

∞ A Crow In The Wheat ∞



PROLOGUE

Pine gives up its sharp sticky scent easily. Anyone who's been in a forest knows what pine smells like. Oak, with its tight grain and hundreds of years of slow growth, holds on to its secrets. Laurence Sousa was running some black oak through his table-saw, and reveling in the smell. A woodworker knows it when he smells it, though it's hard to describe. Sweet, with a tiny hint of cloves mixed with leather. The clock in the shop said 2:00 which meant 1:50...Emmy's bedtime. So Laurence shut off the saw, hung up his apron and locked up. He knew he had just enough time to get Susan a caramel latte.

Laurence and Susan Sousa lived in Strathmore, California, population 2615. It was statistically unlikely he'd have to wait in line at Red-Eye Coffeehouse. Perched just on the edge of the Eastern Sierra Foothills. Strathmore's downtown--its packing houses, water tower and single-story ranch-style homes -- seemed preserved in a Rockwell painting from the fifties. And that's what made living there so magical. 'Sousa Fine Custom Cabinetry and Woodwork' was just a block over from downtown, with its mom and pop storefronts. Laurence got the latte, then drove the two miles to 1890 Cuervo Dr. where, inside, his baby girl was hopefully falling asleep in the bassinet he'd barely finished in time.

Susan eased Emmy's door closed. This was one of the little moments when she fell in love with her husband just a little more. He'd built their house from scratch, and did most of the work himself. Which meant, among other things, squeak-free hinges on the nursery door. She padded barefoot silently down hardwood stairs to the ground floor. Laurence was in the kitchen pouring her latté into a proper mug, the steam dancing in the Sunday morning light.

"Caffeine?"

“Yes, please.”

“One Splenda?”

“Mmm hmmm.”

“As you wish.”

Laurence sweetened and stirred Susan’s coffee. She giggled and kissed him. He could always get her with a line from The Princess Bride. From the baby monitor on the island counter they could hear Emmy quietly sleeping. She slept unusually well for a three-month-old.

“She go down like a box of rocks?”

“Yep, just like her papa.”

“That’s my girl.”

“You call my brother to help you with the glue-up tomorrow?”

Laurence shifted his eyes down and kicked at invisible gravel with his foot. He’d never been able to lie to her, nor did he ever need to. She would softly chide him. He would put up the barest of protests. And they would laugh together, both knowing whatever it was, she was probably right. These were their dance steps, comfortable and forgiving. Susan saw his tell.

“Babe....”

“Well, it’s just, he insists on listening to his music...”

“In lieu of pay...”

“In lieu of pay, yes, but Suze, Justin Bieber? I mean...”

“Need I remind you of your recent entry into fatherhood.”

“I know...”

“And that Emmy and I would much prefer safety and the Beebs, over crushed under a custom armoire and Hank Williams.”

“How do you feel about Johnny Cash?”

She kissed him again. “I love a man in black. Call. Today.”

“I will.”

They sat in a comfortable silence. Susan sipped her latte. A eucalyptus log popped in the stone fireplace.

“How do you always wind up winning money from Stan in poker? You have such an obvious tell.”

Laurence lifted his eyebrows up and down. And did his best come hither stare.

“Can you tell what I’m thinking now?”

“No way, buddy.” Susan waved her hand in front of her pajama pants.

“This whole area here is in recovery mode.”

“Can’t blame a fella for trying.”

“Your mom called again this morning. We should take Emmy out there.”

“To the dairy? Weren’t we just there?”

“That was weeks ago and you know it. Emmy loves it.”

“Emmy has not developed a sense of smell. Okay, visit: next weekend. Now: Forty-niners versus the Rams?”

“Oh, hell, yeah.”

They raced to get the best spot on the overstuffed leather couch in the living room. He let her win, which he always did. They drew up a blanket and Laurence grabbed the remote and pointed it at the flat-screen. The TV winked on, but instead of a green field and men in helmets, there was a live news update. A network anchor, pale and sweaty, was speaking to the camera.

“Again, what we do know is that multiple missiles are in the air. Several targets seem clear, including New York. Washington reports retaliatory measures are under....”

Then the screen went black.

Chapter 1

In the Eastern Sierras, wind blowing through the high pines makes a sound like that of distant rushing water. The white-noise murmur bounces off of granite canyons in every direction over scrub-choked terrain. Many have died of exposure and thirst, hopelessly lost in search of a river that isn't there. However, Jerk Petty was never lost. And Sheriff Stan Edison was never lost, because he was always at Jerk Petty's side. They were on horseback, moving slowly and quietly South.

The murmur of the trees and the hypnotic breathing of the horses was suddenly cracked by a more consequential sound.

BOOM!

The sharp report of the PK didn't startle the animals. Petty knew firing a round was risky in this terrain. In the saddle, facing slightly downhill on limestone bedrock above a dry riverbed overgrown with Manzanita, one spooked misstep could permanently ruin a mount. Mounts were increasingly rare. Mounts were expensive.

"Got-damn, Jerk. If it'uz a snake it'd jumped up and bit ya," Stan snorted. The tall man simply grunted. Neither rider moved as the big diamondback writhed away its last few seconds. It had been a good shot. A quickly drawn handgun, even a Ruger, was a dicey bet at twenty paces. Likely, the snake hadn't been hit totally clean. But dying was not the same as dead. Anyway, there was no point in wasting a second slug, so they waited. Even someone as thick as Edison, who slurped noisily from his canteen, wouldn't go near a snake that was still thrashing with its head intact. After the War, diamondbacks, like a lot of animals in the Territory, had gone through a series of genetic adaptations. The result was a cold-blooded population almost universally without rattles. A hundred percent less warning and twice the venom. A big male like this, if it struck close enough to an artery, could

take down a hundred-pound Whitetail deer in a matter of minutes. “Satan’s dicks,” Jerk’s uncle Elway used to call them. Elway had a way with words.

In a few minutes, there’d be fresh protein. And that was a boon they hadn’t counted on today. Jerk eased out of the stirrups silently, which is how he did just about everything, and slipped a six-inch Buck knife out of the sheath stitched to his saddle fender. There were two, one on each side. The design added a bit of weight to the tack, but it meant two weapons within reach, perfectly hidden by the legs of a mounted rider. And Jerk’s roan didn’t seem to mind much. Edison also dismounted, less silently, and started fiddling in a waterproof saddlebag.

“Goana hafta use some of the propane, I think, Jerk,” said Edison. “Cain’t have the smoke. Wind’s moving westerly, it is.”

Westerly. Stan was right. That meant toward the Fence, which was no good. Not in the middle of the day and not in this late-afternoon heat. Jerk grunted his agreement and started down into the wash, kicking mica flecks into the crevices as he went. No need to run into a poisonous relative this close to dinner. He reached the snake, writhing more slowly now, on a large, granite stone rounded smooth by the friction of an eons-dead Calaveras River. In another age, at this time of year, he’d be five feet under the surface of roaring snow-melt. And he’d be cleaning Pacific salmon instead of mutated reptile. But that was the past.

He shrugged off his faded North Face, rolled up his shirtsleeves, and tugged the flat felt of his black Stetson hard onto his forehead. Gripping the bone handle of the Buck hard, Jerk sharpened the branch of fallen grey sugar pine, called a ‘sweeper’ when the water was running. It stretched toward him from the bank just enough. He staked the squirming corpse on the makeshift spike firmly, about two inches below the back of the jaw. He fought to choke down the adrenaline; suddenly, everything in that moment seemed sharp. Hard sunlight on bleached boulders, the silhouette of the timberline, the blue of the sky, the smell of blood,

the wind. Petty felt for an instant that he could cut himself on all of it if he wasn't careful. Prehistoric nerves will keep a snake spasming hours after the muscle has gone cold. With one boot on the tail, he quickly made a vertical slit along the belly and started peeling. The hide sloughed off in one piece but it took a surprising effort. In minutes, he was looking at five solid pounds of pinkish-white meat twitching eerily in the light Sierra breeze. They'd eat their fill this afternoon and salt the rest.

They might even have some left to barter with once they reached Oakdale Station. Alive, a diamondback would be worth a small fortune. There were a handful of venom dealers in the Eastern Corridor who traded with black-market hospitals inside the Fence for opiates and iodine. But any hospital was a hundred clicks in any direction, and lifeless venom sacs were of no use out here. Jerk Petty thought there were far more poetic ways to die than antidote wrangling. The meat would have to do.

Any concern about more reptiles was immediately erased as Edison made his way into the wash. Off of a horse, the man lumbered. He listed toward Jerk, who was already pumping pressure into the cylinder of the portable Coleman burner. Both men knew the routine. Propane wasn't plentiful, but the supply on both sides of the perimeter went largely unmolested after the War. Electricity was still plentiful on the Valley floor. Still, out here, being judicious with fuel was beyond wise.

Jerk sliced the meat into sections while Edison broke off and stripped two green branches of buckhorn cholla. The stove hissed to life, and Edison spat on the blackened match head just to be safe. Each man silently cooked his share directly in the flame as the other ate quickly and carefully around tiny rib bones. It was a greaseless and rather taste-free affair. But it was a hot meal, which was a welcome change of pace. And after fifteen minutes, they'd packed in more sustenance than

they had in the last three days combined. Especially the sheriff. “Tastes like chicken, my ass,” he said, more comment than complaint.

Jerk wiped his chin on the sleeve of his shirt and said nothing. By the time everything was repacked, the sun was already starting to set behind the ridge line. The temperature would drop quickly as the shadows advanced into the canyon. It was only September, but nights could get down into the thirties, particularly if the wind was off the Glass Sands. They’d been making cold camps since Jackson, and tonight would be no different. The two men walked their horses up past the high water mark and beyond the tree-line.

Jerk chose the spot. A tight grouping of old-growth pines backed against a thirty-foot cracked granite face, its smooth, grey expanse stained with black stripes from a thousand snow melts. Edison nodded. Nothing could approach from the West unless it was coming straight down. The ground was spongy, fed by a trickle from an underground soda spring. It stank to high heaven, but they’d have a water source overnight and the sulfur would mask their scent from most predators, even dire wolves. They used the mounts to string two neoprene hammocks between trees about ten feet up. Once the saddles were off, the horses tolerated this stocking-footed negotiation on their backs surprisingly well. It wasn’t the first time and it surely wouldn’t be the last.

Once racked in, with seven-hundred-weight parkas and warm horse blankets over their legs, it was a remarkably comfortable way to spend the night in open country. They used the hammock guy-lines as a stringer. When the horses shifted, you got a hypnotic rocking. If they got spooked, you were shaken awake. It would be unusual for any Fence security to wander this far East. And even an experienced tracker wouldn’t think to look up. Not until it was too late, anyway. Edison, nuzzling his sawed-off Browning was already starting to breathe heavily. The man slept like the dead, but if a twig snapped the wrong way, he’d have two barrels

unloaded before he was fully conscious. And they'd probably both be direct hits. Say what you wanted to about Stan -- he was six-feet-five, two-hundred-seventy-five pounds of awkward, dim, and socially unacceptable -- but he was masterful with a firearm. And born to be a lawman. He had a numbingly broad sense of humor. That, and the way he wove anywhere on foot like John Wayne after three shots of whiskey, made him so utterly disarming, and ultimately, so deadly. No one ever saw it coming. And those who knew better, which was pretty much everyone north of the Tuolumne, respected his authority.

It was rare anyone got close enough to the Placer County sheriff to experience his sheer strength. In a way, being expertly shot in the head by him was merciful. When they were eighteen, Jerk had watched Edison tear a hissing, twenty-five-pound possum in half just for fun. And in the South, during the War...well, there were things they rarely spoke of.

"You'un tell me t'night?" Edison asked.

Jerk let a full minute pass before answering. "No. We got five days to get to Southgate. And we need to see Elway first." Stan shrugged to himself, closed his eyes and let the cold Sierra night come. He didn't know where they were going and didn't need to know. Jerk had asked him along and that was enough for him. Stan had never been much for plans or details. They made his head hurt. But he could put one foot in front of the other like no one's business. And god help the idiot who got in his way. Or his friend's.

They passed the rest of the night in silence. Jerk didn't sleep much, never had. He curled one arm over his eyes, holding the Ruger .45. With the other hand, he gripped the three-foot, wax-dipped moleskin cylinder he'd been carrying every day for over a year now. He gripped it tight with no way of knowing what was inside would permanently change the Territory of New California for generations to come.

“Tomorrow,” he thought. “Maybe I’ll tell him tomorrow.”



Chapter 2

Mendoza scrubbed his swollen hands through his hair. To be fair, it was mostly scalp now, but the flat-top buzz cut he'd worn since childhood had somewhat masked the genetically inevitable retreat of his hairline. This was at the top of a very short list of things he didn't have the power to change. The two men posted outside his door and the dozen more on the first floor had been on shift since four a.m. By the looks of the despotados outside it was still cold, even as the first hint of sunrise was already hitting the south side of the compound. If there had been a possibility of frost, he'd have been roused during the night. He'd make sure the orange groves didn't freeze. A hard frost could kill entire sections without countermeasures in place. The temperature might have gotten pretty low, but he wouldn't know. The Romanovs had had their furs. Manuel Luis Alves Mendoza Jr. had central fucking air.

"Benny!" he bellowed

The door of Mendoza's suite creaked open instantly.

"Yes, Mr. Manny?"

"Breakfast. And make it light. I'm gonna be in the pickup all day. Eggs on toast runny. And don't overcook them sonsabitches, hear me?"

"Yes, Mr. Manny."

"Then pack me some cold linguica, bread, some hardboileds and a big bag of sunflower seeds. And get Matthias to prep me two cans of chew. I want one on the table when I sit down in six cocksucking minutes, hear?"

"You got it."

Mendoza sighed heavily, then dressed. At sixty, it took maddeningly longer than he liked. He donned his usual: manufactured jeans, a wife-beater undershirt and short-sleeved, checked, snap-up shirt made from his cotton, and a filthy,

ancient Carhartt coat which was not. Clothes were not counted among his numerous excesses. He dressed like a farmer, walked like a farmer, even pissed like a farmer, but everything else about him was pure Baron. Holding his Redwings in one hand, Manny shuffled in white socks on solid walnut floors toward the curved staircase which led down to the second of three floors. He paused at the ornate Chippendale mirror in the hallway. His hair, what was left of it, was greying fast. His gut hung well over his belt buckle and strained the snaps on his homespun fabric. He looked...old. And it infuriated him. Not two weeks ago his "doctor" had told him to lose thirty pounds, cut the caffeine, the sausages and the tobacco. That doctor was now in Wasco shelling pecans by hand in sixteen-hour shifts. This thought lightened the Baron's mood quite a bit as he grabbed his Resistol off the newel post and headed down the travertine stairs.

These were simpler times, a by-product of the Big War, no doubt. Everything was nice and orderly in what was previously called Central California. Now, inside the Fence -- the series of heavily-guarded concrete walls, chain-link, and barbed-wire barriers that formed a perimeter around the former San Joaquin Valley -- things had snapped back to a Steinbeck-like simplicity. The multitude of small and medium towns had been consolidated into twenty-three townships. Everything else had been torn down, plowed over and planted. There had been waves of refugees who, as they arrived from war-torn parts of the country were sorted into two classes: townie or wayfarer. Townies lived in town, obviously, and were allowed to employ their pre-war skills -- doctor, dentist, plumber -- but only in numbers the township could bear. If you were the fourth optician to migrate in filthy and starving, well, that was just insult to injury. You were now a wayfarer, which was almost everyone else who stayed alive as indentured laborers in the fields of the 'New California' economy.

That meant tilling, picking, husking, hoeing, planting, harvesting, digging and irrigating roughly eight thousand square miles of the most fertile soil on Earth -- Manny Mendoza's soil -- twenty-four hours a day. Every day. Oh, you were a Dartmouth-educated securities trader before the War? Fuck you. You're picking oranges now. Farming was the single most powerful and profitable interest in what was left of the known post-invasion U.S. A decade ago, like everyone he knew, Mendoza was over his head in tax debt, socially marginalized, and treated like an ignorant ass by every simpering politician who passed through sucking up for the working-class vote. Now, he controlled the entire food supply and every local life attached to it for a thousand miles in every direction. Not too shabby for having only made it through the eighth grade.

In the kitchen, all was ready. Black cup of coffee, two eggs runny with toast plated on bone china. And a fresh can of Copenhagen long-cut. Mendoza dined alone, as usual, using antique Rogers flatware to lay waste to his breakfast while the main house buzzed with activity around him. He ate his meals now with an actual silver spoon. He drained his coffee, reflexively flicked the Copenhagen can a few times to pack it down, opened it and put a pinch between his lower lip and teeth. Then he waited. Very few people knew that every day Manny Mendoza had pure, dried poppy resin crushed and thoroughly mixed, in precise amounts, into every tin of snuff. The thing about opium no one ever talks about is that as long as you don't take too much, and, of course, have an endless supply, it's not medically an issue. Not physically anyway. There was addiction, of course, but "addicted" in Manny's world simply meant "ran out." And that was never going to happen.

"Benny!" he bellowed.

His house-man was already at his side, clearing the dishes. "Right here, Mr. Manny."

“Oh, there you are. Get that got-damn Yakki up and tell him I says get his skinny ass in the driveway and warm up the king cab. We’re riding the corn-acreage out past Tipton Flats come hell or high fuckin’ water today.”

“Yes, Boss.”

“Eggs was just right, Benny. As usual.”

“Thanks, Boss.”

“Two cans of diesel in the bed. Shotguns in the rack. We’ll need ’em for...something. Well, who knows...pheasants, let’s say.”

Mendoza winked at Benny and nodded to himself. The opium was kicking in. Getting the dope was the easy part. Getting the Copenhagen was a considerable pain, and something only a man of a Baron’s means could afford. Producing tobacco at any kind of scale in the Valley, even for the greediest, was impossible. It raped the soil of nutrients, was vulnerable to every pest imaginable, and had no nutritional value. The pre-war glut of commercial finished product was waning fast, but it was the only viable option Mendoza knew of to maintain his dipping habit. His personal supply had to be shipped via train from Stockton, where he had men on payroll hunting for Copenhagen day in and day out in the contraband markets. The manpower for the scavenging alone cost him a small fortune. Rail freight was free for Mendoza, of course, it was an understanding he had with the railroad Baron, but the traditional credit tolls to the other three bosses were steep for crossing provinces with personal swag. This was one of the many “gentleman’s agreements” that kept the truce across the Territory. Though his was arguably the most expensive snuff habit in the nefarious history of nicotine, he thought it well worth the price. It kept him in a good mood. Not that anyone could tell.

The phone in the hallway rang, which made everyone jump. Phone calls were rare, as Mendoza famously discussed business either in person or through a small circle of lieutenants. If the land line rang, it meant something unusual had

happened. And unusual was usually bad. He could hear Benny in the background mumbling into the receiver. The Baron's pleasant morning buzz was already caving in to a cold fury. The only thing he hated more than getting old was getting off schedule. Benny set the heavy rotary-dial gently on the mahogany dining table and proffered the handset meekly. Mendoza willed himself to speak calmly.

"Yeah? Mr. Phong! Well, fuck me running. How's things?"

The most powerful Baron in New California turned a noticeable shade of merlot as a voice on the other line interrupted. Manny's face wore fury easily. Most living people never witnessed this for long. He finally took a quivering breath.

"Yeah. Where's he at? ... Now, now. I will handle it. With your permission, of course. ... Well, it's these kinds of professional courtesies that elevate us above the common shit-bag, pardon my French."

Mendoza snapped his fingers at Benny and waved with agitation with his free hand, while forcing a smile into his voice. The house man obliged with paper and pencil.

"Sixty-eight and one twenty-five. That's damn near past Coalinga isn't it? ... I see. Mmm hmmm."

Mendoza glanced at his grandfather's cheap, scarred Bulova, its band stretched to the limit on his beefy left wrist.

"Oh, I'd say by one. Give or take. ... You bet. ... Oh, having a helluva day already, Mr. Phong."

With that he laughed thinly and pressed the button on the cradle with his index finger, then listened for the severed connection. Then he slammed the receiver down hard enough to shatter the Bakelite into several flying pieces.

"Well, fuck."

The caller had been Hai Phong, supplier of the dope currently pinched between Mendoza's cheek and gum. Phong ran the small but lucrative strip of

Territory known as Poppyland, just east of Fresno toward Gilroy Township. The problem was there'd been a runner. And by unofficial rule, runners were to be "dealt with" directly by the Baron they were running *from*. So, ironically, the man responsible for providing Mendoza's daily mellow-morning buzz was seriously chapping his ass today. Because this runner had tried to cross through Poppyland. Today's plan was shot to hell.

Matthias pulled the truck up to the main gate and waited for his boss. The old Yokut, Mendoza's longest acquaintance and top lieutenant stared forward in stoic silence, thinking how cliché this personality quirk must look to white people. He didn't care. Technically, he was Chukchansi. But leave it to the White Man to show up and lump a dozen vibrant tribes under one title: Yokut, the native word for "person." Before the War, this was the kind of insult young people on the reservation wasted energy discussing. Now, what was left of the Rez was outside the Fence. Better to be a cliché sitting at the right hand of the White Man than being crushed under his boot. Matthias was one of the last of his brethren old enough -- only he and Manny knew exactly how old -- to have gained this level of wisdom. He leaned over and unlocked the passenger door. Mendoza huffed his way in. "Runners? Still? You gotta be cocksucking kidding me. Drive. Let's get this shit over with."

The Baron always rode in the passenger seat so he could survey every inch of earth as they moved around the Valley floor. He wanted both eyes free. After more than fifty years of riding country roads, he could spot canker on a peach leaf from half a mile. Or some picker pocketing extra walnuts three Sections away. He also liked having both hands free so he could pepper such a thief with high-base shells from the Fieldmaster in the rack behind his head. Those were the moments he lived for. Only today, instead of the corn rows at Tipton Flats, he was driving out of his way, using his fuel to Coalinga to personally take care of the political

equivalent of a spanking. The small convoy of pickups, beds loaded with security and weapons, pulled out of the compound and drove down Hanford Township's Main Street. Trading was already active. Graveyard-shifters were coming in on horseback, ATVs or on foot for company supplies, haircuts, flour and eggs, laundry soap, or kerosene. Morning autumn sunshine lit the scene so harshly that the shadows looked blue. Pedestrians waved as the pickups headed north onto road 56. Matthias waited for the rant. It didn't take long. "Shit, half the sonsabitches in the Valley would be dead and rotting someplace between Tejon and San Diego if it weren't for me. Come crawling in from San Francisco and LA dragging their fuckin' runny-nosed families with them. Waaaaaa, we have no iPads, no iPhones. Couldn't find their own iDicks with two hands and a flashlight. Hell, they can barely dig holes."

Matthias nodded. "But we house 'em...how many houses we yank up just outta Hanford and move out to the Sections, a thousand?"

"Two," Matthias corrected him.

"That's, what, twenty, thirty thousand from here up past Madera? Shelter. Over refugee heads. We feed every goddamn one! Do they work for it? Hell, yes. Honorable work ...useful fuckin' work. They get field-credits to spend in town on whatever they actually need. And shit, anyone can turn around and trade that in the Corridor for whatever your preacher or wife won't let you have. You don't think I know about that? I know." He shook his head in legitimate disbelief. Fifth Avenue and Rodeo fuckin' Drive are gone. Would these ungrateful fuckers rather be picking through rubble in a radiation zone for some Chanel goddamn Five? Here, you get to be alive! And by my grace. *My* grace got-dammit! Then some asshole's gotta run every fuckin' month? To what? Outside the Fence? Christ on a fuckin' cracker. We got order in here. Food. Shelter. Order." Matthias just shrugged and kept driving.

Hai Phong wasn't recognized in any official capacity as a Baron. The loopier township pastors and their feckless congregations would never stand for a dope lord, a *Vietnamese* dope lord, to be recognized as a pillar of New California. Still, titles meant something now. The four ruling bosses would never call Phong 'Baron.' But they gave him more than grudging respect. Mendoza admired him in a way. At the end of the war, Phong had played his shitty cards pretty well. He took a heavily impoverished and undervalued population of Hmong immigrants and some remote, less than ideal soil and whipped it all into an opium empire almost overnight.

Outside of Poppyland Phong was rarely seen. But like any famous recluse, his legend loomed, even into the darkest corners of the territory. He was the specter of Pablo Escobar in black pajamas. Supposedly sinister, aloof, and mean. Or so it was said. He ran his Territory with his own rules and tactics and no transparency. Poppy was the most profitable crop in the ground at any given moment, everyone knew it. And Phong had a monopoly. Mendoza and the other Barons turned a blind eye to irrigation violations, and murky reports of internal atrocities. Plus they kept the more righteous of the pro-clergy out of Phong's hair...for thirty percent off the top. Phong provided a product that kept the wayfarers and the Townies pacified and happy after sunset. And the black marketeers busy all year round. It was a perfect situation, except for days like today. Forty-five minutes later, the convoy pulled onto the dirt shoulder at the corner of road 68 and avenue 125, creating plumes of dust the color and consistency of instant cocoa that settled on the white pickups in the midday sun. Two of Phong's men held the runner roped between them. The man was tall and thin. He was in his fifties, white, but judging by the sunburn on his face, not Valley-born. His eyes were cast down and fixed on a worn pair of cheap cowboy boots. Manny instantly hated the man. Though, if asked, he'd never be able to

articulate why. His security men poured out of the second truck and made a piggish show of aggression, racking shells and clicking off safeties loudly. Phong's men were unarmed.

With a nod from Mendoza they pushed the bound man toward his Baron. Phong's men did not move. They were expected to witness and report back the entire meeting. Their boss wanted reassurance the matter was being handled with the appropriate amount of seriousness. Mendoza barked at one of his thugs, "Well, cut them fucking ropes off him!" The knife slid through the silk rope easily. Almost immediately the tall man began to stammer, involuntary tears forming at the edge of already bloodshot eyes.

"Now, now. You just let me do the talking. Understand? Nod if you understand," Mendoza said. The man nodded.

"What's your name, son?"

"L-L-Leonard."

"Well, La La Leonard, we got ourselves into some kinda pickle, haven't we? Do you know who I am?"

"The, the, Baron."

"*Your* Baron, that is surely true. Now let me ask you something, Leonard. What Section are you on? Or I guess in your case what Section *was* you on?"

"319."

"319. That's...grapes, isn't it? Raisin grapes."

Leonard nodded and went back to watching his boots. Mendoza eyed him up and down like a sick heifer at a sales yard.

"What'd you do before all this unpleasantness...before you showed up looking for asylum? No, now let me guess. I'm pretty good at this." The Baron snapped his pudgy fingers together sharply.

"Banker."

“Attorney...I was an attorney.”

“Well, sheeeit. Makes sense. Pretty light duty on 319, ain’t it? Raisins? Not like digging potatoes or chopping corn. Jesus H. Christ, man, the sun does most of the fucking work for you. You got a roof over your head out at 319, don’t ya? Three meals a day? You got a bunk. And e-lec-fuckin-tricity? And ain’t but twenty minutes to Tulare Township, is it?”

Mendoza moved close. Close enough for the man to smell the Copenhagen on his breath. “Man of your credentials...an honest-to-cripes lawyer...I bet them Mexican bitches in town probably fuck your brains out for free? Am I right so far? I bet I’m dead on the bubble, right, ain’t I?”

Leonard swallowed hard. Mendoza pressed, now only inches from the man’s face. He hissed, “So. Why. Did. You. Run?”

Wincing for a blow that didn’t come, the man was barely able to croak, “I just wanted...I just, I needed out. Just...out.”

“Out,” Mendoza said. “I see.” He walked casually over to the Ford and pulled a worn spade out of the bed, then walked back toward Leonard.

“Well, Leonard, I find it pretty fuckin’ interesting, you being a lawyer before and all. You should understand the importance of rules in a civilized society. You of *all* people should know that running is not what we do here! We especially do not fucking run between territorial boundaries put there to keep the cock-sucking peace! You don’t want to bring us to lawlessness, do you, Len? I mean, lawlessness brought down the Roman got-damn Empire, or did they not cover that chapter at law school?”

Mendoza stopped to calm himself and draw breath. He spit a perfect line of tobacco juice onto Leonard’s left boot. “Look at me, counselor. When rules get broke, people get killed. Worst than that, when some dirtbag like you pulls shit like this, I lose a little wealth. What with the cost of picking you up, not to mention

the cost of MY time!!” Shaking his head, Mendoza leaned on the bumper of the F150 and breathed hard. Leonard trembled visibly. A blooming spot of wetness began to form on the front of his grubby corduroy pants. The rednecks tensed their triggers just the slightest. Mendoza began again, more calmly this time. “You know what Winston Churchill once said? He said, 'To be a great leader, every day you’ve got to perform one act of kindness and one act of terrible cruelty.' Every day. Follow me? That way, people will see that you are capable of both. Now, in a situation like this’un here, I’d have a choice to make, Leonard. But today is different.”

Mendoza put his hand on Leonard’s shoulder. “See, on the way over here....I was pretty well fucked-off angry at you, Len, I really was. Then I seen this three-legged puppy on the side of the road. Feral. Mangy. No more’n six months old by my guess. Probably chewed itself out of a leg trap and lived, you believe that shit? Anyway, I’m seeing red, not thinking real clear...I grab the 12-gauge off the rack behind me and just as we’re passin’, BAM, I blow that sonofabitch’s head clean off. Poof. Pink mist. Just like that. I don’t know what possessed me...truly, I do not. But it felt good at that moment. It really did.”

The men -- all but Phong’s -- began shifting uncomfortably on their feet. Mendoza grabbed the wayf by both shoulders now and turned to face him with a broad smile. The air itself seemed to come to a standstill. Suddenly, Mendoza began to chuckle. A deep, loud, guttural chuckle. Matthias was convinced it would end in a wet coughing fit, and it nearly did. But the mood on the dirt shoulder changed like a soap bubble popping. You could almost feel everyone easing back into their boots. Mendoza was actually grinning as he continued, “Anyhoo, guess that leaves me with only one extreme to cover off on today, don’t it? Lucky for both of us, hey, Len? Here’s your shovel.” Leonard practically slumped to his knees with relief. He never saw the spade headed for his face swung by Mendoza

with every ounce of his might. The flat of the blade shattered his nose instantly. One edge caught his forehead and sliced open a four-inch gash which began to bleed profusely. Screaming, the man crumbled into a pile like a sack of stones. Manny leaned into Leonard's face just before the waves of pain truly began to arrive.

"You look confused. Let me clear this up. See, killing that pup was a kindness, Lenny. A three-legged, young animal like that? Out in the open? Poor thing like as not woulda been gutted alive by coyotes. The gopher-crows'd pecked him blind by nightfall surely. I did that dog a kindness. So it had to be cruelty for you, Leonard. Had to be. Winston fucking Churchill."

Leonard moaned for a final instant then blacked out. Mendoza waved Matthias over and spoke in hushed tones. "319...they still fixing to burn those old-growth vines they pushed out last week?"

"Yeah," the old Yokut grunted.

"Tell 'em to light it up today. Take him over there. Tie him up good and tight, wake his ass up and toss him on one of them piles. Close to the road. So people can hear him. And Matthias, don't spare the kerosene. We're not animals."



Chapter 3

Even the slightest breeze in the Sierras can make the tall trees pop and screech like old bones. But Petty and Edison both recognized the distinct creak of a hanging man. It was a sound, once heard, you could never un-hear. It was coming from the thicket of sugar pines and dogwood about a hundred yards ahead on their left. The two men had been moving quickly down route 120 toward Oakdale Station. Wide, relatively flat and covered by years of accumulated silt and loam, it was by far the fastest path for mounted travel in this stretch of range. Total lack of cover made it a calculated risk even in daylight. Neither man drew his weapon as they reined their horses toward the noise in the tree line. It was highly likely they were already centered in at least one scope. Outside the Fence, any appearance of a threat could lead to justified violence by local militia. In this jurisdiction, Edison's credentials "wouldn't be worth shit on a Ritz cracker." When they saw the body, Jerk knew that was a grand understatement.

"Thief?" Edison asked, with a notable level of irritation.

"Likely."

"Jesus wept. Use'd ta be people knew how to string someone up, they did. What in Christ we coming to?"

The bright yellow extension cord seemed to hum with the strain of the dead man's weight. It was not an uncommon sight. Rope still had a number of practical applications, especially outside the Fence. It wouldn't be hastily wasted and then left behind for even a low-brow lynching like this one. Power cords, on the other hand, had next to no value left in the Corridor. The hydro Baron in the North used to buy copper by the pound to patch up generators and lines, but not for years now. Edison spat loudly on the carpet of pine needles at his feet. Jerk recognized this as the signal of his friend's level of disgust with the scene in front of them.

“Som’bitch couldn’t have been more’n seventeen, thief or no. Just a boy, he was. Suffered like a got-damn animal you can bet your ass on that.” Jerk nodded in agreement. Other than the pale scar tissue from a brand on his right cheek, the dead man’s face was solidly purple and inhumanly swollen. Barons routinely burned sigils on the faces of runaway wayfs before banishing them outside the Fence to prevent them from reemerging undetected onto another Barony.

Banishment was the harshest “legal” sentence anyone could get in the Valley. In the Corridor, where the rule of law was a grey area at best, it could get much nastier. Especially if you were caught stealing. In a world where people had little, thievery was the worst infraction possible. Horse thievery, even among thieves, was unthinkable. Robbery was also a special kind of heresy. But at least in a robbery, victims had a reasonable chance to defend their property. Many a desperate, usually drug-addled, attacker had ended up stabbed, choked, beaten, or shot to death on the wrong side of a robbery. Murder? Well, murder happened. This particular murder however, had been a botched job. It had all the marks of amateurs. Bulging eyes indicated the execution had happened within the last few hours. Birds had not been at the body yet. But the man’s feet were touching the ground, and judging by the marks gouged in the dirt, he had thrashed in agony for some time. He had been purposely hung low so dire wolves could reach and dispose of the corpse. The posse had been both heartless and lazy.

This very much rubbed the sheriff the wrong way. Edison, who had had to dispense this kind of Corridor justice, would have had a much better grasp on the vagaries of tensile strength. Copper, while an excellent conductor, stretched easily. And an extension cord was by far more plastic and insulator than it was wire. Given the size of the dead man, Edison guessed they’d overshot the length by more than a foot. Even had the hangman gotten the distance right, it would have still been a grossly inhumane execution. The point of a hanging was to break the

victim's neck. It was supposed to be instant. Very few people knew or appreciated that death by mere strangulation could take twenty minutes or longer. The thief would have been awake and aware for more than half of that.

The two men exchanged silent looks. Edison, shaking his head all the way, walked up to the body, took the knife off his belt and made a clean cut in the cord. He then grabbed the thief and threw him over one shoulder like a sack of corn. Jerk watched the surrounding trees, hand on holster while the sheriff tied the body over the back of his roan.

“Better get to Shellie’s,” Edison said. “Borrow some shovels and get this poor bastard underground before nightfall. We ain’t animals, it is. Not yet.” Jerk thought it more than a little unwise to ride into Oakdale Station with the body. It was very likely the thief was a local and lynched by one of the regulars currently inside Shellie’s, the only trading post for critical supplies between here and their destination, which was a five day ride south. But when Edison made up his mind on something he considered to lack “square dealing,” there was no talking him out of it. So they mounted and headed toward the village.

A handful of gopher-crows, blind and flightless from generations of genetic damage from the atmosphere over the Glass Sands, hopped across their path. They were hunting for the prize Edison now had draped over his saddlebags. Uncle Elway would have considered this an extremely bad omen.

“You know who don’t think a rabbit’s foot is lucky? The fuckin’ rabbit,” he used to say. Elway had a way with words. Jerk paid the disgusting birds no mind. They were too late anyway.

The town of Oakdale was founded in 1871. The main street through the town center had stubbornly resisted any kind of architectural progress decade after decade. The hitching posts, which no Chamber of Commerce ever tore out due to their “historical significance,” had several horses tied to them as Evans and Petty

rode in. Both men noted the sounds of rounds being slowly chambered on rooftops on both sides of the street. If not for the cracked Union 76 ball on top of the rust-covered husk of a filling station on their left, it would have been hard to tell it wasn't *actually* 1871.

"You 'un tell me now? I don't mean to rush ya or nothin' here, Jerk, but, geez, I'd sure as shit like to know how to explain my presence to ole' St. Pete if I get my head blow'd off today, I would. Just sayin'." Petty ignored the question silently. He'd seen this a thousand times before. Edison got chatty when he needed to focus under pressure. It was a tic, more than anything, though the big man probably wasn't being completely rhetorical this time.

"Me?" said the sheriff, "I got a dead man tied to my saddle. What's in the tube tied to yours again? I forget."

"Ten, Two, and..."

"Six," Edison said, instinctively finishing Jerk's declaration of the manned defensive positions. They were being allowed to enter by Shellie's security force. If they moved slowly, dealt plainly, and bartered quietly, they'd be allowed to leave without issue. The corpse, though, potentially complicated things. The street was almost completely derelict. Bits of old, wind-tattered plastic sheeting caught on telephone wires waved in the breeze like Spanish moss. Every store front had been looted long ago of anything that could be repurposed for survival: glass, bricks, sheet metal. Everything else was either rusted, sun-bleached or covered with a thin film of brick-red dust and a carpet of moldering pine needles. The two men passed the awning of an ancient Ace Hardware which had at one time been patched with a large piece of faded vinyl signage reading "Welcome to Palin Country." The one indication of life sat at the center of the second block. Unmistakably constructed as a livery, it had served for a hundred years as a feed

'n' seed. Now it was Oakdale Station, the most infamous trading post in the Eastern Corridor, known to locals and regulars as "Shellie's." No one knew why. Petty and Edison rode past the eclectic collection of quad-runners, dirt bikes, and swaybacked mounts haphazardly left in front of the building and turned down the small alley on the lee side, aware that in the last few seconds their presence was made known to every person drawing breath inside the peeling wooden walls. The top half of a stable door opened and the weathered face of Nora Albers, proprietor, looked out.

"Stan," she announced dryly.

"Nora."

"Don't trade for corpses around here, Boss. You just undone somebody's hard work and they're gonna be none too pleased. That badge isn't going to help you, but I don't need to tell you that."

"You know'm?" Edison asked, nodding at the body.

"I seen him around. Come off Cheney's Barony a few months back. Didn't have nothing to trade. Starvin'. Mean as he was stupid. Must have been on the derricks awhile, 'cause he stank like sulphur all the time. I felt for him. Gave him this and that...dogwood sticks to clean his teeth, piece of hard candy, couple of batteries...nothin' big. Heard last week he snuck into Donny Larson's place. Didn't get much. Fishing gear. Jar of pickled eggs."

"And?"

"The code's the code, Stan. You know better'n to make me spell it out. Westbrook twins lit out half-cocked yesterday afternoon. Heard they strung the kid up this morning. And that's that. Waste of my empathetic good graces, as it turns out."

Jerk spoke up. "Assholes did a piss-poor job, Nora. Shovels." The trading-post owner's face disappeared with a slam of the door, then reemerged holding two

worn spades which she shoved at Edison disapprovingly. “Goes without sayin’ this zeroes our account, Jerk. Let you get this far alive on my word. We do any bartering today, it’s from scratch, hear?” Jerk nodded.

“Well, I expect you ladies will want to get started, then.” And with that, Nora slammed the door again.

Hours later, Edison and Petty finally got down off the ridge, filthy, exhausted and getting cold. The white-gas lanterns burning in front of Shellie’s were a welcome sight. They walked in and headed straight to the trading counter. For more than a century the counter had been a classic bar right down to the creaky brass foot rail and dented spittoons. But where once there had been single-malt whiskeys and bottles of tequila, the shelves behind Nora now displayed every manner of random post-war items that held any value in the Corridor.

Salt, bleach, silk rope, bottles of motor oil, butane lighters, and decks of playing cards were among the flotsam of the lower shelves. Aspirin, canteens, knives, and batteries of every shape and size were higher up. Higher still were packs of machine-made cigarettes, a few worn-looking .38 specials, neosporin, amoxicillin, and an assortment of sterile bandages, gauze, tape and syringes. It was visual chaos. Some shelves had seemingly random things three and four layers deep as if put there by a hoarder in a fever-induced delirium. The lighting in the place was dim, its electric bulbs fed by a modified propane generator in the back. This gave the place a general sepia-wash at night and made the faces of the crowd murky at best, even to keen eyes. Jerk would have rather done his dealing in daylight, but that plan had been squashed by the lynch mob this morning. Nora put two mason jars, the glass fogged with age, in front of Edison and poured a finger full of something clear and foul from a watering can she produced from under the bar.

“Made this morning,” she cracked. The proprietor was a short woman. Five-two on her best day. And the only black person of means, man or woman, anyone knew about for fifty miles in any direction. Some said she was the Baron of the Corridor. This cracked her up. She may have needed to blow a hole in someone from time to time, but she doubted any "Baron" literally had to mop up the mess like she did.

Her ebony skin disguised her age to the point that none of the two dozen men in the place could even hazard a guess. Her hair was jet black and always braided tight and close to her head. Her giant malamute Chester, who outweighed Nora by a good thirty pounds, was currently snuffing loudly at Edison and Petty. Anyone with half a brain moved with purpose around that dog. Jerk had seen men shit themselves just from Chester growling.

“Cheers,” Stan grunted.

Both men held their breath, downed the hooch and concentrated hard on not grimacing. It was an effort. As the burn made its way down to his stomach, Jerk could start to feel the stares. He’d long since stopped taking it personally. The left side of his face was covered with burn scars from his chin to just beneath his eye. His left ear, which functioned well enough, looked like a lump of melted putty. The way he wore his hat wasn’t to effect a clichéd air of outlaw menace, but to keep the sensitive tissue out of the sunlight. Strangers assumed he’d taken the wound during the war. They were wrong. Some thought he’d burned himself to hide a runaway brand. They were wrong, too. Regardless, Petty’s face put people ill at ease and he was in a hurry to get business done. Edison and Petty shrugged off their backpacks slowly and started fiddling with zippers. The tall man’s tube was rolled inside a foam sleeping mat to disguise it. Not for sale.

“So, what can I do ya for today, Jerk?” Nora began.

“Jerk?!” said a voice to their left. “Jerk!!?” louder this time as a filthy man wobbled up to the bar next to Edison. “That really your name? Was ‘Dickhead’ taken? HEY!” the junkie yelled.

Edison’s arm shot out so fast not even Petty saw it. The sheriff’s hands were huge, he was easily able to grab most of the filthy man’s throat and all of his lower jaw. Conversation ground to a halt. Shellie’s was known far and wide as neutral territory and violence within the walls was strictly a no-no. For an instant, every man froze, none more so than the man immobilized in Edison’s grip. Without squeezing, or even taking his eyes off the bar surface in front of him, Edison very quietly and calmly started, “ I giv’im that name, I did. Do you not like it?” Silence. The sheriff wasn’t squeezing hard enough to knock the other man out, but he was close. The junkie tried with both hands to loosen Stan’s grip but he might as well have been trying to break an arm off of a Greek statue.

Edison continued, “You don’t mind if I tell you a story, do you? I get tuh storytelling when I drink, I do.” The sheriff was the only one in Shellie’s who could sense the head shake. “Good. See, while you was still eating crayolas, me and my friend here volunteered for the Rangers. Now, mind ya, at the time that was a death sentence. I mean the invasion was going real bad, it was, I’ll tell you what. But hell, you know...God and Country oorah?”

The murmur of conversation around him had died completely now. Men stared at their drinks. Edison paused slightly in thought and sucked his teeth. From somewhere in the back came a few barely-audible ‘oorahs’ in solidarity. “Anyway we’s in boot. And private tall-guy he’us as skinny as a railroad tie. Skinnier ’n now even. So fellas get to foolin’ with him in the barracks and the mess hall. Pickin’ on him. Sucker punches. General meanness and the like. So I ask him, I says, you want me to step in? And he just shakes his head. Next day at bunk check, he says to the DI in front of the whole platoon that he would whup...every day,

one at a time...every asshole in the place. DI, well, he thinks this is a helluva deal, better entertainment than we was ever gonna get from the USO, it is. The bigger guys, the real shitbirds, start gettin' excited. Two of 'em was linebackers from, where was it?"

"USC," Jerk mumbled.

"USC, yeah. Anyway, like clockwork, he puts a whoopin' on thirty guys in thirty days. Every day after mess. Never says a thing. Just...bam, bam, bam. Put six of 'em in the infirmary. I just stood on the side, I does, watchin' him take licks enough ta knock out a drunk sow...bled all over them fellas, lost three molars, but he never did give up. After he broke the sergeant's jaw, the platoon got to calling him 'beef jerky' 'cause he was su' thin but just tough as hell. I shortened it to Jerk, I did. Been goin' by that ever since."

The sound of the next shot made his hearing tinny for two solid days.



Chapter 4

To Jerk, the scene inside Shellie's stood frozen for an instant as the gunshot rang out. It had happened multiple times in firefights during the war, though he'd never talked about it, even with Stan. For what must have amounted to half a breath, he could see everything around him. All at once. Elite athletes, back when such things mattered, called it being in the zone. A sense of everything slowing down and appearing in sharp relief. Then, the moment caught up. Pandemonium ensued in real time. A few inches in front of Petty's face, was a hand he didn't recognize holding a nickel-plated Colt Peacemaker, smoke still curling out of the barrel. It was pointed at the shadowy end of the bar where a .45 slug was now buried head high in an old king-stud. The Westbrook twin standing next to it had wood shards in his face, blood dripping off his chin and a Beretta in his hand half-raised in Jerk's direction. Petty would have never seen it coming.

Seemingly out of nowhere, Nora's security jumped all over everyone at once. Nora herself pulled the man who fired the Peacemaker bodily over the bar and threw him onto the ground behind the counter where Chester pinned him under huge paws, drooling and growling inches from his face. Everyone else in the place instinctively refrained from moving a twitch. It took several minutes to restore order. Nora got up on the bar, shotgun in hand, and yelled, "Everybody out! G'wan out! We closed!"

There was a general, low murmuring of displeasure, but the men began to shuffle toward the front door. In an uncommonly undiplomatic fit of pique Nora shouted after them, "Ya'll shitbirds was just sitting here drinkin' and savin' your credits for the Pussy Wagon anyway. Well, they's pulling through tomorra, so you can sleep your cheap asses outside and wait." She glared at Petty, Edison, and the dapper man with the cufflinks pinned on the floor and spat, "You three, don' move

a muscle, or swear to gawd I'll shoot you my damn self. Dalton, pray I don't set that dog on your pretty face."

In a few minutes, Shellie's was closed, which never happened before midnight. Nora set the Remington down, put her hands on her hips and paced for several minutes, cursing under her breath as she calmed down. The only sound was the man with the bleeding face hissing in pain and breathing hard. His arms were pinned behind him by two of Shellie's enforcers who hadn't bothered to tweeze out even the largest of the oak shards still sticking out of his right cheek. The proprietor called her dog to her side and broke the ice.

"Dalton, you best have a good reason for shooting a man in my place. Speak the fuck up." Dalton Stalker straightened himself behind the bar, as the giant malamute let him up.

He grinned a perfect white smile, then removed his crisply blocked Resistol and set it on the counter. The hat looked brand new. Everything about him did. From his fitted, black jacket to his dark creased jeans and french-cuffed white shirt, there was, impossibly, not a speck of dirt on the man. He was fit, clean-shaven, and handsome. He rested one hand on the brass rim of the bar casually and managed to check the silver Omega Seamaster on his wrist with an expert flick of his eyes. His movements were fluid, like a dancer, his voice a melodic baritone with a noticeable southern lilt.

"Miz Nora, I hate to get into the trifles of prepositions here, what I did is shoot *at* a man in your place and for that I do apologize."

"Don't play with me, Beekeeper. You was aiming at him and missed."

"Ma'am, if my purpose today was to blow open a slack-jawed Westbrook, that's what I would have done. In the inimitable words of fireballer Hoot Gibson 'If I was aiming at somebody, I'd hit him.'"

Nora huffed, “So you drew, and hit a post not three inches from his face instead. Why?”

Jerk spoke up. “He didn’t draw.”

Nora wheeled on Petty, furious. “I don’t remember asking *you* a damn thing!”

Edison spoke now, calmly. “Nora, he already had the gun out. Had to. Colt like that got a single-action trigger. Gotta leave the chamber behind the hammer empty less’n you shoot yer damn foot off. He hadd’uh spin the cylinder to a round. Then cock it. *Then* shoot.” Nora eyed the shiny pistol on the bar next to her dull black shotgun. The filigree and mother-of-pearl handle made it look like a stage prop. But even she knew the Colt was the longest-issued military sidearm in history.

“That right?”

“Now, these gentlemen clearly know their finer firearms, I’ll give you that. I drew early, true, when our yeti friend here,” he nodded at Edison, “was palming the skull of that unfortunate addict. What you couldn’t see -- it’s Sheriff, isn’t it? -- was the .32 the degenerate had tucked in his britches. Small of the back. I felt, well, the gentlemanly thing to do was to look out after a neighbor. You were spinning such a fine story. I wanted you to be able to finish it without the grievance of a giant hole in your kidney.”

“Thanks, I think,” Stan grunted.

“Then I noticed the imbecile twin at the end of the bar raising his Brigadier at thin-man here -- Jerk, right? -- drawn and cocked, admittedly, I shot *near* him assuming that hundred-year-old oak would splinter, which it did spectacularly. The way I see it, I *saved* two valuable lives and didn’t take even the one. Though that boy’s days as a leading man are now certainly behind him.”

Nora turned to the bleeding Westbrook. He was six-five but Nora seemed to tower over him as she poked him hard in the chest for emphasis. “That the way you see it? Because here’s what I see: this -- all of this -- is on you. You’s a real screw-up. Cain’t even hang a thief proper. And what? Your feelin’s was all hurt when these hard-headed idiots cleaned up your mess? Was it your momma or your grandmomma who taught you how to fight?”

“For a bitch nigger you got a real -- *ooooooooommmphhhhh!!!*”

“Well,” said Nora, almost whispering, “this bitch nigga has a handful of your nuts. You want I should pull ‘em off? I pulled bigger’n these off Spring lambs for years. It’s easy. Lemme show you...”

Westbrook could only grunt in misery as he shook his head desperately. Nora let go of him and wiped her hand disgustedly on the front of his shirt. “You want to talk about a bitch? Good lord, I haven’t had a piece of cock in twenty years, and the first one I get to touch is your sad, white ass. Ain’t *that* a bitch.”

Nora planted her feet and dropped her head. She spoke to Westbrook first. “You,” she leveled at him, “you’re eighty-sixed. Permanently. You and you’rn got no quarter here anymore. You want to eat? Kill something. Cain’t see? Settle your blind ass down until morning and wait for the sun. I mean it, Pete. No trade, no credits, nothing. I see you again, I’m gonna assume you’re coming for me. And I’ll have one of these fellas here blow your balls clean off, no questions asked.” She locked eyes for another few seconds with the condemned man who was turning a shade very near blue with fury. He was stupid, to be sure. But no matter how murderous he might have felt in this instant, he wasn’t suicidal. He knew one more word would be the difference between mere exile...slow death...and dying on the spot. His lizard-brain instinctively shut his ego down. She waved her hand dismissively and her security dragged Westbrook through the front door.

She turned next to Stalker. A smirk flitted across her face. But if Dalton thought it was his charm he was soon disappointed. “Well, handsome, you just wore out my last nerve. Took you a lot longer’n most, I admit. You are easy on the eyes. You’re slicker’n hell and a damn good source, so I ain’t gonna cut off any more nose to spite my ugly face today by kicking you out. Maybe you saved these two, maybe you was just bored, maybe you’re a murdering rat bastard...devil, angel, I don’t know anymore. And I don’t care.”

“Ma’am...”

“No, you don’t,” she snapped, “you keep that honeypot closed. Save it for the bees. You’re gonna do me a job on your way out, free, of course. And then maybe, stay out of my sight for a spell before you come back in. Plus I’m docking you for that post you ruined. It’s twice your age and half as irritating.” Stalker picked his hat up off the bar and set it at a perfect tilt on his head with no effort. He simply nodded, and flicked his eyes questioningly at the Peacemaker.

“Oh, hell. Take it,” she quipped, “I don’t know anyone else vain enough to carry a *five*-shooter. Couldn’t give it away if I wanted to.” Stan snorted audibly at this.

Nora walked back behind the bar as Dalton vaulted over to the customer side in one nimble, pommel-horse hop, surprising even the malamute who barked sharply with displeasure. She walked to the shelves, pulled on one and slid open a hinged section of false wall, goods and all, toward her, revealing a locked door beyond. The handsome man turned to Edison and Petty with a genuine look of shock on his face. Neither of the other men seemed surprised at all. Jerk had built it himself. To this day, even he had to squint to see the seams and joints. He’d also handcrafted the desk in the office behind the wall, complete with false bottoms in each drawer that hid, among other things, ammunition, iodine, zithromax, gold and

silver, anti-venom, quarter-sticks of dynamite, halogen bulbs, an assortment of rare, non-GMO seeds, and an unopened bottle of Pappy Van Winkle.

He had once had a different obsession than the one now driving him south. And he'd been very, very good at it. Nora pulled a small set of keys discreetly from somewhere inside her bra and began an efficient unlocking of multiple deadbolts on the metal fire-door. She disappeared for a few seconds and emerged with a small package wrapped in wrinkled, plain-brown paper and tied with twine. She shoved this at Stalker. "You're going to Doll Town."

As if on cue at the news of Stalker's destination, Edison belched loudly, startling the dog for a second time in as many minutes. Nora rolled her eyes and continued, "I was gonna have to do this m'self. Now you're gonna ride out and see this to Junior Robinson personally or die trying. And I'm gonna avoid a week's worth of badass nightmares. You're gettin' off light. I know you know that, Stretch."

"Nora, now, I've never been. Surely if the import of this delivery is such..."

"Go with God, Dalton."

And with that, the matter was settled. Stalker picked up the parcel and walked slowly, in impossibly burnished boots, out the front door. But not for the final time. At last, the proprietor settled into her familiar trader stance behind the bar and turned to the scarred woodworker and the fat sheriff sighing heavily.

"Now," Nora said, "where were we?"

Both men began to rummage in their backpacks. For the next thirty minutes, the trading was fairly unremarkable. Snake meat for canned peaches, isopropyl alcohol for butane, sugar for wolves bane, a decent Swiss army knife for a new camelback bladder. Few words were spoken and no motion was wasted. Nora knew where everything was and what it was worth. Items came off the shelf and were replaced according to a mad algorithm only she seemed to understand. When

the sheriff went into his shirt pocket and plunked a dingy set of Uno cards on the bar, she came to a full stop. Anyone who knew Stan knew he treasured this deck, and begged anyone and everyone to play whenever he needed to pass the time. She wasn't going to trade for it. But she let it sit there for leverage. Her eyes swiveled to Jerk, who rummaged in his pack and pulled out a tattered, White Owl cigarillo box sealed in a filthy, gallon-size Zip-loc bag. He pulled it out of the plastic and opened the lid without ceremony. Inside was a full prescription bottle of amoxicillin, two vials of iodine, a solid gold, railroad-grade, Waltham Vanguard pocket watch and a dog-eared 1963 Topps Johnny Unitas card. He opened the watch cover, wound the crown a full turn and set it, ticking, in front of a dumbfounded Nora. Jerk pocketed the trading card as he waited for her to speak.

“Is that what I think it is? Because you know I can’t.”

“It is. And you can. Because I need the Remington under that board,” Jerk said, pointing to a specific part of the office floor. “Assuming it’s still there.”

Nora nodded, then looked at Stan as if to confirm what she’d just heard. The sheriff nodded back. “Scope’s still on her, is it?” he said. “That’ll be a deal-breaker a’course, no offense, it is.”

“Once we do this, it cain’t be undone, y’all understand that. Not tomorrow. Not next week. This ain’t a rental. I didn’t get where I am today worryin’ I’m gonna feel bad in the morning.”

Jerk stared straight ahead, unblinking. Nora turned, sighing. She fished out her keys again and mumbled almost to herself, “Good god, man, you ain’t got scars enough?” Nora keyed open a worn oak board in the floor and reached in. She shuffled over and put a Remington 700 with a Burris 50mm scope attached on the bar in front of Petty. It looked like it had been well-cared for. He slid the single bolt open to make sure it was unloaded, then set it back down.

“Shells. Winchester .308 ? 168-grain?”

Nora shuffled back into the office and came back with a mostly-empty ammo box. "I got five rounds," she said.

"Five'll do," Petty said as he dumped the bright brass into his filthy hand.

Nora leaned back on the counter with both elbows. "You flipping your granddad's railroad watch for this, I don't understand, Jerk. Stupid is what I think. But you're almost gettin' what ya paid for. It'll knock a dime off a Fence post at five hundred yards easy. Good shooter could hit what they's aiming at from eight hundred yards. Some say a thousand, but that's just people talkin'. Only you ain't gonna be shooting at dimes or deer, are you? You two are going to the Tribute Call in New Baker is my guess."

The sheriff glanced at Jerk's icy, silent stare and said, "Best we didn't say, Nora. We caused you enough trouble, we did."

"If you're thinking of trying what I think, they're gonna shoot you boys a'fore you get close enough. Best you keep this." She put the amoxicillin in Stan's huge hand. And take Westbrook's pea-shooter on your way out. Gives me the willies."

"So we're square, then," Jerk asked. Nora leaned in close. "Account-wise, we balanced. We'll be square when you walk your skinny ass back in here alive." She kissed Jerk tenderly on his scarred cheek. She swept the cigar box off the bar and turned her back on the two men. She walked into the hidden office and started fiddling with places to hide the high-end contraband. "You best watch over him, Stan, or I'll hunt you down myself."

"I always do."

Nora spent a minute getting false drawer bottoms secured and locked, floorboards locked down and the fire door bolted closed. As she swung the shelf wall back in place she said, "You boys have a drink for the road?" She turned around. The place was empty. On the bar was a hand-carved eight-inch replica of

her Malamute, spots perfectly rendered in birds-eye maple, mahogany, and white oak. Nora knew it was one of Jerk's fiendish puzzles. Not the first Jerk had gifted her with. Normally, finding the first piece to pull out took an hour. Then once she'd worked out how to get it apart, she'd need Jerk to put the whole thing together next time he came around. This one, she was going leave as is. She picked it up and breathed in the scent of newly carved hardwood. She felt like weeping. But of course, she didn't.



Chapter 5

Katy McClure was intimately familiar with every sound associated with the act of sex. Desperate sex. Kinky sex. Rough sex. I-think-I'm-in-love sex. You name it, as madame of the mobile brothel colloquially known as the “Pussy Wagon,” she’d heard every orgasm, grunt, and gasp there was. But the sound she was hearing now wasn't right. She tore down the length of the double-bus that delivered New California the oldest profession, and stopped at room 2. She threw open the door and found a john angrily choking Alexa, one of her most expensive consorts. She immediately cracked him on the back of his skull with the axe handle she always carried. He let go and Alexa gulped in air and began coughing and spitting all over fresh sheets. Katy shot her a dry look before dragging the unwelcome customer back the length of the bus and tossing him out the door. The man hit the ground hard in a ball of dust, making a group of loitering customers jump out of the way. The john stood up, put his hand on the back of his head which came away with blood. He looked at Katy, all six-one, hundred-and-seventy-five pounds of her, and hissed through his teeth, “You cunt!”

“Hold that thought for a minute.” Katy raised her voice so the rest of the assembled johns and janes could hear, “Listen up! Some of you I seen before, some not, so we’re gonna cover the rules again so we’re clear. You want a quick poke, okay. Ass end only, no problem. You and two ladies, you and a buddy on one, hell, you and that buddy shove dildos up each other asses while a lady watches and knits. Doesn't matter. As long as it’s agreed upon beforehand and you pay up, we got no problems. But you do not mark my merchandise.” Katy turned to the bus and yelled, “Alexa, get out here!” A minute later Alexa stepped out wearing a bathrobe tied loosely at the waist. She was beautiful, waifish, with

flowing dark hair and classic features. The red welts on her throat were already starting to turn purple. Katy whipped around on the john with the bleeding head.

“See, no one is going to enjoy paying for a lay with bruises on her like that. Pushes a lot of men over the edge of guilt they already feel walking in. And makes me look like I don’t run a tight ship, which I most assuredly do. You cost me money, and her no shortage of trauma. I know what you’re thinking. ‘Well, she’s just a whore.’ I’m here to tell you different. I don’t see it that way.” The madame walked up boldly within a few feet of the offender, bent her knees, got her boots centered on the balls of her feet and put both fists up like an old-timey prize-fighter. Now, I got to mark you. What do you prefer? Left or right?”

“Oh, we’re gonna fight now? Haahaa, okay.”

“Left. Or right.”

“Surprise me, you fucki...”

Katy’s right fist shot out straight and true like an experienced boxer, landing square just above the left cheekbone. Then, she stepped back, hands down. Everyone thought she’d simply snuck in a technically impressive jab until the man started screaming in agony and fell on his knees. What the onlookers didn’t see, not at first, was the sharp point of an awl sticking out an inch and a half past the middle and ring fingers of Katie’s left fist. It dripped with what was formerly the fluid of the man’s left eye. “See, now you’re marked. You’ll go back to your wife or your pastor or your foreman with one eyeball missing. That’s going to raise some questions, I would think. And you’ll need to explain that you got caught choking out a defenseless woman on the Pussy Wagon, and was made to pay. By *another* woman. And you still owe for the around-the-world. Not my fault you didn’t make it all the way around. All in all, not a good day for you. Tell your friends.”

Katy had everyone's attention. She nodded at her head-bouncer Skinny who was busy helping the man up and getting a handkerchief to his ruined eye socket. He nodded back signaling that payment would be extracted. Katy walked Alexa back to the bus doors. She cuffed her on the back of the head, but lightly, and turned her so they were facing. Katy lowered her voice and spoke firmly, but tenderly. "You don't give up your back on a guy who comes in with that energy. You had to sense it, right?"

Alexa nodded, tears forming at the edges of her large brown eyes.

"Now, now. A john like that shows up radiating rage, whether he asks for it or not, you suck his dick for awhile. Nibble some, get that feeling of mutual destruction working, make him see you as an equal. Calm things down. What do we say? If we don't stay on top of them..."

"They get on top of you."

"Get Joyce to look at that. You'll be alright."

She kissed her best girl on the lips, then turned to the rest of the men waiting their turn. She was still properly pissed off. Katy hated violence, giving as much as receiving, though she could have easily made a living at it. It clouded her judgment. It upset the careful emotional balance she worked hard to maintain between hard-assed businesswoman and warm mother duck to the relative innocents in her care. She pivoted for the moment and leaned against the side of her mobile fiefdom. "Gentlemen, let's get things back on track. I'm embarrassed, Cyclops there is obviously embarrassed, we have lost our hard-on mood here, haven't we? This is supposed to be fun. Next hour is half-off. The quicker you come, the more you save." This was greeted with a smattering of nervous but enthusiastic clapping. "Supposed to make Oakwood Station tomorrow so let's get to it."

The Wagon itself was originally a double-length natural gas vehicle that had been in service in Santa Monica. Like many Southern California city vehicles, it had been reassigned to moving civilians north in the early days of the War, and like most, had been abandoned along the Tejon pass in the highway gridlock following the initial panic. This one had gotten close enough to the Valley that it could be retrieved in relative safety years after the nuclear event that destroyed everything south of the Tehachapi Range. Thus, a cottage industry was born.

There were only a few cities big enough in the Valley where public transportation had ever been a going concern. After the re-consolidation, New California's fuel allocation left buses all the way to Stockton to go to rust. From Katy's standpoint, that meant plenty of parts. That fact, combined with the emerging truth that, War or no War, people were going to keep fucking meant there was serious income to be had.

She had been neither a madame nor a mechanic before. She was a second-grade teacher in Modesto. Which, it turns out, provided her the skill sets she needed. She was a natural nurturer to her girls. She knew how to be in charge. And how to deal with seven-year-old boys, which was the average emotional intelligence of her horny customers. She was brilliant and incredibly persuasive. And she got to executing the idea first. The rest was salacious history. The outside was painted hunter-orange, a color only a militarily-neutral vehicle would use, plus, as customers famously said, everyone could see it coming but the deer. Inside, it had been divided cleverly into ten small rooms and outfitted with tailored luxuries that would make the porters on the Orient Express jealous.

It ran on two massive custom-built, natural gas engines, and featured everything from solar-powered tankless hot water and air-conditioning to 2000-thread-count sheets. It was the nicest, rolling, no-tell motel in the known world. Outside the Fence, there were very few rules and even fewer deals for Katy

to negotiate. There were tolls at Northgate and Southgate, local “taxes,” and general small-time extortion. But most of those debts could be settled with an expert blow job. Hers was, in fact, the only economic concern allowed to operate over Barony borders and in both Corridors. She was the lone queen on the chessboard. The Wagon's employees were beautiful, well-fed, reasonably intelligent, clean, and up for just about anything filthy minds could come up with.

The downside was, it was the only business whose main transaction wasn't directly defended at the end of a weapon. Katy had security, but she lived with the un-paranoid conviction that her enterprise was vulnerable at all times. So much so that she occasionally, casually, robbed a man of an eye. The Pussy Wagon serviced, on a day to day basis, the most unpredictable, potentially violent clientele in the territory. They were either tragically guilt-plagued and defensive about keeping their proclivities quiet, or callously indifferent to what anyone thought. Katy's regulars included dough-faced deacons, trigger-men, drug smugglers, abused field hands, Barons and the men that could be hired to assassinate them. Katy could pay so she had the best handful of security men credit could buy. And she had trained all her life to fight.

As business got back to somewhat normal, Katy leaned her tall frame against the side of the bus, and smoked contraband tobacco out of a polished cherrywood pipe. Mostly, she kept a keen eye on the men congregating around the stop. Today, she chit-chatted more than usual with those who cared to do so. They were just on the Corridor side of the Fence east of Lindsay Township when something moving toward them from the interior caught her eye. “Wolf,” is all she had to say. Katy pointed to her right with the stem of her pipe, and instantaneously, several men raised their rifles in that direction, two of whom she knew for a fact were supposed to be on patrol on the other side. One shooter, Blackwater by the look of his gear, steadied his weapon on the branch of a scrub oak and peered through the scope.

“Dire wolf, alright. Big fucker too. Moving through them eucalyptus in the bayou.”

“Well, shoot it, dumbass.”

“Hold your water, dickhead. It’s moving like hell, must be on to something. Black tail maybe. Can’t see it.”

“Pete, I swear to god, if you don’t pull that fuckin’ trigger...”

The 30/30 rang out. Even without a scope, Katy could see the hit. The shape stopped in its tracks. From this distance, the wolf had to be at least the size of a small buffalo. The smell of burnt gunpowder hit her nose in a satisfying way. She knocked the ash of her pipe on the bottom of her foot in anticipation of what was inevitably going to happen next. Now that the kill had happened, someone was going to have to do something. A fact that never seemed to sit well with border men on either side. They started in on each other immediately like hens.

“Nice shooting, Tex. Now, if only there were someone on patrol on the other side, you know, who was getting paid to go over and field dress that som’bitch ’stead of standing around waiting to dip their wick for free.”

“Oh, I see. Why didn’t you take the shot then?”

“Because, it’s on your side, asshole. The Land of Plenty side. You want to trade places?”

“With a Corridor troll? Shit, no.” The Cro-Magnon insults spun out back and forth predictably. Predictably, guns were drawn, sides were taken, a dozen hairy ten-year-olds on a never-ending schoolyard fight found their way to an impasse in minutes. The shooter gave up first. Predictably.

“Fuck, fine. Ma’am, you need to wrap it up. Neutrality is now off the table, boys. We get back here in an hour and see someone we ain’t supposed to see, I’m’ a do my job.”

With that, the madame gave the signal to start closing down the operation. It was close to time anyway, and with only a few hours left until dusk she was satisfied to move to the next location before nightfall. They were going to make a mint at Oakdale Station tomorrow. A dire wolf in the middle of the day was uncommon. Katy figured that would be the end of it. She was wrong.



Chapter 6

The dream is always the same. She's running between the corn rows as fast as her legs will take her, drawing ragged breaths in the stifling humidity of the stalks over her head. She knows if she can get to the end of the row, she'll be safe. She bursts through the edge of the cornfield in a cloud of corn silk and bright orange pollen. She coughs. Still hard to breathe. After a minute she can finally pull in a lungful of dry, cool air. She looks up, and the dire wolf is there. She freezes as she's been taught. The wolf walks toward her then suddenly leaps, pinning her to the ground under hundreds of pounds of muscle and fur. Its muzzle is wrinkled into a snarl inches from her face, and she smells an odd smell on its breath. A scent she knows doesn't belong on an animal. The wolf rears back, but before it can tear her throat out, it bursts into flame.

Emmy woke with a start, breathing hard. As the foggy panic of the dream faded, she stared at the leak-stained ceiling of her bunkhouse. Ed always said dreams were "a silly-putty copy of life." Ed *was* a little funny. She didn't know what "silly putty" meant, or half the other things he said. But he was nice. Over eighty, so people said, and still up before dark cooking for the entire Section. It had been that way as long as she could remember. That, she was sure of.

Emmy knew people had bad dreams. Lots of the kids did. But she was eleven now. Old enough to pick, starting today. It seemed weird to have the same dream *all* the time. Plus she hadn't lived *any* of it. She'd never seen a dire wolf in her life. Nobody she knew had seen one. Grown-ups said they roamed the Corridor but were practically a myth inside the Fence. Too many people. And all her life Section 440N had only ever grown cotton followed by wheat, never corn. Cotton, wheat, cotton, wheat.

The sharp, familiar smell of the canvas from her cot made Emmy smile, and wiped away the night completely. Reality settled on her like a comfortable sheet, the faint laundry soap and line-dry smell of her blanket. The sound of a scoop of pork fat hitting a hot skillet in the common area outside. The mixed aroma of pine boards and bleach from the floor underneath her. The sight of her breath backlit by the sun through the window in the frigid morning air. Today was going to be a good day. The house madam Marie was already knocking loudly at the bedroom next door. She could hear the other kids stirring. Marie pounded on her door and shouted something in Portuguese. Several heads popped out of blankets, hair going every which way. They dressed quickly, a controlled flurry of worn dungarees, shorts, overalls and t-shirts. Older kids put on socks and shoes. The younger ones went barefoot. A dozen kids ranging from ages six to fourteen filed out of the stark-white, two bedroom clapboard house. The breakfast line was already forming. Ed Lavery was dishing out food from pots hung over the wood-fired half-barrel. Kids got fed based on height, and Emmy's place was still in the back third. Today there was fry bread, grilled tomatoes, and broccoli plus orange juice and all the Thompson grapes you could eat.

Emmy found the routine comforting, but today everything seemed extra light. She could feel the oak trees in the bayou holding up their own weight. The odd mixture of the warmth of the sun on her front and the cold of the shadows on her back gave her goose bumps. It was the first day of the cotton harvest. All the people she knew in the world were around her and Emmy felt like she could just ... *explode*. It was the only word she could think of.

"Pickin' today, huh?" Ed said.

"First time," she said, beaming. Ed made a goofy, pantomime of looking over both shoulders, then gave her an extra slice of fry bread and a wink.

In all, 440N was ten structures housing fifteen kids, forty-nine men, twenty women, three foremen and seven straw bosses. As she sat down to eat, David Wilcox, who had just turned sixteen and been made a straw boss, sat down next to her. With a shock of red hair, David had always been a wild kid, and found himself on the wrong side of a foreman plenty of times. He had the scars to prove it. He settled in as he got older. Emmy still found him to be a bully and mildly irritating.

“You see that?” David said, pointing to a hole in one of the white boards at their backs.

“Knot hole. So what?”

The older kids were always having the younger kids on about something. Vampires in the eucalyptus grove, brown-widows that leapt out from under the eaves at night, fire ants that could make your heart stop with one sting. She rolled her eyes anyway as David continued.

“That’s not a knot hole, that’s a door. A copperhead sees one of those at night they come on in to get warm. They move real quiet up onto the bed, then they curl up right here between your chin and your breast bone.”

“Right, David.”

“It’s not that big a deal ‘cause you’re asleepin’, but if you cough, or roll over or something and spook em, BAM, they get you right in the neck. Dead by mornin’. You live in that cottage, right?”

“So?”

“If I was you, I’d be sleepin’ with them covers tight around my neck, boy.” They ate in silence for a minute. “Probably some under your cottage just waiting for the sun to go down,” he said, smirking. Emmy almost laughed at that one, but wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. She had heard dozens of stories, each bloodier than the next. And she didn’t believe a one. David bounced to his feet with the energy all teenage boys seem to radiate.

“Anyway. See you in the rows, slug. Start slow. You’ll get the hang of it,” he said. “Don’t make me pop you one.” He raised a fist half in jest.

The cotton cars had been lined up on the local Corcoran spur for weeks, waiting for the largest number of cotton bolls to open. In the last seven days, the acres had burst open like a popcorn machine. One combine per Section was prepped and ready to run. The massive, rust-red harvesters swept four rows at a time and could pick a hundred-thousand pounds a day, which amounted to roughly four days of operation per Section. But the great machines were expensive to maintain. 440N had spent all of August every day from sunup to sundown chopping nutgrass and making sure every square foot of field was free of rocks, garbage, rusty metal, broken bottles...*anything* that could damage the sweeper tines, belts, cams or those giant tires. Decades ago the machines would make multiple sweeps per acre, but maintenance was now nearly impossible. Parts were scarce and diesel came at a premium from Cheney's Barony in the south. Now, laborers swept behind the first combine pass for weeks afterward getting every stitch of the precious white fiber possible. By hand.

It was back-breaking work. But wayfs could earn bonus credit in town -- one tenth of a credit per hundred-pound picked -- which could make the difference between a lean existence year and a comfortable one. Extra credits meant an extra set of clothes, soap, toothpaste, winter shoes, whiskey, electric lamps, a shortwave radio, or even a record player like Hal Lavery, the man next door, got last season. The boys always bought comics, trading cards, chocolate and plastic army figurines. Emmy was going to get the thing in life she loved most: books. “Pride and Prejudice,” “The Chronicles of Narnia,” “Tuck Everlasting,” “Star Girl.” She loved stories about girls her age doing extraordinary things, because she felt like that’s the kind of life she lived. Well, not really, but close enough. She was smart, and fast -- faster than the boys, and fearless, and this year was the first year she

was old enough to pick. So, filled with anticipation, she sat absently eating grapes, going over the Foreman's rules as the titles she would buy with her credits swam in her head.

Lavery's record player was playing something called "Nebraska" by someone he called "The Boss," which was ridiculous, of course. The song made Emmy sad whenever she heard it, especially the harmonica bits. But soon, another sound drowned out everything else as several fuel trucks began pulling up on the gravel road. If combine parts were gold, the fuel in the tankers was liquid gold. And that meant they came with security. The commotion level in the village went up immediately and so did a barely stifled sense of dread. Blackwater had been in operation way before Emmy's time. Ex-military forces paid by private contract to do things the military wouldn't or couldn't do. Some of the current guys were working in hot zones overseas when Congress made private armies illegal. Now, there *was* no Congress. The Barons made the rules. In the beginning, small militias began to form on their own. There were way too many guns, and way too many yahoos in the Valley to let that continue. They needed experienced, organized security, and there were plenty of veterans from the invasion who liked that life. Men who felt most comfortable taking orders and holding guns.

So Blackwater was reborn. The original founder had been in D.C. during a nuclear event. So this new version was under the command of former five-star general Charles Saul, whose victory in Colorado was one of the few high points for U.S. forces. The operation ran out of the northernmost part of the Valley, where members were recruited, trained and armed at private facilities by former high-ranking military commanders. Technically, they were private contractors on the payroll of the Baronies and everyone knew it. But there were whispers that Blackwater was a soft paramilitary incursion sent by former Federal officials to defend the West once a central government was re-formed. In any case, today, they

were here to guard the fuel. If the Barons were worried about a Federal reformation or control, they didn't show it. In fact, they used Blackwater muscle all the time. The beauty of a private military is that they did whatever they were paid to do. They maintained professional control through professional terror better than any local militia could. They defended the Fence clearly, but they could be used to hunt and intimidate rogue elements in the Corridors so no kind of organized insurgency could get traction. Or so they thought.

"Are you scared," said a voice on Emmy's left. She hadn't even noticed Brydon sit down next to her. He was her age, slender and tall "for an Asian kid," as he constantly put it. He'd emigrated to 440N two years ago with his family from San Francisco.

"No," Emmy said. "I'm excited! Aren't you?" Brydon shrugged and faked a smile in typical Brydon fashion. He worried a lot. He wasn't athletic, and the transition to working on the Section had been hard for him and his parents. They had both worked at VC firms in Silicon Valley, and he was an only child. Brydon knew symphony halls and NPR fundraisers, not cotton fields and fire pits. He was awkward and shy, but friendly when you got to know him. Emmy liked Brydon, but thought his mom and dad were too overprotective for ways.

"Just line up in my row, okay? In front of me. So I can see what you're doing. I've watched people do this, like, a billion times. I'll keep an eye on you," Emmy promised.

By mid-morning the cotton harvester had begun running in earnest and had finished its one and only pass. The diesel fumes had abated and the deafening noise of the machine had given way to stillness. It was time for the hands to start. The younger kids, too small to pick, were busy tromping down the harvester loads in the cotton cars. They laughed and carried on squishing and compacting the fluffy fiber into every corner and making every ounce count. The sun was directly ahead

and the temperature was climbing. Emmy stepped into her row, empty burlap sack over her shoulder. A foreman named Silas looked at her neutrally and asked, “You ready for this, young’un?”

“Yes, sir.”

He grinned at her air of serious commitment. The foremen were stern, but Emmy knew they had a soft spot for first-time pickers. Just as she thought that, Silas' face fell back into its normal scowl. He announced the basic rules loudly and with authority: “Don’t drop none. And keep up. They’s water at the end of ever’ other row. Sip it, don’t gulp it. You puke on a pile, there’ll be hell to pay.”

The day went by without incident. It was hard, hot work. There was definitely a learning curve. The burrs on the dry bolls poked her fingers painfully without mercy. And at first she got stuck goose-stripping, pulling on the same boll several times to get all the fiber out. But soon she realized if she spit on her hands the cotton would stick to her fingers and pop out in one go. She showed Brydon the trick. The rows were filled with hands. Experienced pickers moved quickly and bled a lot less. It was all the new kids could do just to go half as fast. By late afternoon she’d lost count of the rows she’d gone down. The foremen kept track of how many full sacks each wayf picked. The muscles in her hands were cramping badly. She had a permanent stain on her backside from wiping sweaty, bloody fingers on her dungarees. But there was also an exhausted sense of contentedness and pride in getting through her first day.

Then, several things went wrong at once. She was getting toward the end of a row. The hulking red combine was shut down and parked just a few yards away, the hot metal ticking in the cooling shadows of oncoming dusk. Brydon was picking in front of her and he was rushing. She'd told him not to. He probably just wanted to be finished, and he wasn't paying attention to where he was putting his hands. Without looking, he grabbed a packsaddle worm.

They were fairly common on local cotton leaves as pesticides had become scarce. The packsaddle will show up to eat the cotton leaves when the temperature drops. They're an alarmingly ugly bug and easy to see, if you're looking for them. If you touched one as Brydon just had, they stung hard. The venom of a packsaddle sting is about ten times as toxic as a honey bee. The pain is sudden and excruciating. Brydon immediately began screaming and flapping around. It was a shrill, high-pitched scream that stopped everyone in their tracks. The Blackwater securing the combine walked into the row, irritated. Holding on to his M16 with one hand, he grabbed Brydon and shook him hard with the other.

Adults in the rows started looking up. Some took tentative steps toward the scene. The tension was escalating quickly. Suddenly, from two or more rows over, Brydon's father came crashing through the cotton, furiously screaming in clipped, angry-sounding Mandarin. The Blackwater, out of position, turned toward the "threat" and ordered him to stop. Brydon screamed. Emmy was frozen. Again, he ordered Brydon's father to stop. He didn't. And the security man put a single 45mm slug right through Brydon's father's heart.

Emmy's mind went blank. She started screaming gibberish at a high volume. After, people would swear she was screaming "Johnny 99, Johnny 99" over and over. Brydon was passed out from the pain of the sting, his arm swelling visibly. Emmy was throwing clods of dirt at the security guy as fast as she could pick them up, screaming with rage. She only half-noticed the man take aim at her face with the butt of his rifle. Then hit her. First there were stars. Then there was nothing.



Chapter 7

Manny Mendoza was in the grease pit. This was at the top of a long list of reasons not to disturb him right now. He'd had what he considered to be one fucked-up, shitty, cocksucker of a wasted day, and being in the shop eased his mind. The grease pit was what, at one time, would have been the epitome of an environmentalist's nightmare. It was a simple, four-foot by eight-foot hole six feet deep into the packed earth of the barn floor. There was no framing, no cross-beams, no drainage or circulation whatsoever. You simply straddled the pit with whatever four-wheeled machine that needed fixing, then got in underneath to fix it. Any motor oil, diesel or hydraulic fluid that leaked simply leached into the ground. Were it not for the smell, the resemblance to an open grave was astonishing.

The most powerful man in the Valley was changing a pan gasket on a '67 GMC pickup. Normally, the downside to this exercise would have started to outweigh the upside hours ago. The only light was a hundred-watt bulb hanging from a cord hooked on the driveshaft. Even in broad daylight, everything closer than elbow-length was a blur, unless he had his glasses on. Which made him feel feeble. The space for his large, callused hands was limited at best, and any slip of a wrench meant scraped knuckles, which made him feel inept. And the dirt walls of the pit swallowed air and every reasonably audible voice within a few feet, which made him feel old. And deaf. He was none of these things, at least he didn't used to be, and that's what fueled his perpetual rage. But today he felt anything was better than the litany of managerial crap waiting for him at the house. So he'd come straight here for some much needed solace.

The shop let his mind wander. And so disarming was the solitude, or the opium high, or both, he was actually half-singing under his breath. "...mmm, mm...drinkin' whiskey...playin' poker on a loosing night...mmm mm mm 'ol

Jim start's thinkin,' somebody been cheating and lyin'...mr. saturday night...special...mmm...barrel that's blue and cold...mm mmm good for nothin'...put a man six feet in a hooooole...." While garden-variety interruptions to his thought process were beyond irritating, Manny saw shop interruptions as personal. Close to sin itself. So when Matthias walked in the barn, he was half-sure Lynyrd Skynyrd would be the last thing he heard before he died. The Baron was lost in the rote motion of tightening bolts. Under normal circumstances, Matthias could have easily walked off and no one would have been the wiser. He'd seen and ignored much worse. And that wasn't a stealthy-Indian thing, though at seventy-eight he could still sneak up on a man surrounded on all sides by broken glass. But the whole day was turning out to be nowhere near normal circumstances. So he rapped hard on the metal hood and waited. The singing stopped immediately. For what seemed an eternity, the air was filled only with the clicking sound of the socket wrench tightening and retrieving. Then, quietly from the pit, "Matthias?"

"Phone."

A few minutes later, Mendoza found himself sitting at the Queen Anne dining table for the second time in twenty-four hours, holding a receiver to his ear. It was a foreman from 404 North. "I'm aware what fuckin' time it is. It's nighttime. You know how I know? Because I'm looking out my window and it's fuckin' dark outside, now pull your head out of your ass, stop apologizing and just tell me what you need to tell me, Silas. ... You're shitting me. His name? ... His *name*, dumbass. ... Uh huh. And her name? ... The fucking kid, Silas, am I speaking cocksucking French right now? ... Sousa? You're sure about that? ... I will have this taken care of first fucking thing tomorrow. Try not to fuck anything else up in the next twelve hours, can you do that? ... Good."

Mendoza hung up the phone. While Matthias waited patiently and Benny wrung his hands in the corner, their boss paced in his socks around the dining

room. Without warning, he grabbed the socket wrench that was still sticking out of his back pocket and started violently destroying the John Hackney grandfather clock in the corner. It was a deafening cacophony of shattering glass, crashing bell tubes and splintering mahogany. A primal scream seemed half-stuck in his throat and came out as a long, eerie squeal as blow after brutal blow laid waste to two-hundred-year-old inlaid rosewood, hand-carved finials, and rococo spandrels. He shoved the whole thing prone to the floor with a crash, dropped the wrench and used his bare fists to beat the antique clock hood until brass cogs and clock hands littered the tile.

Mendoza was on his knees, sweating profusely and breathing hard. Spittle was all over his chin and his knuckles were bleeding freely. His eyes were squeezed tightly shut and his jaw was clenched so hard you could see the muscles in his face rippling with the effort. Then just as suddenly as it started, the wave of fury passed. Manny slumped over. The old Yokuts gave Benny a look and they grabbed him under each armpit and helped him get up and into a chair. The Baron looked older and more exhausted than either man had ever seen him. He wheezed, his mouth hanging open until he caught his breath. Matthias took a Copenhagen can out of his pocket and slid it across the mirror-polished surface of the table. The boss shot a silent look of thanks with his eyes, thumped the can, and put in a fresh dip. He leaned his head back, closed his eyes and kept them closed as he spoke.

“An over-fuckin-zealous Blackwater guard name of Wentworth shot a wayf picker out on 440. Killed him dead as hell. In the middle of the fuckin’ cotton harvest. Obviously, balance has to be got, but Matthias, I am too fuckin’ tired, and too fuckin’ old to deal with this level of horseshit twice in one week. And it cain’t wait, so tomorrow I want you to go over there and make it right.”

Matthias nodded. Mendoza opened his eyes. The left one now had a giant red spot from iris to tear-duct. The subconjunctival hemorrhage was hard to look

at, but when Mendoza turned to him, leaned forward on his elbows and stabbed the air with a bleeding forefinger, Matthias didn't blink. "I'm not calling the spook society, hear me? Ain't asking for permission. What happens tomorrow goes without sayin'. One for one. I don't care how you do the math, s'long as it comes out zero for me, understand? You decide. Hell, have some fun with it. Do some of that Comanche shit you like so much."

"Yokuts. I ain't Comanche."

Mendoza laughed hard, which ended in a minor coughing fit before he could get the next word out, "Motherfucker, I know that. Since the third grade. I ain't asking you to *be* a fuckin' Comanche, just do some Comanche shit is all I'm saying."

Matthias nodded again.

"Emmy Sousa. That's the name of some kid on 404 freaked out on the shooter, had something to do with it, I dunno. Why is that name ringing a bell, I wonder?" Mendoza's face became conspiratorially grim.

"Lot of Sousas in the Valley, boss. Don't mean anything," Matthias replied evenly.

"Well, yeah, it's just Silas says she's on the Tribute request list. Orphan, he says."

Matthias could sense the paranoia creeping in with the opium rush. He proceeded cautiously and kept his response low and level. "Manny, I was there. Elway is the only one made it out, and he's older than both of us. Stuck in a wheelchair deep in the Corridor's what I heard. Probably dead. You know this. If she was one of *the* Sousas, which is impossible, it isn't him made the ask. Coincidence. That's all."

"Yeah. You're probably right. I guess I'm just screwy is all. Two dead workers in one day and all this political rim-jobbing...christ...I guess if a freak

outside the Fence wants to beg for some strange orphan and can pay, they're just looking for a toy or a slave or both."

"More'n likely."

"Just in case, though, why don't you take care of her while you're over there. Shit, she'll wind up killed anyway or wish she was. Let's just be King-Herod-safe on this one, know what I mean? Do it real quiet, sell some bullshit story to Silas, and take her to that old county dump. The one off 128 over toward Lindsay. Once it's done, I'll tell New Baker to take her off the list. Easy peasy, okay?"

"Your call."

"That it is. That it is." Benny and Matthias waited a beat, but the Baron waved them out. "You fuckin' hens stop hoverin' now. Im'a get up to bed in a bit. Stay if you really want to hold my pecker while I pee. No? Okay then, Matthias, you're alright for a fuckin' Indian. Let me know how it goes tomorrow. And Benny, maybe unplug this cocksucking phone for a week or so, huh?"

The house man picked up Mendoza's hat off the rubble in the corner and set it reverently on the table, then both men walked out of the dining room and drew security off the doors. It would take another thirty minutes for Mendoza to find the strength in his legs to head upstairs. It had been an expensive day.



Chapter 8

Dalton Stalker was frying eggs. It was just one more thing in the string of improbabilities that had been the last eight hours. When Stalker confronted them the night before on their way out of Oakdale Station, it wasn't hard for Petty and Edison to stand down, at least until first light. Between the night-weavers and the wolves, it was foolish, at best, to be riding in the dark anyway. Even single-file. So, the trio had left the trading station together in search of a suitable camp. Edison had only agreed on the condition that there be no talking until morning. Stalker had honored that. Then with, no explanation, had improbably lead them to an improbable hunting cabin improbably close to route 120. It turned out to be improbably provisioned and unoccupied.

Then this morning, from nowhere, eggs. Practically impossible. Nobody got this lucky. Nobody. Edison, who was not overly suspicious by nature, was seriously not buying any of it. Despite having a roof over their heads for the first time in a month, the sheriff had not slept at all. Again, improbable. He'd spent the whole night instead watching Stalker, who slept like a rock. Sleep deprivation and deep irritation soon grew into mild paranoia. Jerk had stirred awake before dawn. He got up and prepared for the usual scavenging routine: food for the horses, water for the horses, water for the men, food for the men. In that order.

On a good day Petty and Edison managed to avoid going into the saddlebags for what little stores they carried. Now they had a third man, and, as in any society of hunter-gatherers, that was going to put pressure on the sustenance ecosystem. Stan was so fixated and flummoxed by Stalker, Jerk had to physically push him out the cabin door. They rode in the cold several miles up a steep logging road overgrown with deer fern and gooseberry. Above the tree line, a dusting of snow had fallen overnight. Towering menacingly at the top of the ridge was their

destination: the Bowl. The former parabolic deep-space antenna was one-hundred-fifty feet in diameter, and now served as the largest unnatural reservoir outside the Fence. Over the last decade, the giant structure had been rigged, retrofitted, and repurposed enough to make NASA spin in its grave. Over the years, locals had locked the Bowl at ninety degrees, tarred its interior surface and filled it several feet deep with aquifer-producing gravel.

The accumulated snowmelt made its way to a myriad of jerry-rigged pipes running chaotically to ground-level in several directions. Water from the Bowl was cold, pure and could be had well into summer. While Stan stood guard, Jerk filled the canteens and camelbacks and repacked the saddle bags to distribute the weight on the horses. Two hours later, they'd arrived back at the cabin to find Stalker clean and neatly dressed, whistling and frying over-easies in a pan.

"Gentleman. Breakfast?"

Edison mopped up yolk noisily with hot pan-biscuits and Stalker ate silently with gentry-like fluidity. Oddly, it was Jerk who broke the silence. "You keep bees?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Nora called you beekeeper. You keep bees?"

"Well, no, technically I don't keep them. I do acquire them. And sell them, of course, to the highest bidder. We are all yet businessmen ultimately, are we not?"

"You do that one at a time, do you?" Stan quipped with more than a little sarcasm.

"Come again?"

"Bees. You acquire them one at a time? That would explain some shit, it would." There was the tiniest sliver of hesitation filled by a snort of self-amusement from Stan. The smile on Stalker's face remained rock-solid.

“The real question, I suppose is why? You two being native sons of the region know better than I, nothing can be cultivated, no food grows, without bees to do the pollinating. All the colonies, the known ones anyway, are inside the Fence. Moved in crate-hives from Section to Section every spring like clockwork.”

“So?”

“So in the Corridor we starve from the lack of ability to start farming our own sustenance in the very shadow of the Barons who keep us out. Some people are willing to pay a premium for the mere chance to subvert the draconian geography of the Barons. I’ve moved eight hives from under Mendoza’s nose alone, to spots from Jackson to Springville.”

“You steal bees. Sheeeit. I heard everythin’ now. Look, your worship, where we’re goin’ we don’t need honey in our tea, thank you very fuckin’ much.”

“Where are you going?”

At this, Edison was momentarily stymied. He fidgeted with his hands and shot a wondering glance at Petty which even a blind man would have taken as a clear sign the sheriff had no clue where they were headed. Stalker recognized he’d hit a nerve, and proceeded smugly but cautiously. “Here’s what I think...”

“No one gives a rat’s ass!”

“Stan, let him finish.”

“I think....that rifle you traded for isn’t for squirrel hunting. You walked your bedroll into the trading post last night. The one place least tolerant of thievery in the entire Eastern Territories, a fact to which the corpse you two buried could attest. I think you’re carrying something very valuable, or you’d have left your tack on your horse without a second thought. How am I doing so far?”

“Fuck you, it is!” Stan was coming apart and Dalton was clearly enjoying it.

“I think you’re going South to make a Tribute deal. And I think you’re willing to get it done or die trying. But you have no idea how. And I think you’re going to need my help.”

Jerk stared flatly. It was all he needed to do. Edison, so enraged or unhinged or both had tears forming in his eyes. He gripped the edge of the kitchen island, and with one hand tore it violently from the cabinetry underneath, sending shards of pressboard and half-eaten biscuits flying. He held the entire counter in his grip, making him look momentarily like a deranged surfer, then rammed the whole piece two feet into the cheaply-paneled wall and clomped out of the cabin.

“What do you want? Jerk asked icily.

“This courier assignment to Doll Town, I’d like you both to ride with me. If you’re heading south anyway, it shouldn’t delay your plans by more than a day. I could use the guns. It’s not a place, as I understand it, to be trifled with. And I have no contacts in that community.”

“You made your bed with Nora. Why would I help you.”

“Other than the fact that I saved your life?”

Again, Jerk stared flatly.

“I know every inch of the Fence. Every weak spot. Every greasable palm of every drug addict on patrol. I’ve been in and out of the four Baronies dozens of times, even Poppyland. I know the railway, the canals...all of it. Do you? Does Chewbacca out there? Whomever your trading for must be very dear to you to get that close to Mendoza. I bet he doesn't even know you're alive.”

“No.”

“I thought not. This is one hand washing the other. Simple as that. Whatever your plan is, and we both know you don’t have much of one, I can help.”

“If you’re lying to me, I’ll kill you.”

Stalker glanced down and was, for the first time in as long as he could remember, shocked. Somewhere in the last few seconds, the scarred-man had drawn and cocked his Luger and had it aimed hip-high at the middle of Stalker's crisp, white shirt. "I'm impressed."

"Don't be. Thanks for the eggs." Jerk holstered his pistol and turned toward the door. "If you're lying to him out there, you're going to wish hard you were dead."

Outside, Stan was pacing, pausing every so often to break four-inch branches over his knee. Jerk had seen him this way many times. He was crazed, in an uncontrollable childish fit he didn't have the intellectual maturity to swim his way out of. Jerk walked by him, passing close enough to put a dent in Stan's awareness. Then kept going. "On me."

Stan reflexively, almost hypnotically, fell into step. In that way, he'd been an ideal infantryman. Though, at times, before and since the War, Petty felt guilty about that blind loyalty. Which is why it never occurred to him to explain the plan, which was barely a plan at all. At the horses they stopped. Petty caught his friend's gaze and held it as Stan's breathing evened out and his blood pressure eased. He was red-faced and sweating buckets. Jerk handed him the canteen draped over his saddle horn.

"Drink." As Edison took deep sips, Jerk started unbuckling the blanket roll from the back of his saddle. Inside, Stalker watched Petty pull something off his mount and show it to the sheriff. He was clever enough to use the horse to screen it all from the cabin widow. The two men talked for several minutes. The woodworker rerolled his gear and waved Stalker out.

Stan put his foot in a stirrup and mounted in one surprisingly graceful move. Just under his breath he said to Dalton, "Now I know somethin' you don't, I do, smartass." No further conversation, handshakes or acknowledgment was proffered.

The deal was what it was. Stan had agreed to stick to it at least until they reached Elway's, admitting that three guns was better than two. And admitting that he did appreciate the magical appearance of this morning's eggs.

The trio rode south out of Oakdale for over an hour in total silence. The road was easy, and the weather was clear and fair. Doll Town was the nickname of a hollow just East of the abandoned town of Moreno. They wouldn't get to the crossroads for a day. Normally Stan would have filled the silence with non-stop chatter. But he was so stubborn, he refused to be the first one to speak. Jerk was becoming irritated with the sibling rivalry.

Finally, Stalker piped up, interrupting the rhythmic clapping of hooves on dirt. "I'd heard that story. Thirty fights in thirty days."

"Bullshit," the sheriff scoffed.

"Truly. Perhaps you didn't know. Among the enlisted, Jerk here had become the modern equivalent of Cool Hand Luke, the use of the internet still being what it was then, of course."

"You served?" Petty asked.

"Heard your tall tale in basic training all the way over in Texas."

"Pffft." Edison screwed his face into a comic expression of utter disbelief. "What unit?"

"Charlie company. First battalion. Fourth division." As this sank in, the air was filled only with the sound of the high wind and the breathing of the mounts. Stalker didn't elaborate. Stan stared at him hard, trying to read the man's inscrutably straight expression. That expression didn't waiver. There was something behind his eyes that seemed to verify the truth of the statement. Edison shifted his look down to his reins uneasily.

"Jesus wept. New Orleans?"

“32nd MAPs. To be fair, I did boot with the 23rd in Corpus Christi, trained as a sniper, but when the Chinese blew the levees we were deployed otherwise and immediately. Of course it was no longer Big, and certainly not Easy, pardon the wordplay. Couldn't swim a stroke, still can't unfortunately, but they put me on a PCF Mark Five and there I stayed, on Twain's magnificent ribbon, until we fell back in St. Louis a year later.”

“That's one shitty tour,” Jerk mumbled in a thin attempt at solidarity. “The old-timers say it was like Antietam but worse. Lousy terrain. Unclear battle plan. Hand to hand a lot of the time. Eighty percent casualties, I heard.”

The U.S. casualty rate during the Mississippi River Invasion *was* higher than the bloodiest battle of the Civil War. Civilian deaths in the first two weeks were even higher than that. Once the flooding ensued, enemy naval vessels were easily able to control the choke point of the New Orleans delta. American ships that had been sent to operations in the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic couldn't get back upriver to help. Everything North on both banks was a shooting gallery. Swift boats, like the Mark Five, and shelling from small, land-based positions had barely slowed the enemy down.

“I did two tours, actually. I stayed with the WUSPG infantry, yielding to my sense of patriotic vanity. Caught between the ‘River and the Rockies’ as the saying goes now. It was quite literally true at the time. Got West on a convoy before the heavy snow, which as fortune would have it, was the only fallout-free route, as we've all since learned, to...here.” Stalker waved his hand to the Valley in general.

Stan glanced at Petty, who was still parsing the narrative intently. The sheriff kept his eyes forward on the road, projecting as much respect as he deemed appropriate for the level of disbelief he still had. This was a familiar sensation he'd experienced around wordy people all his life. Stalker's details were right, but not enough evidence to breed real trust. Not today. Dalton picked up on this

immediately. “I’m not denying I’m extraordinarily lucky, sheriff. Always have been.”

“Maybe lucky. Maybe full of shit.”

“The one thing I can’t seem to stretch my mind around, sheriff, is that when I heard about Jerk’s legend, lo those many years ago -- the skinny private at Pendleton who beat up a platoon, *including the drill sergeant*? -- I don’t recall his name being ‘Petty.’” Stalker eyed his companions. "Odd, don't you think?"



Chapter 9

Early in the morning, at Section 440 North, Matthias and several of Mendoza's henchmen pulled up in pickups just as the sun was rising. They got out holding multiple, redundant weapons and went straight to Silas' cottage. Matthias banged sharply. The foreman, still half-asleep, opened the cheap, hollow-core door.

"Wentworth. Where is he?"

"Uh. Sleeps in the cabover in that semi just there," Silas said, pointing. "Uh, them security boys, they don't like to...."

The old Yokut stared and said nothing, clenching and unclenching his jaw.

"What I mean to say is....well, they was up late, so..."

Matthias gave hand signals to his squad. They moved in on the Peterbilt. The A/C motor on top of the cab was humming. Silas was an idiot but he was a good foreman, so Matthias had counted to ten in his head before doing what he was going to do anyway. A small measure of respect. Two men climbed up on the runner of the truck and inside the cab. A minute later they emerged with a shocked, struggling Blackwater man wearing only unfortunate tattoos and a pair of boxer shorts. They could smell the alcohol coming out of his pores. The hangover he was suffering made things slightly easier, but it still took three men to keep him under control. He was strong. All the security men were. Only once the victim was pinned firmly on the ground did Matthias step up to him. "Killed one of the Baron's wayfs. He don't like that."

The naked man spit. "Fuck you, old man."

Matthias paused and put on something that, on *his* face, passed as a smile, and crouched down on his haunches. "No. I'm going to fuck you."

With a nod, Mendoza's men dragged Wentworth twenty yards into the cotton field. They set him right in the middle of a windrow, the naked bolls and stalks digging cruelly into his bare skin. One of Matthias's men pounded a heavy grape stake into the soil with a five-pound sledge. Two others forced the Blackwater into a cross-legged sitting position. They zip-tied his ankles together and his hands behind his back and to the stake. Wentworth was screaming and cursing so loud, the whole Section had wandered out of the dead sleep of their bunks to see what was going on.

Matthias walked past the screaming man to the behemoth John Deere 7660 harvester, swung himself expertly up into the cab and cranked it to life. Dark diesel smoke poured out of the standpipe. The noise was sudden and shocking in the heavy morning silence, easily drowning out the desperate screams of the security man pinned like an insect in the field. From the cab, Matthias put the harvester in gear and got it pointed into the field centered on the row where Wentworth was tied. He fired up the picker heads and the air system, then moved in second gear toward the man, rpms revving at maximum. From Wentworth's perspective on the ground, the spinning metal spindles and the doffer mechanism rocking back and forth looked like a medieval nightmare come to life. As the Harvester moved closer and closer the unearthly sounds of the machine drowned out even Wentworth's own terrifying final thoughts. The lifters were almost on either side of him now. He closed his eyes tight and cringed, bracing himself for evisceration and whatever awaited beyond. His sad life literally flashed before his eyes as his brain began to automatically shut things down.

The pain never came. The screeching metal sounds from the harvester's heads, picker ribs and compressors suddenly ceased. The giant tires stopped rolling. And the diesel engine coughed to a stop. Ears ringing, Wentworth opened

his eyes. The harvester had come to a stop mere inches away. If his hands weren't tied he could have reached out and touched the worn, stainless steel tines.

From the shade of the bayou, a hundred yards north, Emmy and Brydon watched the macabre scene as they crouched in the tall sawgrass on the rim of the canal. She grabbed Brydon by his sweatshirt and pulled hard. It was the first gut decision she'd ever had to make. It would be the first of many. "We gotta go."

"Go where?"

"I don't know, I don't know...that way. We need to run. Now. Close to the water. Don't make dust. I don't know. Follow me close. Trust me. Now. Go now!"

Matthias stepped off the harvester, old springs creaking as his boots hit the ground. He walked around the front of the machine and squatted in the dirt facing the Blackwater who had shat, pissed and vomited all over himself. Matthias made a face from the stench, and reached out with a finger touching Wentworth on the forehead. "Hmmm. Too wet to pick. Pick when it's wet and cotton bails will catch on fire. Did you know that? That wayf you killed yesterday? You do his job now. All that fancy gear in your truck, that's the Baron's now. You don't mind, right?" Wentworth was now nearly unconscious and shaking from trauma. No answer came.

"Thought so," Matthias went on. "Man named Silas over there? He's your boss now. You do what he says. Baron's looking for a 150 yield, so you work real hard. And take a bath. You reek."

While Matthias' men cut Wentworth loose, gagging on the stench of him, Matthias walked calmly, spookily so, over to Silas as if on a Sunday stroll. He spoke to the stunned foreman casually. "Got you a replacement. Gonna work real hard, he says. If I was you, I'd fly right for the rest of the season. Boss-man not happy. Second lifter is too high by at least an inch. Not gonna get a clean pick on that side."

“Oh. Fuck. Yeah, okay, um. Yeah. I’ll adjust it, no problem.”

“Okay.” Matthias’ eyes darted around to the crowd of wayfs who’d gathered and were staring in shock. He cleared his throat and projected as much as an old Indian projected, which is to say, barely above normal speaking level. “Which one is Emmy Sousa?”



Chapter 10

When Dalton Stalker opened his eyes the first thing he noticed was the splitting headache radiating from somewhere in the vicinity of his left ear. With a great deal of alarm, he suddenly realized he couldn't rub the throbbing spot on the back of his head. His arms were behind him and tied painfully, wrist to wrist. He could neither move them forward to defend himself, nor back to worry at the knots. He was tied to a tree, his legs unbent. His left pointed at ten o'clock and his right at two. Each ankle was tied by a length of stiff rope that ended, in turn, tied to the saddle horn of a horse. The sharp scent of tree sap he usually found comforting smelled like crucifixion to him now. Jerk knelt on one knee, like a ballplayer taking a break and looked Stalker eye to eye. The scarring and the shadow from his hat brim kept Petty's facial expression almost permanently neutral to a casual observer. But the potential cruelty he was radiating was impossible to miss.

"Sorry about this. Trust has never been my strongest suit. Ole Sheriff Stan there knocked your block off with the butt of his Mossberg. He blindsided you, admittedly. I was about to do the same m'self. You said something before...what you said...*bothered* me." Jerk paused for a moment as an aside occurred to him, "You talk too much, by the way."

Stalker nodded.

"I'm going to tell you something now. If I get a shine you already know it, I'll figure running into you was no coincidence. Then, I'll get upset. And I'll whistle at them cutting horses and they'll both take off and, well, that would be that. If you got something to get off your chest, now'd be the time. I could just plug you and have it done with." Jerk pointed an index finger at Dalton's head and made a popping sound with his lips.

Stalker willed the nausea growing inside him down and shook his head. Jerk shrugged. "You said in boot you heard the story -- thirty fights in thirty days -- but you didn't recall my name being Petty." Jerk stared intently for a few seconds. Whether he got the reaction he wanted or didn't was unclear. But his eyes shifted and he gazed off at the trees reflectively. He picked up a granite chip and unconsciously flicked it with a calloused hand, shaking his head.

"Bootcamp. Shit. Things had gone so far to hell by then, I figured we'd be in body bags inside a week. Didn't think names would ever matter one way or another. Then I went and survived World War III. Hadn't counted on that." He looked back at Stalker. "My name is Sousa. Laurence Sousa. It was, anyway."

Stan shifted his weight noisily, but Jerk kept his eyes locked on the man in front of him. Realization spread across Stalker's face like tiny bulbs lighting up in waves. He was smart. That would come in handy. What was instantly clear now was that Petty's confession came as a total surprise. For a second, the woodworker almost felt remorse for the dandy man tied in front of him. Almost.

Satisfied for the moment with Stalker's reactions, Jerk started unknotting the stiff waxed hemp from around Dalton's feet. He unconsciously coiled it as he went.

"Jerk," the sheriff began in a warning tone close to a whine.

"He didn't know, Stan. Can you stop being such a fuckin' hen."

The big man hung his head visibly like a scolded child, and Jerk immediately regretted his tone. He evened out his energy with a deep breath. "Let me get to the bottom of this, okay?" Petty stood and walked to his horse, seemingly finished with intimate eye contact. As he tied rope to his saddle, he continued with his usual nonchalance, speaking to Stalker over his shoulder. "Okay, Chatty Cathy, why don't you tell me the rest."

"You're supposed to be dead."

“Good. Why?”

“The 100-Acre Massacre?”

Jerk wasn't satisfied with the tone. “Sounds like you're guessing. How long'd you say you been in the Territory?”

“As I stated previously, I arrived a few months after my second tour was supposed to have concluded. November. Just after Denver fell.”

“You did say that. So, you've heard what, exactly?”

Stalker chose his words carefully, keeping everything as simple as he could. “Right after the invasion began in earnest, Baron Mendoza started consolidating land in the interior. He's a lot of terrible things but at the time he was a natural leader. People were afraid and desperate for some kind of stability. The state legislature in Sacramento had fallen apart. There were no rules. The Sousas were the first family who refused to sell. Dairy people. One hundred acres.”

“Eighty five, but go on.”

“Mendoza couldn't stand the resistance. And he needed the momentum. If other families heard the Sousas had refused, it could catch on. So he hired a militia to come out in the dead of the night, no warning, no negotiation, and shot every man, woman and child, house to house, with zero resistance. At first. Murdered forty-four people.”

“And the cows.” Jerk added.

“I'm sorry?”

Jerk clarified. “When they were done with the people, they shot the livestock. Over eight-hundred head. And all the dogs. You were saying ‘no resistance *at first*...’”

“Right. Two of the Sousa men took up defensive positions in a tower.”

“Grain silo.”

“In a silo. And held out for several hours until they expended all their ammunition. There was Elway, whom was never found. And Laurence. Executed with a shot to the back of the head by Mendoza himself in front of witnesses.”

“Yeah, I heard that one, too. Anything else?”

Stalker concluded flatly. “They burned the entire place to the ground, including all the bodies.

In the silence that followed, a blue jay swooped brazenly between the men and into the lower branches of the next closest pine. It jeered and whistled for a moment, then simply looked on with its black bead-eyes gleaming.

“Let him up.”

The sheriff did as asked and walked over to cut the cords binding Stalker’s hands. The big man helped Dalton stand, a gesture the trader would have found repulsive were it not for the fact that he couldn’t have stood at all in that moment without Edison’s sweaty grip on him. Stalker looked around for his possessions. Jerk clucked softly from where he stood holding Stalker’s perfectly-blocked hat and gun belt. Stan shoved a canteen roughly into his chest and Dalton took a long drink. The open space settled on the three men in the mottled noon sun like a cloud of gnats.

“Okay. Tell him what he got wrong, Stan.”

Edison put his arms above his head and cracked his back loudly. The armpits of his shirt were soaked down to his belt. Even in the shade of the trees, Indian Summer was making itself felt. The sheriff folded his arms behind his back Atticus Finch style, and paced slowly. He had clearly rehearsed this in his head. The pantomime looked strange on him.

“Jerk didn’t get executed, fuckin’ obviously, it is. Elway was never there. Out on a three day bender per fuckin’ usual, he was. He swigs lighter fluid if you hand it to him just right.”

“Elway’s alive?”

“Pffft. Oh shit ya. Old as dust itself, but still. Every bounty hunter and Blackwater in the Corridor been lookin’ for that rummy som’bitch for years. He gets spotted ev’r so often. Never caught, though. He’s a wily one. Just one of them people always one step ahead of the law. When the satellites and the cell towers went down, wasn’t nobody gonna find him. Mendoza has a ten-thousand-credit price on his head to this very day, it is. I thought of cashin’ it in a time or two m’self, I ain’t gonna lie.”

Stalker asked. “And what events, pray tell, conspired to allow for young Laurence’s good fortune?”

“Can you for fuckin’ once talk English?”

Jerk looked at his saddle, his eyes seemingly trying to bore themselves into the cracked leather. He spoke up softly, to the sheriff’s chagrin. “Maybe a year before, give or take. Fought with my old man. I wanted out from under the dairy. Had for a long time. Hated it there, honestly. I’d started a carpentry shop in town. Was doin’ real well. Then the War started. What didn’t get stole in the riots got hoarded by the Barons. The big-box stores were over in a flash. People started making do with what they had. Stopped throwing stuff away the second it broke.”

Edison eagerly jumped back in, “He were good, too, he was. If he couldn’t fix it, hell, he could make it. People come from two counties over sometimes. Old gunstocks, gates, window frames been broke in the fuckin’ panic, heirloom furniture’d been handed down generations. You name it. You seen what he done at Nora’s place. Tell you who *really* lost the War, fuckin’ Walmart, it was.”

“What happened to your face?”

Petty usually responded to this by reflexively cold-cocking the questioner with a sneaky and devastating right cross. Now, he sat as still as marble and answered with the hard truth. “Time I heard and got out there, it was over. If it

wasn't dead it was on fire. So much blood you could see it in the dark. I walked the perimeter. Thought I might find survivors. Mendoza's Indian was waiting. Hit me square with a burning creosote post. Left me for dead."

Dropping the courtroom choreography altogether now, Stan said, "Fuckin' time I got there, this stupid bastard... 'scuse my french, Jerk... was face down in ashes, he was. Burnt bad. Scared the shit out of me. I pick him up, threw him in the pickup and tore ass for the naval air station in Lemoore."

"You went directly from the mass murder of your entire family, suffering severe burns, and joined the army?"

"The man killed babies in their sleep over eighty-five worthless acres of cow shit. I was left for dead. Needed a medic. Couldn't exactly call an ambulance. What would you do? Air station was the closest place with trained medics. Once I was in the infirmary for six weeks, the joining-up part just sort of...happened. No idea what his excuse was," Jerk concluded, cocking his head at Stan.

Stalker nodded in silence.

"Elway got out. Everybody knows that. I got out. Only Stan knows that. Changed my name to Petty on the induction papers after boot camp. Simple. All you have to do to disappear is misfile a goddamn government paper. That, and melt half your face off. Poof. You're born again." Stalker walked as smoothly as he could over to Jerk where he still leaned on his horse. He took his Resistol and put it back on his head. He took his two-gun belt, with no resistance from Petty, and buckled it on familiarly, nickel and pearl filigree glinting.

"Plus there's one other..."

"Jerk," the sheriff began in a warning tone.

"Stan. I *know*. Anyway, that's it," Jerk concluded. "Had to know you weren't set on me. The Barons have spies on payroll all over the Corridor. Us meeting how we did was too convenient. If Mendoza knew I was alive, he'd butcher the whole

Corridor to get to me, and, paranoid as he is, he'd start killing every Sousa who could remotely be a loose end. If the wayfs and the townies knew the tactics Mendoza used to 'unite the valley,' it wouldn't go well for him."

"He's on the dope is what some people say," Stan added.

Jerk added, "Way I see it, the Barons are in the business of crowd control now. They're PR spinners as much as they are businessmen. They have to keep the farce going. A hole in the story is Mendoza's greatest nightmare."

"I see. If you prick us do we not bleed? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

"Merchant of Venice...You ain't the only one to ever *read*...Taking the man's life with a sniper rifle, that'll be easy. Suicidal ultimately, but, easy. Only that wouldn't be real revenge. What we're gonna try is hard."

"And what is that, precisely?"

"We're gonna live." Jerk put his right boot in the stirrup and mounted smoothly. All conversation now completely swallowed by silence and the incessant stereo hum of cicadas in the distance. Had Dalton wanted to shoot right then, he easily could have. Neither of the other men, no matter how skilled, could have outdrawn him. They seemed uncharacteristically resigned. Petty's speaking of the full truth had put Stalker in a deficit of trust. As a gentleman and a soldier, he was indebted. Engaged. No matter how cruel the circumstance of the engagement. Walking away now simply wasn't in his makeup.

If there was any doubt a partnership agreement had just been reached, Stan erased it by brushing the dirt fussily off the back of Stalker's Pendleton shirt. Jerk reigned around, narrowed his good eye and nodded. "We're gonna get you through Nora's delivery first. Like I said we would." The riders made their way south for the next two days with a nearly total lack of conversation. Tree hammocks were the sleeping quarters the first night, the starscape so crisp at this

elevation it hurt to look too long. In the morning, they awoke to a thin layer of frost. The blue Sierra sky was showing off, coming all the way down to the ground.

It was the last clear day they would see for a week. By late afternoon, a sudden thunderstorm formed and pelted the men with raindrops the size of old dimes. Then the world changed to scales of gray, and the rain came down hard. The trees came alive with sound and leaves rudely dumped freezing water in tablespoons when they could no longer hold the weight. The forest floor of pine sizzled as rain hit pine needles. Dark clouds got even darker as the day progressed and occasional lightning strikes made blinding flares. The sky gave no sign of letting up. They moved lower into the foothills to avoid flash streams and loose footing, trading the anonymity of the tall timber for the relative cover of the downpour and open ground. Nothing else, good or bad, was moving in this.

Eighteen insufferable hours later, they hit the trail running west to Moreno with an hour of gray daylight left. As they sat, cold and soaking even in their rare, high-tech rain gear, they had a decision to make. Stress the mounts and camp in the open mud another night, or head back to the trees and into the hollows beyond. It was the sheriff who decided.

“Fuck it. Let’s go east ’n get this done. Day can’t get any more fucked anyway, it can’t.” They reigned their horses left. As night fell, they hit a small, worn trail that disappeared into a tunnel of thick foliage. Hanging from seemingly every available limb like macabre wind chimes were filthy plastic doll parts of every imaginable shape and size. The heads were the worst, painted eyes seeming to follow them in the feeble light of the Coleman lantern. Doll Town closed around them.



Chapter 11

Inside the Fence, the war had created a permanent indentured underclass. In the Corridors, it was lawless destitution. Everyone else ended up in Doll Town. The one-percent controlling the 99 percent -- a classic political theory for years leading up to the war -- had finally come to pass in a very real way. The incessant rain lessened somewhat on the path, which wasn't more than a glorified game trail, as the cover of overgrown ash trees stitched themselves together overhead. Edison, Petty and Stalker walked their horses slowly, each pointing mag lights and burning valuable batteries to fight off the guttural black. After several claustrophobic minutes the tunnel of vegetation began to widen. Torchlight emerged intermittently revealing hints of ragged structures, most of which used the wide bases of ash and fir trees as organic frames. Some were several feet above the ground, becoming part of the canopy itself. Others appeared to be dug deep into the hillsides of the hollow, creating a ghoulish version of a Hobbit village.

As they neared the town center, weak electric light from a line of bulbs strung through the trees illuminated the locals. No one was prepared for what they saw. As the horses plodded in on a soft tarmac of compressed leaves and dirt, the riders who passed had every human malady imaginable. Down's Syndrome faces, deformities of all kinds, coughing fits, missing arms, missing legs, heads permanently red and hairless from the radiation that still consumed most of the air between Tehachapi Pass and what was once Los Angeles. A large misshapen man stepped out of the shadows directly in front of the trio. With a deep voice, he spoke with some difficulty through a cleft palate.

“Yeevm eer.”

Petty dismounted. “He wants us to leave the horses here.”

“My ass, I will.”

“Do it, Stan. Grab your packs and let’s get this over with.”

The men dismounted as the sentinel stood like stone, holding on to the reins with one giant hand. The three men stepped under the lights into the center of a wide clearing and put their backs instinctively to one another. Worn pathways led into the murk in several directions. Acrid wood smoke curled its way out of a few large buildings inside the hub and a generator close by hummed noisily. They could feel all the eyes on them, but right now nothing was stirring.

“Anyone see a doorbell?” quipped Stalker.

“Just wait,” Petty breathed.

A strange thump started coming from the path on their left. A thump followed by a scritch dragging noise. Thump then drag. Thump. Drag. Soon, they could see a figure moving. A man, his legs missing up to his pelvis, was approaching them. He jammed two gloved fists into the ground in front of him, then dragged his bottom, which was covered by an apron of thick, double-stitched gray leather worn to a glassy sheen on its underside. It took a few minutes for him to get to Stalker. The man sat about knee-high, bare-chested but for a deerskin vest, arms impressively tattooed and ripped with muscle from massive shoulder to massive shoulder. A red bandana held back long stringy hair. He looked the riders up and down, then smiled, showing a gold tooth. “Whatchoo want?”

“Looking for Junior Robinson. Got a delivery for him from Nora at Oakhurst Station.”

“Oh, I see, you gonna stroll in here on them good legs and start ordering me around, is that it?”

“No....”

“What if I just plugged all three of you?” The man opened his vest to show off a double shoulder rig holding two Beretta 9mm pistols. Jerk lifted his hand to

the others slightly. No one drew. “Could have easily, you know. On the way down here.”

“I don’t doubt that. I’m Stalker. This is Edison. And Petty.”

“Well, we ain’t get too many tourists here, Stalker. ’Less they’s runners. Then we just stab ’em to death. And eat ’em.” The half-man feigned a dramatic slurping and eating motion, then cackled loudly. He stopped suddenly and said in a dead-serious tone, “Just joshin.’ We don’t eat ’em.” He stared hard. The trio stared back and didn’t twitch a muscle. “Now, why in the hell are you creeping around my hollow, man?!!”

“Like I said, just trying to deliver a package for Robinson. That’s it. Then we’ll be on our way.”

The half-man pointed at Petty. “What’s *his* name?”

“Again, that’s Petty.”

“Petty, huh? You one ugly sonofabitch, Petty. I like you.”

Edison couldn’t hold back any more. “Listen, short-stack, why don’t you just...”

Two pistols whipped out in a blur and were cocked and pointed at the sheriff before he could draw a breath to finish the insult.

“Hahahahaha. Short-stack? Short-stack! That’s good. Hahahahahaha. Lay your shit on the deck. Slow.”

The three men did as they were told and laid their guns on the ground at their feet. “You want something done around here, you go through me. I got juice, understand? Juice. Slide this package on over. I’ll see he gets it. Guaranteed.”

“I apologize. Nora was very specific. Have to hand it directly to Junior Robinson.”

The half-man began to shake with rage. A vein was beginning to swell visibly on his forehead. A voice from the right startled all of them. “Curtis!

Goddammit, let them in!” The Berettas went back into their holsters much more slowly than they came out. A tall figure walked into the nearest building behind Curtis, closed the door behind him and flicked on a light, which bled profusely into the night through large gaps between the planks. “Fuck. Alright. Pick up your shit. Follow me.”

Curtis thump-dragged away and Stalker, Edison, and Petty holstered their weapons and followed, twitchy and unamused. Inside the building, a tall, broad figure of a man with his back to the door gazed into a glowing fireplace. He wore a dark pea coat with the collar turned up, his hands jammed deep into his pockets. The man spoke without turning around. His voice was deep and rasped like sandpaper on glass.

“You all must be freezing. You can take off that wet gear, hang it on the pegs behind you. Gun belts, too. You won't need them in here.”

Petty scanned the room. It was empty except for the guy at the fireplace. Spartan. Either a mess hall or a barracks or both. Hastily constructed with unmilled timber. Not a square angle in the place. The gaps in the walls could easily hide sniper barrels and they'd be impossible to see at night. All he could tell about the man from where they stood is that he was bald. And not afraid of having his back to three armed strangers. Petty nodded at Stalker and the sheriff and they hung up their sopping gear on the dowel pegs just inside the doorway. Including, with some reticence, their guns. Petty re-shouldered his knapsack -- it was an automatic habit -- and stood still while the coats and hats dripped thickly on the packed-dirt floor. “I suspect you're starving. When's the last time you had a hot meal?”

“Two days back, that was, ” Edison replied.

“Well. Can't have that. Curtis, fetch us some stew, would you. I'm a bit peckish myself.”

“Jesus H. Christ, Junior, it's the middle of the fuckin' night.”

“Then use some of that ‘juice’ I hear you talk so much about.” With that, Curtis thumped his way huffily back out into the gloom. He mumbled loud enough for the room as he swung the door open and slammed it behind him. “That’s fucked up, man. That ain’t right.”

“You’ll have to excuse my exuberant friend . The mine that blew off his legs also obliterated his sense of common courtesy.” Junior Robinson turned from the fire and gestured at a long, rough-hewn dining table surrounded by mis-matched chairs of every stripe. “Please. Sit.”

The men did as they were asked, and tried with some difficulty not to stare. Every exposed inch of Robinson was one huge burn scar, the skin of both hands and his entire head swirled with thick, marbled tissue. His face was a horror show. Little to no nose or ears remained. There were no brows, no lashes, no hair of any kind. When he spoke, missing lips occasionally revealed a row of perfect white teeth. He had surprisingly soulful eyes. If not for those, his overall look was that of a lurid, comic-book skull-villain. On the battlefield, Stalker, Petty, and Edison had all seen burn victims like Junior. Though not this bad, and none who’d managed to live.

Robinson sat at the head of the table and folded what was left of his hands in front of him calmly. His eyes flicked from man to man. He took a wheezy breath, then began an introduction he’d given a thousand times. “Let’s get the obvious out of the way. I was at San Onofre. I know you all know what that means -- yeah, I recognize vets when I see ‘em -- so I’ll spare you the history lesson. Suffice to say, even though it’d been offline for years, when the shelling hit the containment domes, all those sub-par steam pipes, well, they failed just like the politicians said they would. The enemy used incendiary rounds, so between the resulting fire and the radiation, everything for fifty miles north and south ended up beyond FUBAR. How did I survive? No clue. I was medi-vaced to Denver...which was the interim

Capitol for a hot minute. Eighteen months in a medical-induced coma, and voila...*it's alive!!*"

Petty's scar began to itch like a phantom. Between the reactor leak in San Diego and the nukes in Los Angeles, the first-wave bombings had made the south instantly uninhabitable. The offensive was the turning point in the war. The casualties, military and civilian, numbered in the tens of millions in the first day alone. Trapped between the water and the collapsed freeways, there was simply no place for people to escape the destruction. The intensity of the explosions had turned the sands of the surrounding desert landscape into a sea of milky glass.

"Anyway...long story short, I ended up here along with the rest of the flotsam and jetsam. So. You said something about a package?" Stalker rose and went to his dry-bag and retrieved the plain-paper-wrapped box. He set it wordlessly and respectfully in front of Robinson, who tore off the paper, unceremoniously revealing a simple, cardboard shoe box. He lifted the lid and set it off to the side. Nestled in excelsior like Fabergé eggs were three M67 grenades. He picked one up gently and admired it in the dim light, turning it this way and that.

"That Nora. She really knows the way to a man's heart, doesn't she? Thank you for this." Edison stared at the grenades, dumbfounded. "She's something, she is."

"So, package delivered," Robinson concluded. "Duty done. You three can bunk here tonight."

"All the same to you, Mr. Robinson, I believe my companions and I would just as soon get started out tonight. Long way to go yet. We've taken advantage of your forbearance too much as it is," Stalker nodded politely. At that moment, Curtis threw the door open and thumped his way in with a sickeningly pale and

thin young woman in tow who carried a small pot and a handful of tin plates and spoons.

No one saw Robinson pull the pin. The half-man froze and all eyes followed his gaze to Junior's ruined right hand which gripped the M67's spoon gently against the body of the grenade, in his left, the pull ring hung from his index finger.

Curtis stared. "What the fuck, boss..."

"Leave it and get out. Now."

The young woman, with shaking, palsied hands, put the stew and the cutlery on the table. The clunk made Curtis wince. Then they both hurried out, leaving the men in stunned silence. "Please. I insist. Stay. Eat." Petty slowly reached for a plate, never taking his eyes off Robinson's face, which had been rendered incapable of any expression. The others followed suit. Even in the face of the tension playing out, the stew smelled incredible.

"Good. That's good. Now. I've told you my story. It would be rude of you to not reciprocate. Why don't we start with what's inside that tube of yours?"

Petty spooned potatoes, brown sauce and some kind of meat onto his plate calmly.

"Nothin'."

"Nothing? Just like that Bushmaster on your horse. That's for nothing, too, I suppose? Honestly...I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name?"

"Didn't give it to you."

"No. No, you didn't. How about you tell me your name right *now* then, because I tell you, if your face still hurts as much as mine does, well, I'd just as soon frag us all right here, right now...it'd be a goddamned relief...rather than have you come into my refuge armed, bearing nasty *secrets* and refusing my *hospitality*!"

Robinson's grip tightened on the grenade a noticeable touch. If the safety lever was released there would be a four to five second delay. Too short a time for three seated men to make the door, much less get beyond the hundred-foot fatality radius. If it was a bluff, it was a good one.

"Petty. This is Stalker. This is Edison." Junior relaxed a little. "I hate to interrupt your meal, but I'm going to need to see what's in that tube so important you grip it like a canary in a hurricane."

Petty moved his hand toward the tube tied to the top of his pack.

"No, not *you*. You. Handsome. Stalker, is it? You do it." Stalker looked at Jerk. They'd all done the mental math. Petty just shrugged and kept chewing. Dalton untied the tube, peeled the waxed moleskin from the cap joint and unscrewed the top. What he pulled out looked, at first glance, like a simple roll of grayish-brown linen about two feet wide. Stalker began to unroll it across the dining table. Then, flipped it over. "Wheatfield with Crows," Junior said with a sense of awe.

"What?"

"Hahahahahaha. You have got to be kidding me. That's a goddamn, honest-to-christ Van Gogh. 'Wheatfield with Crows.' 1890. Some people believe this was his last painting before the suicide. I felt like killing myself many times looking at this."

Edison stared incredulously at Robinson's surprising pivot from suicide bomber to docent. "Due respect to the half a pound 'a Comp B you're still holding there...Say again, professor?"

Robinson eyed the sheriff sideways. "Balls. Ignorant, but you got balls. I was a security guard at LACMA for seven years before the war started. This exact canvas was hanging in the West Hall where I posted myself six nights a week for \$7.25 an hour. Midnight to 7am. The most pointless and boring of several pointless

and boring jobs I held down to pay the family bills. I got to hating the very sight of this thing.”

Petty shrugged. “We were skirmishing house to house on the Miracle Mile. Found it in a shipping container that was blown to hell. There were more. This was just the one on top.”

“You stole a priceless impressionist work...during a firefight?”

“We were pinned down for four hours. I *liberated* it off an M35 convoy later that night.”

Everyone stared at the painting. It was a beautiful double square canvas covered in Vincent Van Gogh’s signature brush strokes. Zinc Yellows and Van Dyck Browns for the wheat field, Cobalt and Ultramarine swirled in a sky filled with inky black crows and a Lead White moon. It was moody and mesmerizing this close up. It *felt* like a masterpiece.

“This is rare, I mean, even among Van Gogh’s. I know that, and all I know is what I read on the wall plaques to kill time night after night. I heard the Reds burned all the Western art at LA County.”

“Most of it, yeah. Smelled like hell. Didn’t get it all.”

“And you are riding through the Corridor with this strapped to your pack why, exactly? For the mystique of it all? You know jack shit about art obviously...so.”

Petty flicked his eyes at Edison. It was now his turn to shrug. “Tribute trade.”

“My god, for *what*?”

“My daughter. I think.”

“Your daughter. You *think*.”

Robinson looked at Edison who was clearly Petty's second. You could see the muscles of his hand squeezing and unsqueezing the grenade like a stress ball.

This story wasn't making sense. And that made Junior very nervous. Edison cleared his throat. “ My friend here used to go by the name of Sousa. The Sousas of the 100-acre massacre, it is. He thinks his daughter who were an infant at the time might have miraculously survived through some kind of divine intervention.”

“Pervert I had to kill in Woodlake a few months ago was drunk and popping off about how when he was working the Sections there was this eleven-year-old piece of ass, green eyes, reddish brown hair. He started in on what he thought every night about doing to her, real sick shit, and well, I stabbed him in the heart with a butterfly knife. ”

Stalker spoke tentatively. “Thing is, there's a lot of Sousas in the Valley, but my friend here is convinced she's his kin. They did name her Emmy when she was born.”

“It's her. I know it.”

“Hahaahaha. Well, if it is her, dammit if you don't got a trade that might just work. Only five people inside the Fence -- Mendoza, Cheney, Wright, Foster, and Phong -- would value this for what it is. So they could brag about it to each other. Then that bragging becomes urban legend in the fields about how rich and powerful the Barons are...*He's got a Van Gogh hanging in his dining room....*”

“That's the gist.”

“Nobody else would give you a bag of potatoes or a chicken for this. So *that's* why the Bushmaster on your horse. In case plan A -- assuming you make it that far, which I doubt -- doesn't pan out?”

“No,” replied Petty. “The painting, that ought to be enough. That’s the plan. Rifle’s insurance, is all. If she's my daughter, Corridor's not a great life, but it's better than working for *him*.”

“So let's say this trade of yours goes off. It won't, but let's say it does. What happens after? Live and let live? Once he puts the pieces together he'll hunt you

both down like mule deer in winter. You realize that. Wayfs get ahold of a story that the boss got what he has through genocide, that might put ideas in heads Mendoza don't want. He can't know you're alive. Or who she is. This peaceful path won't work out." Petty just stared into space.

"Manny Mendoza needs to *die*. You know that. I know that. We've got more in common than our scars. I assume he gave you yours..."

"His Indian did. So what?"

"He took your land. He took your family. Hell, he even took your name, didn't he? Look at you. You're wandering around playing UPS man under an alias. He did all that to me and mine. Time I healed up and got back, the Barons had the whole Valley locked up. I couldn't even get past the South Gate. My sister Nora, whom you've met, set up the trading post. My face wasn't helpful there. So I started this. An encampment for the extra-marginalized. Doll Town may seem to outsiders like a spooky, pathetic haven for the sick and feeble. But I'm telling you, everyone in here can ride, shoot, and fight. I've been laying in arms for years. Training people. I plan on taking a run at that fat sonofabitch. No one else will."

Stalker piped up. "Junior. I mean, what have you got here, two hundred people? It's a suicide mission. You'd be wiped out by the time you got to the derricks at Hobarts."

"I have a little plan with your uncle Elway. You have no idea? You haven't seen him?"

"We're headed that way."

"I got *eight* hundred. And zero fucks to give. We're not going to ring the doorbell. We have a solid tactical plan. If he's not killed himself his ass will be well-chapped for a long time. The other Barons will eat him up, which is as good as dead. I could use you. All of you. We could help you get your girl back."

Petty stood up and began carefully rolling the painting back into shape. Stalker and Edison began to pack up, too. "Appreciate the meal. And the entertainment. But I'm not your man."

"Petty..."

"You got your package. I wish you luck."

"Stalker? Edison? Talk some sense into your neo-pacifist friend here."

"We're about full-up on suicide missions, we are. Expect none of us want to see 'nuther'un, much less be in the ass-center. I get how ya feel, I do, but the Barons they're gonna eat your lunch, general. Feeble or no, too many guns, it is. It'd be fuckin' Gettysburg or Khe Sanh, or Shreveport."

"Maybe. You know I hear credible reports of radiation survivors with mutant abilities crossing the glass sands: 20/100 vision, extra sensitive hearing, overgrown hearts that give them strength and speed. They're coming. Doll Town will be the only place to accept them. How fitting to take down Mendoza with an army of mutants and misfits. My offer remains open."

"We ain't burn buddies. And you can put that pin back in. No, we'll make Springville by noon, and rest up. Only reason I told you my story's because of that grenade. Anyone comes at us between here and South Gate I'm going to assume it was you who talked. If that happens, you'll be the one losing sleep. We'll keep that offer in mind. Thank you for the stew."

The men reshouldered their packs and weapons and walked out into the gloom. Their horses were where they'd left them. The Granite Statue hadn't moved an inch. They remounted and headed out of the hollow at a trot, flashlights drawn. It had somehow gotten even darker, and the rain was still coming down in sheets. Only they weren't headed anywhere near Springville. Petty and Edison held up their end. This detour had cost them a day. They couldn't make it to Elway's

sticking to the Corridor now. Stalker promised to get them through the Fence and they were going to make a beeline across for Hollister.



Chapter 12

There's a path in the Eastern Corridor, scarcely a game trail, that meanders over five-and-a-half crooked miles choked with buckwheat and sawgrass, all bleached blonde with drought. It's twenty miles from the nearest former road in any direction. Rusted sections of dilapidated barbed wire fencing occasionally criss-cross the landscape with now pointless starts and stops. The path disappeared into a thick grouping of massive oak trees, many as old as a hundred years or more. Some had shed branches as big as six or seven feet in diameter. Even a mighty oak can't hold up its own weight after a time. Hidden from view on all sides in the natural center of this ring of monoliths, lies a smattering of corrugated tin and unmilled-lumber structures that looked as if they'd been thrown together by a strong wind. Shades of grey upon shades of grey in a sea of saffron-yellow. A giant albino hawk sits on an ancient aluminum windmill that lists noticeably with age. The hawk's pink eyes sparkle, as it has just used its beak to tear flesh from a large copperhead snake.

In full view of a tiny house, it is surrounded by a sea of detritus including car engines, old tires, machine parts, shattered computers, shattered flat screens, shattered windows, shattered *everything*, and spent shotgun shells, broken vodka bottles – *lots* of broken vodka bottles – dead water heaters, and unrecognizable hunks of wood, plastic and metal. On the north side of the structure, a tiny curl of woodsmoke trailed from a hundred-gallon propane tank that had been converted into a still with twists and curls of copper tubing. On a decrepit clothes line near the front porch, a pair of faded overalls and a checked, Pendleton shirt move slightly with the breeze. Spooked by the movement, a kit fox lopes nervously back and forth in the shade of an old Dutch barn just to the east. Inside the house, past wallpaper stained sepia by years of cigarette smoke, is the figure of an old man

reclined, feet up in a vinyl Lay-Z-Boy clad only in stained, white boxer shorts. This is exactly how the man will be found a few days hence.

Elway Sousa was dead.



Chapter 13

Matthias had spent more than fifteen minutes combing the buildings on 440N. Everyone seemed to have remembered seeing Emmy, but no one could say quite where. More importantly, *when*. The kid whose father had been shot -- Bryan, or Brydon or something -- was missing, too. The implications of that were not encouraging. The one place they hadn't looked was the bayou. The foreman said they played there on free days so it was a good bet that's where they'd gone this morning. The bayou was a good four hundred yards away, south of the houses and well off the paved road. A meandering canal that carved a path from the foothills to the delta and carried, most times of the year, natural run-off from the Eastern Sierras. It was lined on the edges year round with full-grown dogwood and ash and eucalyptus trees. For a snatch-and-eliminate job, this was the worst possible circumstance. Matthias had only one pickup and three men, a tactical disadvantage.

The targets had cover winding for miles in two directions, a full view of his approach, and if they spooked, a head start on terrain impassible by truck. They clearly would have seen the cotton harvester stunt, and as satisfying as it had been, Matthias had raised the anxiety level on the whole Section. The old Yokuts had made a rare error in not grabbing up Emmy first. Now he'd need to do both the brats. Only one still had a mother, a grieving mother, and his "disappearance" would raise a lot of questions. Eventually, there would be hell for him to pay one way or another, no getting out of that now. So Matthias did what he did best and focused on the present. Time to put one moccasin in front of the other, as his racially ignorant boss liked to say. He walked up to Silas and spoke in a serious but nonchalant tone. "How are you for transpo?"

“Quarter-ton pickup, don’t run it much. Couple of dirt bikes. Quads.”

“Horses?”

“Two, yeah. They ain’t Derby winners, but they’re decent, why?”

“Saddle one up for me. Now.”

There was no hesitation. While the foreman ran to fetch the mount, Matthias quietly got his men back into their truck and told them to stay there. Then he went into the toolbox in the bed and pulled out something roughly the size of a yardstick wrapped in soft deerskin. He undid the rawhide ties with a certain amount of ceremony, and pulled out a machete. It had belonged to his grandfather. Polished and gleaming, with an ox-bone handle carved with Native-American runes, Matthias rarely touched the weapon. But it would be highly effective for a horseback job.

On the reservation, the elders had used to tell him and the other boys horror stories about scalping whites with weapons like this one. They were lies, of course. The tribe had ceded their ground to worthless treaties and ruthless railroad expansion by the mid-1880’s. Still, there *was* something powerful about this particular piece of steel. And Matthias kept it well-oiled and sharp. Silas walked up with a slightly sway-backed chestnut about fourteen-hands high. The saddle seat and seat jockey had an almost mirror shine from years of wear, and the rest of the tack was cracking with age, but it would do. If the Sousa girl was still there, a lone old man, walking up slowly on a horse was the least-threatening way to approach. Multiple men on dirt bikes or quads would just create noise and confusion and likely make the quarry go to ground. Matthias mounted with an ease that belied his age, and draped the horse-hair leash of the machete around the saddle horn, letting it hang down and pinning it between his jeans and the fender. He clucked to the horse and they started off toward the trees in the distance.

Emmy had had good instincts about running. And a lucky instinct about the direction she chose. She and Brydon had had a twenty minute head start and were flying east as fast as their aching legs could take them. The sheer banks of the bayou ran about ten feet deep to the sandy bottom where there was still a foot of water running in a serpentine trickle. That meant two small people on foot could move through the water without leaving a trail. There were plenty of places for cover in the tall dirt banks, thick bunches of bulrush and honey mesquite. But Emmy just ran. Brydon did his best to keep up.

Matthias urged his pony down the soft bayou bank at an angle and came to rest on the sandy bottom. From where he sat the canal curved away in both directions. No sightline. He sat serenely on his horse, closed his eyes and listened. Wind through the eucalyptus, the whisper of the water over gravel, mourning doves chirping their flights overhead. Then, a rattle of brush to the right. He clucked at his chestnut and turned her west. He began to pull at the loop on the saddle horn in order to get a good grip on the machete. Then he announced, as pleasantly as he knew how, “Emmy Sousa?”

The dire wolf flew out of the tules like a blur. In seconds, the massive jaws of the wolf were clamped on the underside of the horse’s neck, crushing its windpipe. As weight of the massive predator flipped the dying animal down on its side, Matthias’s leg got caught underneath and even over the horse’s screaming, he could hear it snap. The fear of death quickly overcame the pain of his shattered tibia, and the old man slowly drug himself out from under the macabre scene while the predator was distracted. Dire wolves were notoriously single-minded during a kill, but Matthias knew his window wouldn't last long. He shakily reached into his jacket for his .38 and aimed blindly at the combined mass of animal in front of him. He fired off a shot. Dirt exploded on the far bank. The dire wolf, only the tiniest bit smaller than the horse, raised his blood-covered snout and looked at

Matthias with yellow eyes as if to dare him to do it again. Matthias fired a second shot. He couldn't see where it lodged. The wolf seemed to waver for a second, then loped away upstream, and out of sight. He could hear the dirt bikes at the compound starting up. He lay there as the adrenaline thinned, and did a mental check. The leg was bad. There were two broken ribs at least, and he'd hit his head on something on the way down, and was bleeding. It's no wonder the kids never made a move to come out of the bayou when all the harvester commotion was going on. They'd probably been long dead by then. Against an aggressive lone male, they wouldn't have stood any more of a chance than the poor horse had. The mare was still gasping for air, its eyes rolled back in its head. Matthias limped over and laid his hand on the animal's forehead.

“Shh shh shh. A-ye-ga-li. A-ye-ga-li.”

The sound of his native tongue seemed to sooth things. With his free hand he leveled his pistol at the temple and put the horse down. His men started scrambling down the bank, weapons drawn. Matthias must have looked pretty awful because they immediately turned into mother hens. They field-dressed a decent splint on his leg, tension-wrapped his ribs and bandaged up his head. They started helping him up. He made sure someone retrieved his machete. The men half-dragged, half-carried him up to the top where Silas waited, a horrified look on his face.

“I owe you a quarter horse,” was all Matthias could say.



Chapter 14

It had been a few hours and no pursuit, though they'd heard gun shots far in the distance. Emmy and Brydon stopped to drink. Emmy looked around and started foraging. She pulled what looked like a weed and shoved it at Brydon. "Minor's lettuce. Eat it." Emmy dug around in the root base of a tall eucalyptus tree and pulled out two single-leaf onions. She handed one to Brydon. "Eat."

Brydon hung his head and looked like he was going to start crying.

"Eat! That was the Baron's man. I seen him before. He was sent to kill us. I *know* it." Emmy was close to tears now herself. "If it hadn't been him, it would have been one of the Blackwaters, 'cause of what we did. What happened to your dad today was *our* fault, Brydon."

He gave her a blank look. "We're going east. See the way the sun's falling? That means we'll probably get to the Fence by night. Getting past that is how we live." Emmy took a juicy bite of her onion and grimaced. "We need fuel in the tank."

"But, but my *mom*. We need to go back."

"Can't. She'll still be there. We need to make it to the Fence alive. We'll go back for her. Soon, I hope. Okay? Not today. But soon."

Brydon bit off a piece of onion and wrapped it in the lettuce and ate it. The combination of fear and bitterness made it hard to swallow. But he got it down. They each took long drinks from the running water at their feet. Then they started off again at a fast walk. An hour later they took a chance and wandered up out of the protection of the banks to pick up walnuts in a walnut grove. They ate them with some wild blackberry fruit that wasn't quite ripe enough but it gave them the energy to keep moving. Twice, they had to stop at barred-up and locked culverts and scramble up and over a county road and back down into the bayou. Emmy

would peek her head up from time to time to mark their progress. The sun was an hour or so from setting by her guess and she could just make out the Fence in the distance.

She scrambled back down the bank and grabbed Brydon by the shoulders. “I told you! We’re nearly there!” They started to laugh as they swelled with relief. Then a sound from behind made them freeze. It sounded like a horse and rider galloping through the water. Emmy grabbed Brydon’s shirt to pull him up to the top of the bank. He was fixed on hiding behind an old standpipe obscured by bulrushes. Emmy let him go and headed up. She put her back against a dogwood and peeked into the bayou. The dire wolf that rounded the corner was the biggest animal she’d ever seen.

“Brydon. Don’t move.” The wolf looked up at where Emmy’s voice had come from, and Brydon made a break for it. He didn’t get far. In two strides the wolf was on him. It grabbed the boy by the throat and shook him violently, breaking his neck.

“Noooooooo!!!”

The wolf kept his huge paw on the dead boy’s chest until it was satisfied the prey wasn’t going anywhere. Emmy bolted toward the Fence, weaving between trees. The wolf tore after her. It wasn’t good at tight turns but it was gaining on Emmy, she could smell it, fetid and rank. Then suddenly, she heard the *whump* of the huge body dropping to the ground behind her. A split second later she heard a rifle report. She fell to her knees, overwhelmed, and started crying and vomiting at the same time as she clawed her way back into the bayou on her stomach. At the bottom, she just laid there in the fetal position rocking, until she heard male voices approaching. She crawled as quietly as she could on hands and knees the last five hundred feet east, where she found a large aluminum culvert. She crawled to the

center of that, shaking from cold, adrenaline, and shock and sat there until well after dusk.

She had fallen into a fitful half-sleep when she was awakened by the sound of a large engine starting up. Emmy scrambled the rest of the way through the culvert and up the bank on the east side. She ran onto the road as a bus rolled toward her, the headlights blinding. She put up her hands and waved. The air brakes of the bus engaged. It idled for a minute, then a tall figure stepped out the door and approached Emmy. When she saw it was a woman, Emmy burst into tears and grabbed on to Katy with all her might.

“Well, what the fuck do we have here? Okay, okay, little duckling. I got you.” Katy scooped the girl up in her arms and boarded the Pussy Wagon. The driver put it in gear and drove into the night.



Chapter 15

The Pussy Wagon was attempting to cross into the Valley interior at Springville. Normally, Katy would work the Corridor all the way down to South Gate and go straight up the gut from New Baker to Fresno. But the Tribute meeting was in a few days and Southgate would already be overflowing with idiots trying to curry favors from the Barons. Then there would be a whole crowd of people there just to rob the idiots. And delusional vigilantes to take down the robbers. The raw numbers were enticing, but the danger would be too arbitrary to steer around. What she'd make in volume she'd have to spend on security. And if push came to shove -- which it always did -- and somebody had to die, well, no one thought twice about a dead whore.

The Springville crossing normally would have taken a matter of minutes. A small bribe of opium and a round of free blowjobs, usually. But today something was up. Weather in the foothills wasn't helping things. The first rain in ages had turned the golden landscape, thickly dusted by summer pollen and windblown silt, into a snot-like crust of mud. It all depended on where you stepped. And keeping a double-length bus from running off Route 137 was turning out to be a feat in and of itself. The soft shoulder was not a place a mobile madame wanted to find herself on the best of New California days. And today was definitely not one of those.

A full roadblock was in effect. In truth, a handful of men could have run the blockade. The foothills, impassible on all sides to vehicles of any size, created a natural funnel point. That, and the double layers of concertina wire that made up the Fence here, forced all Valley-bound travel through a twenty-one foot gap. From gatepost to gatepost, was an eight-foot-wide cattle guard made of rusted lengths of thin-gauge Central-Pacific rail set four inches apart, so riders on mounts could only pass single-file on a removable sheet of plywood. Two good gunmen

could take care of anything else. But today, there was a swarm. Danny Durant, a hard-case Mendoza lieutenant, and one of Katy's regulars, ran point. He came up to the bus's open double doors where Katy waited impatiently.

"Danny. What happened? You guys lose a contact lens or something?"

"Gonna have to search you today, Katy."

"Strip search?"

"Katy..."

"Unless you're *searching* for the finest pussy in the territory, Danny, you aren't getting on. You or anyone else. This is a sovereign enterprise. Your boss knows that."

Durant lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper, "We got a runner. Eleven-year-old girl. If you picked 'er up or even seen 'er, Katy, you best tell me right..."

Matthias appeared limping from around the front of the bus, a sawed-off Browning hanging from his right hand. His left was wrapped around the handle of a dinged-up aluminum crutch shoved rudely into his arm pit. The enforcer's right leg was field dressed tightly with a jerry-rigged splint, and even through his filthy black Wranglers Katy could see it was horribly swollen. His face, usually the color of burnt caramel, was now an ashen grey. "Move."

"Give me one minute. Make sure everyone is decent."

The old Yokuts just stared. "If you're runner's in there, I ain't going to be able to stash her between someone's titties in the next minute. Let me get the girls dressed. You don't strike me as a T&A man anyway."

Matthias nodded imperceptibly. Katy shut the hydraulic doors. Several armed men circled around the Pussy Wagon just to be safe. But in one minute, she was back. And the doors hissed open again. "Mi casa es su casa."

Durant and two other men began to board. As they brushed past Katy, who leaned in the doorway casually filling her pipe, she said under her breath, "You

muss one hair, or break one thing, I swear I'll have you swinging at the end of Mendoza's own rope by nightfall. See if I don't."

The interior was more spacious than it looked from the outside. A single aisle ran straight down the center with rows of pleasure suites on either side. It was cozy and musty with the smells of perfume, recent sex, and bleach. Katy's whores stood in the aisle outside their rooms. There were twenty five to thirty girls and a few young men. Hair was tousled and most were still half asleep. Durant and his men made quick work of going room to room. Each was about ten feet by eight feet. There was barely enough room for a bed and a small shelf of personal items. The mattresses were on built-in platforms screwed to the floor. Nothing could go underneath. Clothes and suitcases were stuffed into the small overhead row along each side. No one could hide above. There was a small bathroom toward the back. Empty. And a kitchenette at the very rear of the bus. Also empty. Durant checked the oven interior anyway. No luck. It was an ingenious whorehouse, but a haven for stowaways it clearly was not.

After about twenty minutes of inspection, the men were satisfied and started back to the front. Danny tweaked the breast of his usual girl Rosemary on his way out. His grimy hand left a smudge on her white linen sleeping shirt. No one was surprised, least of all Rosemary, though Durant's goons seemed to get a kick out of it. Katy blew smoke in their faces as they stepped back out onto the highway.

"She's clean. Barely enough room to pull your cock out in there, much less hide a little girl." Matthias stared at Katy looking for some kind of tell.

"He's mostly right. Danny, I've noticed, though, can whip his tiny pecker out with room to spare. But I ain't got your runner. I trust this breach of protocol is anathema. I won't tolerate it a second time. I'll be mentioning this little stunt to Manny when we get out Hanford way." With that Katy closed the doors, and Danny waved her through.

A few miles into the interior, they pulled off at a lookout point. Katy grabbed the ring on the floorboard, the one she'd stood on during the whole inspection, and opened a compartment underneath. She helped Emmy Sousa out of the cramped space, occasionally used for concealing contraband of the non-human variety, and offered her a glass of water. The madame walked Emmy toward the middle of the bus and sat her down on an empty bed. The harem, now wide awake, pushed in close enough to hear, but not so close as to appear to be eavesdropping on their boss which they knew irritated her profusely.

"You want to explain that to me?" Katy's tone was sharp, and Emmy was physically and emotionally frayed near to breaking from the last forty-eight hours. Big tears immediately began to form.

"Explain?"

"Matthias Blackfeather is looking for you. *You*. Which means every swinging dick in this Barony is looking for you. Why? Tell me the truth, little duck, or we can set you back on the road right here and now. I can't hide you in the floorboard forever."

"I d-d-don't know."

"I see. Uh huh. Well, then we have nothing more to..."

"I DON'T KNOW!!!" The primal scream surprised Emmy. The wave of fear, horror and confusion that had been swelling in her for days bloomed into anger and exploded at the thought of being abandoned to a fate she didn't create or even understand. The Pussy Wagon went stonily silent. Even the whores who'd been with Katy from the beginning had never seen her screamed at like that. Not once. Katy stared flatly. Tears now flowed freely and uncontrollably down Emmy's reddening cheeks.

"Shit. I believe you." Katy McClure was a control freak. She was a control *master*. She could not tolerate the tail of circumstance wagging the dog of her life.

For the first time in a very long time she was conflicted about what move to make next. If any one of her whores had dared to put a target on her back like this, she'd be kicked off before the wheels stopped rolling and abandoned to fate. The way Katy saw it, the people in her employ, while family of a sort, lived by her grace. There was an unwritten but clear understanding that anyone who broke the rules not only wasted the opportunity Katy provided but endangered the Wagon and everyone else on it. There was a code. But Emmy was a child. She was innocent. And the code didn't reconcile that.

Katy needed to think. She stepped off the orange behemoth that was her world and looked out over the expanse to the west. From atop drought-brown foothills, the Valley looked like a verdant dream. An impossible picture painted from Steinbeck mythology. Pillows of green upon pillows of green folding in on each other all the way to the coastal range 150 miles away. There was an inversion over the Valley today. Rain from yesterday appeared as a ghostly white mist marking the bottom of where the cold air was trying to get to the hot air underneath. In a few months, that mist would become the famous Tule Fog where people wouldn't be able to see two feet in front of them all day.

Skinny walked up, trying not to disturb his boss, but watching her back just the same. There were three men she'd known in her life besides her father whom Katy trusted. Skinny was one of them. "Skinny. You make anything out of this?"

"Rumor is all. Old one."

"Tell me."

"I know a guy was supposedly there the night Mendoza hit that dairy."

"The massacre?"

"Says there was an infant survived. It's just a rumor, Katy. The order was 'no survivors.'"

"She'd be the right age, though."

“That’s a big stretch.”

“Mendoza’s right-hand handling point on a runner hunt. Apparently on one bad leg. You ever see anything like that before?”

“No. No, I ain’t.”

“If she’s one of the Tulare Sousas, the old man couldn’t know she’s still alive. Things would go very *very* bad for him if the truth came out now. Which means we’ve lucked into some leverage.”

Katy and Skinny ducked back into the Pussy Wagon. Emmy was being comforted by some of the girls. She looked sleepy. Katy knelt and got eye level with Emmy. “Let me ask you something, little duck.”

“Alright.”

“Where’d you grow up?”

“Section 404 North.”

“That’s where you worked. Honey, where were you born?”

“Section 404?”

“You don’t remember any place before that?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Okay. Okay. You sleep now.” Katy looked at Skinny. He rubbed the stubble on both of his chins. Emmy, overcome, curled up and dropped into sleep like a stone. The madame and her top lieutenant walked to the front of the bus. The cloud cover was breaking, and crisp sunshine was shooting through pollutant-free sky, making the Wagon uncomfortably warm. “I’ll tell you one thing. No man is going to put that little girl through any more shit. Not one iota more. We’ll keep her tucked tight. Have her help with the washing at night. Give her little indoor chores during the day. We’ll keep making our stops, keep her away from Mendoza’s payroll, and see what we see. Skinny, that Indian is not someone to be fucked with. Extra goddamn vigilant, hear?”

Skinny nodded gravely. Katy raised her voice loud enough to be heard all the way to the back. “Okay, ladies! That’s enough down time! When we get to Oakdale I expect you will all be too busy to swallow twice.” The driver cranked up the engines and the Pussy Wagon roared to life. Emmy slept for the next twelve hours. With no dreams.



Chapter 16

Matthias reveled in the lightning strikes of pain coming from the nerves in his shattered right leg. The leg was most assuredly making progress harder, but he was glad to be *feeling* anything. He was headed west on Route 198, a pothole-ridden stretch of two lane that ran out of Coalinga to the 101. His leg was so swollen, he'd cut vents in his jeans with a buck knife to relieve the pressure. The '98 Chevy's suspension had seen better days and every bump and crevice he hit went through the worn springs of the bench seat and straight down his ruined leg. There was a vial of good opium in the ashtray, but he let it be. He needed to focus. He needed to feel the pain. It was glorious. Since he'd been with Manny they'd done so many things. Brutal things. Unconscionable things. He'd gone numb to it all years ago. A little pain -- serious pain -- was a godsend.

The kid on 440 had apparently vanished into thin air. Probably eaten by the dire-wolf that had taken down his horse. The small tracks leading away from the wolf, nearly ruined by the tracks left by local militia, told another story. It wasn't one Matthias wanted to hear. And one Manny would most definitely not want to hear. So he ignored it. A pothole hidden by years of leaves and dust sent a shock of new pain that almost forced the old Yokuts off the road. The night of the massacre, when he found a baby crying in her carrier under a piece of corrugated tin, he decided he was simply going to choke the life out of her right there and then. Crush her windpipe and be done with it.

What temporary insanity had possessed him to let the infant live? Whatever it was, it was long over now. He'd placed her on 440N with a decent hodgepodge family. Didn't think it through. Didn't think he had to at the time. He just put her on their doorstep, knocked, and walked off. That night, he was so tired, so covered in blood, so shrouded in death, he just couldn't extinguish another life. The

Matriarch at 440N called the child by the name daintily cross-stitched on the tiny pillow under her head: Emmy Sousa. Eleven years later, Matthias's oversight was biting him in the ass. He never told Mendoza, obviously. It's the only secret he hid from his friend and Baron to this day. It would end his employment at a minimum. Probably his life, if he didn't find her. Manny was cruel and that was something Matthias could relate to.

But Manny was also paranoid, and getting more so by the day, his head fogged by Phong's opium. If he knew there was a survivor from that night, he'd spend half his anger plus substantial money and time looking over his shoulder for the bogeyman of revenge. He wouldn't be able to *focus*. And that would be bad for everyone. Since he consolidated the Valley, Manny had killed hundreds of innocents in the interest of keeping a hold on his power. He didn't worry about repercussions because he saw it as his *job*.

The Sousa massacre was personal. It was his first taste of organized murder. It had lacked any sense of political artistry. It had been blunt and overwrought. Mendoza mostly did it because he could. Which is why he'd told Matthias to leave no survivors. None. As open as people had been to the comfort of organized autocracy, Manny had taken a crazy risk with his public mandate. Of course, he lied about it. Told people the Sousas were in support of his plan. When asked about where they were, he just threw up his hands and said they must've moved to the Corridor, what with all the kin they had in Bishop and Lone Pine. People bought it. It was an emotional error he would never repeat, and the reason he'd elevated an Indian to be in charge of operations.

Matthias simply couldn't go home without this base permanently covered. He showed up on and off usually. But in twenty-four hours his presence would be missed. His instinct was directing him toward a long shot. But that was the best he had at the moment. If the girl had survived, and if she'd made it outside the Fence,

and if she told her story to the right people, and if they believed her, she'd be headed to Elway's. There would be no other parley available.

So Matthias winced and gunned his Chevy onto highway 25 toward Hollister. Matthias and a few dwindling elderly knew Elway Sousa had a place in the Eastern Corridor. Matthias never pursued the infamous prize money on Elway's head. Nor did he ever put anyone on to it. The two had served in the same unit taking back Phước Long Province in '74. The Big Red One. *That* was a bond even a professional enforcer for the most powerful boss alive would not betray. Elway. Once the baddest-assed of bad-asses, mercury-slick and lethal within any range, was constantly drunk off his ass now. So Matthias would pour him another cup of whatever he was having. And wait for red riding hood to come along. If she did or didn't, bad things would happen either way. Natives he knew would question this epic loyalty and devotion to the White Man.

They were looking at it all wrong. Earth was not a contest of one side versus another. That was thinking in checkers. Red against black. Offensive move against offensive move, until attrition settles everything. Matthias saw the world as chess. No matter what side you were on, sacrifice and loss were valuable. His heritage, his race, his identity -- these were immaterial to him so long as he was valuable to the game. There was no right or wrong. He lived to protect his King. There was no point otherwise. Matthias reached under his seat with his free hand and popped a cassette of the least native music he could think of into the tape deck -- a move Manny never allowed in the pickup -- and the Rolling Stones pumped tinnily through the mono speaker in the front dash. *Please allow me to introduce myself, I'm a man of wealth and taste.* The pain eased. Just a little.



Chapter 17

A Baronial business meeting was in progress. They were held on the last Friday of every month. Technically, there was no neutral territory inside the Fence. No buffer zones. So it was agreed that when Baronial sit-downs needed to take place, they happened on a moving train. The Central Pacific line had a six-foot easement through the four main territories. It was immune to home-field advantage and, because asphalt frontage roads were mostly rubble now, the railroad was virtually unassailable by either horseback or vehicle. The agenda always concluded in exactly eight hours and fifty eight minutes...the time it took to go from New Baker to Stockton and back. So long as the Sygnet engine was moving, a fragile peace existed among the powers of New California.

George Dean Foster, the railroad Baron, provided his personal gaming car for these occasions, less out of a sense of cooperation or fraternity than as a chance to flaunt his personal wealth and acquisitions. George was about Manny's age but fit and adorned in the latest fashion that could be found. He kept his white beard trim and neat. The fifty-foot Mark III coach had been lavishly customized, its walls lined with hand-polished, burlled-walnut panels. Between bullet-proof windows rimmed with cast brass moldings hung two renaissance tapestries featuring Saint George slaying his dragon. Etched Tiffany-glass pendant lights hung from the ceiling.

In lieu of seats, there were plush leather couches and vintage settees. Amazingly, despite the rare plants potted in 17th-century porcelain, and the whiskey bar stocked with priceless single-malt whiskeys, the coach did not rattle, clink, or creak. Not a single whisper. Just the white-noise hum of the exquisite air-conditioning and the *ca-clack, ca-clack* of steel wheels on steel rail. Around an

antique felt poker table originally used at the No.10 Saloon in Deadwood, South Dakota (or so Foster claimed) sat the five richest men alive.

“Call.”

Manny Mendoza hated poker. He despised trains. He equally despised being in an enclosed space with these other men. He believed whole-heartedly that he was better than any of them. Above them all in the natural order of things. But, though he hated himself for it, every year, he relished this particular parley. The Tribute meeting.

“Bump it a thousand.”

In the Fall, Barons and their lieutenants gathered at Southgate to consider public requests from citizens outside the Fence. The Barons struck deals. Trades were made. A few asks were even granted. Most pleas involved clemency that would allow a Corridor dweller to reunite with family inside. Or a release from inside allowing to be with family outside.

“Fold.”

Only twice since the practice began were condemned men pardoned. Every year there were several spectacular public executions. Each Baron expected to be handsomely compensated for any favor granted. Usually that meant some kind of upgrade in human capital or weaponry. Occasionally they were swayed by the acquisition of rare objects that padded their egos and their personal collections. Thus, the opulent interior of the train car the men found themselves in now.

Manny reviewed his hole cards, a suited king and queen. “Call.”

The Tribute was part ancient Rome, part medieval England, and part Third Reich. Everyone who participated knew it. But then the specter of hope turned the gathering into something bordering on dangerously festive. It was a strategic risk the Barons had to take. Be too benign and the crowd of thousands get delusions of grandeur. Too draconian, and they riot with hopeless rage. Mendoza, Cheney,

Wright, and Foster had to be on the same page. They were getting closer with every *ca clack, ca clack*. At the poker table, Phong made an amateur move of pushing a messy pile of coin into the center of the felt. “I’m all in,” he declared.

“Mr. Phong you haven’t seen the flop yet.”

“Yet, I’m still all in.” Phong was invited on these trips because, while not a Baron, Phong controlled the drug trade. Phong could make things happen. All the Barons were hooked on unlimited supplies of his opium, most of all Mendoza. Phong was anathema in this company. The spookiest character anyone had ever met, which helped his case for blindly pushing a pile of American Gold Eagles into the center of the table. No one really wanted to cross him. He sat nattily dressed in all black from his tie bar to his pocket square. He did not remove his ever-present black bowler when he sat down at the table.

There were several others in the coach: personal security, assistants, lieutenants who politely turned their heads to roll their eyes at Phong’s bet. Hai’s entourage, two beautiful Vietnamese girls he travelled with, smirked dull smirks. They were either his personal toys out of their minds on opium, or extremely relaxed, deadly killers. No one could know for sure.

“Pot’s at eleven thousand. You’re a bit short,” Foster pointed out.

“I’ll make it good if anyone goes in and I lose,” Phong countered.

Mendoza couldn’t take any more so he shouted, “I fuckin’ call then!” Everyone else elected to fold. Manny turned over his king and queen of spades. Phong turned over a pair of aces. The flop was the ace of spades, king of diamonds, and queen of hearts. Phong grinned broadly. The Turn was the 5 of spades. It was Manny’s two pair losing to Phong’s bullet trips. But then came the River card. The 9 of spades. Mendoza’s flush took the pot. All eyes turned to Phong. He spoke impeccable English in a deep baritone and prided himself on having plowed through and memorized most of the Encyclopedia Britannica.

“You know, humans in extreme conditions can suffer what’s known as Acute Stress Disorder. When a life is threatened, catecholamine hormones facilitate immediate physical reactions through increases in heart rate and breathing and constricting blood vessels. There can be a mix of epinephrin and adrenaline that some theorize causes the brain to black out.” Phong then stood up and walked toward the middle of the car, his girls on either side.

“Some think unexpectedly falling from a plane, for instance would be a good way to go, as you would simply pass out before you hit the ground. Though it’s never been proven.” Before anyone could move, and to the shock of everyone present, Phong opened the double door and bodily tossed out the girl on his right at eighty miles an hour. He closed the door and walked back to the table and sat down. “Because no one’s ever lived to talk about it. Hahahaha. Anyway Miss Lin was worth two thousand easily. I trust her loss makes our pot even?”

“No, Mr. Phong, don’t work exactly that way,” Mendoza said. “You’re two thousand more in the hole, but let’s just say the pot is good before anyone else gets kilt. George, maybe we could dispense with the fuckin’ pleasantries and get to business before my luck runs out?”

“Yeah. I think you’re right.” Over the next few hours there were discussions ranging from Doug Wright’s need to replace two plant engineers, one of whom was asked for by Tribute and one he intended to hang for rerouting and selling water on the black market. Mendoza offered up an engineer he knew was shucking corn near Corcoran in exchange for two days of power to the lower Valley grid. Dan Cheney put up an engineer but wanted to replace him with two roustabouts who could run platform rigs in Oildale, which Foster agreed he had on a spur maintenance crew, but wanted fifty barrels of diesel from Cheney at eighty percent cost. And around and around it went. It was a Sesame Street version of Wall Street.

In the end, Cheney was considering one Tribute and would be executing two men for being drunk at one of his refinery IFR tanks. Wright was one Tribute, one execution. Foster was considering three Tribute offers for some kind of personal rarities he was refusing to disclose. No executions. Phong had two unofficial Tribute applications to bring Vietnamese workers in. He never let anyone out of Poppyland. Ever. Plus he had already bartered several security personnel to Foster for trafficking dope, tariff-free, to Stockton. Phong's executions, as on every Tribute Day, would be a game-day decision. As he'd just confirmed, the man had a macabre flair for the dramatic. Manny had just put in dip dosed with Phong's personal opium. He was lightheaded when his part of the final settle-up came around.

Wright, who looked like a ferret and drank like a fish, yelled from the whiskey cart, "What about you, Manny?"

"Aww, hell, Doug, you know I hate this shit. I got one Tribute request."

"Well, don't leave us all in suspense, Mendoza. Request for what?"

"Some orphan girl outside Tulare. Damnedest fucking thing. My Indian is snatching her up now. I just hope he can find her."

"Random for you, isn't it? What are they offering? Solid-gold swimming pool?"

Manny Mendoza didn't like being criticized. He knew these meetings were delicate. Mostly, they were held to give the Barons a chance to keep an eye on each other. He knew he should have let this go. But he was on a roll. "Since when do I need to check with you fuckin' hens about *anything* I do? This is a *democracy* now?"

"Manny..."

"Well, I don't know which one of you ladies is keepin' the fuckin' minutes these days, but write this down. Girl's last name is Sousa. I figure Elway for the

guy who applied. Or some proxy thereof. If someone shows, I execute him and keep the girl. That alright with you? Or would you like to pinkie-swear on it?"

Cheney stopped counting his Gold American Eagles and looked up.

"Elway's still alive?"

"Well, I ain't killed him m'self, Danny. If he's dead, I'd know it. Don't have any idea where the kooky bastard is."

"Well, even if that were true," Wright interrupted, "he'd never be able to pay what you'd be asking. Son of a bitch has been drinking every penny he ever made since he was a teenager."

"Hollister." All eyes turned to Phong who sat, hands folded, smiling his weird smile.

"What?"

"I saw him in Hollister. White man, white hair, tattooed, hunched over with a stick. A drunkard? Called me a 'dirty gook?'"

"Pffft, that could be anybody."

"I've seen this filthy man several times in town. He begs for free product in the street. I had several of his ribs broken, of course. He screamed -- pardon me -- 'Tell Mendoza Elway says fuck off' during that beating. I took no note of it, as that was not the first or last time I have heard similar reactions, begging your pardon. I gave him the opium anyway for his pain. Which was probably severe."

The green and gray of Dinuba whizzed by in a blur as the train car went silent. Every last man in the room but Phong had gotten their seats of power by following Mendoza's lead as he consolidated the Valley. They were his followers once. And they were all complicit in the Sousa massacre in one way or another. By lending men, guns, or just turning a blind eye. Elway coming at Mendoza, if that indeed is what was at play, would mean Elway coming at all of them.

The train car was now like a post-modern painting of the last supper. People leaning worriedly. Whispers being passed. It was one thing to be the messiah who fucked with Rome and could rise from the dead. Quite another to be a flesh and blood apostle with everything to lose. Wright spoke up. "Okay, maybe. *Maybe* Elway's drinking himself to death in Hollister or wherever. He couldn't make the trip to New Baker. What would he be now, eighty? Plus why would he show *now*? It won't be him. It'll probably be some random old dirtbag in the Corridor looking for a young gal to rub his feet and help him hunt squirrels."

"The Sousas *all* died," Cheney mumbled. "Everyone knows that, Manny. Unless you're not telling us something."

"Shit, Danny, I know you're not calling me a *liar*." Manny leveled a decimating stare at Cheney, who swallowed roughly, then looked away, shaking his head with a thin smile frozen on his lips. "Elway is the last one. Probably couldn't lift his cock out of his underpants to take a piss now, much less level an assault rifle at any of you royal lords. Wipe the worry off those ugly faces. Look, you fuckin' asked me, so I'm telling you. One tribute consideration. And a surprise execution if some Sousa lunatic turns up, okay?"

"Okay. So we are aligned then."

"Time for one more hand."

"Gentlemen, just one more agenda item," Phong intoned gravely. The train was passing Pond Road in Delano at a good clip. There was half an hour left, forty minutes tops. "I would like to be made a full Baron." And there it was. The moment Mendoza had known would be coming, Phong begging for a title he didn't earn. It galled him every time.

"Mr. Phong. We've talked about this a thousand times. The four Barons are fuckin' equals here. I grow all the food, but I can't do that, as Cheney will tell you, without his fuel. He can't feed his rig workers without me, which Mr. Wright will

tell you is impossible without his hydro for irrigation and power, and nothing gets out of this Valley without Foster's train we're on, and *that* runs on Cheney's diesel ... and around and around we go. Mutually, fuckin,' indispensable. Understand?"

"So, you are saying, Mr. Mendoza that I am *not*...indispensable."

"What I'm saying is opium keeps the wayfs calm, and the roughriders from fighting on Friday nights, but it just don't hold any sway on our general system here, economy-wise. Not to the fucking scale that you'd be a full Baron, same as *us*," Manny said, as he waved at his three fellow autocrats, expertly including them in the argument without allowing them to speak. "You're a dope pusher. A drug dealer. We've come to the fucking unspoken agreement that we don't ask, you don't tell. You don't kick up tax, that's fine. You only secure your part of the Fence. Never a yard more. Fine. Plus you do all that black magic oriental shit in secret. No one knows how you run your racket and we're all too spooked to dig into it. *Fine*."

"You use my product, do you not, Mr. Mendoza?"

"I do. Like everything else in life I want the best. But I would never in my fucking life be high enough on it so's I'd think it okay to throw a woman off a moving train to pay a poker debt. We need stable partners. You just ain't it. No matter how good your English gets."

Phong leaned over the table to fix Mendoza's eyes, "I *am* indispensable."

"You grow flowers. I could grow fucking flowers."

"Ahhh, clever. But could you defend them? I recall just weeks ago my men had to drag a runner of yours off my property. If you are so indispensable, tell me, how can you not manage to secure a corn field?"

"That gentleman was dealt with. It ain't none of your business how I defend *shit*, and you, friend, are way out of line with your tone. You best start picking your rocks carefully from here on out. You're in the middle of the stream now,"

Manny said between clenched teeth. “You exist because I allow you to exist, simple as that.”

“Is that so?”

“Yup, it is. You can stick that in your hooka pipe and smoke it.”

“I would like to be made a full Baron as was discussed before.”

“Hahahahahahaha. Mr. Phong, I like you. I do. Persistence is what made you people such a powerful adversary. Okay, you want to do this Mekong Delta style, we can dispense with the friendly debate-team shit...”

“Manny...”

“Shut up, Doug.” Manny walked over to his shoulder holster, which had been draped over an antique brass coat tree when he boarded in New Baker. He pulled out a nickel-plated .38 revolver. A dozen various security men reflexively had guns drawn and pointed, waving them between Manny and each other. It would have been comical in a Chaplin-silent-movie kind of way, but Mendoza could sense the men forcing their heart rates *down*, and breathing thinly but evenly. These were the deadliest of the deadly. That's why they stood where they stood. No one was going to back down until told to do so. The military instincts of these guys were still sharply tuned. “Now, now. No need to get guts all over Georgie’s nice things.”

Manny raised both hands slowly and deliberately, his right index finger well away from the trigger-guard. No one relaxed. With one surprisingly dextrous move he thumbed the cylinder release, popped it out, and rotated it. Six slugs thumped luxuriously, one by one, on to the thick carpet. Weapons began to lower. The big Baron chuckled to himself. With a good deal of knee-popping Manny squatted to the floor, careful to keep the revolver’s cylinder hanging open, and used his left hand to pick up a single bullet. He presented it with the theatrical affectation of a

bad magician. Then he stood, and started slowly back toward the poker table shaking his head and mumbling softly, “Fuckin’ jumpy as a bag of feral cats.”

Phong eyed all of this warily. He wore the expression of someone who’s just seen a butterfly and begun to ponder the impossibility of its aerodynamics. The other Barons waved their security off, too curious to stop the show now. Safeties snapped back on, guns were lowered.

“You like to gamble, Mr. Phong, we can all see that. Only high stakes for you. Well, this *is* a gambling parlor, is it not? Let’s play a game.” Mendoza slid the single bullet back into the cylinder and spun. He cleaned and oiled his own guns so, unsurprisingly, the cylinder whirled for the longest time before Manny snapped it closed suddenly, his eyes never leaving Phong’s. Then he laid the gun down on the poker felt between them. “Now, if I pick this up, point it at my head and squeeze, and it don’t go off, you stop asking about this Baron horse shit *forever*. Not one more goddamn time, hear? Obviously, if I blow my own head off it’s every man for himself.”

Phong’s eyes flitted to the room.

“No, no. Look at *me*. Or *you* can pick it up, point it at *your* head, squeeze, and if it don’t go off I make you a Baron officially with all the glorious bells and whistles right here. Right now. Blow *your* head off, though, and we’ll all divide Poppyland between us. Deal?” Phong grinned his odd grin and stared at his hands, nodding almost imperceptibly.

“Gotta hear you say ‘Deal’”

“Manny. C’mon.”

“Manny, he gets it. We all get it. Not a Baron. Not this time.”

“Will! You! Shut! *Up!* We’re making it official in his own gook custom, now let us finish.”

“Deal.”

Mendoza was a blur. He grabbed the gun, put the cool barrel of the .38 on his right eye and pulled the double-action trigger.

“Click.”

Manny surveyed the room, which was frozen solid with shock. “So that’s settled, then. Tell you what, I’m’a go ahead and take these gold eagles as a bonus prize, you okay with that? How’s them catecholamine hormones treating you *now*, ya bush-league motherfucker?”

The baddest Baron in New California put the revolver in his lap and used both huge, sunburned hands to rake the coins his way. Phong’s silent fury made the color of his face barely perceptible from the black-on-black of his outfit.

“Phew. I mean to tell ya, I’m glad I didn’t end up ruinin’ this hat. I really like this hat.”

Ca-clack, ca-clack! Ca-clack, ca-clack! Ca-clack, ca-clack!



Chapter 18

During the Reagan administration, Hmongs, a persecuted ethnic group from the northern mountains of Laos, Viet Nam and Cambodia, were fleeing Southeast Asia. First they found their way to refugee camps in Thailand and then, in huge numbers, to Merced and Fresno Counties in California. Having won the Cold War, the Republican establishment began rummaging desperately for domestic issues to solve. Hawkish liberals needed to be thrown a bone and they got one in the form of benign immigration reform. First, there was the 1986 Amnesty Act. It was a disaster from the outset. The man who came to power on the sound bite, “The six most dangerous words in the English language are, ‘Trust me, I’m with the government’” ironically believed six million illegal, Spanish-speaking aliens would raise their hands to La Migra to fill out citizenship papers. Never mind that those documents -- and the public relations campaign to promote them -- were written exclusively in English.

The next step was to open the doors to legal patriation. Southeast Asia was rife with post-war poverty and Communist regimes were beginning to feel the economic pressure of global isolation. An official program was established and many promises were made. Hmongs were told there was ample land in California’s Central Valley to own and farm. There was not. They were told there were ample jobs white Americans wouldn’t do. Those jobs were already being done under the table by Mexican and South American illegals. While out from under the necrotic thumbs of Saigon and Phnom Penh, “boat people,” as they were mistakenly called by whites, quickly ran into rampant racism and a lack of skilled employment. Poverty was high and violent gangs became common. A mere twenty years since the Vietnam war, the social divide for most Hmongs was wider than any prior

generation of immigrants. Most only ever spoke Vietnamese, Lao, or Tai Daeng. Very few learned English or integrated into American schools.

It was not the *Morning in America* ole' Dutch had promised. Hai Phong, it turned out, was not most Hmongs. From the time Hai Phong's feet hit American soil, he embraced everything red, white and blue he could wrap his skinny arms around. To the consternation of his family, he wore the blue jeans, watched television, and cherished Frosted Flakes. By sixth grade, he'd completely lost his accent. By seventh, he'd memorized the catalogues of the Eagles, Aerosmith, and Springsteen. In high school he drove a used Ford, played Dungeons and Dragons, and briefly dated a half-Anglo, half-Armenian girl named Tiffany. He lived in one house with his extended family. He had Vietnamese friends in Vietnamese neighborhoods, observed Vietnamese celebrations, and spoke three dialects.

But as constantly connected as he was to his heritage, he felt early on it was somehow wasteful not to adopt America. He fed out cows, and waited tables for two years to get through junior college, then worked three jobs to put himself through pre-law at Fresno State. Hai Phong was seduced by hope. The hope America proffered day in and day out in ads, political speeches and movies.

He graduated with a degree in corporate law from Davis, an undertaking that left him deeply in debt with government loans. He took, but did not pass, the bar exam on his first attempt. Then, suddenly, the government loans disappeared with the government. The Russo-Chinese invasion cut short Phong's ascendance. It stole his dream inches from him realizing it. As the conflict worsened and the ground war in the South began in earnest, Mendoza's land-grab happened quickly. Phong and his people found themselves, again, in supplication to power-mad, violent Americans. The loop was almost complete. Phong, with a few trusted associates, gathered thousands of Hmongs for a meeting at an empty national guard hangar, and persuaded them to take up and defend a near-worthless 1200-acre

stake of land in the shadow of the San Benito Mountains. Mendoza and the other Barons had grabbed up all the arable, drillable and navigable land.

Phong shed his love for his adopted country and thanked himself every night for having kept one respectful foot in the old-country ways. It was a cliché. Nevertheless, only one plant of any value would survive the sandy, alkaline soil he had claimed. And only one business model could stand up to the post-war economic depression -- two if you counted whoring -- and that was opium. Phong went from law student to drug lord almost overnight. But no matter how hard he tried, it was not enough to get ahead in the new world. Phong's product was always in high demand. The simple fact was half the labor force in the Valley was high. There was no other way for former-non-indentured people to cope with the heat, the conditions, the humiliation and the fear. Unskilled, miserable refugees thought they were trading away problems for some small relief, when in fact, many were getting more problems than they bargained for.

An opium high was easy to hide, but the withdrawal was not. Within twenty-four hours of being cut off, agitation, muscle pain and aches, abdominal cramps, night sweats, diarrhea and vomiting took over if you couldn't score. With those symptoms, you were a lousy field hand or Section boss. A super-lousy security guard. Those who got caught either too stoned or tweaking in the fields or at their post were banished immediately. Some offenders were occasionally hung as a warning to "just say no."

Phong played his end of the game perfectly. Never letting a customer get too far ahead or too far behind. A dead user was a user who couldn't pay. His workers, however, did not get the kid-glove treatment. Extracting poppy resin is where manual labor and art meet. The mature bulbs need to be nicked gently around the widest part of the boll in order for the resin to escape at a rate that hardens in the air. It's then scraped and harvested. Cut too shallow and the resin ran off the plant.

A worker who did that would get covered in shallow cuts as punishment. Cut too deep, and the flower inside would be drowned with resin that could not be extracted. A worker who did that would be drowned. Scrape too hard and break a bulb head off? Pretty much everyone avoided that for obvious reasons.

The humiliation in the train car was the proverbial last straw. What Mendoza didn't realize is that most of Phong's men were previously soldiers on one side or the other of three bloody civil wars in Southeast Asia. And it was surprising how easily a random hard-core addict would trade an AR15 for a couple of ounces of junk. Over the years, Phong secretly created one of the most efficient drug operations of all time, *and* acquired one of the best-trained and outfitted armies in the process.

Phong sat in his office, which looked from the outside like a simple foreman shack but inside was a display of Asian and American elegance: criss-crossed Hanzo swords, bolts of ancient silks, a terra-cotta warrior draped with an American flag. Phong sat at a polished cherry wood desk going over some papers and smacking beads loudly on the antique abacus he used to keep accounts. His customary black-on-black high style was a little looser than usual today. He was in a very dark mood. The rest of the room was covered floor to ceiling with bookshelves holding every manner of volume imaginable, from Proust and Shakespeare to the first issue of Archie comics. The bead curtain at the entrance parted quietly and a lieutenant walked in, head bowed.

"What is it?"

"My pardon, *bê hạ*..."

"I am not an emperor, Tran."

"My pardon...Mr. Phong."

"What *is* it, man?"

"There was a spill. An herbicide spill, and..."

“Show me.” Tran walked out and Phong followed, hopping on the back of a quad runner. They rode through miles of rows filled with workers in various stages of production. At the end of one, a few square yards of poppies were brown and withered. Several more were dying slowly. A boy about ten stood looking at his feet and holding an empty gallon container of RoundUp. Pre-war weed control was hard to get and it was generally mixed eighty to one with water, then sprayed with old brass fire extinguishers to keep down the sawgrass between the rows. From the plant damage, it was clear the full-strength bottle had been spilled somehow. It was easily eighty degrees in the Indian Summer heat, but the boy was shivering.

“Tran. Get me a full gallon of that stuff. Blow the whistle and send the runners. I want everyone in the bowl in twenty minutes. You. Come with me.” Phong grabbed the boy by the collar of his Batman t-shirt and half-carried, half-dragged him roughly to the bowl, a granite sinkhole created before the war by natural gas fracking. Every other inch of Poppyland was planted, but the bowl would yield nothing more than lichen and moss in the winter. It was often used as a public gathering place. Thousands could sit on haphazard chunks of granite and limestone. Thousands more could stand as the crater radiated out and up. The acoustics rivaled any man-made amphitheater. Phong used the bowl for speeches.

Today, he thought, would be the last speech he would make within his borders. Steam whistles sounded and were echoed further and further into the distance. Confused workers began to file in quietly and orderly. In about forty-five minutes, far less time than it would have taken in any other Barony, nearly ten thousand had assembled. Phong and the boy stood alone in the center of the sinkhole.

“When I was a boy, I loved watching American Westerns on TV! Did you know that?” Phong announced. This was met with questioning murmurs. “It’s okay. it was a rhetorical question. What I never understood is why don’t the horses

get shot? You have these bad guys chasing good guys and they're bouncing all over the place taking shots with huge hand guns.”

Phong pantomimed a cowboy riding and shooting, which garnered some laughs. “The horse is by far the biggest target on the screen. Most likely to get hit by stray bullets, yet never a dead horse. I think it’s because that would ruin the illusion of the story, so people just accepted it. No dead horses.” Phong paced for a bit, then exploded. “We! Are living in that illusion!” Phong looked down at the boy and his entire face clouded over in rage. He was so angry he unconsciously flopped into his native language “Reā kǎlạng ca mī kār thả s̄ngkhrām!” (*We will soon be at war.*) “P̄hm d̄i phūd s̄emx wā reā m̄i s̄āmārth th̄i p̄hid phlād th̄i n̄i!” (*I have always said we cannot afford mistakes here.*) Phong took a breath and shook his head as he searched for some inner calm.

“Conflict is coming, I assure you. We can wait for it to kick down our door, as generations of our people have done. Or we can lull the demon to sleep by continuing to do what we do...*perfectly*. Then strike suddenly with *great* power. Until that day, *no* mistakes! None! We left places where wickedness kept a boot on our throats. Thanat Khoma, Ho Chi Minh, Pol Pot, Westmoreland. In the old country we clung to the illusion that either we had a home or we were defending one. Both were lies. We come here and still, we end up working for an enemy! I have decided No More. These poppies will buy your freedom. *Real* freedom. You lose a flower, you lose a bullet. That’s what we are doing here. No. Mistakes.” Phong waved in Tran who had shown up with a full gallon of RoundUp.

“Hold him. Open his mouth.” Tran pinned both the boy’s arms with one of his then pulled hard on the back of his hair to force his mouth and throat open. Phong uncapped the bottle, pinched the boy’s nose closed, and began pouring. As he struggled, then began to drown, Phong continued. “You kill a plant. You kill

yourself!” The boy’s body went limp and Phong poured what was left in the bottle on the prostrate corpse, then pitched the jug aside.

“See?” Still breathing hard, he slicked his hair back into place and tugged at his tie knot. “Reā ca mī pratheṣ̄ k̄hxng reā xeng!” (*We will have our own country!*) As the workers filed back to the fields there was a sinister energy of renewed purpose in the air. Phong sat. Choking on the RoundUp fumes and the horror of what he’d just done, he nodded at the body and spoke to Tran.

“Burn it.” Tran picked up the dead boy and started walking out of the bowl.

Phong was trying very hard to gather his thoughts but one phrase kept blocking him: *Bush-league motherfucker. Bush-league motherfucker. Bush-league motherfucker.* Phong knew he couldn't forcefully take and hold everything inside the Fence. Not without help. From outside and in. So he would seek knowledge from his enemy’s enemy. In the morning he would grab his best opium stash and head to Hollister to pull an attack plan out of the pickled brain of the only white man he trusted: Elway Sousa.



Chapter 19

Petty, Edison and Stalker made good time overnight. Instead of heading south like they'd told Junior, they'd picked their way through the scrub and down onto the Valley floor on a path that was more or less due west. At dawn, they reined up in a granite outcropping to hide themselves from the flatiron view of the Valley floor. From this distance it was a beautiful patchwork of various greens and browns as far the eye could see. As the sun rose, Stalker pulled out a pair of Vortex binoculars and handed them to Jerk. He scanned the horizon. The Fence was less than a quarter mile from them. As he moved the glasses up and down the line, he could see only one sentry point. Manned by one sentry. Who, in his matte black-on-black-on-black Blackwater-issue gear, stood out in this environment like a housefly on a white linen curtain.

The Fence was fairly light, militarily speaking. It looked like standard fifteen-gauge, high tensile barbed wire. Six wires clipped to metal posts about every ten feet ran ruler-straight for miles in both directions. It would keep cattle in or out but was hardly invasion proof. The sentry at the aluminum gate however, was all the defense this kind of ground required. Petty noted an AR 15, and a Weatherby 30.06 with a scope. There were probably more, but with his sightline that'd be more than enough. He had transportation they could see, which meant he was pulling at least a 24-hour posting.

"No backup?" Petty grunted.

Stalker, his hat now wisely in his rucksack, shook his astonishingly neat haircut. "Not this far North. They get thicker and dumber the closer you get to Madera. Or the further up you get to Merced. No, this fellow here is all there is protecting the Rubicon. It was probably a weak spot like this that undid the Gauls."

Edison spat as he often did when Stalker started using his ten-dollar words. “Okay, general, is the brilliant plan to sit here all day and watch this shit-bird watchin’ for us, it is. Or do you have somethin’ a little more what-I-like-to-call fuckin’ effective...” The sheriff turned in his saddle to add dramatic emphasis to his point, but, while his horse hadn’t moved an inch, Stalker’s saddle was empty. Edison’s heart began to pound. Just as the wave of panic was about to break over the sheriff completely, Dalton minced out from behind a sedan-sized chunk of granite with a small burlap sack in his hand and a smile radiating from ear to ear. His crisp, blonde Resistol was somehow back on his head. Stalker was in the stirrup and over, reins in one hand, sack in the other, before Edison could pull his pistol. He clucked his mount forward at a trot and shot back over his shoulder, “Time to go.”

The two other men had no choice but to follow. Out in front, Stalker never got his roan past a slow trot, forcing the riders behind him to do the same. It was the tactic of a seasoned point man, and Jerk and Stan relaxed in their saddles just a touch. There was nothing left to do now but follow his lead. Stalker pinched his bottom lip to his top teeth and make a sharp whistle, the kind you only hear used for cattle drives or cat calls. The Blackwater stood with his AR 15 and looked toward the company. Stalker took his hat off and waved it in the air. The security man sat back down but kept both hands on his rifle. As the riders neared close enough for conversation, the security man quipped, “Jesus, Stalker, I can see that hat of yours a mile away. You look like the ass-end of a white-tail doe.”

“Gary.”

“What is it now, *Dalton*?”

“Well, I’ve got these clients. Told ’em I could get them to the Western Corridor by sunset tomorrow, but that rain really put a damper on the calendar, you

know. Was hoping I could take a short-cut, straight across. I was hoping you could help me out with that.”

“No can do. Runner alert. Given by the big man himself. Couple kids. You’d have to have some hell of a prize in that sack to cross today. Stalker dismounted with the burlap sack in one hand and his free hand far from his gunbelt. “As always. It’s a lulu. May I approach?”

“C’mon, let’s just get this over with. What is it.?”

Stalker walked up to the gate. “Found this. In a dry river bed. Just sitting there. Heavy as hell. Stick your hand in and feel *that*.” The guard rooted around in the bag and his face went white as he screamed in pain, “Aiiiiighhhh! What the. Fuuuuck. What was that?”

Stalker dropped the bag and the rattle-less diamondback slithered away. Edison and Petty put two and two together and were off their horses. Stan had a grip on the AR 15. Petty had a grip on his free hand. It was only moments before the poison would render the security man unconscious. He looked Stalker in the eyes, shocked at the betrayal of whatever relationship they had, “What did you do to me, man?”

Stalker smiled, “Gary, you fret not, I’ve got the antidote right here. I just need you to pick up that sat-com and let everyone know you’ve got three riders headed west and they’re cleared. Can you do that?” Gary nodded his head...barely. Edison handed him the walkie.

“This is 67. I have three riders crossing at the Chowchilla gate. They’ve been cleared. I repeat, these are friendlies. Skinny man on a roan. Skinny man with scar on a paint. Fat man on a quarterhorse. Copy?” There were lots of “copys” on the channel.

“Okay, man? The antidote. Hurry up, Dalton.”

Stalker patted down his shirt and said, “Well, that’s just pitiful, Gary. I left it in my other shirt.” Edison now grabbed the Blackwater with two hands and held him steady and harmless until his legs gave out and the convulsions started. Stalker turned to Jerk. “We got about twenty-four hours before they find him, another forty-eight before they find us. I hope this Elway of yours is some kind of miracle worker. Keep the walkie. We’re going to need to key it for him every hour.”

Petty was already busy with the task of putting the body back in his chair convincingly. They used a small piece of cord to secure him and put the guns where they saw them last. No need to take them, it would only speed up suspicion. Stan led the horses through the gate and closed it behind him.

“Damn, son. That was some cold shit.”

“Well, we couldn’t risk gunfire. Those little bastards sun themselves on that rock around this time every day. Odds were on our side. We’re going to have to move. We can water the horses at the San Joaquin.”

The riders pushed their horses hard. The quilted squares of soft canal banks and dirt roads made it much easier than riding in the Corridor. Petty hadn’t been inside the Fence since the massacre. The smells were familiar, the humidity from the flood irrigation made the air thick around them. The invasion had been a real coup for both Mendoza and Wright. For decades, environmentalists in the state legislature had outlawed flooding fields and orchards. Strict water-rights laws were voted in to restrict water to sell down in L.A. With no legislature (and no L.A.) this matter appeared to have been settled permanently.

They stopped a couple of times to give the mounts a blow, once in the shade of a peach orchard just outside Mendota where they ate their heavenly fill. The plenty all around them was incredible. Miles and miles of plums, peaches, oranges, corn, walnuts, almonds, grapes -- it really was the food basket of the country. They headed slightly north to follow Route 152. They planned on watering the horses at

the San Luis reservoir. What they hadn't planned on was seeing the bright orange Pussy Wagon set up and working on the side of 152, drawing what looked to be half a Section's worth of men, probably from the groves in Los Banos, standing around on shifting feet. They stopped and huddled up behind the cover of an old-growth orange orchard.

This was an issue. Edison broke the silence. "We can double back, but that'll take some doin'. Three riders this close to high-quality whores and not stopping, that's going to raise suspicion, it is. We don't know who's in there lookin' out. Mendoza hisself could be."

"You want to get *laid*? *That's* your plan??"

"I believe what the sheriff is getting at is, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do.' We don't want to be noticed. And we don't want to be noticed *not* being noticed. I know the madame well. I can get us to the front of the line. No trouble. She's the biggest secret-keeper in the Valley. Has to be in her profession. It's like we'll be hiding in plain sight. Most of those gents are married, they'll be looking at their boots and not much more. It's genuinely the safest play unless you want to wait for dark."

Jerk shook his head silently. It would be hours before nightfall. "Five minutes. I'll wait outside. I'm heading to the reservoir with or without the two of you after that." For the first time in their short friendship, Edison and Stalker shared a genuine smile of solidarity. They all knew the rules. So as they walked the horses toward the Wagon, they took off their gun belts and hooked them around their saddle horns. When they reached the back of the bus, they tied the horses to a crowded stringer. Edison and Stalker went around to the front. Petty stayed back. He saw a decrepit folding beach chair leaning against the bus and sat down. He plucked a piece of milk weed and chewed on it thoughtfully, gazing west into the sun. Katie was all hugs when Dalton turned the corner. She seemed genuinely glad

to see him. “Dalton Stalker, as I live and breathe. Are you *paying* for it now? Or are you just here to make one of those offers of yours that supposedly can’t be refused?”

Edison stared uncomfortably as his own suddenly huge feet.

“And who’s your handsome friend. An actual lawman...don’t see many of those anymore.” Katy spoke through a tight smile in her teeth. “You’re aware every last one of these horny bastards is watching me let you cut the line.”

“I have some of that Cartier you prefer in my saddle bag.”

“Eau De Parfum II L’heure Convoitée?”

“Oui.”

“Well, fuck, let them wait then.” She invited the smuggler and the sheriff on board. Katy waived Skinny over to take over the door. “I don’t know how you do it, Dalton, but Satan has to be somewhere in this supply chain, lord help us all. You really know how to reach a gal.” Three riders and two johns didn’t square totally, but it wasn’t worthy of any kind of panic.

Katy worked the door mostly so she could notice anomalies like that. So she walked around the lee side of the bus and found a cowboy in her beach chair. His face was badly scarred, but you could still see the handsome. Katie put one boot on the bus and loaded her pipe. Once she had it lit she started what she knew would be a one word conversation. “You’re sitting in my smoking chair, cowpoke.” Petty didn’t move. Or even look up. “You don’t partake?”

“Not anymore.”

“Married?”

“Once.”

“You in the war?”

“Yep.”

“Wow. You know what I hate most about the war? Made for so many of you strong, silent types. I mean the Corridor is littered with guys like you.” Petty looked up suspiciously. “Yeah, I know you're from the Corridor. I'm pretty tight with Nora. We female CEOs gotta stick together. How many scarred woodworkers who ride with the Placer County Sheriff do you think there are out here? Relax. Don't know you. Never saw you.”

Just then there was a loud crack. Petty stiffened, reached for the guns that weren't there and turned his head toward the sound. It was just a young girl snapping sheets and hanging them on a line to dry. He instantly regretted the look of reproach he'd given her. But he just turned and stared back at the sun with no apologies.

“The PTSD. That in itself has gotta be a bitch. You're safe here, Mr. ...”

“Petty.”

“Since we're talking, Petty, what's your theory on how the whole thing started? Over-leveraged dollar, bad trade deal, Iran got the bomb and everybody hit 'go.' The Chinese did the math and figured they outnumbered us ten-to-one so why not roll in and take the place? Personally, I think it was the bots. The algorithms running Wall Street and all the websites and the social media, hell, your refrigerator. Eventually, they started forming a consciousness. Not a singularity, per se, but a separateness. So the 1's and 0's launched all the missiles to get rid of us. Then came the governments and the armies because it couldn't possibly be *technology*. Technology is *good*. And here we are. You traumatized into non-verbal communication and me running whores like it was 1860.”

“Yeah, I wouldn't know too much about that.”

As the next two minutes rolled out in silence, Katie gave it one more try. “Story is your sheriff pal got his badge by shooting his boss in the back.”

Jerk sighed with irritation. “Nope. They was runnin’ down robbers over Donner Pass. Truck rolled on the ice. The Old Man’s gun gets loose, shot goes off. Went straight through his heart. Anything else?”

The conversation was over. Katie’s pipe was empty anyway. So she headed back to her post. “Well, it's been practically Dickensian, Petty. You're a real conversationalist. Girls will swoon over that poetic approach of yours.”

Then suddenly the silence was rudely broken by a squelch from the radio in Stalker’s kit. Katie froze. She turned to the girl. “Honey, that's enough laundry. You go inside now.” The girl did as she was asked. The madame pulled herself to her full height, put her hand in her pocket and wrapped it around the awl there. She walked slowly toward Jerk and spoke softly and firmly.

“Now that is the sound of a Blackwater sat-com. I know for a fact there aren't any of those assholes on my wagon today. And those boys don't get separated from their walkies by accident. I'm going to get your crew and you're going to ride out of here like Lucifer himself was chasing you. You've endangered me and mine.”

Katy disappeared. Petty fished in the pocket of Dalton's kit and keyed the radio, then turned it off. He was up on his horse in seconds. Around the corner came Edison, a mess of untucked shirttail, one boot on, and a radiant smile. Stalker, of course, looked equally satisfied but not a hair was out of place. But the look of confusion on his face was almost comical.

“What the...”

“Later. Show’s over. Mount up. These animals are thirsty. I want to make Hollister by noon tomorrow.”



Chapter 20

On the ride back from the train station in New Baker to Hanford, Manny Mendoza was uncharacteristically quiet. Even with drivers other than Matthias, he was renowned for his ability to fill a silence with angry complaints, off-color allegories, or general streams of old-man consciousness, most of which equated to long versions of ‘get the fuck off my lawn.’ For forty-five minutes, the only sound in the cab was the growl of the Ford’s three-liter diesel engine and the wind through the open passenger window. Combined with a 360-degree view of derrick pumps nodding in slow motion, the experience was hypnotic. So the man behind the wheel flinched just a little when Mendoza finally spoke. “War is the promise of violence in order to constrain the enemy to accomplish one’s will.”

“Sorry, boss?”

“It’s a fuckin’ quote, Donny. Know who said it?”

“No, sir.”

“George fuckin’-ay Washington.”

The driver nodded and stared straight ahead, exactly as the playbook had been explained to him. But today, it appeared, this was not the right play. Mendoza raised his volume and slowed down, a combination of tone and mannerism even a toddler would find offensive.

“Well...can...you...take...a...guess...at...its...meaning?”

Donny was not stupid enough to take a guess.

“War is the promise of violence in order to constrain the enemy to accomplish one’s will. It means if somebody is convinced you’ll fuck with ‘em, they’ll stand down. *That’s* what war is. Control. Intimidation. Strategy. The rest is just idiots pulling triggers. And do you believe George Washington was an idiot?”

Donny shook his head.

“No, he was not, Donny. But when it came down to it, the country Washington fathered had its head so far up its own ass all it took was fucking idiots pulling triggers to bring us down. Wave after wave, they just *smeeeeeared* us. We were the dog shit on their shoe. They wiped us off with blunt force. The nukes helped. But the rest was a fuckin’ garden variety ten-on-one ass whuppin’ in the parking lot behind the bar. Was I a benefactor of this? Fuckin’ A. But to keep things where they are, I’m going with Washington. When we get back, you’re gonna turn around and head straight up to Fresno. You’re gonna go to that neo-fascist Blackwater armory in Modesto and at the gate of that frat house you’ll ask for Colonel Hornung himself.”

“Due respect, Baron, ’less I was Mr. Blackfeather himself, they ain’t gonna let me past the first checkpoint...”

“Are you *questioning* me, Donny?”

Donny gripped the steering wheel ever so slightly and stared ahead at the razor-straight ribbon of Highway 99. “No, Baron.”

“You’ll get in. I fucking guarantee it. And they will let you in because you will present a personal letter from me and a pristine, unopened bottle of twenty-four-year-old whiskey which I will provide. If I knew where that redskin sonofawhore was, I’d do it a different way. Not that I need to explain *that* to a pissant like you.”

“No, sir.”

Mendoza sighed heavily. “Anyway, you’ll pick up an empty M2 tanker and a flame-thrower -- that’s it -- and drive to just outside Coalinga, where you will camp, smack in the middle of Road 68 at Junction 66.”

“Junction 66. Got it.”

“I’ll write it all down for ya, Donny, pay attention now. Right on the asphalt. About, oh, a hundred yards or so from Poppyland. Give or take.”

Donny swallowed while the Baron eyed him for any kind of weak response. Getting none, Manny laughed out loud at a joke only he understood. “Jesus, Donny. You probably think I’m screwing with your head, right? Well, that’s exactly what I’m hoping the chinks who’ll be watching you are gonna think. ‘Are those guys fucking with us?’ Is this a Washingtonian promise of violence? Not that they’d know Washington from a hole in the ground. I’m pulling you and about fifty guys off the Fence. They’ll meet you tomorrow morning, understand?”

Donny just nodded.

“The tanker will be empty. It’s just for show. I wasn’t born yesterday, no whiskey is *that* good. But you and your men will sit there with the pilot light on that flame-thrower lit day and night until I tell you to stop, and you will not move. If Phong thinks I’m willing to burn him to the ground, and I mean right now, he’ll second-guess ever making a move on me, see? I mean, a man would have to be insane to light up that many acres in the middle of a sixty-year drought. It would take out half the Valley. Maybe you, Donny. Maybe me, too. If the wind’s blowin’ wrong.”

Donny nodded again. Manny rubbed his eyes tiredly and seemed far away for a minute. “Anyway, if there’s one promise of violence that’ll freak out a gook, it’s burning diesel, right? I don’t know why I say these things. I guess there’s just a meanness in the world. And I am its conduit. Who knows?

“Four or five days with fifty sets of brass balls just *sitting* there should get it done,” he went on. “I swear, you break rank, fire a round, or even *look* uninterested, I’ll kill all of you myself. You don’t rip a fart without my say-so.”

“No, sir.”

“I just got a hunch is all.”



Chapter 21

Mattias was dealing with several unpleasant things at once. His broken leg was beginning to fester, and the pain was almost unbearable. The putrid stench of Elway Petty's body was beginning to permeate everything. Medical supplies were no place to be found. Ditto with anything else, as the inside of the house looked like it was organized by a blind hoarder. Every surface was covered with random bits of garbage, flotsam and jetsam.

The old Yokuts had taken to sleeping outside in a claw foot tub just to get a breath of fresh air. His instincts told him someone would be coming soon. So, he kept one eye open and one hand on his MR 15. There were buildings strewn all across Elway's property. Shacks, really. Held together with corrugated tin and bailing wire. Matthias couldn't get around to investigate any of these. He assumed they would contain more useless junk, just like the main "house." The man was a fucking swine. If there were anything important out here, the next person who showed up was going to give him a tour at gun point. He thought several times about burying the old man. It would've been the Christian thing to do. But being as he wasn't a Christian and the man was an opiate addict *and* an asshole, he figured just let sleeping dogs lie. Or, *rot*, in this case.

The only thing he found was a cigar box gripped in the dead man's hands. He pawed through it and couldn't make heads or tails of anything. All it contained was a random collection of baseball cards, paperback book covers, and coupons held together by rubber bands. Maybe it was the dosage of junk Elway had been on at the end. Maybe he'd been as unhinged as everyone always said. Neither the dead man nor the box was of any use to him. Not now. So he left it where he found it. Matthias had left the rez in the '50s in the hopes of finding the future he read about in comic books. By the time he was seventy, there still weren't flying cars but

technology had taken over everything else. And it wasn't pleasant. Anyone with half a brain could see the crash coming from a mile away.

But white people, they believed that AI was gonna save everything. They Ubered, and Facebooked and Tweeted themselves right into a coma. They left the back door open. When the bombs started falling, Matthias wasn't a bit surprised. As far as he was concerned, the country got what it had coming.

The fever was getting bad so he found some white-willow bark and chewed on it as he dozed. Opium would be better -- and easier to find -- but he never touched the stuff. He just made sure the white bosses got it where they wanted it to go. If no one showed up by tomorrow morning, he'd have some hard decisions to make.

The Baron was probably already furious with him. He could lie and say the girl was killed by a wolf as he ran her down. But if the little brat somehow showed up at the Tribute, he'd be dead before he could take a single breath. And he knew who'd do it. If he didn't literally stumble onto some antibiotics in this trash heap, he might lose a leg. So Matthias Blackfeather, the most feared enforcer inside the Fence, shivered through a night of fever dreams hoping for an idiot, or even two, to show up after sunrise.



Chapter 22

Jerk, Stan, and Stalker headed due west toward the reservoir. It couldn't have been more than five miles. Their only exposure was crossing the flat expanse of Interstate 5. Sure enough, as they broke out of an almond orchard onto the first lane, a pickup doing over 100 caught them in its high beams. The driver slammed on the brakes and slid the last thirty yards and came to a stop just in front of the horses. The dashboard lights were bright enough that they could see Donny looking them up and down and not liking it. He made the mistake of reaching for the sat-com on the seat next to him. Stan put a bullet in his head through the windshield before anyone knew what was happening.

"Dammit, Stan."

"That's one of Mendoza's inner circle, he was gonna call us in. You seen it, it is."

"You couldn't have shot a *tire*? Or the arm he was reaching with?"

"Didn't occur to me."

"Hell of a shot, though," offered Stalker.

Jerk shook his head. "Marksmen, fuck. Well, we better figure out what he was up to at this hour." It wasn't difficult. There was a piece of stationary, with every step of the mission written in Manny's own hand. And one bottle of very good whiskey that somehow hadn't broken. Using the headlights, Petty read the paper to himself. "Shit. Shit. *Shit*." He shoved the instructions at Stalker, who read them quickly. Then they were shoved at Stan, who was only halfway through when Jerk threw up his hands. "Well, we gotta do it." Stalker nodded.

"What?" Stan asked.

"And you gotta be the one does it."

"Jerk, he'uz reaching for the radio. You *seen* it."

“It ain’t cause you shot him, Stan. He’s supposed to go the Blackwater to make a trade. We have to complete his mission. It can’t be someone this Colonel Hornung or anyone at the depot would find...remarkable.”

“Huh?”

“Obviously, it can’t be the guy with the bullet in his head. It can’t be scar face man, or the Mayor of Smugglerville over there who probably knows half the guys up there. So that leaves you.”

“Why? We’ll just leave’m here and go on about our business.”

“Stan...”

“The San Luis ain’t but a couple of miles...”

“Stan...”

“Then it’s maybe another twenty to Elway’s then...”

“Stan!”

The sheriff looked stunned and confused and a little hurt. Stalker, who was leaning on his saddlebags and hanging his head, explained. “Sheriff, if that tanker isn’t picked up in the next hour then driven down to 68 and 66, which I believe is Corcoran...stone’s throw from Poppyland, isn’t it, Jerk?”

“Damn near on the corner.”

“So if that tanker isn’t there in the morning waiting for Mendoza’s hired men? There’s going to be a phone call, then every Blackwater in the Valley with a swinging dick -- pardon my French -- is going to be combing every inch of countryside looking for anyone who doesn’t belong. That’s us.”

“But we’d be to Hollister by then. Outside the Fence...”

“Shit!” Petty spat.

“What?”

Stalker continued, “Hollister is the first place they’ll look. Only Elway would be crazy enough to jump one of Mendoza’s couriers. From what I’ve heard,

he'd have shot the poor bastard for the whiskey alone. I know people say they don't know where he is, but Blackfeather knows. I heard they were in the same unit in Viet Nam. He knows, he just doesn't say. 'In nature's infinite book of secrecy, a little I can read' is how it goes, I think."

"Okay, now I'm done tryin' tuh follow you. Why would Mendoza..."

Jerk interrupted by yanking open the driver's door, looking Donny over with a Mag-light. "To scare him, Stan. Phong sees a tanker with a thrower attached? He'll go to ground like a pheasant hen, you can bet. But if it ain't there, and I was Mendoza, I'd figure it was Phong sussed it out somehow, killed fat boy here, and believe me, they'd go to war over it. And we ain't got time for that. So strip."

"What?"

"Can't roll into the middle of Blackwater HQ with a badge on. Strip."

Jerk unbuckled the seatbelt and Stalker helped him pull the body out, trying not to get blood all over his clothes. Luckily, Donny was a San Francisco Giants fan and had the fitted hat to prove it, which greatly decreased spatter. Dalton had the cab cleaned quickly using sanitizer wipes. Petty and Edison just gave up wondering how he constantly had the right things at the right time. It was working for them. Stan struck a miserable pose, shivering in his long johns. He stuffed his uniform in a saddle bag and everything they pulled off the body, he put on. Except the hat. And the shoes. It was weird seeing Edison as a citizen, but so long as he didn't talk too much he'd pass easily.

Once Stan was in the pickup they were committed. Stan seemed a little nervous. Petty wouldn't let him be. "It's written down step-by-step. Don't talk too much. Get the tanker. It'll be empty like it says, so it'll be light. Then tear ass down the freeway. We want it there before first light. Before the security guys start showing. Once you get enough of those fuckers together they won't miss Donny. *Remember*, take the sat-com out of the pickup and take it with you in the tanker.

We'll leave it in the cab. As long as Mendoza can talk to *somebody* in the morning, we should be fine."

"Alright, Jerk, I ain't a baby, it is."

"Stan, look at me." The sheriff turned to look his best friend in the eyes. He sensed a whiff of nervousness. "If he offers you a drink of that bourbon, you *politely decline* and leave. Even if he insists. Hornung is a raging alcoholic, and that whiskey is gonna smell like heaven. You know how you are with the brown stuff. We're gonna run the horses down now. We'll meet you there, get through the Fence, then round the backside of the San Benitos to Elway's. Okay?"

"Yah, yah."

Stalker turned in the saddle. "If anyone asks about the bullet hole, just say Mendoza was screwing with you. Everyone will believe it."

Jerk mounted holding a lead rope clipped to Edison's paint. Stan started the pickup, Petty and Stalker started across the 5.

The riders disappeared into the darkness. And Stan turned his headlights toward the off ramp to the 152. Edison would rather be on a horse eleven times out of ten rather than inside any kind of vehicle. But once he was in there, he drove like mad. He made the 99 in twenty minutes. Then the outskirts of Modesto in just under an hour. There was no mistaking the place. It looked exactly like what a secret military training facility should look like. Big black box surrounded by chain link fence and razor wire. Stan pulled up to a guard post and rolled down the window. Out came a skinny twenty-something dressed head to toe in black gear and with a chip on his shoulder.

The sheriff knew the type. "Help you, sir?"

"Delivery for Colonel Hornung from Baron Mendoza."

"I see, so you wouldn't mind getting the Baron on the radio to corroborate this little delivery?"

Stan calmed himself and took a breath. “Son, my Baron is asleep this time of night. I radio him now, first thing he’ll do is order me to shoot you in the head, I shit you not. You see this bullet hole here? I was just pulling into the driveway and he put one through the windshield for *fun*. So that’s a no-go on the radio. Is there someone who can get me through that gate and to the Colonel? A superior officer or...”

“It’s just you ain’t *Donny*.”

“True. Donny had a headache. I was next man up. Sorry for the confusion.” Stan grabbed the whiskey. “Like to get this to its owner asap.”

The kid wasn’t quite as stupid as he looked. The gate opened. The sentry, with a little more respect in his tone said, “To the right. Last door on your left.”

“Thanks.” Stan drove to the Colonel’s quarters. He got out of the pickup, taking the radio with him. Two sentries flanked the door. All Stan had to do is hold up the bottle. The door was opened. Inside, Colonel Hornung sat at his desk going over papers. He was military through and through. Had a face like a bulldog and was chomping on a cigar. He never looked up.

“You Mendoza’s man?”

“Yes, sir.”

The Colonel slowly slid an empty whisky glass toward the edge of the desk. Stan opened the bottle and filled the glass. Jerk was right. If heaven had a smell this would be it. “Leave the bottle.” Stan put the bottle on the desk. Again, without ever lifting his eyes Hornung said, “Thomson, take this man to hanger three and give him the keys to the empty M2 Tanker therein. Also, provide him with a flame thrower and a five-gallon canister of natural gas. That will be all. Send my best wishes to Baron Mendoza.”

“I will, sir.” With that Thomson escorted Edison through several hangars where there were vehicles, racks of rifles and munitions, riot gear and hundreds of

Blackwaters on one mission or another. It was an army by any stretch. In hanger three, as promised, was the tanker. Thomson secured the flame-thrower and the canister to the top of the rig. “Keys are in it.”

“Thanks for your help.”

“You get what you pay for.” Thomson slid the barn door open, Stan got in, started her up and put it in second gear and rolled out. He stopped at the sentry post again. Again the same kid who shoved a clipboard in his face. “Sign here.”

The sheriff almost panicked but signed the only name he could think of: Junior Robinson. Then he geared up his way into the night. He drove as fast as he could without feeling the silt would run him off the road. He got to 68 and Junction 66 in four and half hours. About an hour before sunrise. Petty gave him a bear hug, an unusually public display of affection. The radio was in the cab. They needed to mount, but Stan would not ride in civilian clothes. He took precious time putting his uniform back on. He shoved Donny’s clothes into a saddlebag. “We’ll burn them at Elway’s.” Then, they were on their way.

They didn’t observe that they were being followed.



Chapter 23

Early the next morning, Stalker led them to a loose panel of hog-wire and they were in the Eastern Corridor as easy as that. The security forces on the east were spread further apart. Most ways came down from the north or from the west. The trio road through the last twenty miles of scrub brush and wild buckwheat to the shit-hole that was Elway Petty's living quarters. The sun was just coming up, shining its saffron-colored light on the rusting hulks of garbage that laid in every direction from the main house. To the untrained eye, it looked like a junkyard. But there was a method to the madness. The eastern crows could still fly and they made a deafening racket from a hundred-year-old live oak next to the "house." The albino hawk watched the proceedings from its perch on the old power pole.

As they dismounted, Petty knew something was wrong. Elway would have at least fired a warning shot as soon as they were in range. And now he'd be standing on the wonky porch holding a double-barreled shot-gun and demanding to know Petty's business. Neither of those things happened. So he signaled for Stan to go around the right side. And Stalker the left. Petty would take the front door. Stan randomly picked up a piece of 3/4" galvanized pipe just in case Elway was high. He wasn't about to shoot him but he *would* defend himself from the tough old geezer.

What he found on the backside of the house was Matthias Blackfeather coming at him with a machete. The sheriff swung the pipe at Matthias's head almost without thinking. The crack was audible. The old Yokut fell backwards into an old bathtub. And lay there motionless. Eyes half open. The rest of the exterior was clear. A sharp whistle from inside brought both men running. No one was prepared for what they saw. And there were a few minutes of putrid silence.

Edison offered, "I think I just killed Matthias Blackfeather."

“Good. He was probably waiting for us. He didn’t do this, though. This was the opium.”

Elway stank. He’d clearly been dead for some time. He was beginning to bloat. Whatever wisdom Petty needed about the Tribute, he wasn’t going to get. Elway Petty had lived in and around Hollister his whole life. He was an old school deal-maker. Hand shake contracts over fifty gallon drums. He knew every family, every name, first and last, for miles around, including the now-Baron class. He graduated eighth grade with Mendoza himself.

After the war, and the massacre at the Sousa dairy, he started hiding out. Which got him to drinking to pass the time. Then that lead to harder drugs. He was laid low by opium, which was readily available. He grew increasingly paranoid that Mendoza was hunting him down. So he became a hermit. But the drugs never totally dulled his edge. He understood the big picture of the Valley. That was the information Petty needed. How to get Emmy to the Tribute without triggering the system. Information he would never have now.

They went outside. Stan checked the status of a decent-sized backhoe. “Due respect, Jerk, we ain’t got time for the official Christian particulars, we ain’t.”

“Spread out. Try and find a charged battery and some diesel. They’re hidden around here someplace .”The men spread out. Jerk walked around the back of the house to take a look at Blackfeather. He was a mess. He clearly had a gangrenous leg. His forehead was bleeding freely and his eyes were open and crossed. It didn’t take them long to find what they needed. Elway had somehow amassed a vast supply of necessities and then some. In one dilapidated shed, Stalker found hundreds of red, five-gallon diesel containers filled to the brim in double stacks. Also a Mercedes Benz Unimog 437 under a dusty tarp on which Elway had spray painted “The Messiah.” The Unimog was by far the world’s best and most expensive off-road vehicle. Survivalists and deposed military leaders salivated at

the thought of this vehicle. The weirder thing is that Elway never drove. Never even got his license. This must be part of what Junior Robinson was talking about. But *where* would he get paramilitary gear of this level?

In a rotting pole barn covered by a quilt of filthy, oily tarps, Edison found a battery charging station and fifty or so charged batteries along with 13 Military-grade Humvees with 50 caliber rifles attached. Elway had spray painted names on each vehicle. “James,” “John,” “Peter,” “Andrew” -- the disciples. Elway had never lacked a wicked sense of irony. He never spent a single day in church. Or even near a church.

Under a pile of straw in an ancient hay barn, Petty found, impossibly hidden by cleverly stacked bails of straw, an M1 tank. The three men came back together to exchange stories.

“What the fuck is going on? Who’s he expecting to fight? And with what army?”

Stalker quipped, “Maybe he’s readying for the mutant invasion coming from the Glass Sands, who knows? He was clearly fatally fogged by opium. My condolences. I’m sorry you didn’t find the answers you were hoping for, Jerk. I truly am.”

“Gotta get him in the ground, Jerk.” Petty nodded. “Two days to Tribute.”

The sheriff got the backhoe running and began digging as the other men went inside for the body. He was skinny to begin with, and the opium had made it worse. It was relatively easy work to get him out of his chair, roll him in a sheet and drag him outside. The hole was deep. They rolled the mummy-looking Elway into the grave without any ceremony. No eulogies. No hymns. He was family, but he’d never been close to anyone. In reality he was less of a stranger to the people of Hollister than he was to the Sousas. Jerk stared for a long time, maybe trying to shake some memory loose.

There had been an old Havana Tampa cigar box laid on the man's chest. It was meant for Jerk. Before the grave was filled in, the men sat on the crooked, dust-covered porch and were silent, Stalker and Edison watching for Petty's lead. Petty opened the box. To his partners it seemed like a mash-mash of random junk -- pieces of magazine ads, sports cards, bible pages with highlighted verses. This was a code only Petty and his uncle would understand. Petty explained as he went.

The first thing was a 2014 baseball card for journeyman catcher Drew Butera. That year, he was on the Dodgers who won the National League West. His home run total was three. This was the start of a map. Three clicks West. Next was a coupon for Northern Toilet paper for \$4.00 = four clicks North . A magazine coupon for a Southwest Airlines flight on sale for 10% off. Ten clicks Southwest. And so it went. The contents were kept in order wrapped in a rubber band. All Jerk had to do was lay them out. Why Elway had taken the time to engage in this childhood ritual even Jerk couldn't guess.

"He wanted me to find something. Me and no one else."

"What do you want to do?"

"Guess we finish burying him first." Stan swung up on the backhoe and fired it up. Petty and Stalker stood at the edge of the hole and peered in, hats in hand. Petty shook his head. For a crazy bastard, who lived a crazy life, it all came down to laying at the bottom of a hole wrapped in a sheet. Suddenly he started having flashes. The sound of the motor and the smell of the diesel fumes became razor sharp in his head. Jerk thought he might be having one of his PTSD panic attacks. But then clarity hit him like a church bell.

"Stop!"

Stan turned the engine off and walked over. Petty was stone-faced with concentration. He was mulling something. Something that made his whole countenance appear *tight*. It was the same energy he had under fire, planning a

quick out for his squad. It was there, then it was gone. Petty seemed to ooze back into his natural stance. Just *regular* stiff and straight. He stared hard at the wrapped body in the grave.

“Didja wanna say some words first?” the sheriff offered.

“No.” Jerk put his hat back on.

“When we filled out those papers for the Tribute, we used Emmy’s given name. Right?”

“Yeah. Emmy Sousa. That’s what we wrote.”

“It was stupid. This whole thing is looking stupid. Whoever found her or took her in could have named her anything. Million to one shot at best. Probably no one will show.”

“So?”

“But what if she *was* raised as Emmy Sousa?” Stalker flicked a buckhorn husk off his jacket, “You just said million to one.”

Stan put his huge hands on Petty’s shoulders. “We’ll go. We’ll do Mendoza like we planned. You’re grasping at straws, it is. How would anybody know that little bitty baby’s name?”

“My wife’s sister cross-stitched her name on a baby pillow. *If* they found her in her carrier it’d been under her head. It’s all starting to make sense. Dalton, your dead friend at the border said the runners were kids. You ever hear of a kid runner in all the years this Valley’s been Fenced?”

“No. Always been men.” Stalker’s eyes lit up.

“But if your name was Sousa. And you got asked for at Tribute. Mendoza would want you dead, just to be safe.”

Jerk nodded, then looked up at Stan. “Has The Pussy Wagon ever taken on a pro under eighteen?”

“Jesus H Christ, no. Never. Why?”

“Because while you two were dippin’ your wicks I saw a young girl, ten or eleven, hanging sheets on a line at the back of that bus.” Dalton seemed convinced. “The pussy wagon *is* the only place she could hide. And Katy would be the only person with the balls to hide her.”

The sheriff leaned on the butts of his guns, making old leather creak. “Got to be at the Tribute in two days. Mendoza’s gonna be looking for either you or Elway to show. He wants to close that door permanent, he does. Likely he’d shoot you where you stood his own self. And her later probably. That’s our plan *A*. It’s a half-day’s ride to the bus. And a half a day back. *If* she’s got her own pony. And if she’s not took already. Jerk ain’t the only one that sees things. We’d be pushing it, goin’ back in.”

Stalker was somehow already in the saddle. “I’ll do it.”

Stan looked at Petty, then up to Dalton, drawing a deep breath to reply, but whatever it was got hung up in his throat for a beat. Stalker ran with the silence. “What? I’m a smuggler. This is what I do. I’m allowed around, in unofficial circles anyway. I’ll have night cover the whole way. And dear Kate loves me. I’m your best chance and you know it.”

Petty looked up. “Dear Kate knows about the sat-com.”

“What?”

“Not how we got it. Just that we have it. She was yapping at me...anyway, the thing went off. She got jumpy real quick.”

“*That* was the reason for the bums rush off the bus.”

Jerk nodded. For a few seconds you could almost *hear* the place rusting.

“Doesn’t matter. It’s a hiccup to Odysseus. Katy will listen to me. I’ll get the girl for you.”

Stan stared at the dust, his head shaking the tiniest bit. Jerk had already decided.

“Back here in *one* day.”

“Done. Maybe by then you two will have worked out which continent your uncle there...God rest his soul...was planning to invade. He and Robinson were going to take the Valley by force, I guess. And what are you going to do with the dead Indian in the bathtub behind the house. I’d wager someone’s waiting on him.” Stalker reined his horse around and took off full gallop.

Stan looked at Petty. Jerk shrugged. “You’re the one who clocked him.”

“Welp, if it’s up to me, fuck’m. Didn’t hang around to bury *you*, did he? Anyway, what with the hawks and the coyotes and the blind gophers come tonight, the som’bitch’ll be picked clean by mornin’. That’s more than he ever did for anyone, it is.” Petty nodded at that logic.

The sheriff swung up on the Caterpillar and fired it up. The backhoe’s engine screamed with complaint as Stan filled in the grave. Blue exhaust hung in the heavy twilight air. Petty drew an approximate map from the clues in the cigar box. Hai Phong watched it all from inside an ancient water tower. The sun was just beginning to dip behind the hills.



Chapter 24

It wasn't unusual to find Blackwater officers among the Pussy Wagon's clientele. They always had the credits no matter which Section Katy found herself in. Security paid. The business today with the cowboy was fresh on her mind. The whole business of harboring Emmy was making her unusually itchy, but Dalton riding with partners was unusual to the point of alarm. The truth was Katy was in love with Dalton Stalker. Had been for some time. He wasn't the first but he was the only man she slept with. And he was most certainly the only one who made her *feel* something. At first, it made her uncomfortable, like she was wearing someone else's clothes.

She'd always equated emotion with weakness. It was simply not in her nature to be head over heels for anyone. But Stalker was different. Handsome, obviously. Unselfish in bed would be putting it mildly. But that wasn't it. There was no shortage of good-looking men who could fuck -- it was the basis of her entire enterprise. With him, though, she felt *connected*. Maybe it was the fact that both made their livings in morally questionable ways. Or that they were both wanderers. Or maybe they were just soulmates bound together by the universe.

Whatever the cause, it was real. And though their time together was infrequent, and always too brief for her liking, she felt like she knew him well. He almost always worked alone regardless of the scheme. And there was no love lost between him and Barony strongmen. Yet he showed up with two other riders and a sat-com radio in his saddlebag. Katy McClure did not trust easily, and she was starting to think her feelings had blinded her to something. They'd moved the wagon north on highway 39, toward Merced.

The plan was to overnight here, cross east in the morning and catch the flow of the Section workers heading to the Tribute. It was half-past eight. "Last humps"

had been called. Katy never operated past nightfall. It was just too dangerous. She was in the back showing Emmy how to make sure the clientele found the exit and nothing else on the way out. Skinny waved her over and whispered something in her ear. Katy went cold as she looked to the front of the bus and saw General Charles Saul.

During the war, Saul was a four-star general in command of the entire Northwest Theatre. Now he was Blackwater's Major General and in charge of all the forces on the Valley floor. Also, he was one of her regulars. Saul was a happily married man of forty years to his wife Evelyn. He didn't visit the wagon for sex. But he found it invaluable as a confessional, given Katy's strict privacy guarantees. He would just sit and talk. All the girl had to do was be pretty and listen. After awhile when he felt unburdened, he'd leave and pay full price. He was the easiest customer of all time. And the scariest.

He was on her bus, the head of the apparatus engaged to bring Emmy in, and he was looking right at her. "General Saul. What fortunate winds have blown you to my door. Haven't seen you in awhile."

"No. I've been quite busy. And who is this?"

"Ah, yes, my niece Abbey. My sister in Earlimart passed. Cancer. The father is out of the picture so I've taken her on as family intern, so to speak. Teach her the trade. I'm not going to live forever, right? Say hello to the General, Abbey."

Emmy extended her hand. "Pleasure to meet you, sir."

"The pleasure is mine." The General kissed Emmy's hand and let it go.

"I'll see if Cecily is free..."

"No need. I think Abbey here would be a nice change of pace, don't you?"

"She's off-limits to customers."

"Let's put her on-limits," Saul said, smiling with the assuredness that things would go as he wanted.

“Give me five minutes to set up and explain, Abbey being new and all.”

“Of course. Take your time.”

Katy calmly steered Emmy into a curtained bunk. The child’s eyes were as wise as saucers. “Take a deep breath. One more. Good. All he does is talk. No sex of any kind. You sit here and keep the panic off your face and listen to his problems and occasionally throw in a ‘That sounds terrible’ or ‘I can see why that would be upsetting.’ In thirty minutes or so it’ll all be over. Can you do this?”

Emmy was white as a sheet, but she nodded her head and arranged her skirts so she could sit comfortably. Katy stepped out and waved the General in. She closed the curtain and stood just outside. Inside, the general sat on a small stool and looked at Emmy. She thought he looked tired, but not evil. And so began Charles Saul’s Litany.

“I’m sure you don’t know this, but it’s my responsibility to the Barons to keep the peace across the whole Valley. It can get hard sometimes. It’s not the big things. It’s the little political things that I have to get involved with that cause me the most amount of stress. For example, Baron Foster, he runs the railroad, and there is a ten foot easement on either side of the tracks, and I had an hour and a half argument about who’s responsibility was it to secure those ten feet, the railroad or the Barony the train passes through. Well, there are security on the train, aren’t there?”

“That sounds terrible.”

“Well, it was a terrible waste of my time. Security is doing its job all along the Fence. The oilfields are protected, the water-works and irrigation is protected. All the Sections of food are protected. And with the control of these things and the steady influx of migrants for labor, the Valley as far as I know is thriving. But every time there’s a dust up between Baronial security and Blackwater forces -- who gets what guns, or who gets what Section of Fence, or who gets Corridor

patrol -- it's all just complaints upon complaints. And it makes me weary. How did you find security as a citizen in...where was it?

“Earlimart.”

“Right. What Section did you work?”

“Oh, I worked in town at the company store. Still a little too short to pick corn or even cotton, so. My mom and I had a room above the store. Then she got sick....”

The General moved from the stool to the end of the bed. “We don’t have to go over that. I’m sure it’s painful for you. Plus I’m the one supposed to be letting off steam here. Which brings me to Baron Wright. The irrigation feuds happen every day. They often come to blows, so up the chain of command it goes and if it can’t be decided I got to get in a convoy and ride out and do crowd control, which I hate, I don’t mean to boast, but I was a highly decorated officer in the war. Now I’m breaking up fistfights over water rights.” The General slid closer and ran a hand up Emmy’s skirt. Never breaking the cadence of his talk, with the other hand he pulled out a snub nosed .38 and made a shushing sound using the barrel as a defect finger.

He laid the gun on the bed. “Of course every security man wants a raise. We have a big budget but I have too many employees to give even a small raise....”

The general ran his calloused hands up Emmy’s leg and over her panties. Again without breaking the cadence of his talking he turned her face down on the bed fully clothed. He slid his hands under her dress and massaged her barely budding breasts. He laid on top of her. His weight drove half the air out of her lungs. And the stink of his sweat would be stuck in Emmy’s memory forever.

“I’ll be honest, I have a moral compunction with the oligarch tactics the Barons use, especially Mendoza, but I turn a blind eye, because technically, they’re my bosses. The way the president used to be. They keep me well paid, and listen to

my tactical advice and give me a lot of lease.” Saul pulled up Emmy’s skirt. He left his pants on. But positioned his hard-on right in the crack of Emmy’s backside. He didn’t penetrate her. He just had one nasty dry hump. Emmy closed her eyes and tried to think of something else, but he just kept thrusting.

She’d heard the older boys talking about penises and sex. She hadn’t heard about this. The general ground himself into her back and forth over and over to the point where it began to hurt. She thought she might be bleeding from the friction. He never stopped talking. The humping reached a fevered pitch then stopped suddenly. When he got off of her she used the sheets to dry the tears off her face. She didn’t want Katy to know. She felt like her humiliation might be infectious.

Without missing a beat the General sat back down on the stool, sweaty, with a load in his boxers, and concluded. “...I suppose I’m lucky to be where I am. But I’m a warrior. And it was never tedious and small like this and I guess that just gets under my skin. So these talks really help. Thank you for listening.” Saul stuck his head out of the curtain. Emmy took that moment to grab the .38 and jam it in her boot.

“Hey, Skinny, you got any duct tape? I’m starting to get a tear in this belt. Can’t look very General-like with your pants around your ankles.”

Katy stood by, smile on her face as Skinny handed Saul a roll of tape. Suddenly Saul grabbed up Emmy and taped her wrists and her calves together.

“Saul. What are you doing?”

“What’s it look like, Katy? I’m binding Mendoza’s runner. You’re an only child. And the hands on this kid are field hands, cotton by the looks of it. Never spent a day in her life in a store. I’m taking her to Tribute, where I’ll make enough off of this to retire permanently.”

“General, do you have a boner? Is that what that is? Looking at little girls in dresses turns you on? Oh my, what would Evelyn say? Why don’t we just get a radio and..”

“Save it. She died two weeks ago, God Rest Her Soul.” He stopped and swallowed the emotional hitch in his throat. “Anyway, I don’t know why Mendoza wants her. I don’t care. Even you don’t have the nuts to shoot a major general. You so much as cross your eyes at me, I’ll have you shut down by sunup and all these bitches, including you, working in the Sections. So here’s what’s gonna happen. You’re gonna let me off this bus with my prize, and as a merciful show of gratitude I will not mention you or the Pussy Wagon as playing any part in this. That’s more’n fair.”

With that, the General threw Emmy over his shoulder and walked cautiously off the bus. He put her in the back of his Humvee and drove away. The rage was eating Katy alive. There were no words. If there was anything to do it couldn’t happen until day break. She began hardening her heart. When she heard hoofbeats approaching. Skinny announced from the front window, “It’s Dalton.” Katy made for the door and the cover of night and completely fell apart in her lover’s arms.



Chapter 25

Manny Mendoza sat at his kitchen table taking off his boots. The phone rang. The instinctive anger that swelled up in him at the sound made him turn beat red and his hands began to shake. “Benny! Answer that and make ‘em wait til I call ya, hear?”

“You got it, boss.”

The Baron pulled out his Copenhagen can and flicked it a couple of times. He put in a dip and waited for the opium kick. No matter who was at the end of the line he wasn’t going to have this conversation sober. Probably Phong had seen the flame thrower on his front door and wanted to chat. “Benny!”

The house man brought the phone on a long cord and set it gently in front of Mendoza. He handed over the receiver. “It’s late. This better be good. ... Well, hey, there, General Saul, to what do I owe the honor? ... You’re shittin’ me! Where? ... Los Banos? No kidding. Where was she holed up? ... Just going tree to tree, huh? She give you a name? Abbey what? ... Earlimart?... Yeah. “No no no. Too close to the Tribute now. New Baker ain’t change the list if they know she’s alive. Just bring her here. If she’s what I think she is, I wanna see who she draws in. We’ll get him close, pretend to barter blah blah. I kill him. Keep her. Then you can do whatever you want with the rest of it. Whatcha say to that? Looks like someone’s gonna be getting an early Christmas bonus. ... Well, don’t thank me just yet. Any your guys near Los Banos are gonna have to be banished. Can’t have security men who can’t find a little girl hiding behind trees. I expect more and so should you. ... No, shootin’ em would be bad for morale. No, it’s banishment. And I want you to do it. It adds irony in the narrative, see? Sends a message. See you in a few. And Charles, it’d be wise not to let me catch you in a lie. But I’m sure her story’s gonna match yours perfectly. Lock her in your vehicle and come up to the house. We’ll

get some business done, then we'll talk to Abbey or Emmy or whoever she is. Okay?"

The Baron hung up the phone and looked at Benny, who was, as always, at the ready.

"Whataya know. Good news on that sonofabitch for the first time all fuckin' week! Better put on some coffee, we're gonna have a late one."

Benny shuffled to the kitchen. And Mendoza found himself worried about Matthias for the first time in his life. He'd have to let that lie until tomorrow.



Chapter 26

Stalker got the download from Katy, whom he'd never seen so distraught. He borrowed a fresh horse off the stringer and made a beeline for Hanford. He was sure he could get there first. General Saul had to use the roads in that ridiculous Hummer. Couldn't off-road anywhere in the Valley, it would sink to the axles instantly in the lake-bottom soil. Stalker could cut through the Sections on horseback in a straight line to Hanford, picking up valuable minutes. His mount was frothing when he got there.

He tied it to an oak limb, then skirted the outer ring of security in the woods at the edge of Mendoza's property. The security squad's timing was predictable and no one was using their night vision. Stalker quietly worked his way to the edge of the driveway, which would be visible by sentries on the roof and the patrol around the house. He needed luck. And he got it, when minutes later, General Saul pulled his vehicle within a yard of one of the huge halogen ground lamps that lit the property. Stalker slithered to the huge light and made himself as small as he could behind it.

He'd be invisible to anyone looking his way. The light was just too blinding to look straight at. General Saul got out and walked the formidable distance to Mendoza's front door. Emmy wasn't with him. The Humvee was parked with the loading-door side facing Stalker. More luck. After a security pass he carefully made his way to the vehicle. He easily picked the padlock on the loading door and slid inside. There, hunched in the back was Emmy Sousa, wrists taped together and a .38 awkwardly pointed in his direction.

"Who are you?"

"Whoa whoa. Gimme that." Dalton grabbed the gun out of Emmy's hands. "You want to shoot someone with this model, you have to have the hammer

cocked.” Dalton demonstrated. He showed Emmy how to turn the safety on and off and put the gun back in her boot, where he figured she’d had it stashed. She was smart. But the experience with Saul had clearly broken her. So Stalker proceeded extra calmly.

“You’re a smart girl, keep that in your boot. I’m a friend of Katy’s. I don’t have much time. Day after tomorrow at the Tribute they’re going to put you out on riser next to Baron Mendoza. The Placer County sheriff, a man by the name of Stan Edison, is going to try and barter for you.”

“I don’t understand what’s going on?!!” Tears were beginning to form again, only these tears seemed driven by rage.

“You’ve heard of the hundred-acre massacre?”

“No, I ain’t.”

“We’ll get to that later. You and your father were the only survivors.”

“I already have a family on Section 440. I want to go *home*.”

“Honey, this is your biological father. And he’s been looking for you for a very long time. He looked for you that night but was taken out by...”

“The Indian.”

“That’s right.”

“I’m not an orphan?”

“No, darlin’, you aren’t. You have a father. Only Mendoza doesn’t want you two together. I’ve got a few minutes left. Are you listening?” Emmy nodded her head, screwing up her face with concentration. “No matter what happens on that Tribute riser, I will be in the front row. Look for me. This blonde hat. This purple shirt. Anything at all goes funny, you jump to me. I’ll catch you. I’ll catch you and get you out of there. You can trust me. Got it?” Emmy nodded again.

“You keep that gun hidden. Don’t let Mendoza’s goons find it.” And with that, Dalton Stalker closed the loading door and locked the padlock, just as

Mendoza and Saul were heading out the front door. He made his way back through the dark timing the patrols, which was an exercise in patience. Finally, he made it back to his mount. He couldn't push this horse any further, so he unsaddled it and let it go. Then Stalker broke the worst law you could break, and stole a nice quarter horse from Mendoza's corral, swapped on his saddle and rode like hell to Elway's.

The Baron and the General were in good spirits as they walked to the vehicle. General Saul was a little pale, maybe from smoking the cigar Mendoza had given him, maybe from fear Emmy wouldn't back his play. Saul unlocked the lock and Mendoza peered into the shadows in the back to see a little waify thing. He reached in with his big hands and gently lifted her out.

He sat on his haunches so he could look her in the eye. "Everthing's gonna be alright. We'll get you cleaned up and fed and rested for the Tribute coming up."

Manny took out his Old Timer pocket knife and cut the duct tape off Emmy's arms and legs. Manny looked up at the General. "Jesus, Charles, you think you used enough. Is she the Unabomber, for fuck's sakes? 'Scuse my French there, darlin'."

Still looking into Emmy's eyes, Mendoza almost whispered, "I just want to know what happened. The truth. That's it."

"I live out on Section 440..."

"That's cotton, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. Anyway, my picking partner Brydon got stung by a pack saddle worm and he screamed and screamed. And a Blackwater killed his dad who was just comin' to help." Big tears crested and spilled over. They kept coming. Her throat was tight but she managed to get words out.

"I heard about that."

"Next day, we...we hid in the bayou because some Indian man came to kill that Blackwater and he was real cruel about it...and, and we were just so scared th-

that it was all o-o-o-our *fault*. And I thought he was gonna kill us, too. So, we ran...ran. I'm s-s-sorry, Baron."

"It wasn't your fault."

"A dire wolf got Brydon." Her chest heaved for a few minutes, big teardrops audibly hitting the driveway. "I made it to a culvert."

"I see. Exeter to Los Banos on foot in two days is quite a feat. That's over fifty miles."

"I stole a horse." More heaving. "I know that's wrong. Please don't hang me. I'm...I'm sorry. Awful sorry." Mendoza pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and handed it to Emmy, who mopped her face as best she could while she caught her breath.

"Now, now. You don't worry about that now."

"I rode him through the groves until it got dark. I let him go. I thought he'd find his way home probably. Then I walked. It was so dark, I thought no one would see me, 'specially in the trees."

"Infrared, kid," Charles said. "We don't mess around."

"Thank you, General. You can take your leave," Mendoza said, giving him a withering look of dismissal. He closed the door on the Humvee, then walked around, got in and started it up. Mendoza waited for Saul to get to the town road before he spoke to the child again.

"We *have* been looking for you, honey, not to kill you. Those things you hear in the Sections is people talkin' is all, it's not like that. Someone has asked to trade for you at the Tribute. That's good news, right? We needed to find you, that's all. And here you are. General Saul, he ought not to have been so fuckin' rough with you. He got a talkin' to from me, you can bet your ass on *that*."

The Baron caught himself. "Sorry. I cuss a little."

"You cuss a lot."

Neither of them could help chuckling at that. The sudden release of tension caused Emmy to faint on the spot. Manny caught her in his beefy arms, picked her up and carried her gingerly to the house.



Chapter 27

Two-handed Uno is less than exciting. But it helps pass the time. Neither Jerk or Stan was much for sleeping tonight. They needed daylight to put together Elway's loony map coordinates. They found a bottle of cheap tequila among his things. They sat and drank at his kitchen table in the light of a kerosene lamp on peeling linoleum, just playing Uno cards on the pile without thinking. Jerk cleared his throat.

"Need to tell you something. About that night."

"No, you don't."

"Not only did I not fire a shot, when I got there I froze. Like a fresh grunt on his first patrol. So much blood. Never seen anything like it before or since. I found Susan. She'd been shot in the head."

"I'm sorry you had to see that."

"She'd be mad as hell at me now, though. I knew I should have been turning the place over to find Emmy. Susan surely would've stashed her someplace. But I couldn't move. I don't know how long I stood there. The Indian had all day to swing that post at me. By the time you found me it was too late."

"I didn't know."

"So even a one percent chance that she survived is enough for me. I haven't been making strategic decisions. My emotions are overriding my better judgment. You came when I asked you. No questions asked. You're a good friend, Stan. If she's my Emmy I owe her a debt I'll never be able to pay."

"You'll do your damndest knowin' you, it is. 'Course I came. Didn't need a reason. Anyway, it'll be decided one way or tu'other in a few days. I hope things break our way. I do. Fuckin' Uno, by the way." Jerk lost. Again. Stan shuffled the cards, and said, "All this new flimsy information, I don't believe it's gonna pan

out. Between you and me the original plan stands. I give Mendoza my present, he gives me the girl. We walk into the crowd. You give him *your* present. Easy peasy Japanesy. Anything else happens, we improvise, roger that?"

Jerk nodded in agreement as he looked at his crappy hand. The night went on like this for hours and hours. It was windy out and the house was so out of square everywhere, it whistled like a preschooler on a recorder. Sometime around three they heard a loud thump and some scratching at the back of the house where Blackwater's body was last seen in a claw foot tub. "Probably a bobcat. The ones from the foothills have gotten bigger and meaner."

What they didn't hear a minute later was a pickup starting and driving away into the night.

"This map of Elway's better be worth it. We got a pussy hair's worth of time to check it out, we do."

"Elway was lots of things. Lazy was at the top. I'm sure he didn't make this much effort for nothing."

Just before day break, Petty and Edison herd the sounds of hoofbeats approaching. They drew and took cover. Dalton Stalker burst through the crooked front door and said, "They have her."

"What?!"

"General Saul shows up at the wagon, for a regular visit just as they're shutting down for the night... We're talking Henry the Fifth odds here..."

"Spill it, godammit," Stan spat.

"Long story short, he makes Emmy. Trusses her up and drives her straight to Mendoza's. I follow, of course, on a tangent that gets me there first. He goes in the house. I jimmy his hummer open and told her if anything at the Tribute goes hinky -- say Mendoza gets shot with a long range rifle -- she's to jump to me. I can get

her through the crowd. We just need to agree on a rendezvous point no one will think to look. I'm so sorry, Jerk, I was ten minutes too late."

"Fuck."

"The good news is she's real. She seems to be holding it together. And Manny can't touch her now. Too many witnesses. Too close to the Tribute. And she's in his compound, which ironically is the safest place she can be right now."

"Welp. Looks like it's back to fuckin' plan A. Uno."

"No use showing up early, any of us could be made by those Blackwater boys, especially Clark Gable here. Stan wagged his head at Stalker. "And they'll be thick as gnats too, it is."

"Sun's well up, let's see what Elway was on about." They could have taken one of the vehicles and saved a lot of time, but the horses were more flexible and reliable. They mounted up and Jerk called out directions, Stan used a military grade compass to navigate. For the first few hours they wandered apparently aimlessly through buck brush and dead bentgrass. They doubled back over the same dry wash twice, but after a few hours of going in circles, they found the destination. It wasn't what anyone expected.

Dug straight into the side of a large foothill was a ten-by-ten tunnel. The excavator used to move the earth was nearby piled with Sandbar willow branches to hide it. From whom? Who knew? Anything was possible when it came to Elway. There was no telling how deep the tunnel went. But it was properly reinforced with 4x6 timber on the sides and across the top. The tunnel angled down so even the tactical LEDs couldn't penetrate the darkness. There were plenty of vehicle tracks leading out, so obviously Elway had been back and forth safely a dozen times. The riders had no choice but to go in.

About four hundred yards or so into the earth the tunnel became a giant metal culvert pipe. Suddenly Jerk knew where they were. Before the war broke

out, the State of California had been in a drought for thirty years. Finally plans were drawn up by the government in Sacramento to build a giant de-salinization project. This giant intake pipe had been the first step. The plant was to come after. The taxpayers were apoplectic. But then the invasion happened and all plans were tossed to the wind. Elway must have gotten ahold of a surveyor's map, and knew where the pipe was meant to break through. He'd dug the football-field-length DWP engineers didn't get to and finished the job. It was a few miles of downgrade in total darkness before a light appeared at the end of the tunnel. The three men exited and found themselves on the beach at the southern end of Monterey Bay.

What they saw was inconceivable. Listing on a sand bar a half-mile out was a Nimitz class aircraft carrier. She'd likely taken bad damage at sea, torpedo maybe. The captain would have made for a port like this. But she must have been boarded and her crew killed or captured. The tide must have drifted the giant to her current position long ago. Up and down the beach, troop carriers, amphibious landing craft, and light armored vehicles lay everywhere. Elway had found the holy grail of military leftovers. He had his pick of munitions. An endless supply of diesel. And all the M52-based assault vehicles he could ever ask for. Apparently, Elway figured he could topple the autocracy inside the Fence all by himself with sheer firepower. He'd have tried it, too. Even crazier is that neither Petty, Edison, or Stalker had ever once heard mention of a battle on Monterey Beach.

As war theaters went, this was a worst-case scenario. The beach was thin in both directions with fifty-foot cliff-faces running straight up. The gigantic intake pipe had probably looked like their last hope, a perfect back door to the safety of the Valley. But the escaping troops would have found it impassible. It had never been completed. Not until Elway dug through the last quarter mile, which would have been years later. Trapped, they'd have been easy targets from air and sea. An American Normandy. The three men checked the bodies for sidearms or radios, but

Elway had already taken anything easily reachable. And, apparently, quite a few things that weren't. While it quietly offended their veteran sensibilities, there were too many corpses to bury. The gulls, then years of salt air had left little behind anyway. Bleached bones in tattered uniforms.

Jerk could see now why his drug-addled thief of an uncle had gone to such lengths to code the map. A man with a Zodiac could make an invincible escape, north or south, without leaving so much as a footprint behind. It was a good bet in one of his tin shacks, or under a stack of alfalfa, there was a pontoon boat with twin Evinrudes and plenty of gasoline. But they didn't have time for that now. They would be leaving for the Tribute in the morning. But one thing was sure. "That rendezvous point you were talking about, Stalker? This'll do."

Edison and Stalker both nodded silently. The three riders mounted, took one long last look at the Nimitz -- the scale was mind-bending, let alone the fact she'd been scuttled by any enemy -- then rode back up into the corrugated tunnel. Hai Phong's silhouette went unnoticed on the cliff edge above their heads.



Chapter 28

Emmy struggled awake from a murky dream. She opened her eyes and a wave of panic washed over her. For an instant she had no idea where she was. The disorientation made her stomach do flip-flops. Then she looked at the floor. There lay her filthy clothes from the day before, and everything came rushing back to her. She was at the Baron's house. How she got into this room, she had no memory. Someone had put a large white t-shirt on her, so large it made a fair nightgown. She began to take in her strange surroundings. For starters, the bed she was in would fill half her bunkhouse.

And it was soft. So soft. She'd seen some of the foremen had mattresses. When she was little she bounced up and down on them with the other kids. The sheets were clean and soft. And there was some kind of puffy blanket or cover on top. There were four pillows. *Four*. She threw back the covers and hopped out of bed. It was a bigger jump than she figured on.

It should have been freezing cold. It wasn't. The room was toasty warm. She could feel the air coming from a vent in the ceiling, which was smooth and white. As were the walls. There was a door in one corner. She opened it and another room appeared. A bathroom as pristine as if the tiles had just been laid. There were *two* sinks. And a giant mirror. She stared at herself for quite some time. She didn't know the person in that reflection. There was a spotless toilet. And a shower with an impossibly thick glass door. Even with never having seen anything like it, Emmy didn't hesitate. She took the t-shirt off and walked in and turned the knob with an 'H' on it. Hot water shot out with good pressure. Too hot. So she added a little 'C' until it was just right. She sat on the floor of the shower and let the soothing water wash over her. She cried and cried.

When she felt better, she used the soap and shampoo she found in the shower caddy to scrub herself clean. By the time she finished, the water was getting lukewarm. She got out, dried off, and wrapped herself in the biggest, softest towel she'd ever seen. The reflection in the mirror was still a stranger to her. Only now the stranger had red, puffy eyes. She suddenly remembered something and sprinted back to her bed. She reached into her boot and found the .38. She jammed it deep between the mattress and box spring. She went to the door of her room and listened. The house was quiet. Emmy eased the door open and walked along the third floor hallway. She counted six rooms just like hers. There was fancy furniture here and there and big, framed paintings on the walls. It was like a house out of a fairy-tale book.

Only her mood didn't lighten. With each new discovery, it got darker and darker. She was trying to slip quietly into her room when the voice of the Baron startled her nearly out of her skin. "There she is. And pretty as a picture. Sleep okay? See you found the shower okay."

Emmy nodded.

"Well, you must be just about starved from the goddamn travails of yesterday, I expect. There's breakfast downstairs. I'm gonna have Lupita bring you a dress'a her daughter's. She's a little bigger'n you but, it's just so you don't have to eat breakfast in a towel, okay? Later, I'll have Benny drive you into town and you can pick out whatever clothes suit your fancy. Okay?"

Emmy nodded again. "And, no offense, I'ma have Lupita just burn them clothes you's wearin' before. Beyond saving, she tells me."

"Okay, Baron."

"Good. Down in five, hear?"

The dress was homespun, and not too big. Emmy tentatively made her way down the stair case. The railing was a dark wood, highly polished. She'd seen old

furniture made of walnut, which she knew became expensive after the war. The stone on the steps looked like some kind of pink marble. The first floor looked like a faded postcard she'd seen once of Buckingham Palace, with lots of gold and filigree and furniture that didn't look like for sitting. Throw rugs with intricate patterns were everywhere. And lots of pointless glass baubles you might see in one of the pre-war magazines in town.

She looked above and saw a third floor just as huge as the one her room was on. She walked to the bottom of the stairs and turned toward the delicious smells of breakfast. There was a big room *before* the dining room. There was a pool table. She'd seen one in town once in the bar. This one looked like it had never been used. On a table in the middle of the room was a square piece of marble made of smaller black and white squares. On some of those squares there were hand-carved figurines, one set in black and one in white. She recognized the horses. Everything else was a mystery.

Manny leaned down and scared her for the second time this morning. For a fat man, he moved like a ghost. "Pretty, ain't it?"

Emmy nodded.

"You play?"

"Play...?"

"Chess. Oh, sorry, I imagine the Sections got no time for chess."

"I don't play, sir."

"Ha. Neither do I! This set is from China and I just had to have it. No idea what the rules are."

"We play checkers sometimes."

Manny ruffled her hair dismissively. "Course ya do." They walked into the dining room. The table was long enough to seat fifty people at least. It looked hand carved and heavy. The chairs were red velvet and gold. She and the baron sat at

one end together. The spread on the polished table far outdid the best Thanksgiving she'd ever seen. She sat, and Benny asked what she would like.

"Whatever we're having."

Mendoza laughed. "You just tell Benny here what you want and he'll bring it to you."

"Oh, eggs?"

"How would you like them?"

Emmy looked at the baron for some help. He turned to Benny. "Couple fried eggs, couple pancakes, bacon, home fries and orange juice. That sound good to you, kid?" Emmy could only nod in astonishment. Benny served her everything she asked for on bone china, and Emmy could tell her knife and fork were real silver. Her mood was getting blacker.

There was very little conversation, so Emmy ventured, "How many people live here?"

"Just me. Benny and Lupita have rooms and a few other domestics. I don't know where the security guys sleep. So long as they show up armed on schedule, I don't much give a shit. Pardon my French . Whole thing sits on ten acres." At that moment something deep in Emmy snapped. That had happened a couple of times in the last forty-eight hours. The meal was the best she'd ever had. Later that afternoon, as promised, Benny drove her into Hanford township. She picked out a checked flannel shirt and a pair of denim overalls -- she wanted as many pockets as possible -- and a new pair of boots.

She had her hair washed and cut to be somewhat presentable. She asked Benny to stop at the general store. They had a dog-eared copy of "Tuck Everlasting." She permitted herself this indulgence and traded the necessary field credits. She would try reading herself to sleep tonight, but she doubted it would work. Lunch and dinner were a repeat of breakfast. Silver. More food than two

people could eat. Most of the dishes she'd never heard of, though they were delicious. As she headed up to bed, The Baron shouted up, "Leaving at five am to get everything in place at the Tribute. I'll have Benny wake you. Copy that?"

"Yes, sir."

Mendoza hated himself for being this nice, knowing tomorrow he'd likely welsh on the trade, keep the offering and the girl. He'd have her killed a little later. But gently. He genuinely hated kids of all ages. But despite the fact that Emmy was a Sousa, and therefore a threat, he'd taken a shine to the kid.

Upstairs, Emmy tried to distract herself with her new book, but she was overcome by an entirely new emotion. Hatred. How could one man have so much when so many thousands had so little by comparison. It took a few hours, but she fell asleep, unconsciously pulling fury down with her into dreamland.



Chapter 29

Tribute morning broke clear and cold. The South Gate, a pair of forty-foot wrought iron doors, were open. The southern end of the Fence East and West ended here. The gate spanned the two northbound lanes of the old 99 Freeway just to the Valley side of the ghost town that used to be Laton. Scaffolding had been set up to keep the Barons above the fray. There were gallows erected using old barn planking and framing. And to show off the electric grid, a sound system blared mostly Merle Haggard, Johnny Cash, and local legend Buck Owens.

In the beginning, Tribute Day was modeled after all the similar gatherings that happened throughout history back to ancient Europe, especially England and France. But examples could be found as far and wide as Nordic Vikings and Mongolia. The basic idea was to have a day of public benevolence, where lower lords and land holders were heard by the King or whatever despot occupied the throne. A few requests would be granted to randomly chosen peasants, followed by free entertainment, jousting, swordplay, maybe even a stage performance of some kind.

Tribute started out as a day of benevolence to elevate the people's opinions of the Barons. But it devolved pretty quickly year after year. Of the post-war population in the Valley, nearly a million-and-a-half lived inside the Fence. The dead the war took were replenished with refugees. Roughly another half-million to a million made their homes in the Corridors. In the west, rolling foothills north to south that ran straight up into the granite and thick trees of the Sierra Nevada range. In the east, rocky rolling hillsides that puffed up to the Coastal Range most of which ended in sheer cliffs at the Pacific Ocean. Both Corridors were the color of the wheat in Van Gogh's painting due to the drought. There were communities, and families, but no law. Cut off from the Valley, goods and food either had to be

bartered for, bought at inflated prices on the black market, or hunted. There were few county roads. There were decent houses. People were protective of what little they had, and that often led to violence. It wasn't the life of plenty on the valley floor. People were poor but at least they were free to come and go as they pleased. No wayf could say that.

Tribute generally attracted twenty to thirty thousand attendees. The crowd was a generally filthy mixture of former Burning Man types: con men, trinket sellers, opium pushers, drifters and gypsies. It would have felt almost throwback cool -- the kind of crowd once found at a Coachella show in pre-war days. Only most of the thousands were either blotto on opium, or dangerous with a knife or gun. And everybody wanted *something* out of this day. Thieves abounded. As well as a mob who just liked to see hangings for entertainment.

The whole thing had the energy of a macabre county fair. There was dust and dirt that had settled on the 99 over the course of a year in the air everywhere. It was a cacophony of voices, snake oil pitchmen, and acoustic country groups playing every few hundred yards. If it was a county fair, it was underneath barely contained chaos. Security was thick around the gate and the Valley side of the Fence. Shoulder to shoulder in some places. Verbal skirmishes and some physical ones went on throughout the day. Valley dwellers and Corridor dwellers hated each other like Hatfields and McCoys. Every year there were a few stabbings through the Fence.

The numbers of security on the Fence was something Petty had counted on. No patrols out his way. He was on the outer berm of the train tracks that ran parallel to the southbound lanes. About 600 yards from where Mendoza would be sitting. Well within the Remington's reach. No train today. George Dean Foster would be gathering with the other Barons on the make-shift dais. Another thing Petty had counted on. Jerk watched through the scope as the day developed. It was

minor bedlam from sunup to about eleven a.m., when a line started forming at the steps that led up to the Baron's seats.

He could see his sheriff friend running over the conversation in his mind like they'd rehearsed. Of course, his lips moved while he did it. At 11:15 the Barons filed out on the dais. There was a mixture of cheering and booing. Mendoza grabbed the microphone and said, "Happy Tribute Day!!!" This got some cheering and somewhat focused the crowd to the proceedings. "We will begin with Baron Wright. One tribute. One execution."

An engineer named Pierre Parisot stepped up to the Baron and offered his grandfather's Patek Phillipe, the only thing he had of value, to come inside the Fence and work on the hydro generators that provided the Valley's electricity. Wright waived him through. And pocketed the watch, of course.

A second man stepped up by the name of Allan Carson. Wright took the microphone from Manny and announced, "For the crime of diverting water to the Corridor for personal profit, you will be hanged from the neck until you are dead." The crowd cheered. Two security men escorted Carson to the gallows, put a cord around his neck and a hood over his head. A lever was pulled and the extension cord went stiff with the weight of the body breaking the neck instantly. The crowd applauded.

Next was Cheney. He accepted a tribute from a strong young man he needed as a roustabout in his northern oilfield. He also executed two men for being drunk at one of his refinery IFR tanks. He shot them in the back of the head. More cheering.

George Foster accepted three Tributes to work on his rail line. No one knew what the offer was, but gemstones, a copy of Action Comics #1, illegal ivory...It could have been anything. Foster was a hoarder with expensive tastes.

Manny was next. Standing by his side was Emmy, dressed in overalls. As Petty watched through the scope, he saw Stan unscrew the cap on the tube and unroll the painting. On the dais Mendoza turned to Wright and said, “What the fuck is this?”

“That, my friend looks like an original Van Gogh. Pretty sure it’s one of his famous works.”

The way Foster was drooling, Manny knew he had something. “How much something like this go for?”

“Manny, it’s a priceless work of art. If there were still auction houses, tens of millions, maybe hundreds. It’s not really the kind of thing you sell.”

Through the scope, Petty saw Mendoza carefully roll the painting back into the tube. He exchanged a few words with the sheriff, then, motioned in the upper right hand quadrant of the crosshairs. Matthias Blackfeather jumped out from behind Mendoza and whipped a machete across Stan’s neck, sending blood flying everywhere. The big man clutched at his throat. Then, in seconds, the Placer County sheriff fell dead back into the crowd, which moved to let him hit the tarmac.

Jerk put a .308 slug in the middle of the Indian’s forehead, which exploded like a ripe pumpkin. The sonofabitch was gonna stay dead this time. Pandemonium was breaking out. People were starting to panic and run. Emmy was already leaping into Stalker’s arms. Petty pointed the scope back toward his intended target. He looked for -- and had for a split second -- a head shot. But the fat bastard moved at the last second making a grab for Emmy, and instead he got a .38mm hole in his shoulder.

The second shot gave away his position. He could hear the quad runners starting up. He looked through the scope for another few seconds, hoping the

crosshairs would reveal a fatal shot of some kind, but security was surrounding the Barons and moving them to safety. He was out of time.

Jerk grabbed the Remington and jammed it into the scabbard attached to his saddle. He had to think quickly. There were two choices. Run up the Western Corridor, the direction security would be deploying based on the sound of his shots, and toward the rendezvous point. Or back through the Tribute crowd and up the Eastern Corridor to Nora's to regroup. Either way, he'd probably take on some fire. He didn't care. The cold fury of Stan's assassination made him numb to everything but the mission. Petty grabbed the reins and walked calmly into the chaos that the Tribute had turned into. He was bumped and grabbed at but he used his horse to make a hole for him to get through the crowd. It took about twenty maddening minutes. But he finally reached the eastbound Fence which ran for about twelve miles before the 90-degree corner that opened the north passage into the Eastern Corridor.

The Fence was thick with Blackwaters. But Jerk didn't get much hassle. A man guilty of an assassination attempt wouldn't be walking his mount at a snail's pace in full view of security. The first sign of trouble came at the corner. Two Blackwaters stood sentry on either side of the road. The Alpha made his way to Petty's mount and noted the Remington.

"Nice gun."

"Thanks."

"You use it for deer and such?"

"At 800 yards?"

"Yeah."

"Know what I think. This'd be a perfect weapon for an assassination. Mind if I take a look? Keep a barrel on him, Thompkins." The Blackwater pulled the

Remington out of the scabbard, opened the action and sniffed. The acrid smell of fresh gunpowder was giving away that the rifle had been fired recently.

“I’ll be damned. Looks like we got ourselves the shooter. He went for the radio and Jerk pulled both pistols on his hips and shot both men in the chest. He mounted and took off in a gallop. He took some fire from behind, but he was flying. Five hundred yards out from the first sentry, he pulled the Remington and hit him with a head shot he never saw coming. Jerk dismounted, stepped over the fence and began to think there was a God in Heaven. This gaudy Blackwater bastard was armed with an A15 with a Sig Sauer silencer and a Leupold scope. Way overdone for a fence sentry but perfect for what Petty needed to pull off. He dropped the Remington and loaded the AR, as well as three magazines and a sat-com radio.

He put his horse into a gallop, kept about fifty yards from the Fence and every half mile, he blew the head off a Blackwater. No noise, no warning, just death. This went on like clockwork for fifty miles. Petty was locked in like the soldier he used to be. Shoot, move. Shoot, move. Thirty-two dead in all. At the thirty-third, a shift change was underway. The sun was setting. Petty shot the sentry but the replacement got off a couple of rounds before Petty blew his head off, too. Finally, he reined his horse away from the Fence and slowed to a trot up the road to Oakhurst.

As night fell, the adrenaline dissipated. Petty, who’d been hit several times was barely in the saddle, draped over his horse’s neck. He’d lost a lot of blood. As he hit Main Street, Charlie, Nora’s head of security, grabbed the reins and walked Jerk to the lee side of Shellie’s. Charlie paused and winced for a minute, then got on the sat-com.

“Um, Nora, this is S1 over.” There was a solid two minute pause.

“Charlie, it’s after midnight. Unless someone’s dying, I’m a KILL you.”

“Um ,yes, ma’am, I think someone *is* dying. The skinny cowboy with the scar, he don’t look so good. You should get down here. Over.”

In short order Nora was at the side entrance. Without any sense of panic, she started giving out orders to her men.

“You. Boil some water. You two find the cleanest blanket you can and lay it on the bar. Charlie, I’ma need some light. See if we have any of those old military halogens someplace.”

Nora leaned down to Jerk’s face. He was pale but conscious, and in a lot of pain.

“I told you two fools not to go messing with no Tribute, didn’t I? Y’all never listen. Where’s Stan?”

“They killed him, Nora.” Then, Jerk Petty, the toughest sonofabitch alive, began to weep. Waves of buried anguish began to make his body tremble. “They killed him.”

Nora, with tears running down her face never changed the tone of her voice.

“Now, now. Listen to me. You cain’t waste that energy right now. You barely alive yourself, okay? You hear me?”

Jerk nodded. Two men got him off his horse and onto the bar. Nora tore open his shirt. There was one wound midway down his left side. No exit wound. They turned him halfway over. There was a wound just above his hip that went straight through. There was a third below his right rib cage. Missed the kidney but it was deep. Nora grabbed Jerk’s dog tags.

“AB positive. Goddamn if the Almighty ain’t on your side tonight. Okay. Tommy, I need you to cook some opium. Bill, everything that’s on that medical supply shelf , bring it over.”

“Nora, that’s the most expensive...”

“Motherfucker, did I ask you how much it’s worth? Just get it. And bring it over here.”

It was a mixed bag, but it was enough. She took out a box of blood collection kits. “Okay, the three biggest of y’all step on up. You do this for me, free drinks for a week.”

Nora found veins and started filling bags. She had one IV canula. Jerk had almost no blood pressure left so finding a vein was a challenge. She basically guessed and hit one. In one port she shot fifteen ccs of pure opium and in the other started using the volunteer blood. The wound in the front was easy. The bullet had cracked a rib but not gone past it. You could see it. She swabbed everything with iodine. Packed the two other wounds, then stuck a pair of needle nose pliers in some boiling water and dug out the first bullet. Jerk writhed in pain.

“You keep moving, and I’ll strap you down. Wasn’t me caught three bullets. Hush now.”

Nora sparingly used what lidocaine she had and sewed up the first and second wounds, till her hands were aching. She had to get the third bullet. She looked down at Jerk, sweaty and pale, and a very unorthodox idea hit her. “Charlie, can you find me a piece of 1/4” steel rod?”

Nora went to one of the cabinets Jerk had built her. She took out her pocketknife and pried loose, with some effort, a round 1/4” magnet from a fancy door catch. Charlie handed Nora some quarter inch stock of steel rod. She put the magnet on the end and put the whole thing in the boiling water. Nora offered Jerk a stick to bite on. “I ain’t gonna lie, this is going to hurt like hell.”

Nora let the rod cool off a bit. The she gently guided the rod through the bullet’s path. When she met with resistance she felt a tiny click. She backed the rod out slowly and when she withdrew it, stuck to the magnet was a steel slug. She packed the wound with gauze. Jerk was still bleeding but not bad. She wrapped his

torso tightly with a couple of Ace bandages, then gave him the first course of the most precious thing she had: zithromycin. He'd taken six units of blood. He stayed awake through the whole affair.

He waved her to him so he could be heard. "She's real. My daughter, she's alive and with Stalker. They'll be waiting on me at a rendezvous point. It's hard to...."

"Elway's tunnel? Junior has a map. Your uncle had no way of knowing you were gonna come. So he shared everything with the last person anyone would expect. I'll send him in the morning. Let 'em know you're here."

"Nora, I can't pay you back for all this."

"Pay me back by being alive in the morning. Everybody back to bed. Keep breathing, Jerk Petty, or I'll feed you to the wolves myself."



Chapter 30

Dalton Stalker knew how to move in crowds. He kept both hands on Emmy's shoulders and steered her through the worst of it. He made a beeline for the thick oleander that grew between 99's north and southbound lanes.

"They'll find us in that," Emmy said.

"Oh, we're not hiding in that." Stalker headed straight for a gap where the growth was thin. The two pushed themselves through with some difficulty. On the other side, waited Katy McClure in a white Ford F150 pickup. Security knew Stalker traveled on horseback. This would give them some much needed cover for the next twelve hours. Katy sat in the driver's seat, Emmy in the middle and Dalton on the passenger door, window open, and a 30/30 between his legs. No one noticed as Katy drove north on the crumbling southbound 99.

"Hi, honey."

"Hi yourself. How'd it go almost getting yourself killed?"

"I love you, too."

Emmy buried her head into Katy's shoulder and sobbed.

"Sheriff?"

Stalker shook his head.

"Petty?"

"Hard to say. He got off two shots. Blackfeather is officially in the Happy Hunting Ground. Mendoza is wounded badly. He's on horseback being chased by an armada by now, I'd guess."

"My money is on him using the hills and the creek beds to lose them. He'll be at the rendezvous. I'm sure of it."

"Are you crying?"

“That fat sheriff grew on me. He was like my...Falstaff. I liked him, Kate. Seeing him sliced like that, totally unarmed ... It upset me, okay? I’m human. It’s going to mess with Jerk’s thinking, too. They were really close. The sooner we meet up, the better.”

“I figured at Goshen we start taking roads and avenues.”

“I think you’re right. We’ll be invisible in this rig. Just keep working your way west and north. When we get to the Fence, I’ll do the talking. Once we’re past, I can get us to Elway’s.”

Emmy was frothing with emotions: anger, confusion, horror. Her innocence had been burned to ash. Her childish youth, vanished. And she could never get it back. There was a rock building inside of her. Life on 440N seemed like a dream now. She could barely even recall it. Just a few days ago she was in such a hurry to be a grown-up. She felt stupid about that now. Being an adult was horrifying. And she was one now. She was broken in too many places to go back. Anger was new to her but, as she turned that feeling around and around inside, she liked it. She’d earned the right to use it. And she would.

If this is the price she had to pay to get into the adult club, she was never going to let anyone control her life. When they got to the rendezvous point she’d have some things to say. For now she let the humming of the tires lull her into a half-trance and just rode, blank and exhausted. Her bearing was visibly different...stiff, like her father...and she would be that way permanently.

With the exception of the 99, the 101 and the I5, which traversed the state at an angle, the surface streets in the country were laid out in a perfect grid of squares. Perfect Sections framed by *roads* running east and west and *avenues* running north and south. It was a simple system that had worked for a century.

With a series of lefts and rights, Katy angled them toward Hollister. They had to stop at the Fence in Coalinga. They looked like a Valley family. Stalker

talked to the gate keeper and explained they needed to go into the Corridor to Salinas for his wife's mother's funeral. The Blackwater was a hard case. He asked them to get out of the truck and asked his partner to help him inspect it -- for what, it was impossible to say.

"You don't look like you're going to any funeral to me. Not a stitch of black on any of you." He started reaching for his sat-com when Emmy, who was visibly crying, stepped up. "Well, we're real sorry that Mee Maw decided to die on the day the town store was closed. She was a nice lady, she wouldn't care what we was wearing. But I'm sure she'd want us to be on time. Please, mister." Emmy's chest was heaving now and she was rubbing her eyes hard with both fists.

Stalker struck just the right apologetic tone for the outburst and said, "We'll be back in a day." The security man wrote something on a clipboard while the other opened the gate and waved them through. Stalker thanked the man and drove slowly over the cattle crossing and into the Eastern Corridor. He looked at Emmy whose face was now expressionless. "That was an *act*? Jesus, kiddo."

"We got places to be. 'sides, every one of them Blackwaters is as ugly as an ape and twice as stupid." Katy raised an eyebrow and shot a look of surprise and worry at Dalton.

They found the beginning of a barely perceptible fire road in San Benito. Stalker put the F150 into four wheel drive and headed in a straight line off-road through buck brush and igneous rock to Elway's spread, where they had mounts waiting. He hoped like mad Jerk Petty would be there. He wasn't. The beach was now the safest place. They'd have to find a Zodiac, if there was one, and drag it down the tunnel. Katy and Stalker split up, turning over every shack, barn, pole barn, garage, workshop and tin "building" they could find. Emmy sat on Elway's couch sulking.

They got lucky early. Katy found a Zodiac hidden in what looked like a stack of straw bales. Elway had cleverly stacked bales around and over the boat. Unless you were looking for it, you'd never guess it was there. Stalker uncovered it in minutes. The twin props were locked in a horizontal position. There was no trailer. All they needed to do was rope the skiff to their saddlehorns and drag it down. Dalton put Emmy on his roan and the trio disappeared into the darkness of Elway's tunnel.

On the beach they found a few tarps and rigged a passable tent just above the high-tide line. Emmy was fine with sleeping in Stan's sleeping bag. Katy and Stalker had their own. Dalton built a small fire of driftwood which took an edge of the cold ocean air. They chewed on jerky and listened to the breakwater for a long time.

Katy sat up. "You want to talk about it, little duck?" There was a long pause. "After all that, he ain't here."

"He'll make it." Dalton repeated for Emmy some of the stories he'd heard Stan tell about Petty -- especially the thirty fights in thirty days -- and what lengths he had to go through to find her and get to her. "He was relentless."

"Who found me, then, that night?"

"No one knows, duck. It's been a long day. Let's all try to get some rest. I'm sure when your dad gets here, he can tell you lots." Katy, Dalton and Emmy spent a fitful night on the beach.

At sunrise, Junior Robinson appeared out of the tunnel. He explained the events of the previous night and Nora's heroic effort to save Jerk's life. As of this morning, according to Junior, he was hanging on. Emmy stood. She stood willow straight and stiff, with her weight on her left foot. A carbon copy of Jerk Petty. It was eerie. She stood, looking at the aircraft carrier snagged on its sandbar. This seemed to go on for an eternity. Then Emmy walked toward the surf, stripping off

her clothes as she went. Her nakedness made her seem small, and like the child she was on the outside. She walked out into freezing Pacific until it was about waist-high.

Then she dunked under. Dalton made a move to get up and go after her, but Katy put a hand on his shoulder. “Go find a blanket.”

“What?”

“There’s gotta be a blanket in one of these rigs, Dalton. Find one.”

Stalker got up and started rummaging around. Emmy re-emerged, with wet sand in her hands and began methodically scrubbing the blood off of her pale skin. Katy watched and cried. She cried for the dead sheriff. And she cried for the girl in the water, her idealism dead, as she tried to scrub away the nastiness of the real world she had been forced into.

“Are you crying?”

Dalton sat back down with some green wool Army blankets. He knew he wasn’t going to get an answer.

“Thanks,” Katy said as she grabbed the blankets, stood and walked toward Emmy, who was retreating to the sand and starting to turn blue. Katy wrapped her up and rubbed her arms and legs to get some circulation going. They wandered on the beach to a Humvee permanently turned on its side, Katy held up one of the blankets as a privacy screen while Emmy got dressed again, then wrapped her back up. They both sat and leaned their backs against the under-armored plating, which was warm from the sun. Junior and Stalker walked over and joined them.

Emmy broke the silence. “You know. If every wayf could feel the way I feel inside, they might go up against the Barons. ‘Specially if they knew how they live. I’ve seen it. It ain’t fair by half. And there wouldn’t be no shooting because there would just be too many people....”

“Protesting?”

“Yeah. Protesting. Like in the olden times.”

“She’s right. A bloodless coup is imminently possible. Not preferable but possible.”

Stalker grinned at that. “Emmy, in theory it’d work but Mendoza has a political web, never mind control over...”

A bullet thunked into the sand in front of them. The report hit their ears a second later. Then more bullets, ricocheting off the Hummer. Someone was shooting at them from the cliff. Stalker reached up behind him, feeling for the side mirror bracket. He found it and yanked. Years of rust let the mirror loose easily. Dalton used the mirror to scan the cliff. “Twelve. Saul’s guys. Everybody sit still. They don’t have an angle.” Another barrage of loud clanking as fresh clips were emptied.

Then Stalker checked the mirror and saw the strangest thing of his life. All twelve men were pushed off the cliff edge simultaneously. Stalker dropped the mirror and covered Emmy’s ears. The sounds of screaming, then of bodies breaking on the boulders, was horrifying. No one survived the fall. Stalker stood up and turned around. Twelve Asian men in black karategis stood, unmoving, arms folded. Another man walked to the edge of the cliff.

Hai Phong doffed his bowler. Stalker doffed his Resistol in response. Phong pointed to the tunnel opening. Stalker nodded. Emmy, who’d been spying over the edge of the Hummer, started to walk toward the tunnel. Katy grabbed her arm.

“Whoa, whoa, where you heading?”

“You all in the Corridor don’t say thank you?”

“We’re gonna sit this one out.”

Stalker and Robinson started toward the giant intake pipe. “We’re going to meet Hai Phong. The crazy emperor of Poppyland. In a pipe. Stan was right. You really *never* know what’s going to happen when you wake up.”

They met Phong about halfway up the tunnel. Everyone used military issue flashlights. Phong began, "I am sorry about your cowboy friend. He seemed like a good man."

"Thank you. He was. Now would you mind explaining what just happened?"

Apparently, along with Elway, and Junior Robinson, Phong was ready to take the Valley by force. There had never been a foreign war on US soil before. Blazing away at targets would inevitably lead to collateral damage. The very people they were trying to free. Robinson and Stalker explained the futility of trying to outcrazy Mendoza. The stunt on the cliff was a set-em-up, knock-em-down piece of theatre meant to impress Mendoza. It was sloppy, dangerous and unnecessary.

The plan was for guns to go dark. And to reveal to millions inside the Fence that the Sousa family didn't "buy in" to the plan but were massacred -- men, women and children -- by Mendoza to seal his grasp on the Valley. There were two survivors. It was enough for a bloodless insurrection. All The Baron's would have to lean on at that point would be the Blackwater. And that's where two trained and equipped armies could make the difference. Soldier versus soldier. Junior pledged his two thousand to the cause and shook Phong's hand in solidarity.

Hai Phong was not a stupid man. The beginning of a slow play Phong hoped would end in conflict. He liked Stalker and his story. Apparently he'd been following their activities for some time. After a long talk with him in the tunnel, he bought into the bloodless coup plan. Yes, it needed time to work.

Stalker gave Phong a task. After the Fence came down, the reunited San Joaquin would need a united security force. One with a lot of white faces. So it was Hai Phong's job to recruit General Saul's men to the cause. Those he couldn't, he would give a little free opium and ask again. If they were hard cases he could disappear them into the middle of his poppy operation and they'd never be seen

again. It had to be done at just the right pace. Once he got a few Blackwater guys on board, they could start recruiting each other. By the time brass caught wind of things, it would be too late. Phong could command the whole thing. The Emperor of Poppytown seemed to relish this assignment. He agreed and shook Stalker's hand on it.



Chapter 31

Manny Mendoza convalesced at home, of course. He hated hospitals almost more than anything. He didn't trust the "fucking quacks" in Visalia. He didn't trust 'the fucking mongoloids' in Merced. So he had his personal GP, who had done very little surgery, do the job. "That way," he said, "if he fucks it up, I can kill him myself." It was a fairly simple procedure, all things considered. The bullet had passed through, taking a miraculous path just between the brachial artery and the right lung. A couple of millimeters either way, and the whole thing could have been much worse.

As it was, there was a lot of stitching, antibiotics, and morphine. It looked like the wound would heal quickly and cleanly, but it would be pretty painful for some time. Manny had a hospital bed brought to a room downstairs. The only medical equipment was the stand with a bag of saline. And whenever he got a mind to, he had the doc hit him with a fresh dose of morphine. For the most part, he was groggy or asleep. But this afternoon, he became dead sober when he heard the sat-com crackle to life.

"M1 This is Field 2. Copy? M1 This is Field 2. Copy?"

"Benny! *Benny!* Goddammit, hand me that fuckin' radio!" Benny grabbed the radio from the hallway and ran it to Mendoza, who grabbed it out of his hands as rudely as possible.

"Go for M1, Over. Phong's tip was good. Petty or Sousa or whatever you want to call him is ZAP. Over."

"I told you fuckers to take him alive! Over."

"He must've gotten hit leaving the Tribute. He was practically bled out. I put one in his skull to finish it. Over."

"Aww hell. What about the girl? Over."

“Never showed. Or the guy who helped her out of the crowd. Looks like Elway Sousa is ZAP for the record. Fresh grave here. Over.”

“Well, stop fuckin’ around and you morons find that girl *copy*?”

“Copy that M1. Out.”

“Fuck me.” Mendoza threw the sat-com left-handed against the travertine floor. It was unlikely it would function again.



Chapter 32

Stalker took the battery out of the sat-com and threw both pieces into the random junk in Elway's yard.

"That was smart, D."

"Yeah, that's gonna buy all of us some time, especially Phong." Stalker flopped his saddle onto a sawhorse, picked up the saddlebags and threw them over his shoulder. The quarter horse mare was in a corral with plenty of hay and water.

"Dalton Stalker, are you *pouting*?"

"It's just that usually on a crossing like the one we're going to make I'd..."

"It's not even *your* horse! Stole it, didn't you?"

"My Love, I *liberated* that animal in a time of great exigence, as you recall..."

"We're taking my ride. You agreed."

The bright orange Pussy Wagon was idling on Elway Sousa's dirt drive. Katy had radioed Skinny to come south and guided him in using coordinates from a GPS in one of the Hummers in Elway's armada.

"We get through the Fence at Hollister with no questions, or even killing for a change. We'll have to take a few back roads, then it's onto the 152 all the way to the Oakhurst crossing, again, no questions or killing. It's the fastest way to the cowboy. And no one will think twice about the Wagon crossing in the middle of the day."

"You're right. Just give me one sec."

Junior, Emmy, and Katy got on. Dalton went into the house. There on the chipped kitchen counter were Stan's Uno cards. He gingerly gathered them up and put them back in the worn box, then into the pocket of his saddle bag. He bounded outside and onto the bus. Skinny pulled away, rearranging the dust on the junk in

the yard. As predicted, there were no issues at the Hollister gate. The girls knew how to play it. Boobs and fannies and downright dirty talk appeared in every window. By the time a Blackwater could get his head together, the gate was open and the Pussy Wagon was on her way. He'd radio it in, of course, but that was standard procedure. Once they hit the silted asphalt of the highway, it was a smooth ride. Hollister to Oakhurst was a little more than an hour if you were trying not to look like you were in a hurry. About thirty minutes in, a Humvee passed them and slid to a stop sideways blocking their path. The loading door opened and out stepped General Charles Saul. He clicked a magazine into a 9MM automatic and unfolded the folding stock. He walked straight up to the front double doors. And knocked.

"Katy? I'm going to go ahead and assume I'm guessing right again, and that our little friend is under your protection inside that godforsaken bus."

Stalker, Junior, Skinny, even Katy had guns drawn. Emmy tried to keep from trembling.

"Only thing on this bus is the finest adult pussy in twelve counties. If I remember right, what you're looking for, *Charles*, is a Sunday School."

The General stepped closer and pounded on the glass hard.

"Godammit, Katy, you don't have that kid out here in ten seconds, I'm gonna kill everyone on your rig from right here. Now open this fucking door!"

"Move."

Junior pulled Katy gently out of the doorway and positioned his huge frame on the bottom step.

"When I say 'go,' you open those doors."

Skinny nodded that he understood. The General was getting irritated. He tilted his head back with full drama and said, "One!"

"Go."

The bus doors whooshed out bringing with them Junior Robinson's massive, mangled right hand, which he wrapped with all his might around Saul's throat. Then Junior lifted him off his feet. Saul dropped the 9mm to have two hands to work on Junior's grip. But it was too late. Junior stepped off the bus now so as not to offend the women, and using his left hand broke General Saul's neck. He laid the body on the road and didn't let go with his right hand until he was sure the man was dead. Then he stood up and pulled his hood back onto his head. Stalker and Katy got off and got to work.

"No muss, no fuss. I can see the family resemblance now," Stalker quipped. Junior laughed a deep laugh that ended in a coughing fit. Katy and Skinny drug the body onto the bus all the way back to the kitchen. Stalker moved the Humvee onto the shoulder. He opened the hood, and loosened a spark plug wire. Anyone passing by would think the general had engine trouble and called for a ride. Not that he'd had his neck broken by a ghoul. They carried on down the highway and had no trouble at all at the Oakhurst crossing. The Wagon pulled on to main street and stopped in front of Shellie's. Skinny and the girls stayed on to ply their trade. Everyone else rushed into the front door.

The place was empty save for Nora, and Petty, now on a cot with a sheet and wool blanket tightly tucked around him. His eyes were open, he was a little pale and in some pain, but he'd made it through the night, which was a good sign. He motioned Emmy over.

"You okay?"

"Am I okay? Am I OKAY?"

"Do you have any idea what you've put me through?! You *ruined* my life! I was happy until you came along. Since then, it's been nothing but blood and death and fear. You give me a father back for what, ten minutes? I don't even know you. What, are you gonna die on me now?!"

Emmy pulled the .38 out of her dungarees, thumped the hammer just like Stalker had taught her, and aimed it at Jerk, “WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME? Answer me! Or I swear...”

“Forgiveness.”

“What?”

Nora’s cool hands wrapped around Emmy’s as she eased the hammer down. Emmy willingly handed it over and Nora put it on the bar. She grabbed both of Emmy’s hands and locked eyes with the girl. She spoke uninterrupted.

“You know, they say when a parent has a child, it’s like there’s a piece of them walking around outside their body. They can always feel that feeling. Do you understand me, child?”

Emmy nodded, entranced.

“I knew your mother and your father before the war. They was so lovesick with each other hardly anyone could stand to be around ’em. When Susan -- that was your mother’s name -- got pregnant with you, I did all the alterations to her clothes as she got bigger and bigger. They couldn’t wait to meet you. On the night you was born you was born into true love, you follow?” Tears started streaming down Emmy’s face

“Then the war came. And the Barons started land-grabbing and your family knew what that would lead to so they said no, thank ya. And for that everyone in your family was wiped out. Oh, when they knocked the place down and plowed it under they told everyone the Sousas were with Manny. Or that they pulled up and moved to the Corridor. But that night, your father showed up and looked for you everywhere. The whole place was on fire. Before he could find where you was hid and get you out of there, he was knocked out and left to die in the flames.”

“Dalton told me that part.”

“Someone did find you and moved you to the Sections. That night, you was reborn into slavery.”

“But I *liked* living in the Sections..”

“You didn’t know no better, child. You was a frog in a pot. Could you go anywhere you wanted, anytime you wanted? Could you say anything you wanted? Did you get fair trade for your work? Did they make you work when you was sick? Could you run up to the mountains on a sunny afternoon and fish for trout if’n the mood struck you?”

“No, ma’am”

“You were not living in freedom. Your sweat and the sweat of millions make five white men enormously wealthy. That’s called a dictatorship. That’s not what this country used to be. Your dad wants forgiveness, because he wanted freedom for his little girl, not slavery. And as much as he loved you with all his self, he failed you.” Emmy hugged Nora hard and let out all those pent-up feelings. Nora hugged her back and rocked her a little.

“When he got back from the war he spent every second figuring out how to find you. I know you been dragged through the shit last few days. But now you got kin for the first time in your life. And he’s right over there.” Junior put a hand on his sister’s shoulder.

Emmy let go of Nora and walked slowly toward Jerk. She put her arms around his neck and he embraced his daughter.

“I forgive you,” she said.



Chapter 33

The next day, Jerk was feeling a little better. Woozy, but the antibiotics seemed to be working. Emmy sat cot-side, listening to snippets of her parents' life. Stalker was putting a spit shine on his boots.

"I've been thinking about this since Stan, since the Tribute went haywire the way it did. Maybe we're looking at this all wrong. Everyone is approaching changing the status quo in the Valley like a military plan. The more guns, the more power. But it can't be. Think about it. Between the twenty-three Townships and the two Corridors that's what? Two million? Two and a half million people? Against five."

Nora walked into Shellie's storeroom to check on the patient.

"Shot three times and already making plans. Cowboy, you amaze me."

"Dalton, check me on this. What do people hate more than a philanderer, more than a cheat, more than a thief even."

"A liar."

"Emmy, in the middle of the night a bunch of Mendoza's men slaughtered our family, my wife...your mother, Susan, three generations dead as they slept. All because we wouldn't join Mendoza. He figured if we resisted, others would, too. If the field hands knew that Mendoza committed mass murder to build his empire and then covered it up so he could keep them farming his land like slaves, would they rise up.?"

"Yeah, they would. It would start slow but it would build fast."

"We're the last two Sousas. If we held meetings at night. Went township to township we could start a rebellion." Katy interrupted.

"Sorry to pop your bubble, Messiah, but the Barons have the Blackwater."

"Already taken care of," said Stalker, picking lint from his favorite shirt.

Emmy addressed the elephant in the room, “This rebellion idea, it doesn’t work if Baron Mendoza is in the picture.”

“Well, kid, it’s much harder, yes. He has a lot of leverage, the other Barons look to him for leadership. He could lie and say the massacre is just a ghost story teenagers use to scare one another. That it never happened. You were an infant. Jerk is a liar. Every other witness is dead. Where’s the proof?”

“You said Mr. Phong says the Baron is at home. Refused to go to a hospital.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, I’m going to kill him. And you’re going to show me how.”

“Emmy....”

“He slaughtered my family *like animals*, that’s for starters. I never got to know any of them, my history. I never met my own mother. He took that from me. Second, I’m the only person not on his staff could get close enough. But I need to get in AND out. So I was thinking this.” She held up Jerk’s six-inch ,bone handle Buck knife.

“Dalton Stalker, if you open your mouth right now, I’m gonna shut it permanent-like.”

“It’s dangerous, I’ll give you that, but Katy, my love, you know she’s right. You heard. He’s looking for her. She could walk right up to him.”

“And how’s she going to get into the compound to begin with?”

“Well, someone will have to fetch a full set of a Blackwater uniform. Say, off a dead General”

“No.”

“We gas up one of the quads out front -- someone will rent it for credits-- and I drive her in all the way to the front door.”

“No.”

“I stand watch at Manny’s door. He’s probably quite inebriated on morphine, opium or both. She puts that Buck in the right place, it’ll be over in two seconds.”

“Dalton Stalker, I am going to say words out loud I never thought I would hear myself say, but I love you.” That hung in the air for nearly too long.

Dalton replied, “And I love you.”

“I don’t want to lose you. There’s been too much loss for my taste already.”

“You won’t lose me. You’ll never lose me.”

“Emmy, don’t do this thing,” Petty warned.

“*You* would. Like father, like daughter, right?” And the conversation was over. Stalker and Emmy ran through the plan again and again. Preparing for multiple contingencies. When he was conscious, Petty croaked out tips. Emmy was sharp, a quick learner. She asked good questions and listened well. As twilight fell on the trading post, Stalker found the owner of a quad-runner with a full tank of gas. To borrow it he traded all of Emmy’s credits and left one of his ivory-handled Colts with Nora as collateral. The lack of symmetry on his gun belt made him visibly uncomfortable. Emmy slept on and off on a cot pushed right against Jerk’s. She curled toward him. The night crawled.



Chapter 34

A hundred million years ago an oceanic plate began to dive under the North American plate. Magma began forming deep underground. A few million years of volcanic activity followed by a few million years of passing glaciers, and you have the Sierra Nevada Mountains. There had been a light snow in the night and everything above the tree line was dusted white. It was a breathtaking sight. The quad runner was a poor replacement for a horse. Emmy kept her arms wrapped around Stalker the whole way, running through the plan in her head and staring at the mountains. She wondered how something so beautiful and something as grotesque as Manny Mendoza could exist simultaneously and so close together.

Dalton Stalker was dressed in a Blackwater uniform. And a dirty one at that, which offended him on a deep personal level. They had to refuel twice from red plastic gallons tied down with bungee cords. The outer security was predictably in the tree line, and they wouldn't bother to stop someone who looked like one of their own anyway. They made it to the house fairly easily. One security guard stopped them and questioned where they were going and what the sit-rep was. Dalton did his best Stan Edison.

"You dumb sonofabitch, this is the girl the Baron's been looking for. It's only been on every fucking sat-com channel for the last twenty-four fucking hours. I'm walking her in to the man himself. And don't even try to get in on a piece of this action. I found her. I get the credit. Now move your ass." The guard backed off, and they met no resistance all the way to the driveway. Dalton grabbed Emmy by one arm and pulled her roughly into the house. Benny stood in the way. "What room is he in? I got his prize princess and no fucking around." Benny pointed to a corner of the bottom floor. "Last door on the left."

They crossed the extravagant living quarters, all gold, ivory and Italian. To Stalker, even though every item was the best money could buy, the Baron's taste sucked. They arrived at Manny's room. There was a sentry posted. Stalker convinced him he was relieved, given the special circumstance. Emmy opened the door and walked in. Everything smelled of disinfectant and fresh laundry. The room had been emptied save for the hospital bed, a saline stand and a tray with preloaded needles of liquid opium. The parquet floor was polished to a shine, and luckily, the Belgian linen drapes were all drawn closed. Mendoza was pretty out of it. As an addict it took quite a bit of opium to dull the pain of his wound. He turned and was surprised to see Emmy. Surprise quickly turned to alarm behind his eyes, but it was trapped there by a thick fog of drugs which eroded his ability to form words. His brain was sounding alarms, but his mouth was having none of it.

"Oo."

"Yeah, it's me."

Manny felt around for the sat-com. Emmy calmly grabbed it, set it on the floor and slid it under the bed.

Mendoza was furious. "Oo lil bish."

Emmy slapped the old man hard across the face. He was stunned. "Language," she said, as the outline of her hand bloomed red on Mendoza's cheek, "The way you talk is filthy, like you. I'm tired of it." She approached the bedside and looked straight into the Baron's bloodshot eyes. "By now you know that I am one of *the* Sousas. I guess if you'd knew that earlier, I'd be dead, right? I'm a whadaya call it...a loose end. I was just a baby the night you murdered my whole family. There were other children, you know. And women. I'm sure you meant to get me, too, but you didn't. And guess what? I'm not the only one. That hole in you ? That was put there by my father." At that Mendoza started moving around

and mumbling like mad. Emmy grabbed one of the syringes, looked around and emptied its contents into Mendoza's I.V. port. An opium rigor-mortise settled in.

"For eleven years I was told I was an orphan, when I had a family and a history that I'll never know BECAUSE YOU BURNED IT TO THE GROUND!"

Mendoza just stared.

"You took that from me!"

She took a breath to center herself. "In the sections, you steal a horse, you get hanged. In the corridor, you steal *bread*, and you get hanged. Or so they say. But *you* steal someone's life and everyone who could have been in it. Nothing happens. 'Cept maybe you get fatter. Well, mister, YOU AIN'T GOD. You're just another redneck farmer who was in the right place at the right time. We don't belong to you. My father and I are going to tell every worker in every field the truth about you and the massacre. About how you even killed the cows – which is sick and weird – and they will drop their hoes. They will drop their shovels. They'll drop the irrigation pipe, and they'll come for you and the other Barons in *waves*.

"Blawader gon fu Ooo."

She slapped him again. "I said *language*. No, Blackwater will go wherever the money is. They don't care whose payin'. Dontcha see, Baron?, Leading by being mean, and, and...*cruel*... doesn't work. Anyone who says it does is a dope. No, they'll make their way here, and we'll tell them to take whatever they want."

"You won't be home anyway."

Emmy felt for the fifth and sixth ribs. Manny's eyes widened. Then, she froze. The buck knife, gleaming in her hand, suddenly became too heavy for her to wield. A burning sensation bloomed in her chest and started spreading, as the renegade grudgingly gave way to the child. The moment hung, still and blurry, its color lost as if they were trapped in a daguerreotype. Manny actually managed a

drunken smirk. The sound of bone china shattering broke the spell. Across the room, Benny stood stiffly, a tray hanging at his side, and shards of a fine tea service scattered at his feet. Stalker peered around the door-frame, alarmed, but kept absolutely still as the house man, wide-eyed and pale, shuffled slowly toward his master's bed. There was no telling how long Benny had been standing there. He'd come in through a pocket door that led to the kitchen. Judging by the look on his face, he'd heard plenty. Manny looked at his loyal servant with desperation in his eyes.

"Enny. Hep mmm-muh me."

Benny walked around the bed dropping the tray with a clatter, and stood staring at Emmy.

"Is it true, what you say?"

Emmy nodded soberly. Benny held out his hand and beckoned for the knife. Heart pounding, the child-assassin willed herself to respond, but could not. Dalton, seeing the gesture for what it was, spoke up, quiet but firm.

"Let him take it, Em."

Benny put his hand on Emmy's. It was calloused, and swollen, red from years of hot water, bleach, and silver polish. Emmy loosened her grip just enough. The house man grabbed the handle of the buck carefully. The weight lifted. Stalker kept up his calm instruction.

"Okay, can you walk over to me? Get your feet under you and come to me, Em. It's time for us to go, kid. It's okay."

Emmy stood and turned. Each step she took made her head a little clearer like she was emerging from a fever-dream. She didn't see Benny drive the knife home. Dalton did. Satisfied, he grabbed Emmy and half-carried her to the front door. On the way he pilfered Manny's Resistol which was hanging from a set of antlers on the wall. Mendoza's pick-up was parked right in front. They jumped in. Stalker

tilted down the sun visor and the keys fell out. He jammed the hat on Emmy's head and told her to lean back like she was ill or sleeping.

Then Stalker took the one route he thought could get them out of there. He drove straight down the main street of Hanford. Mendoza's truck, a Blackwater driver and Manny's signature hat, as thin a disguise as it was, worked. No one really took a hard second look. Stalker drove ten miles out of town then doubled back to the 99. It appeared they were in the clear. If there was a pursuit, it was well behind them. Dalton looked over at Emmy.

"You okay?"

"I couldn't...I didn't..."

"You did enough. He's gone Emmy. I saw it."

Emmy stared ahead, "Benny..."

"Yes. Not part of the plan, but I'm glad he did it. Not you. I mean, we've got plenty of other things to cover. Uno, Star Wars, Shakespeare..."

"Mmm hmm."

"We accomplished the mission. That's all that matters. You're free of that bastard now. We all are. *And* your soul is intact, so..."

Dalton looked over at Emmy. She was wilted against the door, eyes closed. She looked smaller somehow, frail, like a baby bird. Dalton shifted his focus back to the road. He was deep in thought when two hours later they reached Oakhurst.

Stalker rolled Manny's truck into a ditch. He saw no one but Nora's people. They hadn't even been tailed as far as he could see. But the alarm had clearly been sounded. You could sense the disruption swirling like a storm over the valley. It would rain down soon enough. They walked the rest of the way. When they got to Shellie's, Katie jumped on Dalton and planted kisses on him like a school girl.

Since she'd first met him, her lover had long been on a path beset on all sides by fear and danger. Dalton was *on* the path. He wasn't burdened with *seeing*

himself on the path. Katie was. What he breezily attributed to a preposterous run of luck, she experienced as her own Garden of Gethsemane.

She asked, "Is it done?"

Stalker nodded.

Now, her lover safely returned from Calvary, Katie was hit by waves of relief that buckled her knees. She sat, leaning on Stalker for support, and gazed at the cowboy and his long-lost daughter. For once, no words came.

Jerk felt her looking, but was too tired to mind it. For his part that day, he'd done the only thing he could do: stare at the door and worry. He slipped into a nap or two, but when he startled awake, he went back to work on that door, hoping to bore through it like Superman so he could see the truth beyond. When Emmy walked in, unhurt and breathing, Petty's emotional stiffness snapped like kindling.

He couldn't lift his head so he looked to the ceiling. Tears came, seemingly with minds of their own, and flowed from the outer corners of both eyes. The more he willed it to stop, the more they ran in twin paths down the cheeks of his ruined face. The pressure on his chest eased enough for him to take a few deep breaths. A wave of chills ran up his injured body, as he felt a peace that had abandoned him more than a decade ago.

Emmy shuffled over to Jerk's bunk and lay down on her side. She gingerly put one arm over his chest and curled toward him.

"It's begun," she said.

Just then, Nora walked in with a tray containing soup, a small pot of hot tea and saltines. She set it on the floor at the end of Petty's bed. She looked at Dalton and Katie. "Time to move along now, hear? These'uns need rest."

Jerk managed to croak the thinnest of protests. "Nora, I'm not an invalid."

“Well, *I* ain’t a doctor. And yet...” And she waved her hands in Petty’s very-much-alive direction. With that, Nora, Stalker, and Katie left, leaving father and daughter...still strangers...in the oaken silence.

Exhaustion clawed at both of them. Neither would surrender easily. Jerk took a breath and reached for a simple phrase. It stuck in his throat. He swallowed hard and tried again. “I’m sorry.”

Emmy’s reaction was automatic. “Don’t be.”

Another minute passed as the ghosts seem to settle in for the show. This time Emmy began.

“What should I call you?”

“What?”

“You never told your name. The *real* one.”

“Oh.”

For the first time since that horrible night, the scarred cowboy answered with his given name.

“Laurence. Laurence Sousa.”

“That’s nice.” Emmy yawned. “But I can’t very well call you Mr. Sousa.”

“Oh. Um.”

Petty’s brain spun as it searched neural files for an old memory. Emmy offered some help.

“Well, what was it in your imagination? I mean, when I was a baby.”

“In my...well, you weren’t talking yet. You didn’t make a lot of noise at all, actually. Even when you were just born. Not one little cry of protest. Like you *expected* to arrive just then. In my mind, I thought you’d call me ‘Papa.’”

“Papa.”

“But, you can...”

“Would my mother have liked that?”

The ghosts leaned in. This one, he knew.

“Yes, I believe she would have.”

Petty couldn't see, but a tiny smile crept on to Emmy's face. He continued,

“You have her eyes, you know.”

“I do?”

“They don't prepare you for that. And, believe me, your mom was prepared for everything as far as you were concerned. But when the doctor held you up I thought to myself, ‘Those are Susan's eyes.’ You weren't just a child. You were *our* child. I mean, of course you were going to look like one of us, it's just, well you're not prepared, is all. You know?”

“I guess.” She yawned again. “And the rest of me?”

“Pure Sousa. Can't say as to whether that's hitting the genetic lotto or not. The way you walk and stand. Hard-headed, too. I swear, I look at you and I see my grandpa, your grandpa, my uncles, my siblings, it's...uncanny. I can tell you have Susan's heart, though. And darlin', that's something. She was...” Again, Petty had to swallow a knot of grief in his throat. “She was the most amazing person I ever knew.”

He allowed a memory of her to pass briefly into the light of his consciousness. Just one. A tiny one. Then, almost to himself, “I never did get to mourn.”

Emmy tightened her embrace for a beat, an unconscious squeeze of empathy. Susan's heart, indeed. Her eyes were closed. Sleep was swooping in on heavy wings, Jerk's voice barely over a whisper now.

“Having you here is like getting a piece of her back. I'll be forever grateful for that.”

He closed his eyes, the fight in him easing away. Emmy asked, “Papa, what now?”

Laurence Sousa replied, “We live, Emmy. We live.”
Then a deep, healing sleep engulfed them both.

