



The Others

Shawn Haley ©2016

**For Ellie,
Always my inspiration
And my life**

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Lompoc Prison

"Why are we even seeing this guy? He's technically eligible all right but his record inside is abysmal - fighting, bullying, extortion, disobedience. He hospitalized two guards and God knows how many inmates. I could go on." Bolton, one of three Parole Board members present in the room seemed genuinely confused. Listen to this. An informant described him right after he arrived. It's in his file. Listen!"

He read aloud: "With most new guys, the cons push and harass the fish until his status at the base of the hierarchy was firmly established. At least that's the way it is supposed to happen but the hazing was over more quickly than usual with him and this guy did not emerge at the bottom of the heap. The dude is nuts, man! The Aryans came at him demanding the usual protection fee but the dude just laughs. He laughs! Bobby grabs him and the guy goes serious. I mean death row serious. Then the new guy smiles and he says: 'Whatever you do to me, make sure it kills me. If not, I will retaliate and f**k you up a hundredfold.' Those were his exact words. Bobby was a bit confused. Maybe too many big words. He hammers the dude a couple of times - just to save face, you know. A week later, Bobby loses his hand in an accident in the wood shop. Nobody saying that the new guy did it but he was there. Now nobody botherin' him, you know, just in case." He stopped reading and looked at the other parole board members.

"Does this sound like a good candidate for parole? The guy's a psycho. He needs to stay locked up."

"Bolton, he's already done ten years. Maybe it's time to give him a second chance?" His other fellow board members were uncomfortable with Bolton's apparent hard line stance especially given the situation. They wanted to do this the easy way and he'd been given a way to save face but Bolton was not going to cooperate.

"What is he in for in the first place?" Bolton was on a rampage. "I don't see it anywhere in his file. No sentencing report. No rap sheet. There's no information here." He threw the file onto the table. One of his colleagues had had enough.

"Look, Bolton," he hissed. "If they wanted you to know, it'd be in the file. You may not like this guy but we have our orders. The powers that be want him out. They want him paroled forthwith. Now I suggest you sit back and shut up." His voice was barely above a whisper.

"But..."

"No buts, Bolton. No matter how you vote, we are paroling this inmate today. You can demand a recorded vote and put your dissent into the minutes of these proceedings but both you and I know that that kind of blatant disobedience is going to generate a reaction upstairs. You just might find yourself in some backwater posting listening to some redneck homeboy complain that the system won't let him and his sister have conjugal visits. So, once again, sit back and shut up."

"Guard, will you escort inmate Swanson in so we can give him the good news. Thank you."

* * * *

Washington, DC (ATF Director's Office)

Director Walker answered the phone quickly. He'd recognized the number and did not want to keep the caller waiting.

"Hello. What can I do for you?"

"Swanson. He's out. The Parole Board approved his release two months ago. Why wasn't I told? You were supposed to notify me the second he was out. I want him on the team so you want him on the team. Get him back in the saddle as soon as possible."

"He's bound to be hostile to us. We put him away."

"I don't care. Find a way. Find a way or I'll have you transferred to some shithole embassy by the end of the week."

"Yes sir."

Walker slammed the phone down and swore. Swanson was a cruel bastard and a vindictive one. He was not looking forward to the reunion.

* * * * *

Baltimore & Washington, DC

They were waiting outside his house and demanded that he come with them. They didn't even want to give him time to put his groceries away. They were feds although they didn't show him any id. He told them to go to hell and tried to step around them. They grabbed him and threw him into the back of their SUV. He didn't protest. There was no point. He just sat there fuming and memorizing their faces.

It was a quick ride – no more than twenty minutes – and no one said a word for the duration. Two more unidentified feds waited to escort him – a strong arm on each elbow – into a fourth floor office.

"Hello, Patrick. Long time, no see," the balding man rose from his desk and held out his hand.

"F**k you, Walker. I figured it was you who sent the goons. Whatever you want, the answer is no. Now can I go home?"

"I'm afraid not. Sit down."

"I prefer to stand. That way you can't sneak up on me from behind like last time."

"Suit yourself," He checks a file. I see you have a girlfriend. She know you're an excon?"

"We're not that close."

Walker sat back down at this desk and thumbed an intercom button. "Send in Agent Barber."

The door opened a fraction of a second later. Agent Barber must've been waiting just outside the office door, ready to appear on command. She was short, five foot two in heels, blonde and stunning but Patrick was too angry to notice. He stared out the window wishing himself away from there.

"Agent Barber, will you bring Patrick here up to speed on Operation White Rock, please."

"Sir? That project is classified."

"I don't expect my agents to question my orders. Do it . . ." There was no mention of repercussions or penalties for disobedience but they were there in the look he gave her.

"Yes sir. How much does he know, Sir?"

"I'm right here. If you want to talk about me behind my back, wait till I leave. And you asked the wrong question. The right one is: "How much do I want to know about your project." And the answer is "f**k all." Can I go now, Walker."

"Damn it, Patrick. No! Barber, do your job."

Still standing, Barber outlined the project trying to ignore the hostility that electrified the room. "We have been tracking guns bought in the US and then smuggled into Mexico for the drug cartels. We thought we had the organizers, the bosses identified and we were getting ready to bust them all. We were just days away from arrests when all three turned up dead."

"Typical fed cluster f**k. So, Walker, why am I here?"

"Tell him the rest."

"Most of the guns we tracked into Mexico started showing up back in the States, in Los Angeles in the hands of gangbangers. Several of the weapons were used in multiple crimes." She paused, obviously reluctant to go on. Her boss motioned for her to continue. "Here's the real problem. The guns are being recycled out of police lockups and sent back out to the streets to be used again in crimes. Three of the guns have reappeared on the streets more than once after being seized by the police."

So have the relevant IAD find the bad guy and that is that."

"We already thought of that but the guns were being liberated from different jurisdictions, different police stations. I can't believe there is a bad cop in every evidence facility in California." She stared straight at Patrick daring him to contradict her. He considered it but didn't take the bait even though he had no trouble envisioning a bad cop in every evidence facility in the state.

"Well Walker, it seems you have a genuine problem on your hands. I hope it's giving you ulcers. But I bet you don't give a shit about the crimes or the dirty cops recycling weapons. You only care about your image ... about your reputation when word gets out that you let those guns reach criminals in the first place. Maybe I should rat you out to the media and watch you squirm."

Walker was on his feet. He spoke slowly through clenched teeth. "Years ago, you signed a confidentiality agreement and there is no statute of limitations on that. You violate that and I'll have your ass in prison so fast, it'll ..."

"Don't you mean you'll have my ass in prison again. F**k you. I'm outta here." With that, Patrick left the room and headed for the elevator. It opened right away and he was gone.

Her boss handed Barber a file containing, among other things, Patrick's home address. "Go after him. I want him on the team asap. No questions." He knew she was about to interrupt. "Get him on board or you'll be collecting your next paycheck by dogsled. GO!"

She raced down the stairs and out the front door just in time to see her target board a cross-town bus. She headed for the parking garage. She could beat him

home if she drove fast. Meanwhile, her boss called his boss and provided an update.

"He is hostile as expected but I sent Barber after him. Once he cools down and we remind him that he is still on payroll under a different name, the threat of losing his paycheck will bring him around. Do we really need him on this. ..." He paused to listen. "Yes, I'll let you know when he's on board."

* * * *

Los Angeles

Cynthia Ross sat on her couch with a microwave dinner on a tray in her lap and a glass of wine at her elbow. It was time to unwind and she wanted nothing more than a little diversion. She turned on the television and caught the opening strains of the "Nightly News" theme. She settled in.

"The monsoons in South East Asia are the worst in ten years according to the U.S. Weather Service. In parts of Vietnam, over 30 inches of rain has fallen in the past twenty-four hours and experts predict that the rain will continue for at least another week. Floods have driven tens of thousands from their homes and authorities fear the death toll could reach five thousand." The news anchor delivered the information as video clips of raging rivers and drowned villages filled the background. Cynthia shook her head and wished the poor people of Vietnam luck.

"In eastern Guatemala, rain is also creating chaos. Unseasonably high rainfall in the mountains has started massive mudslides along the eastern slopes. Early this morning, two villages were buried as tons of mud and debris flowed over them. Local authorities are trying to reach the affected area but washed out roads and torrential rains are hampering rescue efforts.. One militia officer, speaking on condition that he remain anonymous, admitted that there was not a lot of hope for survivors. He said that since the slides occurred before dawn, it is likely that the villagers were caught in their beds. He fears the death toll will be very high."

Cynthia refilled her glass from a bottle she kept in the refrigerator. At the same time, she added some dry food to her cat's dish.

"Eat hearty," she told him as she returned to her couch and the news.

"In Nigeria, police and firefighters are sifting through the ashes of a church fire that so far has claimed the lives of 475 people. More are expected and the final death toll may not be known for several days. Members of this church, located in a small town just outside the capital, Niamey, apparently committed mass suicide — the largest mass suicide in Nigeria's history. Let's go to our reporter on the scene."

"Thanks, John. As you can see behind me, the firefighters are still searching for more bodies. We have been told that there may have been as many as 700 in the church when it caught fire. Apparently the church was pretty close to capacity. The police believe that the congregation gathered at midnight for a prayer service after which they locked the doors from the inside and burned themselves to death."

The anchor interrupted: "Any idea why they did this?"

"Not at this moment, John. Investigators are searching for the remains of the congregational leaders." He consulted his notes. "Robert Mbashi and Joyce

Panacter. Witnesses say that it was these two who gathered the people together and may have set the fire as well. Police suspect that the leaders may have escaped through a small door in the back. If their remains are not found and identified by this evening, the police say they will issue warrants for the arrest of Mbashi and Panacter.”

“We look forward to talking to you again later, Brian” Turning back to the audience, the anchor addressed his audience. “Brian Cushing, our reporter in Niamey, Nigeria. We will bring you updates as new information comes in. And now a word from our sponsor.”

Cynthia shook her head. She never ceased to be amazed at the gullibility of people in general. They always seem so willing to believe. She wondered if she would ever believe in anything strongly enough to die for. It would have to be something incredible for that to happen. She sipped her wine and let her mind refocus on the television. The newsreader was back.

“The tropical storm off the Bahamas has been upgraded to hurricane status. Hurricane Pauline is expected to reach the islands of Hispanola and Cuba within the next few hours. Winds have been clocked at over one hundred and twenty miles per hour. Warnings have been posted and everywhere along the anticipated path, people are seeking shelter and preparing for the worst.”

“In other news, reports released today by the Environmental Protection Agency warn that the hole in the ozone layer is expanding at an alarming rate. The latest figures show an increase of over twenty percent in the past few months — the largest increase in a decade. The Sierra Club and Green Peace staged a protest in Washington, demanding that emission control legislation be implemented immediately. The protest turned ugly when rival factions started hurling bricks at...”

Cynthia turned the television off. All of the news was just too depressing. She looked around her living room furnished in a variety of Salvation Army specials and odds and ends picked up in various markets. She smiled. She had recently made associate professor with tenure and could afford better furniture but didn’t see the need. It was a comfortable room for her and Brutus, her cat. They never had to worry about stains or spills. They just added character to the décor.

This room was kind of like her life was supposed to be, she thought, comfortable without being flashy, kind of beat up but still doing okay. No great adventures but no great disappointments either. She laughed as she remembered the stories she’d told her fellow professors. She’d said her life was good but it could be better if there was someone to share it with but so far she had not been lucky in the relationship department. She’d intimated she’d had a few brief affairs but never anything serious. If her parents were to be believed, she had met and rejected a number of Mr. Rights. They called every weekend and managed to remind her that they didn’t have any grandchildren yet and that they weren’t getting any younger.

She told her cohort that that phone call usually left her feeling a little guilty but she was learning to get over it quickly enough. All she had to do was watch the news and realize that only crazy people brought children into a world that was as screwed up as this one. On occasion, she watched those crazy people with their children, including some of her coworkers, and admitted to them that it would be nice to have a little ‘mini-me,’ a little person totally dependent on her, to love her

unconditionally but invariably she would be jolted back into reality by a reminder that children were a huge responsibility and a huge worry. Colleagues with kids were always telling stories of crises, trips to emergency rooms, dangers lurking in playgrounds and parks, and predators out to steal their loved ones.

She took another sip of wine and thanked God she didn't have children. She shook her head and laughed. Of course, the parents didn't exist and neither did her comfortable life. Sometimes it was dull and uninteresting but she had a roll to play. Right now, that meant grading midterm papers from her astronomy class. It was a waste of her time since she already knew how well or how poorly her students would do. Some worked hard and got it. Others worked hard and didn't get it while many didn't work at all, hoping to skate through the class with a D. They were in for a surprise. No work meant no passing grade, no matter how much whining was involved.

* * * *

Baltimore

Barber resisted using the siren in her SUV although she was half convinced drivers were being more than the usual assholes because they somehow knew she was in a hurry. No matter which lane she chose to drive in, the other lanes were always going faster. She pounded the steering wheel with her fists in frustration and cursed using language she'd never dare use at the office and felt a bit of guilty pleasure as she swore. Deep down, she knew her boss, Walker, the prick, couldn't really ship her off to Alaska if she failed but he could make her life miserable and destroy her career with less than favorable performance reviews. She could not afford to fail.

As she drove, she contacted her department's researcher and asked for a quick background on Swanson, Patrick, no known middle initial, ex-con, early to mid-fifties, 5'10", balding, address – 87439 Birch St., Baltimore, MD. She said she needed it right away and the researcher promised to get right back to her.

Her frustration doubled as traffic slowed to a crawl when she needed it to fly and as her phone remained silent. She wanted to get to Swanson's place as fast as possible but hoped to have some information, anything to use to convince her target to change his mind. She was nowhere near the address she'd been given and had no information at all.

The fates combined to deliver responses to both needs. Traffic cleared and she blazed down the city streets. Just as she pulled up and parked across the street from Swanson's house, her phone rang. It was the researcher.

"Sorry it took so long. I had to go to the paper files. Your guy is not in any of our computer databases but we did have a hardcopy file in the archives. Funny that. The file was updated just a few weeks ago so it really should be in the computer. I really don't under . . . "

"Rick! I need that info. What have you got?"

"Oh yeah, sorry. Swanson, Patrick Gerald, age 56, born in Flagstaff, Arizona. Engineering degrees from University of Arizona. Graduated with his Masters degree in 1984. Joined the ATF in 1991 as an analyst. Promoted twice and

transferred to the Washington, DC office as a Senior Analyst. Arrested in 2003 for allegedly passing information to the Mexican drug cartels. Convicted 2004, sentenced to 30 years.”

“Now this is odd. He did 8 years and was granted parole in 2012. He was released without conditions despite quite a violent record in prison. It says he killed at least two people while in prison but they just let him go. He appears to have been unemployed since. That’s it. That’s all I’ve got.”

“Thanks Rick. You said the file had been updated recently. What was the update?”

“That’s another odd bit. There was a handwritten note stuffed in the file with an employee number and a date on it. I ran the number and found a file for another ATF staffer who started work for us right around the time Swanson went to prison. He is still with us although I cannot seem to locate where he works or what he does. Even more interesting, the address for this staffer, whose name is Phillip D. Carlson, is the same as the one you gave me for Swanson.”

“That is odd, for sure. Can you pull up the file photo for that person?”

“No. I can’t and before you yell at me, there isn’t one. No photo.”

“I would never yell at you, Rick. Thanks for the information. Later. Gotta go.”

As she was receiving the information, she saw Swanson walking down the sidewalk. He was carrying what looked like carry-out containers and waiting for his order had delayed him long enough to allow Barber to reach his house first. She smiled and relaxed a bit. She’d give him time to start eating before knocking on his door. She watched him stroll up his walk, key his front door, and go inside. She looked at her watch. 8:49 PM. She’d give him ten minutes. She hummed and reviewed the info she’d received. She wished she’d had time to research him more but she felt she had a possible way to get him to come over to her side. That reminded her of a tee shirt she’d seen recently – a Star Wars shirt. It had a phrase on its front and an image of the Cookie Monster dressed as a star trooper. It had said: “Come over to the Dark Side. We have Cookies.” She smiled at the memory but then wished she had some cookies. She hadn’t had time to eat since lunch.

A few seconds before 9:00, Barber slid out from behind the wheel and headed for his front door. As she hit the middle of the street, she hit the car lock on her keychain and her SUV beeped in response. That was the last sound she heard for the next little while because the explosion deafened her. As she watched, the front of Swanson’s house disappeared in a cloud of smoke and fire. A gigantic fireball expanded rapidly in all directions preceded by a shock wave that threw Barber backwards like a leaf in the wind. Her vehicle shuddered and all of its windows shattered. Windows in the surrounding houses disintegrated and up and down the block burning debris started little fires.

Barber staggered to her feet and took a few steps towards the burning house but the heat pushed her back. She retreated to the only refuge available – her SUV – and sat back in the driver’s seat. She didn’t bother with her keys because it was obvious that vehicle wasn’t going anywhere. The tires facing the house were flat, the windows were gone, and a chunk of rebar had impaled the engine. She wasn’t in much better shape. Her ears were ringing, Her hands were shaking, She was bleeding from dozens of small cuts, her back was bruised where she’d landed after

being launched by the blast and her clothes were smoldering here and there where cinders had touched the cloth.

She watched the emergency vehicles arrive. In short order, the street was filled with all kinds of specialized vehicles. As the firemen battled the blaze and the EMTs tended to her wounds, the police questioned her but all she could do was shout that she couldn't hear what they were saying. The ringing blotted out all other sounds. With the aid of her ATF badge and notebook, she was able to communicate what she had seen. She reported that there was at least one person in the house – presumed dead by now – and she refused a trip to the hospital. Instead, she had a uniformed policeman call her office and have an ATF vehicle come by to pick her up. As she waited, she watched the house burn and wondered how she was going to break the news to her boss. He was not going to be happy.

* * * *

Washington, DC (Swanson's Hotel Room)

He was watching his house burn on the local news when his cell phone buzzed to tell him a text message had been received. Of course, it was not meant for him but for the bomber's handler. He smiled as he read it.

"It is done. ATF agent was a witness."

Perhaps he'd order some champagne from room service to celebrate his death and his newfound freedom. His attackers certainly would be toasting each other tonight since they now believed that after more than a decade of trying to kill *the* Patrick Swanson in prison and on the street, they had finally succeeded. Fools! They finally got the Patrick Swanson who had been extremely effective at putting down members of the terrorist cell that called themselves The Others. Amateurs, every one.

Swanson had known they'd be trying soon when his network of informants told him that Portia, one of The Others' better assassins, was in town. She had a habit of staying in a particular hotel and Swanson had used that against her. He'd cloned her cell phone, bugged her room, and put a GPS tracer in her car. Her three visits to his neighborhood convinced him that he was indeed her target and that the attempt was imminent. Her purchases from stores around town and from illegal sources pointed towards an incendiary attack.

He prepared the necessary countermeasures. He acquired the body of a homeless man and distributed packages of accelerant in key places to help Portia's fire along a bit. "No point in prolonging the agony," he thought. He left the house unseen and relocated to a nearby hotel to watch the fun.

He knew that in the days to come, the investigators would discover that the fire had been deliberate. They would also find the body, burned beyond all recognition, that they would assume was him. It would be considered arson and murder but no matter. He could disappear without a trace. Gone up in smoke, so to speak.

Yes, he'd celebrate tonight. His former bosses at the ATF would stop harassing him. The Others would cease tracking him. For the first time in years, he

was completely free to concentrate on his real job – the location and elimination of all of The Others.

He was saddened a bit when he realized there would be no real challenge. The Others were inferiors, capable of following orders but lacking in initiative and innovation. No imagination. No creativity. He laughed.

"If I was doing the job, I would have made sure I was dead before I blew up the house. It was a mistake to rely on the explosion and fire to do the work. Now they would pay and pay dearly for that error. Stupid lowmen!"

* * * *

Los Angeles

"Hallelujah my children! The Lord, in his infinite wisdom, has given us this time upon the Earth. He has great plans for us."

"Amen," cried a woman from the front row. Michael flinched. He shouldn't have come but his wife insisted and would make his life miserable all week if he hadn't. He looked at her. She was leaning forward in the pew, hanging on Brother Daniel's words, apparently determined to wring every last ounce of meaning from them. He sighed. He knew that for the next few days, she would be repeating passages back to him as if they explained everything there was to explain.

"There are many out there, many who look like you, talk like you, act like you but..." Brother Daniel paused to make sure his audience was paying attention. "But they are not like you. They do not know of the Lord's word. They are ignorant. Pity them. They are little children lost in the wide, wide world. They are blind with no one to guide them. Is that right?"

On cue, the audience responded.

"No."

"Is that right?"

"No!" The tone deepened as if the congregation recognized the weight of the matter.

"I ask you, should we leave those poor souls out there?" Brother Daniel's pitch climbed. He pulled himself up straight, challenging them to reject him.

"No!" They didn't.

"Shall we lead them to the light?"

"Yes," they responded in perfect unison. It was a great release, an orgasm. Michael glanced at his wife. She was in the thick of it nodding and amen-ing with the most fervent. He could feel the gulf between the two of them growing. He pictured the conversations they would have in the coming week. The pattern had already been established. Brother Daniel was driving a wedge between them. Last Friday had been particularly bad. He had been excited about a show he'd seen on the Discovery Channel. He had described the burial customs of the Raramuri to his wife and she had reacted with unexpected vehemence.

"That's disgusting! The dead belong in the ground. Brother Daniel says that..."

"You're missing the point. They need..."

"Brother Daniel says that the body is a shell, a house for the spirit. When you die, the spirit abandons the body for the other world. The body has to be properly

disposed of before you can move on. Those poor Raramuri are wasting their time talking to a dead body in a tree. Nobody's home." She giggled at her little joke. "They should be taught to place their dead in graves like all civilized people, like us." She folded her arms, daring him to argue with her. He didn't. She was secure in Brother Daniel's world and no rational argument was going to shake it. He promised himself he would avoid telling Mandy anything that would put him up against Brother Daniel. He mentally shrugged since he knew there were few topics that didn't invoke some response from Brother Daniel.

He glanced at her again. She ignored him. Brother Daniel was speaking and when he spoke, nothing else mattered.

"My children, do not be distracted from your work. The Bible tells us there is but one God, one Truth. God's way is the only way and we were sent onto this earth to do God's bidding. Can you hear him? Can you hear him? He is crying. Yes, he is crying as he looks down from above and sees what a mess the world has become. He weeps for the millions of people who do not know His way. So many are lost or ignorant of the truth. He wants you, yes, you to spread the word for him."

His congregation was on its feet, arms raised above their heads. Michael rose too, not because he felt the spirit but because his wife had given him such a withering glare, he had no choice. In his wife's eyes, you were either for Brother Daniel or you were the enemy. It was that black and white. No grey areas allowed. The people watcher in Michael had started to note the patterns of behavior in these meetings. They weren't called services; they were meetings. After the rituals were completed and sermon time was reached, Brother Daniel would focus on the difference between his congregation and all of the others out there who knew nothing about the truth. If you listened carefully, you could hear him attacking Moslems, Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, and Anglicans with equal zeal. His attacks were never direct and were carefully worded to avoid lawsuits. He was a zealot but a careful one. Near the end of each sermon, he pounded on the one basic tenet that separated Brother Daniel and his people from literally everyone else. It was simple. Brother Daniel knew the truth and would tell it to you if you believed in Brother Daniel. If you didn't believe, if you weren't a member of his flock, you were blind and ignorant and deserving of pity.

As the service ended and the people filed out the door, each stopped to shake Brother Daniel's hand and express their gratitude for the fine meeting. Michael dutifully followed suit but knew that his wife saw through him and knew that he was not a true believer. Maybe next week, if he acted with apparent fervor, his wife would lighten up and give him a break. The next few days were going to be hell. He could already feel her energy as she prepared to berate him for his attitude. Perhaps he should refuse to go next Sunday. Then she'd probably throw him out of the house.

"Would that be such a bad thing?" He thought.

* * * *

Bakersfield, CA

He could hear them more than see them – the police cars. Their sirens wailed outside as the police doggedly set up a perimeter around the school. He smiled at their by-the-book procedures. He was counting on it. He knew that they would have the building surrounded in a few minutes. Once they had that, they would try to determine how many terrorists (their words, not his) were inside the building. In order to do that, they would commandeer the nearest large building or business as a command post and interview as many escaping students as they could. Meanwhile, they would gather all of the students together and wait for parents to arrive and claim them.

He'd spent several days scouting out the area around the school and guessed that the police would use the Burger Barn a half block down Carver Street as a staging area and would hold the students in the movie theater next door. He had watched a movie there two nights ago and had marveled at the vintage stage and velvet seats. He thought it must be one of the few movie theaters surviving from the old days before the cineplexes. Too bad.

More sirens brought him back to the classroom. It was a pretty ordinary classroom, like any other, but he had made it extraordinary by gunning down about half of the students unlucky enough to be in that particular class at that time. Lots of blood. Lots of death. He smiled as he strolled into the hall in search of more students. He knew most had left the building evacuated when the emergency evacuation siren had sounded, precisely 16 minutes ago. He knew because he had switched it on right after knifing the secretary at her desk. She never saw it coming.

Most were gone but there were always a few who scoffed at the rules and stayed inside. It was raining slightly so he really couldn't blame them for refusing to go outside and get wet. He went hunting anyway. He needed to up the terror level and a few more flying bullets would work.

He heard whispering coming from a classroom near the main entrance. He grinned. It was perfect. Quietly, he slid up to the door and eased it open. There were four of them, just sitting around. One was texting and chewing gum. The others were chatting. No stress here.

"Mind if I join you?" He asked and they, of course, all jumped to their feet and backed away from him. He was a rather disturbing sight with a matted beard, ball cap pulled low on the forehead, military type clothes and, of course, the blood. He'd spent a long time on just the right look. He raised his gun and aimed at the biggest kid in the room – a jock as far as he could tell. "You really should have left the building when the siren went. You need to be punished and I don't think a detention will be enough." He pulled the trigger and the kid flew backwards and slammed into the wall. The others screamed. Good.

He gestured with the gun and got the remaining students moving out into the hall and towards the front lobby with its three sets of double glass doors. He walked them to the center of the lobby while he remained just out of sight and therefore away from the sniper's crosshairs. He ordered them all to kneel and then he slowly counted to 100. He knew that by the time he hit 100, there would be lots of sets of eyes on those students. Putting his gun on full auto, he emptied a full clip into the

students who bounced like marionettes before dropping to the floor. He imagined the reactions of the audience to his little drama and laughed out loud.

“Time for the last act.”

He opened his backpack and pulled out a cellphone. Without hesitation, he hit the speed dial button – there was only 1 number programmed in – and waited. He heard it ring once, twice, and then silence. In that instant, the movie theater and the Burger Barn ceased to exist and the air was filled with flames, debris, and body parts. He heard it. He felt the shock wave and he was pleased.

“I am done here.” He said to no one in particular and put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger for the last time.

* * * *

Los Angeles

“Code blue. 1623. Code blue. 1623.” The innocuous words spoken calmly over the university hospital intercom belied their meaning. Albert Peterson, the patient in room 1623, was in cardiac arrest. His heart had stopped and the hospital staff reacted like cogs in a well-oiled machine. Nurse Preddis, first on the scene, began CPR. Seconds later, the resident arrived and placed a mask and airbag over Mr. Peterson’s mouth and nose. He ventilated the lifeless form in sync with the nurse’s heart massaging rhythm.

The crash cart arrived with several additional staff. One hooked up the cardiac monitor while another prepared a syringe of epinephrine. A third charged the defibrillator. The resident, new and relatively unused to death, handed the airbag over to a nurse and asked for a status report.

“No pulse.”

“Right. Ten cc’s epi.” He plunged the syringe into Peterson’s chest. He turned towards the monitor.

“Nothing.” The nurse responded to his unasked question.

“Clear.” The physician applied the defibrillator paddles to the chest and pushed the trigger. Electricity forced Peterson’s body into an arch. Once. Twice. Three times.

“Sinus rhythm. We’ve got him.”

The tension drained from the room as Peterson began to breathe on his own. The gray pallor of death was edged aside by the healthy pink of oxygenated blood flowing through the veins and arteries as it should. All but Nurse Preddis and an orderly left the room to complete tasks they’d hastily abandoned. Preddis cleaned up the mess and left too. An hour later, the physician returned to check on Peterson, now conscious.

“You had a pretty close call, you know.”

Tears rolled down Peterson’s face.

“It was so beautiful over there. So calm. So peaceful. Why did you bring me back? Why?”

“Now, now, Mr. Peterson. Calm down. You’ve just been through a terrible ordeal.”

"No! My whole life has been an ordeal. Today, for a few minutes, I was without pain, without worry. It ... it was heaven. I can't tell you how wonderful it was. And then. And then you and your damned nurses yanked me back to this." He waved a hand across his body. "I suppose you expect me to be grateful to you for saving my life but I'm not. You should've let me die. I want to die!"

The doctor tried to reassure Peterson but he wasn't listening.

"Look, doctor. I want you to understand something. The next time this happens, I don't want you interfering. I want to be left alone. No more. No more!"

The physician stood. He shook his head. He did not understand.

"If that's the way you want it..."

"That's the way I want it." With that, Peterson turned his head away. He sobbed into his pillow. The doctor walked to the nursing station and grabbed Peterson's chart. In bold letters he wrote across the top 'DNR', short for 'Do not resuscitate.'

"Silly old fool," he muttered as he slammed the chart shut.

* * * *

Bakersfield, CA

"Two hundred and sixty dead, over 300 wounded, many seriously, and we do not have a clue who the perpetrator was or why he did it. People, what's wrong with this picture? There have been over 40 school shootings across the country in the past 5 years. We have worked most of them and always, and I repeat, always have the perp or perps had some connection with the school, some perceived beef with the school, the teachers, the students, something. He or they decide to get revenge and shoot up the school and try to kill those they perceived as the enemy. Usually, they manage to kill a few but end up the way they always were – as screw-ups."

"But this guy. He was no screw up. He plans. He booby-traps our holding area so he knew we were going to use that particular space. He panics the kids and the cops into running into the holding area and then detonates a bomb that puts all of our domestic terrorists to shame. He kills himself when we are trying to cope with the explosion when he could have walked out the front door of the school and disappeared. We wouldn't have noticed. I do not understand that."

"We do know one thing. The guns he used at the school were not virgins. He used a Sig 8 mm, an Israeli uzi submachine gun, and two assault rifles – both AR-15s (not M-16s before you ask). That is an odd collection of weapons but more to the point, the Sig was used in several robberies in Los Angeles, the uzi in a drive-by shooting in Atlanta, and the AR-15s were part of a shipment stolen from a Canadian army base and subsequently used in an armored car heist in New York. How he managed to acquire such an array of weapons from all over the place is another question that we need to answer."

"When a crime like this occurs, we usually look for motive, means, and opportunity. He has handed us the means and the opportunity but the motive is unknown. We don't know why he did this."

"Do you now what is bothering me the most? No you don't so I will tell you. This guy not only had absolutely NO connection with the school or anyone in it or

associated with it, he has no connection with this world. He does not exist in any database anywhere. We know nothing about him and unless someone comes forward with new information, we never will. The perp is a complete mystery.”

“Perhaps he’s an alien from outer space,” muttered one of the agents sitting around the conference table. He thought he was saying it low enough for only him and his partner to hear but the cosmos conspired to change that. As he spoke, there was a collective silence in the room and everyone heard his comment. Some smiled, a few stared down at their feet waiting for their boss to react. Others pretended not to hear.

SAC James Oberon starred at the offender for several minutes then abruptly dismissed the task force. Pointing to the one who had spoken up, he said: “you stay.” His partner patted his shoulder as if to wish him good luck and then left with the rest. When they were alone, Frank Becker, smart-ass extraordinaire, started to apologize but was stopped by his boss’s hand. For several minutes, he sat and waited while his SAC read through a file. He didn’t know it was his, delivered from personnel that very morning.

“We need a special team on this and an interagency taskforce won’t cut it. Too many asses being covered for real work to occur. The Director (you could hear the capitol letter in his voice), the Director wants a team prepared to take this investigation wherever it needs to go. There will be a lot of resistance and a lot of political crap to deal with so we need a different kind of agent. You, Agent Becker, have refused promotions three times despite an exemplary record – although you do have a number of insubordination letters in your jacket. This tells me you like being a field agent. You don’t want to ride a desk. Am I right?

Becker debated for a minute and then thought “What the hell” and nodded.

“You have an amazing closing record. You’ve cleared just about 80% of the cases assigned to you. The Director was impressed by that. I told him that you were given all of the easy ones but he wouldn’t listen.”

Becker leaned forward, anticipating his bosses next words. He couldn’t resist asking: “He wants me on this team?”

“No. He wants you to lead it. More than that, he wants you to select the personnel you need. Physical requirements like office space, budget requests for travel, that kind of stuff come through me. Everything else is yours.”

Becker sat back and let out a whistle. “Wow. Is this for real?”

“As real as it gets, son.”

“I can’t help but wonder why a whole new team is being created when we have a whole building full of task forces and special squads and anti-everything panels. What’s really behind this?”

His boss smiled. “Suspicious? I would be too. I can’t tell you much right now but there is more involved in this than one mad bomber and I, no, the agency needs you to look into this.” He looked into his agent’s eyes. “Are you in or out?”

“You leave me no choice. I’m in.”

“Good. Then congratulations are in order. The team leader needs a top secret clearance and, as you are aware, top secret belongs to Senior Supervisor level staff. As of now, I am promoting you to that level. I believe that bumps you up

two pay grades. That's all for now. You start your new job on Monday. Be in the 6th floor conference room at 8:00 am. You'll be fully briefed then"

The silence that followed told Becker the interview was over and he was dismissed. He nodded to the SAC and left. He needed a drink.

* * * *

Monrovia, Liberia

Dr. Stephen Lathrop paced in his hotel room in Monrovia, the capitol of Liberia. It was a hotel room just like all the others he'd been in since his arrival in West Africa. He could not remember the name of the hotel or even the name of the city. He counted himself lucky that he remembered what country he was in. In the past 6 weeks, he'd been in countless towns and cities in six countries and the situation was so dire, he didn't have time to remember trivialities such as his current location. He paced and every few steps glanced over at his computer that sat on the desk ready to accept his report just as his superiors in D.C. were ready to receive his report. His bosses loved their reports but most of all, they loved successes and he had nothing but failure to report to them. He had no idea what to write for them. All of the facts were depressing and indicative of defeat. He ran through them in his head:

As of today, there are 6574 reported cases of Ebola Virus in West Africa with a death toll of just over 3000 persons. More were dying every day and the disease was spreading.

So far, six African nations had reported cases including a few in the Congo (DRC) that his bosses were quick to dismiss as unrelated to the central epidemic centered around Liberia and Sierra Leone. He was not sure the Congo cases were unrelated.

Because many of the people in west Africa were generally mistrustful of governments and hospitals, the actual number of Ebola cases were estimated to be at least 4 times that of the reported cases – 25,000 infected, 17,500 dead or dying – with more appearing every day. This strain of Ebola had a CFR (case fatality rate) of about 70% while all previous strains had CFRs of between 50% and 54%.

The medical facilities were overwhelmed by the demand for beds for those suffering from Ebola – especially when quarantine was highly recommended for those affected. Fully ten percent of those infected by the Ebola strain were medical staff including several members of his own team. He had already lost three nurses and a doctor, colleagues he had worked with for years under difficult conditions.

He was now working with a skeleton crew – he smiled at his poor attempt at gallows humor – and would have to include with his report a request for replacements for those he'd lost. Actually, he thought, I should ask to increase the size of the team here. He had had a staff of twelve. He needed a hundred sets of hands just to care for the ill. He had no time for research into how the disease was being spread or how to cure it. All he could do was offer his patients some water with a little sugar in it while they could still drink and an I.V. of saline solution when they were too weak to do even that.

Mentally he readied himself to deliver the bad news to his superiors. He suspected they already knew the situation was bad but since they weren't here with him, they really had no idea how bad it was. Already, in the past six months, more people had died from Ebola than had succumbed in the past 40 years. He decided there was no reason to sugarcoat the situation for the bureaucrats in the States. Maybe if he scared them, they'd get him some help.

He sat and began to type: "The Ebola epidemic ravaging parts of West Africa is the most severe acute public health emergency seen in modern times. Never before has a biosafety level four pathogen infected so many people so quickly, over such a broad geographical area, for so long."

* * * *

Monrovia, Liberia

"Have they started suspecting something, Jusef?"

"No. I don't think so. They are frustrated by their lack of progress at stopping the spread of this Ebola sickness. They think they are in a grand battle with Mother Nature. They work on a vaccine and tend to the sick. They watch them die and complain they do not have enough resources."

"Excellent, my friend. We need them to remain in the dark for a while longer. The epidemic is beginning to take hold in the Congo and soon it will reappear in its place of origin, Southern Sudan. Thousands more will die in the coming weeks."

They shared a moment of quiet reflection and some hot sweetened tea. They had watched the crisis develop over the past half of a year and had seen it exceed their expectations time and time again. Governments had closed borders, declared states of emergency, and fought its own citizens for scant medical supplies. West Africa was on its knees and soon, the entire continent would feel the sting of the epidemic. They would make sure of that.

Jusef sighed and rose to his feet.

"I must go back to work before I am missed. There is much to be done in the fight against this epidemic and I must do my part." He winked and left.

His friend smiled and dialed his cell phone – a throw-away that he would use just this once. "We need to meet. Jusef has provided some information that could give us an opportunity to take Ebola to the Americans directly. It seems that they are airlifting some of their sick doctors to hospitals in America." After listening for a few seconds, he hung up and tossed the phone into a nearby trash barrel. He strolled away from the café whistling quietly to himself.

* * * *

East Los Angeles

It was an ordinary room filled with ordinary furniture and things and a few hours ago, it had been just that. The naked body that now lay beside the bed, arms together in front, knees bent changed things. It wasn't a room anymore. It was a crime scene, a place that received extraordinary scrutiny and attention. Mark Wheaton stood in the doorway, watching the crime scene technicians scour the

floor, the furniture, the walls, collecting this and that, bagging each precious token, taking pictures, and writing copious notes. Soon they'd be done and like the first wave of examiners – the coroner and his assistant had already gone having completed their aspect of the ritualistic process – they would be waiting for the body to arrive back at the morgue. He waited as well. He was the third wave. He would spend a few minutes alone with the victim. He would touch nothing but he would use all his other senses. He would absorb the scene, record it in his mind to be replayed when needed. The fourth wave, the body removal crew, would wait for him to finish. They were, he imagined, outside smoking and swapping lies about their recent dates. They got paid by the hour and didn't mind a bit that they had to wait for Mark to do his thing.

Some of his fellow detectives considered him a bit odd because he insisted on this silent communion with the dead but he didn't care. He did it anyway. He had learned to do it this way from his former partner – dead just over two years now – who had showed him the method.

"Every crime scene revolves around the victim," He had insisted. "The crime is centered on the victim and is grounded in the crime scene. This too is where your investigation must center and must be grounded." It was a litany Mark had had recited to him on the way to every homicide they'd partnered on. Eight years worth of homicides but that had stopped suddenly. His partner was gone, killed by a drunk driver. Now, Mark recited it to himself on the way to each scene. He'd worked with several other detectives since – he didn't call them partners – but none had shown any interest in the method. They were all too young. They'd grown up with CSI-type television and had no interest in old-fashioned police work. They put more stock in trace evidence and high-tech gadgetry.

Mark liked the toys too but he needed a beginning for each case and so he used his quiet time to provide it. Even though he'd been at the crime scene for over two hours and watched the first two waves do their thing, talked to a number of people including the neighbor lady who'd discovered the body and although he'd already filled half a notebook, in his mind, the case did not begin until he was standing alone in the middle of the scene. The technicians were getting close to the end of their work and he could feel the excitement building in his gut. Soon it would be his turn.

He glanced across the living room of the ground-floor apartment. He could see the street through the picture window. Out there, milling around, were a dozen or so neighbors, attracted by the flashing lights of the emergency vehicles. Several held coffee cups and some were taking videos with their cell phones – to thrill their coworkers later, he thought. Mark smiled at the memory the scene evoked. His partner had once remarked that a lot of the vics were social rejects. He heard the words again:

"They don't see nobody for weeks on end. Nobody, Mark. And then they die and instantly become the life of the party. Probably get more attention in that one day then they did in the whole last year of their lives." Those words held a certain irony for Mark because since his partner's death, he'd finished his transition to social reject – a loner. It hadn't happened overnight and had begun long before he'd partnered with Trevor. Being Trevor's partner had slowed the process a bit.

He'd been an only child and his parents were long gone. He had no family left. He'd been married but his wife had left him, citing the married-to-the-job excuse. "As good as any," Mark thought. Trevor kept him from retreating into his own world by dragging him out to various functions. As a team, they always seemed to be out and about doing something social. It had been fun for Mark but it had stopped rather abruptly by a drunk and a car. His new co-workers whom he referred to as the transients because they never stayed long sometimes tried to interest him in a beer after work or a ball game or a barbeque but they soon gave up. He was simply not interested in a social life. He was comfortable with his own quiet life that revolved around the job but also included solitary pleasures like hiking, reading, and his garden. One of the secretaries, a cop groupie, had recently flirted with him but he'd politely ignored it until she got the point. Now, he'd heard that she was mumbling about Mark being gay. No one, including Mark, took her seriously.

"We're done here," the head tech announced as he brushed past Mark. "She's all yours."

Mark nodded and stepped into the room. He closed the door and in doing so closed out the rest of the world. He took two deep breaths and set to work. Some of the newer detectives who had seen him do his thing had been convinced he was doing nothing because he stood still, unmoving, unblinking for several minutes at a time. But the older detectives, the ones who knew Mark knew also that he was concentrating, memorizing every detail of the scene. Weeks later when the other detectives barely remembered the vic's name, Mark would be able to recall and describe the entire scene in detail. The squad had cracked more than one case because of some detail that had at first seemed insignificant but later assumed major importance when paired with new information. This was the real reason they let Mark do his thing – weird though they thought it was. It worked.

The older detectives often told the story of how Mark broke the case involving the murders, apparently killed with a poison gas, of four young men who were sharing an apartment in Queens. When he arrived on the scene, he noted that one of the vics made it to the bathroom but the others died in the living room. He also found some guns, a few copies of letters sent to various city officials threatening acts of terrorism as well as crude plans for various public buildings. He suspected the men who died had terrorist ambitions and the gas that killed them may have been something they'd manufactured. A background check showed that all four had recently converted to a rather extreme Muslim sect and two, including the one who made it to the bathroom, had long rap sheets that identified them as low level drug dealers for the local gang. All of this information was stored in Mark's head and was combined with additional information that came out of the local precinct. It seems that a beat cop had knocked on the doors in the victims' apartment building looking for the owner of an old car that had been involved in an accident. That visit by a police officer occurred at the same time as the alleged murders and that officer reported that there was no answer when he knocked on the vic's door although he thought maybe somebody was home but didn't want to talk to the police. At first, someone suggested that maybe the policeman was the killer but no one took that seriously. Mark put it all together and changed the crime from murder to accidental suicide. It seems that a drug dealer's instinctive reaction

when a cop comes calling is to flush his stash down the toilet and, in all likelihood, instinct kicked in and one of the four grabbed the gas container (a small glass vial) and tossed it into the toilet. The vial breaks and the gas mixed with water to become an instant poisonous cloud that spreads through the apartment, killing all within seconds.

No one knew if that story was true or simply a tale told to impress rookies and civilians. Mark refused to confirm or deny the legend but was not above using it to have fellow cops accepting of his methodology. If it paved the way, let it.

Mark began where he always began, with the victim. This one was relatively young – so many were these days. He figured she was in her late twenties and in good shape. The muscle tone was still visible despite death having robbed her of her vitality. She was tanned, probably a salon tan as there were no tan lines visible. Blonde. Petite. He guessed 5'2" or 5'3" but the coroner would provide exact height and weight that he pegged at 100 pounds. She was naked but there were no clothes strewn about. He could see underwear in a hamper near the closet. There was a blouse and skirt hung over the back of a chair. They looked expensive, probably not work clothes – he remembered that she had been a secretary in an accounting firm downtown. Across the bottom of the bed, there was a dressing gown, clearly placed there rather than thrown or tossed aside. The bed itself was made up with the pillows and blankets in their correct positions. There was some blood on the bedspread nearest where the body lay. Mark decided that the victim, one Beverly Kehoe, had not used that bed for any ordinary purpose that night.

He stared at the body. It appeared to have fallen beside the bed after being struck in the back of the head. At that point, her killer had walked away. There was no attempt to pose the body or to cover it up. Something bothered Mark about the body's position but he couldn't pin it down. He shrugged, assuming it would come to him later. He continued his scan of the room. He could not see any object that could have served as the murder weapon. The room was filled with what he called girlie things, all soft and fluffy or glassy and delicate. No. The murderer took the weapon with him when he left.

He glanced back at the body. She was naked and that was what had been getting to him. Why? She was in the bedroom with her killer and naked. As far as Mark could tell, there was only one reason for that – sex – but the bed was unrumpled, unused, so no sex at least in the traditional sense. If she was naked in her own bedroom with her killer, she had to have known him. Mark flashed back to his training days and the first time he'd heard that almost all murder victims are killed by someone who knew them, often quite well. Husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, siblings were the usual suspects. Boy and girl friends and other non-relatives came a close second. His time on the force had confirmed this statistic so odds were Beverly knew her attacker. But, thought Mark, what if she was the one in fifty to be killed by a stranger. No, that didn't fit either. The usual motives for stranger killings were rape and/or theft but nothing had been taken and the bedding was undisturbed. No sign of struggle. Had she interrupted an intruder before he could rob her who then killed her and ran without stopping to steal anything? That didn't make sense either. If she'd heard the intruder from the bathroom – and evidence suggested that she'd been in the bathroom just before her murder, surely

she'd have put her robe on before confronting him. More likely, she'd have called 9-1-1 from the bathroom (there was an extension there) before even attempting a confrontation. None of it made sense. It was all contradictory. She knew her attacker but she didn't. He sighed and left the room. He nodded to the disposal team who moved in to take her away.

Outside, he stopped and scanned the street. The small crowd of rubber-neckers was still there. He counted a dozen or so. He smiled and wondered if they knew they were being filmed. Standard procedure at crime scenes was to have one of the uniforms photograph all of the onlookers on the off chance that the perp had returned to the scene of the crime. Where do these people come from? It was just after ten in the morning and yet here they were, vicariously enjoying the excitement of another murder in the city. Without speaking to the other detectives, he climbed into his car and headed for the station to start the paperwork.

* * * *

East Los Angeles

Three days went by. Neighbors, friends and relatives of the deceased were interviewed and re-interviewed. Forensic evidence was being analyzed and results were slowly coming in. As each hit his IN box, Mark entered it into the murder book. He sat with his feet up and a cup of coffee, bad though it was, nearby. He was reading Beverly Kehoe's autopsy report. It contained no surprises. A single blow to the head with a blunt object (unknown) had killed her. No sign of defensive wounds so no struggle. Time of death was near midnight and she'd eaten a light supper of salad some hours earlier. No signs of sexual activity, rough or otherwise. Apparently, Beverly had had a normal if boring evening at home her final night. Other evidence supported that. There were bits of salad fixings in her trash and a single wine glass sat in the dishwasher.

The Crime Scene Unit had gone over the whole place. Fingerprints belonged to the victim, her friends and relatives and to no one else. There was no sign of forced entry, no sign of any kind of struggle, no sign of visitors, nothing. It was as if the killer had been a ghost leaving nothing of himself behind. He felt it was a him. Mark scanned the interview reports. Neighbors identified the victim as a nice Catholic girl, home most nights, always respectful and helpful, went to mass every Sunday. They liked her. Her family, parents and one younger brother, provided pretty much the same description and evaluation. She was never any trouble, helped around the house, moved into a place of her own to be closer to her workplace. She took the bus to work when the weather was too bad for walking.

Mark mused that this was typical of murder victim's friends and relatives. They were leery of saying anything negative. The vic was always just short of a saint. He knew that wasn't true. There were always vices, bad habits, bad moods and arguments but none of that was relevant at this moment. They were concentrating on looking for the perp within Beverly's circle before approaching the stranger angle. Unfortunately, so far those interviewed were able to provide reasonable alibis and no obvious motives. Her ex-boyfriend had been the one to break up with her some months back and was now deeply into a new relationship.

No motive there. She wasn't seeing anyone at the moment. Her brother had said that she was tired of the "relationship game" as he put it and was taking a break from it, only dating occasionally and never with a serious relationship in mind.

There were a few things that bothered Mark about the case. He needed to answer the question he'd posed the morning after her murder – did she or did she not know her attacker? He was seeing signs for both but how can you know and not know someone at the same time? The other related to the position of her body. Had she been posed? Why didn't she resist her attacker? Why was she naked? Again, he got the feeling that he was on the edge of figuring out the body's position when his phone rang.

"Wheaton."

"Mark, Steve here. We got a dead body just off Center Street. You're up so it's yours."

"Okay. I'm on it. Another day, another DB." He closed the Kehoe Murder Book and headed out onto the streets. As soon as the door closed behind him, his phone rang again. The coroner's assistant had something new for him about Beverly Kehoe's body. He left a message for Mark to call him.

* * * *

Washington, DC

Physically, Barber was feeling better. The ringing in her ears was almost gone and her head didn't hurt. The cuts and bruises were healing and her hands were rock steady but she was an emotional wreck. A week of forced sick leave – she wanted to go to work, HR would not let her – had given her way too much time to consider what her boss was going to say and do to her. She took the death of Patrick Swanson as a personal failure. She believed that had she acted as soon as she saw him on the street, he'd be alive instead of dead and burned to a cinder.

She had spent some of those sick days writing reports and answering questions from the local PD, the fire department's arson investigator, and her own internal affairs representative. They all seemed satisfied that Patrick Swanson had died as the result of arson – the crime being committed by person or persons unknown. They were pleased there was only one eyewitness to the crime because when there are more, their accounts almost always contradict each other. And they were pleased that that witness was a cop, a fed no less. That gave her statements a high level of credibility.

She got the sense that they would file all of their reports and hers and let the case go cold. The arson investigator told it like it was: "Unless the arsonist starts more fires and we can see his signature, there is little we can do. Whoever did this will, in all likelihood, get away with it." For some reason, that pissed Barber off.

She had tried to keep herself busy to avoid having to think about this moment; that moment when she showed up at her office and her coworkers would gather around wanting the details. No doubt there was already a note on her desk from her boss telling to report to his office forthwith. The coworkers did as expected. Several asked after her health. Others demanded a blow by blow of the incident and there indeed was the note on her desk. She straightened her back, brushed off

her colleagues and climbed the stairs to Walker's office. The receptionist told her to wait in the hall as her boss was tied up at the moment but will get to her as soon as he can.

She waited for a good half hour, her punishment for being prompt, before she was ushered into his office. He was seated at this desk and glanced up at her before returning to the paperwork he was reading. "Pretending to read, more likely, just to put me in my place," she thought. He was quicker than she anticipated and started talking to her while her mind was wandering away. It took a few seconds to realize he'd been talking. She took advantage of her injury.

"Sorry sir, my ears are still ringing a bit. Could you repeat what you just said."

"How are you feeling? The EMTs report stated you received minor injuries. Is that true? Do you need more time off?"

"I'm fine sir. I am ready and able to get back to work. I watched him go into his house. I could have stopped him. I ..."

Walker waved his hand in the air.

"Water under the bridge, Barber. Water under the bridge. I am sure you did everything by the book. I am having a letter put in your file commending you for your actions so let's put that behind us. We need to move forward. Quite a bit has happened since you were last here. There have been several more crimes involving the guns stolen from police evidence lockers and several reports of large numbers of weapons gone missing from PD custody. A few days ago, they did an audit at the central storage facility in Los Angeles and found that there were at least 150 weapons missing including submachine guns and automatic rifles as well as several pounds of explosives. We are encouraging other local police departments to do similar audits so we can some idea just how big a problem we have."

"The upper echelon of the ATF has decided that our task force would be better served if it was operating in California rather than here, especially after that LA audit and a mountain of weapons back out on the streets there. The Director is worried that there will be gang wars starting using the recycled firepower."

"But sir, we've spent months on this. We have all the data and we've done hours and hours of interviews. I've got more information about the problem on my computer than they could possibly have in Los Angeles. It's taken months for them to get up to where we are now." As she uttered that statement, she caught a faint sneer on her boss's face and realized she'd stepped into his trap. He slammed it shut.

"That's exactly what I told them. As our expert on the issue, you were best suited to be running the investigation from here. They agreed with the first part and disagreed with the rest. You are now the official head of our task force dealing with the recovery of recycled weapons – and that comes with a promotion to Special Agent in Charge and a hefty pay raise – but, effective the end of the week, you are to assume command of the task force in Los Angeles. You will report to the Division Head out there till the Director gets the chain of command settled. The folks in LA might be a bit testy about having someone from outside jumping into a command position."

"Sir, this is a temporary transfer?" She mentally crossed her fingers. She loved the DC area and knew nothing about LA.

“The Director and I figure that the task force will be operational for at least a year and to ask you to run a California office but be responsible to us here would be unreasonable. So, to answer your question, no. The transfer will be permanent. Of course, once the task force winds down, you can always apply for a transfer back to this office. I’m sure it will be looked upon favorably. Here are your transfer papers, travel arrangements, and all the other stuff related to the transfer. Keep me posted when you can on your progress.”

She recognized a dismissal when she heard it and left. She headed for the cafeteria where she sat in a corner and scanned the paperwork she’d been given. It identified the data packages – hard copy and digital – that were to be sent and how they were to be sent. It included airline tickets for four days from now. It was a good thing she lived in a furnished apartment. She only had a few boxes to pack. The packet included her new working address, contact information for the HR person who would process her transfer in LA and help her find a place to live and all that, and a career summary for each of the people she would be working with. It was an impressive group but none were as impressive as Walker was. Barber realized that he had gotten rid of her, transferred not to Alaska but still a long way away. Not only that, he had managed to get out from under the whole gun recycling issue and make it look like it was someone else’s decision. The whole thing could go to hell and he’d be safe. She on the other hand stood right in the forefront and if the task force failed, it would be her responsibility to bear.

She didn’t bother going back to her desk. There was no point. All of the data, her computer and all the rest were already on their way to California. She decided to go home and pack.

* * * *

At Sea, Coast of North Africa

The tanker passed through the Straits of Gibraltar and turned south along the coast of West Africa. It would stay that course for two days before turning west towards the Americas delivering its precious cargo of crude oil from the Gulf to the refineries in Texas and Louisiana. As it chugged by the coast of Liberia, it was met by a small fishing vessel that sailed alongside while it discharged its passengers, two men who were to join the crew for the journey across the Atlantic. They had no official duties but stayed in the crew quarters and left at shift change and did not return until the shift changed again. They kept to themselves but that aroused no suspicions since the crew spoke a diversity of languages and rarely had more than three or four comrades who spoke the same language. Keeping to ones self was the norm aboard most commercial vessels that plied these waters.

Every day, the two met with the First Mate for training and the training was rigorous. They had to learn how to behave so as not to appear suspicious in a land where all minorities were eyed with suspicion as a rule. They learned how to swallow their pride and be subservient to the bureaucrats who would question them at their port of entry. But most of all, they learned how to conceal and smuggle the small plastic canisters that carried their weapon – the ebola virus. The canisters were disguised to appear to be shampoo bottles and would pass any inspection,

they were sure of that. The canisters would be hidden in plain sight and the arrogant customs officials in New Orleans would not see them for what they really were. Only in America would they rely on underpaid, undereducated and under motivated fools to guard their borders. They were a joke but one had to account for the occasional chance discovery.

At night after their training, the two men would whisper about how they were going to bring the American people a gift, a gift that would kill all of whom it touched. And they marveled at the simplicity of the plan. They were to travel to their respective target cities. They found it hard to believe that you could travel anywhere you wanted inside America without running into check points or other security stops. They had laughed when they were told that America had laws that forbid policemen from demanding identification or travel papers from anyone unless they actually saw some criminal activity. How absurd. In their home country, one couldn't travel more than 20 kilometers without being stopped by the police or the military. Much more sensible.

Once at their destinations, they were to go from market to market, grocery store to grocery store, spraying invisible droplets of water and death onto vegetables and fruits until their canisters were empty. They would be infected along with their targets but it was for a good cause. They were glad to be given the chance to spread the Ebola disease to the arrogant Americans. Soon, they would be on their knees begging for release from the great plague.

They shared a laugh at the expense of the tanker's crew because they had an extra small canister that they would use on their last day before making port in New Orleans. If it worked, and they were confident it would, the tanker would become a death ship, filled with the dead and dying by the time it reached its next destination in Texas. If all went well, it would crash into the harbor and destroy it. If not, the ship would drift in the Gulf of Mexico until the authorities boarded her. Then, the disease would be spread in turn by those who came to the ship's rescue. Either way, it was a win for the two.

* * * *

East Los Angeles

Wheaton was tired. It had been a long week and he was looking forward to a couple of days off. He checked his watch as he sat down heavily into his chair. An hour before quitting time, that is if there wasn't another murder in the next sixty minutes. The last one he'd investigated turned out to be a no brainer. One gangbanger had killed another gangbanger for messing with his girlfriend. He had intended to go to his girl's place and do her too but had stopped off at the local watering hole for some liquid courage. Apparently beating a fellow gang member to death was easy while taking out his girlfriend might be a challenge and a bit of alcoholic help would make the difference.

While at the bar, he bragged about the killing and detailed how he was going to take out the two-timing bitch. The detectives showed up in time to hear him explain to his buddies how he'd wasted his rival. The threat against his girlfriend

was pure gravy. The case was open and shut. Wheaton doubted he'd even have to go to court. After the barroom confession, he'd be better off pleading guilty.

That was not why the detective was tired. It was the Kehoe case. It was really bugging him and every time more info became available, the case got more complicated and confusing. For example, there was no record of a Beverly Kehoe prior to six months ago – no IRS files, no employment records, no driver's license, no social security number, literally nothing. She simply popped into existence half a year ago. Fingerprints threw a curve ball at the investigators. A Sylvia Warburg had once worked as a nurse at a state correctional facility and so had been fingerprinted. Beverly Kehoe was Sylvia Warburg in a new package. She had a husband and parents in a small town not far from Bakersfield. A trip up there painted an interesting picture. Sylvia had been a nurse working in a local hospital while her husband had a good job with a construction company. They were a normal blue-collar couple. They went to church every Sunday, Pentacostal, and then had Sunday dinner over at her parents' place – usually fried chicken or burgers on the barbeque depending on the season. One day, according to the husband, Sylvia changed. He said she was a totally different person, spoke differently, dressed differently, walked differently and even started disliking foods that had been her favorites. One day she changed and the next day she was gone. Apparently, she withdrew the couple's savings from the bank, packed a small bag and left. She had not been seen or heard of since.

The husband made the trip to the LA County morgue to identify her remains and to finally understand that Sylvia was never coming back. The body of Beverly Kehoe was indeed that of Sylvia Warburg. He cried over her and then thanked Wheaton before heading back up north. He provided photos of his wife that were compared to some more recent photos found in the deceased's place. The differences were striking. Looking beyond the changes in hairstyle and color, there was a distinct difference in attitude that could be seen in the eyes. Sylvia's eyes were kind and caring. Beverly's were hard and filled with disdain.

Discovering Sylvia/Beverly's real identity added another layer of mystery because according to field reports, detectives had interviewed Beverly's family (parents and a younger brother) who had painted a very positive picture of the deceased. According to the records, the family had showed up at the crime scene and had made a fuss about not being able to see their daughter's body. Obviously, this family was a phony; an assumption that proved accurate when, on a follow-up, Wheaton found the address the parents had given was a vacant lot. The Driver's license information that the initial interviewer acquired was bogus as well. Beverly didn't exist. Her second family didn't exist. What had happened to Sylvia to bring this about was unknown.

Wheaton was getting a headache trying to make sense out of this. And the Coroner's Assistant wasn't any help either. The autopsy showed a perfectly healthy woman who had died from blunt force trauma, a blow to the head. Mark expected that. What just moved the whole thing into the surreal was an accidental discovery the Coroner had made. With Kehoe/Warburg's body on an adjacent table, the coroner had been using a black light to detect tiny shards of glass stuck in the skin of a victim of a fall from a fourth floor balcony. Ultraviolet light made the shards

glow. In addition, it made something glow on Beverly's right shoulder – a tattoo. She had a simple tattoo looking vaguely like two crossed swords on the shoulder and it had been done in an ink that was invisible under normal light but glowed under ultraviolet. It was a secret tattoo. A quick call to Bakersfield confirmed that Sylvia had never been tattooed. Beverly had gotten it after she ceased to be Sylvia. Why?

* * * *

U of C, Los Angeles

They entered the bank in a rush – four men in black jeans and black leather jackets, faces covered by ski masks. Each held a machine pistol in one hand and a gym bag in the other. Before the security guard, a minimum wage rent-a-cop, could move out of his chair, he was down with a bullet in his shoulder. Within a few seconds, the bank's staff and customers had been herded out onto the main floor. They were all made to sit with their backs against the walls, while three of the thieves cleaned out the tellers' cash drawers. The fourth counted out the elapsed time in 15-second intervals. At the two-minute mark, they were ready to go and it looked like they were in the clear. No sirens. No visible changes in the traffic patterns outside the windows.

The four gathered near the center of the room to confer. They seemed reluctant to leave the bank. After a few disparaging remarks muttered about the inefficiency of the campus police, one of the robbers asked the question: "What now, boss?" The one who had been clocking the robbery glanced at this watch before responding.

"I think we have to go to plan B. We could walk out of here with the money but where's the fun in that?"

"Plan B it is, boss." One of the gang turned and grabbed one of the tellers.

"Okay Sweetheart, come with me." He grabbed her arm but before he could pull her to her feet, the elderly gentleman sitting next to her spoke up.

"Leave her alone, you bully. She's done nothing to you." He stood and faced the thief, effectively blocking his path.

"Het Dude, you got a death wish or something. Step aside or I'm gonna have to shoot you. You're messing up Plan B."

"Shoot me then, you ass. You think you're a big shot because you got a big gun. You're just a punk, too lazy to work for what you want. I am not afraid to die. I already died once and the hospital brought me back. I'd rather be there than here. Do what you have to do. I'm not moving."

"I hear you. What's your name?"

"Albert. Albert Peterson." He replied, head held high.

"Well Albert, be at peace." And with that, he shot him in the chest. As Albert fell, he smiled. He wanted to say thank you but didn't seem to have any energy left. His assailant stepped over the body and grabbed the teller's arm again.

"Let's go. Plan B awaits." He lead her easily into the tellers' cage. She was in shock and followed meekly. The thief pointed to a cash drawer.

"Sweetheart, I need you to trigger the silent alarm for me. Can you do that for me?" He spoke as if to a small child and she responded as a small child. She nodded and edged towards the drawer and the hidden button beneath it. She pushed the button and turned towards her captor for approval. He smiled and nodded. She smiled back. He shot her and as she fell, he said: "Thanks, darling, See you on the other side." He then yelled across the room. "Plan B initiated." The boss glanced at his watch and started his elapsed time count again. The others poked and prodded the hostages and forced them into a tightly packed group near the front of the bank and in clear sight from the street beyond the doors. This accomplished, they took up positions around the edge of the hostage group and waited. It was apparent they were excited. They fidgeted, rocked on and off the balls of their feet, grinned at each other over the huddle in the middle of the floor. They could not stand still.

"This is going to be a riot." One of them commented. The others simply grinned. The leader nodded in agreement. His eyes caught some movement just outside the front doors.

"Get ready boys. The cavalry has arrived."

Within seconds, the street in front of the bank was filled by police cars and the passers-by had been shoved out of the firing line. All the robbers could see were normal police with pistols and a few with shotguns.

"Soon now, the big guns will show and then we can get serious. Are you ready?" His three cohorts nodded in unison. Then they checked their automatic weapons once more, as they'd been trained to do. The leader smiled. This was a competent bunch. He was proud of them.

The phone rang and to the thieves, it sounded like the opening bell to a boxing match. The leader answered it and listened as the hostage negotiator went through his introductory monologue. He made a rude gesture that sent his mates into a laughing frenzy and then, still silent, hung up the phone and huddled with his men.

"This is it, boys. We do this by the numbers and you will have the time of your lives. Are you ready?"

"Hell yeah!"

"Okay. Step 1: Each of you select a hostage and move them to near the front doors. Try to stay back as they probably have snipers out there by now. Signal when you and your hostage are in position."

The men did as they were told. Two tellers and a customer found themselves standing in front of the main doors, a few feet away from freedom. There was a moment of quiet and then one of the men yelled "run." One of the tellers and a customer raced for the doors. The other teller seemed frozen and unable to move. Of course, it didn't matter. Almost as soon as the word run was said, the three hostage takers opened fire on their respective choices. The bodies were propelled forward into the street as the glass doors shattered, spreading shards of glass all over the steps.

"Move back, gentlemen. Take your second positions."

They obeyed as soldiers would and distributed themselves around the perimeter of the hostage hoard, now pressing even closer to one another than they

had been, hoping to avoid what they prayed was not going to happen. The leader addressed his team.

“Right now, the cops are in a state of shock. They wanted to negotiate a peaceful and non-violent end to this hostage taking. That’s what they’ll call it. We’ve eliminated the possibility that this will end their way. They are undoubtedly conferring right now and in less than 2 minutes, they will storm this building with everything they’ve got. This is what you have been waiting for. Take a deep breath and relax a bit. Put in new mags and tighten up your vests.”

He checked his watch and started a count down. Thirty seconds, twenty seconds, ten seconds, wait for it. Five, four, three, two, one. Go.”

On that last word, they opened fire on the remaining hostages with their weapons on full automatic. The room filled with gun smoke and screams. The team laughed and kept on firing. The SWAT team that had been crossing the street to begin their frontal assault stumbled and their resolve vanished as they saw dozens of helpless people gunned down. They had anticipated losing a few hostages in the crossfire but now had to face the fact that they had lost them all. Their captain called for a retreat and regroup. They needed to modify their strategy now that there were no hostages to get in harm’s way.

“We’ve got maybe two or three minutes before they come back in. Take a moment to calm down. Check the hostages. Make sure they are dead but let’s do it quietly. Use your knives.” And they did so with murderous efficiency. Within 30 seconds the four who were only wounded joined their brethren. Once again, the team replaced magazines in their guns and readied themselves for a final assault.

“Now we have a choice, boys. Do we wait in here and battle from cover or do we hit the streets and go out in a blaze of glory. I’m good with either one but decide quick or SWAT will decide that for you.”

After a brief discussion, one stated the position of the group. “Let’s take the fight to them. It’ll be more fun in the open.”

“As you wish. It has been an honor, gentlemen. See you on the other side.”

“On the other side!” The other three shouted in unison. As a unit, they raced out the door and into the street where they sprayed bullets in all directions, killing police, news reporters, and bystanders alike. They had enough time to empty one mag and slap in another before the police reacted with a hail of bullets that bounced the perps around like puppets. In seconds, the bank robbers were dead and the investigation began. It would not lead very far.

* * * *

U of C, Los Angeles

The EMTs stood off to the side and watched the police take measurements and try to make some sense of the massacre. The wounded had all been attended to with some going to hospital but most of the injuries were minor and were treated on site. The dead still lay where they fell and would remain until the forensic investigation was completed in the coming hours. Kevin Treacher, the senior EMT at the scene, had had to check each one of the dead to make sure they were just that. It was a necessary part of the job of an Emergency Medical Technician. He

checked for a pulse and for any other signs of life. He believed that they were still humans and needed to be treated properly and with respect. He talked to them as he checked their vitals, apologizing for his intrusion and asked their forgiveness.

This was a habit of his whenever one of his call outs led to a fatality. It made him feel better but was considered eccentric and just a bit creepy to his fellow workers. They teased him but he just shrugged it off and continued following his instincts. His current partner was the worst offender:

“Hey Kev, What the dead tellin’ you today?”

Kevin looked at him and, knowing that it would creep out his partner, pointed to the bodies.

“They told me they had lived too long but not long enough, whatever that means.”

His partner stiffened and then relaxed.

“You messin’ with me, is all. They don’t say nothin’.”

“If you say so.” Kevin smiled but knew what he had said to be the truth. As he’d checked the bodies for signs of life, he’d gotten distinct feelings that some of the dead were supposed to have died earlier, more righteous deaths. And at the same time, he sensed that others were not ready to die yet. He was confused but hid it.

“Let’s go get some coffee. I’m tired.”

“Works for me. They’ll call us if they need us. I could use a donut or somethin’.”

* * * *

U of C, Los Angeles

At the other end of the campus, Cynthia Ross lectured her astronomy class. There were forty students in the room but only a few were paying attention. The majority needed the credit but cared nothing for the information she was giving with them. She addressed the few. With them, she shared the secrets of the universe.

“Suppose you had a bunch of marbles weighing one kilogram in total and, just for fun, you took each one of the marbles and weighed them individually. What would you expect?”

She paused. The back row stared at their hands. As expected, Sarah, one of the better students, filled the void.

“The total weight of the individual marbles would equal one kilogram. If the density of each was the same as all the others, each one would weigh one kilogram divided by the number of marbles in the bunch.” She looked at her instructor for approval. Ross smiled at Sarah’s enthusiasm. She always stated more than was necessary. Such was the exuberance of youth. She nodded as she spoke.

“Correct. That would be the expectation. How would you react if the total weight of the marbles when weighed individually came to 100 grams?”

“That’s not possible!” Joshua snorted.

“It shouldn’t but it is. Maybe not for a bunch of marbles but it is for the universe.”

"That's silly," Joshua pouted. He hated being wrong. He hated being put down by anyone.

"Weight is relative in that it is actually the measure of the gravitational attraction between two objects. Right?"

The keeners in the crowd nodded. Several of the rest mumbled into their books. One burly track star mumbled about someone losing her marbles. His girlfriend giggled.

"Weight can change but mass cannot and if we know the gravitational strength, we can calculate mass. Still with me?"

The keeners nodded again. Sarah leaned forward, resting her head in her hands. The track star and his girlfriend at the back of the room noisily packed up their books and left. As the door closed, the class heard a loud comment about lost marbles in the hallway followed by another high-pitched giggle. Ross glanced in the general direction of the door. She shrugged.

"A few years ago, astrophysicists from UCLA calculated the density, the mass, of the universe using the strength of the gravitational pull of parts of the galaxy against other parts. The figure they came up with was ten times greater than the mass that could be accounted for by adding up all of the known sources. Since then, a few new bodies have been added to the inventory but over 88 percent of the universe remains missing mass. My colleagues, the ones with a penchant for mystery, like to refer to that missing mass as 'dark matter' although it is most certainly transparent — otherwise we'd see it."

Sarah could barely contain herself. Her mind was racing. She'd just entered graduate school and had been casting about for a potential thesis topic. Maybe 'dark matter' was it.

"What do you think dark matter is made of?"

"We don't know. If we did know that, Sarah, it wouldn't be missing. We do know that it can't possibly be composed of the conventional building blocks of the universe, stuff like electrons, protons, or neutrons. This stuff has got to be totally new to us, like nothing we've ever seen before."

"Wow." Sarah's eyes shone.

* * * *

Los Angeles

The cop sat at his desk, the surface of which was barely visible under the mounds of paperwork. He was a little behind and the Sergeant had been after him to clean up the backlog but every time he tried, he'd get a call to investigate yet another murder in Los Angeles. Now crimes meant new piles of paperwork. The most recent addition to his pile was the coroner's report on the bank robbers. He read the summary.

"No surprises here. And no answers, I'm afraid. All four of the bank robbers were in fair to good health with no major illnesses or conditions. They were ordinary men in their late twenties to early thirties. Cause of death in all four cases was multiple gunshot wounds."

The summary said it all and he knew the rest of the coroner's report would be filled with mundane details and make for very dull reading. The lead detective tossed it back into his IN basket and sat back.

The lead investigator on the case wrote in his report:

"All four of the perps were law-abiding pillars of society until they decided to walk into a bank and kill everyone. They do not have criminal records. No histories of violence or psychological problems. They were ordinary people; ordinary people who decided one day to kill 41 bank employees and customers as well as 9 police officers and 17 civilians plus wounding at least another dozen people before committing suicide by cop. We have no idea as to motive. In short, we have nothing. No answers."

There were so many questions that were left unanswered but since the criminals were all dead and further digging would not change that, he was under pressure to officially close the case and move on to the next homicide. In giving up on the report from the coroner before reading it thoroughly, he missed the one and only anomaly – all four men had been recently tattooed using an invisible ink that glowed only under ultraviolet light.

* * * *

Bakersfield, CA

He'd been in charge of the newly formed FBI Multiple Murder Investigative Team for a week and was still settling in. Sometimes he wondered if he'd ever get used to being the boss. He had to admit there were advantages to being the man. He could arrive for work late, for example, and no one would question him. Of course, so far, he'd arrived at work every day well before anyone else and stayed late at night after everyone had gone home. That was the downside. There were demands on him as the boss that had to be dealt with appropriately and in a timely fashion or things start falling apart. His team liked to get paid on time and vacations had to be scheduled and he was also expected to report on the team's progress on a regular basis as well. He was gaining a new admiration for the superior officers he'd had to deal with in the past and promised himself that once he went back to being a regular field agent, he would be more respectful to and supportive of his bosses.

The hardest part of the job, for him, was having to deal with the parents – it didn't matter if he was talking to the parent of a victim or the father of the perpetrator. All seemed equally confused and at a loss as to how to cope. Becker never knew what to say and couldn't help but feel that the standard "sorry for your loss" was wholly inadequate. He wanted to be able to explain to the parents why their son or daughter was dead because someone went on a killing spree in their child's school. Unfortunately, he could not. So far, no one could explain it. There was plenty of blame going around – violent video games, lack of parental discipline, drugs, mental illness – but although any one of the causes could explain one spree killing, there was no consistent pattern. They couldn't even come up with a profile for a potential killer. Several times the boys in Quantico had published a list of the

characteristics that a potential spree killer only to discover that the next spree killer had none of those characteristics at all.

The FBI had been grappling with this problem ever since the 1970s and the first time a postal worker had lost it and started shooting his fellow employees. The media soon were calling any workplace shooting “going postal” but Frank tried to avoid using that term as he believed it trivialized the problem. He insisted his people use the term spree killer as it applied equally well with workplace incidents and attacks in schools.

One of his initial tasks as head of the unit was to draw up a set of goals and expectations for his team. Beginning with the mandate he’d been handed the first day, he and his team were to be tasked with investigating any and all spree killings (defined as 3 or more killed in a single location or as part of a single event) in the United States. He had created a list of basic requirements that included rapid transportation and communication and with the list of equipment needed to meet the requirements – things such as vehicles and computers – and he had started a list of the specialists he wanted to make sure all of his bases were covered. At the end of each day, he would submit the part of the list he’d worked on that day. He was pleasantly surprised that in an organization that could take up to two months to approve a replacement for a broken desk or chair, he was getting feedback – mostly approvals – within 48 hours. Occasionally, there were modifications to the list and he had to admit that they made sense. Early in the week, he’d submitted a request for a jet and crew to be on standby 24/7. He had sent it in after seeing an episode of Criminal Minds on TV and thought it was a good idea. His boss sent a message denying the request and explained that it was not cost effective. He did however arrange with a local charter airways to provide a charter jet as required so he had his jet but didn’t have to carry the cost of the plane of the crew during downtimes.

Today, he was getting ready to send in the next part of the list and he was sure that his bosses were not going to like it. Up to now, he and his team, a secretary, two field agents and himself had been making do with a small set of offices at the Bakersfield FBI office. It could hold about 6 people comfortably but since Becker anticipated having upwards of 30 operatives and support staff, they were going to outgrow their space. Indeed, his team would soon be larger than the entire Bakersfield FBI force so, even if he was able to commandeer the entire Bakersfield office, there still wouldn’t be enough room. At the end of the day, he would be forwarding a suggestion that the FBI acquire or rent an office building to house his team and he was going to strongly recommend that the team be moved to Los Angeles. He would argue that there would be more suitable accommodations for his team as well as access to more services there. He had no idea that his superiors had already anticipated this and were ready, once Becker submitted the request, to approve it and to send him on a trip to LA to locate a suitable office space.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Near UCLA)

"Is this job weird or what?" The taller of the two men leaned against a tree about half a block from the target's address. His partner sat on the hood of their car.

"Weird how?"

"Think about it for a minute. Usually we get orders to pick up people who criticize too much. We get rid of them, quiet-like. No witnesses. But this time, they want us to kill the target in public without regard to who sees us. That's strange enough but this time, the target makes it even weirder. Up in that house over there are two people – kids really – and the Authority says one of them has gotta go but it doesn't care which one. Isn't that strange?"

"Yeah. I guess it is but I try not to think about stuff like that too much. It hurts my head. All I know is that sooner or later, one of them is going to leave their place. Whoever it is, we follow and eliminate at the first opportunity. That's enough for me."

"Geeze, I was just making conversation. No need to get all testy on me."

"Never mind. I guess I am a bit spooked. I don't like this. It's too public. If somebody makes us, we're done. If they find out we're cops, we're really done."

"Nah. The Authority got us covered. It's like we got diplomatic immunity or something."

"You are such an idiot. We embarrass the Authority and they'll toss us down a hole so deep, we'll never see the sun again. They've done it before"

"Yeah, yeah. I heard the stories too but there's no need to get paranoid. We are professionals. We do the job. We do the job right. Then we go get something to eat. Okay?"

"Okay. You buying?"

"Ha! If the chick comes out first, I am. If it's the guy, you pay. Deal?"

"Deal."

They lapsed into silence, a comfortable quiet that comes from working together for a long time. Neither felt the need to fill the void with words. They waited. They waited knowing that eventually someone was going to come out of that apartment. They were ready for either of their targets to show a face but they hadn't seriously considered what to do if the couple appeared together. So that's exactly what happened. As the sun was setting, the couple emerged and walked down the street past their watchers, arm in arm, focused on each other as if the rest of the world didn't even exist. The hit team watched them pass by.

"Now what?"

"Follow them. Our orders are clear. Take out one and only one. Not both."

The taller one guided the car into the light traffic and cruised slowly along behind their target. He was nervous that the targets would turn and see them. The tail was obvious and he knew he couldn't keep it up for long without drawing attention to themselves. He was about to suggest they drive a block past and wait when a gust of wind blew the girl's hat into the street. She chased it. The driver sensed the opportunity and floored the gas. The car connected with her as she bent to retrieve her hat from the ground. Her body sailed over the killer car and bounced back onto the pavement. Ignoring everything happening behind him, the

driver sped to the corner and took a right. Just out of sight of the accident, he pulled to the curb and shut off the car.

"Well, that was public and messy. Good call, my friend." The passenger beamed.

"Seemed right. You think she's dead?"

"Absolutely but we'd better check anyway. You know what those assholes at the Authority are like."

They abandoned the car and walked down the block to an off-street parking lot where their regular car was parked. The Crown Vic reached the street just as an ambulance raced past, siren wailing. The tall man was talking to burn off the adrenaline.

"They'll connect that car to the hit and run soon enough but there's nothing to tie us to it. Hell, I don't think the owner even knows it's been stolen yet.

"Cruise back. Let's see what's happening."

They pulled into the street and, as expected, it was blocked by the emergency vehicle. A crowd had gathered, hiding the body from view. They stopped the car and went the rest of the way on foot. They walked up to the ambulance and flashed their badges.

"What's up?"

The EMT was writing on a clipboard. He looked up.

"Hit and run. Young woman got mowed down over there." He gestured with his chin. The cops could make out a white shroud through the crowd.

"Guess she didn't make it."

"Fraid not. We got here as fast as we could but too late anyway. The victim, ..." He checked his clipboard. "...a Sarah Cunningham, died at the scene. Looks like her neck was broken."

"Damn. That's too bad. Anybody else hurt?"

No but her boyfriend over there was with her. He's pretty broken up."

The taller of the team shook his head and asked: "Anything we can do?"

"Nah. The coroner is on his way."

The killers turned to leave.

"Keep up the good work," he looked at the EMT's nametag. "Mr. Treacher."

"Kevin. Not so good but thanks anyway."

The killers kept their faces neutral while they worked their way through the crowd to their car. One backed the vehicle out while the other guided him past the obstacles. Once clear, they relaxed.

"I'm starved. What about you?"

"I could eat. There's a taco stand over on Battery Ave."

"Works for me."

* * * *

Los Angeles

Wheaton's phone was ringing when he arrived. He stared at it before deciding whether to answer it. All of the recent calls had been bad news and he didn't need any more of that. He put his coffee cup down and reached for the receiver.

“Wheaton.” He was curt. Wanted to sound impatient so the caller would hurry and get it over with.

“Hey Mark, you still working the Kehoe case?” He recognized the voice as that of a Baltimore cop he’d met during training. He knew him to be a good guy and a good cop.

“Yeah Reese, but it isn’t going anywhere. Why do you ask?”

“It might have a connection to my case here in Baltimore.”

Wheaton sat up straight and grabbed a pen.

“I’m all ears.”

“First, do you have any info that your vic took a trip to the D.C. area recently?”

“Nothing. Why?”

“There was an arson/murder a while back here. One man, a former ATF agent who did hard time for taking a bribe, name of Patrick Swanson, was home and about to get a visit from another ATF agent when his house exploded and burned to the ground with him in it. Clearly arson. The Fire Department investigator found a cell phone trigger attached to the remains of a small bomb placed on the house’s gas main. Lit the block up like the fourth of July.”

“I think I read about that in the newspaper. The news said it was a gas leak, used it to kick off a whole series of articles on how safe is the country’s gas infrastructure.”

Reese laughed. “Yeah, a gas leak is what we told the press. If we’d known they were going to run with it, we might have come up with a different explanation but hey – what the hell. We just didn’t tell the press what caused the leak. Anyway, the cellphone, a prepaid throw away, was pretty much toast but tucked between the cell battery and the phone housing, we found a partial fingerprint. It was protected from the blast and we were lucky enough to find it.”

“I doubt luck had much to do with it. Probably just good police work.”

“But you might not like the results of this good police work. The fingerprint matched the 10-card you put in the system under your vic’s name – Sylvia Warburg aka Beverly Kehoe. Looks like your victim was our arsonist.”

“Wow. This changes everything, Reese. It explains a few things too. I’ll send you the file.”

“Sounds good. I’ll send you what I’ve got too. It looks like my arson/murder is closed but yours just got busted wide open.”

That’s true. If Kehoe was a pro killer, a hit man, we have a new direction to go in. After all, she was already using one alias. Maybe she had others. We have to find them and we can start by looking at how she got from here to D.C. and back. Oh and you mentioned an ATF agent was going to visit your victim when his house went up. What did he see?”

“She actually. Joanna Barber. She was close enough to the blast to require medical treatment so she saw quite a bit. Her interview and statement are in the file I’m sending you.”

“Contact info too? In case I have follow-up questions.”

“You bet but you can meet with her in person if you like. She’s been transferred to the ATF office in LA – just down the road from you.”

* * * *

Los Angeles

His fingers flew across the keyboard as he put the final touches on his new program. The clock on the screen told him dawn was fast approaching. Good. He had beaten the darkness with work. Satisfied, he activated the program.

"Hello. My name is Sarah. What is yours?" A voice intoned.

"Joshua," he typed the reply as he evaluated the various voice qualities. The essence of her voice was there but it wasn't perfect. There was something lacking. It was flat and lifeless, devoid of emotion. He shrugged. At least it was a start.

"What can I do for you, Joshua?" The computerized Sarah asked.

"Come back to me," he choked aloud. On the keyboard, he typed "Read file SA91."

"My pleasure," it began. As the machine recited a lengthy paper on astrophysics, Joshua concentrated on the voice. He could hear the computer, the mechanical quality, behind the voice of his former friend and lover. He was pleased with his initial attempt. His mimicry program was the best he'd ever heard and it almost captured Sarah's voice patterns. Sarah would've been pleased too although now she'd never hear it. He'd intended to surprise her and program her computer with the voice so she could talk to herself — something she'd always done anyway. But now, now she'd never hear it. She was dead and he missed her.

He felt a tinge of guilt, as he had every day for the past month. He had wanted to attend her funeral but her parents had claimed the body and taken it back to Butte, Montana, for burial. He was a scholarship student and barely had enough money to live on let alone fly a couple of thousand miles for the funeral. He had gone to the local Anglican church and held his own silent service but it hadn't helped. Sarah had been taken from him. He should have been with her. He should have died instead of her. At the very least, he should have gone to say his good-byes properly. He recognized it as survivor's guilt but that didn't matter. Whatever he knew intellectually was offset by his emotions.

He looked out his window. The first light of dawn was adding a yellow tinge to the world. He stretched. He listened to the voice recite the current theories to explain quarks and scowled. It wasn't really her voice. It was too mechanical. It would never be truly hers since it was emotionally flat. The complex commands that would've given emotion to the voice were too much for the desktop computer. It would've taken all the available memory and then some to handle the convoluted logic behind emotional simulation. He had added some quirks to simulate Sarah's character but the imitation was pale. He shook his head at his own foolishness. Nothing, no amount of computer wizardry could duplicate the intensity that had been Sarah. Sarah faced life with enormous energy. No. She had faced life squarely and without fear. She'd always raced everywhere she went. Life was a competition and Sarah had to win every time. In class, Sarah had to be the best. Joshua had found that irritating at first.

"So. You're Joshua Adams, boy wonder?" Her first words to him had been delivered after the introductory astronomy class. It was a challenge. She'd blocked his exit.

"I'm Sarah Cunningham, girl genius. Buy me lunch. We need to talk."

He had started to protest but she'd grabbed his arm and dragged him to the cafeteria. She assaulted him with questions about his background, his interests, his plans. She was a whirlwind and he was lost in the flurry. He answered her questions. She was impossible to resist but she was also fair. She told him of her childhood in Montana as the daughter of a family medical practitioner and a local Council Woman. She talked about the constant parental demands for her to excel. She laughed when she told Josh of her mother's way of introducing her to her friends: "Sarah is going to be President of the United States, you know. My daughter, Ms. President." Their lunch became dinner and they talked well into the night.

Within weeks, they were living together and sharing everything. Their individual dreams had become intertwined and inseparable. Then she shattered all of them. She died. She was gone and so were all the plans, the dreams, the hopes. Shattered by a stupid laboratory accident. Josh threw a book across the room. He filled with rage but couldn't even find someone to blame. That only fueled the rage. He cried as the sun rose into sight and the computer recited Hawking's Theorem in a rough approximation of Sarah's voice.

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