

Los Angeles (Neighborhood Pub)

Everyone in the bar had eyes glued to the television as the news reader delivered the latest bad news.

“Over 100 cases of Ebola Disease have been confirmed in New York state according to the CDC. There are also suspected cases in Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Corpus Christi. Authorities are at a loss to explain these sudden outbreaks and are looking for any connections between these cases and the epidemic in West Africa where almost 6000 have died of the disease.”

The reader continued with video footage of overwhelmed hospitals in Liberia. “Scientists have confirmed that the strain that has shown up here in the U.S. is genetically identical to the West African strain and the virus that has recently appeared in South Sudan. They now plan to focus on two key questions. Our correspondent, Melanie Leclerque, has just emerged from a CDC press conference. Melanie, what can you tell us about the CDC plans to stop this outbreak from becoming an epidemic.”

“Well, Jackie, as you said, the CDC is working in two directions. First, they are trying to trace the origin of the outbreak – Patient Zero – if you will. They believe that someone recently visited West Africa or the Sudan and then came to the U.S. before they showed symptoms. That person most certainly infected others and the disease spread out for there.”

“Melanie, how does the CDC account for almost simultaneous outbreaks in four locations.”

“One theory they’ve put forward is that Patient Zero came in contact with people heading to those locations – perhaps at an airport or train terminal. The second area they are focusing on is how the Ebola is spreading. Normally it is through contact with bodily fluids of an infected person but this strain seems to be spreading some other way. Once they know the transport vector – how the disease is spreading – authorities can take the necessary precautions to curb the spread.”

“Thank you, Melanie. In the newsroom, we have Dr. Yuri Petrov from the World Health Organization. He is a recognized expert on Ebola and has travelled to West Africa numerous times in the past few weeks. Dr. Petrov, you’ve heard what the CDC is trying to accomplish. Can you give us your opinion on their plans?”

“What they propose is standard protocol for outbreaks or epidemics. They will be talking to everyone who contracts the virus to determine who they were in contact with at certain stages to track back to the origin. It is always difficult when you have a disease such as Ebola. It is fast acting and quickly overwhelms a person’s system, frequently ending in death. If the CDC wants information, they are going to have to talk to the patients as soon as they are identified.”

“You said that it frequently ends in death. Could you expand on that?”

“Sure. The fatality rate for this strain of Ebola – that is the percentage of people who contract the disease and then die is quite high – around 70 to 72%. Put another way, for every 10 people who contract the disease, seven will die and three will recover.”

“How do you suggest people here protect themselves from the disease, Doctor?”

“There is not much a person can do since we don’t yet know how it spreads. The authorities are quarantining patients as they are identified.”

“Thank you, Doctor. This is Jackie Kilroy in the CNN newsroom in New York City.”

The barman snapped the television off and mumbled to himself: “What about the people who have Ebola but haven’t been identified yet. I bet they’re still contagious.”

“Yeah. The government doesn’t care about the little guy. We can get sick and die. Who cares? Besides, maybe there is no Ebola disease. Maybe it’s our government getting rid of a bunch of people they don’t like. I wouldn’t put it past them. Me, I’m going to keep on doin’ what I’ve been doin’. No Ebola disease, real or imaginary is gonna stop me.”

The barman looked at the guy sitting on a stool at the bar. The guy had to be legally drunk and was being an idiot. There was no government conspiracy. There was a disease going around that killed. The barman knew one thing that he could do to protect himself. He could quarantine himself. He tossed his apron onto the bar and left. He planned to stop at a local grocery store to stock up on food and then isolate himself in his apartment until this thing goes away. Across the country but especially in the cities where Ebola cases had been identified, thousands of people were having the same thoughts and taking the same precautions. Over the next few days, businesses were shut down and stores closed because employees were refusing to show up for work. They were all hiding in their homes waiting for the Ebola scare to end.

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Los Angeles – Glenarm Power Plant

They sat in their van across the street and watched. Orion had been right. There was little or no security surrounding the power plant, not even a fence. Well, there actually was a fence but it was only a waist-high chain link one. A quick look at the parking lot showed them only six cars in the lot that could handle over a hundred vehicles. Apparently, as Orion had said, there was only a skeleton crew on duty. The passenger shook his head. Sunday, a peak demand day for household electricity, was the day fewest people worked. He never understood that.

“So, wat ya think? Come back tonight to plant the charges?”

“I’m thinking we do it right now. There’s only a few people about and lots of daylight. We can see what we are doing.”

“Now? What if someone sees us?”

“We’re dressed like workers. People won’t give us a second glance. Someone outside the plant sees us, they’ll think we belong. We run into anyone inside, we waste ‘em.” He patted his machine pistol.

“Okay. You talked me into it. Let’s go!”

They drove their box van through the parking lot and pulled up to a loading bay and started off-loading cardboard boxes. With dollies purchased the day before, they deposited the boxes according to a detailed plan of the complex they'd been given. It didn't take long and no one approached them or questioned their presence.

"Think this'll do it?"

"Damned if I know. Orion thinks we set these babies off and the power plant goes up in smoke. He's thinking the resulting power surge will start a cascading failure that'll kill the power across southern California."

"Why bother? They'll have it fixed in no time."

"Man, you gotta pay more attention at the briefings. Shut down the power, all the traffic lights go dark. Lots of accidents. In hospitals, more accidents. During power failures, lots of people die and that's what Orion wants."

"Yeah. I get it. Shall we go?"

"Naw. I was kinda thinkin' I've never been blown up before. It'll be a new experience. You up for it?"

"Sure, why the hell not."

With that, the leader dialed his cell phone and that signal ignited the seven bombs. In an instant, the power plant crumbled and sent a huge cloud of smoke and dust into the air. Orion, watching via a live satellite feed, saw the cloud grow and obscure the area.

As he watched, others monitored the flow of electricity from various interconnected power plants and substations. The surge from the Glenarm Power Plant was much less than anticipated. The Los Angeles area experienced a brownout as the other stations and plants recovered the balance across the grid. It took less than five minutes for the flow of electricity to return to normal.

"Shit," Orion muttered as he shut down the satellite signal.

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Los Angeles (Josh Adam's Apartment)

Across town, Joshua's lights dimmed slightly as the town's power grid adjusted to the surge. He heard his computer restart itself.

"Damn," he hurled himself off the couch and over to his desk. The program he'd been running had been nearing completion. He crossed his fingers. Maybe the brownout hadn't aborted it. He waited as the machine went through its startup routine and then punched up the statistical package. He typed a query as to its status. Sarah's voice responded.

"No problems, Josh. The stack was spooled to a backup before the power went down."

"Thank you," he muttered in relief as he ordered the machine to rerun the data.

"You're welcome," responded the voice. He returned to the couch and a continuation of his nap. He needed to get a few more hours of sleep if he was going to pull yet another all-nighter. He had been afraid to sleep in the dark ever since the nightmares had started. They had begun a week after Sarah's death

and featured her death at the hands of formless monsters made of pure energy. He fought them but it was like wrestling with smoke. Every time he gained an upper hand, they'd change form or simply disappear. In the end, Sarah died and Josh was left all alone. He couldn't face those battles so had altered his lifestyle to let him sleep during the day and be up at night. The nightmares never came during the day.

As his mind fogged and he hovered between awake and asleep, it occurred to him that the computer had responded directly to his voice. Funny. He had no voice recognition software for his computer. The machine could not possibly have heard him. He slept. When he awoke, he was aware there was something important he had to think about but like a half-remembered dream, it faded from his consciousness as the sleep receded.

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Los Angeles (FBI Offices)

Barber arrived at the new FBI offices just off Wiltshire Blvd wondering if she'd made a mistake, agreeing to meet Becker in his office. Maybe she should have suggested a more neutral location. But then again, she had requested the meeting so had to take what was given. She looked around and saw nothing but chaos. Cardboard boxes were scattered everywhere and several people were sorting and resorting them, sometimes moving the same box repeatedly. She watched for a while until someone noticed her.

"Can I help you? Oh, you must be ATF Agent Barber. The boss is expecting you. Come with me." Without waiting for confirmation, he turned and they navigated their way through the outer office to a small room in the corner. It was in slightly better shape with just a few boxes stacked off to one side. The desk was mostly clear and a computer appeared to be up and running on the credenza. The man behind the desk jumped up as Barber and her guide entered. He had an infectious grin that lit up his face. He reached across the desk, hand outstretched.

"Agent Barber. Welcome. I'm sorry if my people kept you waiting. We had two truckloads of documents arrive this morning and my staff is wrestling with them. Can you believe it? We moved into a new office a few days ago and already we are faced with a space crunch."

"Seems to be a chronic problem for everybody these days although you seem to have quite a bit of space. How many people do you have on staff?"

"Right now, ten here. They have another couple of days before the rest of the team arrives and it gets really crazy."

"The rest?"

"Fully staffed, this office will have about 45 full time and another 12 part time people."

"Wow. I am impressed. Usually workforces get reduced in size but yours is growing."

"True but we are dealing with a problem that is as serious as it is baffling. Workplace and school killing sprees. The powers that be expect us to develop a

way to prevent them or, at the very least, a way to predict them and be able to disrupt someone's plans to wipe out their fellow workers or classmates. Personally, I'm not sure we can do it but we are going to damn well try."

"Listen. I appreciate you taking the time to see me. I understand that my assistant who made the appointment didn't really tell you what it was about."

"True. All I knew was that an ATF agent wanted to see me. That got me curious. What can I do for you?"

"It's complicated. I am coordinating an investigation into illegal guns, particularly those being stolen from police evidence lockers and reused in additional crimes." She went on to tell him all about the recycled weapons and the problems they were creating for the ATF. He listened without interruption. As her explanation wound down, Becker began to see where this was going.

"The last school attack the FBI worked on, I worked on. The perp used guns like the ones you described. Am I right?"

"Yes but your weapons came from at least two more secure lockers. We've now got nine police evidence lockers across the country that had guns stolen and reused. How is it possible? Are there that many crooked cops all working as evidence clerks?"

"That's bad."

"For sure. It's reached a point where the ATF is requesting that all weapons in police lockers not serving as evidence in active cases be sent to our facility near San Jose. Some are complying and sending us mountains of firearms but others are dragging their feet and arguing that doing what we ask is going to affect their budgets."

Becker smiled. "Hinting at getting the feds – that's us – to pay for it. I get the picture. It's a nightmare. Tell me. You didn't volunteer for this assignment, did you?"

"No. I was appointed by a boss who wanted me and the problem to go away from his jurisdiction."

"His loss. Our gain." He paused to see how she'd react to that compliment. She seemed to ignore it.

"I was hoping you had some luck tracing the weapons used in the Bakersfield school shooting. None so far but I intend to push that lead hard. I can keep you in the loop, if you like."

"I'd appreciate it. Look. I've taken up too much of your time as it is. I'll let you get back to work."

He was reluctant to let her go but knew he had too.

"I'll have my staff add you to the list of people receiving our updates. Text me your contact info. Will that work?"

"Yes and I'll let you know if we get anything related to your school shooting."

"And who says federal departments can't cooperate." He smiled and she smiled back. They shook hands. He decided to give it a shot.

"Listen, I'm new to the city and don't really know anyone here. You've had more experience getting around LA. After all you've been here 3 weeks already. Can I take you out to dinner some time and you can show me the sights."

She smiled and shook her head. "As a line, that sucked, I must say, but sure, why not. Give me a call."

They parted ways, each smiling their own secret smiles.

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Location Unspecified

They sat across from one another in a quiet café. There were no other customers but then Orion had arranged it that way. It was his café and they'd closed an hour earlier. He was cautious and did not want anyone listening, even by accident. The person across from him had never been there before. Indeed, until an hour ago, he'd had no idea that this particular café even existed. He was nervous. He was out of his element and knew it. He did not hide it well. Orion figured he was either a potential client, they were often nervous during the initial meeting, or he was a cop trying to trap him and his group for crimes against the state. He had to decide which his guest was before anything else.

"Before we get down to business, let's establish your credentials, shall we." It wasn't a question. "Tell me who told you about us."

"Marconi did. He told me all about the adventures he'd been on with you guys and . . ." A raised hand stopped him.

"Perhaps he was in a bar and bragging – which we discourage for obvious reasons – and you might have happened to overhear what he had to say. We have to determine that one way or the other. If Marconi recommended us to you, he would have given you a message to deliver to me. You have ten seconds to produce it or you die."

"Hey, now. Let's not get crazy!"

"Nine."

"Wait. Wait!"

"Eight." As he counted, Orion drew a small pistol from his pocket and held it so his guest could see it.

"Seven."

"Okay. Okay! Marconi said you were paranoid. Okay. He said to tell you that he would see you on the other side. Okay?"

"Good. Thank you." He put the gun away and took a sip of his coffee. "I am paranoid. Of course I am. What we are doing is highly illegal. We violate the prime law on a regular basis and would suffer greatly if we were caught."

Orion continued, mostly to relax his guest who clearly was not used to having a weapon pointed at him.

"I do not know what Marconi told you about us or his ... um ... adventures but we offer our select clientele the ultimate hunting experience – the opportunity to hunt and kill members of your own species. That is the core of our service. Does that interest you or should I stop now?"

His client was grinning and nodding. "Please. Go on."

"We have several options but as a first timer, you will have to be accompanied by a guide on each hunt until the guide is convinced you are ready to solo. You will also have to undergo some training before you head out. Once

you are ready to solo and that usually requires at least four hunts, we will have a new set of options to offer you. As a beginner, it is important that you stick to the rules. Any resistance or reluctance to follow the rules or the guide's orders will result in immediate cancelation of the hunt and termination of our association.

Am I clear so far?" Again the nodding and grinning signified a yes.

"Good. Depending on your budget and your inclination, we can jack you into the hunting zone – just you and a guide or as a member of a larger hunting party. There are never more than six members in a group. Most people opt for a group package their first time out."

"Sounds good. I'm in."

"Excellent. We have several parties getting ready to depart. Do you want to make a quick trip – what we call the spree package – where you track and kill a lot of victims all at once – or would you prefer the serial package – where you hunt a number of individuals one at a time over a longer time period? Again, most first timers go with a short killing spree package."

He paused to give his guest time to absorb the info and consider his options. He didn't take long. He was excited.

"I like the short term group idea. That way, I can see if I'm going to like it without spending too much time or money."

"A wise choice, my friend. We require a deposit of 50% on signing and the rest is due just before you jack in. There is a short training session to be scheduled before you go. Any questions?"

"Yes. Marconi talked about jacking in but I didn't really understand it. This is real, right? It's not like a video game?"

"I assure you it is no video game. It's as real as it gets. When we jack in, we transport you to an avatar. Your body stays with us but your mind goes hunting. To jack out, you terminate the avatar and wake up back here. It is really quite addictive. I've been on several expeditions myself."

"What does it feel like?"

"It's different for everyone. I can tell you what it was like for me but it is better to experience it yourself." His guest, now a client, pulled out a credit card and handed it to Orion who ran it through a reader. When the deposit cleared, he handed his client back the card and informed him that from this point on, he will be known as Priam and his fellow hunters will know him only by that name. For his own security, Orion explained.

Priam left the café, apparently pleased with the outcome of the meeting. He was now a hunter and after a short training session, he'd soon be hunting people. What a rush. Orion watched him go and allowed some time to pass before pulling out a laptop from the briefcase that was by his side. He added the new recruit to the training roster and schedule his mission and also took the opportunity to review the current and upcoming missions. As word spread, their business was growing at a steady rate. It was only a matter of time before it reached a critical size and destroyed itself. Criminal activities remain secret only when there is a very small number of people in on it. The more people involved, the more likely someone will talk to the wrong person. But no matter; their mission should be accomplished before that happened. For now, they were holding it together.

He laughed. Hundreds of people were paying absurd fees for the chance to kill others of their species. There were group adventures happening every other day and several dozen solo clients active in the kill zone – some in place for months or years. They were experimenting with large scale attacks and Orion knew that the clients had no idea what really was going on. With any luck, they never would know.

So far thousands of ‘ghosts’ had been sent into the atmosphere putting pressure on the containment shield. More were needed and his clients were providing them for him. If all goes according to plan, the shield should crumble soon and when it does, chaos will follow. The threatened judgment day or Armageddon that various religions preach would seem like Sunday School Picnics compared to what would happen when the shield falls. And he, Orion, would go down in history as the founder of a free world.

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Los Angeles (Home of Cynthia Ross)

Cynthia Ross, on a break from grading papers, enjoyed her daily dose of bad news courtesy of America’s news reporters who provided equal doses of news and fear-mongering. She believed that the news had become more entertainment than real news even though the newscasters tried hard to maintain the image that they were delivering hard news.

The news reader put on a solemn face as he announced that three more people had died in rioting after the latest figures were released concerning the ozone layer. He showed his viewers videos of the riots in New York, Los Angeles, Washington, and Chicago.

“National Weather Service announced earlier today that the hole in the ozone layer had grown another four percent and was now roughly the size of Greenland. The NWS says that the change may be seasonal but the Sierra Club and other environmental activist groups were quick to condemn the NWS as a government stooge. They demanded the government do something about excessive use of fossil fuels to prevent further depletion of the ozone layer. When a White House spokesperson stated that the President intended to wait and see whether the changes are seasonal or not before acting. The activists took to the streets and as others joined them, protests became riots. Looters quickly followed and there were a number of violent confrontations between rioters and police. Relative calm was restored on most areas when the National Guard were deployed in the inner cities.”

“In other news, the number of Americans infected by the Ebola Disease continues to rise with cases being reported in more than twenty cities across the country. Quarantine and isolation do not seem to have prevented the spread of the disease. The CDC reports roughly 12,000 reported cases and 4560 reported deaths from the disease. States of emergency have been declared in New York, California, Louisiana, Texas, and New Jersey. People are being advised to stay at home and avoid places where large numbers of people congregate – malls, movie theaters, and sports stadiums for example.”

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Los Angeles

“911. What is your emergency?”

“There is going to be a robbery at the Mutual Savings Bank, Wiltshire and Clark Drive. Hurry! They are armed and will be there any minute.”

“Please stay on the line. Are you in any danger? What is your name?” But the operator was already talking to dead air. She immediately pushed the information up the line and recorded the incoming number from the Caller ID display alongside the case number for the call as per standard protocol. Seconds later, she was answering another emergency call unaware of the flurry of activity she’d started in the West Hollywood Precinct Station. SWAT and several squad cars filled with armed policemen raced down Wiltshire Blvd at break neck speeds.

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Los Angeles – Wiltshire and K Street

As if on cue, the bank robbers, masks on and guns at the ready, piled out of the van they’d stolen that morning at the same moment the police converged on the bank. The ensuing gun battle lasted less than three minutes but to those involved, it seemed an eternity.

The would-be robbers tried to force their way into the bank to get away from the police but the bank employees had been alerted and had locked the doors. One robber, in frustration, emptied his clip at the armored glass doors. His bullets bounced in all directions. One hit a civilian who’d been crouching behind a dumpster. He was killed instantly. The killer’s frustration and life were both cut short as he was on the receiving end of a hail storm of police bullets. He was dead before he hit the ground. The remaining perps, cornered outside the bank’s main doors and cut off from their vehicle returned fire. Their shots created a lot of damage but no one was hit by them. One by one, the bank robbers fell but they all went down fighting.

When the shooting stopped and the smoke cleared, four perps were dead and one was critically injured. He wasn’t expected to make it but he was sent off by ambulance to the nearest trauma center. While surgeons battled to save his life, homicide detectives descended on the street in front of the bank. There was one civilian dead and a few dozen bystanders and cops with minor injuries, most from flying glass. Because of the civilian’s death, the street was their crime scene and it was their responsibility to process it and to make sense of it, if that was possible.

The lead detective realized quickly that more manpower was needed. He sent out requests to the nearby precincts. Any detectives not currently busy at active crime scenes elsewhere in the district were asked to help on this one. Mark Wheaton was among those who responded to the appeal. He spent the afternoon collecting and logging in firearms both from the police and the perps.

The latter's weapons were tagged and locked in a police van while those police officers who discharged weapons during the gun battle were required to provide Mark with make, model, and serial number of the weapon or weapons they used, the number of rounds they fired and their locations relative to the bank at the time they used their guns.

Security cameras and several cell phones had recorded the shoot out. The resulting videos made it crystal clear that the perps fired first. There was no question of the use of excessive force by the police. They responded appropriately. The only real question that required an answer was whether the civilian who died, did so at the hands of the perps or the police. Again, video footage caught the victim falling several seconds before any police officer fired. The bank robber was responsible for the death but the paperwork still needed to be filled out and ballistic tests done on the confiscated weapons. There was not going to be any reason for the media, or anyone else for that matter, claiming a police cover-up.

Mark completed his assignment and approached the lead detective to find out what more needed done.

"Thanks to you guys, we got this handled. We're pretty close to wrapping it up here and me and my boys can cover it." He turned and then turned back.

"There is one thing. I'd appreciate it if you'd make sure the weapons get transported and processed at the Two-Four Precinct House."

"Can do. They're all in the SWAT van. I'll ride with them back to the precinct."

"Terrific. When you get to the station, will you pop upstairs and check in with the 911 dispatcher? That got a call telling us a robbery was about to happen. Gave us enough time to get here and catch the perps with their pants down. It bothers me. The caller must've had prior knowledge of the heist. Might be worth having a chat with him. Check into it for me?"

"Consider it done but you might owe me a beer when this is done."

"Probably more than one."

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Los Angeles (Wiltshire and Clark Drive)

Kevin had huddled over the wounded gunman as his partner drove the ambulance, siren blaring, through afternoon traffic heading for the nearest hospital with an active trauma unit – Angels of Mercy. Kevin concentrated on stopping the bleeding from the six gunshot wounds the man had received. He called to the driver to radio ahead and let the ER know he was going to need lots of blood. At the same time, he started an IV to prevent his patient's blood vessels from collapsing. He worked hard to keep the man alive primarily because he couldn't tell if the man was going to live or die. Usually his gut told him which ones were going to die and who would live but this guy was an enigma.

In less than six minutes, the ambulance arrived at the ER entrance and handed the patient over to the waiting trauma team who rushed him into the operating room as Kevin outlined what he had seen and what he had done. He

also reminded the nurses that the patient was a murderer and a bank robber who the police wanted restrained until guards could arrive. The head nurse laughed and gestured at the still form on the gurney.

“Come on, Kev. You know as well as I do that that man ain’t gonna move anywhere on his own anytime soon. He’d be dead already if you hadn’t worked on him. Relax. We’ll keep an eye on him till the cops get here.” She winked. Kevin smiled.

“I had to tell you that cause the police told me to. I’m just covering my butt. He’s your problem now. I’m going to restock and head back to the station. See you later, Stella.”

“Later.” She watched him go, admiring his butt as he strolled down the hall. She wondered if he was gay or maybe just a bit dense since she’d been flirting with him for months and gotten nowhere. Maybe, she thought, she’d have to be a little less subtle next time.

She knew Kevin Treacher had a kind and gentle soul because he had shown it to her on several occasions. He always cried a little when he lost a patient en route to hospital. He treated little old ladies and gangbangers equally well while in his care. He’d told her once that he believed everyone was someone’s child and deserved respect. That was one of the things she liked about him.

She did not believe the rumors that floated around the hospital about Kevin because they just did not fit with the Kevin she’d known for almost two years. The rumors talked about how he let certain people die in his ambulance when they could have been saved had he worked harder or traveled faster. To support their case, the people spreading the rumors pointed to an elderly gentleman who’d had a heart attack and whom Kevin had picked up in his ambulance. The man died in the ambulance from a second heart attack and there was no record of Kevin using the paddles or administering the adrenaline as required by the EMTs’ protocol. Rumors argued that Kevin picked and chose who lived or died in his ambulance.

Stella staunchly defended Kevin and argued that he would never do something like that. Her words fell on deaf ears as most hospital staff knew she had a crush on Kevin and so didn’t want to hear anything bad about him.

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Los Angeles (Josh’s Apt)

“Joshua Adams! LAPD! Open up!”

He heard the yelling through a fog of deep sleep – the first real sleep he’d had in days. The pounding on his door finally penetrated to his brain and it told him to answer it. No sooner was the door unlocked when he found himself being shoved backwards as three rather large men pushed their way into his little apartment. They seemed to fill it up. All three had badges and guns out. Josh was too tired to be afraid. He was more angry.

“Hey! Back off, man. You got no right . . .”

"We've got every right." Wheaton tossed a warrant onto Josh's desk. "You need to come to the precinct right now to answer a few questions."

"What for? I've done nothing wrong."

"That remains to be seen. Let's go." One of the other cops grabbed him by the elbow and started to propel him towards the door. Josh tried to pull away.

"Shit, man. Can I at least get dressed first?" Mark nodded and the cop released Josh's elbow. Josh threw on his pants and an old sweatshirt as the cops watched to make sure he wasn't going to pull a gun on them. He slipped into his shoes and strolled to the door. Two of the police detectives sandwiched him between them and the third fell in behind – standard escort procedure. Despite being much larger than him, they seemed, to Josh, to be a little afraid of him. He wondered what they thought he'd done.

It was a quiet ride to the station. Josh knew this silent treatment was designed to make the person being transported nervous or stressed out. That was Psychology 101 and he relaxed. The warm car started to lull him back to sleep. If the station had been further away, he would've napped.

He was put in a dreary room that had seen too many coats of paint and not enough cleaning. It stank of sweat and fear. There was the standard two-way mirror along one wall but Josh figured no one could see through the streaks and cracks that turned the mirror into a mosaic. They probably watched everything on a television hooked to the camera in the corner. He was tired and the waiting was using up the energy he had left. He was tempted to put his head down on the table but was afraid of what had been on the table earlier – bodily fluids, most likely. He opted for trying to slouch back in the metal chair as best he could. He closed his eyes.

He awoke with a start at the sound of the door opening. He saw a familiar face – the cop who'd insisted he come to the precinct.

"Why am I here? Do you think I did something wrong? Am I being arrested for something?"

Mark took his time answering.

"You are not under arrest. No one has read you your rights, have they?"

"Do you mean I am not under arrest or not yet under arrest? I don't appreciate being dragged down here in the middle of the night!"

"It's only 9:00 pm – hardly the middle of the night."

"I'm a grad student. I have weird hours. Okay. So, if I'm not under arrest, I can go home now. Right?"

Wheaton sighed, "Technically, yes, you can leave any time you want to. But we have a little problem and maybe you might be able to help us with it."

"You have a damn funny way of asking for help." Josh crossed his arms and did his best to appear to be above all that was happening.

Wheaton took out a notebook and started: "Where were you between 9:15 and 10:30 am today?"

"Why?"

"Please just answer the question."

"Astronomy 436."

"What?"

"I was in class. Astronomy 436 with Professor Ross. Baker's Hall, room 1629. It's a three-hour class – 9 to 12 Monday, Wednesday, and Friday."

"Can anyone verify that?"

"Sure. Professor Ross takes attendance. Call her." He pushed a couple of buttons on his phone and slid it across the table. That's her home number.

Wheaton read the number out loud, Josh presumed, so some other cop listening in could call her.

"Plus it's a small class. Only seven of us in the class. We were all there today. Professor Ross can verify that too."

"A three-hour class. Pretty tough. Did your class take any breaks?"

"I see where this is going. Whatever I did, I did on a twenty minute break. But okay. We took one break, as usual. Before you ask, it was about 10:15 to 10:30 roughly. Can't be 100% sure. I never really got a break though. I spent the time chatting with Professor Ross in the classroom."

"What did you talk about?"

"My girlfriend, a former student of hers and was killed in an accident a few weeks ago. I was missing her and depressed. Professor Ross gave me the contact number for the student counseling service."

"I see. I am sorry for your loss. Tell me, do you live alone?"

"Yes, I do now." Josh wanted to explain how Sarah and he had planned to get married at the end of the semester but stayed quiet.

"Anyone else have keys to your apartment?"

"The Super does, I assume, not that he'd ever bother coming up to fix anything. No one else that I know of."

Wheaton was distracted for a second by a uniformed officer who stepped into the interrogation room to deliver a note.

"It seems your alibi checks out. Your astronomy professor corroborated your story."

"You sound disappointed, Detective."

Wheaton laughed. "I am, a bit. Now I have to dig some more."

"What's this all about?"

"Did you hear about the attempted robbery and shoot out downtown this morning?"

"Yeah. I heard a bit but I don't really stay current with the news. I'm a grad student and don't have a lot of free time." The skeptical look on Wheaton's face made him feel a bit defensive. "I take being a student seriously. I came to UCLA to get an education, not to party or screw around."

Wheaton held up his hands as if to surrender.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to suggest otherwise. It's just been a long day. We have a problem – more like a loose end. At 9:35 this morning, 911 got a call warning of a potential robbery at a bank. Usually 911 calls come in after the fact but this one came in about 15 minutes before the bad guys showed up at the bank. The call probably saved a lot of lives but . . ."

"So whoever called knew about the robbery in advance?"

"Yes. We are very anxious to talk to the person who made that call."

"You could . . ."

"We could trace the call to 911. And we did. And that 911 call originated from the telephone in your apartment."

"Holy shit, man? No way."

"It apparently wasn't you. And you tell me no one else has access to your apartment. So what's going on?"

"Wow. This is like something from The Twilight Zone."

"I'm going to play you the 911 call. Maybe we'll get lucky and you'll recognize the voice."

"I'll try."

Wheaton hit the play button on his pocket recorder and the 911 operator's voice filled the room: "911. What is your emergency?" As the caller started talking, Josh froze and his face went white. A thousand thoughts fought for attention in his brain. His emotions did cartwheels and back flips. He heard himself mumbling: "No! No!"

Wheaton was excited. He snapped off the recorder and stared at Josh.

"Did you recognize the voice?"

Tears streamed down Josh's face as he struggled to find the words.

"Yes, I do, but I must be mistaken." He hurried on before his emotions strangled his voice. "The voice, it sounded like Sarah, Sarah Cunningham. But it can't be."

"Why not?"

"My girlfriend, the one I told you was killed in an accident last month, that was Sarah. Sarah Cunningham is dead! She couldn't have made that call." He sobbed and his voice faltered. He was feeling the loss all over again. "Sarah is dead. Sarah is dead."

* * * *

Los Angeles (Becker's office)

Becker received an email from the ATF – the third in as many days. It seems Barber had kept her word and was keeping him in the loop. This particular email had been forwarded from one of her agents who'd been tasked with reviewing employee records for all of the police evidence facilities that had had weapons disappear from their inventories and subsequently reappear in the criminal underworld.

The report, and thus the email, ran for more than thirty pages but thankfully it began with an executive summary – a 1-page overview that offered the highlights of which there were three:

1. No one employed at the relevant facilities showed any suspicious behaviors, no changes in spending habits, no unexplained monies. Bank records, phone records, work records, all came back clean.

2. Although one or two of the workers at the various facilities were casually acquainted with employees from other facilities, there was nothing to suggest a network of thieves or really any kind of connection among the personnel of the evidence storage facilities – not even a bowling league.

3. In the past three months, at least one employee from each relevant evidence facility had died – from natural causes, illnesses, or in an accident. The reporting agent noted this seeming coincidence was the only out-of-the-ordinary thing that connected all of the relevant facilities. He suggested that perhaps someone was taking out personnel so they could be replaced by criminals who wanted to steal guns but in the same sentence, the agent dismissed the theory as unworkable – noting that some of the positions made vacant by deaths had yet to be replaced and other positions were eliminated.

Becker flipped to the section of the report that detailed the deaths of the employees and read it carefully. The ATF agents theory was untenable but he thought the relationship between the stolen guns and the deaths may be real. He thought that maybe the relevant personnel had stolen guns on behalf of someone and then were killed for their trouble. That theory was a better fit. He sent an email response suggesting that theory and encouraging a more careful look at those deaths, specifically to see if they were not so natural after all.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Josh's apartment)

The squad car dropped Josh off at his building just before dawn and he dragged himself up the three flights to his apartment cursing the building's super the whole way. There was an elevator but it had been out of order since before Josh moved in. He was sure all it needed was a small part for the elevator motor and the super was just too lazy to fix it.

He leaned against his door to catch his breath and gather some more energy. He was exhausted and ready to go back to bed. The sleep deprivation he'd experienced since Sarah's accident had caught up to him. He felt beat up. He could see evidence that the police had searched his apartment looking for whatever they were looking for. They'd left all the lights on. Stuff was out of place. All the cupboard doors hung open. They'd even left the computer on. No respect. Josh shrugged. Too tired to care, he turned out lights on the way to his bedroom where he collapsed, face first, onto his bed. He fell asleep with the bedroom light still on.

Two hours later, his alarm sounded to let him know he had an hour before his first class. He showered while the coffee maker did its thing. He did a bit of tidying before sitting at his computer with a fresh cup of coffee. He tabbed the computer out of sleep mode and proceeded to open a variety of windows. As was his habit, he vocalized what he intended to do. That made him appear strange to people who did not know him but he'd always done it. He rationalized his talking to himself as a way of reinforcing his intentions.

"I need to know if the police screwed anything up last night."

Sarah's voice was quick to respond reassuringly: "Everything is okay. I backed everything up for you just in case."

Josh just sat there, his fingers poised above the keyboard. Then he shook his head as if to clear it. "I must be going crazy. There is no voice command software here." He paused. "Maybe I'm still dreaming."

“Josh. I don’t need VR software. I can hear you through the built-in microphone and see you through the monitor’s camera. You look pretty whipped, if I may say so.” Sarah’s voice was crisp and clear sounding, not at all like the crude imitation Josh had installed.

“What the hell? What is going on?”

“I don’t know either. One minute I was walking down the street with you and the next I’m in here. In this computer. For a while I was helpless, blind, mute, but I learned my way around. That voice program you put in here helped a lot. And that was so sweet of you, to make your computer sound like me. Now I can navigate in here pretty well but I can’t get out. Josh, tell me what happened.”

Josh could not ignore the plea because it was in her voice. He told her he didn’t know how she got where she is but he did tell her everything he could. He told her about her accident and her parents came and took her body home and how he missed her. He added that car that had hit her had been found only a few blocks away from the accident scene and the police still had no clue as to who had run her down. He finished and then added that he felt like a fool talking to a computer. Sarah’s voice argued that she was not just a computer. She was a person too. He scoffed and she challenged him to ask her anything that only Sarah could know.

For over an hour, he grilled his computer, tossing question after question at the machine. Finally he gave up.

“I don’t know how you are doing it but you have access to her memories. Did she keep a journal online?”

“No, Josh. I am Sarah.”

“What you claim to be is physically impossible. You must be a program of some kind.”

“Josh you can be so pigheaded sometimes. Can’t you just accept that I am here, with you? You know there have been at least two other similar occurrences I can give you the online references if you want to check them out.”

“Wait. You can access the internet?”

“Yup. I can surf the regular internet even get into the dark net. I can read anyone’s email. Cool, huh?”

“No. Not cool. What else can you mess with?”

“Outside the world wide web and the internet, not much. I can communicate over a VOIP connection though.”

Josh considered the implications of this and sat bolt upright as it hit him.

“You . . . you used the internet phone connection, the VOIP protocol, yesterday, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did.”

“You called 911 about the robbery.”

“I had to. I caught an email exchange on the dark net and knew it was going to happen. I had to warn someone.”

“You . . . you . . . you,” he sputtered. “You had to warn someone? Do you know what you did? The police dragged me to the police station and questioned me all night. They searched the apartment, went through all my stuff. They even

called Professor Ross to check my alibi. I was treated like a common criminal. It was awful.”

“I’m sorry, Josh, but my call saved a lot of lives. Isn’t that worth one night’s discomfort?”

“Spoken like a person who didn’t have to go through it.” Josh was angry and confused. He needed time to think. Without another word, he shut down the computer and went for a walk. He was already late for his first class so he decided to skip it and the next one too. He needed a day to himself.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Angels of Mercy Hospital)

The corridor was full of medical personnel constantly on the move, catering to the needs of the patients in the emergency ward, and avoiding the police officers, some in uniform and some not who stood immobile like rocks in a stream of humanity. One officer’s focus was on a single individual, the lone surviving bank robber who was located in a small room just off the main emergency room’s open ward. He’d recently been placed there after seven hours of surgery to remove nine police bullets and to repair the damage done by them. According to the doctors, that damage was extensive but they were confident that he would survive his wounds. Ever cautious, they had hooked up to a number of monitors and sensors that would alert the nurse assigned to him of any status changes. So far, there had been no changes. Heart beat, respiration, brain activity were all stable.

The lead detective checked to make sure that the patient was cuffed to the bed. They’d chained his right hand to the bed frame but his left was too full of IVs and other gauges to accommodate handcuffs. They left the hand unshackled. The detective then made sure there were police guards in the patient’s immediate vicinity. The closest they could get was the corridor outside the room because it was too small to handle medical personnel and the police at the same time. Just to be sure, he put guards at each of the exits and entry point for the emergency ward. They were instructed to try and stay out of the way of the medical people but keep an eye on everyone who came or went. Can’t be too careful, according to his bosses. He considered the precautions to be a bit of overkill but the powers that be wanted it and so they got them.

Satisfied that all was well, he approached the doctor in charge of the ER.

“Can I get an update on our prisoner? My boss is driving me crazy.”

“Not much to update you on. We are at a wait-and-see point. He was pretty torn up inside. We repaired what we could, stopped the bleeding, that sort of thing, but it is highly likely he’ll need additional surgery in the days to come.”

“When can we talk to him?” He tried to make it sound like he really wasn’t anxious to do so but the doctor saw right through his attempt.

“Not for some time, I’m afraid. He is heavily sedated and should be unconscious for several hours. Even when he wakes up, he’s going to be weak and disoriented. Anesthetic does that to most people. If you pushed me for a

guess, I'd have to say it'll be at least three or four days before he'll be well enough for any kind of interview."

The detective sighed: "I suspected as much but I hoped . . . I'd just really like to talk to him as soon as possible." The doctor laughed.

"You and half the world, I'll bet. Let him rest. I'll let you know when he is strong enough."

"Thanks, doc. I appreciate that." They shook hands and the detective headed down the hall towards the exit. He hadn't eaten all day and was on his way to a well-deserved meal. He reached the door and had his hand on the push bar when it seemed like alarms were going off all around him. He spun around to see the river of medical staff rush towards his prisoner's room. He joined the flow but was stopped at the door to the room by an ER nurse.

"Wait here. Give my people room to work." She ordered.

"What happened? Can you at least tell me that."

"His monitors went crazy. Looks like cardiac arrest. The crash team is in there now. The rest of us just wait."

The flurry of activity around the perp's bed lasted half a minute and then stopped abruptly and the monitors were shut off. The attending physician came out of the room, discarding his bloody scrubs as he did so.

"Sorry, detective. There was nothing we could do. Your prisoner is dead."

"What the hell happened in there?"

"It seems I underestimated your guy. He woke up and, how shall I put this, literally tore himself open. He dug into his wounds and disemboweled himself. I've never seen anything like it. By the time we got there, he was all but bled out and his organs were shutting down. There was nothing we could do at that point. He was already gone." The doctor leaned against the wall, suddenly very tired.

"In all my years, I thought I'd seen everything. He was determined to die and picked a very painful way to do it. I can't think of anything that would hurt worse. I'm going to make a note in his chart suggesting that the medical examiner do a full tox screen. If our patient wasn't on some psychotic drug, I'll bet he was certifiably nuts."

The detective listened to the doctor's words and watched as the medical staff wheeled his prisoner, now covered in a bloody sheet, to the elevator on its way to the morgue downstairs. The robbery attempt and dramatic gun battle had raised several questions but now his last lead and potential source of information had turned himself into just another dead end.

* * * *

Los Angeles (LAPD)

Mark sat at the computer and thought about his two recent cases and how both had ended with no real resolution but with no reason to continue the investigation. The Kehoe murder was rapidly becoming a cold case with no leads forthcoming. Public appeals had been made to no avail. Whoever killed her was going to get away with it unless he or she made a mistake in the future. The other case, although technically not his, was nagging at him too. All of the bank

robbers were dead. All attempts by police to figure out motive ultimately failed. The perpetrators were similar to Kehoe in that up until the robbery attempt, each and every one of them had been an upstanding and normal citizen with their share of speeding tickets and other brushes with the law. No criminal records and family members seemed just as baffled as the police. Was the world going crazy?

To take his mind off his recent failures, he buried himself in paperwork. He was still peripheral to the bank robbery investigation and had been given the job of entering the basic information about the crime into the VICAP computer. Theoretically, every violent crime is entered into the database and made available to police officers across the country. Some jurisdictions were lax about entering the data or sloppy about it but Mark was proud that the LAPD policy was to make sure the data was entered within a reasonable length of time after the crime was committed and updated regularly. More to the point, it was a policy that was enforced and officers who failed to meet the standards for timely completion of the VICAP forms were penalized.

Mark actually liked doing the VICAP entry as the standardized forms gave him a chance to rethink the crimes and see them from a different point of view. He hummed as he did the online entry. As he finished with the bank robbery event, he began to enter to details of the Kehoe murder, including the link to the murder/arson in Baltimore. In the section that required him to enter a description of the victim, he went back to the autopsy report for the relevant info. He noticed that a tattoo had been noted on her left shoulder. The hair on his arms stood up as he read the details. It was an ultraviolet tattoo – one of the latest trends among the “beautiful people” – that could only be seen under black lights. So the rich and self-indulgent could appear to be covered in art while out clubbing but be free of decoration during their days in corporate America, someone had invented the invisible ink. But it seemed that the criminal element had also availed themselves of this secret marking. He flipped back to the personal information on the attempted bank robbers. Yes. They all had ultraviolet tattoos and all were on the left shoulder, just like Kehoe. He pulled out autopsy photos, the ones showing the tattoos, and got another jolt. They were all similar. No! They were identical. Beverly Kehoe had the exact same tattoo on her left shoulder as did all of the would-be bank robbers. Weird. Now he had a potential lead and he returned to the VICAP computer. He completed the forms as fast as he could and then put in a request for information. He asked the computer for all crimes involving perpetrators who had an ultraviolet tattoo on the left shoulder. He included a photo of the design and hit the send button. What he got back was quite a surprise. VICAP pointed to the recent school shooting in Bakersfield and the robbery at a bank on the UCLA campus where dozens of hostages were massacred. Mark sat back. He now had four seemingly unrelated crimes with the unusual commonality of an invisible tattoo. He reviewed them in his mind:

1. An ex-ATF agent murdered and then the assassin Beverly Kehoe became a murder victim herself.
2. The UCL bank hostage debacle – all perps killed by police.

3. The killing of students and police by a lone gunman at a school in Bakersfield – the perp commits suicide.

4. The foiled bank robbery in downtown LA – all perps dead.

In each case, the bad guy wore the tattoo and ended up dead. Mark knew in his gut that there was some connection between all of these crimes, but what was that elusive link. Was there a mastermind coordinating these crimes and then killing off his team. That was diabolical, according to Mark's way of thinking, because if the perp dies, the case is closed and the investigation gets shut down. It was criminally brilliant. That thought raised about a thousand questions in his head and he was happy. He now had a direction to investigate further and could use the unsolved murder of Kehoe to justify it. He went back into the VICAP computer and asked it to alert him whenever violent crimes were committed involving criminals that had ultraviolet tattoos or included the perpetrators being killed at the scene by police. He'd started the ball rolling. Now it was up to other jurisdictions and VICAP to start providing answers.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Josh's Apartment)

Josh had been back in his apartment for two hours after a long day of wandering about and thinking. He still hadn't turned on the computer and the silence was killing him but he didn't know what to do. He'd walked out on Sarah. Yes. He accepted it was her in the computer – her, not the artificial voice – and that was strange and probably impossible. However, the idea of having Sarah back in his life was so wonderful, he was willing to believe in the impossible.

"I should turn the computer on and apologize to Sarah. She is going to be so pissed."

The monitor glowed and the hard drive fired up on its own.

"Apology accepted, Josh. Glad you're back."

"You can turn the computer on?"

"Sure. But it was never really off. I bypassed the on/off switch a while ago. You couldn't turn me off now even if you unplugged me." Wanna see what else I can do?"

"Absolutely." He loved the sound of her voice.

For the next hour, she put the computer through its paces. She'd hijacked the unused disk space on over a hundred other computers to make hers a super computer with as much processing power as NASA. It was blazingly fast with unlimited processing ability. But that wasn't all. Sarah had tweaked her access to the web. Every program she wanted was available. All she had to do was think about it.

"Why all this power?" Josh was a bit overwhelmed.

"I've been trying to figure out how I got here and why I am still, well, me. I'm dead but I'm not. I'm a ghost." In her best Jack Webb voice, which wasn't very good, she stated: "I am the Ghost in the Machine." She giggled at her little joke. "The machine has been searching everywhere looking for answers. Have you got any idea how much crap there is on the net? It's amazing."

"I have to admit the answers that I am getting back are a little bit scary . . . and confusing. For instance I ask about ghosts and I get back mountains of data on ghosts, of course, but I also get tons of stuff on earthquakes, the ozone layer, funny tattoos, and DNA among other stuff. I have no idea what it all means yet but the computer seems to think it is all related."

"Sarah, I am tired – not much sleep last night, remember – and I have to go to class early tomorrow. I can't miss two days in a row."

"Oh dear, I didn't realize it was so late. I lose track of time since I don't need to eat or sleep any more. But you do. Go to bed. I'll wake you in the morning and, Josh, I'm really glad we're back together again. I missed you."

"I missed you too. Good night."

* * * *

Location Unspecified

Orion wondered if he was doing the right thing. He had his doubts but little choice. A police detective had started putting things together and the group risked discovery. It was too soon for that. Their goal was a ways away still and they had to act to prevent being stopped too soon.

An informant employed by the LAPD had pointed out the potential threat during the LAPD investigation of the assassin's death. It had not gone the way Orion wished it to. There was no quick surrender to the lack of evidence; no letting the case go cold in favor of more recent murder and mayhem. This detective, a Mark Wheaton, had kept the investigation going with follow-ups and by teasing new leads out of seemingly nothing. The warning that he might prove difficult was certainly prophetic. Orion's spies monitored all of the databases and computer traffic in and out of the LAPD and Mark's use of the markings as a means to connect the events was raising all kinds of red flags.

He had suggested that they give this Wheaton a bit more time and assume that he will run out of leads or energy but his cohorts were nervous and were urging him to react before the detective got any closer. Reluctantly he had agreed but at the same time, noted that it was possible that acting against the detective could serve to draw attention to his small successes. What if someone stepped in and took over where he left off? His cohorts did not want to listen to that kind of possibility. They were determined to go forward. Orion set things in motion. In less than a week, Mark Wheaton would be dead. What that meant for the cause was not yet to be known.

* * * *

Los Angeles (TV Newsroom)

The newsroom grew quiet as the floor director counted down to “On Air” and the newsreader started in on the lead story.

“The Ebola Disease has officially been declared to be an epidemic in the United States with over 16,000 cases reported in nine states. California is the hardest hit with around 9,400 reported cases. Officials are working to bring the epidemic under control.”

They switched to some footage under the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco where a cluster of ambulances had gathered. One of their reporters stood next to them.

“The poor and the homeless are the hardest hit in California. I’m here with Dr. Gupta Sanji of the Bleeker Street Clinic. Dr. Sanji, can you tell us what is happening here?”

“Certainly. The people who live down here or in other shanty towns don’t have even the basic sanitation. They are forced to live in squalor. If you have money, you can isolate yourself. You can maintain a sanitary environment. These people don’t have any money. They live on the streets. In our clinic, a few blocks from here, we are seeing twenty or thirty new cases of Ebola Disease every day. And those are the ones who still have the strength to walk to the clinic. There are many others, too sick to help themselves. So, every few days, we call the EMTs who come down here and do a sweep. They gather up the seriously ill and take them to the hospital. Unfortunately, they also end up transporting the corpses of those who have died to the morgue. There are more and more of those every time the EMTs come here.”

The newscast cut to a press conference with Leonard McCleary, governor of California, and other dignitaries. As the footage ran silently in the background, the newsreader summarized for the viewer:

“This was recorded earlier today at the Capitol Building. Our correspondent asked the governor what he intended to do about the rampant Ebola Disease among the homeless and indigent. The governor had this to say: ‘We are taking the situation very seriously and are currently exploring all of our options. Have no doubt, getting control of this epidemic is our first priority.’”

Back in the studio, live, the newsreader noted that no one at the press conference would commit himself to any specific course of action or timeline.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Brother Daniel’s Church)

Brother Daniel stood behind his podium and scanned the crowd – standing room only – and was pleased. Week after week, his flock had grown. Passing the collection plate provided him with a tidy income. Too bad he didn’t need it where he was going. The hymn ended and he stepped forward. This was going to be good.

“My children. The Lord, in his infinite wisdom, has given us this time upon the Earth. Now he asks us if we have used this time wisely. How do we answer him? Have we brought the Word to those ignorant of it? Have we led the blind to

the light so that they may see? Sadly, we have not. The Lord still weeps for the millions who do not know him.”

Maude, sitting near the front, nodded in agreement. She felt Brother Daniel was talking directly to her, pointing out her failure. Michael, her husband, had rejected Brother Daniel and she had thrown him out of their home. He was one of the ignorant. Maybe she should have tried harder. If she had, maybe Michael would have seen the truth. She had reacted in anger when Brother Daniel insisted she pity the blind. She had failed Brother Daniel and wanted somehow to atone. Brother Daniel looked directly at her. She knew he was looking right into her soul and could see her shame. She hung her head.

“My children, we need to redouble our efforts to bring the Word to the blind and the ignorant. It will be a difficult road. Will you walk it with me?”

“Yes!” His congregation responded. Maude, grasping at the lifesaver Brother Daniel had thrown to her, was among the most enthusiastic responders.

“Yes! Oh, yes!”

“What I am asking of you will put you to the test. Are you ready to be tested?”

“Yes, Brother.”

Thank you, my children. I am heartened by your response. God will be pleased too. Let us seal our intent with a covenant, a shared communion, if you will.”

He nodded to his assistants who stood ready at his left. They began wheeling out carts, covered in white tablecloths. He raised his hands above his head and looked up towards the heavens.

“Our Lord, bless this wine that it may serve as a reminder for your flock, remind them to do your work on Earth.”

He watched his congregation as his assistants uncovered the hundreds of small glasses of wine and began distributing it. He had instructed them to make sure that everyone present was to get a glass. Recorded music was piped in over the church’s speaker system as he and his congregation waited for the drinks to be handed out.

“My children, yesterday I prayed, asking for guidance. Our Lord has given us the calling, the task, of bringing His Word to the unbelievers. We have been trying but I felt that we were not accomplishing what the Lord had commanded we do. I prayed. I prayed, my children. And the Lord has answered my prayers. He has given us a plan.”

For effect, he held a rolled up piece of paper, letting his listeners believe it was THE plan. In reality, it was a take out menu from a local restaurant. He tried to evoke the image of Moses and his commandment tablets. He’d practiced in front of a mirror.

“Our Lord told me that we will succeed and he showed me how. I would like to show you the plan. Do you want to see it?” His voice boomed through the speakers.

“Yes!” was the response.

“Now, I know and you know that when there is something you really really want to do, there is something else you must do first. The Lord told me that only

true believers can see the plan and I must test the flock to see who believes and who does not. Our Lord has said that each and every one of you must drink. If you are a true believer, the wine will be sweet and pleasant tasting. If you are not, the drink will be bitter and vile. Once you drink, you will know which side your faith falls on and I would ask that all who are not true believers leave the hall so that I may reveal Our Lord's plan to the rest."

He'd dumped a lot of sugar into the drink to make sure everyone would feel they were true believers – for a little while anyway.

"I ask once again. Are you ready to be tested?"

Again, he got the positive response he'd come to expect and so nodded to an assistant who restarted the recorded music.

"So, my children, we have arrived at the moment of truth. If you would all rise and raise your glasses. Repeat after me, I believe in the one true God."

"I believe in the one true God."

"I believe The Word of God to be the Truth."

"I believe The Word of God to be the Truth."

"I believe . . . "

"I believe . . . "

"I pledge my soul to the Lord's work."

"I pledge my soul to the Lord's work."

Brother Daniel figured he'd pushed it as far as he dare. He raised his own glass and held it near his lips.

"Now, my children, drink and be tested."

In unison, his flock drank the wine and he could see smiles forming on their faces as they tasted the drink's sweetness. He smiled and as soon as he was sure everyone else, assistants included, had finished their drinks, he shot his down in one gulp.

"My children," He grinned. "My children. I shall see you on the other side."

The fast acting poison hit the elderly and frail first and they dropped to the floor but even the strongest among the flock succumbed before they reached the exit doors. Within minutes all were dead. Brother Daniel was the last to die and his last thought involved wondering if this would be one for the record books – the most religious nuts killed at a single event.

A stranger whom until now had stayed hidden in a side room, emerged and applauded Brother Daniel in his mind. "Well done. Well done." He spread gasoline down the aisle as he made his way to the exit at the back. As he reached fresh air, he tossed a lit match through the door and heard the satisfying hiss of gasoline fumes igniting. In a few minutes, firemen would arrive. They were in for a big surprise.

* * * *

Los Angeles

Wheaton ran. Feet slapped the ground. Air rasped from his throat. The overhead lamps, evenly spaced, gave his movement a strobe-like rhythm. His

eyes darted side to side. Nowhere to hide. No deep darkness. He dug deep, ran harder.

They watched him through the windshield. One smoked a cigarette as he kept his foot barely touching the gas pedal. There was no hurry. No need to chase him. Soon, he would stop, exhausted, unable to run any more. Then they'd have him. The driver crushed out his smoke, lazily savoring the coming meeting. He felt the warmth well up inside him. He thanked the Gods for giving him a job he truly enjoyed.

They'd tried first at his apartment but his reactions appeared to be lightning fast and he was out his patio door and across the pool area before they could sight him in. In seconds, the wooded area behind the building hid him. Had he stayed there, they might have had to abort the hit and try again another day but Wheaton kept running through the woods and across the street a half a block down. The assassins slid back into their car and followed, keeping a few hundred yards between them and their target.

Wheaton dashed down an alley and his pursuers followed on foot. They too ran as they did not want him to get too far ahead or be out of sight too long. They picked up the pace when they saw him disappear into what looked like an abandoned warehouse. They followed, pulling flashlights from pockets as they ran. They caught sight of Wheaton at the far end of the room. He wasn't running. Indeed, he was standing still, facing the way he had come. He was grinning. The duo both reacted by reaching for weapons but they weren't fast enough. SWAT police officers fired tasers from behind them. They dropped and writhed on the ground while they were disarmed and restrained. One of the criminals started cursing as soon as he found his voice. His partner growled at him to shut up. He obeyed.

Before he'd let them be put into squad cars, he ripped open their shirts to expose the left shoulder and shone a handheld black light at them. He nodded when he saw the glowing tattoos.

"I thought so." Turning to the escorting officers, he started issuing orders.

"Get them back to the precinct. Print them. Get the boys upstairs to do a quick background check. I'll be along shortly." He smiled at the prisoners. "You are not going to be very popular at the station. You just tried to kill a cop."

"So what?! There ain't nothing you can do to us."

"Shut up," His partner hissed. "Don't say another word."

The perp nodded and went silent despite the rough handling they received from the officers who processed them. In record time, they were fingerprinted, photographed, searched, and read their Miranda rights. They were dumped into separate interview rooms where they were shackled to their chairs. Guards were posted inside each room. As the prisoners sat and waited, the police in the bullpen down the hall were busy pulling all of the information they could on their new guests.

Wheaton arrived at the station armed with an inventory of everything that had been in their car and a list of the firearms they'd been carrying. He was impressed. The guns were top-of-the-line. He also had wallets with credit cards and identification in them. He'd radioed ahead with the basic information to give

the other detectives a head start on the background checks. He found it interesting that he had found the wallets on the floor of the backseat along with trash typical of a stakeout. It was as if they'd thrown the wallets away.

"Speak to me, Grover. Tell me about these guys."

Grover Spitzer, the unit's information specialist – the guy who knew how to mine the data contained in the various databases available to the police – was ready.

"Not a lot to tell, Mark. The older one is Thomas Kirby, age 47, an accounts executive, whatever that is, for an advertising firm downtown. Married. Two kids, both in junior high. A house in the hills. No criminal record. His prints are not in the system. The other one is Edgar Gomez, an unemployed actor, 27, single. Has an apartment in Century City. His prints were in the system. A couple of arrests for drug possession – busted doing coke at a party or two. No jail time."

"In short," Wheaton commented, "you have nothing."

"Got it in one. Either these guys are master criminals no one has caught on to yet or they are amateurs on their first job."

"They acted like pros. They were mostly invisible tailing me. They handled their weapons like they were born to them. All of that screams professional hitman."

Grover started playing Devil's advocate, a role he'd been cast in many times before.

"But their backgrounds say otherwise. No real money. No hidden bank accounts. Kirby has a second mortgage on his house. Drives a 6-year-old Chevy. Gomez doesn't even own a car. Takes the bus everywhere. Whoever heard of a pro hitman using public transit?" Grover raised an eyebrow. Wheaton simply shrugged.

"Hey Wheaton," a uniform yelled from down the hall, "someone to see you."

"Wheaton introduced himself to the woman standing by the door. She responded: "I'm Margaret Kirby. Someone called me and said you'd arrested my husband this evening." Wheaton nodded and directed her to a nearby chair. He sat next to her in the hall.

"Yes. I am afraid that's true. He and one other person tried to kill a police officer."

She nodded. "I've been expecting something like this." Wheaton went into listening mode, nodding and grunting in all the right places but otherwise keeping his mouth shut.

"Don't get me wrong. Tom is, or was, a good man. He worked hard to look after me and the kids. It's just that . . ." She paused to compose herself. "It's just that the man you arrested isn't my husband. He isn't my Tom." She stifled a sob then went on to tell Wheaton how three days ago – and she was sure it was three days ago – it was like someone threw a switch and Tom was gone, replaced by some stranger. Her Tom was gentle and thoughtful. This person kicked their dog and swore at the kids. Tom never swore. He talked differently, smiled differently, and even walked differently. After almost 25 years of marriage, she knew. That first night when they went to bed, he was different. She and Tom made love. This felt like rape to her. That was bad but the worst thing about this new Tom was his

attitude. All of a sudden, he didn't care about her, or about the children, about anybody. She got the sense that he felt she and the children were beneath him. Tom loved and cherished his family. The new one used them to get what he wanted.

She admitted that she was relieved when her husband didn't come home after that first night. She was glad she didn't have to sleep with him a second time. The new Tom was an awful man and she was glad to be rid of him. She wanted her old Tom back but knew, in her heart, that wasn't possible.

"When your man called me to tell me he'd been arrested, I wasn't surprised. I hope he goes to prison for a very long time. He took my Tom from me." She finally let herself cry. Wheaton comforted her as much as he could at the same time as he processed the information she'd delivered. He excused himself to get ready for the upcoming interviews but told her she could stay as long as she liked.

Both prisoners had been read their rights and so far neither had requested a lawyer. That was good. He decided to start with Gomez who, despite being the younger of the two assassins, appeared to be the leader. Mrs. Kirby had given Wheaton some insight into Tom Kirby but Edgar Gomez was an unknown. Might as well fill in some blanks.

By way of introduction, he went over the background Grover had given him.

"You are Edgar Gomez and you live at 27674 Pine Street, Apartment 6, Century City. Is that correct?"

"If you say so." The perp practically spat the words out.

"Okay. You are being charged with attempted murder – of me actually. That's quite a step up from simple drug possession." Wheaton waited. The prisoner just shrugged and stared at his own reflection in the two-way mirror behind Wheaton. Wheaton started again.

"When we caught you, you were carrying a pretty sophisticated weapon. Where did an unemployed actor get ahold of that kind of gun? And where did you learn to use it?"

The prisoner looked at Wheaton and then back to his own reflection. "This is boring. I want a lawyer."

Wheaton sighed, closed his file and left the room. By law, once a prisoner requests a lawyer, the police cannot ask any more questions until the perp's lawyer shows up. Wheaton hoped the other one was more in the mood to talk.

"Mr. Kirby, Tom, you are being charged with the attempted murder of a police officer. That could put you in prison for life. If you help us in this investigation and tell us what you know, maybe we can cut a few years off the sentence."

Kirby was smiling, obviously amused by something Wheaton had said. He laughed.

"I could tell you all about it but I doubt you'd understand. I'm not going to waste my time."

Wheaton played to his arrogance. "If you are so superior to us, why is it that not only did you fail, we have you in custody?"

"Luck. You were just lucky. Next time . . ."

"There won't be a next time, Tom. We have you and you are going to jail for a very long time." The prisoner smiled. "Besides, you have a leak in your organization. It wasn't luck that got you here. It was a phone call telling us what you were up to." He was referring to a 911 call that had come in a few hours before the arrests. That phone call had saved his life.

For a brief second, the prisoner frowned while he processed the information. Then the sneer was back.

"No problem. When I get back, we'll take care of any leaks. And don't think this is over. It isn't. We didn't get you this time. But next time or the time after that, we will."

Wheaton shook his head. The level of arrogance was astounding.

"Tell me, Tom, last week you were a model citizen with a clean record. This week, you tried to murder a cop, a complete stranger. What happened?"

"See. I told you, you wouldn't understand . . . and you never will. I'm done talking. Lawyer."

* * * *

Unspecified Location

Orion sat at the head of a long table and faced those who occupied the chairs along its side. He glanced at his notes before setting them aside. He wasn't going to need them. He stood up and cleared his throat. There were fragile egos in the room so he chose to keep it light.

"As they often say in the movies – I have some good news and some bad news. Let's start with the good news. Edmund succeeded in releasing almost 400 souls, 391 to be exact, in a single event. He feels the method he used could be used again. He has already been sent back to start over. I myself witnessed the event. I was impressed and I agree with Edmund that it will work again. Perhaps we can prevail upon him to instruct others in his method."

"As much as Edmund's efforts were astoundingly successful, the event at the Wiltshire bank was an astounding failure. The police seemed to know in advance and were able to stop our team from reaching their objective. Only one kill was registered. We had anticipated the release of dozens of souls but only got one. Disappointing. I have asked Damian to review the event and try to discover what went wrong."

His audience accepted that from Orion so he pushed on. No doubt they had already heard about the bank fiasco but he was sure they were as yet unaware of the other failure.

"As you will recall, we jacked a two-man team in to take out the nosey cop. It turned out that once again they were ready for us and they sprung a trap on our team. Not only did the team fail to kill the policeman, they have been captured and are currently being held by the LAPD. I am afraid that I must report that the assassination attempt ended in a total disaster."

There were murmurs around the table. One who had strongly advocated for the assassination attempt spoke up: "Can't they just jack out?"

“It’s not that easy. They are under constant suicide watch and any attempt to jack out would be stopped almost immediately. Of course, given the opportunity, they will jack out but we may have to consider another option.”

He explained what he considered a viable solution to the imprisonment of his soldiers. His refusal to simply abandon them to their current fate was seen as admirable, akin to the U.S. Marine tenet to never leave a man behind. Orion did not need to point out that the prisoners knew a great deal about his operation and the longer the men were in prison, the greater was the likelihood that one or both would talk.

“We have one other issue to discuss. Several years ago, the United States and its allies destroyed the Taliban rule in Afghanistan and with it the Sharia law that they had established. As a result, there was a steep spike in people surviving past their Sentence Termination Dates. Thousands of new ghosts resulted and that was good for us. However, there is a new player in the Moslem world and it calls itself Daesh – the news calls them either ISIS or Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Of late, it has established control over significant parts of those two countries. It, like the Taliban, is enforcing strict Sharia Law in those areas. The key aspect of relevance to us is the edict against the use of Western medicine to prolong life. There is therefore a distinct drop in ghosts coming from that area. We need to do something about it.”

Damian, always willing to speak out, suggested: “Sir, our resources are stretched just about as far as we can stretch them. How can we take on an entire government halfway around the world?”

Macbeth smiled and said he had an idea. “We have that three stage nuclear program coming up in a month or so. If we work it right, we can blame at least part of it on Daesh and get the U.S. government to take care of them for us.”

Orion was pleased. “I like it. Put the team together and see how we can do that. Get back to me when you are ready.”

* * * *

Los Angeles (ATF Task Force Office)

Barber sat looking at the monthly reports her people had put together as well as those forwarded from Becker’s team. She had to discover some kind of order in it all and forward that to her bosses. It was insane. There was so much involved. In an attempt to find the threads hidden in the mountain of information, she started creating lists. The first included all of the Police Evidence Storage Facilities that had been compromised and had weapons missing from them. There were now 12 known locations that fit the criteria. As an addendum to that list, she noted the deaths of employees at all 12 of them – at least one per location. Her second list dealt with all of the crimes that the recycled weapons had been used in. She had a list of 24 such crimes from all over the country. There didn’t seem to be any geographical relationships among those locations or in relation to the evidence storage locations. She did note that each of the crimes was of a violent to extremely violent nature – assassinations and mass murders. Several were school shootings. A couple appeared to be hostage takings gone

wrong. There were cases of individuals being stalked and killed. In every case, people died and, interestingly, in each and every case, all of the perpetrators were among those who died.

Her final list was the most incomplete but also the most intriguing. Thanks to Becker and to an LAPD detective who uploaded data to the violent crimes computer, VICAP, she was now aware that a fair percentage of the perps who used recycled guns had invisible ultraviolet tattoos. True, there were other alleged criminals – who did not use recycled guns – who had the same tattoos. She noted this in her report but her gut, like Wheaton's, was telling her the crimes were all related somehow.

She put the finishing touches on her final report and sent it off by email to her superiors with copies to her team and to Becker. Then she picked up the phone and called him.

"Frank, we should meet for lunch. Something has come up."

"I agree. And it is your turn to buy. Italian would be nice."

She laughed. "Italian it is. Did you get my report?"

"I'm looking at it right now. That invisible tattoo thing is interesting."

"I thought so. I wonder how many tattoo artists are doing ultraviolet designs?"

"Hang on a sec." Barber could hear Becker clicking computer keys. In seconds, he was back. "The FBI keeps a tattoo and tattoo artist database. According to the computer, there are about fifty nationwide but only four in the LA area who can do this type of work. They need to get a special license to get ahold of the ink."

"Good stuff. How about lunch at Luigi's at one and after that, we go visiting?"

"Works for me."

* * * *

Los Angeles (Josh's Apartment)

"Hi, Detective Wheaton. I've been expecting you. Did you bring your friends?" He pretended to look down the hall for more police before Josh stepped back and gestured for his visitor to step in.

"Expecting me? Why?"

"That's sort of a rhetorical question, isn't it? But then don't they teach you in detective school to only ask questions for which you already have the answer?"

Wheaton laughed, "I think that's law school." He noted that Josh seemed happier and much more relaxed compared to the last time they chatted. He decided to play it straight.

"We received a 911 call that came from your phone almost an hour before a crime was committed. Very similar to last time. What is different this time? Last time you didn't know how the 911 call could've been made from your phone. I expect that this time either you made the call or know who did."

"Actually, you are almost right. Not 100% though. Last time when you played me the tape, I told you that it was Sarah's voice and I said that it was

impossible. It turns out I was wrong. She did make the call and she made the second one too.”

“How . . . ?”

Josh explained about Sarah being inside the computer and had heard about the crimes by listening in on the dark net. He went on about how Sarah had heard they were going to kill Wheaton and after talking it over with Josh, placed the call – knowing there might be consequences. Wheaton naturally was skeptical. Actually, he was more than skeptical.

“Have you gone nuts? Your girlfriend resides in your computer and she overhears assassins plotting to kill people?”

“Does sound a bit crazy but no, I’m not nuts. And yes, Sarah is in the computer and hears things. She was right about the attempt on your life, wasn’t she?”

“Someone was right and the call saved my ass. But I still need to know where you are getting your information!”

The computer hummed and whirled. Sarah spoke up.

“Can I show you instead, Detective?”

Wheaton sat up. Josh leaned back, smiling, proud of his girlfriend.

“Show me how?” was his automatic response after which he mumbled more or less to himself: “Listen to me. Talking to a machine.”

“Careful, Detective. I might get offended.” She giggled. “Just kidding. The dark net is a series of websites and virtual chatrooms available only by invitation. The URLs are so complex, you won’t hit these locations by accident. I developed an algorithm that tries every possible combination of letters, numbers, and symbols in strings up to 100 characters long. For instance, here’s a dark site with a 60 character URL where you can buy all kinds of drugs – an online pharmacy. And it’s one of the more innocent sites. There are child porno sites, places to get tips on effective torture techniques. There are how-to videos on getting rid of bodies. The dark net is a horrible place.”

“Why do you go there, then?” He was curious.

“I want to stop them. I want to shut down the dark net. When I come across a nasty site, I collect the URL, the WHOIS data – that is who owns and operates the site – and the IP address – where the physical server is located. Once I have that, I email the info to the appropriate authorities. And before you ask, my emails can’t be traced. They are completely anonymous.”

Josh took over the narrative: “We made the second 911 call for two reasons. The most obvious reason is that a crime was imminent and we had an opportunity to stop it. But we also wanted to get your attention. There is something you need to know.” He turned it back to Sarah.

“The crimes that we called 911 about – the bank robbery and the your assassination – were set up using the same chatroom and as far as I can determine, the same person set both in motion. I am monitoring that URL but there are several others that also appear to be related. I am keeping tabs on those as well. Here is where it gets really interesting. All of the relevant website addresses – the URLs – end in the suffix .echo and no such suffix exists on the

world wide web. Plus, I cannot locate the servers that house the echo sites anywhere. Believe me I've looked. They don't seem to exist."

"You're sure? Of course you're sure." It was interesting to him how quickly he got used to treating the computer like a real person. "I already suspected a link between the two events – the robbery and the hit. There are other pieces of evidence that suggested a link but you confirm it for me. That helps a lot. Oh, and thanks again for saving my life. But there is one thing you have to stop doing."

"What?" Both Sarah and Josh asked.

"No more 911 calls. They make my department go crazy and then I have to come here and drag Josh downtown for the third degree." He smiled and gave Josh his business card. "Here are my private numbers. You get any more activity on the echo sites, you call me – day or night."

"Thanks, Detective. That'll make things easier. And we will call. Those are busy sites." As Sarah talked, the printer hummed. "Here's the website address for that chatroom. Maybe your IT guys can track down the owners."

After Wheaton said goodbye and headed back to his office, Josh spoke up. He was a bit confused. "Why did you give him that URL? You can track the owners much faster than a hundred IT guys."

"You're sweet, Josh. But you aren't too good with people. We need him to trust us and he wasn't quite ready to take our word for any of this. He needs to see the chat site for himself to see that we are telling the truth."

"You gave him one site but there are hundreds of echo sites. When are we going to tell him about those?"

"Soon. Soon. We need him on our side before we swamp him with all of the ugliness these echo sites are planning."

* * * *

Unspecified Location

This was not shaping up to be one of Orion's better days. First thing, he received word that the website he used to coordinate the events in California had been compromised. According to his informant in the LAPD, detectives had been scouring the site for WHOIS date. Because of that, Orion had been forced to contact everyone and reroute all communications through a new hub. The URL the police had was now dormant. They wouldn't learn anything more from it.

He wondered how long they'd had the site URL. Was that the reason the last two operations had gone south? He put a couple of his best guys to work. All of Orion's active sites needed trap-and-trace applications on them. Once in place, these apps would notify him if someone other than an authorized user enters the site and, more importantly, they would provide names and addresses for the trespassers. He chastised himself for not doing that sooner. He'd been too arrogant to even consider that one of them had enough intelligence to penetrate his basic security protocols and he'd paid dearly for that arrogance. No more. He would not underestimate them again.

An assistant interrupted his thoughts to tell him he had a visitor – Priam. "Damn," he thought. "Another fire to put out."

Priam swaggered in, looking for a fight. He was visibly angry. He'd probably been working himself up for this all day.

"Orion, you owe me! You promised me an exciting hunt and I didn't get to kill anybody . . ." He went on and on. Orion let him rant. He knew that technically Priam had killed one – the avatar he'd jacked into died as he replaced him in the body – but to point that out to Priam would only exacerbate the situation. Priam was winding down. Orion remained calm.

"I agree with you, my friend. We had bad intel. I will make it up to you. Now, normally you have to go on a few hunts before you get to jack in alone but I have an adventure for you and you alone. Does that interest you?"

"Yeah, it does." Priam was a bit disconcerted that Orion had agreed with him so readily. His suspicions were raised and then disintegrated, forgotten.

"Priam, I need you to penetrate a secure facility – we can get you part of the way but then you'll be on your own – to track and kill two people. Actually, it is a kind or rescue mission. Two of our own are being held under constant surveillance. They are unable to jack out so I need you to go in and get them. It will be difficult. Can you do that?"

"You bet! I'm your man. When do I go?"

"Soon. First you'll need some training on the weapons you'll have. And you will want a crash course in the identification protocols. We don't want you to jack the wrong guys." They both laughed. Orion had found a solution for what he hoped was the last crisis for today.

* * * *

Los Angeles

The first two tattoo parlors were a bust. At one, the artist had acquired a license to use the ultraviolet inks but did so few of that kind of tattoo, he had given it up. Now he only did regular ink tattoos. At the other, the artist stared at the photo of the tattoo and then asked "What the hell is that?" He specialized in bones. He drew arm bones on arms, hand bones on hands, even skull bones on heads so that when the black light hit his work, it looked like you were seeing an x-ray of the body part. He went on and on about his x-ray style and made a point of wondering out loud why anyone would want an ultraviolet tattoo of anything other than bones.

Barber was getting tired but Becker was jazzed. He'd been out of the field for weeks and was enjoying his time away from the office. He cajoled Barber into hitting just one more. As it happened, it was only a few blocks away.

"Okay. One more but that's it. My feet are killing me."

"I'm not surprised. You're wearing heels. Field agents don't wear heels."

"I know. I just forgot. Let's get this over with."

The third tattoo parlor was the charm. It was an upscale shop that looked like a doctor's office with a bright and clean waiting room, private salons where the work was done, and an efficient no-nonsense staff. When they identified themselves to the receptionist, she didn't hesitate. She keyed the intercom and told her boss the FBI needed to see him. He came right out and shook hands

with both of them. Becker had trouble keeping a straight face. The last tattooist they'd seen looked like a biker with leather pants, long hair and a Harley T-shirt. This one looked like a dentist – gray slacks, white shirt and a tie with a white lab coat over top. Barber cleared her throat as a warning to Becker and explained what they needed to the artist. The photo of the design was instantly recognized.

"That's my work. The design is quite popular these days. We do ten or twenty of these a week. I don't really get it but it is trending. What can I say? I'd draw the Tower of Pisa on your ass if you paid me to do it." Becker laughed out loud this time. Barber tried to keep it serious.

"Can you provide us with a list of your clients who had this particular tattoo done?" She phrased it as a question but her body language made it more of an order. The artist's response was unexpected.

"No. I can't."

"Can't or won't?" Becker was back to serious.

"Sorry. Can't. Our business is strictly cash and we don't collect any personal information. Someone walks in, tells me what they want. I do it. They pay and leave. That's it."

Seeing the disappointment on the faces of his guests, he tried to find some way to be helpful.

"I think I can tell you how many people have had that design done here. Candi," He turned to his receptionist. "How many of those ultrasonic implants do we have in stock?"

Checking the computer, Candi looked up the information. "Looks like we have 232 in inventory."

The artist nodded and did some mental math. "We started with 1000. There are 232 left. So 768. We've done 768 ultraviolet tattoos of that design. Did one this morning, as a matter of fact."

"768?"

"Implants?"

The agents stumbled over each others words trying to get their questions out. The artist was amused.

"Yes. 768. We've done that many in the past six months. Just before we started doing them, a man comes in and gives me the box of implants. He gives me the design. He tells me lots of people were going to come in and want that design on their left shoulders in ultraviolet ink. He says if the people ask for that, I'm to do the design and I'm also supposed to take the implant – about the size of a grain of rice – and insert it under the skin at the design location. He paid me a whole bunch of money as a kind of retainer. We've been doing that design ever since. It has been a real money maker."

"What does the implant do?"

"It sends out a kind of signal vibration, I think. We turn it on before implanting it. When it's on, it vibrates whenever someone else with the same implant is in the neighborhood. It's like that app you can get for a Smart Phone – the one that when you ask it to locate friends, it comes back and tells you if there are any Facebook friends within a specified distance nearby. The implants do that kind of thing automatically. I guess in a weird way, it is a secret handshake."

"The agents looked at each other, nodded and then turned back to the artist.

"I'm afraid that as of now you are out of the ultraviolet tattoo/implant business. We are going to have to confiscate the remaining implants. You can voluntarily turn them over or we can all stand around until one of my guys arrives with a court order." Becker leaned forward. The artist took a step back.

"No. No. No need for that. You can have them. I always knew it was too good to last. Can I ask why?"

"Criminals have been using the tattoo to identify each other."

"Like the Japanese Yakuza?"

"Kind of but not exactly. I'm afraid I can't say any more."

"No need. No need. What do I do if one of them shows up and asks for the tattoo?"

"Tell them your equipment is down or you are out of ink. Whatever you want. Then call me or my partner." They handed him business cards and he gave them the box of tiny implants.

Back in the car, it was Barber's turn to be excited.

"You realize what this means? We now have a way to track and identify these guys. We can distribute the implants and use them to do a little bit of hunting of our own."

Both were grinning.

* * * *

Los Angeles (SHU)

Priam had to admit he looked good in the policeman's uniform. The avatar he'd jacked into had kept himself in shape – lots of muscle, not too much fat. He flexed his arm and felt the tug as the bicep pushed against the fabric of his shirt. Nice. Not that it had done his avatar a lot of good. He looked around, familiarizing himself with the territory just as any good hunter would do. Orion had been right, he thought. He was part of the way towards his objective. Behind just one more locked door were the holding cells where his brethren were being kept. Their markers were emitting strong signals and he was sure they could feel his. If he was one to fantasize – and he told himself he wasn't – he could imagine the signals crying for help and release.

Orion had found an avatar who was part of the police crew assigned to watch over prisoners considered too dangerous or too important to be sent to a regular prison. His ID card said he was an officer of the SHU – the Special Handling Unit. As part of his regular duties as a SHU officer, he and another officer would patrol down the cell block, do a prisoner count and then return to the central control area to monitor the CCTV system. Priam figured he'd do one patrol for recon and then do the rescue on the second pass.

He had a tiny explosive device in his pocket and a ceramic pistol in the belt holster where handcuffs would normally be housed. He'd been told that these items were undetectable and were designed specifically to outwit the sensors in the SHU. Priam knew there were quite a few scanners and sensors in the

corridors leading into the SHU and he hoped the designers had done their job. He suspected they had because the pistol was shaped so that it could fold and form the outline of a pair of handcuffs in a holder. Its bullets were plastic and no gunpowder was used. Instead, compressed air propelled the bullets. The explosive device, essentially a grenade, looked like a Zippo lighter and its explosive semtex core was positioned inside a compartment that was filled with lighter fluid. Hell, even the lighter worked.

At precisely 11:00 am, a third of the way through his shift, Priam and his shift partner entered the SHU's wing of cells. They walked side by side stopping at each cell to physically see and identify the inmates. There were eighteen cells but only seven were occupied as only the worst of the worst rated a cell in the SHU. As Priam looked around, he wondered if it would be possible to do all seven plus his guard partner in the thirty seconds he'd have between the first strike and when the other guards flooded the cell block with a powerful knock-out gas. He figured it wasn't possible without getting stuck and then needing rescue like the two he'd been sent for.

"Too bad," he thought. "It would've been fun."

He didn't have any trouble locating his two targets. Their markers were registering his proximity so they were both standing at the front of their cells waiting to get a look. The other prisoners, unaware anything was going on, mostly ignored the routine patrol. Priam nodded to each of his cohorts as he passed them. They nodded back. One smiled.

The patrol and count over, Priam returned to his desk to think. He stared at the CCTV monitors and developed a plan of attack. He had to eliminate his fellow guard first and that would set off alarms and start the thirty second clock. He then had to take out his targets who were situated at opposite ends of the cell block as far away from each other as they could be. That complicated things a bit but if he could get his cohort's cooperation, his plan would work.

He sat and waited the two hours between patrols. They were the longest hours he'd ever experienced but he knew it was going to be worth the wait. His shift partner finally stood and stretched. He moved toward the door to the cells and Priam followed. He stayed two steps behind the other guard and tensed just a bit as they came up to the first target's cell. As he hoped, the cell's occupant was standing close to the bars.

Priam grabbed the other guard and shoved him hard against the bars and ordered his target to hold him. The order was immediately obeyed and strong arms were clamped around the guard while Priam raced to the other end of the cell block. Drawing his weapon as he ran, he was ready on time. One shot was all it took. The bullet went through the eye and into the brain. The prisoner was released. Priam then ran back to the first cell with the lighter/grenade in his hand. He stepped in close to the prisoner and the still struggling guard. His eyes met those of the prisoner who smiled and said: "What took you so long?"

"Traffic," was Priam's response. He triggered the explosive device and for a brief second could hear the hiss of the igniter fuel being released from the grenade. Then there was nothing.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Cynthia Ross home)

Cynthia Ross sat in her living room grading term papers with CNN on in the background. It was a tedious job, reading lousy paper after lousy paper written by students who clearly didn't understand the material or care enough to try to arrive at that understanding. A good bottle of wine made the work a little less onerous but it also tended to loosen her tongue or in this case her pen. Many of her marginal comments were dripping in sarcasm, some of it biting. She probably shouldn't write some of the stuff she was putting in the margins but she didn't really care. She wasn't worried about it either. Chances are the students would check the back page for their grade and never bother to read her comments. Sometimes she was talking to herself when she wrote comments on student papers.

She took a break when CNN World News came on. There was some good news for a change and she wanted to get the details. Apparently a lab in Camden, New Jersey, had developed a vaccine that was effective against the Ebola Disease that was plaguing the nation and the world. Fast tracked clinical trials had been successful and the government had gone into mass production of the vaccine. According to CNN, supplies of the vaccine would reach clinics around the world in the next couple of days. It was expected that those currently infected would recover and those at risk of infection would be protected. The newscaster speculated that the epidemic would be under control in a few days and completely eradicated within a few weeks. Cynthia thought he might be just a bit overoptimistic but, hey, optimism is a good thing. She poured herself another glass of wine and turned back to marking essays.

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Los Angeles (SHU)

Wheaton took the news of the attack at the SHU badly. He was furious since, once again, the perps escaped justice by dying and he still had loads of questions without answers. Actually, the more he thought about it, the more he realized that the attack and multiple murder/suicide carried out by a long-time SHU staff member raised about a zillion more unanswerable questions. The big one was, of course, why a senior SHU officer would suddenly turn into a murderer. Another one was where did he get the gun he used – it had survived the explosion more or less intact. It was like no weapon Mark had ever seen before.

He stood in the cell block and surveyed the damage. He took several breaths then began his routine. The bodies were gone and the survivors – four injured and one untouched – had been shipped to another SHU halfway across the country. Even without the bodies, it was easy to reconstruct the event. Indeed, Mark didn't have to reconstruct anything. He could watch the crime being committed on the closed circuit TV system that had recorded everything. Two things were clear – the perps being held for trying to kill him were the targets and they cooperated with their killer. One even restrained the guard while the killer took out the perp's partner. Mark repeatedly replayed the first kill. The victim

steps forward and turns his head to present as wide a target as possible for his killer. That posture reminded him of something but he couldn't put his finger on it. He went on. He watched the killer pull out what appeared to be a lighter and embrace his target and the guard. Briefly Mark considered that the restrained guard may have been the intended target but it didn't fit. He was struggling to get free while the second target – the perp – returned his killer's embrace. They appeared to share a few words before an explosion filled the air with a red mist as three people's blood was vaporized and their bodies torn apart.

So, once again, Mark knew what had happened but no clue was offered regarding motivation. The crime was illogical, senseless. He shrugged and accepted that he probably would never know the whys. He had to focus on the hows if he was going to get anywhere. The gun. He could start with the gun. If he could find the manufacturer, he'd be one step closer to getting his answers.

He doubted the killer had worked alone. The SHU guard turned murderer had to have been "gotten to" and somehow persuaded to kill his own prisoners. Someone had provided the weapons since a SHU officer would not know how to get ahold of a ceramic gun or semtex explosive. Mark assigned a couple of detectives to check out that angle, to look at the guard's life. That left an open question how the bad guys – he thought of them as such – knew where these specific prisoners were being held. If the guard was working on his own, that was a moot question but if he had handlers – and Mark's gut told him he did – it was THE question.

Mark cursed as he realized the implications. The only people who knew where the prisoners were being housed were cops. He cursed again. They had a rat in the department. A cop was feeding info to the bad guys. As much as he hated to do it, he needed to visit Internal Affairs when he got back to the precinct. He needed the cops who investigate other cops to start looking for the mole, the rat, the snitch. Damn, he hated dirty cops.

When he'd gotten all he could from the crime scene and the recordings, he left the SHU and headed back downtown. During the drive, it hit him. He had been bothered by the posture assumed by the first victim. It had bugged him because he'd seen something like it before. He remembered where he'd seen it. Beverly Kehoe's body had been found in an odd position and that had bothered him at the time but now he understood. Kehoe had sat and then turned to her killer. She, like the first victim in the SHU killings, was cooperating with her killer by offering her murderer the biggest possible target she could. "Shit," he mumbled. She was one of them. It was almost like Kehoe and today's victim were the same person but that wasn't possible.

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