnated as someone who is forced to listen to someone like you babble self-serving nonsense.”

Brooks chuckled. “Of course, you are right. That would be the worst and best punishment. But I have had a chance to look around inside your mind, and it doesn’t seem like such a pleasant place. Maybe we each carry our own hell inside.” Brooks closed his eyes.

“Since my monologues torment you, I will just continue the torture with some random thoughts I’ve been having about memory and how memories are stored in the brain. It’s really still a mystery. I can probe inside your brain and trigger these memories without knowing exactly where and how they are stored. It is certainly dependent on patterns of synaptic connections, but is that the actual memory or just the manifestation of some more deeply etched pattern? They call it junk DNA because it doesn’t appear to have a function in the manufacture of proteins in the human body, but DNA is an excellent recorder of information, and if I had the time I would like to conduct some experiments on storing information in junk DNA. Perhaps I could use you as my lab rat.

“Regardless of how they are stored, memories seem to be flexible in how they are

recalled. For example, I can see in your mind that you consider the death of the Greek merchant, who was providing transportation for Lebanese extremists, to be a work of art. The way you startled him at just the right moment. The way you brought the knife blade up to catch the light, fast enough to be convincing but not so fast that he couldn't jump out of the way. I see that you even estimated the age and mileage on that old delivery truck, and the age and reflexes of the driver, to be certain of a window of possible stopping times and distances, all too late for the bewildered Greek. And you have his file memorized, complete with a list of crimes that Israeli intelligence convicted him of without his even knowing he was the subject of investigation.

"What is missing from your memory is that his fourteen-year-old daughter killed herself the day after his funeral because she felt there was no point in struggling through life if a man as good as her father could have his life, and his life's work, eradicated by falling in front of a truck. You also made sure to avoid knowing that the transportation network continued without slowing when another man took his place, that there was no deterrent at all because you were too successful in making it look like an accident. You also were not aware that he lived for three days, in excruciating pain, before he died. So, what looks like art in your eyes seems quite disgusting to an outsider, or it would if I were capable of feeling disgust anymore. But I guess that's why you work for The Company instead of freelancing, so that the guilt and blame will fall on them and you have the expedient of just following orders."

Zawahri squirmed on his hook, and the screws pulled out of the door. He fell to the ground without any effort to ease the fall, whipping his head onto the concrete floor. He was unconscious for a moment, but then he jerked awake. He moaned a little, and then bit his lip. Blood seeped from his cracked skull.

"I was going to ask you," continued Brooks, "for advice on how to deal with one's feelings in the aftermath of direct and deliberate murder, as opposed to the death by a thousand cuts that we at the top of the food chain inflict upon faceless third-worlders and other animals. I was considering choking the life out of you with my bare hands, so that I would have an honest, firsthand experience of murder and take full responsibility for taking a life, but now that you've given yourself a fatal injury, I am more in the position of committing a sin of omission, since I can't take you to a hospital where they would probably be able to save you, what with the missing eye and all. Tell me, though, while you still can, does it hurt when I pick the locks of your brain? Does it feel like you are going insane when the nanoprobe makes your neurons fire and reveal your secrets in spite of your will?"

"I will tell you," muttered Zawahri, as blood started to ooze out of his mouth, "if you tell me where you hid the farm."

"Well, that's too easy. You should have bargained better. I have hidden the farm in plain sight. This warehouse was a decoy, obviously. All those agencies who are looking for the data, every single agent has looked right at it at one point or another, and none of you knew that it was right there in front of you where you could reach out and grab it. Here, I'll show you, from one of your memories."

"Ahh. How is it that none of the best agencies in the world knew that you had achieved such advanced technology?"

"Because it was not predictable. I stumbled onto the solution by accident. Now, they are all trying to hack into my system, and I put up the usual types of resistance to keep them busy, when in reality I am already long gone. They sent you here to die for nothing. I have even blocked the implanted transmitter that you didn't even know you were carrying, so this last minute revelation will be a secret that you take with you to your shallow grave in the desert. So,

now, tell me. Does it hurt?"

"It is more like going insane."

"Would you like me to stop it?"

"Yes. Please."

"Okay, Zawahri, here it comes. Just the push of a few electrochemical buttons, and you are now awash in a lethal dose of your own endorphins."

The man's face relaxed as much as it could while wrapped up in the tape. The tension melted from his body. His breathing slowed, became increasingly shallow, and gradually stopped. Brooks opened his eyes and looked at the dead man's face. To himself, he said, "It's a good thing I put a failsafe on my own endorphin switch."

He pulled a small plastic container from his pocket as he rose from the chair and then knelt in front of the body. The tape made that taunted, scritch sound as he unwound it. A metallic clunk in the plastic container, and then the snap of a lid. Another metallic rattle as he dropped it into his pocket. He pulled a sheet of plastic off the desk and laid it out on the floor. He rolled Zawahri onto it so that he was lying on his back. Brooks used the thumb and index finger of his right hand to hold the upper and lower eyelids of the empty socket wide open, and his left hand retrieved the eyeball from the ashtray and gently popped it into the socket. He massaged the eyelids a little to get it seated properly.

"There. Good as new. They might not even notice the hemorrhaging or the severed optic nerve. Unless he's listed as an organ donor." Brooks glanced up and to the left. "Not in this country, anyway."

"If he were dead, I don't think Washington would care," said Billy.

"Maybe," grunted Simms.

"And if they went to the trouble to let us know they have compromised our surveillance and communications, it must mean they are already on top of things and don't want us in the way."

Simms just stared at the dirty paint of the old storage room wall.

"You think they have all the new construction bugged?"

"It's possible, but they would only go to such lengths if the Carters were into something really big. If that were the case--if they were working for a foreign government or trying to sabotage our government for some whacko reason--why draw the attention of the local police with the red flag of a huge insurance payout?"

Billy shifted his weight from one boot to the other. "I can't think of any twisted story that makes any more sense than UFOs. But I'd be willing to bet that whatever the secret is, it's all him and she never knew anything about it."

Simms looked directly at him. "Is that your objective observation?"

Billy open his mouth to speak, but then remained silent.

"You know," said Simms, releasing Billy from his stare, "it might not have been our government that interceded. We should set out some bait and see who shows up to take it."

"Like what?"

"Maybe we could say we had a disk with Ryan Carter's notes on it, but it's in a code that we can't crack--it could just be a CD burned with random ones and zeros--and.... Do you think Georgia trusts you?"

"Not really. I mean, she'd probably trust me with some things but not others."

"I want you to tell her casually, in passing, you know, about the disk, that it is stored in

the safe here, and that we think it says something about the secret project Ryan was working on before he disappeared. Whoever is on this case will have the expertise to steal it from our safe, and we'll let them. We'll let them knock out our surveillance, but we'll have another camera on the safe...."

After a few moments of silence, Billy dared to interrupt the boss's thoughts. "When do you want me to tell her?"

"Hmm? I don't know yet. Let me think it through and do some planning. And you think about it and see if you can think of any pitfalls that I've missed. Don't say a word of this to *anyone*. If they think this is such a big case, they may have a man on the inside of the department."

Billy smiled. "How do you know I'm not the mole?"

"Sorry, Billy." Simms patted him on the back, almost without contempt. "I just can't picture them putting all their trust in you."

Billy shrugged as they left the storage room. "Me either."