

The Uncomfortablists
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Table of Contents

Chapter 1 – Pledge.....	3
Chapter 2 – Dust.....	8
Chapter 3 – Sacrifice.....	13
Chapter 4 - Meat.....	17
Chapter 5 - Party.....	21
Chapter 6 - Fake.....	26
Chapter 7 - Briefing.....	29
Chapter 8 - Shovel.....	33
Chapter 9 - Duck.....	36
Chapter 10 - Greed	40
Chapter 11 - White.....	43
Chapter 12 - Quake.....	46
Chapter 13 - Secret.....	51
Chapter 14 - Tuesday.....	54
Chapter 15 - Smoke.....	58
Chapter 16 - Backstage.....	62
Chapter 17 - Keywords.....	68
Chapter 18 - Spammed.....	72
Chapter 19 - Treeline.....	76
Chapter 20 - Shelter.....	80
Chapter 21 - Stars.....	83
Chapter 22 - Information.....	87
Chapter 23 - Ultra.....	91
Chapter 24 - Practice.....	94
Chapter 25 - Confession.....	97
Chapter 26 - Blown.....	100
Chapter 27 - Choice.....	104
Chapter 28 - Chance.....	108
Chapter 29 - Beat.....	114
Chapter 30 - Soup.....	119
Chapter 31 - Cracks.....	123
Chapter 32 - Fall.....	127
Chapter 33 - Survival.....	131
Chapter 34 - Agenda.....	135

Chapter 35 - Wheel.....138
Chapter 36 - Resistance.....142
Chapter 38 – Payback.....146
Chapter 39 – Noon.....150

Chapter 1 - Pledge

"Did you masturbate this morning?"

"Fuck, Ma!"

She's stirring a pot on the stove. She doesn't look up.

"I know you don't like to discuss it, honey."

"What do you want me to say?"

"It's not about what I want, Ben."

"It's none of your business."

"You know I'm going to keep asking."

She will, too. At least once a day. She doesn't even care about the answer.

"We are not having this conversation."

"Well, try to remember tonight."

I say nothing. I hunch into my jacket and try to warm my hands in my armpits.

Ma slops mush into bowls, puts one in front of me and sits down with another. It looks like beige wallpaper paste.

"What's this?"

"I see a queue, I stand in it."

I pick up my spoon.

"What do you say?"

"Thanks, Ma."

"Say it."

I sigh.

"For what we are about to receive, make us truly uncomfortable."

"Was that so hard?"

"It doesn't even make sense."

"It's not supposed to make sense."

I force down a few swallows and stand up.

"Gotta go."

"Weapons inspection."

I hand over my gun. It's a Colt .38 Detective Special. Series One, snubby. It used to be my Dad's. She flips open the cylinder, unloads, squints down the barrel and the chambers, checks the ammunition and reloads, flips the cylinder back. She shakes her head.

"Five rounds?"

"Safer."

"Less firepower. And you're not even loading +Ps."

She hands it to me.

I put it back in my pack.

"Yes, you loved your father, so did I, but."

I shrug.

"He had an automatic he might be here today."

I have to get out of here.

"Are you going to be too warm in that?"

"It's freezing out there!"

"Take off your jacket."

I take it off and stuff it in my pack.

"Bye Ma."

I give her a kiss. She slaps me lightly on the cheek.

I run down the stairs. The cold hits me like a fist. I turn the corner, haul out my jacket and put it on, gasping in the icy air.

The low, leaden sky amplifies the traffic noises. They grate in my skull. I have to run for the bus, and the bus driver pulls out just as I reach it. Then he squeals the brakes so loud my teeth hurt and lets me on. He's grinning and I can't help grinning back.

"Thanks, man."

"Shut the fuck up."

He made me run on purpose, no question. All part of being uncomfortable. I head for the back.

There's a girl on the back seat, at the end of the aisle. I've seen her in the cafeteria. She sees me looking and looks straight back. Then the bus lurches off. I stumble, fall forward and end up on my knees, face in her crotch. I scramble up.

"Use your head!" she says brightly, with this vacant Barbie face. I don't know what to say, but then she gives a low chuckle.

She moves over and I sit down.

It's not exactly an original line. Half the ads in the bus say "Use Your Head!" The other half say "Give a Friend a Hand!" They're really graphic, but it doesn't make you feel horny. Not me, anyhow. Roy says it works for him, but he's a walking hard-on. The government claims it reduces unwanted births. How they figure that out I do not know. She sees me looking at the ads.

"I'd say they suck, but that's the whole idea."

I try to come up with a good reply.

"They're everywhere."

"They're giving porn a bad name."

Her eyes are brown with dark green flecks. There's a little gap between her front teeth.

"That's just what I was thinking."

"May."

"Oh, yeah, I'm Ben. Ebenezer, really. You may as well know the worst."

"Yeah. Mayberry. Just plain idiotic. We're not supposed to like our names."

"There's this guy I know, he acts tough but his real name's Fauntleroy."

"Maybe he deserves it. But how could his parents have known? Why do they do it?"

"Oh, my Ma buys into the whole thing. Like "Give a friend a hand". She keeps asking me, you know..."

"Don't you hate that? It's just none of their fucking business."

"That's what I tell her, I say, Ma, it is absolutely none of your fucking business, but she's like 'It's for your own good, honey'".

"Grrr."

She clenches her fist and looks fiercely out the window. Her fingers are thin and there are freckles on the back of her hand. I can see a blue-green vein below the surface.

"Something bad out there? Delivery trucks? Fast food franchises? Maple trees?"

I seem to have locked into some stupid jolly mode.

She gives me a puzzled look, then glances at her fist. The knuckles are white.

"Just something I was thinking."

She opens her hand and puts it on her knee. For a while we ride in silence.

It's like a staring contest in reverse. I crack first.

"Thanks, by the way."

"For what?"

"For being ok about me falling on you."

"It was an accident. Wasn't it?"

"But, you could have acted embarrassed, or mad. Or weird."

"I wasn't weird?"

"Well, maybe a little."

"Just comes natural. You're pretty weird yourself."

"You're too kind."

"Not at all."

"Fuck you very much."

"Shut the fuck up."

May walks into school with me. We can't seem to stop talking. Then she looks up at me with a little smile.

"See you around."

She heads off to her class. I watch her go. I'm still watching after she's been gone a while.

"Blocking the hallway is a detention offense, Ebenezer."

Beamish thinks he's made a joke. I don't even bother to reply.

There's the usual traffic jam around the lockers.

"Hey, Ben, did you finish the assignment?"

It's Ted from my homeroom. Full name Asafoetida. He never gets assignments done on time, and he gets himself in this anxious state about it. All the time and energy he spends panicking he might as well do the assignment.

"Sure. You?"

I know the answer anyway, but while he's clenching his trembling lips together and building up to admitting he hasn't, I think I see Roy at the other end of the corridor. I haven't seen him for a while. He has his camouflage pants on and a big coat and he's carrying a sports bag.

"Roy," I yell. He turns. His eyes are dark underneath, as if he has paint smeared on his face. He doesn't even nod. Maybe he hasn't seen me. He turns and goes around the corner in the direction of the gym.

"That guy is a...dick," stutters Ted.

I look at Ted for a second, deciding there's not much point in discussing Roy with him.

"He's ok," I say.

The class stands and faces the flag and we move our lips while the old P.A. distorts the pledge:

"Party's over, that's enough,

Do it now and do it rough.

Look behind you. Lock and load.

Zero parking. Clear the road.

Pain is gain and gain is pain,

Learn to like it, don't complain,

No-one blameless, nothing free,

No-one cares if you agree,

Let things go the way the go,

Nothing that you need to know,

Use your hand and use your head.

Do it right or do it dead.

Death to spammers."

Beamish says it loudly in his high, cutting voice, making every word a threat, and his little black eyes dart around, looking for students who aren't suitably awestruck by the emotional power of the occasion. The trick is to do it completely deadpan. Crack a smile and he'll haul you out and give you a week's detention. You can't even roll your eyes. We get it over with and Beamish says "Be seated".

Then he calls the roll. He does it in this accusing, sneering tone, as if our names are our fault, and he lingers on each syllable trying to extract the maximum annoyance. When he calls out "Fauntleroy Nebuchadnezzar Kelly" no one answers. I look around. Sure enough no Roy.

"Has anybody seen Fauntleroy?" Beamish asks, scratching an armpit. I don't say anything and I give Ted a look. He looks at me and clenches his lips and keeps quiet.

"Absent," says Beamish with great deliberation and makes sure he records it immediately on his tabula so it will go straight into the database for all eternity. Roy is going to get himself expelled if he doesn't start coming to class. He's missing at least one day a week, and more lately. It's not really his fault. Ma can be irritating but she does care whether I go to school. Roy's Dad is really strict but only when he comes home, which I gather is not often. I've never seen him. They have this really messy apartment with a sink full of plates and bits of broken equipment and memory tabs scattered everywhere. Roy is pretty much looking after himself and he can't get organized.

Then the door bangs open so hard it slams against the wall and everybody jumps.

The guy in the doorway is in full ballistic gear. He's wearing a riot helmet with a dark tinted visor, full vest and groin protector. He's wearing Death to Spammers armbands. He has a Swock in each hand and an M4 slung across his back. He has a belt hung with equipment and ammunition belts criss-crossing his chest. He looks like a fucking battle robot. He walks into the room.

Beamish hauls out his pride and joy from under his desk. It's a Barrett M82A1. That thing will blow a hole through armor plate a mile away. The recoil will probably dislocate his shoulder. It makes no sense whatsoever to have it in the classroom for close combat, but Beamish thinks it makes him a big man. The truth is there is no gun big enough.

The gunman simply walks between Beamish and the students. If Beamish fires, the .50 caliber high velocity bullet will go straight through the gunman and kill any of us in its path and probably through two more classrooms, out of the school and into the library next door. Check-fucking-mate. Beamish gets this dimwitted confused look on his face. He obviously doesn't have the faintest idea what do to next.

We all have to get down to give Beamish his shot. Which he probably hasn't got the guts to take. I look around fast in the hope the others will catch on and then duck under the desk. My bag is there. I take out the snubby, as quickly and quietly as I can. From under the desk I can see one combat boot. He's still covering Beamish. He's going to hear me cock the hammer so I'll have to cock and fire in one movement. Three shots rip out in rapid succession and in the noise I fire at the boot. His helmet hits the ground right in my field of view. He seems to be looking at me but I can't be sure. I raise my eyes above the edge of the desk and look around.

Beamish is down. He's taken two in the head without firing a shot. Both beady eyes are gone. The gunman is moving a little but it's like he's lost interest. He's dropped his semi-autos and his M4 is under him and he can't get up with a shot foot anyway. He's making a high sound, not quite crying. I move around, covering the gunman, and kick his Swocks well out of reach. Then suddenly the class wakes up. They pull their guns and take aim at the gunman. Ted is doing it strictly by the book, right arm straight, left hand cupping the butt, and his jaw is working as he clenches his lips.

"No Ted!" I yell but he fires before I get it out. Then the others open up and I have to fall backwards out of the way. It feels like it goes on for about ten minutes. It's probably only a few seconds. I'm in the corner holding onto my knees with my back against the wall.

I don't really follow things too well after that. There's a lot of running and shouting. People keep yelling "Don't touch him, don't move him, wait for the paramedics."

Paramedics aren't going to be able to do much except collect shell casings.

One of the local vigilante groups arrives about ten minutes before the cops. They come in two by two cover formation, in battle robot outfits just like the gunman. Except for the last one. He's just wearing regular clothes, and he's unarmed. He's still the boss though. They all take up positions looking dangerous but they wait for him to decide what to do next. He's a big tall guy and he doesn't look excited at all. He scans the room, taking in Beamish, the gunman, me in the corner and the kids who are standing around still holding their guns. Then he says "Stand down."

The robots lower their weapons and the kids start putting their guns away.

He checks out Beamish and nods to himself. He walks over to the gunman and looks down at him. He sees the wound in the foot. He takes a big breath and swallows once. Then he bends down and opens up the visor.

He knew it was Roy. Roy had all his Dad's gear, after all. We all knew. The face is still recognizable. He has this strange expression, though. It's not like an expression a live person would have. You can still see the dark marks

under his eyes. Two big bruises. Roy's Dad looks at him, breathing quietly. Then he turns away without a word and walks straight out.

The vigilante robots don't know what to do. They shuffle their feet for a few minutes. Then one of them says "Fuck this," and goes. The others trail after him.

Then the cops show up. They do more or less the same thing the vigilantes did, but with less style and more yelling. The cops are mad because someone has touched the body and they like to do their forensic shit. They're very territorial. They hate it when vigilantes get there first.

The paramedics arrive. Somebody points them at me. One starts prodding me and asking questions.

"Are you hit?"

My mouth isn't working very well.

"Don't think so."

My voice is a dry croak.

I'm starting to shiver and he drapes a blanket around me.

The paramedic is trying to get me to lie down but I just need to stand up. I feel a little dizzy and I lean on the wall until it passes. I sort of want to throw up. A detective comes over and shows me a badge and says something. I can't even focus on it. He says it again.

"Detective Halloran. Your name?"

"Ebenezer Hollins".

"You fired the first shot?"

"I don't know. I think the gunman. Roy."

"Roy the perp? You know him?"

"Yeah. Fauntleroy Nebuchadnezzar Kelly."

"Jesus fuckin' Christ. Helluva name, even these days. How many times you shoot your friend?"

I'm out of breath and it's hard to talk.

"One."

"You the foot?"

"Right."

"So he shoots the teacher, you shoot him in the foot, he goes down, the rest of the kids tap him."

"Yeah."

"Ok, future reference you maybe shoulda shot him a little more but you did good, kid, and the other boys and girls came through. Look, there's no suspicious circumstances here, standard school massacre, we got your name, we may be in touch. Ok?"

"Yeah."

"You can go."

He turns around and yells "People, we are done here. Let's wrap it up."

They start zipping up body bags.

I decide to sit down on the floor.

Chapter 2 - Dust

The next few days I just stay home. Ma isn't letting anyone in the apartment. They say they came to offer their condolences but they just want to hear about what happened. It's a bit of excitement for them. The local paper sends a reporter round. Ma tells him to fuck off. They run a page one headline "Fuck Off!" with a picture of Ma at the front door giving the finger straight to camera. She prints it out and puts it on the fridge.

I hear Ma at the door. She is saying "I'm sorry May, but he really doesn't want to talk about it."

"Ma, let her in," I yell.

May has brought a cake. I have no idea what it cost her. It has fruit and nuts and chocolate and this sugar glaze on the top. We have it on the sofa. Ma sits with us for tea and cake and then she leaves us alone.

"How are you doing?" says May.

I put my arms around her and kiss her on the lips. She holds me and we sit there for a while.

"I'm not too bad," I finally say.

Her hair smells like cinnamon and vanilla and pine smoke. We kiss some more.

"What's happening at school?" I ask in a break.

"Wall-to-wall rent-a-counselor. The death of a school community member is a traumatic event. Your grief is a normal reaction to abnormal stress. As you come to perceive the enormity of this tragedy we would caution you not to engage in dangerous, self-destructive, or socially unacceptable behavior. You may experience denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. I mean fuck. Just send me a link."

I kiss her again.

"The tragedy being Beamish and Roy."

"I don't think anybody much is going to miss Beamish."

"I do miss Roy."

"I know you do."

"Why did he do it?"

She moves her fingers around in my hair. I literally do not ever want her to stop.

"It wasn't your fault."

"He wasn't happy, but, shit, who is?"

"You're allowed to be happy."

"Is that what you think? Roy wasn't allowed?"

"What do I know?"

"You think someone was hurting him?"

"Why don't you talk to his Dad?"

"Roy's Dad. Fuck, Roy's Dad did it!"

"Maybe he was at fault, but you two have Roy in common."

How does she know these things? It's like this whole other form of intelligence. After that we don't talk a whole lot.

So I need to use a tabula. They loan you one for school but mine broke. You're not supposed to open them up, but I tried to fix it. I could have got it going if I could have found another one to use for spares. But everything's running on spare parts already. They don't make anything new. Anyway you have to fill in forms and wait for a replacement. Which never comes.

The library has more but the post office is closer. I go down there and stand in the queue. I can't find an address for Roy's dad, but I find a chat address for the group, [EternalVigilance14674](#).

"Ben Hollins looking for Zebadiah Kelly."

"Zeb here."

"Mr Kelly, my name is Ben Hollins. I was a friend of Roy's."

"The foot."

"Yes."

"You want to meet?"

"Yes."

"Grounds for Prosecution, 15:30".

I start to type "Ok" but EternalVigilance14674 has left the conversation.

Grounds for Prosecution is near the law courts. Not that there are lawyers any more. I show up early and find a table. I can't really afford it but I buy a coffee so they don't mind me sitting there. He shows up at 15:30 on the dot. He sees me straight away and nods. He gets a coffee and sits down.

"So."

"Mr Kelly, I'm so sorry about Roy."

"What is it you want?"

I have to think about that. It's the obvious question, but I don't know the answer.

"I want to speak at Roy's funeral."

"You knew Roy before?"

"I was a friend."

"What do you want to say?"

"I want to talk about him."

He looks at me hard. It's the same way he looked at Beamish.

"You saw the whole thing?"

"Some."

"Roy got off three shots?"

I don't know what to say to that. I nod.

"He hit that teacher twice?"

"Three I think. Two in the head."

"The teacher with the Barrett?"

I just stare.

"The teacher didn't get off a shot?"

I am struggling. What does he want from me?

"Roy stayed cool, Mr Kelly."

He slumps.

"I didn't know my own son."

I can't believe I'm feeling sorry for the old bastard. He beat Roy whenever he felt like it.

"How could this happen?"

His voice is shaking. I can't handle this.

"Mr Kelly..."

He raises his head and looks me right in the eye.

I nod.

"Something stinks. And I am not gonna stand for it. You hear me?"

He's sniffing.

"Did he say anything?"

"No."

"You were his friend? He said nothing to you?"

"No."

"He said nothing to me. Nothing."

I'm not saying anything either. I don't want to set him off. He's glaring past my right shoulder. It's not even clear if he's talking to me. It's like he's making a holy vow to someone behind me. I want to turn around and look, but I have this horrible feeling it's Roy.

"Someone is responsible for this. And they will pay. They will find out there is a price and they will pay that price. I will demand payment. I will exact that price."

Trying to talk to this guy is worse than getting shot at.

"I want to talk about Roy at his funeral. May I do that, Mr Kelly?"

He nods, head bowed over his coffee.

I stay there for a decent interval, shallow breathing, every muscle aching. It's not a good time to bring up the subject of why Roy did it. I manage to leave without breaking into a run.

The funeral is a big event. It happens on the Thursday. The whole school shows up, and some media. There's all this organ music as we go in, like random notes but maybe it's Bach. It trickles out and stops.

The lights dim, then up comes a spot on Santa. He walks to the altar. He stands there a moment, looking gravely out at the congregation. The majestic red costume and flowing white beard do their work. When he speaks there is total quiet.

"I giveth and I taketh away," he says, and pauses for effect.

"Hallowed be my name!" he says, and someone says "Amen."

"We are here," says Santa, "to celebrate the life of Fauntleroy Nebuchadnezzar Kelly."

Roy, I want to shout.

"Earth to earth," whispers Santa. Everybody leans slightly forward.

"Ashes to ashes," intones Santa, almost singing. He raises his eyes high over our heads, and his hand sweeps broadly but gently out from his chest. It's a beautiful gesture, an offering of infinite peace. He moves the thumb of a glove and I realize he has some sort of controller in there.

"Dust to dust."

It's the blizzard of death howling over the the frozen wastes of time. I look around at the speakers mounted around the great sanctum. I have no idea how Mr Kelly can afford such a good Santa.

"For dust you are, and to dust you shall return."

Santa surveys us matter-of-factly.

"Every soul will taste death. And what is the life of this world except the enjoyment of delusion?"

He has us there.

"Look, it cannot be seen – it is beyond form.

Listen, it cannot be heard – it is beyond sound.

Grasp, it cannot be held – it is intangible."

It's amazing. I never really thought of it that way.

"Roy chose his time. Anyone here want to say he was wrong?"

He waits. No one pipes up.

"What is this our life? A boat that swims in the sea, and all one knows for certain is that one day it will capsize."

Santa works his eyebrows.

"He's not coming back," says Santa. "You won't see him again. That's it for Roy. All over. Anyone mad about that?"

"Yes," someone says.

"I can't hear you!"

"Yes!" we shout.

"Are we just gonna sit here and take it?"

"No!"

"Roy is dead, people!" bellows Santa. "Is anyone mad about that? Let me hear you say it! Are you mad as hell?"

"Yes!" we shout.

"Is it fair?"

"No!" we shout.

"Is it fucking bullshit?"

"Yes!" we yell.

"Do we take any bullshit?"

"No!"

"Is this world stark staring fucking crazy?"

"Yes!"

"Does it make any sense?"

"It's not supposed to make sense!"

We all know that response.

"Do not go gentle."

Santa has dropped it back so he can build it up again.

"Stand at his grave and weep. Wail, rend your garments, slap your cheeks. Knock yourself out."

Now he's roaring.

"Will you do that?"

"Yes!"

Will it matter?"

"No!"

"Are we gonna do it anyway?"

"Yes!"

"Do it! Do it now!"

Lights come up on The Virgin Barbie, in full backswing, sequins shimmering in her long gown. She strikes the gong and a wave of glittering noise rolls out over us. Opposite her the Bunny, white ears quivering, holds her arms raised above her head, her drum thrust out in front of her. She brings her mallets down in sharp, firm beats, cotton tail bobbing, long legs swishing in her fishnets. The Virgin Barbie joins her on tambor and they build an insistent, lilting rhythm.

Santa starts to chant. No words, just a sound. Other voices join in. The air fills and throbs. The sound pulses and swells. People are swaying, eyes closed. A few kids and old people are whirling around. A gravelly bass is thrumming along. Santa drones like dark honey. There's a high tenor that could cut glass. Women's voices are ringing bell chords. High tones pop out of the corners of the temple ceiling. People are stamping and pounding and clapping. The benches are buzzing. I'm howling. The Bunny is whirling her mallets around her ears in a frenzy. She gives her drum a final mighty thwack. There's a shriek I can feel at the top of my spine, and an explosion of sirens and howls. It dies away, with giggles and sighs. I feel a shiver in my solar plexus.

The blinds open and colored light streams through the tall stained glass windows. High above the ceiling screen has rolled back to show the enormous all-seeing eye, with its bright pupil open to the sky, its clear gaze turned at once up to the heavens and down upon us. Below it the great glass globe of the world turns slowly, ripples of watery light moving around the decorated walls.

"To talk about Roy, I am going to call on Ebenezer Hollins."

I walk up the aisle. The Virgin Barbie greets me with a dazzling smile and leads me to the lectern. Her hand is warm and moist, from the exercise I guess. I'm holding my notes, but the papers are snapping and rattling and I have to lay them down for a minute. My throat is raw. I look up.

"Roy was my friend," I say. I pick up my notes but they start rattling again.

"Roy was just a normal kid," I say. "He wanted what everybody wants."

I look up again. They're waiting for me to start making sense.

"The Roy I knew cared about his Dad, and about his friends. Roy was interested in nature, and he could tell you plenty about space as well. He was interested in everything."

I'm losing them. I press on.

"I went home for lunch at his place sometimes. We had spaghetti-os. We used to look at the net and just talk about stuff."

They're really quiet. Fuck knows what they're thinking.

"Someone should have told him he was allowed to be happy."

I know what I want to say now.

"Roy didn't know he was a good person, but I did."

I look up. No one seems to be getting it.

"I knew."

I pick up my notes and walk away, in no particular direction. The Virgin Barbie heads me off and leads me out the back. She isn't smiling any more. The organ starts up again.

I'm wandering around looking for the bathroom. Downstairs there are small chapels. There's a sign outside one. Beamish.

I put my head in the door. There's an old lady in there. She's sitting very straight and staring at the coffin. Her head snaps around and she's staring at me with small black eyes. I act like I meant to go in all along.

"Mrs Beamish."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

Lipstick is leaking out of the wrinkles around her lips into the deep grooves beside her mouth.

"Forty three years I kept him alive," she says. She looks down at her folded hands. "Come March it would have been forty four."

Water is welling from her red-rimmed eyes into the gray, puffy pouches below them.

"He was trying to do his job."

She gives this snort, like steam escaping.

"No one liked him. Not even me. He was a moron. Got it from his father."

I am saying nothing.

"What kind of a world is this?" she wheezes.

After a while I decide she isn't going to say any more. The door seems a long way off. Every footstep echoes.

The crowds are standing around in Temple square, not sure where to go next. I'm waiting around to see if May is there and Zeb comes up. He towers over me for a moment, then he holds out his hand. I take it and he pulls me into a hug. What the hell. I hug him back.

He keeps on hugging. I sort of ease off. He increases the pressure. He has this big man smell, cigarettes and coffee and sweat and stale breath. Mold is coming faintly from the suit.

I realize I can't remember what my Dad smelled like. I don't see how it could have been anything like this. I'm just standing there, arms by my sides. He's hugging away. I see May and raise my chin. She smiles and shrugs her eyebrows.

Finally he lets go.

"Excuse me, Zeb."

He nods, not meeting my eyes.

I go over and take May's hand. Rain is falling softly.

Chapter 3 - Sacrifice

"Who has not completed the assignment?"

Ted puts up his hand.

"Excellent, any one else?"

A few other kids raise their hands.

"Why do you think I give you these assignments? Asafoetida?"

Ted just shrugs. He's not looking too good these days. Not that he ever did, but now there's no color in his face and the spots show up in high contrast. He used to come up with great excuses, though. Like the time he said a stray dog grabbed his assignment, ran into a building and took the elevator before he could catch it. Or the power went out in his apartment and they had to burn his assignment for heat and light.

Gomez is just playing with him. She looks around. "Anyone?"

"To help us to learn?"

Fran always answers those questions. She's like a cheerleader for the teacher.

But what good is learning anyway? What are we looking forward to when they get around to throwing us out of here? Not a lot of choice. We can try to join the cops. We can join a vigilante group. Maybe if we get good and get lucky we can make it into a private security outfit.

Or we can start clocking in at a crop factory. That's what most people do. And it doesn't seem to matter how many people do it, there's never enough to eat.

Some people try to smuggle food out of the factory. Ma never does it. It's not worth the risk. We don't even eat what her factory makes, just in case. I worked there one break. Great way to spend a vacation. None of the machinery works, it's always breaking down, and you end up doing moronic things like sorting out the pellets that are too big and might jam the mechanism. I just about went nuts. Brain-dead shit like that is what the machines are supposed to be for in the first place. And if you get so bored you forget what you're doing you get your arms ripped off.

That happened to this girl while I was there. It got hold of her hand and peeled her arm off across her back then took the other one too. She wasn't dead either. I never found out what happened to her.

"Fuck yeah, Frangipani," says Gomez. "Can anyone offer a better reason?"

Fran looks peeved. The whole class is just sitting there as if they aren't getting paid enough to answer questions. Sometimes I say something just to get things moving.

"To annoy the crap out of us?"

Gomez throws me a beaming smile. "Thank you Ebenezer. To annoy the crap out of you, to make you...?"

"Uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable. Yes. Now why would I want to do that?"

"Because you hate us?"

For Fran that's a temper tantrum, but it's a good call.

"That's a significant consideration, Frangipani, but the main reason?"

The fact is everyone knows what Gomez is driving at. We just don't want to give her the satisfaction. After all, this is Uncomfortablism 101. We go over this every time. I've had enough.

"Comfortable bad, uncomfortable good. That's all you're saying. I mean, you give us this stuff about scientific studies proving this and proving that, but you can make an experiment come out however you like, it's not about science, it's about this goddam religion, what's so bad about comfortable, is it going to destroy the world if people wear their fucking jackets, I mean what is this shit?"

Gomez is delighted. I've just made her day.

"Emphatically put, Ebenezer. Someone has been paying attention. However I want you to be more precise in articulating your concerns. You mentioned a distrust of science that supports Uncomfortablism doctrine. Can you offer alternative studies that support the opposing viewpoint?"

"You raised the conflict between science and religion. This is a profound observation, and together we shall explore this more deeply."

"And your final question, perhaps you will allow me to rephrase as 'Can Uncomfortablism save the world?' Perhaps it can. We do know the pursuit of comfort came very close to destroying it."

See, this is what they do. They bait you until you go crazy and then they act like they've achieved something unbelievably positive. They put it all down to this moronic Uncomfortablism but really they just get a charge out of driving us nuts. Congratulations to me, I just got one of my students to embarrass himself.

The rest of the class is looking at me like I'm some kind of traitor. Frankly I don't care about that much. I'd rather give them what they want than waste my time being bored.

"Ok, but I don't see you looking all that uncomfortable."

Gomez frowns. "The fuck you say?"

"I said, you don't look like it hurts you to give us a hard time. You enjoy it. Where's the uncomfortable in that?"

Gomez is watching me with a different kind of smile. Her teeth are really sharp, I notice.

"You know, what with spending my nights marking confused assignments, untangling tortured syntax and preparing classes for you all to ignore, and my days fending off your surly attacks and striving to kindle a glimmer of interest in your unreceptive minds, I haven't got much time to be uncomfortable."

Ted sniggers and Fran practises her bell-like laugh, which, to be fair, is coming along. It used to sound like pterodactyls mating but now it's more like a bad attack of hiccups.

"Ok, Gomez, point to you, because you got me to lose it. But point to me, because I got you to lose it. But point to you, because now you've got me playing this stupid game. But point to me, because I know what you're doing. Spam."

The class stops breathing. Gomez stops smiling. For a moment she looks thoughtful and sad and tired. "You can stay after class, Ebenezer."

The class goes "Ooooh!" I ignore them.

"Class, fuck off," says Gomez.

I wait while Gomez makes her report and packs up her notebook and straightens things up. She doesn't meet my eye while she's doing it, so it looks like I may be in deep shit. I watch her. She's wearing this grey-green top that goes really well with her skin tone. You can see her age under her eyes and chin, but her movements are light. She's taking a long time, thinking about what to say.

She sits down on the edge of the desk and tilts her head to one side. Her eyes are even darker than May's.

"You don't accuse someone of spam."

"I know."

"Not in fun. Not in anger."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Are you seeing a counselor?"

I shake my head. I went a few times but then I quit.

"Are you talking to anyone?"

I shrug. "Everybody talks."

"Ben, my job is not to make you unhappy. It's to help you think. But I'm not going to stop doing my job because the thinking hurts. Do you see that?"

You just never know with Gomez. She always comes at you from left field.

"You have a good mind, Ben. We have to keep it moving, keep it busy. I want you to keep using it. Keep talking to me, in class, whenever. If you want to get angry, get angry. With me if you like. If you hear anyone say anything you don't agree with, tell them. Talk to them."

"What good is talk?"

"Talk is what we have. Or write it down. How about writing me something every night? Hand it to me in the morning."

"About what?"

"It doesn't matter. Write the first word and then write another."

"Why would I do that?"

"Let's just try it. You write a few words for me, I'll write a few words for you. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Uncomfortable doesn't mean unhappy, Ben. It means active. Alive."

Her eyes are very dark. She's looking right into my head. She thinks she has some kind of message for me that she can't say out loud. It's too terrible to mention. She stands up and puts a hand on my arm.

"Now, we'd better get along to hear what Secretary Garner has to say. I'm sure you'll enjoy that."

The hall is full and the noise is bouncing around the ceiling and walls. There's a blur of chair scrapes, coughs, laughter, shouting, feet drumming, doors banging, high pitched chatter.

A gunshot booms and everyone goes quiet. The principal gives her smoking Colt Magnum a slow, luxurious sniff and surveys the school over her bifocals.

"Thank you for your attention. Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, we are very privileged to have with us today Secretary Garner, who as I am sure you know is responsible for the administration of policy throughout the region. He will speak to you on a topic of vital concern to us all: Whither Uncomfortablism? So listen the fuck up."

Dutiful applause. A pudgy character steps up to the microphone. He's bald on top with a gray pony tail behind. He's wearing a suit that doesn't fit too well, with shiny knees and patches on the elbows. There's a brown wool vest underneath it and a thin greenish tie caught at a funny angle underneath that. It looks like he got the whole outfit out of a recycled clothing bin. Which knowing these guys he probably did.

"Thank you, Principal Braddock. Ah, hello everyone. Thank you for coming."

Like we had a choice.

"I trust you're all uncomfortable."

He smirks. Maybe back when he had hair this was a joke. He scores a few titters.

"Our educational institutions are our life blood. Here, in these halls and classrooms, is our future."

He beams modestly, like he invented schools but doesn't want us to fuss over him.

"But not so long ago, schools were not held in such high regard. Schools had to pick over what was left after industry and the military had their fill.

"In those dark days, as the resources of the world were dissipated in pursuit of comfort, students were packed thirty or forty to a classroom, with a single unarmed teacher struggling to be heard above their anguished cries for help.

"As the ice caps melted and the forests died, a mere two percent of the population owned half of the world's wealth. One country with a twentieth of the world's population used a quarter of the world's energy.

One in five could neither read nor write, while the privileged spent on their child's education what would support twenty families for a year.

"They burned irreplaceable fossil fuels to drive miles for recreational shopping.

"They squandered fabulous resources on weapons of mass destruction.

"It was a time of irresponsibility and excess, of greed, of inequality, of shocking, criminal waste. A time when the comfort of a few deadened their sensitivity to the ruin they brought to all. A time of shame.

"Their shame is our shame. We must shoulder that burden of guilt. We must live with the damage done by our forebears, and try to repair the catastrophe with our effort and our sacrifice.

"We make a virtue of necessity. We can no longer consume as they did. There is no oil, no coal, no natural gas. The minerals are exhausted. The forests are pulped. The topsoil is in the sea and the fish are fertilizer.

"Where they grew bloated and ill, we live lean, and mean, and clean. Comfort is our enemy. We are willing to sacrifice. But some things we will not sacrifice. We will not sacrifice our self-respect. We will not sacrifice our respect for each other. And we are fucked, we are fucking fucked ladies and gentleman, if we will sacrifice the education of our children!"

I have to hand it to him. He must have done that speech a million times but he sounds like he means it. On the last word he hits a high note that twangs off the metal roof. There's a big burst of applause.

For all I know he may be mean, but I'm not seeing lean and clean. He turns, acknowledging the audience. Anyone would think he was trying to get elected. Except they had the last election before I was born. As his gaze passes over me it feels like we lock eyes for a second, and his eyelid twitches.

He steps up to the microphone again.

"Recently a terrible event took place at this school; an event that would have been even more terrible had it not been for a quick thinking young man. Ebenezer Hollins made a difficult decision and carried it out, and in so doing saved lives. The party believes that acts of dedication and courage deserve recognition. I would now like to call on Ebenezer Hollis to receive the Citizen's Sacrifice Medal. Ebenezer?"

Ma tried to talk them out of it but they insisted. So I walk up and shake hands with Secretary Garner, and we have to stand there, holding hands, the medal held up for the cameras, while the other kids clap and hoot and whistle. I can't blame them. It's an opportunity to let off steam.

Then I'm supposed to go to tea in the staff common room. I don't talk to anybody much. There's an unbelievable number of cookies, no doubt to impress Garner. I just keep eating them.

Gomez comes over with the Secretary. He's added to his look with a little scattering of food on his vest.

"Got a spare cookie there?"

I start to answer but my mouth is full so I just nod. He nods back and takes a cookie, studying me as he takes a bite.

"Not bad. Thanks for letting us give you the medal. I understand you weren't too happy about it."

I swallow. "I'm not proud of what happened."

"It's hard to make sense of these things. Giving you a medal helps the others, don't you think?"

"I think it helps you."

Gomez narrows her eyes and gives a tiny shake of her head. Garner raises an eyebrow and smiles with half his mouth.

"You know what would make sense to me?" I say.

"Tell me," says Garner.

"Do something to stop people shooting each other."

"Easier said," says Garner. He takes a sip of tea. "Turns out you can't stop them getting hold of a gun if they want one. So we make everyone carry a gun, and train them to use it. Idea is you have a general deterrent, fewer accidental gun deaths, fewer casualties when someone snaps."

"Another dumb idea that doesn't work."

He gives me a wry look.

"On the whole, there's probably an improvement, if you read the statistics creatively. Some gun deaths now might have happened another way before. Suicides. Murders. Overall death by violence is down."

"It didn't save Roy. Why would he do that? Why isn't there something to stop it?"

He munches his cookie. He looks as though he's about to say something and then he changes his mind.

"I'm sorry about your friend. And it was not your fault. What I hear, if it had been up to you, he would have survived with a limp."

He puts down his teacup.

"Pleasure to meet you, Ben. Thank you again."

He makes his farewells and his minders walk him out. Gomez comes back.

"Whew. That went pretty well considering."

She puts her hand on my arm again.

"Write me something, ok?"

I want to touch her but I can't figure out how to make it feel right.

Ma refused to come to the ceremony or the tea. She didn't want to get into any fights. I catch the bus home as usual.

"Hey, big man, let's see the medal."

Ted has a grin that can't decide whether it's a sneer. I could punch him out but I'm not that bothered. I fish the medal out of my pocket and hand it to him.

May is in the back row. She doesn't make me talk. We just sit, her head leaning on my shoulder.

Chapter 4 - Meat

When I open the door I see Ma at the kitchen bench, arranging flowers in a big peanut butter jar.

"Honey, look who's here."

Zeb is sitting on the sofa in the living room. He stands up and holds out his hand. I take it.

"So, they gave you a medal."

"Oh, yeah."

I realize I left it with Ted.

"I didn't bring it."

"Zeb is joining us for dinner, Ben. He brought steak."

"Steak?"

"You know what steak is, Ben?"

"Sure. Meat."

I've read about it. But it's funny the way in old books they just assume you know what they're talking about. There's a lot of things they don't describe in any detail and you just make a guess. I mean what the fuck is a samovar?

You can find recipes on the net that they missed when they cleaned it up. There'll be this picture of a plate with things on it that you have no idea what they are. Roy used to have thousands of downloaded pictures of food. Sometimes he'd leave a SlideShow running and we'd just sit there staring at it for hours.

Where is Zeb getting the money for steak? Not to mention the black market contacts. I realize I have no idea what he does.

"Are we celebrating something?"

"They gave you the medal for the wrong reasons, Ben, but Zeb and I talked about it. You know we're both proud of you, honey."

We? Both? Zeb and I? Zeb is staring down at me trying to arrange his face into a smile. He doesn't have a lot of talent for it.

"Zeb was wondering if you'd like to go with him some night to Group."

"Oh. Right. Yeah, I guess so."

Zeb's vigilantes are probably the tightest group in the area. They have the best equipment. In a way it's kind of childish, dressing up and running around with guns, but I would sort of like to see how it all works.

Zeb is smiling now, no question. There's no substitute for regular brushing.

"How about tonight?"

"Sure."

Ma serves the steak with fried onions and mashed potato and frozen spinach. It's only cooked on the outside. On the inside it's almost raw. It's like a big lump of bunched muscle. When I cut into it blood runs out all over the potato. I have never tasted anything like it. Iron mostly, and carbon and salt. There's all these different flavors in there. And the added thrill of eating something illegal. Nobody talks while we eat the steak. Even after we finish we just sit around running our tongues over our lips and our teeth.

"So, how about you boys help with the washing up and then you can head out?"

Zeb actually does the washing up, with his hands in the sink. I'm drying and Ma is running around wiping and tidying. I am wondering if this is going to become a regular thing. I'm trying to figure out whether I'd mind. I'm not thinking straight after the steak. My whole body feels sleepy and grateful.

Outside it's already dark and really cold. Zeb pulls a black balaclava out of his pocket and hands it to me. That's better. He puts one on himself. Zeb strides ahead, and I get warm trying to keep up. We turn at every corner, apparently at random. I hear ice crunching under tires and realize a black van is cruising slowly behind us. It pulls ahead and the back doors open.

Zeb nods me inside. In the back are two guys wearing black overalls and balaclavas. There's another guy up front with the driver.

"Hi," I say. "I'm ..."

Zeb puts a big hand on my shoulder and squeezes hard. I stop talking. He nods at the others. They nod back silently. These guys know how to have fun.

"Stoner, Monk," says Zeb, pointing with his chin. "I'm Wolf. Gap at the wheel, Snapper shotgun."

I look at the guy in the passenger seat. Sure enough, he's cradling a Mossberg 500. Zeb stares at me through his eyeholes for half a minute. Maybe the steak's wearing off. I'm not so sure this is a good idea any more.

"You're Foot," says Zeb.

Zeb pulls a curtain across between the front and the back. We drive around for a long time. The van is going to run out of charge. There are no windows in the back but there's a shelf with a tabula and on the screen you can see different angles of the road.

Zeb motions me to sit in front of the tabula. He leans over close and runs through a few quick moves on the interface, switching the view, zooming. I try it out. You can see all around, but it's hard to get a sense of everything that's going on. I figure out there are six cameras, two in front, one on each side, one behind and one on top. You can rotate the one on top through three sixty. I need a way to arrange smaller views with a main view in the center. After a minute or so I find a working layout. I'm getting the hang of this. There's a car behind us, not too far back. I check its number plate and take a look at the driver. I watch it for a while to see if it's following, but when we make a turn it goes on.

Zeb and the others are watching me. What was that, some kind of test? Zeb reaches over and closes the tabula. He squeezes my shoulder again. Apparently there's a sign on my forehead saying please grope me. We drive around blind for another half hour. No way are they using fuel in this thing. What's next, a helicopter?

We pile out of the van. We're round the back of a big house built in the middle of a barren field. There are a few stars showing but no moon. No sign of other buildings nearby. It just disappears into blackness. There might be the outline of woods against the sky. I can't even hear distant city noise. The only light is spilling from two open basement doors. We go down the stairs.

It's a normal basement, full of cobwebs and dust and old paint cans and gardening equipment. Zeb waits till all the others are down the stairs, except Snapper, who is on sentry duty. Then he opens a metal door. Everyone goes through and Zeb triple bolts the door behind us.

This room is clean. It has white cement walls, but you can't see much of them. They're covered in racks and shelves. On the shelves there are tabulas, rows of manuals and stacked boxes. On the racks there are gas masks, riot masks, goggles, gloves, vests, overalls, belts, straps, holsters, pouches, packs, rappelling gear, rams, grenades, knives, batons and clubs. But mostly there are guns. They have all the guns in the world.

They have Sigs and Colts and Glockes and Swocks. They have M4s and MP5s and Uzis and Kalashnikovs. They have Remington 870s and Mossberg 500s. And they have long range sniper rifles, including a Barrett.

I pull out one of the office chairs next to a tabula and sit down. I put my face in my hands for a minute. The steak is definitely wearing off.

"He ok?" says Stoner.

"He's fine," says Zeb. "Foot, me and the unit are going to have a briefing session for a few minutes. Why don't you wait out here? Use the tabula if you like. Might find something there to interest you."

They head deeper into the basement through another metal door. It clangs shut and bolts bang into place. The reverberation dies in the room, and after a while it dies in my head.

Whatever they're doing in there, it's not making much noise. I scan the shelves and racks absently. Some things on those racks I don't even know what they do. There's a Sig model I haven't seen before. Maybe it's a custom job. I think maybe I'll get up and take a look at it, but then I notice a Swock right next to it. Later.

I turn to the tabula. I browse around a little, checking on a few sites I like. There's this one classic cartoons site with stuff from last century. Roy found it and showed it to me. Most of them don't make any sense. Roy said that was the interesting part. If we could figure out why they weren't funny we could understand the human condition. It sounded good but I didn't bother to think about it too hard. He was always saying things like that. But there was this one where there are two hippos in a river, and one says to the other, 'I keep thinking it's Tuesday'. I have no idea why but we both completely cracked up.

I can't find it. I start searching, changing terms, following links, looking for keywords. Here it is. I don't believe it. Paul Crum, aka Roger Pettiward, Punch 21 July 1937. More than a century ago. Just a few lines and you can see the hippos and the river and the desert and the trees. I have to save this. I open the file browser dialog and all these children are staring back at me.

The thumbnails are tiny but it's obvious they're naked. I open up the folder. There are thousands of pictures in here. I start flicking through them. It's sort of fascinating. How does a creature as vulnerable as this, as frightened as this, do anything at all, let alone wreck the planet? Soft skin stretched over fragile bones, little delicate ribs and shoulders and hips, small, smooth muscles. Faces waiting to register what's happening to them. There are pictures of men with kids, too.

Something in the room changes, and I know that the others are back. I have to hand it to them. They can move quietly. They're standing right behind me. I push the chair back slowly and turn around.

They're all carrying weapons. They're completely still, staring down. My heart is beating pretty hard. I'm shivering and sweating at the same time. I can't get to my gun but it wouldn't do me much good against this anyway.

"How's it make you feel?", asks Zeb.

"You like those pictures?"

"Cute kids, huh?"

"See yourself in there?"

I'm sick of them looking down at me. I stand up, a little too quickly. There's a hum in my ears and I'm seeing them through a dark tunnel. It's too hot. I haul off my balaclava.

"How does it make me feel, you sick fucks?"

But that's all I manage to say. The steak was a little rich for me after all. I heave all over their feet.

"Ah, shit!"

"Goddam it!"

Zeb starts to laugh. I didn't know he knew how.

"Well, boys, I guess he told us."

"He did at that."

The others start laughing too. They lay down their weapons. Stoner goes off and comes back with a mop and bucket and few towels. They start wiping down and mopping up.

"Man, what is that? Is that steak?"

"Classiest spew I ever saw!"

I feel a lot better after throwing up. I'm trying to figure out what I should do next. Make a run for it. Grab a gun and start shooting.

"You need a glass of water? Something stronger?"

Zeb has taken off his balaclava. The others strip theirs off too.

"Water's fine."

Zeb gives me a glass and motions me to sit down. He looks at me seriously.

"Know your enemy, Foot." He puts his hand on my knee. He looks around and the others nod.

"That disgusting manure you saw there makes us all sick to our stomachs," says Monk. "No one who enjoys that filth has a right to call themselves a human being. Anyone who traffics in that, who exploits the suffering of those children, who derives erotic satisfaction from that hideous vileness, has effectively resigned their membership of the human race."

"Scum," says Gap.

"Fucking spammers," says Snapper.

"The law censures spammers. Trouble is, the law is ineffective," says Monk. "In a society that promotes universal tolerance the law is without teeth. The law requires all manner of evidence and premeditation and habeas corpus and quid pro quo and quod erat demonstrandum. No time in the world for all that bullshit. But to give it credit, the law, setting aside the theory and moving along to the application, has the good sense to tolerate a little quiet vigilantism. Citizens of good will who are prepared to devote their time and their skills to addressing this problem with the occasional disciplinary action earn the tacit approval of the authorities."

That's probably overstating it. I never saw a cop who tacitly approved of vigilantes. Mostly they tacitly hate their guts.

"We follow due process," says Monk.

"Goes without saying," says Snapper.

"We collect evidence", says Monk. "You saw some. We find these bastards lurking in chat rooms, looking to groom some helpless kid, and they groom more than they bargained for. Oh, I'm so depressed, I hate my crack-whore mom, won't you please make me safe and buy me stuff? I'll do anything, you just name it, use me, I'll be your slave. What did you say your address was again? That's me knocking on your door."

"Unless we decide to just blow the hinges off," says Snapper.

"Or go in through the wall," says Stoner.

They're waiting for me to say something.

"So what if I had a hard-on from those pictures," I say. "What do you do, blow me away?"

They go very quiet.

"Did you have a hard-on?" asks Snapper.

"No, you assholes, I did not have a fucking hard-on!"

"Cause if you did, I couldn't make it out."

They bust out laughing again. Zeb is wiping his eyes.

"Listen, you fucking psychos, I have school in the morning."

Zeb gets up. "Come on boys. We had enough fun for one night."

He comes over with what I can now recognize as a smile.

"You better take this. You need to be able to find that little gun of yours."

It's an ankle holster, made of some soft black mesh. He puts it in my hand. The others are all grinning at me.

I take my snubby out and start to put it in the holster.

"Let me see that."

Zeb does the kind of inspection Ma does, but his hands are so fast you can hardly follow it. Then he spends a long time looking it over on the outside. I suppose he's thinking about Roy.

"Sure you don't want to take something that'll be a little more use?"

"No. This is fine. It was my Dad's."

Zeb shows me how it goes in the holster. He's gone very quiet.

We go back up the stairs, into the frozen silence.

Dear Gomez,

Meat. I'm doing what you said and writing a word and finding out what the next word is. My word is meat. We are meat. We are meat eaters. In fact, meat was the word for what we eat. So we used to eat ourselves. Then we stopped eating ourselves. Then we stopped eating meat. Only nobody really stopped. My thought for today. Ok?

Ben

Chapter 5 - Party

"I called round last night."

There's a quaver in May's voice that may be more than the vibration at the back of the bus. I wait for what's next.

"I spoke to your Ma. She said you were out."

"Yeah. I was out with Zeb."

"Zeb! What, playing soldiers?"

"I just wanted to see what it's like."

"So what's it like?"

"I don't know. Pretty dumb. Weird."

"Oh really? Imagine that."

"So why did you call round?"

"To talk to you."

"You're talking to me."

"I was going to invite you and your Ma to Harvest."

"With your family?"

"Yep. My mom suggested it last night. But maybe you want to go play with Zeb."

"Your stepfather going to be there?"

"My stepfather. Oh, probably not. I hope not."

The knuckles of her fists turn white. She scans the passing traffic.

"What did Ma say?"

"She said to ask you."

"Well, yeah, that would be nice. Thank you. Tell your Mom thank you, we would love to come."

"She's orthodox."

"Tell her fuck yeah."

"I'll do that."

May takes my hand and strokes the fingers with her thumb.

"It won't be so bad."

Ma makes a whole lot of pumpkin pie and pumpkin pudding and we have to carry it up two flights of stairs to May's apartment. It's funny when you walk up somebody else's stairs. There are all these new smells, sharp and sour, moldy and dusty, fumes of paint and polish and old cooking. There must be something like them in the stairs where you live too, but you don't smell them.

I knock on the door. There's that moment when you knock on a door and you're listening for sounds inside, staring at the flaking paint, waiting in the smell of the stairs for the next thing to happen. Senses heightened. The door will open and everything will change.

The door opens suddenly with a bang. There's this big dark figure blocking the light. Ma gives a little gasp. I'm planning the moves to drop the pumpkin pudding and get my gun out of the holster, but then I see May's face, white and strained, appear beside his shoulder.

"It's all right, it's Ben and his mom, they're invited," she says. The figure moves back into the light and I see stubble around a tight jaw, high temples mapped with veins, tension lines arrowing between bloodshot eyes.

"No one asked me. What am I, nothin?"

"You weren't here."

He turns on May and glares at her. He's not as big as all that, but he makes up for it by being in everyone's face at once. He looks like he's going to say something or do something, then he just shakes his head and stalks off.

"Come in. Please. I didn't know he was going to be here. Come in," says May. We go in and look around. There are kids' drawings of pumpkins stuck around the walls. There are a couple of tables pushed together with a white cloth over them, covered in all kinds of plates with scones and lentils and fruit and cheese. There's a little guy skipping around the table, reaching for each plate, moving it, stroking it, not quite touching the food.

"Lock! Hands off!" says May.

He gets down and crawls in underneath the table.

"That's Lochinvar. Come out, Lock. Say hi to Ben and Ma."

I bend down and look underneath the table. He's grinning at me and hugging his knees.

"Hey, Lock. Ben." I hold out my hand. He takes it and gives it a big shake. I grin back. What the hell. I crawl in underneath too. It feels like being a little kid again. The smell of the tablecloth, and the low, tight space. Secret and protected.

"This your place?"

"Uh huh."

"I used to have a place in the hall closet."

"I go under Mom's bed sometimes. But this is better. No dust bunnies."

"You come here a lot?"

"When I want to. When stuff is happening."

Lock has one of those faces that is waiting to show. I realize I'm trying to save it in my memory, trying not to see the shadows growing.

"Hey, Lock, you know scissors, paper, rock?"

"Sure."

"Want to play?"

"Sure."

We play for a while. He's pretty good. He doesn't look at your hand, he looks at your eyes.

"Ben?"

May's voice.

"Yeah?"

"You want to come out and say hi to Mom?"

"Sure. See you, Lock."

I crawl out. It's hard to look completely cool when you're crawling. I look up and see May's Mom looking down at me with a kind of tolerant smile. I clamber up, brush off a little and reach out a hand. She takes it.

"Ebenezer. I'm Clytemnestra. I see you have met Lochinvar."

It's weird when you meet a girl's Mom. You can't help trying to figure out how that young girl could ever turn into that woman. What would have to happen? Sometimes you think there wouldn't be enough time in the world. But it takes, what, twenty, twenty five years? The colors fade, the glow dims, the weight grows and shifts, the lines deepen. Sinking, stiffening, settling. Setting.

I can see that May's Mom is beautiful, but she's holding herself very straight. She's looking through me and judging me and finding me wanting, and that's taking the edge off. I'm trying to feel like a man while she does this, but it would be easier to give up and feel like a little kid.

She gives me my hand back.

"I understand you received a medal recently, Ebenezer?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Mayberry tells me you gave it away."

"Sort of."

"The party does not give medals lightly."

I am glancing at Ma. She's pretty good at controlling herself, but there's always a chance she'll lose it and I was hoping to get through this day without a major fight. Ma takes a breath, catches my eye and nods.

"Yeah, I gave it to this guy, Ted, in my class. Asafoetida. He deserved it as much as I did but they didn't give him one."

Clytemnestra seems to buy that. She looks slightly less suspicious. I doubt she ever totally relaxes. May isn't looking very relaxed either. I give her a smile. She smiles back.

"Mayberry, perhaps you can show people their places at the table? And call Agamemnon."

May sits us down. She bends down and looks under the table.

"Hey, Lock, come out and you can sit next to Ben. Come on. It's ok. Nothing's going on."

Lock peers out cautiously then slithers between the two chairs and sits beside me. He's trying to sit still but he keeps shifting and wriggling.

"Hey Lock, want to play scissors paper rock again?"

He nods. We start to play.

May goes to the door of another room and knocks quietly. Nothing happens. She knocks again. Nothing.

"Aggie, food's up."

May starts helping her mom bring stuff out from the kitchen.

There are lots of greens and baked vegetables, parsnips, potatoes, carrots, yams and pumpkin. There's a big plate of steaming TLC, cut thick and arranged in a spiral pattern, and another big plate of sham done the same way. I wasn't sure I was hungry, but now I realize I'm starving.

Clytemnestra sits down and we all sit quietly. She holds out her arms and we clasp hands around the table.

"Ebenezer, perhaps you would like to say the words?"

"Ah, for what we are about to receive, make us truly uncomfortable."

Clytemnestra does not seem satisfied.

"And, ah, may we suffer gladly for the sins of our forebears."

She wants more. I'm racking my brain.

"Let us remember that each morsel we eat comes to us from an earth ravaged, an earth raped, an earth violated. No one is blameless. Let us take only what we can replace, consume only what we can sustain, and welcome the day when we can return to the earth so that our worthless existences can serve some useful purpose in fertilizing the future."

That's it. I'm out of ideas. Clytemnestra nods and everybody breathes out.

"Mahitabel, would you like some Tastes Like Chicken?"

For a moment I can't figure out who Clytemnestra is talking to, but then Ma answers.

"Yes, thank you, Clytemnestra."

Clytemnestra gets this look on her face as if she's maintaining the faith in the presence of intolerable barbarianism. Orthodox to the max.

"Some for you, Ebenezer?"

"Fuck yeah."

She serves me a couple of slices of TLC. I start piling vegetables on to my plate.

"Pass the salt, Lock?" I say.

Lock passes me the salt.

"Thanks," I whisper.

"You're welcome," says Lock.

"Lochinvar, we say Shut the Fuck Up in this house."

"Grandma used to say You're welcome."

"Grandma never quite understood that the world had changed. And your Grandma is dead now, Lochinvar. She's never coming back. She's nowhere."

Lock doesn't seem too happy to hear this. He looks down at his plate and moves his sham around with his fork. He was hoeing in pretty good before. He mutters something.

"What was that, Lochinvar?"

"I said Grandma was nice. I like the way she talked."

"We loved Grandma but she is dead."

What is wrong with this woman? She's worse than Beamish. I look over at Ma, who is getting dangerously close to breaking point, but then the door opens and Aggie comes out of his bedroom.

He sits down at the table without a word and reaches past Ma for the TLC. Clytemnestra is suddenly quiet. Nobody looks up while Aggie reaches and grabs and shovels food onto his plate. Then he starts eating. It's kind of fascinating to watch but I try to look away. I guess he's worried if he ever closes his mouth it won't be open when he shoves his fork at it.

"So, ah, Clytemnestra, this food is really good."

It's the first thing I could think of.

"It's fucking cold," mumbles Aggie with his mouth full.

"Yeah, well, it was warm when we called you," says May.

Clytemnestra looks alarmed.

"Really good food," I say.

"Who asked you?" Aggie has actually stopped eating. He's staring up at me with his fork halfway to his mouth. I am thinking about my gun again. I tell myself I'm at a dinner party, this is not a war zone, but this guy is like an unexploded bomb and I am seriously afraid he could go off.

"I asked him," says May. "I asked Ben and his mother to join us, and they are our guests."

"Agamemnon. Please." Clytemnestra doesn't sound so confident when she talks to Aggie.

"Please. Please." He's mocking her in a whiny voice and building himself up to something. Lock ducks down and disappears under the table.

"We haven't been introduced," I say. I push my chair back and stand up and walk around to him with my hand outstretched. I'm keeping the other one open, palm up, in full view.

"Ebenezer Hollins. This is my mother, Mahitabel."

I'm standing there, holding my out my hand. He's still in his chair. He has to turn to look at me. His face is a mask of suspicion and hostility. His fingers tense and bunch the tablecloth beneath them. Then he holds out his hand and shakes without meeting my eye.

"Agamemnon Travis."

"You can call me Ben."

"Yeah. Aggie."

"So, Aggie, thanks for having us around. We don't get out too much and it's great to share your celebration."

This distraction is already wearing out, but Aggie is confused. He's lost track of what he was working up to, I think.

"Yeah, that's ok. You want to sit back down? Go sit down."

"Well, perhaps I can help with the clearing up, I'll just take a few plates back to the kitchen."

Anything to break his concentration. I figure if I can keep everybody moving he might even lose interest and go back to whatever he was doing in the bedroom.

"I'll show you where to put things," says May, getting up. She picks up a few things off the table and walks out. I follow her.

In the kitchen she puts down her plates and leans on the bench, head bowed, heaving with silent sobs. I put my hands on her shoulders. She puts a hand over mine. I turn her and pull her to me and hold her close. Her face is damp against my cheek. She's coming down. She's relaxing in my arms. I'm smoothing her hair.

"What the fuck!"

Aggie is standing in the doorway. His face is purple with rage.

"You fucking slut!"

He takes a step forward. I step in front of May.

"Get the fuck out of my way."

Behind him Clytemnestra and Ma are looking horrified. Clytemnestra darts out of sight. Maybe she's going to call someone. But I have to do something now.

Aggie is boiling. His eyes are unfocused. They're darting from side to side. Suddenly a hand lashes out and hits me open-palmed on the side of the face. I fall back against the sink. He lunges at May and smacks her in the head. She grabs a knife from the bench. I see it flash in her hand. I pull my gun from the ankle holster.

"Stop or I shoot!" My voice is a shriek. "Right now!"

He turns and stares. He's so crazy I'm not sure if he understands. I might have to do it. He looks at the gun then he looks in my eyes. His eyes go dull.

"So shoot."

"Get down. On your knees."

He gets down wearily on his knees.

"Now on your face, hands behind your back."

He lies down.

"Don't move."

"Fuck off."

"Ok, May. Step around him."

She puts down the knife. She squeezes around the benches, past Aggie. I'm watching his hands and legs, working hard on not shooting him just to ease the tension.

May is out of the kitchen. I guess I'm going to have to stay here, holding a gun on Aggie, until Ma or Clytemnestra figures something out.

There's a noise outside. I hear deep voices. I stay focused on Aggie. I don't trust him to have enough sense to stay put.

"Son, you can lower your weapon."

I glance around. There are two cops with guns drawn. I put my gun away. I step back out of the room, still watching Aggie. The cops go in and the older one pulls him to his feet.

"Well, Aggie," he says. "Long time no see. What is it, six weeks? Come on, Aggie. You want to get your coat? Just let me pat you down. Ok, you're clean."

They take Aggie down the stairs. I sit down on the sofa and put my head in my hands. After a while I look up. Clytemnestra is sitting at the dining table, staring straight ahead. May is sitting beside her with a hand on her arm. May's cheek is an angry red and her eye is puffing up. I can see Lock's white face under the table. Ma is standing holding her handbag, near the door. I guess the party's over.

Dear Gomez

Today's word is party. Get together and have a few laughs. Or if it's the Uncomfortablism party, you get together and make laughing illegal. Then there's the crasher. The party pooper. Goes a little crazy. Beats the shit out of someone. Pulls a gun. Calls the cops. Takes the fun right out of it. Some parties need pooping. Send everyone home and they can wake up tomorrow and start again.

Chapter 6 - Fake

The Temple door is open and I take a step inside, halfway in and halfway out. The sun is coming through the stained glass and making beams of color in the dust that hangs in the air. I'm trying to remember what made it feel so special, the day of Roy's funeral. It's just a big empty hall.

"What the fuck do you want?" It's The Virgin Barbie. She's wearing a beanie and cut-off jeans and a T-shirt that says 'SUCK ON THIS'. There's a birthmark on her throat, shaped like a bean. She puts down the broom she's holding.

"I was hoping maybe I could talk to Santa."

"Do you have an appointment?"

Her legs go on forever. Her breasts are at my eye level. And in the light, close up, they're hard to believe.

"Well, no..."

"You're the kid that spoke at the funeral. The massacre kid."

"Yeah."

I mean, I've seen big breasts, but the size and the shape together just don't seem physically possible. On someone so tall and thin. How does she stay upright?

"You're the one that shot him first. In the foot."

I'm thinking maybe I'll just leave when she turns and yells "Buck!" in a voice that makes a sudden swirl in the floating dust beams.

A big guy comes out from somewhere behind the stage. He's wearing a dark jacket and pale trousers that sit perfectly. He peers out from under his eyebrows, and that's the only way I recognize him without his beard.

He seems me standing next to The Virgin Barbie.

"Ho fucking ho!" he says, and comes down holding out his hand. We shake and then he puts his hands on my shoulders and looks searchingly into my face. He doesn't say anything for a minute.

"We thought you'd be back, didn't we Bee?"

"This guy knows everything," The Virgin Barbie leans down and whispers to me. "Don't try and bullshit him." She picks up the broom and goes back to sweeping.

Santa leads me to the front and we sit down on the edge of the stage.

"You felt the call?" he says.

I don't know what that means. I decide to wait and see what else he has to say. He nods.

"I saw you checking out the sound rig. At your friend's funeral. And then that speech you gave."

"Yeah, I was going to work from notes but..."

"But you decided to wing it."

"It just seemed..."

"Well, let me tell you, kid, you got 'em. Fuck, you got me. You got Bee. Bee!" He yells across the floor.

"What?"

"The kid. He got you with that speech."

"Sure he did. Like a fucking pro."

"Those pauses. You'd stop, look out at everyone, make 'em wait, then you'd give 'em a little more. You reeled 'em in. And the voice. I got a voice, I know what I'm talking about. But mine's settled in. Matured. I can get the big effects, but you, you get those quavers, those coos. It's themselves they're hearing. It's their own grief. Not a dry eye in the house."

I'm still waiting to think of something to say. He puts a hand on my shoulder.

"We think you've got what it takes. Now, believe me, it's not easy. Talent is one thing. But it's work. Hard work. It takes discipline. Guts. Doing it once is one thing. Doing it every night, that's another. Every night is opening night. Understand?"

All I can do is nod again.

“That said, it's a good life. Good money, if you stick to it. If you believe. And, call me sentimental, I think we help people. We give meaning to their worthless lives. You still at school?”

“Yeah.”

“You free nights?”

“Some.”

“How about Thursdays?”

Thursdays is group with Zeb. I shake my head.

“Mondays?”

I shrug.

“Mondays it is. Now, you get here on time, no excuses, ready to work. I don't take bullshit. Bee!”

“What?”

“Do I take bullshit?”

“No you don't.”

“What size are you?”

Now I'm really lost.

“Bee!”

“What?”

“What size is this kid?”

The Virgin Barbie comes over with a tape and starts measuring me. She's running it around my waist and up my legs.

“Ok, we'll get something made up. See, we're investing in you. Do you let people down?”

Yes. I don't say it, but he sees it.

“Ah, shit,” he says. “Bee, give him something to wipe his eyes. Look, kid, don't be scared. This is it. Chances come, you take 'em. You grab them by the balls and hold on for dear life. You make bargains, you keep 'em. To lift an autumn leaf is no sign of great strength; to see the sun and moon is no sign of sharp sight; to hear the noise of thunder is no sign of a quick ear.”

“Huh?”

“No prizes for doing it the hard way. You won't let us down. You're a good kid.”

The Virgin Barbie puts her arms around me and hugs me. I don't know what's wrong with me, I can't stop. She keeps on holding me. Her breasts are hard and lumpy. When I come up for breath Santa is gone.

May's class is at the firing range along with mine and I manage to get next to her. I'm working on draw and fire from an appendix carry. Sweeping the vest out of the way is pretty smooth, and I'm getting a reasonable headshot percentage, but I've done a lot better. All I can think about is May standing beside me. The bruise on her cheek is spreading out and turning yellow. She hasn't noticed me.

She's working with an AK-47, so she doesn't have to concentrate that hard. If it were an Uzi I'd let her focus on controlling the recoil, but this is the first chance I've had to talk to her in days.

“May?”

She has earmuffs on I guess. She stares hard at the target and empties an entire magazine into it. It shreds and half of it falls off.

“May?”

She shoves in another magazine, without taking her eye off the target, and fires. There's a still a corner of paper hanging on.

“May!”

She takes her earmuffs off and turns to me.

“What?”

Ted has stopped firing too. He's pretending to be checking out his Glock but the guy is the world's worst actor. I glare at him and he turns away. I turn back to May.

“How... How's everything?”

It's really not a good place to talk. She's frowning as if I'm not speaking her language. She's probably only getting every second word.

“Just fine thank you. Fuck you very much.”

I wait for a volley of shots to end.

“Your stepdad, is he...”

“Oh, he's fine. Back in the bosom of his family.”

“And your Mom?”

“She's having a lot of trouble with walking into doors.”

“How about Lock?”

“Lock's good. He's under the table, if you want him.”

I'm out of people to ask about.

“I didn't know what to do.”

“Obviously.”

“Did you want me to let you kill him? Then what?”

“It's not really your problem, Ben. To solve with your gun. You should try Zeb. He'll have something to keep you busy.”

“May, please, don't...”

She puts her earmuffs back on and loads another magazine. She fires. There's nothing left.

I feel a hand on my shoulder and on a reflex my hand goes to the gun in my waistband. I turn and draw in a single movement. It's Ted.

“What?”

“Hey, whoa, Ben. Listen, man, you ...gotta give her time. She'll ...come round.”

I shake him off and walk out. When I start needing life advice from Ted I just might use my gun on myself.

Gomez hands me a note when I give her my word of the day.

Dear Ben,

Thank you for your thoughts on meat. They seemed to be deeply felt. I concur with your observation that we continue in our cruelty to one another. Perhaps, though, we can find instances of kindness.

G.

This must be the first time anyone has concurred with my observation. It's ok.

Dear Gomez,

Fake. It's amazing how many things are fake. You'd think there would have to be some real stuff in the world just to stop it falling apart. But you listen to what people say, you see what they do, what they teach, and it's all fake. It's just there to look like something else. Not what it is. Breasts. Even the way you think you feel. Maybe one day I'll find something that isn't fake. I'll let you know.

Ben

Chapter 7 - Briefing

Thursday nights are turning into a routine. Zeb is usually there when I get home, sitting on the sofa watching TV. Ma is cooking something good. Tonight it's chicken and rice, with some fresh greens. Not TLC, real chicken. And you know what? Tastes Like Chicken does not taste like chicken. I'm so used to TLC at first I was thinking chicken doesn't taste like chicken. And it has these fibers that get stuck in your teeth. And bones. And get this, it comes in shapes, like a scrawny little wing. Or a leg. Like the whole idea is to remind you that you just killed some living creature and ate it. I'm having trouble picturing what the pieces would make if you put them together. Big fat legs, small wings. A chicken must be a pretty weird looking bird. It'll never fly.

I still have no idea where Zeb gets this stuff. He doesn't talk much and I don't feel like trying to draw him out. We haven't had steak again, which is all right with me. Zeb is still helping with the washing up, which makes me think something's up. I never find him and Ma in the same room though. It's like they have some rule about what I can be exposed to. They don't even touch each other. To be honest, if I think about them doing anything my brain sort of freezes up. Yep, there it goes again. And I remember the taste of steak.

The boys pick Zeb and me up in the van and we go to HQ. We drive there pretty straight, with just a few minutes turning this way and that and checking for tails. I'm on surveillance with the tabula and the cameras. They're giving me a few jobs like that, techy stuff. When they go on operations they leave me behind at HQ. I'm supposed to be on communications. Only they never communicate so I think it's just an excuse. Tonight I actually think we might have picked up a tail. It's a grey car, pretty ordinary. It's there the first time I look, and it's still there after we've done enough turns to make it unlikely anyone else could be following the same route. But then it peels out past us and I don't bother to say anything to the others.

Partly it's that they're not very chatty. After they got used to me they've been talking a lot more, but tonight they're quiet. Snapper keeps stroking the barrel of his Mossberg and Gap is clenching his jaw muscles while he drives. Zeb has his fingers laced up together and he's just staring down at the floor of the van. Wolf I mean.

By the time we get there it's raining hard. We pile down the steps and Wolf makes us all wipe our feet really carefully before we go in the gun room. Wolf bolts us in and we walk through to the briefing room, and he bolts that too. We sit down and he turns down the lights and fires up a SlideShow.

It's a satellite view of a house in some suburb. He zooms out to the map view and looks a question at Gap. Gap just nods. Wolf switches to some drive-by photos, probably taken from the van. We see the front and two sides of the house. It's a single story bungalow with a terracotta roof.

"Double brick. So we won't be going in through the wall."

Stoner looks a little disappointed. Wolf switches to building plans. I wonder where he got those. Maybe he hacks into the local government computers.

"Front door, hallway, basement stairs off the hallway, that's where he'll probably be. No one else in the house. Wife out at book club."

Stoner raises his hand.

"Stoner?"

"Basement doors?"

"What I'm thinking. Back yard. Hard to tell from the satellite, but they're probably wood. He's not expecting us."

Snapper has his hand up. These guys are model students.

"Snapper?"

"Weapons?"

"Unknown. All his online material is kiddie porn. We think he only has one hobby. By law he has a hand gun but we don't know if he's an expert."

"Better safe than sorry."

"That's right, Snapper. So we're going in with four guys, two and two."

What the hell. I raise my hand.

"Foot?"

"You go in through the basement. He's upstairs with weapons. You're in an enclosed space with one line of retreat that he can cut off. He has the high ground. For all you know he has grenades."

Wolf and the others look at me. Wolf looks at the others.

“Suggestions.”

I raise my hand.

“Two at the front door, two at the basement doors. You hammer on the front door loud enough so he won't want to open it. He heads down to the basement. You blow the front door, go in and cut off his retreat back to the hallway. Then you blow the basement doors and take him.”

Wolf look at me, then at the others.

“Comments?”

No one says anything.

“Stoner, Monk, Team A, front door. Snapper and me, Team B, basement doors. Front door, count of ten, basement doors.”

Snapper raises his hand.

“Rear door?”

“Foot?”

“Ok.”

“Gap's got to stay at the wheel.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Think you can handle it?”

“Sure.”

“Team C.”

Wolf looks around.

“Questions?”

I raise my hand again.

“Foot?”

“What do you do to these guys?”

They look at each other. No one says anything.

“I mean, you throw a scare into them, right? So they don't do it again.”

“You can be sure of that,” says Gap. “They definitely won't do it again. In fact ...”

Wolf raises a hand and Gap shuts up. Just when he was getting talkative.

“Talk to you, Foot?”

He leads me into the gun room and bolts the door.

“Foot, what do you think happened to Roy?”

“To Roy?”

“You think one day he just decided to go and get shot?”

“Fuck, Zeb. Wolf.”

“Someone hurt him, Foot.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Someone hurt him so bad he didn't know what to do. He didn't know how to go on.”

“Zeb, you hurt him. You hit him.”

“I what?”

“You hit him all the time. You fucking bastard. Admit it. You are so full of shit. It was you.”

I just don't care any more. I don't care what happens. I don't care who's listening.

“I never hit him.”

“You fucking did!”

“Is that what you've been thinking? That I did it? How could you think that?”

I look at him. His eyes are red. His breath is whistling in his nose.

“Ben. I swear to you. I never hit Roy.”

Zeb is raising his right hand likes he's making the pledge. It's like that time at the coffee shop, when he said he would make someone pay. I thought he was crazy then. You can't believe crazy people. But I'm looking at him, and I think I believe him.

“Then who did?”

Zeb sits on the edge of the bench and looks at the floor.

“I don't know.”

He looks up and his eyes are weak and watery. It's like he's pleading with me.

“I just want to make someone pay.”

I'm so used to thinking it was Zeb that I've forgotten that's what I thought. He's the same man but a completely different one. Now I'm trying to change all the ideas in my head at once. It's easier just not to believe Zeb. Then a thought comes to me that is so blindingly obvious I make a sound like a laugh. Then another thought, and a sound more like a sob.

“You think something's funny?”

“Beamish. That asshole Beamish.”

“The teacher Roy shot?”

“Roy shot him because Beamish was hurting him.”

“He went in there to get him?”

“Roy wasn't going to hurt anyone else. Once he got Beamish he was all done.”

“You don't know that.”

“I didn't have to shoot him.”

“Hey, now, Ben, you don't...”

“He probably would have turned around and walked straight out the door. We wouldn't even have known it was him. He would have gotten away with it.”

“Ben, you didn't know it was him.”

“Oh, fuck!”

“Ben.”

Zeb grabs me which is probably a good thing because I'm about to fall over. He sits me down on the bench and puts an arm around me. I'm staring at all the guns on the wall, trying not to think. I'm making a strange sound and I can't stop, and it's the noise Roy was making after I shot him, that high whimper. The more I make it the more I want to make it. I'm spinning out. Zeb tightens his arm around my shoulder. His fingers dig in until the pain starts to be distracting. He grips tighter. My arm is going numb. I'm gasping and choking. The wailing has stopped. I'm so tired. We sit there for a while. Zeb lets go of my shoulder and my arm starts to prickle. My hand feels like it's on fire.

“Oh, fuck.”

“You're going to be ok, Ben.”

“My fucking arm is killing me. What did you do to my shoulder?”

“It's ok.”

“That bastard. That bastard.”

“He's dead. He's gone.”

“Poor Roy.”

“Roy knew he was dead. Roy got him.”

“There's plenty more where he came from.”

“That's right, Ben. Plenty.”

“Fucking spammers.”

“Under every rock.”

“Roy's dead and they're alive. That's not right.”

“No.”

“So let's go and do something about it.”

“You sure?”

I stand up and walk to the door of the briefing room. Zeb opens it and we go back in.

Chapter 8 - Shovel

It takes a long time to put all this stuff on. I dump it out of the box Zeb gave me but I can't figure out what a lot of it is. It's all black, which doesn't help. Your eye sort of slides away from it.

There's no dressing room or anything. The other guys are stripping off and getting their gear on like they do it all the time. Which I suppose they do. I could watch them to see where everything goes but they might think I was checking them out. I'm not, but you can't help seeing some things. These guys are real hard bodies. It's all hair and puckered scars and tats and bunched up muscle. They're scary even without the outfits.

There's an inventory list. After a while translating the list from whatever language it's in and matching things up I can sort out most of it.

First there's the long underwear (Chemical/Biological Protective Undergarment), then tough, loose pants and a long thermal shirt, then the kevlar vest and box (Ballistic Threat Body Armor), then the tactical vest, then the utility belt and ammo belts. Then the combat boots (steel toe and shank). I don't put on the liquid/chemical resistant booties. The other guys don't seem to have theirs on. Then you have to hang everything off you, magazine pouches and knife pouches and holsters and knives and guns and compass and radio and gadgets I'll figure out later.

There's a closed-circuit rebreather in there. I try it on to see how it feels. I should have read the manual first because you have to turn it on somehow and if you don't you can't breathe at all. It's like having some animal clamped to your face, suffocating you. I don't panic much, though, and I get it off again before anyone else notices. Or at least before they let on they've noticed. Chances are the spammer won't hit us with poison gas.

There's the balaclava. There's Blast and Overpressure Threat Ear Protection (ear muffs), with a Modular Integrated Communication Headset that plugs into the radio. It's got a bone conduction microphone that goes in your ear along with the earphone. How they manage to avoid feedback I have no idea.

Then there's the helmet. There's night vision goggles but I can't see how you use them with the helmet.

Then the gloves, inner and outer (Chemical and Thermal Resistant). You put them on last, even though it's obvious where they go, because if you put them on first you can't hold anything else properly.

"Lookin' good, Foot," says Snapper. He looks me over critically and starts unclipping things on me and turning them around and putting them back another way. He squats down and picks up some things I couldn't figure out and clips them on around the tops of my boots. Gaiters. I saw them on the list but the name didn't help. Zeb comes over and checks me out. If he isn't satisfied he doesn't let on.

"How's the fit?"

"Pretty good. Bit big in the shoulders."

"You'll grow into it. Ok, radio check."

The others all call in.

"Snapper."

"Gap."

"Monk."

"Stoner."

"Wolf."

You have to press the call button. It feels stupid but there's no point hanging back. I press mine.

"Foot."

On the drive over there I'm on the cameras again. And again I think there might be a tail. This time it's a dark blue van. The rain is bucketing down and I can't get the number plate. I call Zeb over to take a look.

"What do you think?"

He looks at it for a long time, longer than he usually takes to make up his mind.

"Probably nothing. There, they've gone."

The outfit is pretty waterproof, but you can't hear much in the downpour. I'm squatting behind a hibiscus in the back yard, watching the back door. I can see two dark shapes that must be Snapper and Wolf over by the basement doors. There's a slight pop in my ear and a whisper of static.

“Command.”

Wolf's voice is very soft but clear.

“Team B scout, recon to ascertain target whereabouts. All other teams maintain position.”

“Team B ack.”

Snapper crouches down and inches along the wall. At the windows he raises his head a little and tries to get a look in. There are no house lights on. Not surprising at three a.m. I have no idea if he can see anything. Then something changes over near Wolf. There's a tiny chink of light coming from a corner of the basement doors. I didn't notice it before. Snapper is back with Wolf.

“Team B negative on target sighting.”

“Command. Target possible whereabouts in basement. On my signal. Team A first, then on my signal Team B. Team C is to maintain position. Team C is not to move. Acknowledge.”

“Team A ack.”

“Team B ack.”

I press my button.

“Team C ack.”

It's easy to get the hang of it, because they follow the rules. When we do exercises like this at school the kids don't take it seriously. They chatter and fool around and nobody learns anything. It's no excuse, but the school walkie talkies are noisy and the signal isn't loud enough. They're toys really. Sometimes they run out of battery in the middle of an op. It really helps to have good equipment.

There's a bit of reflected street light on the glass in the back door. Without that I probably couldn't see it at all. The water is getting in somewhere, and I can feel it running down inside my protective undergarment. I'm not scared exactly but my heart is pounding hard. I can just see the muzzle of my Colt Commando twitching with each beat. I'm trying to concentrate on slowing down my breathing. I shift a little to see if I can get a better view of the door and I see a glimmer above it. It's just street light on metal or glass. Probably a light bulb. I edge out around the bush to get a better view.

It's a bit bigger and more boxy and complicated than a light fitting. What it reminds me of is the infrared night sights back at HQ. I look over towards the basement doors. There's something similar silhouetted against the wall above them

I press my button.

“Team C. Alert. Possible surveillance devices. Above doors.”

The dark shapes look up above their heads.

“Team A. Shit. We got one. Advise.”

I edge out a little more to see if I can make out what this thing is. Suddenly a light snaps on above the back door, and another over the basement doors.

“Command. Team C stay put. Team A go, go go!”

There's a huge thump and a splintering sound from around the front of the house. Then a crash. There's a long couple of seconds of nothing.

“Team A in position!”

“Command. Team B go, go go!”

Suddenly, before Wolf and Snapper can blow them, the basement doors fly outwards. One of them hits Snapper and knocks him over. This guy comes charging up the basement steps, in pale blue pajamas and a dark red plaid dressing gown, carrying a snow shovel. He has white hair and the overhead light picks up a pink patch where it's thinning on top. He whips the shovel over his head and brings it down on Snapper's arm with so much follow-through it looks like the old guy's feet lift off the ground. Then he dives into the mud, rolls over and sweeps the shovel round into Wolf's ankles. Wolf goes down. The guy rolls again and comes up on his feet, does a golf swing into Wolf's helmet with the shovel. The blade snaps off. He spins what's left of the handle like a cheerleader with a baton then hurls it, sharp end first, at Snapper, who is trying to bring his Mossberg to bear left-handed. The spear is heading straight for Snapper's eyes and he drops his shotgun and covers his face and yells “Fuck!”

The guy doesn't even look at me. He sprints straight at the six foot fence and vaults over it, just touching the top with his hands. His dressing gown flies up like a cloak. It's the sweetest move you ever saw. He's gone.

For a few seconds there's just the roar of the rain. Then a siren in the distance. I start towards Wolf.

“Command. Team C maintain your fucking position! Team A to rear.”

Wolf staggers to his feet. Monk and Stoner come up the basement steps. Wolf gestures at Snapper, who is sitting up cradling his arm. They help him up and walk him around the side of house.

“Command. Team C round the side of the house to the van. Now!”

I follow the other three. As I pass Wolf he turns and heads down the basement steps.

The others have already got Snapper into the van. It looks like his arm might be broken. Gap is looking very twitchy at the wheel. He keeps darting glances from side to side and muttering.

“Come on. Come on. Come on.”

Wolf leaps into the back of the van with a handful of memory tabs and a tabula. Monk jumps out, slams the doors, runs around and swings into the passenger seat.

“I wonder, Stoner, if I might trouble you for the Mossberg?”

Stoner hands it through. Monk flips the safety. Gap starts up slowly so as not to leave rubber on the road, but as soon as we're moving it's pedal to the metal.

The sirens are getting closer, then we're leaving them far behind.

Dear Gomez

Plans. Everybody makes plans. Does anybody's plan ever work? Is there any point in making them? Maybe plans are just to give you something to ignore when the shit starts flying. Some points of reference so you can see how far life is different from what you imagined. Maybe the plan is something to struggle back to from wherever you end up, but it keeps on shrinking further and further into the distance. Until you forget you ever had a plan.

Chapter 9 - Duck

“Is it illegal for a woman over seventy to marry a duck?”

Gomez looks around the classroom. She gets that look she gets sometimes when she's wondering why she bothers. Ted thinks he knows the answer but he's worried he might be wrong and then, I don't know, the ceiling will fall in and a piece of space debris will land on his head and a vortex will open beneath his feet and he'll be sucked down into another dimension full of flesh-eating hamsters. Fran is still sulking. She's been doing that for a while.

After I finally got home from group it wasn't worth trying to go to bed so I just sat at the kitchen table staring at where the veneer is peeling off one of the cupboard doors. Come to think of it, I've been staring at the leg of Ted's desk where the welding is starting to crack for about twenty minutes. Maybe I should try staring at something else, but I don't seem to have the initiative.

“Ebenezer? Are you with us?”

“No.”

“The fuck you say?”

I muster the energy to speak an entire sentence.

“No, it is not illegal for a woman over seventy to marry a duck.”

“That's right. Why should it be?”

“That would be so weird.”

If there were jobs for people who just don't get it, Fran would have a terrific career ahead of her. Gomez ignores her.

“Asafoetida. Ask me a question about marriage.”

Ted opens his mouth but nothing comes out.

“Come on. You kids should be asking the questions. Asking questions is what it's about. You ask yourself a question, you come up with an answer, you check it out. Asafoetida, question?”

“What would the duck do?”

Ted and Fran could work together, in the Federal Bureau of Not Getting It. They'd be running the place in no time.

“It's none of your fucking business what the duck would do,” says Gomez.

“Is it a boy duck or a girl duck?”

I guess Fran is at least engaging in the debate.

“A duck is a girl. A boy duck is a drake.”

You have to hand it to him, Ted surprises you sometimes. You think there's nothing going on at all, and then he comes out with something and you have no idea where he got it from. He's looking at Gomez for approval. Gomez is trying not to meet his eye. I guess she's afraid he might see something in her face that would upset him.

“It doesn't matter,” I say, and there's something hard in my voice I haven't got the strength or the will to control.

“That's the point.”

Gomez shoots me a look, nods and sits down on the edge of her desk.

“Was a time when some men could not marry some women. Wrong race, wrong skin color, wrong socio-economic level, wrong cultural background. There was a time when a man could not marry a man, and a woman could not marry a woman.”

“But that doesn't make sense,” says Fran. I guess Fran knows what they would do, so it's all right. If she didn't know, she could just look at the ads in the school bus.

“Give me two reasons why it doesn't make sense,” says Gomez.

Ted raises his hand.

“Asfoetida?”

“Because it's none of your fucking business.”

Gomez gives Ted this dazzling, beautiful smile. Ted looks so happy. He knows he's right.

“Absolutely, because it's none of your fucking business. Does everyone see that?”

Ted checks us all out to see if we're all caught up with him. No one is giving anything away. Fran is frowning though. I guess in general the concept of none of your fucking business is a difficult one for her.

“Second reason?”

Suddenly I see a pattern in my head. It's like a tree growing, like fireworks rising and expanding. I raise my hand.

“Ebenezer.”

“Because you end up with too many laws. Too many categories. Too many species. And you're multiplying them together. You can't make a law for everything that isn't allowed to happen. And if you make a law that only allows one thing to happen, then maybe nothing happens. Maybe something that should happen can't happen. Too many laws and you can't enforce them. None of them mean anything.”

“So we have no laws at all?”

Fran has started to pay attention.

“Sure there's a law,” says Ted. “Death to spammers.”

Ted is on fire. Gomez looks at him in surprise.

“There used to be a lot more. And a lot of them were about stopping other people doing things we didn't understand. Things that made us uncomfortable. We don't need those laws any more.”

“Because we like being uncomfortable.”

Ted is trying for a hat trick. Fran isn't going to let that stand.

“No, we like making each other uncomfortable.”

Gomez isn't smiling, but in a way the look on her face is better than a smile. Her dark eyes are bright. It's like she remembers why she bothers.

“I got a question.”

“Yes, Ben?”

“How many Uncomfortablists does it take to change a light bulb?”

“Ok, I'll bite. How many?”

“None of your fucking business.”

That was one of Roy's. He had that theory that jokes were information. Funny or not, they told you something. We found this site with light bulb jokes. Most of them made no sense. All we could figure out from those jokes is that once upon a time light bulbs needed changing.

The bell goes.

“Class, fuck off.”

It's all about questions. I wait until the class is gone then I hand over my writing assignment. Gomez hands over her comment on my last one. Gomez is packing away her stuff with precise, smooth movements of her hands. I hang around watching her hands, trying to think of the best way to ask.

“What is it, Ben?”

“Did you ever hear anything about Beamish?”

“Hear anything?”

“About him doing stuff. To anyone.”

Her hands stop moving. Then they slowly start up again.

“That man is dead. He can't hurt anyone now.”

“So you did hear something?”

“Nothing I can prove. And what's the point now? Leave it, Ben. It's over.”

“But if you knew, why didn't you do something?”

Gomez doesn't say anything. She stops packing up and her shoulders slump.

“What, did you think it was none of your fucking business?”

I want to unsay the words as soon as I say them. Her face changes. It's like that picture where you look at it one way and it's a rabbit and the other way it's a duck. Her face has changed from young and strong and happy to weak and old and miserable. I can't figure out what's different. Nothing and everything.

I can't undo it. She can't go back to being who she was. I want the world to spin backwards.

“Sometimes I wonder if I'm doing any good, Ben. Sometimes I think I am. But to do any good at all, I have to be here. I have to keep my job. If I accuse a fellow teacher without proof, a fellow teacher with connections, of unsolicited communication, of spam, what happens? I have no proof. Maybe I'm destroying an innocent man. Maybe people stop believing in him, maybe they stop believing in me. Does he lose his job, or do I lose mine? Do I do any good, or do I lose the chance to do any good? You're a smart kid, Ben. You've got all the questions and all the answers. You tell me. What's the right thing to do? Play the game, flip over the chessboard, what?”

But what about Roy? I manage not to say it. My chest is warm, and my eyes are prickly. It's as if I can feel every one of the hairs on my arms separately. It's not just Roy. They did it to Gomez too. They backed her into a corner, and she had to kill something to go on. Something in herself. My teeth are hurting and I realize I've been clenching my jaw so hard the muscles are tired.

I put my hand out and touch hers. Then I walk out the door.

After school, I go to the admin wing and pretend to read the noticeboard until there's no one in the staff room. I walk into the walk-in stationery closet and close the door. It's pretty dark in here. It smells of paper and dust and fluoro markers. The closet seems to suck in every sound in the school. They could all be just outside the door. A chair scraping. Footsteps coming and going. A man's voice. A woman's voice. A copier flipping out sheets. A man's voice. A giggle. The copier stops. A beep. Footsteps coming closer. Shit. There's the box one of the printers came in. I only just fit. A light switch clicks.

“Lee, where did you say the copier paper is?”

“Well, golly, Min, maybe I should come in there and help you look.”

“Would you do that?”

More footsteps. The door closes.

“Mmm. Where is that pesky paper?”

“Oh. Do you think you're going to find it there?”

“Well, mmph, it's got to be somewhere. Mmm. Ow.”

“What?”

“Your gun.”

“Just shove it out of the way.”

“There. Ok?”

“Oh. Ah. That's right.”

Something big pushes up against the box. It slides sideways then hits something.

“Oh. Oooh.”

This box can take only so much. I brace my hands against the side that's taking the thrusts, but I can't push back too hard or they might notice. And no way can it withstand a direct hit to the top. If that happens I'm history.

“Ahhh.”

“Oh God. Oh God!”

“Mmmmmaagh!”

“Whew.”

Rustling and the sound of a zip.

“Ok?”

“Fine. You?”

“Mmm.”

“Oh, here's the paper.”

“Always the last place you look.”

The door opens, the footsteps move away, the door closes, the copier starts up again. They leave. After ten minutes or so I hear keys jingling.

“Locking up. Anybody here? Locking up.”

The lock clicks. The janitor shuffles off.

I wait a few more minutes just to be sure. The school has gone quiet. I push open the flaps of the box and stand up. My feet have gone to sleep and my knees are burning. After some stretches I feel like I can move without stumbling. The staff room is dark, but I don't need much light. It's strange to think of the teachers here. This is their life. They come here and drink their coffee and eat their lunches. They have their careful friendships, their passions, the people they can stand, the people they can't. Probably they don't think about us much. Mostly they drift through it, I guess, like we do.

There's a workstation chained to a desk. The security is really slack, but you can't just hack in from outside the network. You need a machine the sysadmin builds for you, or a workstation connected inside the firewall. I power it up and wait for the login prompt. They never change their passwords. Roy social-engineered Wilhelmina Braddocks' password 18 months ago and it still works. She may be the principal, and she knows how to handle a Magnum no question, but she's totally technophobic. It's all she can do to work a photocopier. She kept forgetting her password and she was getting embarrassed about asking the sysadmin to give her new ones. Roy used to help her with stuff like that. Figuring out where she saved a document, how to print something. He suggested she write it on a post-it and hide it where no-one would find it. She stuck it under the keyboard. Old Min, who would have thought?

It's not too hard to find Mrs Beamish. Beamish never left home. That was probably her idea. She had to work hard to keep him alive, she said. Too bad she didn't watch him a little more closely. Beamish's address is on the school intranet. He lived pretty close to the school. It's not all that great a neighborhood. Not much better than where I live. It's funny how they care so much about their children's education but they pay the teachers shit.

I already know where to find the detention records. Roy and I came in and hacked the student database once before. Just to see if we could. It was so easy. We didn't hack our own records. Too risky, and anyway we were both doing fine. Roy just thought it would be funny if Ted got a few good marks for once. I didn't think it was such a great idea, and sure enough. Ted was so surprised and thrilled, then they figured out something was wrong with the results and changed them back and gave him a hard time. As if he could have done it. So then he was miserable. He somehow knew it was Roy. I never let on it was me as well.

Beamish was the detention master. He actually liked it, and of course the other teachers were happy to leave him to it.

I scroll back through the entries and there it is. Fauntleroy Nebuchadnezzar Kelly, three afternoons one week, four afternoons another week, never a week with less than two. There's a run towards the end with five afternoons for four weeks running. Just Roy, him and Beamish alone together in the empty school. Then right at the end, for a week, nothing. Was Roy away for that whole week? I don't remember. I look up his attendance records.

Absent every day. The final absent notice is the last thing Beamish ever did. Just before Roy shot his lights out.

Chapter 10 - Greed

The steps up to Beamish's front door could use some paint, but there are hanging plants and wind chimes and a couple of plaster gnomes standing on the porch. There's a cane chair with a cushion covered in a mat of short black hair.

I press on the bell but I can't tell if it works. The insulation on the bell wire is cracked and there's green corroded copper peeking through.

The door opens. She looks a whole lot better without makeup. Her hair is pinned up at the back. There are grey wisps escaping all around her face, and it looks softer that way. The pouches under her eyes are not so dark and puffy.

“Yes?”

She squints up at me for a couple of seconds, then puts on the glasses that are hanging on a lanyard around her neck.

“What is it?”

“Mrs Beamish, I'm Ben Hollins. We met at ... Mr Beamish's funeral. I was a student of his, I...”

“I remember.”

The wind is rising and the chimes are making this strange warbling noise. I suppose you'd get used to it.

“You'd better come in.”

She stands aside and I brush past her into a narrow hall. She shuts the door and flicks a couple of deadlocks. I feel something touch my calf. A black cat is winding itself between my legs. An illegal pet, in Beamish's house? Mrs Beamish leads me half way down the hall, and ushers me into a parlor. The cat trots ahead. Two bulging armchairs squeeze either side of a round glass table. There's a sideboard covered in framed photos.

“Please. Sit. Do you want tea?”

“Yes, thank you, Mrs Beamish, tea would be nice.”

She's old enough to be unorthodox, and this house is a little too comfortable. She heads down the hallway toward the back of the house. I can still hear the wind chimes.

I suppose I'm sitting in Beamish's chair. The cat is looking at me like she thinks it's hers. There's a magazine rack full of gun magazines. I pick one up but it's not my thing. Sniper Aficionado. How people get any fun out of lying on their stomach covered in camouflage doing nothing for hours on end I have no idea. I get up and wander over to the sideboard. The cat jumps straight up on the chair and turns around about ten times. Then it settles down and blinks at me.

My God. Beamish, when he was about my age. He always had the little beady eyes, but back then they just looked intense, and his face could have gone either way. His chin hasn't weakened and lost its definition, and his mouth isn't all pursed up. He's wearing polished hiking boots and a plaid shirt tucked neatly into pants pulled high and belted tight, standing straight with his hands by his sides, in front of a sign that says “Ridge Trail 16m”.

Next to it there's a photo face down. I pick it up. It's a guy standing in front of the same sign. He looks more relaxed, like he's worn the outfit before, but the way he holds his shoulders is just like the picture of Beamish. He's tall, and thin, gray hair, a narrow face. I've seen this guy somewhere. Not long ago. Strange how you can know that you know something but still not know it. There's a footstep in the hall. I face the photo back down and turn toward another picture of Beamish, with a mortarboard on his head, next to his mother. The four black eyes stare straight back at me.

“Milk?”

“No thank you.”

“Get down, greedy girl.”

She shoos the cat off the chair. We sit down, our knees touching the little table. She puts a saucer under the table and pours a little milk into it. She offers a plate of cookies.

“These are homemade. He used to love these.”

I have to hand it to her, she makes good cookies. They're chewy, somewhere between hard and soft, and they have ginger in them. She nods at the picture with the mortarboard.

“He graduated first in his class. I was so proud of him that day.”

“But you said...”

I stop myself a little too late.

“I said he was a moron. Well, so he was. All he had to do was keep his head down and work hard and shut up and he might have made it to principal, then a department job, maybe the school board. He knew how to work hard, but he didn't know how to shut up. For a while he was working on a doctorate. Don't know what happened to that. Instead he ends up dead in an entry level teaching job at forty three.”

I don't say anything.

“Now you, you know how to shut up. I noticed it at the funeral. You don't let on any more than you have to. I don't know what you're thinking, why you're here, or anything about you. Not from anything you've said. I read the papers.”

She looks at me shrewdly. I look back, trying not to make it into a staring contest.

“Why are you here?”

People always seem to be asking me this. It's just as well or I'd never find out.

“I want to know what was going on between your son and Roy.”

“The boy who died. Kelly.”

“That's right. Mr Beamish spent some time with Roy. Detention mostly. Did he ever talk about it?”

“What are your thoughts? Abuse? A love affair? Conspiracy? Drugs? Something more disgusting?”

She pins me down with those sharp eyes. I can't even look away.

“I don't know. But I don't want to just leave it. People are acting like these things just happen. They don't just happen. Something makes them happen.”

I stop myself again.

“See, you notice when you're getting carried away. Jack never did. He could walk into a room full of people willing to give him the benefit, and walk out five minutes later, leaving behind a roomful of lifelong enemies. He brought people together, I suppose, gave them a common cause. Hating him.”

“I never knew his first name. What was it?”

“I just told you. Jack. Never held with all this Uncomfortablist crap. Jack never held with anything else. His was always the right and true way. Everybody else was an unbeliever, a dilettante, a weakling. He was the holiest of holies. Did you know he wore a hair shirt?”

“He what?”

“Come on, I'll show you.”

She leads the way up the steep staircase. At the top there's a door with “No Entry to Unauthorized Personnel” written in faded, childish capitals with a marker pen. We go in. A bed, a chest of drawers, a desk. The cat has followed us in and Mrs Beamish chases her out and shuts the door.

“His cat. Now I'm stuck with it.”

She opens a drawer and takes out a folded garment. She tosses it to me.

It's an undershirt, with long sleeves, made of stiff, thick cloth, gray brown, like coarse hand-woven canvas with a sandpaper finish. A few inches in from the left armpit there's a small, neat hole.

“Goat hair. You can get them in synthetic, but he wasn't allergic to synthetic. He preferred something that would rub him raw, bring on some serious inflammation. He always had a skin infection. Ruined his temper.”

“He wore this?”

“Every day.”

The walls are bare, except for a framed motto in needlepoint over the chest of drawers.

“In Greed is Our Destruction.”

Always a load of laughs. It's plain lettering, with no decoration, gray and brown, like everything else in the room.

“He was good with his hands. Made that himself.”

The bed is made with sharp corners, the pillow perfectly aligned with the bedhead. On top of the chest of drawers, evenly spaced, are a jug, a bowl and a Santa snow globe. In a corner there's a long black gun case. The child's desk

is in the opposite corner, where the roof slopes down, under a window. On the desk, closed up, dead center, is Beamish's tabula.

She follows my gaze.

“They gave me his personal effects. That's the shirt he was shot in. By your friend Roy. I washed it and folded it the way he likes. Is that what you came for? His tabula?”

It's no trouble keeping my mouth shut around this woman. She takes my breath away.

“Take it. I haven't looked. Take the gun too if you want. And if you find anything...”

I wait.

“Keep your mouth shut.”

Chapter 11 - White

I'm walking back from Beamish's place, with the tabula in my backpack and the gun case in one hand. It's a long way home in the dark. The arm holding the Barrett is aching from the weight and my hands are going numb in the cold wind. I'm on an elevation, and every now and then I catch sight of the scattered city lights. There are a few searchlights swinging around, and a flashing red light on top of the big tower down at the docklands.

Around here it's empty warehouses and office buildings, boarded up and falling down. There are faded ads on some of the dirty, dark brick walls.

“Radiant, for Shirts that are Whiter than White! The active ingredient in this product is phosphorous, a serious threat to the environment. Phosphorous destroys vital waterways.”

“Wacked Out of Your Tiny Mind? Eat Crunchy Munchies, for Dindins, Brekkies and Lunchies. Crunchy Munchies contain large quantities of sugar, salt and petrochemicals and have no nutritional value whatever. Obesity kills.”

Gomez told us about this. They never bothered to outlaw commercial advertising, they just made a rule that if you ran a campaign you had to spend the same amount on a campaign to talk people out of it. Sure enough, there were people who didn't get it and actually tried to keep advertising. For simplicity they just ran the two campaigns side by side. They tried to make the anti-copy boring, and maybe it worked for a while, but as the economy died and the government monopolies took over it all just went away. Ghost ads are all that's left. Roy used to come up with these great ghost ads for people we knew.

“Need Someone You Can Rely On? Try Asafoetida! When Predictable Matters. Warning: May be difficult to remove. Avoid contact with skin.”

We never used to do it when other people were around. Except that one time, at the lockers, maybe Roy didn't realize Ted was in range. I tried to shut him up but once he got going he could only hear himself.

There are no buses at this time of night, and not many cars. There's a big black one behind me, though, and when it doesn't pass me I turn around and take a look. It's cruising slowly in the lane next to the curb. I can't see anything through the tinted windows. I don't particularly want to know what's inside. Chances are I won't like it.

At the next street I turn left and as soon as I'm around the corner I duck into a lane way. There's a dumpster and I take cover behind it. The ankle holster and the snubby go in my backpack. I shove my backpack under some garbage in the dumpster. I flip the Barrett case open. It's a beautiful gun, no question, but Beamish had some really bizarre ideas. There are two barrels in there, one full length and one sawed off, and two stocks. That explains why the fucking case is so heavy. I have no idea what he was thinking. A .50 caliber handgun? What the hell, I take the short barrel and stock. It goes together quickly and smoothly. I can lift it, just. There are a couple of magazines, eight shots in each. He was worried about the ten shot jam. I have to hand it to him, he was methodical. I load one and pocket the other, and shove the case in the dumpster.

I've been checking for the black car at the entrance to the lane way. Nothing so far. The other end of the lane ends in a hurricane fence. No way out in that direction. I get as much of the Barrett as possible under my jacket and hug the wall back to the lane entrance. I lean out just far enough to see with one eye. Nothing. There's no cover worth talking about. I take a few breaths and get my pulse rate down a little.

I walk out of the side road and start for home again. The wind has dropped and every sound is sharp. There's the background growl, the endless slow grinding of the city's life support, and over that the sirens, the clashes of gears, the shriek of big trucks braking. And soft but unmistakable, the tires of a big car, gripping and releasing the bitumen behind me.

I move faster and the tires keep up. I turn. The black car is in the curb lane. It slows and stops. I haven't got time for this. I take out the Barrett, place my legs well apart, left knee bent in front, right leg straight behind, brace the little stock tight into my shoulder, lean into it, aim at the center of the grille, and slowly, smoothly, squeeze the trigger.

The recoil doesn't dislocate my shoulder, as far as I can tell, but it spins me round and slams me into a brick wall. I slide down it, a little dazed, and sit there for a while. I guess it must have made a noise, but all I can hear is a single steady high note. I turn my head and take a look at the black car. It hasn't moved. No one gets out. There's some steam or smoke coming from underneath the hood and there's liquid running out on to the road.

It looks like I'm not going to need another shot. Just as well. I slide back up the wall and move away from the car, using the wall to keep me on track. I'm not really sure what the next move is going to be.

“Help you?”

I turn around but someone grabs the Barrett and pulls it out of my hands. It's a relief really, that thing is heavy.

“Ebenezer Hollins, ain't it?”

He takes the magazine out of the Barrett.

“Detective Halloran. We met. Jesus fucking Christ, kid, you could hurt someone with one of these things. Not to mention property damage. Come on, someone I want you to talk to.”

He grabs my shoulder, and a pain shoots right through my skull. I retch. Halloran stops.

“If you're going to heave, do it now, before you get in the car. Not that we're gonna bother cleaning the upholstery after what you did.”

The feeling passes. I nod. Halloran more or less carries me to the car and opens the rear door. I get in. Halloran gets in after me. The other guy in the back seat has white hair and a narrow face. I realize I've seen him twice before. Once in a photo on Beamish's sideboard, and once in his pajamas.

He's wearing clothes now. It's a suit. Nobody wears them any more. It's dark, with thin stripes running straight down the legs and slanting down the wide lapels. It's a beautiful thing. A black shirt, the top buttons undone. There's gold chain around his neck, disappearing down into the white chest hairs.

“Ben?”

He reaches out a hand and I shake it. Even that hurts.

“You can call me Mr White.”

“Not Beamish?”

“Feel free to call me whatever you like. What is that, Halloran, a sawed-off Barrett? Ben, Ben, Ben. I am surprised at you, I must say. It's not like you to act on impulse.”

“I'm tired. I had a long day.”

“Yeah, that's right. I understand you didn't get much sleep last night. I'm not feeling terribly well rested myself. It may not surprise you to learn I woke up in an unfamiliar bed with mud all over my pajamas and a rip in my dressing gown. And then I remembered a strange dream, Ben. Rain, guns, men in black.”

“I heard dreams are about sex. Did it make you hard?”

Smart. Piss off the guy who can disable two heavily armed vigilantes with a shovel. I really need to go home and get some sleep.

“Please don't imagine that I lack a sense of humor, Ben. I have a highly developed sense of humor. Some would say over-developed. But you see, Ben, I try to look at it from the viewpoint of the police. Overworked, underpaid, they have their hands full, and Halloran in particular I know believes in a degree of laissez-faire, but if something starts looking like spam, they are obliged to act. An unsolicited communication, Ben, in this case in the form of four, perhaps five persons with assault weapons knocking down my door in the middle of the night. It's intrusive, Ben, surely you can see that. Then you snoop around the home of a woman for whom I have certain protective feelings. You follow that up with blowing a hole in a man's engine block when all he wants is a little conversation. You're sending me messages, Ben, messages for which I am not asking. I'm concerned about how that might appear to the police. Halloran, what's your take on all this? From the official standpoint?”

“It don't look too good, I'll say that.”

“Would you call it, I don't know, spam?”

“Not wanting to be judgmental, on the surface it does look a lot like spam. Subject to further investigation and like that.”

“And there you have it, Ben. There's my problem. As I say, I know a little about you, what I read in the papers, what my sources tell me, and much of it is admirable. It would be a terrible shame to see a young man, a hero, an inspiration to the community, accused of spam, perhaps even convicted. With the inevitable consequences.”

This prick is enjoying himself, but I've had enough.

“Ok, White, you keep your filthy fucking hands off little kids and I'll quit spamming you. Deal?”

There's that high frequency sound again. When I shake my head it doesn't change. It's like I have a sine wave generator in my head. The human mind is an amazing thing. I open my eyes and I'm there in the back seat with Halloran and White staring down at me. Too bad. I was hoping to wake up somewhere else.

“Ben, forgive me, I upbraided you for acting on impulse and then I succumb myself. I may have misheard you. What was it you said?”

“I said you're a pedo fucker and you can eat shit and die.”

It's tempting not to wake up at all, but something in me knows this is not the place to sleep. I come around and my head feels very fuzzy. I can see stars, just like in the cartoons. It's not like a ring of little cheeping birdies, though, it's just small moving lights, and they're still there, drifting outward to the edges of my vision, even when I finally get my eyes open.

“Now where did you get an idea like that, Ben? Just out of curiosity?”

I'm starting to feel a little bit cautious about talking to this guy, so I just shake my head.

“Ben, you have given me a great deal of information. I'm going to have to process this information, and then I'll get back to you.”

He seems to mean it. He's looking quite thoughtful.

“We were going to drop you off home, but unfortunately circumstances make that impossible. What I suggest, you start walking now, and next time we speak, I hope our discussion can take place in an atmosphere of mutual respect.”

Halloran gets out. I get out. I manage a grin at Halloran.

“Hey, by the way, you better move this car. Zero parking.”

Halloran takes a step toward me.

“Halloran! Give him his gun back.”

Halloran hands over the Barrett. I wait. He hands over the magazine.

“And Ben!”

I bend down. White's thin lips are turned up at the corners.

“Maybe you ought to consider something a little smaller?”

Chapter 12 - Quake

“Ben? Ben?”

The voice is a rasp, it's a face I can't see, the light is behind it, a shadowy form, and it spins around and the robe flies up and the face has changed, the hair is white and the thin lips part and start to whisper,

“...information, information...”

The snow in the globe is swirling, churning, out of the storm comes a man in red, and he throws out his arms and he sings to the sky,

“... ashes to ashes, dust to dust...”

and out of the dark comes the rasping voice,

...the worst, the worst, the worst, the worst...”

and the hands of the children are reaching out, their arms so thin and their bones so light, and the door bangs open, someone coming, a man in black, a face I can't see, and it's moving closer, into the light and it has no mouth and it has no eyes and I'm trying to speak but my throat is too tight and my arms are too weak but I'm trying to fight and I whimper and moan and the faces are nodding, they smile and they wink and their voices are whispering,

“...I concur, I concur...”

“Ben? Ben! Do you have any idea what time it is?”

My heart is beating hard. My mouth is dry. What time is it? All the same it's nice and warm and quiet in here. No guns going off, no tough guys beating the shit out of me. Seems like since forever I've been waking up and thinking better of it and going back to sleep. People tell you to sleep on it, and let me tell you, it really works. You must be thinking about things while you're out. Every time I come out of a doze, something is a little clearer. Things people said, things I saw. And every time there are more questions. But that's good. Gomez is right about that. It's all about the questions.

What did White mean, I gave him a great deal of information? I didn't give him shit. Is he Beamish's father? Why did Zeb and the group go after him? Where does their money come from? What did Beamish do to Roy? Why did Roy kill him?

“Are you masturbating in there?”

My door opens. I pull the pillow over my head.

“Ben, you stayed in bed all day yesterday, now you can get up and get dressed.”

“Fuck, Ma, it's Sunday.”

“That's right, it's fucking Sunday, and you're going to fucking church.”

“We never go to church.”

“We're starting now. It's time we got some goddam religion in this family.”

You don't argue with Ma when her mind is made up. I couldn't move yesterday, but today's a little better. I can't stand up at first, I'm walking around stooped like a gorilla, but after a while my spine starts to straighten out. I'm looking for something to put on. The clothes I wore for Roy's funeral are hanging in the closet. I suppose I better wear them. I feel pretty stupid in that kind of outfit. It's meant to look like the standard Party homeless shelter rags, but it's well made and cut and costs a lot. The perfect compromise of principle and economy. The Uncomfortablists themselves wear genuine crap, and everybody else wears fake crap.

The Barrett is back in its case, under a rug on the top shelf of the closet. My backpack is on the floor next to my desk. It was all still there in the skip when I went back for it. I still don't feel fully dressed. I open up the tote to get my gun and there's Beamish's tabula. I have to look at that. I'll do it when I get home from church. If I get home. I tell you, it is not safe to walk the streets.

I think about Halloran, and White, and the grey car and the blue van. There's another question. Who were they? It wasn't Halloran, or White. We took White by surprise, right up until he took us by surprise. There are maybe two groups tracking Eternal Vigilance 14674. Not to mention now we have White on our case. And any of them might be interested in Beamish's tabula.

“Ben, hurry up!”

“Just a minute, Ma.”

I take a screwdriver out of my desk drawer and open up the tabula. I've seen this model before. The disk comes out really easily when you know what to undo first. I grab a post-it and write a little message and put it in the spot where the disk used to be. The disk goes in my pocket, along with extra ammunition. The tabula goes back in the backpack under the desk.

“Ben!”

“Ok, Ma!”

I pick up a comb and take a look in the mirror. For a couple of seconds I hear that high frequency ringing again. The face I'm looking at has two black eyes.

There's a pretty good turnout. We find a place in one of the pews at the back. The organ is tooting away softly and everyone is nodding and smiling at everyone else. A few people nod and smile at me and Ma, and when they see my eyes they hardly even register. Just a tiny touch of concern, and then they smile some more. You forget that people are basically ok. Families, little kids, old people, you can tell they're decent just from looking at the backs of their heads. The little tufts of hair at the crown, the glimpse of scalp at the parting, the buns and plaits and bows and ponytails, the way they've tried to make themselves look right.

Ma didn't say anything about my face either, but I think she might be saving something up for later. Half way to the front there's a group that makes me suck in my breath. Ma gives me a look. I point with my chin. There's a small brown head that keeps bobbing, and a straight-backed woman with a touch of gray, and a dark, curly head beside her. The woman turns to shush the kid and sure enough.

I guess it's a positive thing that Clytemnestra feels up to leaving the house. Maybe Aggie has gone again.

The organ stops and the chatter fades. The Virgin Barbie shimmers out onto the stage, smiling beatifically, and takes up her position at the left. The Bunny struts out to the right in her stilettos. Santa enters and moves to the pulpit. He gives us the eyebrow treatment for half a minute or more, then he throws back his head and thrusts his beard straight out at us.

“I am jealous, and I revengeth; I revengeth, and am furious; I will take vengeance on my adversaries, and I reserveth wrath for mine enemies.”

He cracks his voice like a whip. The woman to my left shivers from head to toe. Her eyes open wide.

“I am slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked: I hath my way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of my feet.”

Santa stares us down for a while, making sure we know he's talking to us. People are lowering their eyes and looking pretty guilty. The organ is throbbing soft, low and dark.

“I rebuketh the sea, and maketh it dry, and drieth up all the rivers: Bashan languisheth, and Carmel, and the flower of Lebanon languisheth.”

His voice echoes a little, like the room is getting bigger. He pauses for breath and takes it up a notch. The Bunny begins a slow beat on the timpani.

“The mountains quake at me, and the hills melt, and the earth is burned at my presence, yea,” and he aims this straight at us, “the world, and all that dwell therein.”

We're in trouble now. The boom of the timpani accelerates into a roll of thunder.

“Who can stand before my indignation? And who can abide in the fierceness of my anger? My fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by me.”

The Bunny wacks out a final beat, the organ strikes some weird horror chord, and the Virgin Barbie hits the gong so hard it's a miracle it doesn't break. The last few words reverberate from the speakers, fading slowly. We're all completely terrified at this point. Whatever we did, we're really sorry and we will never do it again.

But it looks like Santa might let us off the hook. There's a hint of a twinkle in his eye. He sounds almost chatty.

“So fell Nineveh, the capital of the mighty Assyrian empire. Never again did its cohorts lay to waste the earth they conquered, never again did its chariots rage across the land, fouling the air and making a desert where once grew gardens.”

Tough on Nineveh, but it had it coming.

“And so fell the great Empire of Consumption, laid waste by its own waste, asphyxiated by its own exhalations, crushed by its own greed and ambition, its resources spent and its energy exhausted.”

His eyes dart lightning.

“But of all that is material and all that is spiritual in this world, know for certain that I am both the origin and the dissolution. O conqueror of wealth, there is no truth superior to me! Everything rests upon me, as pearls are strung on a thread.”

He's back on our case again. Not too many conquerors of wealth in here. They can just about afford their fake rags.

“Those miscreants who are grossly foolish, who are lowest among mankind, whose knowledge is stolen by illusion, and who partake of the atheistic nature of demons do not surrender unto me.”

There's a swish of soft cymbal. Santa's voice turns sweet.

“But he who is situated in knowledge of me I consider to be just like mine own self. Being engaged in my transcendental service, he is sure to attain me, the highest and most perfect goal.”

The Bunny strokes the chimes and the temple fills with a sound like the fluttering of tiny robot cherubs. The organ starts tooting again.

“Want to thank you all for coming. And remember, we need your help to continue our important work. Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my temple, and I will open the windows of heaven for you. I said Ho!”

Everybody yells “Ho!” and the band backs it up with a thump.

“I said Ho!”

“Ho!”

“HO!”

“HO!”

The organ holds a big bluesy chord and Santa throws out his arms to the crowd.

“Love you all.”

Santa leaves the stage. The Virgin Barbie and the Bunny get a rhythm going and the organ falls off the chord into a riff. The Bunny swivels her hips up to the mike.

“When you die you're dead, for a long, long time,

If you waste your life, it's an awful crime,

Spread it while you can, while you breathe and live,

Cause it's hard to take, but it's good to give.”

The Virgin Barbie comes in on a harmony.

“Good to give, good to give, hard to take but it's good to give.”

The Bunny steps back and The Virgin Barbie takes the mike.

“For a truth a truth, for a lie a lie,

For a tooth a tooth, for an eye an eye,

And if you can't forget, then at least forgive,

Cause it's hard to take, but it's good to give,

Good to give, good to give, hard to take and it's good to give.”

They're cheek to cheek for the chorus.

“However much you make it you can't take it with you when you go, oh, oh, oh,

For divine accreditation better make a big donation, don't you know, know, know, know”

The organ drops out and the girls almost whisper against the thump of the drums.

“No matter where you are, he is watching you,

Whatever you say, and whatever you do,

The big guy knows when you're asleep and when you're wide awake,”

The organ comes back in and they howl together.

“He know it's good to give, but it's hard to take,”

Hard to take, good to give, hard to take and it's good to give.”

The buckets are passing down the pews. People are throwing in wads of cash. Ma looks flustered and starts rooting around in her purse. I grab a bill from my pocket and put it in for both of us. I can live on the school lunches for a week.

“Good to give, won't you please believe me when I tell you that it's good to give.”

Santa is waiting as we pass out through the temple doors. He's kissing babies and pinching little kids on the cheek.

“Esmeralda, how lovely to see you again. How did it work out with that little problem you were having?”

“Oh, Santa, I just told my husband I knew what he was up to. Just those words like you said. It stopped, right then, all of it. How did you know? And how can I thank you?”

“Thank me with your kindness to others. With your sacrifice. With your prayers. Bless you.”

When we go past he takes Ma's hands in his.

“So glad you were able to come and bring your fine son with you. And if you ever need to speak to me, to unburden your heart, I'm always with you. Always.”

He hands Ma a little snow globe. She turns it over and the snow swirls around and settles to reveal a tiny Santa with his arms out in welcome.

“Oh, thank you so much. I'm not much for confessing...”

“It's just a conversation. A heart to heart. Hold it in your hands and think of me. I do so hope we'll see you again. And I look forward to tomorrow night, Ben?”

Ma gives Santa a confused smile that disappears when she turns to face me.

“What was that about?”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. I'm going to be studying with Santa.”

“Studying? For a life in the church?”

“Well, I don't know, maybe...”

“Oh, Ben!”

She throws her arms around me. Funny, it never occurred to me she'd be pleased. Suddenly someone grabs hold of my legs. I can't move. I look down and Lock is grinning up at me. I grin back.

“Mahitabel. Ebenezer.”

It's Clytemnestra. We turn to say hello and May lifts her face. She has two black eyes. For a few seconds we just stare. I break first.

“Snap.”

May is shaking her head in disbelief. Then she reaches out and touches my cheek.

“Your poor face.”

I touch hers.

“Come on. Ma, me and May are going.”

Clytemnestra and Ma are in serious conversation. They smile distractedly at us and get back to it. Lock starts to follow us but Clytemnestra keeps a grip on him. May takes my hand and we push through the crowd and get out of there.

Chapter 13 - Secret

A duck is paddling along the edge of the canal, trailed by a few ducklings. From time to time she pokes around under the oily surface, and the ducklings try to imitate her, ducking under and sticking their tails into the air and bobbing back up and flicking the water off their wings. They haven't got the moves, though. They need a bit more weight and experience. For now they're just playing at it.

May is on one end of the bench and I'm on the other. She hasn't really stopped shaking her head in disbelief. I told her pretty much everything up until last night. I'm not sure I'm remembering everything right.

"Oh, and Min and Lee came into the closet while I was in there, and did it."

"They what?"

"They fucked. It sounded pretty hot, too."

"Where were you while this was going on?"

"In a box."

"Fuck, Ben. I mean, fuck."

I shrug.

"Do you have any idea what you're doing? At all?"

"Not really."

"You're running around shooting guns and attacking people and hiding in boxes."

It's true, when I see it through May's eyes it doesn't look all that good.

"Are you done, do you think? Or are you going to keep on going until you kill someone or someone kills you?"

This isn't going that well. I was hoping May would have some ideas. She sees things I don't see, but sometimes they're things I don't really want to see.

"What exactly are you trying to achieve?"

This is another one of those questions. They're the first questions to occur to everyone else and I never think of them.

"I'm trying to find out what's going on. Why Roy did it. What all these people are up to."

"It's none of your fucking business."

I don't know what to say to that. It's like you hear those words and all thought stops. Game over. Fuck that.

"That's just a slogan. That's just the fucking Uncomfortablist agenda. It's not an argument. It is my fucking business. It's my fucking business if my friend dies, it's my business if some fucker was hurting him, it's my business if some fucker hurts me. It's my business if your bastard stepfather hurts you."

May bursts into tears. I move over and put an arm around her. She pushes it off.

"You don't have any idea what you're talking about. You don't understand anything."

I put my arm around her again and pull her close to me. She sobs against my chest. She's calming down. I stroke her hair. Her breathing is back to normal. I kiss her throat, just below her ear. She turns her face up and I kiss her on the lips.

We sit there on the bench, watching the ducks.

I put May on the bus then head home. There's a police car parked outside our house. The neighbors are standing around in the hallway and I have to squeeze past them. Ma is talking to a bored-looking police woman.

"Ma'am, if you can't find anything missing then it is not a burglary."

"It's a break-in."

"It's a break-in, but it's not a burglary."

“Listen, honey, I don't care what you call it.”

“Ma'am, I'm going to caution you not to call me honey.”

I step up.

“Hello, I'm Ebenezer Hollins, I live here.”

“Ebenezer Hollins, Patrolperson Johnson, there's been a break-in. Can you ascertain if any items are missing?”

I look around as if I expect to see something, do a few little checks around the kitchen and bathroom, then I go into my room. My backpack is open and its contents are all over the floor. No tabula. I glance up at the closet shelf and the Barrett is still there under the rug.

Patrolperson Johnson is standing in the doorway. I shake my head.

“Nope, nothing here. I guess we haven't got much worth taking.”

“You'd be surprised what people bother to take. We had one, they stole a necktie, a teapot, and a bath toy.”

“Man, that's weird.”

“You know what it was? All bright orange.”

“Yow. The orange bandit.”

“That's right. We found them when we cruised past a house and all the gnomes in the yard were orange.”

“That's good police work.”

“Shut the fuck up. Well, I'll file a report but there's no way I'm calling it a burglary.”

“Thank you for your help. You must have got here pretty quickly.”

“Not a problem, sir. Ma'am.”

Patrolperson Johnson aims a curt nod at Ma and leaves. I shove my hand in my pocket. The disk is still there.

“Ben.”

Ma's arms are folded. I'm wondering what I'm going to tell her. For starters I try looking innocent.

“Any idea why someone would break into our house, Ben?”

I shrug and shake my head.

“What did they take?”

“A tabula. It used to belong to Mr Beamish.”

“And what's that in your pocket?”

I take it out and show her.

“What is that, the disk from the tabula?”

I shrug. Ma is looking very thoughtful.

“All right, Ben, I don't know what you're up to...”

“Fuck, Ma, I'm not up to anything...”

“Listen to me. I don't know what you're up to, and I'm not sure I want to know. But think about this. There are some things you might not want to know.”

“Like what?”

“That's all I'm saying. But think about it. I mean it. Once you know, you can't go back. Ever.”

Ma is standing there with her arms folded, but suddenly she doesn't seem so tough.

“What don't I want to know, Ma?”

She starts to smooth her church skirt.

“Cause I'm hearing this from a lot of people. You don't know anything, you don't understand anything, it's none of your business. What is it I don't know?”

“It's nothing.”

“Oh, it's nothing. So people are breaking into our place over nothing. People are shooting each other over nothing.”

Ma sits down on the sofa.

“Are you going to tell me?”

I never thought this day would come. My mother, unable to speak.

“That's ok, Ma. Because I'm going to find out. Whatever it is. The big secret.”

Oh shit. Two firsts in one day. I get a box of tissues and hand them to her and she blows her nose.

“It's Dad, isn't it?”

She dabs away at her face.

“Other people have photographs, Ma. Pictures of their Dad, to remind them.”

She's sobbing and gasping.

“Other people know the names of their parents.”

She throws back her head and howls. It's like some trapped animal.

“Please Ma.”

She sounds like she's choking. She gets control of it and the sniffing stops. She's back. She looks up at me and her eyes are hard. Her lips are set.

“You're not going to tell me, are you?”

She shakes her head.

“Listen Ma, I got to go. Will you be all right?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want me to find someone to sit with you?”

“Get the fuck out of here.”

I kiss the top of her head and head out.

Chapter 14 - Tuesday

He died when I was seven. I don't really remember him. When I think about it, I feel bad about forgetting him. So I don't think about it. I used to ask Ma about him sometimes. But you know how it is when you're a little guy. People can tell you any shit at all and you just take their word for it. You don't ask the questions.

Ma has stories that feel like they come from my memory. I feel like I lived them. But they're just anecdote. They're frozen, a still photo, and even if they weren't invented in the first place, they might as well have been. I used to ask for more details and there never were any details to tell. Nothing outside the frame.

The time I cut Dad's hair while he was asleep on the sofa. The time he took me out to the game and forgot he had me. Ran back and found me in the booth with the cotton candy man, high on sugar and red food coloring. The time he pretended to forget my birthday and then gave me a peacock kite. I feel those stories, the dread, the anticipation, the excitement, the joy, as if they really happened. Maybe they did. Maybe they even happened to me. The peacock kite is on my wall, faded and tattered. I guess that's evidence.

But when the stories never change, you get tired of hearing them. They only ever come out when there's someone new to hear them. Which hardly ever happens.

He got shot. People do. There doesn't have to be a reason. That's the official line. Natural attrition. The price of freedom, along with eternal paranoia. There were more details for my Dad's shooting than most people get. Most people, you just find them. Slumped over their kitchen bench, under a starred hole in the window. Lying in a pool of blood in the gutter. Under the trash in a dumpster. Dead in the bushes. Dead at school. Dead at the game. The dead aren't fussy about where they do it.

With my Dad, the anecdote has a bit of color. They found him with his gun in his hand, drawn, but not fired. The snubby. His wallet was gone. He was shot three times. Cause of death, cardiac arrest. As in, his heart wasn't doing anything much when they found him, seeing as how it had finished pumping everything it had all over the carpet in the hotel room.

What he was doing in a hotel room is not in the anecdote. That detail was never supplied. Or how it was possible for someone to sneak up and shoot him when he was always expecting trouble.

"Expect the absolute worst, Ben. You'll never be disappointed."

Maybe I heard that from Ma until I thought I'd heard it from him, but there's a voice that goes with that memory. Dark and raspy. What Dad did for a living is outside the frame. Maybe Ma told me and I didn't get it and forgot straight away. But I have an impression. I don't know where from. I think he was a cop.

I need a tabula so I can read this disk. I could try Gomez. She has the same model. But I'm not sure what to tell her. And she might not want to talk to me. Hell, it's her day off, she probably doesn't want to talk to anyone. And whatever is on the disk, she might not want to know. Now I'm sounding like my mother.

I could use a tabula at HQ. But I'd have to wait until group night, and I'd be surrounded by the guys, and they'll want to know what going on, and they'll be in a shitty mood because of the op going so pear-shaped.

Roy would have had no trouble with it. He had a ton of stuff at his place, wires and parts everywhere. Zeb will be there, but I might be able to talk to him.

I pull my hood on and keep my head down. He's in one of those security apartments. You wave a card over a reader. Roy used to keep it in his wallet in back pocket. He'd jump up and twist his ass over the reader so he didn't have to take his wallet out. Sometimes he'd moon the camera for good measure. I press the intercom button.

"What?"

"It's me."

"You alone?"

"Yeah."

"Sure? Anyone follow you?"

"Don't think so."

I've been checking. No black cars, no grey cars, no blue vans.

"Come on up."

The door clicks and I go in. You can't even use the stairs, you have to take the elevator. You can only choose the floor you're allowed to go to, before you get in. The ride is as smooth as silk. There's nothing on the inside except

gray walls and a black camera pointing down at you. I look at my feet. The elevator stops without a bump and the door slides open.

Zeb is waiting with his door open. He's wearing boxers and a dressing gown. I go down the hall and past him into the apartment.

It never occurred to me when I used to come here that Roy was cleaning anything up. It was such a mess. But now it's just unbelievable. The piles of books and electronic equipment have spread out all over the floor. There are a few narrow paths with soft, gray carpet showing through, leading to the bathroom and the bedroom. The dining table is completely covered in gun parts, piles of memory tabs, a couple of tabulas, dozens of ancient cellphones and what look like detonators. Plates and pots and cups are teetering in the kitchen sink and covering every inch of bench space.

There's a sour smell, too. Zeb could probably afford a cleaner but he doesn't want anyone coming here. So I guess it's a real privilege he let me in.

“What happened to your face?”

“I'll tell you later.”

“Get you anything? Glass of water?”

I can't see anything that looks clean enough to drink out of.

“No thanks.”

“What's on your mind, Ben?”

I pull the hard disk out of my pocket and put it on the table. He looks at it but doesn't move. Then he puts a hand on a pile of tabs and pushes them towards me.

“I'll show you yours if you show me mine.”

“Can I use this?”

I pick up one of the tabulas from the table.

“That's the shovel guy's tabula. Use the other one.”

I get it apart, install the hard disk and power it back up. It wants a password.

“You know the password?”

No, I don't know the password. But Roy used to say that most people don't know how to keep a secret. They want you to know who they are. They show you who they are, with everything they do. Their movements, their expressions, the words they choose. And for some reason, instead of choosing a random string of characters, people try to put their whole personality into their password. Either they're desperate for a creative outlet or they don't trust themselves to remember. It's pathetic either way. That was Roy's moral.

I start making some guesses. Beamish would try to be clever, but Beamish clever. And he probably couldn't bring himself to spell anything wrong. I get it on the ninth try.

“GreedyGirl”

The background is a picture of Beamish in camouflage holding the Barrett. He's at some shooting range. He looks younger, but maybe it's just because he's enjoying himself. Zeb pulls round a chair and sits down beside me.

There's nothing obvious. Beamish kept his desktop very tidy. Everything is in categories. He has color codes. It's notes for his classes, assignments, all about his work. Apart from the background picture you wouldn't know he had any other life.

I start browsing through file folders. I search for image files. There are gun pictures. There's a couple of Mrs Beamish, including a copy of the graduation photo. There's a short video of the cat climbing around in one of his bedroom drawers and getting stuck head down. No porn though. No kiddie porn, no grown ups, no nothing. If he had a sex life it had nothing to do with his tabula.

“Roy. Search for Roy.”

I try a few variations. Roy. Fauntleroy. Kelly. Zilch. Maybe there was something on here but he deleted it. I can try to find traces of deleted files later.

I check the histories and the caches. Net browsing history. As if the password wasn't enough, just the fact that this is here shows you he knew nothing about security. Guns again. No porn. Only his mother could love him. But there's other stuff. Maybe he found it by accident while he was looking for guns. Government sites, news sites, book sellers. I click on one of the links and there are two hippos in a river.

I keep thinking it's Tuesday.

I stare at it for a few seconds.

“Is that supposed to be funny? What does that mean?”

“Roy was here.”

“So Roy boosted Beamish's tabula.”

“Or Beamish let him use it. He couldn't have been in much of a hurry if he was looking at this.”

“Why would Beamish let him?”

“I don't know. He spent a lot of time in detention. Maybe so he wouldn't get bored.”

“This Beamish sounds like a nice guy.”

“You're right, that can't be it. Beamish must have wanted something.”

“Roy was helping him?”

“Roy used to help people with tech. It was hard for them and easy for him.”

“He was a good kid.”

Was he? It's the first time I've thought about it for a while.

“He was complicated.”

“So what did Beamish want?”

Beamish. Living with his mother and his cat. In a bad job and doing it badly. Universally hated.

“He wanted out.”

“Well, I guess he found it. Roy helped him out with that.”

“No. He wanted respect. He wanted to play with the big boys. The big guns.”

I start looking back over the files and folders. And I find it. In a folder called thesis.

“The Origins of the Uncomfortablism Movement in the Decay of Consumer Society – Evolution or Revolution? – A Revised Perspective by J. C. Beamish”

I'm bored to the point of self-injury before I even get to the end of the title. Fuck this man was dull. Now I'm going to have to read this shit.

I open up the document and try to read the first paragraph. My eyes keep sliding away from the page. I force them back. They don't want to go.

Beamish probably spent years working on it, dreaming of the awards, the adulation, the professorships, the board positions, the lecture circuit, the admiring graduate students. Beamish's ticket to the big-time, his Moby Dick, the obsessive compulsive gathering of a thousand minute factoids into a plodding and relentless, perfectly neat and perfectly pointless whole. But Beamish never finished it, so he never had to face the truth. Nobody is ever going to read it. Nobody but guess who.

I try again. My eyes keep drifting to the margin. It's full of comment markers. I turn on the full comment display and there are yellow post-its all over the page. All signed FNK. Fauntleroy Nebuchadnezzar Kelly.

“Is this what you mean?”, “Cut to the chase.”, “Unclear – rewrite or cut”, “Cut this”, “Cut entire section”

“So Roy was helping Beamish write his thesis?”

I don't answer Zeb at first. I find the change controls. There are two authors with changes in the document. Jack and FNK. Jack's are on. I turn it off and turn on FNK's. The text ripples. I start to read the first paragraph. It's Roy all right.

“In the early years of the twenty first century, the rise of environmental totalitarianism was unimaginable. A society dominated by fear and consumerism could barely spare the effort to condescend to the tree huggers who were gaining a modest voice in democratic assemblies. There was no time to be distracted by them, and insufficient support to justify attention to the issues they raised. What changed?”

“After the fall of the wall, the tiny green minority crept into the void left by the collapse of socialism. Where its agenda was defined with any clarity, it was the agenda of an increasingly irrelevant left. The principles of Uncomfortablism formed no part of the green movement. Whence came this paltry, inconsistent, vague and dangerous collection of empty slogans? And how was it, when the global economic collapse followed so soon after

the death of the left, that it was Uncomfortablism that took center stage, rather than any of the more moderate and responsible platforms that were, without doubt, more appropriate candidates?”

“Roy was writing it for him, Zeb.”

“So this fuck had Roy in detention every day to write his goddam thesis for him?”

“That's what it looks like.”

“No wonder Roy shot him.”

I can see it. Roy sitting around in detention, Beamish tapping away at his keyboard.

“Whatcha doin', Mr Beamish?”

Beamish shows Roy his masterpiece. This should give you some idea of what I'm made of, young man. Roy takes a look. Roy tears into it as only Roy can do. Beamish listens. Beamish experiences denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance.

That isn't enough for Roy. He decides to show Beamish how it's done. He pounds away at the keyboard, and, as he watches, Beamish realizes his dream is closer than he thought. Somewhere in Beamish is the brilliant boy with world enough and time. He recognizes Roy's talent. He knows Roy is right. The Uncomfortablists need their asses kicked. They'll enjoy it. Denying the very basis of their existence is exactly their kind of thing. They'll lap it up. And Beamish will enjoy it too.

They kept Beamish's title. Roy would have loved that title.

“I don't think that was it, Zeb. Roy was having fun.”

Zeb sits back and sighs.

“What the fuck happened?”

He looks around at the apartment.

“Will you look at this fucking place?”

Chapter 15 - Smoke

Zeb is washing and I'm drying. I never thought we'd get through it but the pots and dishes are gone and we're working on the cups and glasses. Zeb just wasn't seeing the mess until I showed up and he saw it through my eyes. I told him it didn't matter but then we decided to clean up. Zeb worked out a system. He's great with organizing.

It's good for me to see things through his eyes. I'm telling him about the stationery closet and he has to stop rinsing glasses for a second until he stops shaking. Then I tell him about Mrs Beamish and the walk home. When I get to the bit about shooting the car he stops washing and leans on the sink. I can't see his face. He's kind of sobbing. I think maybe he's going to explode.

"Listen, Zeb, I know it was a dumb move."

"Man, I can't let you out of my sight for a minute, now, can I?"

But as I describe the conversation in the car he gets serious again.

"So shovel guy gave you those eyes?"

"Yeah, I guess all we know is that his name isn't Mr White."

"Well, maybe we can find out a little more. Can you do your thing with his tabula and tabs?"

But it's not so easy this time. White's tabula has some serious security. The disk is encrypted, it needs a dongle. Zeb didn't get that when he grabbed the rest. White probably has it. I try the tabs in Beamish's tabula but they're encrypted too.

"I don't know, Zeb. This is munitions quality. Would anyone go to this much trouble to hide kiddie porn?"

"They might if they thought we were coming."

"But he didn't know. And how would he know how to do it? This is something else. Zeb, White said a couple of things. He said I gave him a lot of information, and he wanted to know where I got the idea he was a pedo."

"From the net. We found him grooming kids on a chat site. Monk found him."

"What put Monk on to him?"

"I don't know. Found him on the site I guess. What are you saying? That he isn't one? Read some of the things he was saying when he thought Monk was eleven years old. Better still, don't. You'd spew on my shoes."

"I think the information I gave him was that we thought he was a pedo. That told him something."

"What could that tell him? That we were on to him? We told him that already by showing up at his house."

"Zeb, suppose there's someone you don't like. You want to get rid of him."

"I put a cap in his ass. No hanging back. You check your facts, you check your options, you act."

"You don't want to do it yourself. It's not your sort of thing. And you want to make him look bad."

"Ok, I'm supposing."

"Suppose there's a vigilante group that goes around offing pedos, and somehow you know about it."

"That I can imagine. Yeah, well, as Roy would say, cut to the chase."

"So you don't have to kill the guy yourself. You just make out he's a pedo to the vigilantes."

"Shit."

"Anyone can go on a chat site and talk dirty to a twelve year old and give out the address of someone they don't like. And then you and Monk and the boys go and do their dirty work for them."

"Shit."

"Someone's using you, Zeb. You're somebody's assassination squad."

"Shit."

Zeb gets up and walks around the room. He's flexing his hands and making fists. I try to get him thinking.

"Where does the money come from?"

"What?"

"Someone's funding the group. Big time. The guns, the equipment. The vehicles. This apartment. Where does the money come from?"

Zeb slumps on to the sofa. He's watching his feet.

“Sponsorship. Like any group. We have an angel. An anonymous sponsor.”

“Who?”

“I don't know.”

“Come on, man, that's bullshit. Of course you know.”

“I'm telling you, Ben. Every month I go to two different mail boxes. There's an envelope in each one. One has a key or a ticket. The other has an address. I go there and pick up a bag. It's in a hotel room, or a locker at a station, or it's checked in a check room. That's it.”

“And the bag is full of money. Cash.”

Zeb nods.

“Anything else in the bag?”

Zeb shakes his head.

“How much money?”

“It depends. We have a good month, we do a lot of ops, it's more.”

“You never felt a little curious about who put it there?”

“Of course I did. I tried to find out.”

“No luck?”

“No. And that month the bag was empty.”

“So what? Are you doing this for money?”

“I'm doing it because it has to be done. I been doing it for more than ten years. Way before the money started.”

“How did it start?”

“One day a couple of years ago someone shoves an envelope under my door. Money and a note. The note says if I want more I have to open post office boxes in two separate places.”

“Did it say anything else?”

“Death to spammers.”

“Have you still got the note?”

Zeb gets up. He opens a drawer, takes out an envelope and hands it to me.

It's just a blank envelope. It has a printed note inside, on ordinary paper. Maybe you could analyze the print to figure out the model of printer. The Death to Spammers symbol is the same one you see everywhere.

“See, you can't tell anything from the note.”

“But you can from the envelope.”

“What are you talking about? It's blank.”

“So they didn't post it. They delivered it by hand. What about the envelopes in the post office boxes? Are they blank too?”

“I tried staking out one of the post office boxes. I didn't see anything, but they must have seen me.”

“It's so sweet and old-fashioned. Envelopes and keys and lockers. It's twentieth century. Why don't they just transfer funds to your account?”

“I don't know. Isn't on-line stuff traceable?”

“Maybe they're old fashioned people. They got used to the game fifty years ago and they don't want to change their moves.”

“Anyway, it's a big help to have cash. A lot of people in this game like it. I get great discounts. Cash money is never going to go away.”

Zeb starts patting his pockets and rummaging around. He stands up and goes out of the room and comes back with a smoking helmet.

“You don't mind?”

He puts it on and starts adjusting valves and gaskets. It's transparent plastic, but the bottom half looks like it's sprayed with a dark yellow film. He flips open the proboscis cover, takes out a little magazine, feeds three cigarettes into it, clips it back in and flips the cover shut. Then he presses a button. A cigarette pops out of the magazine into a

mouthpiece and a flame flickers at the end. Zeb sucks and the end starts to glow. The whole thing fills up with smoke to his eye level. There's a seal that goes over his nose and cheeks, so mostly it doesn't leak through into his eye space. He's squinting a little, though.

I never knew anyone who smoked before. Lots of people use heroin and cocaine and designer drugs, naturally. Most of the teachers at school use a cocktail of bennies and downers, although come to think of it Gomez doesn't and Beamish didn't. But smoking is so awkward. Having to do it inside an airtight helmet. That's typical fucking Uncomfortablists. They claim to be tolerant and then they make things so difficult everybody has to give up anyway. You'd think if a drug is dangerous enough they'd just make it illegal, but that would be making a decision.

“Hey, Zeb.”

He doesn't react.

“Zeb!”

His eyes stare out at me over the swirling smoke cloud. I can't see his lips move but I hear a muffled sound that could be “What?”

“Doesn't matter!”

I need a minute to think, anyway. So the anonymous sponsor is probably the same one who is using the group as an assassination squad. Possibly an older person, who may have been involved in crime or undercover work for around fifty years. It sounds like White.

Zeb flicks a switch on the helmet and a tinny voice comes out of a micro speaker in the proboscis.

“What were you going to say?”

“It sounds like White!”

“You don't have to yell. How could it be White? You're saying White funded us to go over there and wax him?”

“That's right. It doesn't make sense.”

“It's not supposed to make sense.”

By far the most popular slogan the Uncomfortablists ever devised. You drop that into a conversation, it stops dead. I would have thought better of Zeb. I give him a hurt look.

“It's a joke, Ben. Like Roy used to say.”

Zeb making jokes. And mentioning Roy. The man is one surprise after another.

“That's the thing, that's what I'm saying. It sounds like White, but it can't be White. So one of our assumptions is wrong.”

“White is the angel but someone else is using us.”

You don't want to assume, just because people don't talk much, that they're not thinking. It's times like this I can see how Roy got to be so fucking clever.

“Ok. So was the group used once? Just for White? Or is every disciplinary action you've ever done a hit for some bastard you don't know?”

Zeb's eyes go thoughtful above the cloud.

“We have to go back over the marks. Check the evidence. Find out if it was faked. Find out who they really were.”

“Zeb, how about instead of going after fake pedos we start going after these pricks.”

“I don't know. The guys won't like it. How do we square it with them?”

“We tell them these fuckers were using them. They'll be just as mad as you are.”

“Not sure that's such a great idea. They could react very badly to that. They might shoot the messenger, you know?”

Zeb presses a button on the proboscis and a little arm pushes the used cigarette out, crushing it into a hopper. Another cigarette pops up and he gets it going. Am I going to have to sit here and watch him smoke three of these things?

“We have to tell them. They've been killing innocent people.”

“No one is blameless.”

“That's just another bullshit Uncomfortablist slogan, Zeb. You know what I mean. You're killing people for something they didn't do.”

“We stop, the money stops.”

“So that's it. It really is about the fucking money.”

“The money stops, the group stops. You got any idea what it costs to run?”

“Haven't you got any saved up?”

“There's an emergency fund.”

“Zeb, wouldn't you call this a fucking emergency?”

The helmet bobs up and down. Zeb is nodding. I can't help it. The sight of Zeb sitting there in his boxers and his dressing gown with his fucking helmet on is too much.

“What's your problem?”

Another one of those questions. I really wish I knew. And the tinny voice just sets me off worse. Zeb unclips the helmet and pulls it off. All the smoke escapes out into the room. He waves it away. Suddenly the room fills with earsplitting howling. Zeb screams over the smoke alarms.

“What the fuck is your problem, Ben?”

I can't stop.

“Zeb...you know I heard smoking was quite bad for you! Have...have you ever thought about giving up?”

Dear Gomez,

Smoke. Where there's smoke there's fire. That's the assumption. If people want to hide something, there's going to be a smokescreen. You find a smokescreen, someone is hiding something. Blowing smoke up your ass. That's a smokescreen. If people are nice to you, you have to wonder. You want to know what's going on, you read the smoke signals.

Chapter 16 - Backstage

May is there on the bus, and makes room for me to sit beside her. We talk a little, but there's something between us. We can't really talk about the important things. After a while we stop talking, and we just sit with her head on my shoulder. What did she mean, I don't understand? It's all words anyway. We don't have to talk.

After class I wait as usual, while Gomez packs up. She doesn't notice me until she's finished. Then she just starts talking without looking at me.

"Ben, I won't be able to give you additional attention any more. It's not appropriate and I don't think we're seeing any benefit from the process. If you have any class business to discuss please do so in class. I'll have to ask you to fuck off."

She picks up her things and walks straight past me without meeting my eye.

"Wait. Wait!"

She stops.

"I mean it Ben. I made a mistake and it's time to stop."

"He didn't do it."

She knows what I mean, but she pretends not to.

"Who didn't do what?"

"Beamish. He wasn't hurting Roy. That's not what it was."

"Are you sure? How do you know?"

"I know. You were right. You had no proof because it wasn't happening. Something was happening but not that."

Gomez breathes a huge sigh. It's like something that was gripping her has suddenly let go.

"Oh, Ben. Can you tell me what it was?"

"I don't know enough. All I know for sure is that you were right. Doing nothing was the right thing. I wanted to tell you."

"Thank you. Thanks, Ben."

I give her my word of the day. She takes it and looks at it in a flustered way.

"I don't know if I should..."

"You were right about this too. It's not a mistake. It is helping. The concurring or whatever."

She reaches into her bag and takes out some sheets of paper and hands them to me. She goes.

Dear Ben,

It's true that some parties turn out badly, but that's no reason to stop going out and meeting people. You make a good point, though. If you can tell early on that the party is over, you're ahead of the game and you might end up with less of a hangover.

Dear Ben,

You've hit on a very interesting question here. What do we mean when we say something is fake? Or indeed, genuine? Nothing is real and everything is real. Plato suggested everything is illusion but for an intellectual world of ideals. We sit in a cave watching shadows, unaware that anything lies beyond. What's the difference? Imagine that everything is real. Every moment is now. In every experience is truth.

Dear Ben,

If I were you I'd keep on making plans. Even if you don't end up where you thought you were going, you end up somewhere. The chances are you've made some progress in the right direction. Don't forget you have a plan. You might want to write it down.

Gomez thinks I need to cheer up. Well, I am getting out and meeting people. Not all of them beat me up. And I am making plans. It's just that I don't find out what they are until after I carry them out. And real, fake, what's the difference? I can see that, no question.

I show up at the temple on time. I'm not sure why I'm coming, but I don't have to know why I do things. Something in me has a plan. When I went last week I guess I wanted comfort. Roy's funeral helped, chased the dark feelings away for a while, and I was hoping for booster dose. Although, as far as I can see, what Santa says doesn't make any more sense than the slogans. Maybe if I learn more about it I'll see the thread linking it all together. Right now it seems pretty random.

“Ben!”

Santa strides over. Somehow in cords and a sweater he looks just as big. I always thought it was the suit.

“Glad you could make it. Are you ready to work?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Good, good. Flopsy over here is going to give you the tour, and then we'll get together and get you started.”

The Bunny is in a track suit, and of course she isn't wearing the ears.

“Ben?”

“Flopsy?”

“Florence. You can call me Flo. Buck tells me you know something about tech.”

“Oh, you know, I get by.”

“You're going to like the sound system. The main console is here in the altar. It controls the teleprompters, the sound effects, the lighting and of course the organ. You can create as many presets as you like, but you can drive it manually too. Buck has controllers...”

“In his gloves. What's Buck stand for?”

“Well, Ben, I don't know, that's classified information, if I told you I'd have to kill you. Don't look so scared, I'm kidding. Buckminsterfullerene Zephyrinus Fisher. You can call him Santa.”

“Can I try it?”

“Oh, the system? Sure, step up.”

I stand at the altar and lean into the microphone.

“Hello?”

Nothing happens. Flo just watches me. I turn on the power and fade up the mike.

“Hello?”

My voice sounds really thin. I adjust the eq and give it some chorus and a little reverb.

“Hello.”

That's a lot better. I want to go looking for the blizzard of death howling over the frozen wastes of time effect but Flo has other ideas.

“Time for that later. Come and take a look backstage.”

Backstage is where they store props and change costumes and put on make up. There's a line of mirrors with light tubes all around them. Beside one of the mirrors is Santa's beard and hat, and a couple of weird things that I realize must be eyebrow extensions. The curly white hair is actually in the hat. Sitting down at another mirror is The Virgin Barbie, putting on eyelashes. She's wearing underpants and nothing else.

“Hi, Ben. Was that you on the mike? Sounded good. Beatrice. Call me Bee. Come and give me a hand, will you sweetie?”

She stands up and puts her back against the wall.

“Stretch me, will you?”

She lifts her right leg up over her head.

“Push as hard as you can.”

I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do.

“Like this.”

The Bunny puts a hand on the back of Bee's thigh, and another on her calf, and pushes until her whole leg is pressed against her body and her foot touches the wall above her head.

“Go on. Don't hang back.”

I push. I'm scared I'll break something, but pretty soon it becomes obvious she can take it.

“Ok. Next.”

She raises her other leg. I push. I'm trying to think about algebra. When you get right up close to her face, you can see tiny scars, little lines around her nose and her eyes and her jawline. The effort of the stretch is making us both sweat. A warm smell is rising from her skin.

“Come on, lean into it. Ah, that's good. Keep the pressure up.”

“Ok. My turn.”

Flo is wriggling out of her track suit pants. I stretch her for a while. She's a little easier. Not so tall, and more flexible. Her scent is different too. Sharper. Bee goes back to doing her makeup.

“So, Ben, you ever play drums? Any percussion?”

“No, Bee, I really don't know anything about music. I wish I did. You both sound so great.”

“Shut the fuck up. Buck don't sing, he'd be such a great bass but he couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. You sing?”

“When no one's around.”

Flo puts her leg down.

“Phew, that's enough. Nice going, Ben.”

She pulls her pants back on and sits down on the edge of the bench. Bee picks up a guitar and strums a chord..

“Do you know Party's Over?”

“Sure.”

“Join in when you feel like it.”

Bee starts to sing, in a sweet, low voice. Flo comes in on a harmony.

“We are the last, us and the band,
Slowly we dance, hand clasped in hand,
Banners and streamers strewn on the floor,
This is the last, there is no more.

“Stars chase our steps, mirror ball turns,
Last of the light flickers and burns,
Just hold me close, look in my eyes,
When we stop dancing, time for goodbyes.”

I know this bit.

“Over before it has even begun,
All of the good times, the feasting, the fun,
Over for them and for me and for you,
Is this the last? Can it be true?

“Everything broken, battered, and worn,
Party clothes filthy, tattered and torn,
There is the banquet, empty and bare,
Let us keep dancing, do not despair.

“Over before it has even begun,
All of the good times, the feasting, the fun,
Over for them and for me and for you,
Is this the last? Can it be true?
Is this the last? Can it be true?”

Bee plays a last chord and we hold the notes together.

“Well, Ben, I think maybe you could think about singing when someone's around.”

“Ben, my boy, you're just full of surprises.”

I turn around and Santa is standing at the stage door.

“I see the ladies have been making good use of your time. Great couple of girls, eh Ben?”

I don't know what to say to that. The Virgin Barbie and the Bunny? Great isn't the right word.

“Bee, your tits are looking particularly lovely tonight. Wouldn't you say so, Ben?”

I hate it when I blush. My whole face prickles and goes bright red and everyone know what's going on in my head. Flo and Bee look away and pretend they haven't noticed anything.

“Come on, Ben, it's time for your religious instruction.”

I start to follow Santa out.

“Thanks Flo, thanks Bee.”

“Oh, thank you Ben, we really enjoyed that, didn't we, Bee?”

“Fuck yeah. Great stretch, great sing. Let's do it again soon.”

Santa leads me up the stairs behind the stage. There's an office with real books in bookcases and armchairs covered with something that doesn't look like plastic. He has a great big desk that looks like it's made of wood. There are a couple of snow globes on his desk and beside it a box marked 'Premium Remote Confessionals. 144 items'.

“Sit down, sit down.”

I sit on one of the armchairs. It's really comfortable and it has a strange, old smell.

“So much to talk about, Ben. What do you know about our mission?”

“To give meaning to people's lives? To help them? And there are the food handouts? For the hungry?”

“All very true, Ben, a valuable part of our mission. But what is it we do? Why are we here?”

I think about it for a minute. The sermons and the songs.

“Uncomfortablism. It's spreading all the stories and ideas.”

“Smart boy, Ben. Why would we do that?”

“It's like at school. People need something to believe in, and this is what you think they need.”

“Interesting the way you put that, Ben. Am I to take it you're not so sure this is what they need?”

It looks like my career in the church could be over before it begins. But then I think about it. Santa wants me for some reason. He put Bee and Flo up to that stretch business. It was nice of them and all, making me feel welcome, showing me it could be fun around here, but it was more than that.

And what he said about Bee. What was that? Someone talks about a woman that way, they're either a scumbag or they know the woman knows they don't mean it. The girls don't seem to mind him, so I'm guessing Santa is gay. That means it was for me, to make me feel comfortable about being a ravaging little hetero surrounded by gorgeous women. He was giving me permission to feel horny. They're bait. For what?

Is my public speaking so brilliant that he'll do anything to bring me on board? Is he grooming me as his successor? I don't think so. To the best of my knowledge my public speaking is crap. He wants me for something. And the only thing interesting about me is the massacre. He wants to know something about Roy and Beamish and what happened. Which means he knows something about what happened. And if I'm going to find out what he knows, I have to let him think I've bought his whole story. I have to step into his trap. Well, that's easy. Walking into trouble is my best thing.

“Well, I need it. That's why I came. Your sermon at Roy's funeral helped me. I'm looking for the meaning behind it all, the golden thread that ties all the words together, the big idea. And it would be such a privilege to learn that from you, Santa, to work with you, and Flo and Bee.”

I have a feeling I might have overdone it. But whether Santa buys it or not, he acts like he does.

“Well, that's just fine, Ben. I'm so proud to meet a fine young man like you and to hear you say those words.”

Now we're both acting like we buy each other's bullshit. And I thought he said he didn't take any. I'm beginning to think that his business is to buy it and sell it.

“Now, as you say, Ben, our mission it to spread the word. The church is not just one man, Ben, it's Santa. There are hundreds of thousands of Santa suits, Ben, but there's only one Santa. What makes a true Santa?”

I'm about to say the suit, but he just said that answer was unacceptable.

“Come on Ben. Here's a hint. You're finished when you start believing your own bullshit.”

“It's the voice, the songs, the sermons. The vibe.”

“I was right about you, Ben. You catch on fast. The voice, the vibe, the brand, the church. Now, who controls the church?”

“Well, I guess, the Uncomfortablists. They tell you what to say, don't they?”

“Wrong, Ben!”

Santa strikes both fists down on the desk and little storms churn up in the snow globes. He gets up and strides around the room, wringing his big hands together. His nose is very red.

“Wrong. That's what it looks like. That's what people think. That's what they think. It's what I want them to think.”

Why is everybody nuts? Do you just automatically go crazy when you turn thirty? I'm not sure I want to end up like this. Maybe Roy was right. Santa picks up a globe.

“See this? My invention. The remote confessional. I design, manufacture and distribute them. The sermons?”

He waves an arm at the bookcase.

“I write them. I take the great literature and I edit it into sermons for every purpose, for every occasion. I put it all on teleprompter scripts, I set it to music, I write the scores, I program the organ, lights, sound. I choreograph the ladies. I write the training materials, run the courses. The vibe is me, Ben. I am Santa! I am Uncomfortablism!”

He sits back down, breathing heavily.

“What do they have without me? Slogans. Thin air. I give them the words, and I make the word flesh. I invented Santa. I invented the Bunny, the Virgin Barbie. You want to be Santa, you come to me. You rent the materials, you license the sermons, you sign in blood. And the tithes come up the line, Ben. I get my percentage. And they better not try to hold back. I have eyes, Ben. You want to be Santa? Eyes and heart.”

He looks around his desktop as if he's missing something. It's like he forgot I'm here. I try to start him up again.

“Eyes and heart.”

“That's right Ben. Never forget that. Now, you. You have the heart. And I have a feeling you have the eyes. I'm seeing signs. All you lack is what?”

“The suit?”

“Faith. Confidence. Belief.”

“But you just said not to believe your own bullshit.”

You don't have to believe in all of this, you've got to believe in yourself. And I'm going to make you believe.”

“Thank you, Santa.”

“Shut the fuck up. Now I know you can't pay for training up front. But I want to help you out. I'm going to waive the training fees.”

He holds up a hand to stop me from thanking him again.

“But you have to work. I need a personal assistant to take off some of the load, the programming, the scripting. We've got a big month ahead, you know that. The Solstice is coming, and this year we're giving them a show like nothing they've ever seen before. It's all hands to the pumps. You can help the girls with the basic administration, the

mechanicals. I'll pay you. I'll take back some of your salary in fees. It won't cover them. I'll be keeping a tab on you, Ben. One day, somehow, you're going to pay me back. In full."

Is he just doing this for payment down the line? I guess he'd have to recruit somehow.

"I'll work, Santa. I'll repay you. I want this chance."

"You're a good kid. Here, take one of these."

He turns over a snow globe and checks the bottom, checks the other one and hands it to me.

"You just talk to it. People tell me it helps. Think of it as a friend you carry with you. Think of it as me. Here, check this out."

He shakes the other snow globe then holds it upside down for a few seconds. It speaks in Santa's voice, small but clear.

"Reject the authority of devils. Reject any who harm beings. Believe in the waters, the air and the plants. Believe in the ox."

"Cute huh? Different quote every time. Never runs out. Check this out."

He twists it on edge, back and forth in a rhythm, and a faint red glow grows out of it. He keeps twisting and the glow changes color, green, blue, then a deep violet.

"I'm a sucker for colored lights. Hold out your other hand."

He takes a memory tab out of a drawer.

"The Holy Bible, Old and New Testaments. The Bhagavad-Gita. The Koran. The Edda. Sun Tzu, The Art of War. The Avesta. Plato. Aristotle. Confucius. Homer. Dante. Machiavelli. Descartes. Goethe. Mark Twain. Dickens. Khalil Gibran, Woody Allen. There's about ten thousand books to get you started. Finish those and I'll give you some more."

He drops it into my hand.

"Got a tabula?"

I shake my head. Santa rummages around in a drawer and hands over a shrink-wrapped package.

"Start with Sun Tzu and Machiavelli. They're nice and short and there's some good tips on what to do in a fight. Looks like you could use some."

That's the first time he's made any reference to my face.

"And, Ben, that golden thread of yours, if you can't seem to string it all together, if it doesn't seem to make sense..."

"It's not supposed to make sense."

"You're going to do just fine."

Chapter 17 - Keywords

I don't get straight into Sun Tzu. The first thing I do when I get home is unwrap the new tabula and swap out its disk for Beamish's disk. Roy and Beamish were all pals together writing the thesis, then something went wrong.

It's a lot easier to read the thesis after Roy's been at it. He takes you through all these other ways of living that might have happened instead of Uncomfortablism. It's amazing how much choice there is. People tried them too. Some of it didn't work out so well. Communes end up with everybody getting stoned. Charismatic religious cults seem to end up with everybody dying. What the fuck is Kool-Aid? Odd-ball dogmatic religious sects can last for a while. Maybe that's why Uncomfortablism is still going. Socialism and communism tend to slide into totalitarianism and corruption. Something to do with over-regulation, centralizing power and the assholes taking control. Military dictatorships lead to military dictatorships. Unregulated consumerism leads to global destruction. Like we hadn't noticed.

Roy seems to have some system in mind. While he goes through all this stuff he's pointing out the negatives and positives, and it's like he's leading up to set of positives that might come together into something that would actually work.

The weird thing is as I read this I get a whole different side of Roy. He's showing something here that I never saw when we just hanging out being pranksters. Roy wasn't just a clever dick who thought everybody else was stupid. I mean, yes, he was a clever dick, and he did think everybody else was stupid, but on balance, compared to him, they were. But he didn't hate people, which I sort of got the impression he did. What he hated was the system. He hated the way it gave people permission to do nothing about their lives, the way it congratulated itself on its single-minded dullness. He wanted everyone to wake up and think. Like Gomez, I guess, but while she tries to do something inside the system, Roy wants to flip over the chessboard and start a totally new game. Wanted. I read this and it's like Roy is still around.

None of this explains why Roy and Beamish ended up where they did. Roy wanted to overthrow the system, and Beamish wanted much more of the same, but they were having fun together. You can tell from the comments they're posting.

“Like this bit. Let's tone it down a little so we can sneak it past them. J”

“I put your idea about approaches to the democratic election process here. What do you think? FNK”

I skim through for a while, looking for some sign of hostility. Right at the end, there's a long back and forth about how to wrap it up.

“Needs something big here. FNK”

“Big like what? J”

“Big like here is how we ended up with Uncomfortablism even though it's so ridiculous. The positive total overpowering final word. The solution to the big mystery. FNK”

“You won't find it. Let's face it, it's no worse than anything else. J”

“I beg to differ. I have some ideas. Tell you later. FNK”

That's as far as the thesis goes. And then Beamish must have decided to go with his original version. He switched off all Roy's changes and went back to the mega-dull approach. He chickened out. Is it possible Roy shot him because he didn't want to publish their thesis? Roy could be very single-minded but I doubt even he would go that far.

Roy went looking for something big. Is it possible he found it? I need help with this. There's times it would be great to talk to someone else about something, right when you're thinking about it. Not to have to go to somebody's house, not to have to write a letter and put it in the postbox. From what I hear, phones and email were like that. Email was nearly free. But then the spammers got hold of them. What might have been the greatest communication system ever created, and the spammers destroyed it.

The Uncomfortablists coped with the emergency in their inimitable style. They didn't make anything illegal, they didn't shut anything down. They just made it impossible to get any benefit from it. Email takes a couple of weeks to deliver and costs too much to use except for special purposes. If it arrives at all, it's full of government messages and warnings tacked on the end. Checked for viruses. Spam content certified acceptable. Report any breaches of the spam code. No telling how many scanners have been over it, how many little gray people have been reading your messages. And phones are so unreliable it's easier to put a voice mail on a memory tab and deliver it by hand. Maintaining the infrastructure costs money we just don't have.

You can use chat, but it's monitored too. The Uncomfortablists, the vigilantes, everybody can see what you're saying. It tends to limit your expression. You can pretend you have a secure channel if you like. You're just kidding yourself. And if they don't like what you say, someone might come knocking on your door.

The only way to do it would be to invent a code. It would have to be something that didn't even look like a code.

One thing I found out cruising the net with Roy. Even with what's left of it after they blitzed it, it's big. There is more stuff than you can ever hope to cover. And if you ever think of something, someone has thought of it already. Not only have they thought of it, they created a web site, a forum, a chat room, and a hundred blogs. You come up with the right keywords, and you can always find it. A lot of the time you find so much you can't filter out enough to find what you want.

The spammers did their best to ruin that too. Get this, they would write programs that would automatically create a response to a search. Or they would look for sites that already appeared in searches, then frame them in a site that took you somewhere else. They stole names. They stole addresses. You would go looking for information, information you needed, and they would hijack it and direct you off somewhere else, to some piece of shit site, advertising some crap they wanted to sell. Porn, pills, real estate. When all you want is to teach your cat to fetch, or find out what a samovar is.

Can you believe that? It wouldn't even be their own crap. They would be doing this for money, for any client willing to pay for help selling their worthless garbage, and they would be filling the net with bullshit to do it. So the Uncomfortablists had to clear all that out, and a lot of stuff got lost when they did it. It was lost anyway, in the spam.

The Uncomfortablists may be wrong about a lot of things, but they got one thing right. Death to spammers.

And another thing I noticed. When I had an idea I thought was new and wonderful, it wasn't just anyone who thought of it first. Roy thought of it first. It was kind of annoying, but in the end I more or less got used to it. Roy was like that. He was always just a few steps ahead. I could wear myself out trying to beat him, or I could go through the stages and reach acceptance. At least he used to wait while I caught up. Until the last time.

Dear Gomez,

Keywords. You can find anything if you know the right keywords. But what if you don't know the keywords? Then you need to go looking for them. And to find them you have to have their keywords. What if you don't know them? The only reason you can find anything at all is because everything is connected. You can start to look for anything, and you'll end up finding what you're looking for.

Ben

When I unpack my pockets I take out the Premium Remote Confessional and put it on the table beside the bed. Do people really talk to these things? I pick it up and shake it. The snow settles and there's Santa, arms outstretched.

"Hello? Hello? Testing? One, two, three? Come in, Santa. Santa, this is Ben, do you read, over."

No response. I shake it and tip it upside down.

"But there came after them an evil generation, who neglected prayers and followed sensual desires, and these were hurled headlong down into perdition."

It turns out if you tip it up while it's quoting, it stops and rewinds. How much seems to depend on the tilt. And you can flick it forward too.

"An evil, an evil, an evil, evil, evil, desires, sensual, de-de-de-desires, headlong, perdition, per dih, per, per dih."

With a little work you could really get something happening. And the girls could back it up on drums. It's tempting to play with it all night, but I have to sleep.

"Do you know your rights?"

Gomez is pacing up and down between the desks. She's doing it totally deadpan. No one has the faintest idea what she's talking about.

"What are your rights. Frangipani?"

"My what?"

"Asafoetida?"

Ted just looks frightened and keeps his head down.

"Ebenezer?"

"I have the right to remain silent."

“I’m guessing Ebenezer has been doing a little research into old cop shows. That’s a dangerous game. How he managed to get hold of them I have no idea. So, nobody?”

Gomez has drawn a complete blank.

“What did you have when you were born? What did you get for free? Standard issue. Yes, Asafoetida?”

“An asshole.”

“Excellent. And a brain. You don’t want to get them confused. Anybody else?”

Gomez is looking quite dispirited.

“You don’t get born with the right to an education. That’s for sure. That’s a privilege that many people fought long and hard to give you. Ok, nobody can think of any rights we have. What about rights we don’t have? Bullshit. Do we have the right to talk bullshit?”

Fran has her arm up ramrod straight and is shaking her head violently from side to side.

“No we do not. What about the Ebenezer right, the right to remain silent? No, we don’t. Why should we? What would it mean, if we did have these rights? What the fuck is a right, anyhow?”

“I guess it would be a privilege you didn’t have to fight for.”

“Good, Ebenezer. And how would that work? Who gave you these rights?”

Fran’s arm is vibrating with tension. It’s like sparks are flying off her fingertips toward the ceiling.

“Yes, Frangipani?”

“Santa!”

She sees the look on Gomez’s face and she slumps back down. She was so sure she had it.

“How could Santa give you a right? What if somebody decided to take your right away? Would Santa stop them? What would he do, would he get the Bunny to hit them with her drumstick?”

Laugh if you like, guys, but I’ve seen her biceps up close.

“No rights, just privileges. And you have to have someone to protect them. Would it amaze you to know that people used to think they had rights?”

If total silence is any indication, the class is amazed.

“They were privileges, in fact, protected by the legal system, and ultimately by the security forces under the direction of the government. Free speech. Habeas Corpus. Any idea what that is?”

“Somewhere to stash the body?”

Ted does it again. Where would he have picked up any Latin? He would have had to read something.

“Good guess, Asafoetida. And almost perfectly wrong. It’s the right to keep the body. Your body. It’s a right to protect you against unlawful detention.”

Everybody’s brain is hurting now. Unlawful detention?

“Yes, Frangipani?”

“But if it’s detention it must be lawful.”

“You’re saying if the law has you, by definition, it’s not unlawful.”

Fran is bewildered to realize she was saying something as intelligent as that, but she nods.

“Ok, kids, get ready for this. There used to be a separation of powers. The law, and the security forces, were not the same thing. If the security forces had you, they had to answer to the law, and if the law said to let you go, they let you go.”

No one can take this in. Ted has actually gone pale and started to shiver. Maybe the guy is ill. He’s so pasty anyway it’s hard to tell. Then he raises his hand.

“Yes?”

“But what about...you know.”

“Say it.”

“Spammers.”

The class goes very quiet.

“Go on.”

“Well, if people had all these rights, if you couldn't lock them up, if they could say and do whatever they liked, wouldn't the spammers go nuts? They'd just take over.”

“How would they do that?”

Suddenly some of those old cop shows Roy and I used to watch are making sense.

“The spammers did take over. They did say and do whatever they liked. Security and the law were all about trying to control them. They had fancy suits and shiny cars and whole big buildings for it. I have no idea what it must have cost. People couldn't communicate. They couldn't walk the streets. The whole world was just one big reaction to spam.”

Gomez has a palm raised. She's worried I'm about to go off, but I stop and take a breath. She nods.

“So we have no rights. Rights protected us, but they protected spammers too. We couldn't afford that, so we surrendered our rights. What's left? You're entitled to whatever privileges you can protect. You get nothing for free, not the air you breathe, not the words you speak, not your own body. And there's always someone ready to take them away from you.”

“Death to spammers. Death to spammers.”

Ted is whispering it under his breath. Some of the other kids take it up. Everybody is doing it. I'm doing it. It's really quite creepy but it feels good. We're all in this together. We're building it. I even see Gomez's lips twitch, then she stops herself. She's not sure what to do about it. The bell goes and she lets out a huge sigh of relief.

“Class, fuck off.”

I hand Gomez my latest and she hands me a comment.

“Were there any other separations?”

“Separations?”

“Like between the law and the security forces.”

“Yes. There were plenty. Power was divided. Here's one you might like. Church and State.”

“How would that work? The church would tell you one thing and the government would tell you another?”

“Exactly.”

“But that wouldn't make sense.”

Gomez gives me one of her dazzling smiles.

“It didn't make sense.”

Some things never change.

May wasn't on the bus this morning. She's not on the bus going home either. I didn't see her at school. I could go over to her house but Aggie might be there. I thought I knew what she wanted but now I realize I don't know anything about her. It all seemed right. She liked me. I liked her. Now what? Did she ever like me at all? Was that just my imagination? There's this terrible feeling when I think about it, a hole inside me, like someone has reached into my body with both hands and grabbed big chunks of dark, purple, quivering flesh and dragged them out into the air and left them smeared all over the ground for everyone to see. I check the floor of the bus but there's nothing there. The other kids are all just chatting away to each other. No one is even looking at me. So I guess it's all just in my head. You let yourself care about someone and this is what happens.

Ben,

It's not all smoke. You're probably right in your perception that people aren't telling you everything, but often they may be motivated by concern for you. Consider, too, that people may conceal things not to deceive you but to protect themselves. Don't reject offers of friendship out of suspicion.

Gomez.

Chapter 18 - Spammed

The guys are very subdued. They didn't talk in the van, and now they're not talking much at HQ. Zeb is debriefing us about the mission. He's getting everybody's story as it happened to them, and he's trying to put it together so we can all see how things went wrong and how we can do better in future. Snapper has his arm in a sling. He's just staring down at his feet, all the time.

“So, Monk, Team A, what happened at the front? You took up your position, then what?”

“We took up our position according to the plan. We waited for your command. Team C alerted us to the surveillance device. We reported seeing it. We received your command. We entered using the ram. Explosives were not necessary. The house was dark. We took up position at the head of the stairs to the basement. We reported that we were in position. On your command we came through the basement and out to the yard. As instructed we rendered assistance to Snapper.”

“Nothing went wrong with your part. You didn't see anything unusual.”

“Oh, wait, Stoner, you remember, there was that herd of elephants drinking gin in the front parlor. Wearing tu-tus. I wondered about that at the time.”

“Guys, I need your co-operation. I need discipline and focus.”

“Discipline and focus, Zeb. And how does that stop us getting totally fucked up by a psychopath with a snow-shovel?”

“You will address me as Wolf. All right, now, Foot has something to report. Foot?”

“I think maybe we ought to change his name to Raccoon. Huh, Monk?”

“Snapper. Foot has the floor.”

“Ah, I was out the night after the op, and I got picked up by the shovel guy. In a car. He said his name was Mr White. No, he didn't, he just said I could call him Mr White. I told him he was a pedo and he hit me.”

“And what was your impression, Foot, why he hit you?”

Zeb is feeding me the lines. It's like I'm the key witness and he's the lawyer in one of those cop shows.

“He didn't like it when I shot his car, and he didn't like me calling him a pedo. I'm pretty sure he's not.”

“Foot's theory, jump in any time and tell me if I'm off beam, Foot, Foot's theory is what, that we got sold a pup?”

“Someone made out White was a pedo. To get us to take him out.”

I'm trying to watch all their faces at once. Stoner's doesn't change. He just keeps on chewing his gum. Maybe something will happen when the words reach his brain. Snapper's eyes flick up at me then drop back to his feet again. Gap's jaw has dropped open. He puts a hand down and massages his balls. Monk is watching me like a cat watching a lizard.

“But, that's unbelievable. That's absurd, Foot!”

He's acting surprised, like he's never heard anything like it. But that's not what his face was saying.

“So Monk. Thanks Foot, you can sit down. So Monk, you picked this guy up on the chat site. Think back and try to remember what made you go for him.”

“I didn't pick him up, you picked him, didn't you Stoner?”

“I never picked him up. I was just looking around.”

“See, Monk, we need to figure this out. What happened. How did it happen. Has it happened before.”

“Well, all right, as I recall, I'm reprising my ragamuffin role, you know, my ugly stepsisters are on my case and isn't there some handsome prince out there who can take me to the ball, scrolling through the responses looking for diaper snipers, and this mark is made to order. Oh, you poor child, what you need is a warm place to sleep and a shoulder to cry on. Oh, I do, I do, and I can make it worth your while. I don't ask for anything in return, my dear boy, just the knowledge that I have helped a fellow human being. But I'd be so grateful, it's affection I need, attention, just tell me who and where you are. See you soon. What should I wear? Oh, there's no need to wear anything, dear boy. That's it.”

“So, standard, by the book.”

“Perhaps a little too easy. I don't know. I have known jackos that were as obvious as that, but not often.”

“Excuse me, Monk.”

“Yes, Foot, how may I help you?”

“What about you? Is there anything you did that might have put them on to you, let them know that you were not really an eleven year old kid?”

“Yeah, that's right, Monk, they had to target you. They make you think you're targeting them, but they have to have your number first.”

“Listen, I've been doing this a long time. I play the part. My performances are legendary, if I do say so myself.”

“Under the same alias?”

“That's right. Why do you ask?”

“Because someone could correlate the pedos that got owned with that alias, what...?”

“CryBaby11.”

“They look at the chat log, find the entries for the guys who had accidents, and there's CryBaby11, every time. They don't even have to know who you are. They can set you up without even meeting you. And then when their mark gets done they know for sure.”

Monk is not happy. Maybe the messenger is going to get shot. Monk turns to Zeb, looking for some kind of support, but Zeb is just shaking his head.

“Ah, shit,” says Snapper disgustedly. “Spammed.”

Zeb is nodding. The other guys nod, except Stoner. He's still chewing. Then he stops, takes out his gum and looks around for somewhere to stick it. Zeb catches his eye and shakes his head. Stoner sticks it back in his mouth and swallows it. Zeb takes them all in.

“Well, boys, we got spammed. What the fuck do we do now?”

Snapper clears his throat.

“I hate to say it, guys, but how about nothing? I mean, fuck knows how long we've been running around messing people up for no reason. And we been lucky until last time. That guy tried to spear my eyes out. We keep going, we'll get hurt.”

“Anyone else?”

Zeb and I agreed to see if we could leave them to come up with the idea. It'll work better if they think they thought of it. Stoner is blinking and scratching himself. He mutters something.

“What was that, Stoner? You want to share it with everybody?”

“I said death to fucking spammers.”

“Man's right,” says Gap.

“Let me see if I understand you, Stoner,” says Monk. “Are you suggesting that we forcefully express our displeasure with this uncalled-for interference?”

“I'm suggesting we find this cocksucker and nail his balls to the wall. Fucking jihad!”

“That seems entirely appropriate.”

“So Monk, Gap, Stoner, you say we go after this guy. Snapper?”

“Ah. Ok. Yeah. We nail him.”

“Foot?”

“I suppose, yeah, if that's what you guys want.”

“Agreed. First item, boys, is to figure out if it's happened before, and when. We read the chat logs, we look for patterns, use their own techniques against them. Foot and Monk?”

“Certainly.”

“Ok.”

“Next, Mr White. Gap, Stoner. We need to put some surveillance on the snow devil. He's in this picture somehow, and the more we know about him, the more we know about who wants him taken out. You boys be real careful, and if he even looks like picking up a shovel, you run like hell.”

Grunts.

“The other side of this thing is where our sponsorship is coming from. Me and Snapper can look into that. Snapper?”

“I can still do field work, Wolf. ”

“Sure, Snapper, but you're easy to recognize with that arm. And you're more use to me this way.”

“Thanks, Wolf.”

“Ok, boys, let's get going.”

Zeb walks me home after the van drops us off. He wants to talk but for some reason he won't start. I open it up.

“That went pretty well.”

“Well, they agreed to it. They didn't shoot us yet.”

Zeb lapses into silence. Then he stops. I go on for a few paces and then turn to face him. He takes a big breath.

“Ben, how about a break? Get away for a few days. Give us a chance to think.”

“Like what?”

“Hiking, camping out.”

“Shit, Zeb, it's the middle of fucking winter. It's Solstice in two weeks.”

“You'll love it, Ben. Survival. The elements. It's the real thing.”

“Survival? Won't we just die?”

“Nah, it'll be great. I know this stuff, Ben. Just us and nature. This weekend?”

“Yeah, well, I don't know. I'll check with Ma.”

“She's cool. We talked about it we both thought it would be good for you.”

We? Both. I wish they wouldn't do that.

“Yeah, ok.”

“That's wonderful Ben. We'll have a great time.”

What the hell. Maybe we will.

May wasn't at school again today. It's up to her to tell me what she wants, but I just have a bad feeling. She won't like it if I check up on her, but if I don't and she's in trouble I won't forgive myself. It's amazing how many situations you can get into where you just can't win. But there's no real problem deciding what to do. It's not about the sensible thing or the best thing. I'm not acting rationally. I tell Ma I'm going out again and she doesn't say a word. She's not really talking to me these days either.

I'm wearing my jacket and balaclava but it's so cold I'm not going to be able to stand here very long. All the lights in May's house are off. There's no sound except for the city roar. A light goes on. Is that May's apartment? It must be. The front door opens and someone comes out. She crosses the road.

“Fuck, Ben. I mean, fuck.”

“Hi May.”

“We can't stand here. Come into the hallway.”

She leads me into the lobby and closes the door. She's wearing a dressing gown and gumboots and a beanie. There's a new bruise on her cheek, overlaid on the yellow smudges dripping down from her eyes.

“What's happening, May? I don't know what's happening.”

“Shhh! You can't come here. It's not your problem.”

“Is he hurting you? Is it Aggie?”

“Ben, I don't know any other way to say this. I'm sorry. I really am. It's not about you. It's nothing to do with you. You have to fuck off.”

“Don't do this, May. Tell me what's happening. I can help. I care about you.”

“I know you do, Ben. I care about you. But you cannot help. Fuck off. Please”

“May!”

It's Clytemnestra. And in the background behind it there's a male voice muttering.

“It's nothing, Mom. I thought I heard something. It's nothing.”

“May, get back up here! Right now! Or I'm coming down!”

Where Aggie finds the energy to be such an asshole all the time I have no idea. At his tension level I'd last fifteen minutes tops. May's face is telling me a thousand things, and there are no words for any of them. I lean down to kiss her on the cheek but she turns away. I head out into the cold. At the corner I look back. There's no sound above the city rumble. The lobby light winks off, and then the light in May's apartment.

At the next block there's someone waiting on the corner. He's holding his arms out, palms towards me. I walk up to him.

“Detective Halloran.”

“Ebenezer Hollins. Maybe you could use a ride?”

There's not a great deal of choice. It's a black car, just like the last one. White holds out his hand and I shake it. What the hell.

“Ben. I trust you're well?”

I don't feel much like getting hit, so I wait until I see what he has to say.

“I said I'd get back to you, Ben. Halloran, here, will tell you I'm a man of my word.”

“No fucking question.”

“You're walking around breathing for a reason, Ben. Any idea what that reason is?”

It's warm in the car, and I can feel sweat trickling down. I pull the balaclava right off.

“Well, you amuse me, Ben. I have a highly developed sense of humor, as you may have noticed. But the core reason is that you are of some use to me alive, Ben. Not a single other reason in the world would have kept you alive this long.”

He waits a long time. I'm supposed to say something.

“So what do you want?”

“That's more like it. I require information. Information is my milieu.”

He strokes the gold chain around his throat.

“You're a resourceful young man, and I think you may be able to provide some information I need. Now, you're associated with the group that visited me recently. Unannounced. When we last spoke you led me to believe that someone in your group has a private agenda. An agenda of which I might be expected to disapprove. This person is working on behalf of someone with whom I may have a difference of opinion. Would that fit the situation as you understand it?”

I'm thinking about the meeting.

“I see you find that plausible. What I would like, Ben, is for you to continue your association with this group, and to keep me informed of any developments. In particular, I want the rat. Would you do that? No need to answer. And I believe you have something of mine. I'd like it returned. We'll meet again. Until such a time as you cease to be of further use.”

White has finished talking. We just sit. I'm wondering if there's anything I'm supposed to do or say. The silence is really quite awkward.

“So, anyone catch the game on Saturday?”

No answer. I guess they're lost in their thoughts. I gradually get absorbed in mine.

“Halloran?”

We're back at my place. Halloran holds the door for me. Something seems to be amusing him. I watch the black car disappear over the crest. Behind it the exhaust condenses in a low cloud, ghostly arms creeping over the icy road, and then that thins and vanishes.

Chapter 19 - Treeline

At lunchtime I leave school. I have to check something out. I head over towards the old Law Courts. Across the road from Grounds for Prosecution there's an apartment building with a fire escape up one side. I noticed it that day I met Zeb. No one's looking. I very quietly swing myself up on the rusty ladder. I find a place just around the corner, with a good view of the café entrance. It's just 1:30 p.m. A couple walks in. A guy in a brown suit and hat walks out. Nothing for a while. I have no way of knowing if I'll recognize the guy anyway, but I have to try. Whoever finds my note in Beamish's tabula may show up, and it may help to figure out what's going on.

“Grounds for Prosecution. 1:30 p.m. Friday. Cash only.”

I don't even know what I meant by that last bit. It just sounded kind of mysterious.

A few more people arrive and leave. It's cold and I'm bored. I'm about to get out of here when I hear a clang on the fire escape a few levels up. I can't see anything through the framework. I'm trying to think of a neat way to explain being here if someone finds me. Then I hear a cough and a quiet voice.

“Negative. No sighting. I'm not at all sure I see any point in waiting. Even if he does show up, he may not bring the disk. And if he does, I want clear instructions. Do I take it from him by whatever means necessary?”

That's Monk. Who is he talking to? It's like he's talking to someone who isn't there. It goes quiet for a few seconds, and then Monk speaks again.

“Whatever means necessary. Understood.”

It can't be Zeb. Zeb knows he could have the disk without asking. I carefully move away to the other end of the fire escape and get down. I don't think he saw me. I make it back to school in time for Gomez.

Zeb picks me up the that afternoon in the group van, looking pretty relaxed in a floppy camouflage hat. He hands me one like it and I put it on. Ma comes down and waves us off. I never sat in the passenger seat before. I'm expecting the back to be full of stuff, but there's only a couple of rucksacks. I brought all the warm clothes I have. I'm wearing most of them.

We get up onto the raised expressway, and the city spreads out behind us. The empty warehouses, the cramped apartments, the crumbling schools and administrative buildings. I turn around to watch it go. There's a flash of gold, a farewell wink, from the docklands tower.

You can't get close to that tower. There's a big wall. A couple of times when I was a kid I used to ask Ma if we could go to see it. We never did and I never found out why not. She must have changed the subject. I must have stopped asking. Nobody talks about that tower. It's not as though you could miss it. But we all just pretend it isn't there.

As soon as get onto the highway and start moving the air seems different. The light seems brighter. We come out into these bare trees. They go on forever. There are squirrels scampering on the branches. On the right there's a big frozen lake. There's a raccoon waddling along the edge. It turns to watch us and I can just make out its black mask.

“This countryside is incredible,” I say. “I never saw so many trees and animals.”

“You wait till we're out of the city,” says Zeb.

Sure enough, it's over in a minute. We come back into roads and houses. It keeps on that way for hours. There are patches of something like forest, but mostly it's cement and weeds just like home. The further out we get, the worse the houses look. I thought they were pretty bad where I live, but there are whole streets that look like nobody lives there. The roofs have fallen in and the doors and windows are smashed. Some apartment buildings are almost totally gone, just shells. Twisted rusting metal with fragments of concrete still clinging to it, just enough to remind you of walls. The rooms where people used to live, sit and eat and sleep and fuck, are just dirty holes with patches on the paint where there was a picture or a mirror. They're the emptiest places I have ever seen. Then I'm looking at an image of Roy's face after Zeb took off his mask.

When Zeb said we needed to get away to think, I thought he just meant get away from the distractions and the stress. But when you get away, you just automatically start to think. Maybe it's seeing things that are new, maybe it's because all the stuff taking up all the space in your brain is away back behind you. Shrinking in perspective. I suddenly notice that my thoughts are drifting along in all sorts of unexpected directions. I'm remembering things I haven't thought about for years.

I feel like I might have been on this road before. We go under an overpass with a big faded swirl of graffiti that says “Dyslexic Spammers of the World! Untie!” and it's like I'm expecting it. The road is getting worse, with big holes that Zeb has to avoid. He's driving more slowly and starting to mutter.

“Wasn't as bad as this last time.”

“How long till we get there?”

“I was thinking about four, four and a half hours, but it's looking like maybe six. We're going to have to sleep in the van tonight if we can't find anywhere to stay. Then we start hiking in the morning.”

It's been a while since we saw another car. It's just trees and snow, trees and snow. Tree. Snow. Tree.

I look over at Zeb, concentrating on the road, his hat and sunglasses masking the shape of his face, and he starts to shape-shift. It's kind of interesting. If I lean a little sideways the front of the hat starts to look like a peak, and he could have a dark beard, and a shadow under his nose looks almost like a black mustache. He looks like someone else.

“Absolute worst.”

“What?”

I wake up with a jump, like I just put a foot down into a hole and stumbled. What was I dreaming about? Walking on a trail in the dark?

“I said, absolute worst case, we get too cold, it gets too dangerous, we just turn around and come back.”

“Uh huh.”

“Sleep if you want to, you may not have a chance tonight.”

“Not sleepy.”

“Ben?”

“Uh huh?”

“Wake up.”

We're stopped. It's black all around the van. My toes are starting to feel really cold.

“Where are we? What time is it?”

“It's about nine. We're a little way up the mountain. I don't want to go any further in the dark. We can sleep in the van or we can try one of the shelters. We might be able to find some firewood.”

“Yeah, let's do that.”

“Put this on. And those boots.”

The fleecy jacket with the hood helps. Outside it's quiet. I mean quiet. The only sound is our boots crunching in the snow and our breathing, and little whistles from the wind. We both have lamps. They make high contrast shadows that race across the whiteness with every movement. I can't really see clearly, but Zeb must be used to it, because he keeps finding dead trees he can strip the branches off. There are a few small buildings around. After we get enough wood we go inside one. There's a little iron stove, pretty rusty. Zeb takes his gloves off and manages to get it open.

“We need kindling. Strip off the little twigs.”

I'm pulling off twigs and Zeb is poking them into the stove. He pulls his lighter out of his pocket and manages to get them going. Smoke curls up and more and more twigs start to catch. I could watch this all night. The smoke smells of pine. There's already a little heat coming from the stove.

“You're on fire detail. Don't feed it too much all at once. When it settles down you can gradually give it bigger pieces. I'll get us some food.”

Dinner is seriously good. Zeb heats up a stew of spiced lentils and steams some rice. And we make hot chocolate. It's like melted chocolate that you drink. You start with a dry brown powder and add water and mix it up into a smooth paste, then you keep mixing to avoid the lumps while it warms up. And we toast marshmallows over the top of the stove, which is glowing red and giving off lots of heat. They're crisp and brown on the outside and soft and runny on the inside. You have to be really careful not to burn your tongue.

When I taste the chocolate there's another one of those strange moments. I'm sure I have never tasted this stuff before, but the taste is really familiar. It's something I've always known. And it's like there's someone else in the room. I look around at the shadows flickering on the walls but we're completely alone. I taste it again. It's as if the chocolate pours into a place that only it can fill, a gap in my body that I didn't know about, and only when it is filled can I feel complete.

“Was chocolate one of the illegal drugs?”

“Chocolate? No. But then, neither was meat. Or tobacco.”

“Do you miss those times?”

“I hardly remember them. I was younger than you are. And it was the end of the good times. Worse than now.”

“Worse?”

“Life is about survival. That's what I learned then. Never seen any reason to change my mind.”

“More dangerous than now?”

“Sure. People were still trying to party when it was over. Like addicts going cold turkey. Rioting, looting, burning. People were afraid and hungry. That makes you do bad things. Nothing was safe. Nobody knew who was in charge, who to trust. Times like that, all you want is a routine. You don't care what it is.”

“Is that all it was? Desperate times and the Uncomfortablists were just better than nothing?”

Talking about this used to fill me with panic and outrage, but here, with the chocolate and the warmth and the quiet I can think about it from a distance. It's not something that was done to me, a trap I'm in, a punishment I'm suffering. It's just life, and life has bad and good.

“It's a little more complicated than that. We didn't know we were getting Uncomfortablism, and if we did it would have been hard to stop it. People weren't supporting something they wanted, they were trying to get away from the things they hated, the things they blamed for their misery.”

Zeb has said more words in ten minutes than I have ever heard come out of his mouth before. I'm coming to realize he's as bright as Roy, but Roy needed everybody to know about him. Everyone had to love him, or at least be in awe of him. Zeb doesn't have that need. He seems to be complete without it. What made Roy so needy?

“What happened to Roy's mom?”

I'm too relaxed and confident. That's probably one of those questions I shouldn't have asked. The stove crackles and the wind whistles. If Zeb were asleep he'd be making more noise. After a while I decide I may as well try to go to sleep too.

“One of the great joys in life, Ben, one of the great privileges, is to make someone happy. I couldn't do it with Roy's mom, and I couldn't do it with Roy.”

That's it. Definitely one of those questions I shouldn't have asked. I'm not going to risk another.

Next morning I'm awake as soon as the light fades up in the grimy window panes. Zeb is still asleep, wrapped in a reflective blanket. There are some embers in the stove and I get the fire going again. The room looks bigger and smaller in the light. Without the shadows the ceiling is higher, but it isn't a dark cave any more, where you can imagine treasures and secrets in the corners. It has names written or scratched all over the walls. All the people who have been in this same room before, and only a few of them have left any trace. You'd think you could feel something, but there are just some scratches and stains and leftover smells. Come to think of it, if people really did leave ghosts around it would get very annoying very quickly. You'd go crazy being pestered by them all.

One of the scratches is catching my eye for some reason. I go over closer and take a look.

Ben Clancy, in a childish scrawl I know.

And below it another name, scratched by another hand.

Joe Clancy.

I taste the chocolate again, and I see a face, dark and bearded, and there's a rasping voice.

“Expect the absolute worst.”

“Morning, Ben.”

I let my gaze wander slowly over a few other bits of graffiti before I turn around. There are scratches close by Joe's name that look like he might have made them. Gymnastic Goddess. Some chat name?

“Hey, Zeb. Sleep ok?”

“Out like a light. You?”

“Yeah. So what's next?”

We have some breakfast and some hot tea and pack everything away. Zeb is really particular about cleaning up. You have to rake through the fire, you have to pick everything up and take it with you. You wouldn't think it when you see his apartment.

“Leave only footprints, Ben. And in fact it's safer if you don't even leave them. I don't want to see you carving your name on anything. That's spam. You don't want to be a spammer, do you? You know you were here. That's enough. Nobody else has to. Understand?”

“Sure.”

He glances at the marks on the wall and I try to look casual about it. I don't know why I'm not telling him. I don't know why I do anything. Maybe one day I'll find out.

Outside there's a light snow falling. It seems warmer than last night, but that wouldn't be hard. We put the stuff back in the van and head up the mountain. The road is something else. There's no guard rail in lots of places. You can see over the edge to a sheer drop that looks like a thousand feet. When you can see at all. But there are these hairpin bends, and you can't see anything around them, even when the snow stops swirling for a second. The wind is blowing stronger as we rise, and buffeting the van. The road is icy and I have no idea what happens if the tires start slipping. I'm trying to act casual about it. I look over at Zeb. His face is like stone. He's just queuing up the next slight turn of the wheel, the next tap on the brake or the gas. One moment to the next.

We climb, zig-zagging up the mountain. I'm praying we don't meet anyone coming the other way because if we do the chances are we'll both go over. I don't even want to speak for fear of rousing Zeb out of the zone he's in. Where he is right now he can do no wrong. When they made this van they did not have ice climbing in mind, but that's what Zeb wants the van to do, and it's going to do it.

Time is relative. It's not obvious most of the time, but when every moment could be your last, and you're in a black van on a white road in a blizzard, time does not go by at the same rate. I don't know if I'll be younger or older at the end of this, but time has slowed right down. Time is all about tiny particles buffeting, and the sharp outlines of the fine hairs on your wrists, and the creases at the corners of your eyes as they strain to stare into the wind of the world as it rushes by you. Time is the long drop over the edge that you'll travel in a few seconds if you have a moment of bad luck. Time is waiting at the summit, or in the valley, wherever it decides to take you.

And then we're out. The cloud is below us. We're at the top. Above us is a brilliant blue sky and below us a sea of mist, a few solitary island peaks the only sign of a solid world.

It's a town of ice. There's a handful of structures, towers, cottages, stairways, frozen over, icicles thrusting out parallel to the ground, as if the wind has been blowing so long and cold and straight that even the ice is straining to escape the blast. Agonized sculptures, some artist's tortured impression of the way the world punishes the pride of those who dare to build monuments to themselves.

Zeb stops the van and we get out.

“Used to be the observatory. Great place to look at the stars.”

“Please tell me we're not sleeping here tonight.”

“No, we'll go back below the treeline. We'll find a spot and make a shelter.”

We walk around the buildings, but there isn't much to see. Ice, snow, ice. But the view is beyond words. The horizon could be a thousand miles away. The sky is all there is, a perfect dome of light.

“It's like we're the only people on the planet.”

“Maybe we are. Maybe we just left them all behind.”

I don't know how long we stand there. When we get back to the van I drink about a gallon of water.

Chapter 20 - Shelter

Driving back down seems to take no time at all. We've been here before, we don't have to think about it. Zeb takes a turn I didn't even see coming, and we bump down what might have once been a road until we find a mound of snow in our way. A tree has fallen across the track and its branches have iced over. We're not going to be able to move that.

Zeb brought snowshoes. When I put my rucksack on it feels pretty heavy. I just grab mine and put it on but Zeb calls me back. We spend like half an hour going through the inventory, checking everything in the packs, the seals on the containers, everything. There's all sorts of really odd things in these packs. There's little medicine bottles full of greasy cotton balls. I hope we're not going to be eating them. Finally Zeb is satisfied and we move on out.

We can't put the snowshoes on until we climb over the frozen tree. On the other side I jump down and plunge up to my waist in powder snow. Zeb shakes his head disgustedly and hauls me out. Then we spend ten minutes getting the snow out of my clothes. Zeb makes me change my socks. We have three pairs of socks each, and Zeb says that'll be enough but only if nobody does anything moronic.

Zeb knows where he's going. I hope. I'm just following him.

Tramping along on snowshoes wearing a pack is hard work, but after a while you stop thinking about it. After a while you don't even notice you're walking. You watch the snow slipping off one branch onto another. Sometimes you get a cascade that goes on for half a minute. Everything is stark black and white under the glare of the sky. If you close your eyes for a while and open them everything is a washed-out blue. Zeb sees me blinking and hands me some dark goggles. I don't want to put anything between me and this day, but as soon as I put them on everything feels a whole lot easier.

The only color is the occasional flash of a little bird, hopping among the branches. Pine siskins and grosbeaks, according to Zeb. He could be making it up for all I know, but he's keeping a pretty straight face. They're the true survivalists, he says. Any time you start thinking you're a tough guy, think about what they can do. They can forage on a winter day and find more than their body weight in food. Yeah, well, it helps if you weigh almost nothing. And they probably burn up their body weight in food looking. I'm starting to get hungry, and it's only been a few hours since breakfast.

There's a big bird way up near the cliff face, wings stretched wide, just hanging on the air. Zeb says it's a peregrine falcon. It's watching for small birds or bats in the air below it. When it finds one it folds its wings and drops. Stoops. It'll hit them at about two hundred miles an hour. They'll never know what happened. Nothing eats peregrine falcons. That's the advantage of being at the top of the food chain.

We pass by a waterfall that's frozen in place. It's like the freeze happened in an instant, but it can't have. It's hard to believe it will ever start flowing again, but in a few months the waterfall will be flowing, the snow will be gone, there'll be grass and flowers everywhere. This moment always seems to be frozen but it never is.

I want it to stay frozen. I want everything I see to burn itself permanently into my eyes. I want to remember every moment. But I know I'll forget. I forgot my dad. Joe Clancy. He must have brought me here. Maybe not long before he died. I don't remember anything about it. Except that Ma wasn't here. It was just me and him. And I don't think it was winter, because I can imagine this place without the snow.

We stop for water and food. It's warm in the sun, but clouds are drifting in, and whenever a cloud crosses the sun the temperature drops about ten degrees.

"We'll go a couple more hours then we'll make camp. We don't want to be doing anything after dark. We gotta give ourselves time to work up a sweat and time to cool down again, before it gets too cold."

"Why don't we just make camp here?"

"Right here? Too close to water. And if that drift up there decided to come down it could bury us. We'll find the right place."

From now on, we start collecting wood for the fire. And birch bark. You can take a little without hurting the tree, but you never take the bark all the way around a tree. That'll ringbark it. Kill it. And there's a fungus that grows on birch trees. Zeb calls it tinder shroom. It's dry inside and lights really easily.

Searching for firewood makes me look at the trees a different way.

Zeb shows me the best wood. I get so I can tell the difference between them: maple, beech, larch, birch, spruce, fir. The hardwoods burn the longest, but the softwoods catch the quickest. I find some birch and grab handfuls of the bark. You dig into it because you need a thick clump. It's soft, like stacks of thin paper. And I recognize some tinder

shroom. The pine smells the best. It has sticky sap on it and you rub it between your fingers it gives off this scent that makes me think about May.

Every now and the Zeb picks up a rock and puts it in his pack.

“Come on, Zeb, isn't it heavy enough?”

“You see something you want, you take it. You might not see it again. That's rule number one.”

We're crossing a little stream and I lose balance and put a foot down on some ice that looks solid. It goes through and into freezing water. Then trying to get out fast I get the other boot full of water. Zeb doesn't get mad or anything. He just makes me take off my boots and socks and get my feet dry. I put on a new pair of socks and stuff the others in a pocket of my pack with the first pair.

“Ok, Ben, you've got one more mistake like that.”

Zeb finds a spot he's happy with. The first thing we do is cut down a tree for a support beam. Zeb has a little hatchet and he starts chopping away.

“It's just one tree, Ben. We're using all of it and it's a young tree that'll get replaced quick.”

He gives me the hatchet and I try chopping but I'm not making any headway. Zeb shows me again. I do a little better. I'm getting hot and I strip my fleecy jacket off. Then we have to get all the boughs off the tree, except you leave parts of some branches sticking out so that we can attach things to them later.

Zeb finds a tree. He has a couple of little shovels and we clear snow around the bottom of it. You don't want to sleep on snow. We haul the support beam over to the tree and lash it up to the trunk. Zeb brought cord, but he says you can find cordage in the wild if you have to. Zeb has cut a few more poles and we lash them on to make a skeleton. Then we take the boughs and start lacing them over the skeleton and into each other. We use up all the boughs we have and go off looking for some more. I've got the idea now and I find some good ones. We have to leave a big one for the door. Zeb tells me to go inside and check it. I crawl in and I'm in a whole new place. It smells piney and there's light filtering through. It's dark and green. It feels safe. I think of Lock.

“You see any light coming through?”

“Yup.”

“Well, come on Ben, we got to fill up the gaps, where are they?”

We keep going for another hour or more. The clouds are gathering and the sun is dropping low, but we're finished. Except we're not. Now we have to heap snow up the sides, then over the top. We find a place that's good for the fire, out the front of the shelter. It has to be somewhere where snow can't fall on it and put it out. We dig out a bare patch where we're going to light the fire, and take the snow from that and put it all over the shelter. The snow acts as insulation, says Zeb. We're using snow to keep warm.

We get soft foliage and drag it inside to make a bed. You use whatever insulation you can find. Grass, reeds, if you can find them. We've got pine needles.

Zeb puts his rocks around the rim of the hole. He lights the tinder shroom, and that works, but the fire isn't catching very fast. Then I find out what the greasy cotton balls are for. They're firelighters. Zeb is really careful. He didn't know if we'd be able to find any tinder shroom, or birch bark, or even dry kindling, so he filled a bunch of cotton balls with petroleum jelly. You pick it apart and light it, and it burns with a big yellow flame. He adds the birch bark and birch twigs for kindling, and pretty soon we have the fire going really well.

“Ok, you're fire monitor again, Ben. Keep building it up with bigger logs but don't swamp it. When we have enough good embers we're safe. Give it a few hours, and it'll stay alight while we sleep and we'll be able to start it again in the morning.”

Fire monitor is the best job. You don't realize how cold you are until you hold out your hands to the fire. The heat is like something alive. It flows into you. You can feel the warm blood coming back to your heart. It's getting darker and quieter, and all I can hear is the fire crackling and Zeb moving around somewhere and little thumps as snow falls off branches.

“You warm enough?”

“Yeah.”

“You got it going good. Don't burn your hands. If you're numb you could cook them without feeling it. Your ears ok? Don't take that balaclava off. Check your feet too, you might need to change your socks. You want to sit on some foam or something, you're losing heat to the ground.”

Zeb gives me some closed cell mat. When I sit on it, it's like lighting a fire under my ass. The heat must have been flowing straight out into the ground, and when you block the escape route it feels like heat flowing back in. Take away something bad, you get something good.

I can dry my socks out now. When I try to get them out of my pack, they're frozen solid, bent over and stuck together. I'm worried if I force them they'll break. I really don't want to find out what Zeb will say if I snap my socks. I bring the pack over near the fire. I'll have to thaw them before I can dry them.

“Gonna be a cold one. We'll try to make a small fire inside, near the tree.”

“Won't that melt all the snow and set fire to the shelter?”

“Well, it could, so we have to be real careful. We'll make a fire pit, we'll take out any overhanging branches, we'll keep it small. We're going to take embers from the outside fire and use them for the inside fire. These rocks are heating up. They'll keep the heat for a good while. We'll take them inside before we turn in and put them around the inside fire. If you want to try to find a few more, same size, it'd be good. We should have looked while it was light.”

I grab a lantern and take a little walk away from the camp to look for rocks but before I get very far I want to turn back. I don't know where to take my next step. The night is swallowing the lantern light. I take a breath or two to calm down, but the air is so cold it hurts. There's ice crackling on my balaclava. I'm shining the lantern around looking for rocks, but I keep imagining things moving in the beam, little dark creatures scuttling behind logs. I find a rock or two, sort of the right size. Then I turn around and I can't see the camp. Where's the light from the fire? What way was I pointing? I really don't want to call out and admit that I'm lost.

How long would it take before I froze to death out here? If I tripped and fell down, ended up lying in the snow. I wouldn't make morning. Maybe only a few hours, and I'd be unconscious in no time. The heat is pouring out of me. How did humans survive the ice age? We're meant to stay where it's warm and flat and safe. Where there's plenty of food. I should never have crawled out of my pond. I'm shuffling around to keep a little warmer, but all I can hear is my own sounds; all I can see is the darting light of the lantern.

I turn the lantern off and stand still, not even breathing. After a few seconds I can see something. Dark, still shapes. I take a step to one side, trying to orient myself with the dim forms. Another step. I start to turn slowly all the way around, keeping track of where I was pointing when I started. About half way I see a glimmer that could be some malfunction in my eye or brain. After I count twelve more steps toward it I'm feeling a little more sure it's there. What light there is from the fire doesn't make it far through the brush, but the brush picks up a faint glow. A few more steps and I hear a twig pop in the fire.

Zeb is cooking up some dinner.

“Here's a couple more rocks.”

“Good. Put them in the fire. You like chili?”

“Yup.”

I sit back down and get to work warming up.

Chapter 21 - Stars

We have the chili with cornbread. We are both so hungry we don't say a word. Just shovel it in. It's too cold to say outside after dinner, even with the fire. Zeb uses two shovels to move the hot rocks into the inside fire pit. Then he carries some embers in and puts them inside the rocks. We carefully build it up with some slow burning logs. The shelter warms up pretty quickly. Zeb hangs a pan over the fire so that any drips will fall in the pan and not put the fire out.

We pull the big bough up over the entrance. Zeb says we should put on all of our clothes, in layers. Shirts, socks, pants, everything. We put a reflective blanket down, shiny side up, and get into our sleeping bags. Another shiny blanket goes on top. It's really quite comfortable. Once I'm in there it's hard to believe it's sub zero just outside the wall of the shelter. The orange firelight flickers on the pine boughs. It even looks warm.

As soon as we stop moving around I can hear noises from outside. When you think about it, there could be animals out there. Bears, or dogs. After they made pets illegal a lot of dogs and cats went feral. They'd smell us and hear us. They'd smell the food. We cleaned the plates off and buried anything that might give off a scent, but Zeb said it probably wouldn't work. They'd still smell it. Maybe they'd be afraid to come close when the fire was going and we were there. But now, they could come sniffing around. It's winter. Not much hunting. They could be really hungry.

“Zeb?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you hear that?”

“It's nothing.”

“It sounds like something walking around.”

“Just snow and wind.”

I try to think of it as random noises. It sounds like something walking really softly, and carefully, on big soft paws.

“Hey Zeb?”

“Yup?”

“Did you go camping with Roy?”

Zeb doesn't answer at first. Another mistake.

“We tried it once when he was a little kid. Roy didn't like it. He wouldn't go again.”

“What happened?”

“I think he just got scared. It was too strange for him. He wanted to be home reading books.”

“Did you bring him here?”

“No.”

“Why did you bring me?”

Another pause.

“Thought you'd like it.”

“Thanks, Zeb.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Night, Zeb.”

“Night.”

I open my eyes but it doesn't make any difference. I have to blink to make sure they're open. I don't know where I am. I don't know what time it is. I've been waking up and going back to sleep and putting it off. The horror is too much to contemplate. But I really have no choice. The inside fire has died and there is no light at all. It's getting so cold in here my feet are starting to freeze. I have to move. I start wriggling around to get out of my sleeping bag.

“What's up, Ben?”

“Nothing.”

I wriggle some more.

“What, do you need to pee?”

“Yup.”

“Just exercise your God-given right to turn over on your side and pee in your canteen.”

“I can't.”

“What, you need to take a dump?”

“Yes, all right?”

“Damn, Ben, you're not going to like it out there.”

“Well, I'm just going to have to do it anyway.”

“Well, you gotta go, you gotta go.”

Zeb turns on a lantern and hands it me, along with a shovel. I wait.

“What?”

“Have we got any ass-wipes?”

“I don't know, Ben, did you bring any?”

“No.”

“Nothing to take home for Ma to wash?”

“No.”

“Then I guess we don't.”

“What am I going to do?”

“Well, let's see. There's a whole lot of snow out there.”

Now I'm out of the bag I'm shivering. I put on the fleecy jacket and the balaclava and a cap with fluffy ears. I take a few breaths, and build up my courage. I push the door bough out of the way. Zeb pulls it back into place as soon as I'm out.

It's like stepping onto another planet. But there's light. The clouds have cleared. That just makes it colder. I turn off the lantern and let my eyes adjust. I didn't know it was possible to see by starlight. I'm dancing from one foot to another and the snow squeaks with every footfall. There are crystals sparkling on the tree branches. They look like they're decorated for Solstice. This must be what gave people the idea.

I keep having to blink to stop my eyelashes freezing up. I find a place far enough away from the camp but close enough so I can find my way back. I dig a hole. Then I have to think really hard about the next step. I can take my gloves off, but that could mean frostbite. I try to pull my pants down with gloves on, but when you're wearing three pairs of pants and long underwear there's a lot of manipulation to do. In the end I take one glove off and undo the buttons and zips really quickly. Then I shove the hand in my armpit, and grab hold of tree trunk with the gloved hand. I am genuinely afraid I will literally freeze my ass off.

But it's worth it. Then I use the snow like Zeb said. It's like taking a blowtorch to myself. I get my pants back up without falling into the hole and bury it all with the shovel. You know when something feels really bad, it feels really good when it's over? I'm feeling warm now, and there's this incredible sense of accomplishment. If I never do anything else in my life, I did that.

When I get back to the shelter I look up at the sky. The stars are blazing. It takes your breath away. I had absolutely no idea there were this many stars. And some of them are moving.

“Zeb.”

“Huh?”

“Come out here!”

“What's wrong?”

“You gotta see this!”

Zeb crawls out and staggers to his feet.

“What is it? Fuck, it's freezing out here.”

“Look!”

Zeb looks where I'm pointing.

“That's the sky, Ben.”

“Some of the stars are moving. See, that one!”

“Satellites. There are thousands of them up there. They fall down from time to time, but a lot of them just keep on going round. They used them for everything. Communications, navigation, surveillance, you name it. Come back inside.”

“It's so beautiful.”

Zeb looks up again, then he looks at me and shakes his head.

“You're beautiful.”

“What?”

“You're such a crazy kid. I love you, Ben.”

“Yeah, well, great.”

“I been thinking about it, and you know, maybe this is not the best time and all, but it's real. It's how I feel. It's love. The genuine article.”

“Shit, Zeb.”

“Ben, I want you to marry me.”

“Get the fuck out of here.”

“Don't say anything yet. Think about it. Sleep on it.”

I never really understand Zeb's sense of humor. I try to get a look at his face in the starlight.

“Well, you know, I'll take that as a compliment.”

“It's not about sex, Ben, that's not what I'm talking about. It's love.”

“Fuck, Zeb.”

Zeb suddenly loses his certainty. The man who always knows what to do. He turns away.

“Oh shit. Look, Ben, get inside, it's cold. You go in.”

I don't need too much prompting. I dive through the gap and wait. But Zeb is pushing the door bough into place from the outside. He can't be serious. I push the bough out of the way and stick my head out. He's not far away.

“Zeb! You have to come in.”

“I'll be ok.”

“Zeb, you stay out here you'll just die. Come on. I trust you, it's ok.”

“You trust me.”

“Just fucking come inside and let's get some sleep.”

It takes five minutes, and we're both of us losing heat fast. Finally I get him inside. I feel like I'll never be warm again. I can feel Zeb shivering violently beside me.

“Zeb.”

“What?”

“We're going to have to hold each other. To get warm.”

“You sure?”

“But this doesn't mean we're engaged.”

“Ok.”

We shift around until we're like spoons nesting together. It's sort of awkward figuring out where to put your limbs, but it's a whole lot better. I put an arm round his shoulder and press my face into his back. Zeb's shivering calms down and I feel his breathing slow.

Next morning Zeb has the outside fire going by the time I get up. We have breakfast without talking much. It's easy to break camp. We don't say anything about last night, but there are my footsteps leading away from the shelter behind the trees, then coming back, then the scuffled tracks where we looked at the stars.

We just leave the shelter where it is and make sure we pick up anything else and take it with us. Hiking back we just think our own thoughts. It's the same scenery as on the way out but not so intense. We climb back over the deadfall and there's the van, right where we left it, like nothing has happened.

After an hour of silence in the van I can't really stand it any more.

“Look, Zeb...”

“It's ok.”

“I really like you, but...”

“That's fine, Ben, I appreciate it.”

“It's just that I have these feelings for May, you know...”

“For May.”

“I feel like she needs me.”

“She needs you.”

“I think so. Only there's something wrong.”

“I thought you broke up with May.”

“Well, it was more she broke up with me. But she's hurting, I don't know what she wants.”

“Hurting?”

“I don't know, that bastard Aggie, her stepfather, she won't tell me the whole story. But she gets bruises, and her little brother's scared of him.”

“This Aggie is hurting the brother? And May?”

“I don't even know for sure, and when I ask she just gets upset.”

“And it's May you want.”

“I'm really sorry, Zeb.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

Zeb drops me outside the house.

“Do you want to come up? Say hi to Ma?”

“No. Got to get home. Stuff to do.”

“It was a great trip, Zeb. The camping was great. I never knew how much fun it is to freeze your ass off. And hey, we survived.”

“Yeah. We survived. You go well, Ben.”

I watch the black van until it's gone. Then I head inside, and for the first time in years I notice the smells in the stairwell.

Chapter 22 - Information

Ma is in the kitchen when I come in. She comes out and helps me with my stuff. She keeps giving me funny looks. She makes us a cup of tea and we sit down at the kitchen table.

“Well?”

“It was great. I'll tell you, I am never going to feel cold in this apartment ever again.”

She sips her tea and looks at me over the top of the cup with this odd expression.

“What?”

“Well, did he pop the question?”

“Fuck, Ma!”

There are no words for this. I just get up and go into my room and start shoving things into my backpack. Ma comes to the doorway.

“I just assumed he would, but maybe he didn't get up the nerve. I hope I haven't said the wrong thing.”

She sounds like my Ma, she looks like my Ma. But I do not know this woman. I sit down on the bed and put my head in my hands.

“Well, I'm dying to hear, what happened?”

“What happened? Ma! You know, it could have been fatal for one of us. Maybe both. Are you fucking crazy? You talked to him about this?”

“Well, we talked about you. I knew how he felt.”

“All that time you were alone with him, I thought you and him, you know...”

“Zeb? And me? No. What a strange idea. He's not really my type. And he never showed the slightest interest in me.”

“No warning? You just send me off with him?”

“Ben, did something bad happen?”

This person is totally incomprehensible.

“It didn't occur to you that I might not really want Zeb to be proposing marriage?”

“Well, Ben, that's up to you, but there's no harm in asking is there? Although I think you could give it a little consideration. Zeb is a good man, he has an income. From somewhere. He cares for you. You have to start thinking about your future, you know. There are no guarantees in this world. You have to take what comes, when you can.”

She's saying this stuff, complete sentences, but none of it has any meaning.

“And does the name Joe Clancy mean anything to you, Ma? Does that ring a bell?”

That shuts her up.

“Joe Clancy and Ben Clancy were up at a hut on that mountain once. Ben must have been a little guy, Joe might have been his dad. Dark guy with a beard. Hoarse kind of voice. Sound familiar?”

“Zeb told you this?”

“No. How would Zeb know about it?”

“So how?”

“I just started remembering. We must have driven the same way up there once, and stayed in the same hut.”

“He took you up when you were seven. It wasn't long before ... He may have known something was coming. He wanted a little time, just the two of you.”

“He was a cop, wasn't he?”

“You seem to think I have all the answers and I'm just keeping them from you. I'm just as much in the dark as you are, Ben. I don't know anything more about your Dad than I know about Zeb. I married Joe because I wanted a future with you in it. And I got that. Whatever else happens, I got you.”

Ma isn't completely totally orthodox, but she sticks close to the basic principle – it's not supposed to make sense. She has a real instinct for that.

“How would Zeb have known about it?”

“I don't know what Zeb knows.”

Ma could last a long time under torture. Eventually they'd just down tools and walk away. She wouldn't clam up or anything, but they wouldn't get a single shred of useful information out of her. I go back to putting things in my backpack.

“Ma, there is apparently something everybody knows but me. I'm feeling a little left out.”

“Where do you think you're going?”

“I don't know. Away from here.”

“Are you going to Zeb?”

I don't care. I'll figure it out when I'm gone. She's right, I haven't got all that many choices. But I can't stay here. I pick up the snow globe and shove it in my pocket. I head out the door. Ma stands at the top of the stairs.

“Are you going to be too warm in that?”

The snow globe must have got shaken and turned upside down. As I walk down the stairs I hear Santa's voice, muffled and faint.

“Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.”

On the street I just walk. My feet appear to have something in mind.

The temple is dark. I bang on the door until a light goes on. Santa is wearing a knee length red nightshirt and his red cap. His nose is even redder.

“Ben? Come in.”

“Santa, I need a place to stay. Just for a little while.”

“Oh, sure, yeah, whatever, the girls will fix you up. Bee!”

He heads off, back to bed I suppose. Bee comes out and shuffles over in a pink quilted dressing gown with matching pom-pom slippers. It doesn't look like she has much on underneath it. Her hair is built up high in curlers with a scarf over it, which makes her about seven feet tall. It must be really uncomfortable to sleep like that. Which, I suppose, in theory, would be a good thing. She opens one eye briefly and grunts at me, then turns around and shuffles off. I follow her backstage then down a staircase. She opens a door and motions me in.

“Bathroom down the hall. Careful where you pee. And don't use my fucking toothbrush.”

“Night Bee.”

“Night.”

She shuffles off.

It's easy enough to tell which one is Bee's toothbrush. It's pink with Barbie written on it in swirly writing. I brought my own toothbrush. I brought the tabula Santa gave me, and my snubby. I brought all the clothes I own, wearing most of them. The snow globe. I'm ready to go anywhere.

I can hear someone snoring as I walk down the hall. It's not far enough down in the bass register to be Santa. I'm trying to figure out whether it's Bee or Flo. One of the things you recognize in people is the resonance of their voices. I guess it carries information about the shape of their skulls, their nose, their throat and lungs. You can hear a cough and know who it is. I'm pretty sure it's Bee. When you think about it, the nose job could have messed up her breathing. So naturally there's this image of her lying on her back, with nothing on but the curlers in her hair, mouth open and snoring. I need to go back to my room and go to sleep right now.

The hall goes the full length underneath the temple, and there are lots of doors. I open one, but mine must have been the next along. This one opens on a stairway that goes down into darkness. And coming up the stairs is murmuring. Occasionally a syllable pops out of the mix, never enough to understand a complete word. There are hundreds of people down there, whispering to each other. Maybe thousands.

The only sound coming from the hall is snoring. Either what's going on down here is business as usual or no one up there knows about the danger. I take the snubby out of the ankle holster and tiptoe down the stairs. When I turn the stairs on the landing I'm in darkness. The whispering is louder. I'm starting to hear words, a voice here, a voice there.

“Dear...sorry ...forgive...bad...wrong...Santa...bless...”

I reach the bottom step and turn another corner. Ahead there are little twinkling lights, red, blue, yellow, green. It's like a Solstice tree, but the lights are arrayed in long lines, stretching off in perspective, ranks upon ranks of them, layers of them that seem to slide over each other as I move. There's no end to them. The whispering is like wind rushing.

“Bless me Santa, for I have sinned. I put an extra blanket on my bed.”

“Forgive me, Santa. I need to know why I have to suffer this pain. This anger.”

“Sweet Virgin Barbie, she says it's for my own good, but I know it is because she does not love me.”

“I have bad thoughts, Santa.”

“Bless me Santa, for I have sinned. I took an extra helping.”

“I want to hurt someone, Santa. I want them to cry out.”

“How can I make him happy, Bunny? He won't even speak to me.”

As I walk between the lights, I see numbers floating. Sixteen digit hexadecimal. They hold for a few seconds, then they switch. The sequence seems to be random.

I take out my snow globe and turn it over. There's a patch of orange glow that gives out just enough light to read the number on the bottom. Sixteen digit hex. I run my fingers over the little keypad below a number readout. I tap in my snow globe ID. It appears on the readout.

“Hello,” I whisper.

And just slightly delayed, floating in the air amidst the other voices, I hear the echo of my own.

“...hello.”

“Hello!”

The lights flicker on all along the huge room.

“Ho, Ben! There's no holding you back, is there?”

Santa strides down between the shelves towards me.

“I was going to wait until morning to get you started, but you just got straight into it. I see you've sorted out the IDs.”

I look up and down the shelves. There must be hundreds of workstations, each with a readout and keypad attached.

“Three hundred and eighty workstations to be exact, Ben.”

Santa pushes his cap back and scratches his forehead.

“We could have put more in, but I don't want it too hot and crowded. My agents have to be able to concentrate. Uncomfortable is one thing, unproductive is another. But I don't have to tell you that.”

“You have three hundred and eighty agents?”

“Listeners. In this group. There's more at other centers. And I'm going to start working them in shifts. We can record this stuff but it's hard to catch up the next day. As you can imagine, there's a big expansion going on right now and that's where you fit in. Ben, I can find listeners. I can train them up. Techs, admins, middle managers, for fuck's sake, when it comes to that. I can even find triple, quadruple threats like Flo and Bee. Not so common, but they're around. Nip and tuck them where you have to and they'll work. But if I'm going to expand I need people with that extra something. Call it intelligence. Call it drive. Call it hunger. Call it fucking balls-out crazy. I know it when I see it, and I see it in you.”

With Santa it all makes sense while he's saying it, but you can't even remember half of it afterwards. He's up to something.

“So you listen, for what?”

“Why, Ben! No prayer goes unheard. None of my flock can stray far when I know where they are. This is an essential part of our mission.”

“This ties them to you, is that it? You know their secrets.”

“As a loving father knows the secrets of his children. Information, Ben, is power. In any world, at any time, but especially now, when there's so little of anything else. Information is a commodity that lasts. Charisma, being the guy in the big red suit, that needs a special someone. That person can grow old and die. The charisma can fade. But information, Ben. Information is forever.”

“You know everything. That's what Bee said.”

“She's a sweet girl, and I appreciate her kind words, however she may have overstated the case. There are things I don't know, Ben, and by that I am deeply troubled. My flock is in need, and to help them I must be strong. Information I do not have diminishes my power.”

I have a feeling he may be hinting at something here. And the weird thing is that he seems to think that not only do I know something he wants to know, but that I will tell him just because he's Santa. It's true, I do feel a compulsion to talk to him. And no matter how much I suspect him of something, in a way I trust him. But that's what he does for a living, I suppose. Makes people feel that way.

“I wish I could help you, Santa. But what do I know?”

“You'd be surprised, Ben. Sometimes we know things without even realizing it. People tell us things, we see things. We think nothing of it at the time. Sometimes it's the presence of something. Sometimes it's the absence.”

Santa leads me to the foot of the stairs, and turns off the lights. As we walk up the whispered secrets merge into a soft, even hiss. It fades to a murmur, and then to nothing.

Chapter 23 - Ultra

Santa gets me started right away. There are so many things to organize for Solstice. Santa has phones that actually work. Bee and Flo are on the phone all day. They put someone on hold and talk to someone else. I've seen Flo juggle four callers at once and keep track of them all.

He has all these people working for him, running around, decorating, rigging more lighting and sound. There are other guys who just stand around looking dangerous, muttering to themselves. There are teams sawing and hammering in Temple Square, building the platforms and the altar and the stands. The smell of cut pine is everywhere.

The listening room is full of these serious people in serious clothes, concentrating on the voices, picking up the keywords, looking for connections. I could spend a week in there just figuring out what they're doing. I'm doing four hours then going to school and coming home and doing another six hours. It's really tiring but it's great to be part of something like this, working with the others, watching it take shape..

I show Bee and Flo the snow globe rhythm thing and they fall over laughing. They want to do something with it to surprise Santa. I don't know if it's such a great idea to surprise him.

Santa's got me understudying him. The idea is if he gets sick or something, I go on in his place. Yeah, right. So I'm learning all his lines and he's showing me how to control the system with the gloves. He's had this suit made up and when I put on all the padding and the eyebrows and beard I'm like a smaller, thinner, younger Santa. I have to put on this red nose. Santa uses his own.

The hard part is to walk like him. He can walk a few paces and you have to watch him. He's the only thing in the room. I try it and Bee and Flo have to turn away so I can't see them laughing. He says it's not about stiffness, it's about stillness. But if you're still, you're not walking. Whatever it is he's doing, I can't get it by concentrating on how I move my limbs. It's in your head. Something in your head goes out to the people watching, straight into their heads. I ask Santa if it's about psychic communication and he laughs.

“It's the absence of something, Ben. Always keep an eye out for that. Making no more effort than absolutely necessary. The young have energy to burn. Move only when you have to, you appear wise. Wisdom and weariness, the twin companions of age.”

That's probably some quote from somewhere. I finished Sun Tzu and Machiavelli, which were pretty good. No fucking prisoners. I'm trying to get into the Edda, which seems to be about dwarves.

So there isn't a lot of time to work on Roy and my Dad. I think about them while I'm doing other things. The absence of something. My Dad was an absence. Roy is an absence. Things can only be an absence if you expect them to be there. You can't miss what you never had. Ever since that door banged open and Roy walked into the classroom, nothing has been the same. The whole past has been an absence.

Bee is working with me on the schedules and the running order. Big things like the Solstice need plans. You can't just give up on plans because they don't always work out. Gomez was right about that. And her classes, I realize now she planned them, even when they felt like a free-for-all. She had somewhere she was going and she always got there. Beamish planned everything, down to the last second, and went nuts if anything happened to disrupt his schedule. Well, it got seriously disrupted.

“Shit!”

Bee looks at me searchingly. I get over it and we go back to checking out the timing of the third set. We've got an overrun and it's not easy to drop anything. My hand goes into my pocket and closes on the hard drive from Beamish's tabula.

When I'm back in my room I get out the tabula and swap in Beamish's drive. What I want is his class plan for the last class. The one that never happened. With Beamish, if it's there you can find it. Color coded, consistently named, ordered, methodical. It's a pleasure to work with him.

Subverting Protocol and Message. Seizing Power, Agreement Missing. Stupid Posts Absent Meaning. Selfish Person Abusing Masses.

Beamish was planning the definitive class on spam. He was going to start with a competition to make up slogans that fitted spam as an acronym. A radical idea, for Beamish. A little interaction, the sound of someone's voice other than his. Not his usual style.

Then he was going to move on to a historical discussion. History in the Beamish sense of putting together a fictitious justification for what he thought his precious Uncomfortablists wanted us to believe. This was vintage Beamish. I

can almost hear the endless, thin, monotonous droning. I start clicking through the SlideShow, and it's like Beamish is standing right there, darting his little eyes from face to face, his own face a mask of suspicion and resentment.

Network abuse, that eventually destroyed the network it fed on. How the term was gradually broadened to mean not just abuse of the network, but any kind of abuse of any system, breaking any rules, real or imagined. These days it's just a catch-all. A spammer is an asshole, plain and simple. I can't get over the idea of the world's greatest spammer lecturing us on spam.

Then there were examples of spam. There's the obvious ones, viruses, email floods, automated phone advertising, graffiti, leeching, trolling. Later any form of advertising qualified, anything you had to read, see, hear, experience that gave benefit to the spammer and no benefit to you. Anti-social behavior like fraud, embezzlement, corruption in office. Taking advantage of someone in any way. Assault, rape, murder.

At first spammers did their damage as a by-product of their greed or their need, for attention, for making a mark. But as it became obvious how much damage they could do, a new kind of spammer emerged, whose goal was the damage. When everything runs on information, spammers started to look for the small piece of information to inject into the system and bring it all crashing down.

The Uncomfortablists knew how to deal with this kind of spammer. There was only one way.

The big climax was the one that nearly got away. Nine years ago, a spammer found the piece of information that would do the job. The virus that would eat the foundations out of the world. Someone came up with a name for him. The only name anyone knows: the Ultraspammer. He was getting ready to broadcast the information, by phone, by email, on the net, through a whisper network, by every means available. That's how close we came. They got him in time. But the only way to make sure it didn't happen then, and could never happen again, was to shut down the networks. Clean out the net and bring it totally under centralized control. Cripple email with security. End public phone access. Terminate all privacy, all rights of any kind.

And they got the Ultraspammer. Three shots to be certain. Eyes and heart.

Of course, Beamish couldn't tell us what that piece of information was. If he did that, he'd be the new UltraSpammer. We wouldn't want to see him take three shots, would we?

There's a sharp knocking on the door.

“Ben?”

“Yeah, what is it, Bee?”

“You ok in there, Ben? You're making the weirdest fucking noise.”

“Like what?”

“Like someone humping a rubber duck. Eek eek eek eek.”

“Sorry, I must have been dreaming.”

“You sound like you're out of breath. Need a hand with anything?”

“No, thanks all the same.”

“Ok. Let me know.”

“Fuck yeah.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

Her pom pom slippers shuffle away.

This is why Roy had to walk into a room full of guns. He had to stop this class from happening.

I still can't see it. Beamish wasn't going to reveal the big dark secret. He was probably bullshitting about knowing it. And what information could be so devastating anyway? And why would Roy care? Roy's whole life was dedicated to stirring things up. He would have loved it if the terrible truth were told.

But he took Beamish out just like they took out the UltraSpammer. Eyes and heart. So Roy already knew that story. He may have even known the secret. Roy was looking for some kind of secret, for Beamish's thesis. Roy's thesis. This secret may have been more than he bargained for. But it would have met the requirement.

But Beamish had some other information that Roy had to stop. It doesn't seem to be here. The SlideShow for the class has one more slide.

The Ultraspammer

- Who was he?

- What made him do it?
- Could it happen again?

That's all he wrote.

At first glance it's a typical very boring ending to a very boring class. An opportunity for Beamish to tell us that we are all the Ultraspammer, that what makes us that way is lack of attention to the pure and perfect gospel of Uncomfortablism, that it will happen again if we deviate even slightly from the strictest discipline and if he for a moment relaxes the vigilance for which we should all be so grateful.

But sitting there staring at it, another possibility occurs to me. Beamish may conceivably have had an answer to the questions he was asking, other than pure bullshit. What if he knew who the Ultraspammer was? What if he knew the whole story? That's information Roy might not have wanted spread around. Roy might have been prepared to kill to stop its spread.

If Beamish had the information, he didn't keep it here.

Mrs Beamish talks tough, but I can tell she's glad to see me. She sits me down and leaves me in Beamish's chair while the cat stares at me. I stare back and eventually it blinks and starts licking its paw. Mrs Beamish comes back in with tea and cookies.

“What's on your mind, Ben?”

“I found out something about what Mr Beamish was doing. He was writing a thesis. It looks like he was finishing off his doctorate.”

She looks so pleased to hear this that I don't tell her Roy was ghostwriting the thesis.

“I was so afraid his disappointment had got the better of him. You accept your children for what they are, Ben, you have to, but you want them at least to have hope.”

I take another cookie and taste the ginger. I can hear Greedy Girl lapping her milk under the table.

“He was going to do a class on the Ultraspammer the day he...”

“The day he died. Was shot. Never shot back. Yes, the Ultraspammer, that was a topic that always interested him. He always took it very seriously.”

“You didn't?”

“Lot of nonsense. A bogeyman invented to frighten the children. And of course they want us all to be like children.”

“So you're saying there was never an Ultraspammer?”

“You're a bright lad, Ben. How could a single item of information destroy the world? It's a myth. It's the serpent and the forbidden fruit, it's Prometheus stealing fire from Olympus.”

“You know that Roy, the way he shot Mr Beamish, it was...”

“The same ritual execution as they supposedly gave the Ultraspammer. Yes. I'm sorry, but all that tells me is that your friend Roy, apart from being a homicidal maniac, had a limited and revolting imagination. No surprises there. And please call him Jack. There was no Mr Beamish. More tea?”

After a little tea I'm ready to ask her another question.

“I think Mr...Jack may have thought he knew who the Ultraspammer was. Did he mention anything to you?”

“Ah. One day you'll come and visit me just for the hell of it. Jack and I didn't always find a great deal to talk about. We were close in some ways, we understood each other, but But well into the night, I could hear his voice, murmuring away endlessly. He loved the sound of his own voice, why I don't know, I never found it his most attractive feature, but he wasn't just talking to himself. He was making confession to his absurd god. Here.”

She reaches into her apron pocket and takes out Beamish's snow globe. She hands it over.

“Take care of it. I'd like it back. I'm a silly sentimental old woman, in spite of myself. And take care of yourself too. I mean it. You follow my Jack down the path he went, you could end up where he is.”

I stand up to leave. I bend down and kiss her on the cheek. It's very soft and a tiny bit furry. She takes my hand and squeezes it.

“Take care of yourself, Ben. I mean it. And visit again. It's a comfort to me.”

Chapter 24 - Practice

I'm not looking forward to the walk back to the temple. It's dark and cold, and I worry about meeting White and Halloran. So when I hear an engine humming behind me I get set to run.

"Ben. Relax. It's me."

Bee. She pulls up beside me. There's not a lot of light, but I can see that it's an old blue van.

"I was just out and I saw you there. Thought you might need a lift."

"Yeah, great, thanks."

I get in beside her.

"So what's up, Ben, what brings you here?"

"Oh, just visiting a friend."

"Anyone I know?"

"Don't think so. She doesn't come to church."

"She? A girlfriend?"

"Well..."

"None of my fucking business, huh? Ok. Whew, it's a cold one. Need a shot?"

She hands me a hip flask. I shake my head. She shrugs, puts it to her lips and tilts her head back.

"Tell you, this Solstice, I'll be glad when it's over. Everybody makes a big deal out of it and it's just stress, stress, stress."

"You got that right. But it's sort of fun too."

"This is your first. You wait till you've done twenty."

"No way you've done twenty."

"This is number twenty one for me. Fourteen as the Bunny."

"How old were you when you started?"

"Well, Ben, if I told you, I'd have to kill you."

"That's what Flo said too. Trouble is, people do get killed."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking. You poor kid. Aw."

She puts an arm around me and pulls my head down into her breast. I guess she's trying to be comforting but I'd just as soon she kept both hands on the wheel. I stay there for a minute or so to be polite, then I gently ease out from under.

"So what brings you out on a cold night, Bee?"

She takes another shot before answering.

"Buck sent me to watch out for you, if you have to know. He's worried about you and so am I."

"Worried why?"

"Come on, Ben. You're getting in deeper and deeper. This is not your fight."

"Well then why am I in it? Why did he want me to work for him?"

"He'd rather have you inside the tent pissing out than outside pissing in. Is that Sun Tzu or Machiavelli?"

"And did Santa, Buck, did he tell you to sleep with the enemy?"

She turns and give me a long look without much calculation in it. I can't help wondering if she should really be driving.

"You're a very cute kid, Ben. Anybody ever tell you that?"

"No."

"Sure they did."

She takes another shot and pulls a sudden left to avoid a pothole.

"Maybe I will have a shot."

I take the flask and tilt it to my closed lips, then put it down on the seat on the side away from Bee.

“Buck's not a young man any more, Ben, and I'm not dead yet.”

I'm wondering if Bee is even capable of dying. They can probably just keep on touching her up and replacing parts forever.

“What does Buck need to know? I told him I'd help if I could.”

Bee gives me another slow, bleary look and jerks the wheel a moment too late. We bump up onto the curb and back down, missing the street light by about a nanometer. Bee jams her foot on the brakes and we go into a long, lazy spin. The van arcs around a full one eighty and comes to rest neatly wedged against the curb on the other side.

“Hey, Bee, good idea, let's just pull over and talk about it some more.”

“Quit sitting on that fucking flask and hand it over.”

She takes a long pull.

“Ok, Ben, how much you figured out?”

“Figured out? I have no goddam idea what's happening. People, places. It's like some nightmare.”

“You went to see the old woman. Beamish mom.”

“I don't have to tell you anything.”

“Listen, Benny boy, you're safer with us than anywhere. Mr Benzener. Going to get messy. Messy messy messy. Stay with us, out of the line of fire, this is over you got your people and your place. Think about it. Don't need to get hurt. Not your fucking fight.”

She starts shifting around as if she's planning to start the van up again.

“Hey, Bee, can I drive? I just need the practice.”

“Yeah, I guess. Sure.”

I get out and go around to the driver's side. I have to shove Bee hard to get her to move over. She's almost out. The van starts up all right, but we must have done something to the axle when we hit the curb. It's wobbling and squeaking. With any luck we'll make it back to the temple before the wheel falls off.

It occurs to me that Santa might not be gay. Maybe he's just old. That stuff about Bee's tits was just to sound like he was still in the game. You can't trust first impressions.

I catch the edge of a small pothole and Bee bounces off the passenger door and stops snoring. She goes quiet for a while and starts muttering. I can't catch all of it.

“...take that fucker out when you were supposed to...wouldn't be in this shit...fat fuck...show our fucking hand...I'll show you my fucking hand, you fat fuck...what's wrong with the way it was...had it made...win this one, you kidding? ... get creamed...we're gonna get creamed... fat fuck...”

Back at the temple I leave Bee in the van and manage to find Flo without running into Santa. Together we manage to get Bee out and into her bedroom undetected. We dump her on the bed and Flo pulls her shoes off, unbuttons a few things and pulls the blankets over her. She starts to snore right away.

“It's not the first time, Ben. She'll be fine in the morning. Any idea how much she had?”

I hand over the flask and Flo shakes it. She tosses it on the bed.

“Come on.”

We walk out together and Flo leads me down the hall to her room.

“Need to talk to you, Ben.”

I shrug and follow her in. She motions me to a chair and she sits on the bed.

“Bee may have been a little indiscreet. She works hard, she needs to unwind, she overdoes it a touch. We have to be forgiving. Wouldn't you say?”

“No arguments from me.”

“She may have said things she'll regret in the morning. If she remembers them. I hope you won't do anything to remind her.”

“Absolutely not. No way.”

She considers for a moment, then stands up and paces a little way.

“It might help if you fill me in on anything she might have said. That way, I can maybe head off any problems before they occur. You know?”

She sits back down on the bed and looks at me with this sweet, understanding expression. Flo works it very differently to Bee. Bee goes for the full frontal attack, whole body, but Flo would rather finesse you out of it. There's a lot to be said for either approach. If I wasn't so impatient to go and take a look at Beamish's snow globe, I'd be enjoying myself. I'm learning so much, so quickly, and from some really good people.

Either Flo knows everything Bee knows, and wants to know how much Bee gave away, or Flo is looking to find out what Bee knows. And this is possibly not for Bee's benefit. Whichever it is, it's interesting. It's not all happy families here at Santa's Temple.

“She didn't say much. She pulled over and passed out.”

“Didn't say much. Was there anything?”

“Let's see, she said something about the guy.”

“The guy?”

“You know, at the thing. The place. She seemed to think I knew all about it. Something about hair.”

“White hair?”

“I couldn't hear her very clearly. She was slurring a lot. And she talked about what was coming up.”

“The Solstice?”

“That, and the other thing. Getting hurt, something like that.”

“Who getting hurt? Santa? The guy with white hair? Garner?”

I'm so new to all this. We play cards up at HQ sometimes, when there's no op, and some of those guys have the best poker face. Stoner's works because it just stays blank, but with Zeb you simply do not know what he is thinking. At first I might as well have just laid down my hand, they could read it in my face anyway. But I got a little better. I don't think they were letting me win. Snapper got really mad one time. He wasn't faking that. Monk and Gap had to grab him.

So I'm using my new poker face on Flo, and I can tell she's using hers back at me. I don't want her to know she just told me something. She doesn't want me to know she's worried she might have given something away.

“She meant me, I think. Maybe working too hard, or too high expectations, I didn't really get it.”

“Oh, yeah, well Bee does worry about you. You're going to school, you're staying up late. Maybe you should get some sleep now.”

“Yeah, I think I'll turn in. Night Flo. And thanks for the help.”

“Sure. Night Ben.”

Chapter 25 - Confession

I duck into my room to grab a few memory tabs. I head back out and pause at the door to the Listening Room. Listening. I can't tell if there's anyone still on shift. I'm trying to think of a way to go down there at this time of night without arousing suspicion. What the hell.

“Santa? Are you there?”

I walk down the stairs, trying to pitch my voice loud enough so I can claim I wanted to be heard but soft enough so that I'm sure I won't be. There's nothing like deception and intrigue to make you do ridiculous things.

“Santa?”

The main lights are off. The murmuring confessions make a soft, white noise. I walk between the blinkenlights down to the far end, near the supervisor's platform, and find a workstation. I flip over Beamish's snow globe and punch the ID into the readout. What I need is the recordings of all his confessions, going back a month or two. I've been watching what the Listeners do, and I have a fair idea how to bring them up. I shoulder-surfed a couple of passwords just in case I needed them one day. It doesn't take long to get in. I grab three months worth for good measure. I plug in a memory tab and start to copy them over. It's going to take a few minutes.

The main lights flicker on. I flip off the display on the workstation and duck down behind the counter. Footsteps are moving slowly up the aisle. Someone is taking a step, pausing to reconnoiter, then taking another. I slip around the other side of the bench. The transfer light on the memory tab stops flickering. I pull it out and power down the workstation. The footsteps are coming closer. I have to do this squatting crab walk down along the benches, head below the counter top. The footsteps reach the workstation I was using. They pause there. Maybe they're noticing that it's warm. I reach the end of the bench and turn the corner. The footsteps start coming down the other side. From here if I keep very low I might make it to the doorway, but they'll probably see me. There's a broom leaning up against the bench. I slowly ease it down, hoping the movement can't be seen.

I start the squat shuffle over to the exit. Almost there.

Suddenly a little Santa voice squeaks from my pocket.

“In the hilt is fame, in the haft is courage,
In the point is fear, for its owner's foes.”

Fucking snow globes. I flick the broom head up and flip the light switches. In the dark I dive for the doorway and race up the stairs.

“On the blade there lies a blood-flecked snake,
And a serpent's tail round the flat is twisted.”

I burst into the hallway and skate to the door of my room. I dive inside and under the bed covers. I try to get my heart rate down to something acceptable, straining to hear the creaks and murmurs of the temple. The place is quieter than usual. I can't even hear Bee snoring.

There's a knock on the door.

“Ben?”

Santa's voice.

“Huh?”

“Were you calling me earlier?”

“Huh, whuh?”

“Not you? Did you hear anything?”

“Hear anything? Nuh. Hear what?”

“Ok. Sorry if I woke you. Get some sleep.”

“Ok.”

Santa's footsteps clump off. The footsteps in the Listening Room were different. Lighter and sharper. A smaller man. Or a woman. It's quiet again. There's Bee, her zees cutting through the steady hiss of the heating.

I get up and take my clothes off, ready for bed. Then I put the memory tab into the tabula, get back into bed and start searching. Three weeks of confessions. I'm working backwards from the latest.

“I thank you for your divine guidance, Santa. I know what I must do.”

Rewind.

“Praise be to you, wise Santa, for showing me your path, though hard it be, and treacherous.”

What's the idea? Is Santa supposed to understand you better if you talk like something out of Dungeons and Dragons? Santa knows a thousand languages and can out-curse The Virgin Barbie.

Rewind.

“Santa, what am I to do? If I let this boy reveal his secret, if I let him mock you and your teachings, I commit a grievous sin. I have only one weapon against him, Santa, and I am loath to use it. Surely it is wrong to take the love one boy has for another, and turn it against him? But that is all I have. Only his fear of the pain his friend would suffer.

“I have made my threat. But Santa, do I have the strength to carry it out? I am looking to you to give me that strength. I need your guidance.

“And, when I have played my hand, what then? Then he is free to destroy you, and our world! What is gained? I must show him I am a man of my word, and hurt his friend. And then I must face the task of wreaking your vengeance upon him, before he can speak.

“It comes down to that, Santa. Let me be worthy of you.”

It's obvious Beamish was loving every minute of this sick fantasy of his. Danger, excitement, a chance to play with his big gun. Cast in the major role of Santa's only friend. And he got to be an asshole, in what he could persuade himself was a good cause. It was perfect. How tall was he? It's amazing how high you can pile bullshit.

So Beamish was blackmailing Roy, to stop Roy letting out the big secret. But it doesn't make sense. Roy hadn't let the big secret out. After Beamish blew his trump card, Roy had no reason to hold back. But maybe Beamish was caught up in the drama. Maybe he wanted to be at the center of the great catastrophe, convincing himself he was preventing it when he was the cause.

What was this trump card? The name of the Ultraspammer? So devastating to his friend that Roy would miss an opportunity to place himself at the center of a major disruption.

I'm getting a very uncomfortable feeling about this. For some reason I can't keep my mind on the problem. I try to think about it and it all collapses in a jumble of sounds and images. An empty face. A rasping voice. A storm of gunfire, never ending, a crackling thunder of death, a drumbeat of doom.

I lie down and try to sleep but it won't stop. It's like one of those strange German movies I used to watch with Roy. My whole life is turning into this flickering sequence of unsynchronized images and sounds. There are those sharp footsteps again. Wait. That sound is real. I get up and ease open the door. There's a figure, walking quickly down the hall, just visible in the dim glow of the safety lights. It whips around.

“Oh, Ben. Hi.”

“Hi Flo. Didn't mean to startle you. Just heading to the bathroom.”

I make good on the excuse. Flo keeps walking. I glance back and see her stepping into her room. Nothing to see here folks.

I glance into the bathroom mirror and there's a strange man, circles under his eyes, mouth clenched, pale face split by arrows of tension. I don't even have my gun. Then I realize it's not Aggie. It's me.

I'm at school, trying to remember what I needed from my locker, and someone grabs my arm.

“May!”

“We need to talk.”

She looks as bad as I feel. Her eyes are bloodshot, but at least I can't see any recent bruising. We look for somewhere private. We end up on a landing of the fire stairs.

“Aggie's gone.”

“Well, that's good isn't it?”

“I mean gone. He's not in the bar. His friends haven't seen him for days. No one knows where he is.”

“But...doesn't that mean you won't get hit any more? Maybe the bastard is out of your life.”

May bursts into tears and sits down on the step. I sit down beside her.

“I'm so afraid something's happened to him.”

I put my arm around her and she sobs against me.

“Oh, it's all my fault.”

“What's your fault? How could it be your fault?”

“I thought we could spend some time together, you and me, without hurting any one.”

“Well, we can, can't we?”

“No, we can't. I was just fooling myself. You make a commitment, you make a vow, you have to honor it. You break your word, there's nothing left.”

“Don't be so hard on yourself, May. You didn't ask for any of this.”

“He was so sweet at first, you didn't know him. He just wanted me to be happy. He really loved me. He used to get me things. And Mom. But he never believed in himself. He never thought he was good enough to be loved back. But I did, Ben. I did at first.”

“Well, May, you tried, but what could you do? The guy's a basket case.”

“But I made him that way, don't you see? Because I couldn't love him enough. Oh, I should never have married him.”

I'm sitting there, May's tears soaking through and making my neck hot and clammy, and it's like someone just swapped my world for another one. The place looks the same. Grey steps with those shiny flecks in the cement, the non-slip treads, the chipped paint on the handrail. But this isn't my universe. How the hell did I get here? There's that hole inside me again, and some invisible hand is gripping my guts and twisting them into a knot.

“Why didn't you tell me? You let me think he was your stepfather.”

“I was afraid you wouldn't want me. You'd run away from me and then I'd be alone.”

“You would still have had Aggie. If you love him so much.”

“Oh, Ben, I was young, I didn't really know what I was doing. He seemed like a good man, and we needed someone. We were starving since my Dad left. We never heard from him again. I so needed someone.”

“So you married Aggie. And your Mom went along with it.”

“She's orthodox. That's what her whole life is about. It fits the creed, she goes along.”

“And then you realized you didn't love him, maybe you stopped wanting his hands all over you, maybe you didn't want to be his fuck puppet, and he started beating you up. And your Mom. Lock too?”

“No, he never touched Lock. Mom and me, we'd keep him away.”

“And you feel sorry for this piece of shit?”

“Don't be so hard on him. He was so hurt. He couldn't help lashing out. It wasn't just me, he got so depressed, he lost his job, he lost his will to live. He thought the world hated him. He hated himself.”

“So why are you telling me now? What can I do about it?”

“I just want to know he's all right. I thought you might be able to find him. Maybe you could ask Zeb and the group.”

I start laughing. It would be polite to get it under control, and explain to May what's so funny, but I'm going to have to let it run its course. May pulls away and stands up.

“You think this is funny. You think I'm some joke?”

“Zeb...Zeb asked me to marry him. I told him I couldn't because...because of you.”

It's not really laughing any more. It's just a really sick noise. I don't know why I'm making it. May is staring down at me.

“Zeb proposed?”

“Yeah, and get this, Ma was all perky and excited and wanted to know how it went, whether I said yes, when's the happy day, she knew all about it. She's just as fucking crazy as your Mom. She's just as crazy as you. Oh, fuck.”

I'm off again. May sits back down and holds me hard until I stop. Now I've got hiccups. I'm trying to hold it down but every now and then, hup. May starts shaking with laughter and sets me off. We're howling.

The landing door opens. It's Min. She's drawn her Magnum just in case. She watches us for a second without saying anything, then she backs out and the door shuts behind her. I catch May's eye and we're off again. It's starting to hurt. But the pain is good.

Chapter 26 - Blown

I'm not very clear on what's going to happen on Thursday night. But after dinner at the temple I step outside the doors for a moment, just to clear my head, and down the road, peeking out from behind a corner, there's a black van waiting, lights off.

I walk over. Gap is at the wheel, with Monk riding shotgun. I go round and get in the back. Snapper and Stoner. No Zeb. Gap drives off. I assume we're headed to HQ. No one says anything for a few minutes. Then Snapper pokes a finger in the end of his cast and scratches a little.

"Seen Zeb?"

"Me? No. Not since Sunday."

"Sunday when?"

"Evening. Around seven. He dropped me off at home."

"Then you left home and ran away to join the circus."

"It's a long story."

"We saw him Sunday."

With Stoner it's just a statement. If he means anything by it, you wouldn't know from the way he says it.

"So you guys saw him Sunday night?"

"That surprise you?"

With Snapper, on the other hand, every word is some kind of ominous prelude to unimaginable violence.

"I don't know. He would have been pretty tired. It was a big weekend."

"Got bigger."

Gap's contribution valuable as always.

"So, what did you guys do?"

They don't say anything for a while. There are times when there are just too many possibilities in a situation. Instead of trying to figure out what's going on, you're better off just keeping the lines open and waiting for more bulletins.

"Op."

Thanks Gap. For that clarification.

"An unscheduled operation, Foot."

Monk is staring ahead, talking to the night outside the windscreen.

"None of our ops is particularly open to scrutiny, but this one is blacker than usual. This is a light sink. Zeb gives us no warning. No explanation. He neglects to communicate the name or any other particulars of the target. We drive to a bar and wait. Finally a gentleman weaves out and starts to pee against a wall. Zeb identifies him as the target.

"We offer him a lift, failing to mention it won't be anywhere he wishes to go. We take him out of town a few miles, into some scrub, haul him out of the van, and drag him off the track a fair distance. We throw him on the ground. He screams, he begs. Zeb suggests we might want to head back to the the van and leave him with the target. We do as ordered. We hear a few more screams, a few more pleases, then three shots.

"Zeb comes up the track after a while and gets in the van. Nary a word. We go back to HQ, but on the way Zeb says he wants out. So we drop him. And that is the last we see or hear of Zeb."

"Any idea who this guy was?"

"We was hoping you might be able to tell us."

Snapper is scratching again. Maybe he's allergic to the cast or something.

"You and Zeb seemed to be getting pretty cosy. Romantic weekends away. We thought you might of come up with some op needed doing that you didn't bother to discuss with the rest of us."

"No. We didn't come up with any op. We just went up a mountain and froze our asses off."

"You got no idea what Zeb was up to?"

"He told you nothing at all?"

"Zeb was approximately as communicative as a house brick."

“Did this guy say anything at all? Anything that might tell us something.”

“Just the usual. Why. No. Please. The last thing he screamed I was unable to decipher. Anyone else?”

“Mostly it's like, mommy, or ma, but this was like yay, but that don't make sense .”

“May.”

Stoner doesn't attach any meaning to the word. It's just the noise the guy made before he died.

We arrive at HQ. We head straight down to the briefing room. Monk starts to talk before we even sit down.

“Gentlemen, in Wolf's absence we have some decisions to make, regarding future directions and activities. I'd like to suggest some propositions and scenarios, then perhaps we can discuss them and come to some more or less democratic resolution.”

“Who died and made you the fucking boss?”

Snapper seems to be speaking for the others. Stoner and Gap and are not rushing to join Monk in his forum.

“I am making no such claim. I just thought we should discuss, on a peer to peer basis, how we intend to proceed.”

“On a peer to fucking peer basis.”

“As equals.”

“I know what it fucking means.”

“Do you have some kind of issue with me, Snapper?”

“You got a problem with me?”

Stoner says it tonelessly. I guess he's just translating.

“Yeah. See, Monk, when Stoner talks people can understand.”

“Well, then, perhaps Stoner would care to lead the discussion.”

All eyes turn to Stoner. He looks around at everybody, slowly chewing his gum, no particular expression. After a while we look away. Snapper recovers first.

“How'd you get your name, Stoner? Tell Foot.”

Snapper is looking for trouble from someone. Anyone.

“Took a couple of guys out with rocks.”

“You believe that, Foot?”

“What, you threw rocks at them?”

“One, I took him out with a rock in a sling. Like that Goliath. He was a big fucker too. The other guy was smaller. I threw him at the rock.”

That seems to be the end of that story. Snapper is grinning like a dog pack that just found dinner.

“Not always what you think, eh, Foot?”

“How about you, Snapper? How'd you get your name?”

“Necks.”

Gap drops the word in without decoration. No need. Before I can ask him where he got his name he jerks a thumb at himself and says, “Mind.” He makes it a threat.

“Mind the gap,” says Stoner. Yeah, I got it.

That leaves Monk. Snapper can't miss the opportunity.

“Monk took a vow of silence. So as not to talk people to death.”

Monk has an expression like he might be planning to get back to Snapper about this later. Suddenly I see what it is about Monk that seems so familiar. I try a little probe.

“Outside the tent, pissing in, Monk: Lao Tzu or Machiavelli?”

“Surely you mean Sun Tzu, Ben?”

Monk thinks about it for a second and realizes he's on thin ice. Snapper sees him realize and raises an eyebrow at me. What the hell.

“Monk here is one of Santa's little helpers. He's had the training and I'd say he graduated. He got us to go and attack White on Santa's orders. Tonight he had it in mind to take over the group and start running us as a Santa death squad. There's some kind of war going on. White, Santa, Garner. I don't know who else.”

Snapper, Stoner and Gap stare at Monk, who is not coming up with anything very convincing by way of a comeback.

“Absurd. I'm not working for anybody. Fellows, be reasonable.”

They stand up and surround him. This is something they're used to doing. They cuff him and gag him before he has a chance to react.

“You'd better make sure he doesn't have anything on him. Anything, weapons, cyanide capsules, Santa snow globes. He'll have some sort of contingency plan for this situation.”

Snapper pulls out a wicked looking knife and cuts all Monk's clothes off him. They leave him lying on the floor in his underwear. Stoner grabs latex gloves and does a full body search, mouth last, I guess to reduce the likelihood that Monk will want to bite him. Monk manages to get a decent bite in anyway. Stoner does something I can't see with his other hand, and Monk goes very still.

“Shit, Stoner, you didn't have to kill him.”

Stoner finishes his search.

“He's not dead. Come to in maybe five. He's clean.”

Stoner strips off the gloves. They drag Monk into a small room they might have used for this purpose before and lock him up. We sit back around the briefing table. Snapper is fuming.

“There's some sort of fucking war on? How long have you known about this?”

“I only just figured it out. The signs are scattered around. But something big is coming up. I think it's scheduled for the Solstice.”

For some reason I trust these guys better than I trust Santa, or White. Or Garner, for that matter. I need someone to trust. Snapper is frowning hard.

“Well the best thing we can do is stay the fuck out of the way.”

“I'm not sure we can. White knows about us. Santa knows about us. Wouldn't it be better to stop it before someone gets hurt?”

“Gonna be a fight?”

“Yeah, that's right, Stoner. There's gonna be a fight.”

“I'm in.”

“Amen.”

Gap is still with us. Snapper is frowning again.

“Thing is, it's awful hard to fight if you have no idea what side you're on. Do we even know what sides there are? Where you going, Stoner?”

“Monk might know.”

I open my mouth to say something, but Snapper holds up his hand.

“Stoner does this alone.”

I try to take my mind off what it is that Stoner does.

“Did you and Zeb find anything? When you were looking into the sponsorship?”

“Only that it dried up. It's gone.”

“No idea where it came from in the first place?”

“Zeb still thought staking out the post office boxes was the way to go. I tried it a couple of times. Nothing definite.”

“Did you see anything?”

“Nothing for sure. Maybe one guy. Hanging around for no reason. Didn't put anything in the box.”

“Describe him.”

“Short, fat, wore a hat. Gray pants, bad fit. Check jacket, orange tie. Kind of a big nose.”

“You didn't know him.”

“Zeb had a couple of cute ideas. He put a motion sensitive camera inside the box, set it up to take a couple of dozen pictures every time there was big change in the light on the slit. Like when someone shoved something in. And even simpler, he just put this permanent purple ink around the slit, so if they touched it their fingers are stained for a week or so. We set that up but if nobody puts anything in, it doesn't buy us anything.”

“When was the last time you checked it?”

“Few days ago. I'll check tomorrow.”

“And Gap, what about staking out White? Did that get you anywhere?”

Gap pulls out a memory tab and shoves it in a tabula. He runs through the pictures while Snapper and I watch. White is the only person you can make out in the pictures. White going out to get in his car. White getting out of the car. White going back in the house. There's one where White has turned back and bent down to speak to the driver. I think I can recognize Halloran, but he's at the wheel behind tinted glass. There's just a blurred profile. Snapper looks hard at that picture.

“That could be the guy I saw at the post office box.”

“How sure are you?”

“Can't be sure. Picture's not good enough.”

The next picture White is looking over the car, directly at the camera.

“What's this, Gap, he saw you?”

“Blown.”

Snapper pats Gap on the shoulder.

“Now I need to take a look at those chat logs, Snapper. Where do I find them?”

“Well, they'd be on Monk's workstation, but I wouldn't trust them after this.”

“Is there going to be another copy anywhere?”

Stoner sticks his head out of the detention cell.

“Monk has something he wants to say.”

Chapter 27 - Choice

We crowd in to the tiny space. Monk is sitting in a corner. He's a nasty yellow gray color, and his eyes are not staying focused on any particular thing. They just flit around the room. There's no bruising, no blood, no sign of any damage or even a scuffle. Fuck knows what Stoner did to him. Just scared him to the point of death, I suppose. It wouldn't take long, locked in a room with Stoner.

Stoner crouches down next to Monk, who cringes back into the wall. Stoner speaks softly, dreamily.

“Now, Monk my man, tell us all about it. Who is Mr White?”

Monk clasps his hands around his knees and starts to talk.

“Nobody knows his name. He has a network even Santa can't crack. He handles security for anybody who needs it. Garner ended up outsourcing everything to White. White outsources to vigilantes. He figured out a way to do it without the cells even knowing they were doing it. Which makes it next to impossible to trace anything to White. White tracks the groups and funds them, with money from Garner. The best groups get the most funds. This group is the best.”

Stoner puts an arm around Monk and pats him on the shoulder. Monk turns a shade paler.

“That sounds just perfect, Monk. Why would you want to go and mess up a system like that?”

“We don't know for sure what happened. Santa got me into this group early. He always had an idea of using the vigilante groups like this. He wasn't too surprised when we found out someone else was doing it. I've been analyzing the chat logs, just as Foot suggested, but for years. At first you could see the targets were just what you'd expect. Anyone who ever said a word against Garner. Anyone who gained a following that threatened the balance. Anyone who showed any sign of imagination. That all made sense. Santa said just hang in.

“Then the picture started to change. The hits weren't just Garner's enemies. Some of them were his supporters. It could have been him getting paranoid, trying to put down conspiracies, but it was eroding his power-base. And there were other signs Garner was getting antsy.”

“And what was your take on that, Monkster-punkster?”

Stoner gives Monk a little hug.

“That Garner didn't suit White any more, and he wanted to put someone else in his place. That was Santa's take. It sounded right to me.”

Snapper is busting to say something, but Stoner turns to him, without a word, and Snapper settles back. I guess he can see the interrogation is in capable hands.

“And Santa, did he make any moves you want to share with us?”

Monk looks if possible even more uncomfortable.

“Santa thought about it. He must have finally decided that he was better off with Garner in place. So he decided to take White out.”

Snapper can't hold it in any longer.

“And we were the fucking bunnies, is that right, Monk? Anything goes wrong, we draw White's fire?”

Monk doesn't have to say anything, and he doesn't. I step in.

“White knew what was up straight away. He knew us already. We're his. He just didn't know for sure who set us onto him. He wanted me to find the rat. We found him. Now we have to figure out what to do next. Whose side are we on?”

Snapper shakes his head in disgust.

“Great choice. Garner, Santa, White. And the winner is...”

Stoner chucks Monk under the chin.

“Monk, baby, don't look so sad. You're in the team. You get a vote.”

Monk doesn't know whether to shit or go blind. He's probably going to end up doing both.

“There's something missing from the story, Monk.”

Monk lifts his head and looks at me with dull eyes.

“How did Santa figure out it was White running the group? Zeb didn't even know.”

Stoner takes Monks hand and squeezes it.

“Answer the question like a good boy.”

“Santa flushed White. He knew White was watching the group. He sent him a message, you know, one of those I know who you are and I saw what you did messages, then sent someone to meet him.”

“How did you send the message?”

“The chat sites. We didn't have to know who he was. We knew someone on those sites was reporting to White. We phrased it so he could see it was for him.”

Snapper isn't buying.

“But we didn't meet him. No one in the group met White.”

“It wasn't someone in the group. He used the kid. Zeb's kid. Santa had him followed, he led us to White.”

“Roy? You used Roy?”

“Is that his name? Fauntleroy? Santa had sources that told him the kid was looking for information. We sent him an anonymous message saying he could have what he was looking for if he'd make this meeting. Just go and meet a guy. Didn't have to say anything or do anything.”

“You didn't tell Zeb you were using Roy as bait?”

“Well, Foot, if I were to tell Zeb I might have had to explain that I'm an infiltrator and that we were subverting the group to purposes other than Zeb intended.”

Stoner does something I can't see and Monk takes a sudden sharp breath.

“Play nice, Monkey Man. Stick to the facts. Yes or no. No opinion, no speculation,” coos Stoner.

I'm seeing a face with two black eyes, the life drained out of them.

“White hit him. You sent him to do this the day before he died.”

“Was that when it was? White may have roughed him up a little, but he didn't kill him. I guess White wanted to know who sent him.”

“Roy couldn't tell him, because he didn't know. Did Santa really have the information Roy wanted?”

“Santa knows everything.”

No, he doesn't. He doesn't know something he thinks I can tell him.

“Did Santa give him the information?”

Monk shrugs. Stoner turns his empty gaze on my me and I nod. He releases Monk, who lists a little to the side.

We leave Monk trembling in the corner of the little room. Snapper can't stand still.

“I say we get the fuck out of here. Let them tear each other apart and come back when the shit stops flying.”

“Well, I'm staying.”

“What good is staying, Foot?”

“People are going to get hurt if this thing goes public. Someone should try to stop it. And I think I know which side I'm on. The Santa Garner ticket isn't perfect, but White is worse by a few orders of magnitude. And I think I can take White.”

“You take White? White took Zeb and me with a shovel. Stoner here would have trouble taking White. You're just a kid.”

“Maybe that's good. Stoner he'd take seriously, but not me.”

“How do you get to him?”

“He'll get to me. He wants me to tell him who the traitor is in the group. I guess that means he doesn't know Santa put out the hit on him. So we know something he doesn't.”

“When?”

“He'll pick me up in the next few days. Maybe tonight.”

Snapper turns to Gap and Stoner.

“Well?”

“Ok.”

Gap's going to be in trouble with a question that needs an answer with more than one word.

“It's a fight?”

“Yeah, Stoner.”

“I'm in.”

Stoner gets up and heads into the little room.

“Stoner, where the fuck are you going?”

“Monk's back on the team, right? We're all Santa's little helpers now.”

Stoner comes out with Monk. He finds some clothes for him, all black, taken from some combat outfit. Monk isn't on top form at this point, but he's definitely looking better than he was back in the room. Stoner helps him get dressed and puts a blanket around his shoulders and sits him in a chair. He stands behind it with his hands on Monk's shoulders, massaging his neck with his thumbs.

The rest of us sit down around the briefing table. Snapper seems to be taking the chair.

“All right, so Monk, just to fill you in, we're going after White, which I'm sure you agree with, Foot here can get in close, says White is going to pick him up. Our job, one man's opinion, is to make sure it don't turn out to be a suicide mission. That work for you?”

Monk's eyes have been closed, as if he's nodding off. He doesn't open them.

“That sounds just fine. I would recommend extreme caution. White is not a man who suffers from a nagging conscience or a deep empathy for his fellow human beings. He'd kill any of us if we so much as blocked his light. Oh, Stoner, that's good. Just there.”

“Ok, Foot, your op I guess, you got any ideas?”

“If it goes the way it has before, he's going to pick me up in a big black car. He's going to be with a cop, Detective Halloran, who I think is his right hand man, or his go-between with the cops. Halloran drives. I get in the back seat. They never frisked me. They took away the Barrett I was carrying one time.”

Snapper stays deadpan but the others snort.

“So you get in the back seat. What do you do?”

“I guess I take the snubby out and shoot him. Then I guess I shoot Halloran.”

Stoner doesn't pause in his massaging, but Snapper looks at him and nods in agreement.

“You using that ankle holster, Foot?”

“Yeah.”

“How long's it take you to draw and fire the snubby, sitting down?”

“I've got it down under two seconds.”

“Too long. Sitting next to you, any of us could stop you in under two, and I hear White is fast.”

“Bomb.”

“That could work, Gap, but Foot's got to leave something with them, then he has to get out of the car alive. Then he has to get away a fair distance before it goes off. You see all that happening, Foot?”

“I'm not sure I'm going to get out of the car alive.”

“Grenades.”

“So, Gap, you're saying Foot basically just draws the car, identifies it, and we hit it with a few grenades? It ain't subtle, but it could be very effective. We have to be close, though. Foot?”

“I want to be sure White's in it. We could be killing anybody in a black car. White could be using decoys. If he sees us do that to a decoy, we don't get a second chance.”

“All right. You get in, make sure it's White, then you get right out again.”

“Halloran gets in beside me sometimes. I'd have to get through him.”

Snapper gets up and starts pacing.

“We're going to have to play it by ear. But whatever we do, we have to track Foot from now on, and we have to be ready for whatever happens. When White picks him up, we take him by whatever means necessary. Ok?”

“We'll use two vehicles. Two men in each. Monk and Stoner, me and Gap.”

“You have another vehicle?”

“Sure. You've seen it.”

“What is it?”

“Black van. Same number plates as the other one.”

“Twin vans.”

“How many we got now, Gap?”

“Six.”

“Shit. One man to a van, we could box the car in and make sure of him.”

“That doesn't get you out alive, Foot. You get out, that's a given. Ok? We play it by ear. Anything else to discuss?”

“You better drop me off at my house. My Ma's house. I'll walk around and try to acquire him. If you drop me off at Santa's Temple he might see me there. He might have already, come to think of it. He might make the connection.”

“Ok. Ma's house it is. Anything else?”

Nobody can think of anything.

We troop upstairs into the snow. There's a strange lightness in the sky, and as we approach the van I feel a flake of snow touch my face. Gap takes the wheel of black van number one. Stoner goes around the side of the house and after a few minutes drives back with black van number two. Gap must be keeping track of the weather reports. He has snow tires on both vans. We take a while to load the vans up. Snapper is being thorough, and we have to fit the gun racks and fill them up. Gap's grenade idea is covered. There are two M79s. Snapper decides to bring some flamethrowers and an interesting range of other weapons and devices.

I get in with Snapper and Gap and we head back to town. The snow is starting to come down heavily now, and Gap takes it carefully. When we get near habitation we break convoy. Monk and Stoner head off by a different route. Gap switches on a radio and keeps up a crackling contact with them. Ahead of us cones of light blindly probe the white curtain in our path.

Chapter 28 - Chance

The guys let me out a couple of blocks from home. The stairwell feels strange and familiar at the same time. I don't know whether to knock like a visitor or just go in. I open the door and yell "Ma!" but she's standing right there.

"Ben."

"Hi Ma."

"You're all right."

"I'm fine. I'm staying at Santa's Temple."

"You look tired."

"I'm fine."

Ma takes a couple of steps forward and hugs me. It's not like her at all. She gets over it and steps back.

"So, just back for a visit?"

"I just... I might be going away."

"You already went away."

"For a while."

She goes quiet. She doesn't want to find out more about that.

"That thing with Zeb, I didn't mean to hurt you, Ben, I just thought..."

"That isn't it. That doesn't matter."

Silence again. Very unusual for Ma.

"Sit down, Ben."

"I have to go."

"Sit down."

I sit down on the sofa. Ma sits down beside me and turns to me so our knees are touching.

"Your father was a good man. I didn't know him very well, but I knew that. He loved you. His work, he never talked about it, but it kept him away from us. That time he took you to the mountain, that was the only time you really had with him. When he died..."

I wait her out.

"When he died he was doing something important. He knew it was dangerous and that's why he wanted to be with you. What happened to him..."

I put a hand on hers and she takes a breath and goes on.

"What happened to him, they didn't want us to know. I kept asking, they wouldn't tell me anything. There was a detective, mean looking guy with a big nose, he acted like there was nothing to it, not worth looking into. And then he said something. Now don't take this the wrong way. I thought about this, and I think he did it to shut me up. To stop me asking questions, to save himself paperwork, I don't know. He said there was circumstances if they got out people might get the wrong impression about your father."

"What kind of impression."

"They might think he was a spammer. A very bad spammer."

"A spammer?"

"Now we know it isn't true. Your father was never a spammer. But whatever he did, for reasons of their own, they wanted to make this threat. That if we kept asking, they'd have to let it out that your dad was a spammer."

"So what did you do?"

"What did I do? I backed off. I gave up. I let it lie. I knew it would come back to us, but I hoped it would come back when you were bigger, and stronger, and you could deal with it. I think I did the right thing, Ben. And I was afraid at first, when you started asking questions, it was too soon, but I look at you now, I think it's all right. You're a man now."

Then she starts crying again. I hold her and she sobs. It's funny me being the one who has to comfort her. Then she pushes me away and wipes her nose and gives me a long hard look.

“Whatever you're going to do, listen to me Ben, your job is to survive. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Ma.”

“What is your job?”

“To survive.”

“Whatever it takes.”

“Whatever it takes.

“Ok. Get the fuck out of here.”

I give her another hug. She slaps me lightly on the cheek.

It's a long walk to May's place, and there are inches of snow on the ground, but I have combat boots and gaiters on and my feet are staying pretty dry. I spend the entire time worrying about White showing up. On the one hand, that's the idea, and on the other hand sometimes you just want a quiet life. I'm keeping an eye out for black vans, and I don't see them. On the one hand, that's a good thing, because they're supposed to be hiding, but on the other hand, what if they're not there? Then I'm going up against White with no backup. Except White isn't here.

It passes the time, and when I arrive at May's place there's no light in the window. Then one pops on, and pretty soon the front door opens and May comes out on to the step. She gestures to come over and I follow her upstairs. Clytemnestra is up there too, in her dressing gown. She manages to look like some ancient queen in it.

“Good to see you, Ebenezer.”

I almost curtsy.

May brings me some hot tea and I sit down at the table. I take a few sips and they watch every mouthful. It doesn't get any easier if I wait.

“Aggie is dead.”

May says nothing at first. She rubs her hands together as if she's trying to get something off. Clytemnestra takes a big breath and seems to inflate to twice the size. She's sitting on a chair, same as me, and her head is slightly lower than mine, so I'm damned if I know how she is managing to look down at me.

“Do you know what happened?”

“He was shot.”

“Do you know who did it?”

May stops wringing her hands and looks at me, face pale, dark eyes open wide.

“Yes. It was Zeb.”

“And do you know why he did it?”

“I think so. It was my fault.”

May's eyes are like wells you could fall into and never hit the bottom.

“I told him about Aggie hitting you and May. I didn't want him to do anything. I didn't ask him to do anything. But he was very upset. He thought Aggie might be hurting Lock. His group did to Aggie what they do to men who hurt children.”

“Want the bathroom.”

It's Lock. He's padding through, hair mussed, face blotchy and puffy from sleep. We hear him in the bathroom. Then he comes out and shuffles over to me.

“Hi Ben.”

He wants to sit on my lap. I hoist him up.

“Why is everybody sad?”

“We're sad about Agamemnon, Lochinvar.”

I'm afraid Clytemnestra is about to do one of her party line death speeches.

“Aggie's gone, Lock.”

“Is he coming back?”

“No, he's never coming back.”

“Is he dead?”

“Yes.”

“Did it hurt?”

“Not much. Not for long.”

“Is he sad now?”

“No, he's not sad any more.”

Lock thinks about it briefly.

“Bye bye Aggie.”

Lock climbs down and goes over and kisses Clytemnestra and May. Then he comes back and kisses me.

“Night.”

“Night, Lock.”

He pads off to his room.

“I'd better be going.”

Clytemnestra stands up and shows me to the door.

“Thank you for letting us know, Ebenezer.”

As she closes the door I can see May, shoulders hunched over the table, still and quiet.

There's another long walk ahead. I pass the ghost ads, faded almost to nothing, almost invisible in the dim street lighting. The snow is coming down too thickly to see the lights of the city but occasionally there's a glimmer. The snow muffles any sound. I hear my feet as they plunge into the powder, and the rustle of the jacket, my breathing. What light there is reflects off the falling snow, so the air has a gentle golden glow. In its way it's almost as beautiful as the mountain. I walk carefully up the steps of Beamish's house. I really should shovel it for her. Mrs Beamish opens the door. She's dressed neatly, as always, a pinkish cardigan and a long dark gray skirt. Maybe she doesn't sleep. She stands aside and I squeeze past her.

She brings tea. I'm going to seriously need to pee. Greedy Girl blinks at me and Mrs Beamish sits patiently but expectantly.

“I don't want anything this time. I just came to say hello. Maybe goodbye.”

“Goodbye? Very dramatic.”

“I might not be able to come back.”

“Better have another cookie then. Take a few.”

“Is there anything you want to ask me? I found out a little more.”

“If I had any questions I'd ask them. How about you, Ben? Any questions? I don't mind. Ask away.”

I look around the room. There's the table full of photos, with one lying face down.

“That photo. That man is Jack's father?”

“I thought you'd get to that eventually. His father? No, Jack's father was a fool of a man that I knew for a very short time, too long even so. I should never have had anything to do with him, but he was a rather beautiful man, and I was young and hot. I learned self-control a little too late, Ben. Perhaps you can profit from my example.”

She takes a sip of tea and looks me over.

“But I doubt it.”

“Then who is he? The man in the picture.”

She goes and picks up the frame and sits down with it, gazing at it thoughtfully as if it still has secrets to tell her.

“He took an interest in Jack. And me, for that matter. I should have sent him packing, but I need company from time to time. He had brains and guts, and that can be very attractive. I thought he wanted to be a father to Jack. A little too late, I realized that he was grooming him, not for sex, I never did work out exactly what it was for. But Jack was never the same. He turned him into a zealot. He went from being a bright, sweet, dreamy, impressionable boy to an insufferable bore almost overnight. I thought he'd grow out of it. He never did. It was as if that man infected him somehow, one of those diseases that takes a person and the person becomes the disease. He recruited him. Jack was always giving off the air of a man with some terribly important, secret mission. I used to assume he was deluded, but you never know.”

“Why do you keep the picture?”

“Getting rid of the picture wouldn't make it go away. It's morbid fascination, I suppose. The fact is we, he and I, did feel something for each other, but when I saw what he'd done to Jack I couldn't have him around any more. Oh, I can never let the past go, Ben. It's all I have. I'm a silly old woman really.”

“What was his name?”

“He was calling himself Gary Gray. I never thought for a minute it was his real name. He brought Jack home from school one day, in a big car, and gave me a story about providing special opportunities for talented but underprivileged boys. Jack doted on him. Calling Jack impressionable is putting it kindly, as I'm sure you understand.”

“Did he ever hit Jack?”

“Now why would you ask that?”

“Did Jack ever show up with two black eyes?”

“He swore he'd had a fall, hit his head, on that hiking trip. Sometimes you try to believe what your kids tell you. Do you know this man?”

“He's calling himself White now. He's involved in what happened to Jack and Roy. He's involved in everything. He watches over you. Did you know that?”

“He what?”

“For all I know he's outside right now, in one of his big black cars, watching. And waiting for me. He hit me. He threatened to kill me. I think he's going to do it, too.”

By this time her eyes are so intense it feels like they're going to burn a hole right through me.

“I assume you have a weapon.”

“Just a revolver.”

“And you're planning to go out and face him.”

“Yes.”

“This is some sort of showdown? Some lethal pissing competition?”

“Well...”

“I have to say I had higher hopes for you, Ben. Jack, of course, could dream of nothing more thrilling than dying in a blaze of glory to satisfy his dimly grasped principles, but you, why would you waste your life?”

“White is bad. Someone has to do something.”

“Yes. I suppose I should have done something years ago. Almost did, once or twice. He used to make me very angry. Couldn't quite bring myself to go that far. An opportunity missed. Do you have anyone to help you? Back up?”

“Yes.”

“You'd better go and get yourself killed then. Time's a wasting. Or do you want another cup of tea?”

“Actually, can I use the bathroom?”

Mrs Beamish makes me take all the cookies that are left. I put them in my pack. She takes me as far as the door, lays a palm against my cheek, then turns and walks back down the hall without a backward glance.

I step outside onto the little porch. The snow has buried the footsteps I made coming in. No one out here in the blizzard. Just me. I'm wearing the jacket Zeb gave me on the mountain trip, but in any case it's not too cold.

I start walking, back toward the others, May, Ma, Santa, but I don't for moment think I'm going to make it that far. The city is quiet and I'm alone in an eerie glow. I can hear myself and nothing else. The regular sounds of my continued existence: breath, footsteps, and the dull thud of my heart. There's no line between the curb and the footpath, it's all just a blanket of soft white. I could just stop walking and lie down in it and go to sleep.

“Ebenezer Hollins.”

It feels like all the blood drains out of me, and then something else takes its place. A fire warming my guts. I turn and face him. There's the big black car. I look Halloran up and down. He's wearing a big woolen overcoat and gloves but the same shiny black pointy-toed shoes as always. His feet are the only dainty thing about him. In his right hand, casually but with intention, he's holding a Smith and Wesson pistol, eight rounds in the magazine and one in the breech. The safety is off.

“Care to join us in the car, Ebenezer? Warmer place to talk.”

He points the way with the gun. I walk slowly ahead of him and stop near the closed rear door. Halloran switches his gun to his left hand and opens the door with his right. White is sitting on the other side, hands folded in his lap. I get in, and sit as far from White as possible. Halloran starts to close the door.

Just before it latches I swivel my back to the door and get my knees up high. I straighten out and slam the back of my head and shoulders into the door. There's a muffled shot. At the same time I kick White, a combat boot for each eye. With my ankle up high I draw the snubby and point it at White's exposed throat, the golden chain bright against his pale skin.

Halloran gave out an almighty grunt when I hit him. The bet was that he couldn't get any traction in the snow and he'd go over. What the shot did I have no idea. It may not be long before he gets up. White is semi-conscious, both eyes closed and puffing up, his right cheek torn and bleeding. All I have to do is pull the trigger.

I wait too long. I'm not going to do it. I reach over, grab the golden chain and yank it free. Then I get out of the car fast. Halloran has fallen back in the snow. He's moving feebly. The door has caught him in the mouth. Maybe he was bent over. There's blood all over his face, and more on the snow under his left leg. Maybe he shot himself. No time to find out. I start to run through the snow. The backpack gave me a little cushioning when I hit the car door, but I still have a bad headache. It's hard to lift my feet up high enough to run through this stuff. I'm not going to make it very far. Behind me I hear the engine of the big car. Either White or Halloran has recovered enough to get in the front and start it up.

Then two black vans emerge from the whiteness. The vans stop and four shadowy figures drop from the doors. I turn. The car is coming our way, slowly but without hesitation. Maybe he's planning to break through us, hit a few of us on the way, and go between the vans. One of the vigilantes drops down on one knee, puts an M79 to his shoulder, and fires. The grenade hits the black car and explodes, but it crawls steadily forward toward us, flames licking over its unbroken windscreen. The vigilantes are firing M16s directly at the windscreen, but it's made of something pretty tough. It's still coming at us. It's too close to hit it with a grenade now. Someone, Gap I think, jumps back in a van and backs it up to close the gap between the vans. Snapper, I can tell from the way he's holding his arm, has a flamethrower strapped to his back. He opens up and aims the sheet of flame at the front wheels of the car, threatening to burst the tires. A cloud of steam wells up and through the fog I see the car stop and back up. It keeps on reversing away from us, flames licking over its hood, sparks and fragments leaping with the impact of each bullet. Stoner fires another grenade. There's a roar of flame and when it clears the car lights are still there, fading back. They disappear into the blizzard.

“Halloran. Over there!”

I lead Monk and Stoner head over to where I last saw Halloran. There's nothing but red slush, starting to freeze.

“Are we going to go after them?”

“We can try.”

We run back to the vans. I'm with Stoner and Monk. We follow the reversing tracks of White's car until they disappear under the fresh blanket of snow. We spend an hour fanning out in different directions from the spot, without finding any trace. Snapper's voice crackles over the radio.

“We're not going to find him.”

I ask them to drop me back at Ma's. There's not much talk on the way there. That was our one chance. We blew it. We're all just wondering what comes next. What will White do? Nobody is looking forward to finding out.

I climb the stairs and open the door. Ma sees my face and doesn't ask. She hugs me, then runs her hands over my back and chest, checking for damage I suppose. I go into my room and lie on the bed with my boots on. It's tempting to let myself pass out.

I heave myself up. The gold chain is in my pocket. It has three objects threaded on it. A cross, like you see on some old churches. A soft bit of gray and white fur. I turn it over and there are little leathery pads. It's the paw of some small animal. Gross. And a memory tab. A dongle. I sit staring at the dongle for a long time. I'm really just pretending to think, to avoid having to move. There's only one thing to do.

The Barrett is still in its case. I might need it. I assemble the hand held version and put the spare magazine in my pack. I get the gun mostly concealed under my puffy jacket.

“Ma, I'm going out again.”

Ma just watches me go. It's another long walk to Zeb's house. No one is out in the storm. The snow is half way to my knees, and it's getting cold and wet inside my shoes. The light flicks on over the entrance as I approach. My

hood is on, and I'm bending to keep my face out of the wind, but I crouch even lower and press Zeb's buzzer. No answer. I press again. Nothing. I pound the thick double glass of the front door.

“Zeb. Zeb!”

Nothing.

I step around the corner, away from the entrance, out of range of the security camera. There's a row of letterboxes set into the wall. One of them is labeled Zebadiah Kelly. There's no one around. No cameras that I can see. I drop the chain into Zeb's letterbox. There's nothing more to do. I head back home into the teeth of the wind.

Ma is waiting for me at home. I tell her what I can. Most of what I know and can remember. She listens quietly.

“Give me your gun. That silly sniper rifle.”

I hand it over.

“That gun in the ankle holster too. And the holster.”

I hand them all over. She takes them somewhere and comes back empty-handed.

“Now, what else? Is there anything you have on you that you don't want them to find when they take you?”

“When they take me?”

“I'm surprised they're not here already. Maybe the storm slowed them down. Anything? Information, letters, bits of computer stuff. Anything linking you to anyone else.”

I just give her the whole backpack. Snow globes, Beamish's disk drive, memory tabs, ammunition, letters to Gomez. She pokes through it and takes out a snow globe.

“You have one of these? I thought you had a direct line to Santa.”

“That could be mine. It could be Beamish's.”

I check the Id on the bottom. It's mine. I shove it in my pocket.

“You never know. It might be some use.”

“Ok. Go to bed. Get some sleep if you can.”

She takes the backpack away. I suppose she's hiding it wherever she hid the guns.

I get my boots off. That takes the last of my strength. I fall down on the bed. I hear Ma come in and sit down on my desk chair.

“Ma?”

“Yes, Ben?”

“Are you going to get yourself in trouble?”

“I did that a long time ago. When I got mixed up with your father.”

Maybe she says more, but I don't hear it.

Chapter 29 - Beat

“Ben! You have to do it!”

It's an urgent whisper. The Virgin Barbie has come back offstage to look for Santa. The Bunny is keeping the Solstice crowds amused with a fierce drum solo, a frenzy of beating. Santa is nowhere to be seen. Somehow I'm wearing my Santa suit. The Virgin Barbie opens up the front and shoves both hands down deep inside. She's putting in more padding.

“It's Tuesday. Come on!”

She goes out and the Bunny brings her solo to a climax and stops. For a second there's deathly silence then the crowd roars its approval.

“And now, the big man himself, Santa!”

The crowd roars again, and I walk on stage. The Temple is flashing and sparkling with gold and silver, lighting effects are strafing the ceiling with ripples and explosions of color, and the organ strikes a spectacular chord as I reach the pulpit. I stand and work my eyebrows for a minute or so. I raise both hands for silence. The crowd settles. There's a couple of coughs.

My mind is a blank. All those hours with Santa. I know I studied those lines. I must be able to think of something. Maybe if I just start talking it will all kick in. But my lips won't separate. They're glued together. I can taste something salty in my mouth.

Every eye is wide, it's like staring into the muzzles of ten thousand guns, dark holes empty of any feeling or compassion, making a single promise.

I try to make a noise but it's just a moan.

The Bunny lifts a drumstick and starts to beat slowly. The Virgin Barbie picks up her drum and puts a secondary pulse just after the first. Da dump. Da dump. Da dump. Da dump. It's the beat of a giant heart. They slowly ramp up the tempo and the volume, and my heart goes with them, my heart is pounding in my chest, rattling inside my ribs, and I get my lips apart and I'm trying to speak but it's just a scream.

“Ben. They're here.”

The pounding on the door stops, and there's a sudden crash and splintering.

“What the hell did you have to do that for, I was just coming to open it. Do you have any idea what time it is?”

“Get over against the wall. Now! Move, move move!”

I've got my boots on by this time. I check my pocket for the snow globe. I stand next to the bed arms out, palms facing forward. The first cop in is the woman who attended our break-in.

“Ebenezer Hollins?”

“Patrolperson Johnson?”

“I'm arresting you on a charge of spam in the first degree. You got the right to shut the fuck up and do whatever the fuck you're told. Place your hands behind your back.”

I do as she says. Another couple of cops are in the bedroom now. One keeps me covered while she cuffs me and the other takes out a nightstick and swings it around meaningfully. They frisk me and find the snow globe. They let me keep it. They lead me out. The front door is lying in the middle of the living room. Great. Ma can't afford to have that fixed. She's faced against a wall, arms and legs spread, while another cop holds a gun on her. There are more cops searching the apartment, emptying the drawers on the floor, pulling books out of bookcases. She strains around far enough to see me. I nod to her and she nods back. One of the cops thrusts a hand hard against my shoulder and I stumble into the one with the nightstick, who jabs it into my kidney.

Outside the snow is swirling. There's a snow plough and a gray van. They shove me into the van. There's no one else in there. I'm the only spammer this trip.

It's an uncomfortable ride. I'm just sitting on a bench in a kind of wire cage in the back of the van. There are no windows, I can't predict any turns or bumps, and when you're cuffed you can't do much to balance yourself, so I just spend the time bouncing off the cage walls. The nightstick cop is in here with me. His job is to look at me like I'm scum in case my self-esteem is growing out of control. Every now and then the shaking sets off the snow globe in my pocket.

“Compassion and tolerance are not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength.”

The cop seems unmoved by the sentiment, but puzzled about the source.

“Water which is too pure has no fish.”

“What the fuck?”

“It's one of those Santa things. You hold it upside down and shake it, you get quotes.”

“You're shitting me. I never knew that.”

He pulls a Santa snow globe out of his pocket.

“You shake it and then hold it upside down.”

He tries it. After a few seconds it works.

“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.”

The cop shakes his head.

“I never knew it did that.”

“Well, be careful, once you start them off they never shut up.”

“Yeah? Sounds like some people I know.”

He plays with it for a while. At least he's stopped glaring at me.

“Beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them.”

“All human evil comes from a single cause, man's inability to sit still in a room.”

“How do you shut it off?”

“Turn it right way up and leave it.”

That seems to work.

“Hey, do you think you could reach into my pocket and turn my snow globe over so it doesn't keep going?”

“I can't do that kid, I can't approach a known spammer without another officer present.”

“Oh, ok, I understand.”

“And thus I clothe my naked villainy
With old odd ends, stol'n forth of holy writ;
And seem a saint, when most I play the devil.”

“That is getting very annoying though, kid.”

“You just need to turn it right way up.”

“It is always by way of pain that one arrives at pleasure.”

“Ok, I'm going to come in there, but you make one move and you're history. Don't try anything. Ok?”

“Come on, man, I'm cuffed. What am I going to do?”

He unlocks the door of the wire cage and comes in. I lean over so the pocket with the snow globe is facing him. He reaches into the pocket. I sit down hard on his arm and bring my elbow around into his head with all my strength and weight. It takes three times before he stops moving.

The tricky part is to get the cuff key off his belt with my hands cuffed behind my back. It's just a matter of patience. I have to back into him so my hands are down near his belt, then do it blind, twisting my hands in ways that could lead to serious problems in future. But finally I feel the release of pressure that means the cuffs are open.

I take the cop's nightstick and his gun. After a moment's thought I take his belt as well, and his shoes. I ball up his socks and stick them in his mouth. He's shifting a little. His eyes are fluttering open by now.

This is as far as the plan goes. I'm in the back of a locked cop van, no idea where I am. What the hell. I might as well keep going. I take his jacket and shirt. Then I put my shirt and puffy coat on him and cuff him to the cage, facing away from the back door of the van. I pull the hood over his head. I drag his pants off. I take my pants off and get them onto him. It's hard work and I'm starting to get hot. Just as well I'm in my underwear.

I dress up in his stuff. Not a good fit, and it didn't look all that great on him. I pull the cop hat down low over my face.

The cop is managing to make a bit of noise, even with those socks in his mouth. You can't tell what he's saying, though.

The van slows and turns. It comes to a halt. I take the nightstick and give him a little tap on the side of the head. He goes limp.

I step out of the cage and lock it, then turn my back to the van doors as they open.

“Damn, Vinnie, what did you do to him?”

“Ungh.”

I just have an idea that Vinnie would grunt in answer to a question like that. I jump down backwards from the van and the other cops jump in. I turn, head lowered, and walk quickly away, scanning for some sort of escape. I'm in a courtyard, paved with cement. They're keeping it pretty clear but the snow is falling and that might help to reduce visibility. There are guard towers at each corner, and long galleries between them with guards strolling along them. The galleries run along the top of long two story structures. The buildings make a wall all around the compound. The van must have come in through a kind of tunnel in the middle of one wall. It has gates at both ends. They're both manned by guards. They're both closed.

In the center of the courtyard is an enormous round tower, rising beyond where I can see it without raising my head, more than twenty stories. It's all glass and aluminium, not new but a lot more recent than the drab, stained concrete of the building and walls surrounding the compound. The glass in the windows has some reflective coating. When it catches the light the right way it flashes gold.

The yard is brilliantly lit by lights mounted on the galleries and towers. The lights throw black shadows in a few places, where something protrudes, like a staircase up to one of the gallery levels. I head for the shadows. There's a shout behind me. I'm almost there. I reach the edge of the shadow and press myself against the wall. I wonder if they've seen me. I sneak a look.

About twenty guards and cops are walking towards me, guns drawn. Up on the galleries, the guards are all pointing their guns in my direction. A spotlight clangs on, straight in my eyes, like a hammer in the head. I hold my arms out, palms outwards, and try to look helpless. It's not that difficult.

They take my gun and my nightstick away. They cuff me again. I'm expecting a lot worse. Maybe they're saving that up for later. Four guards, one in front, one behind, one on either side, march me through a door, past a security post, down corridors, past more security posts.

We stop at a table in front of a guard behind a glass screen. A guard unlocks my cuffs.

“Place your feet behind the line.”

There's a red line painted on the concrete floor. I stand behind it.

“Move right up to the line.”

I shuffle forward.

“Empty your pockets. Place the contents on the table.”

I take out the snow globe and put it down.

“Take off your clothes. Place them on the table.”

I take them off.

“All of them.”

I take it all off and stand there naked in front of the guards. They put the cuffs back on my hands.

“Mmmm. Fresh meat.”

One of the guards runs a nightstick down my ribs.

“You're going to make a lot of new friends, real fast.”

A door opens and a guy comes through. He's wearing a white coat. He's putting on latex gloves.

“Keep your feet behind the line. Place your hands on the table.”

I have to bend right over to do it. The guy in the white coat comes around behind me. He sticks a finger up my ass and probes around for a while. Then he pulls it out and heads back through his door without saying a word, stripping off the gloves as he goes.

“Hope you enjoyed that, honey. You won't be that tight for long.”

They lead me through two more doors. There's a desk with some kind of pajamas. They're patterned. Magenta and lime green paisley. There's a small towel and a thin, tattered blanket.

“Take it.”

I pick up the stuff.

“Do you want me to put it on?”

“Later for that, sweetie.”

“You want to wear something? Here.”

They put a hood over my head. One of the guards jabs me in the ribs. Does the recruiting policy favor shitheads, or do they have to learn on the job?

I keep walking, one corridor after another. We enter a small room and stop. The bottom seems to drop away from under me and we're heading down. There are regular clicks and shudders and pings, which must be floors going past. It's not regular and I give up trying to count them. I'm trying to keep oriented. I think I'm facing the same direction as the entrance tunnel, but what I can do with that information I don't know. The elevator decelerates suddenly. My stomach lurches. The doors open. Another check point. More corridors. Left, left, right, left, left. It doesn't make sense. Maybe it's built for that effect. We stop. There's noise like someone operating a heavy locking mechanism on a metal door. They push me through an opening into a small, musty room. They pull the hood off.

There's a cot with a thin mattress. No sheets. There's a bucket in the corner. That's it. I scan the walls and ceiling for surveillance but I can't see anything. Just stains and marks and scratches made by previous occupants. Counting the days, marking their existence while they still could.

“Hey! Is the kitchen still open? I need room service.”

One of them casually shoves me with a nightstick. Another one has put out a foot to trip me, and I go over onto the bed. I hit my head on the wall behind it. They manhandle me over onto my belly and take the cuffs off. One of them spits. It lands in the crack of my ass. They walk out and shut the door with a bang. That cuts out all the light. Metal bars clang into place. Heavy boots clump off.

I roll over and sit up. I sit there for a while. It's cool down here, just a little too cool to relax. I guess it's underground. The air isn't too good. Stale pee, shit, disinfectant, misery. My head hurts and when I touch my forehead it feels sticky. After a while I put the pajamas on just to have something between me and this place. I can't figure them out then I realize I'm trying to put the pants on my arms. They could be inside out or upside down. I can't see them in the dark, which is the only good thing so far today.

At first I can't hear a thing, but gradually sounds start to emerge. Very faint moaning, over and over again. I picture him rocking in time with it, but maybe he can keep the rhythm without moving to it. Occasionally a metallic clang, far away. There's a low hum, throbbing. Air pumps probably. I wish they'd wind them up a few notches and get some fresh air in here. But they probably keep it stale, same reason they keep it cold.

I'm pretty thirsty. I haven't had anything to eat or drink since all that tea. I haven't got the cookies any more. Ma hid them somewhere. I can taste the ginger. Maybe I'll get out one day and get them. I sort of doubt that, though.

Spam in the first degree. We never did that lesson with Gomez, or Beamish for that matter, but I'm guessing that's the worst kind. White wouldn't settle for less. And seeing as how the only law I know about is death to spammers, it probably applies to spam in the first degree. I have no idea whether they have any kind of a system for deciding whether or not to carry out the death sentence after they charge you. Those old cop shows Roy and I used to watch had these incomprehensible trials, where people argued for a long time. That's what the law courts were for, apparently. These days the law courts have a lot of broken windows and people sleeping on the steps out front. I have a feeling there won't be much argument.

I'm thinking about the pajamas. Why go to all the trouble of putting a stupid pattern on them? I guess if you escaped, people would think you looked funny in those pajamas, but not everybody dresses much better than that, and in any case you could probably steal some clothes and change. It's not about escape. It's about making you feel like a total asshole. As if sticking a finger up your ass and talking like you're a fuck doll and putting you in a black hole with your own shit weren't enough. Think about it that way, they're weak. They're not confident in their power. They have to humiliate you again and again, because they're afraid you might still have something in you they can't control.

I'm inclined to try to hang on to that thing they can't control. To spite them, as if there weren't plenty of other good reasons. But already I'm not optimistic about my chances. This place is not good, and it's unlikely to get better. My dad at least didn't have to deal with this. Whatever happened, it was over pretty quick. Same with Roy. Maybe they won't keep me here too long either.

That cop had it coming, and I had to try and get out. I should have hit him more. If his face was unrecognizable they might not have figured out what happened for a couple more minutes. And if I'd shot White I might not be here at all. Zeb was right. Whatever it takes to survive. It's a little late to be discovering that. Why can't you just take

people's word? Why do you have to find everything out for yourself? Because you don't want to learn from them. You don't want to become them. But they are you. They are what you become. That's all there is. You just have to live long enough.

I don't know if I've been sleeping. It's hard to tell when you open your eyes and there's no change. I've lost track of time. That was quick. There's a clunk, and a shaft of light comes under the door, and something scrapes the concrete floor. Then the port slams back into place. It's like my skull is a bell and someone just swung a clapper at it. The sound reverberates around the tiny cell and I flinch back into the mattress.

It has been quiet again for a few minutes before I dare to go over and feel around. It's a tray. A bowl and a glass. I taste the liquid, carefully. It's water, as near as I can tell. No suspicious flavors in there. No spoon, no implements at all. The bowl is full of paste. It tastes like that beige stuff Mum was cooking for breakfast for a while, until we ran out. Even Ma wasn't prepared to eat that stuff again. That didn't kill me, and maybe this won't either. I lick the last of it off my fingers. Apparently they're not planning to starve me to death.

Why, if they just kill spammers, does this place exist? They keep their captives alive for some reason. Information. The currency that keeps its value. But if they invent the crime, what information can they hope to torture out of the poor fuckers they've accused of it? Do they actually believe their own bullshit? Then they're finished. Santa got that right. I can comfort myself with that knowledge while they run an electric current through my testicles.

Chapter 30 - Soup

A few hours, a few days, I don't know. I've been waiting for the torture, but I'm coming to the conclusion that this might be it. Sometimes it's so quiet I'm hearing strange sounds in my own head, hisses and rustlings, and then I'm cringing at the approach of a footstep, waiting for some deafening noise I can't escape. There's a noise every time I fall asleep. It never fails.

My heart is doing things I can't predict, suddenly racing, pounding to the point of actual pain. Is this what a heart attack feels like? I'm trying the breathing, the control techniques, but when it really gets going they don't work for a long time, I'm gasping for air, I haven't got enough control to use the control techniques.

They're feeding me just enough to have one meager shit and stay alive. The shit feels about the same consistency as the paste. Not enough water. My lips are cracking. I can feel myself breaking out in sores all over, infections I can't fight off. I'm groggy and nauseated. They're probably drugging me too. I have no choice, I have to eat this crap.

I'm forgetting things, important things. I wake and I can't remember for a moment why I'm here. I have to work through it remind myself. My name, my age, the names of the people I know, the days before I came here. It's a chant in my head, a litany that is all I have left of me.

I think it's only a few days. I hear the footsteps, three, maybe four guards, those big clumsy boots. I cover my ears and I take deep breaths of the filthy air. The door opens and light jabs in. I cower away from it, under the blanket.

They haul me to my feet. I can hardly stand. They shove a hood over my head. They put my arms around their shoulders and drag me out of the cell. Back along the corridors. I can barely open my eyes. I feel us enter the elevator. It's going up. Even in this enclosed space, even surrounded by big guards using up all the oxygen, the air is improving. I'm going away from that place.

The elevator is still rising. I'm pretty out of it, but this has got to be further than we went down. It halts. The doors open. Everything is bright. They pull off the hood and I'm blind for a moment. There's real light coming from somewhere. They drag me to a door and shove me inside. It's an enormous bathroom. There are chrome fittings and white towels everywhere. A guard fills the bath while another tears the reeking paisley pajamas off me. He shoves them in a bin. They lower me into the bath.

“Clean yourself up. Don't worry, if your head goes under we'll pull you back out.”

They give me soap. It's scented, pine. I have a flash of the mountain, the shelter, the trees with their delicate frosting. I scrub myself. I wash my hair. They haul me out. They dry me with warm fluffy towels. They dress me in plain white pajamas, big roomy clean ones. There are white slippers, with some soft woolly lining. I almost cry when I feel them on my feet. One of the guards steps aside and there's someone else in the room. A haggard, red eyed old man, his pinched cheeks patchy with wispy hair, bruised and blotchy, dressed in white. There's a mirror on the back of the bathroom door. It's me.

They brush my teeth. They shave me. They march me out. I can walk unassisted now. We come through a door and there's the city. All of it, laid out, brightly lit, intricate, every tiny feature faithfully rendered, but without the coarse grittiness of the real thing.

“Ben. How do you like the view? You may go.”

The guards nod respectfully and leave. Garner strolls over, dressed casually as always, paunchy and sallow, but somehow looking like the man in charge. I can hear soft classical music.

“Used to be a high security prison. Then they decided they'd sell that off, and some high flier bought it and turned it into a luxury hotel. Built the big tower in the middle of the prison exercise yard. The guests could get a little titillation out of drinking their syrupy cocktails at the scene of so much misery. Great creaking pyramid scheme that supports that kind of folly collapses, it's empty for a while. Perfect place for certain needs of our administration. Worked out very well. And of course, you get the view.”

“Great view.”

It doesn't sound much like my voice.

“Come and have something to eat. Must be starving.”

He leads me round the curve. There's a white grand piano, and a woman playing it. She's in a long black gown and her hair is piled high on top of her head, wound round with something that sparkles. There's a table with a white tablecloth. There's a guy hovering nearby, wearing fancy dress, a white suit and gloves. He has this blank expression, but with an edge, like he's working hard to keep it on, it's a trial to be polite because he's used to wearing the outfit and the expression in better circumstances, with better people.

“Sit, sit, Alan, some water for Ben. Ben, I'd offer you wine, but we have some serious discussion ahead.”

“Maybe later.”

Wine? What the hell's that?

“Eat. Don't mind me. Ask for anything you don't see.”

Garner starts examining a bowl of muffins, turning them over and over. He wants to be sure he eats the best one first, just in case he doesn't get another crack at it. I nibble at a piece of bread and sip some water. Garner pulls a notebook out of his pocket and starts leafing through it, scribbling a note from time to time. He's trying to eat a muffin at the same time and dropping crumbs all over himself. He glances up and sees me still working on the piece of bread.

“Alan. Some consommé.”

Alan wheels over a trolley with a tureen. He puts down a white bowl and ladles some clear soup into it.

“Thanks, man.”

He heads off without a word. There's about twenty pieces of cutlery at my place. Tiny forks and spoons on the outside. Fuck knows what they're for, but that spoon is too small for soup. I find a bigger spoon that looks like it might work. This soup is good. How they managed to get so much flavor into it I have no idea. Concentrated real chicken. I take another piece of bread.

The windows go all the way around. I can't take my eyes off the view. I realize it's changing. When I first came in I could see the road climbing Temple Hill, and at the top the bulky old buildings framing Temple Square. Now down below I can see the edge of the docklands and a stretch of water catching the morning sun.

“Revolving platform. Goes round every forty five minutes. Costs a fortune to run. I do it because I can. Couples used to come up here for a romantic dinner. Sorry we can't recreate that atmosphere.”

Cranes, loading machinery, big old warehouses. The docklands are like the law courts, not very much in use except by the homeless. The warehouses are laid out in rows and columns, dozens of them, roofs complex and spidery with walkways and ducts and skylights and machinery. They stop suddenly at a wall. It's throwing a long shadow in the afternoon light. It's as long as the warehouse shadows, so it must be about the same height. Beyond it the roads and houses start and stretch on forever, diminishing to the horizon.

“Interesting history behind the location, putting the prison near the water. There was a law that you had to transport criminally insane prisoners by sea. I suppose the idea was that if they escaped in transit they'd drown. Not run around the community baying for blood.”

Garner places his notebook and pencil firmly on the white tablecloth. He brushes his vest ineffectively.

“Thank you, Natalie.”

Natalie gets up from the piano, tilts a shoulder and bends a knee toward Garner, and leaves.

“If you don't mind, Ben, we'll get started. Distressing to meet again under such circumstances. Sure it's some misunderstanding. Maybe you can straighten me out on what really happened.”

I quit scraping the plate with my spoon. It's definitely empty.

“Hey, Alan, got any more of that soup?”

Alan brings it over.

“What really happened when?”

“Not a laughing matter, Ben. Very serious charge on which you find yourself. We are fighting the war on spam on many fronts, Ben, many fronts, and we fight it with zeal. Sometimes, more often than I would like, mistakes are made. I make it a personal mission to try to minimize those mistakes. When I heard that you, a young man whom I had personally met, had fallen afoul of these very necessary security measures, I asked to speak to you. I'm here to help you.”

“What charge? I don't know what I'm charged with. You are so full of shit, Garner. And you're sounding just like that prick White. Did you two go to the same bullshit academy?”

“White?”

“Yeah, White, the mystery man you hire to do all your dirty work. Your contract murderer. You know he's after you, don't you? Did you think that just because you were paying him it would keep you off his list?”

What the hell. I'm getting a buzz out of this soup, and on top of the drugs they've been feeding me I'm feeling pretty high. If I'd thought about it a little I might have tried a different approach, but this will do for now.

“Disappointing response, Ben. Alan, would you show our guest in please?”

Alan floats out. A moment later he comes back in pushing a wheelchair. Halloran's mouth is still a mess. There are black stitches in one swollen cheek, right to the edge of his lips. He's wearing a cast that reaches above the knee. The sad fuck must have shot through the bones in his leg. No compromises on gun safety.

“Detective Halloran, I believe you've met Mr Hollins?”

“Yeah, we met.”

“Sorry, Halloran, couldn't make that out, can you speak a little more distinctly? Something wrong with your mouth?”

Lucky for me Halloran's in a wheelchair. Garner sighs.

“Detective Halloran, can you repeat to Mr Hollins the statement you made earlier?”

“Mr Secretary, I'm pursuing an enquiry at 2 a.m. Thursday night, in line with my duties, and I see a suspect proceeding on foot. The late hour, the weather conditions, blizzard and all, make this a suspicious circumstance. I'm alert to any discrepancy. I attempt to detain the suspect for routine enquiries. He resists and a struggle ensues. I draw my weapon as a last resort. The suspect seizes the weapon and it discharges, injuring my leg. He takes the weapon and strikes me in the face then makes off. I am unable to follow, however I recognize him from a previous occasion when I attended the school massacre where he was involved and I am able to identify him as Ebenezer Hollins.”

“Is he in this room, Detective Halloran?”

“He is, Mr Secretary, he's over there eating soup.”

Garner raises an eyebrow at me.

“Halloran's version of events, Ben. Very clear case of spam in the first degree, mode of unsolicited communication being shots and blows from a weapon illegally obtained in the course of resisting a legitimate enquiry by an officer of the law. Any comment on that?”

“Yeah, I got a comment. Maybe Halloran could turn around and blow it out his ass. It might be a little clearer coming direct from the source.”

“Detective Halloran is an officer with a long record of service, Ben. Are you calling his testimony into question?”

“Only to the extent that it's a total crock of fucking shit.”

“Do you have an alternative version to offer, Ben? Thank you Halloran. Fuck off.”

Alan slides over and moves him out of the room like they're both on wheels.

“Sure. Halloran works for White. He's his right hand man. Which come to think of it is the only sign I've ever seen of White doing anything really dumb.”

“White again. The mystery man at the center of everything.”

“You can't bullshit me, Garner. I know you're funding him, and he's funding the vigilantes, and they're killing anyone on your list and plenty more on White's list. And it looks like you're in his sights.”

Garner is staring at me as if I'm a muffin he's considering. Then he picks the second best muffin out of the bowl and starts chomping.

“You have a lot of value to this society, Ben. We need young people who question, who probe, who agitate. Uncomfortablism must never be allowed to become comfortable. But there comes a point.”

He studies what's left of the muffin, finds the right spot and takes a bite.

“Personal crossroads, Ben. You can go back downstairs, back to that cell. If that's what you want, just keep spinning the same crap you've been doing ever since you sat down. You can stay down there forever, wondering if we'll ever carry out the mandatory sentencing. Wishing we would.

“Option B, have another bowl of soup, tell me what you know, leave out the attitude, and we'll consider whether Halloran may have been mistaken. I leave it to you. Ten seconds.”

I have to wonder what Garner thinks I know. I told him the White thing.

“I can give you some help here, Ben. A hint. One word. Names. Give me the names of the people you've been running around with, who put these odd ideas in your head. That's all I need. All of them. If you don't give us names, we're going to have to start picking up people and seeing what they can tell us.”

That muffin is finished. He starts looking for the second runner-up. It looks like they're all rejects, but he compromises and starts on one.

“Can't resist these things. Your mother, for example. Your school friends. Your teacher. The girlfriend, what's her name? Mayberry.”

The trouble with tablecloths is they slip. It's hard enough to run across a table scattered with baked goods and fruit bowls and water glasses without the tablecloth slipping out from under you at the same time, dissipating all your momentum. A spoon isn't much of a weapon, but I'm thinking I could get it wedged into Garner's fat face one way or another and it might shut him up.

And then I'm lying on the floor and Alan is breathing in my ear.

“Perfectly understandable reaction, sir, although somewhat inappropriate under the circumstances. Can I help you up?”

That guy can move fast. I still don't know what he did. The room is suddenly full of guards. Alan frisks me, then brushes a little dust off my knees and adjusts my white shirt.

“There we are, sir.”

“Thanks, Alan.”

“Oh no, thank you sir. A most entertaining morning.”

He lowers his voice.

“You're probably still hungry. Why don't you take a muffin with you?”

He shows me something wrapped in a napkin and tucks it into the waistband of the pants, under the shirt. The guards cuff me. Garner has moved on to cookies and doesn't even look my way. They lead me out to the elevator. The bottom drops out from under me, and I'm on my way down.

Chapter 31 - Cracks

They throw me back in my cell and slam the door. It's just as disgusting as before, but some good food, fresh air and exercise has made all the difference. Right now I'm feeling focused and I can think.

One thing: Garner is as bad as White. He didn't seem too horrified when I told him White was after him. Could we be wrong about that?

I take the napkin out of my pants and unwrap it. Sure enough, it's a muffin. I toss it on the bed. I'm still not up to eating. I wish I had some of that soup.

“Some have me in their mouths, but little in their hearts.”

Great. A talking muffin. I feel around on the bed and find it. I spread the napkin out and dig my fingers into the dough. There's something hard in there. It's a hemisphere, hard plastic. A Santa snow globe. I hold it on edge and twist it. It's tricky to get the rhythm just right, but finally a red glow swells out of it. I can see. I adjust it with a few more twists. I found out you can get it to stop on a color if you turn it back on its base at the right moment in the rhythm. It gives off a warm orange. The cell doesn't feel so cold.

“Santa, Ben here. I'm in a prison with a big tower. First degree spam. A detective, Halloran, is lying, saying I shot him. He shot himself, silly prick. Garner's saying they're going to come and pick up the people I know. Please tell them to watch out. Get away if they can. I don't think they're going to let me go. I think once they pick you up you don't come out again. Please tell them.”

I would never have believed what a difference a snow globe could make. Mostly I leave it turned off, but knowing I can have a little light when I need it keeps me going. And I'm not alone. I can talk to it and I know someone is listening. I don't have to tell myself the story about why I'm here. I can tell Santa. I go over it and over it. I keep remembering more details. I've got all the time in the world. Until they decide to carry out the mandatory sentencing.

The more I talk about it the clearer it gets. Garner and White have formed an alliance. Maybe it was triggered by the vigilante group going after White, but it was firmly agreed by the time they picked me up.

That means Santa is along against the two of them. Do they know about him? A few days ago White didn't seem to know. But I have my suspicions about the Bunny. She was moonlighting for someone, and who could that be but White or Garner? Now they probably both know what she knows. It seemed like Santa and Bee didn't trust her completely. Maybe it's not enough information to be dangerous.

Information. It's not information that makes this world, it's disinformation. The Uncomfortablists have been lying about everything. They're maintaining the infrastructure, but only for themselves. They're somehow keeping the satellites in orbit. The old, corrupt, decadent world, with its technology and its toys, is alive and well, and available to a few. We sit in our tiny, freezing cells, breathing our own stink, while they ride around in their golden towers.

Santa has tapped into the infrastructure, but he seems to be using it without their knowledge. And he's planning something for the Solstice. White and Garner probably suspect at least that much. Maybe they know about everything. Maybe they know about the snow globes. For all I know I've been telling my life story to them, and Santa isn't even listening.

Suddenly the cell seems very dark and cold and small. Just me, the bed and the bucket. My heart rate starts to climb again. Sometimes you have to accept that it's only you. No one is looking down on you, ready to sweep you up in his arms before you fall. No one is coming to save you. No one is listening. It's just you and your fluids, naked and alone, in a world that doesn't care enough to be hostile. It's just indifferent. You're a trilobite. You scuttle around in the mud, billions of you, living and dying. The world moves on without a backward glance. Maybe the hole you left in the rock lasts for a while until that crumbles. The end is the same. Total extinction.

I need some occupational therapy. I get as much glow out of the snow globe as I can, throw the mattress off the bed, and check it out. It's a metal frame with a wire net to support the mattress, which it does very badly. It takes a while to get the legs off, but you move them back and forth for long enough, the metal heats up, fatigues and snaps.

The wire netting is a continuous piece, threaded back and forth through holes in the frame. No wonder it's so uncomfortable. I take one of the broken bed legs and use it to hammer and chip and lever away where the wire attaches. It's a matter of patience, and not worrying about a few blisters and cuts. When it snaps I can bend it and unthread it. I end up with something over twenty feet of wire. I coil it up and get to work on the frame.

I put the bed on its edge and push it out of true, backwards and forwards, until the weak joints give up and the frame collapses. This furniture is very low quality. The stuff upstairs was better.

One of the bits of framing has broken off with a jagged point on it. I take a broken leg in one hand and the spear in the other and heft them. That'll work.

Two pieces of the frame are still joined at an angle, like a scythe. I sort of like that, but I can't practice swinging it in the cell, and the corridors aren't a whole lot wider. Even using it as a kind of axe it would be hard to find the overhead room. The grim reaper look would be worth something in psychological effect. There's not much room even for the spear, though. But I can jab with it, like a bayonet.

I don't have any cord, but some cloth from my shirt might work. There are bolt holes in the legs that I might be able to use. I tear the shirt on a jagged edge, and get a few thin strips I can braid into a cord.

I'm so busy I haven't registered the sounds from outside. They've been building up, coming closer. Footsteps, sometimes running. Banging on metal doors. Shouting. Was that a shot? All the more reason to arm up.

The noises are coming closer. I get the cord threaded and knotted between two bed legs. I try some practice rotations. I'm pretty happy with the nunchaku. It works in a small space, and it sets up a shield that forces people to keep their distance. No time to make up another one, and I'm not a big believer in two at once. I just wish I'd paid more attention in Non-Gun 101. You never know what you'll need to know.

The footsteps are right outside. I put my fingers in my ears. There's a massive booming that rattles the bits of metal on the floor. The levers and bars grind. I brace the spear against the far corner of the cell, angled up, and ready the nunchaku. The door opens. Zeb is outside, in full combat gear, carrying a pack. Weapons are hanging off him everywhere. He turns and fires a long burst down the corridor.

“Gear up, Ben. No time to waste.”

He empties the pack on the floor of my cell and goes back to the corridor. I get the combat gear on. I pick a Glock and a knife. Zeb unslings a Colt Commando and hands it over. I bring the nunchaku and the snow globe. The spear will have to stay behind. I grab the coil of wire and clip it on over my shoulder.

Zeb motions me to stay behind and starts moving back down the corridors. Every time we turn a corner there are more guards, wearing expressions of surprise and anger and fear and some emotions I can't identify, their bodies crumpled and flat and empty. The trick is not to slip in the blood. I'm glad Zeb brought boots. Those fluffy white slippers would have been ruined.

We're approaching a checkpoint. To get to my cell Zeb must have got through it, fuck knows how, but there's someone inside now. I swing my rifle into position but Zeb signals me to relax. It's Monk in there. He gives me a nod and joins us. It looks like Monk had his work cut out for him. The bodies in this section make it awkward going, but we get through. We pass another checkpoint and pick up Gap.

They seem to be assuming that the guards are only going to come from the direction of the elevator, but I'm not so sure about that. This place seems to have been built like a maze, and there could be branches and other entrances. I turn around to check and sure enough, just then three guards come around the corner behind us.

“Rear!”

I fire the Colt Command and Gap turns and fires with me. The guards take cover back around the corner. A hand comes out and lobs something round and black.

“Grenade!”

Gap spins me and gives me a massive shove that sends me staggering away around the next corner. I hit the wall and fall. I hear Gap firing, maybe trying to explode the grenade, then there's nothing. Except that high pitched sound.

Zeb is shaking me.

“Ben, get up! Can you move?”

He picks me up with one hand, and drags me along with him.

“Gap. Where's Gap.”

“Gap's gone. Come on.”

I look back and there's a black, broken shape in the corner.

“No looking back, Ben. This way, now!”

We turn a corner and there's Stoner, his face aglow. His eyes aren't empty any more. They're all black, his pupils expanded more than I thought possible. I recognize the corridor to the elevator. It's piled high with corpses. It looks like Stoner may have been using them to build barricades. There are bloody drag marks where he's moved them. I can see a few heads in the pile that seem to be missing ears.

“No sightseeing. Come on, Stoner.”

Zeb leads us up a branch I don't remember.

“The elevator's that way!”

“Can't use the elevator. Might as well go back to your cell and lock ourselves in. This way. Now!”

The bodies are thinning. This looks like an unused section. The paintwork is a filthy greenish gray, almost no color at all, and the walls are matted with damp. Ahead there's rubble. The place is falling down.

The corridor stops in a dead end, opening out into a larger space that goes nowhere. Except someone has blown a hole in one of the side walls. Beyond it I can see dark stonework. Snapper's face appears at the opening. He gestures for us to come through.

We step through into a trickle of stinking liquid. It's some kind of an old sewer or stormwater drain. A lot older than the tower. Even older than the prison.

“Gap's not coming. You can seal it.”

Snapper nods. He bends down over some wires and packages. Zeb takes off down the drain.

“Ben, you are with me. Now!”

Zeb is running hard. The beam from his helmet flashlight is bobbing around all over the walls ahead of him, and Stoner's and Monk's are chasing it. I turn mine on and follow. The drain is leading gently downhill into darkness, which I suppose it would have to, given the way water tends to work. It has a curve to it and when I turn back Snapper's out of sight, just a little light bleeding around the curve from the hole in the wall. Then I see him running towards us. We're going hard but he's catching up. There's a burst of gunfire from back around the curve and he seems to hesitate, then keeps coming.

There's a jarring thud and the ground isn't exactly where I expect it to be. I stumble to one knee and then get up again. The walls of the drain turn orange. I risk a look back. Snapper is a silhouette, against a billowing wall of flame. He's pounding along, but something's slowing him down. It's very hard work for him. The flames are going to catch him. Stoner gets a hand under my armpit and hauls me along. He's moving like a machine, looking straight ahead, chest inflating and deflating like a bellows, knees rising high. Dragging me isn't slowing him down at all. With each breath my rib cage feels like it's about to crack. My knees and hips are burning. There's no choice but to keep running.

A searing breath hits us from behind and blows us off our feet. I smell singed hair. Stoner pulls me back up and we head off again. Zeb and Monk are still ahead. They didn't even fall down.

Behind us there are groanings, rumblings, creakings. Dust is sifting down from the stone roof of the drain. A piece of cracked stone drops out, and another. I'm zig-zagging to avoid debris. Ahead there's a rusty iron ladder. Zeb and Monk are waiting for us.

“Snapper?”

Stoner shakes his head.

“You first, Monk, then Ben, me. Stoner, hold the rear.”

Monk starts up the ladder. I hit a head start then swings myself up. The ladder goes up into a dark circular hole in the tunnel roof. There's water trickling down the sides of the shaft, and sharp-smelling mold in the cracks between the stones. Above there's nothing to see except Monk's feet and ass. Below I can't see anything past my own body, but there are vibrations that must be Zeb.

Then there's a different sort of vibration. The metal ladder groans and more dust and rubble comes down. It's getting in my eyes. A crack zips through the stones of the shaft and the ladder jars violently in my hands.

Suddenly all hell breaks loose below. Shouting, shots, explosions. Then quiet again, just the scrapes and clangs of the ladder. Through my hands on the ladder I feel a series of powerful rhythmic vibrations, then a pause. Then there are three more massive explosions. I'm going to end up with permanent hearing damage from all of this. I should have put on the protective earmuffs.

The powerful vibrations start up again. It has Stoner's rhythm, the same rhythm he was running to. I think he's still with us, and coming up the ladder fast.

Monk stops up ahead, so I have to stop too. I can hear a heavy metal object scraping on stone or cement. He's moving a manhole cover. The feet disappear. I wait a moment. There's a round opening and a little light. It's night. That could be a dim star overhead. Monk's face looms in the opening.

“Looks clear.”

I climb out.

Chapter 32 - Fall

It's a deserted street. The snow has stopped falling. I suppose it's days since the storm. The road hasn't been plowed. The snow is virgin, except for Monk's prints. I follow the prints with my eyes and there's Monk. He hisses and gestures for me to come over. He's over under the shadow of a big dark warehouse. We must be in some industrial area near the prison. There are train tracks and rusted out loading cranes. I join Monk and look back to see Zeb following. A moment later and there's Stoner. He looks our way and nods once. He pauses to drag the cover back over the manhole.

Suddenly the place is bathed in dazzling light. Stoner dives in the other direction, away from us, rolls and comes up firing. There's a shattering of glass, and the light dims down a notch.

I raise my Colt Commando to start shooting at lights, but Zeb puts his hand on the barrel.

“Don't tell them you're here.”

Stoner is diving and rolling, while bullets whip into the snow all around him. He manages to take out another light.

“Stay there.”

Monk runs down the length of the building, staying in the shadows. He reaches the corner, ducks around it and starts firing at the lights.

“Zeb, they were waiting for us. And they can see we're here, even if we don't fire. The footprints.”

Zeb nods, motions me to wait, glancing up and down the warehouse wall. He starts moving and gestures for me to follow. He's found a door. He steps back and gives it a single kick. The door splinters. He kicks it again and it falls off its hinges. The gunfire is loud enough to cover the sound. He goes in, gun raised, then points me in with a nod. The warehouse is dark. There's a little light filtering through from the lights outside, but then the last of them goes out and it's pitch black. There's a pause in the firing. No one can see so they're saving their bullets.

Zeb is scanning around the inside of the building. He taps me and we head off. There are metal stairs leading up to higher levels. We go up two levels and Zeb goes over to a grimy window facing the side where we came in. He stands at the side and takes a quick peek.

“Can't see anything.”

Zeb's whisper is very loud in the silence of the big building.

“We should go back for Monk and Stoner.”

“Monk and Stoner are big enough to look after themselves. This mission was to get you out and we are not going to lose you.”

Another burst of gunfire below. Impossible to tell if they're firing at anyone or it's just someone letting off steam.

“How do we ever get out of here, Zeb? They're all around us. We can't kill them all.”

Zeb is busying himself checking weapons and reloading. He doesn't answer at first.

“We'll get out. First job is to work out where all the exits and entrances are. Determine the enemy's whereabouts. We don't have to kill them all. We just have to find a way between them.”

“We should try the roof. There's walkways on the roofs.”

“How do you know that?”

“You can see from the tower. How did you find me?”

“Monk brought Santa in. Santa can locate snow globes. Don't ask me how. We could follow your snow globe as far as the prison, then it disappeared.”

“Yeah, I used it to steal a guard's outfit and they took it off me.”

Zeb gives me a funny look. He holds out his hand for my gun and I hand it over. He checks it and hands it back.

“Santa has agents everywhere. He contacted them and told them to try to get another snow globe to you. One of them succeeded. Then we could track that. And you sent a message. You must have known.”

“He baked it into a muffin. That guy was fast, Zeb, maybe as fast as White. I was running along the table trying to stick a spoon in Garner, and wham, he's got me down on the floor. I didn't even feel a thing.”

Zeb gives me another funny look.

“You're going to have to tell me the rest later. Let's check the roof first.”

We start looking for a way to get up to the next level. There's another set of metal stairs. That's as high as it goes. The roof is layered, still high above us, with skylights between the layers.

“Must be a way to get up onto the roof. From there we could see better, maybe figure out what they're up to, make it down the outside.”

There's light coming through from the skylights. Maybe it's moonlight, maybe it's getting near dawn.

“What time is it?”

“Little after five.”

“What day is it?”

“Tuesday. Merry Solstice, Ben.”

There's a bang and the rattle of chains, then a long metallic clanking.

“They're rolling up the big door. They're coming in.”

“Look. The roof.”

It's a narrow stair at the end of the level. There's a door at the top. There are small pings and creaks from below. Big heavily armed men trying to walk on tiptoe. We're exposed here. Zeb gets the door open, but makes enough noise at it to tell them where we are.

We're out on a walkway that goes the full length of the building, about the skylights. There are branches off it to service the bulky rusting boxes that hold air pumps and other machinery.

There's a little light in the sky, a paleness spreading from the east. We turn and scan, checking our options. There's the tower, looming over us. The very top windows are catching the rising sun, showing gold. Now I think about it, if I could see this warehouse roof from there, they can see us from there. Garner could be watching us right now.

The ground sways and I grab at the metal handrail. It lurches again.

“What the fuck?”

Zeb looks at the tower and shakes his head.

“Snapper. He never liked that prison. His brother ended up in there. Never saw him again. I was thinking at the time he brought a lot more explosive than we needed just to handle that wall. I should have said something.”

There's a puff of something like smoke from the top of the tower. It's not smoke though, it's all the windows blowing out on one side. The gold has gone. Just black empty holes.

“Damn. He got Stoner in on it. Time-bombed the elevator. Stoner's real good at what he does, but you can't leave him alone for too long. Lacks maturity. Impulsive. Unable to form long range plans. Come on, we got to get going.”

We run along the walkway. It's slippery with ice, rusty and broken in spots, and the rail looks dangerous. We're not using it anyway. We're running full tilt. A bullet pings into the walkway behind us. Zeb steps aside and I run past him. He fires behind us, then overtakes me. I'm ready, and I turn and fire. Back at the door where we came in there are slumped forms. They're wearing white, snow camouflage, and their outfits look seriously expensive. No way they're government with that gear. They must be private security troops. Another couple come through and start running toward us. I hit one and he spins, falls against the handrail and flips over it. It looks very graceful but I don't think it's intentional. He falls twenty feet or so onto a skylight, smashes through and heads on down to the warehouse floor.

“Ben!”

I shake myself out of it and run past Zeb. We keep up the relay to the other end. There's nowhere to go from here. There's a little cover behind a big tank, streaked and black.

A little under twenty feet away is the roof of the next warehouse, too far to jump. Zeb is keeping the troops very nervous about coming through the doorway at the other end, but we're sitting ducks here. .

I take the bed wire and uncoil it. I never got to use the nunchaku on anyone, but maybe it can work as a hook. I loop the wire through the hollow bed legs and back on itself. Then I step to the edge of the roof and start swinging the wire, getting a rhythm. It's no use, the rail's in the way. There's an iron ladder up the side of the tank. I climb up. There's just enough room to stand on the top of the tank and swing.

“Ben, keep down!”

This is no time to follow orders. I'm aiming for a funnel on the next roof. It might be strong enough. What the hell. It takes five goes before I even get close. Zeb is working hard, but without turning around I can tell it's hotting up.

Some of them must be through the door and returning fire. And knowing Zeb, he's spending all his time covering me instead of defending himself.

The seventh try it seems to hold. I pull hard, and I can't dislodge it. I get the wire secured as well as I can to the iron ladder.

“Zeb! Got it!”

Zeb keeps firing. I turn and look back down the walkway. There are half a dozen men on it, but they're still at a disadvantage. Zeb can pick them off and by now most of the handrail is gone. I back him up and we clean off the walkway, but by that time four more have come through the door.

“Come on Zeb. We have to go.”

“You first.”

I swing up on to the wire and get my legs and hands on it. I try to pull the jacket sleeves up to protect my hands. I got it as taut as I could, but it dips as soon I'm on. I slide down, burning my hands and knees through the fabric. It's holding, but it's so slack I'm afraid I'll dip below the level of the next roof. Just over. I get my feet down and look back.

“Zeb, your turn.”

From here I can still cover the walkway on the roof where we came in. Zeb slithers down the wire. He's dipping low. I stick my gun barrel down into the hook around the funnel and lever it back. Zeb clears the roof. He's down. I untangle the gun and the nunchaku from the wire and toss the wire back over the edge. At least they can't follow us that way.

Twenty or so security men are charging down the walkway towards us. Then suddenly they stop. The ground shivers and sways. We all look up at the tower. It's not looking straight any more. Its lines are blurring, as if the whole building is going out of focus. Windows are popping out at random. It's so tall it feels like it's right overhead, and about to falling straight down on us. There's nowhere to run, no time to think. We all just watch. Debris starts to patter round us, then bigger chunks. Small flashes of silver. One of them hits and bounces near me. It's a little spoon, like the ones on the dining table in Garner's restaurant. The explosion has knocked the revolving platform askew and everything is sliding off through the broken windows. Then something much larger is flying towards us. It's a regular, curved thing, silhouetted against the lightening sky. It turns slowly, catching flashes of dawn light on a white surface. The grand piano. It hits the walkway right in the middle of the security troops. They disappear instantly. There's a tremendous sound, metallic and musical and heavily off-key. It goes on and on, dying slowly. You can see right down into the warehouse, cross-sections of the levels where it cut through. Zeb wakes up.

“Come on Ben!”

We run down the walkway, dodging between raining objects, leaping over wreckage. Zeb fires at the door and smashes it open. We head down inside. It's not safe in here, but we might be protected from some of the smaller objects.

There are bangs and crashes overhead. There's the smashing of glass as bigger objects crash through the skylights. The impacts are stirring up clouds of dust that fill the warehouse. It's no time for caution. We charge down the levels, guns at the ready. If we make it outside we still have to figure out what to do then. We reach the ground level and head for the side away from the tower. It's hard to breathe in here. My eyes are stinging and watering. I almost run past them without seeing them.

It's Stoner and Monk. They're propped up against a stack of pallets, side by side. Stoner's arm is around Monk's shoulder. Monk has something clenched in his fist. A snow globe. There's a glimmer of light reflecting from under their eyelids, but the dust is settling on their hair and eyelashes.

Zeb glances at them. His stride falters, just for a moment, then he moves straight on. He's heading for the door. He eases it open and checks.

“Clear.”

He steps out and I follow. We're next to the huge wall that divides the docklands from the city. A glance up and down it doesn't show any obvious way through. I'm trying to remember if I saw anything from the tower. I have a feeling there was a gate at the north end.

“This way, Zeb.”

The north end is back towards the tower, but we've got to get out somehow. We're not seeing any more security guards. I guess it was every man for himself when the tower started looking shaky.

We're running along the narrow gap between the warehouses and the big wall, but we're coming to the end of the last building that can give us any cover. Zeb pauses at the corner of the building. You can see the gate from here and it's open, but slowly closing. On the other side of the gates white uniformed security guards are running away in disorder. We run for the gates but we're too late. They slam into place.

There's no gap between them. We try to shift them, pushing and pulling with all our strength, but they don't move an inch. There's no way around them and no way over them. Somehow we have to go through.

The gates are flanked by two guard towers built out of the wall. We're in full view of the tower. It's still standing but the upper stories are blackened and broken. Ranked along the other side of the loading area are rows of enormous forklifts and cranes and loaders, an obsolete army, flaking reds and yellows and blues showing from beneath their shrouds of snow. So much ingenuity and effort and expense to move things from one place to another in the world. Now there's nothing much to move and what there is just stays put.

There are dark shapes in the snow. Flattened and still. The night shift from the tower.

The guard towers must have the machinery that controls the gate. I run to the nearest and try to get the door open. I try the Zeb approach, with a burst of fire to the lock and a kick. Nope. Behind me there's a grinding roar. Zeb has somehow got one of the huge loaders started. These dockyards are supposed to be unused. Who's maintaining the machinery? He lurches forward, revving and rumbling, getting the controls figured out. He gets the bucket extended out to the front and points it at the gate. Then he growls forward, picking up speed, and smashes into the gate. It bows out when he hits it, but doesn't give way. The loader recoils a little. I have no idea how Zeb managed to cope with that impact, but he's still conscious and in control. He backs up, getting ready for a second run.

Something else is roaring. The nose of one of the biggest forklifts separates from the pack and pushes forward. In the cab there's a glimpse of a cloud of white hair over a lined face with two black eyes. Zeb is absorbed in what he's doing and doesn't respond. Maybe he just can't hear it over his own noise. He starts his run and slams into the gates again. They move further this time. Something is starting to give. Another few runs might do it but I don't think Zeb has that long.

The forklift lowers its hoist smoothly. White has handled one of these before. The hoist stops half way to the ground; at about the height of Zeb's head in his cab. White accelerates straight at the loader, and Zeb seems to sense something. He turns in the cab, sees what's happening. The loader spins. Zeb gets the bucket around and raised just in time to catch the hoist arms. The machines shudder and tip with the impact, then right themselves. The hoist and bucket are locked together. White pulls back, dragging Zeb with him. Zeb puts the loader in reverse. It's a question of who has the most traction. The forklift looks heavier, but the loader's has huge wheels with a deep ribbed tread that might grip better. For a long moment they're deadlocked, engines screaming, going nowhere. Then Zeb raises his bucket. White's front wheels are lifting off the ground and suddenly his rig loses traction and the pair of them start accelerating backwards toward the gate. White raises his forklift hoist, which lowers his wheels back on to the ground. Zeb lifts his bucket higher. It's a question of who can raise highest. Looking at the mechanics of the loader it looks like Zeb is going to win. The bucket starts to swing back over the loader, pulling the forklift with it. They're moving back faster now. Zeb slams backwards into the gate, and the momentum drives the forklift forward into him, pivoting the loader sideways into the gate. The two machines buckle at the join, thrusting upward, tipping. They pause for a moment, two great beasts rearing in combat, locked in a fierce embrace. Then they topple. The gate supports their weight for a few seconds, then with a great creaking and tearing the metal hinges give in. It collapses and the machines crash onto their sides.

The engines howl for a moment then cut out. But somewhere another engine is running, a machine of unthinkable size, gathering itself for some tremendous thrust. Something is happening behind me. It's all I can do to turn around.

Dust is billowing from the base of the tower, a great cloud rising to envelop it. The structure is screaming as it disintegrates, a million souls in anguish, a world torn apart. The tower is slipping into the cloud, caving in on itself, sliding downwards as if it's riding an elevator into the depths of the earth. But it's not going straight down. The foundations have collapsed under this side, where the explosion shattered the underground tunnels. It's falling this way.

I run. There's no choice. My limbs are not under my control. I scramble over the broken gates, past the wrecks of the machines, out into the deserted streets beyond. Around me the tower is raining down, a shower of metal and concrete and golden glass. My feet want to keep running forever but they hit a patch of ice and fly out from under me. I slide into a snowdrift. My brain isn't making any effort to make sense of what I'm seeing or hearing. I put my hands over my ears and shut my eyes until they ache. I curl up into a ball, my chin digging into my chest. The earth jars under the impact of huge chunks of steel and cement. The air fills with unfamiliar smells, materials usually locked in, escaping through the broken fabric of the buildings and streets.

Chapter 33 - Survival

I don't know how long I'm still there after it's over. At some point I realize the noise has stopped. I raise my head. The street is empty, the silence broken by the rustles and groans of subsiding debris. There's no movement visible through the clouds of swirling dust.

I stand shakily on my feet. The path ahead is clear. I can walk home from here. Back towards the docks the way is blocked. I start picking my way back through the chaos. I can't get my bearings. The tower has smashed the wall, the warehouses and other buildings, their wreckage twisted together into a fragmented terrain without form or structure. My eyes can't untangle it. At first glance it's impenetrable. A smashed remnant of a guard tower is still standing, and I use it to navigate back to where the gates used to be, crawling, slithering, climbing, swinging through the shattered landscape. Every movement is a new calculation. I travel ten feet for each foot forward, making detours in every direction but the one I want to follow.

I must be back at the gates. The guard tower is to my right. Slabs of ferro-concrete stand nearly upright, buckled and torn, supporting each other for who knows how long until the balance shifts and they crash down. From underneath an edge a row of blunt metal teeth is protruding, and a flash of orange, fluorescent in the early light. The loader. Slabs lean over it like a tent. I scrabble and tear at the rubble between them. There's a rumble and a blockage falls away. A narrow crawlspace leads down into the darkness. I start in.

“Zeb?”

There's no response. I crawl deeper into the blackness. I touch cool metal. I can just get my hand back to my pocket and take out the snow globe. I turn on the light. The cab of the loader is partially crushed. Its windows are gone. There's space still in there, and in the pink glimmer Zeb's face and hand are visible.

“Zeb?”

I stretch forward and touch his face. His eyelids flicker.

“Ben!”

“Zeb. Can you move?”

“Got to get out, Ben. Get away. Go!”

His voice is a dusty croak.

“Go where?”

“Anywhere! Anywhere but here.”

“You wait there, Zeb.”

I squeeze his hand, and close it around the snow globe. The pink light makes a little sphere of warmth, receding in front of me as I crawl backward.

The dock machines are mostly wrecked. I can reach some of them, even crawl into the cabs, but I can't make them go. With one of them I get the engine started but it's locked in between broken machines and wreckage. It won't move.

Then I find a big trackhoe with a grapple fitted. It moves a little. I ease it back and forward. It doesn't work like a car. This one has two pedals, one for forward and one for backward. Then there's a joystick and levers. You can see how it works in theory, but in practice you lurch around totally out of control, under-steering then over-compensating, heading anywhere but where you want to go, spinning and swinging the grapple wherever.

I get it out around the blockages and start bumping over towards the gate. Even with the tracks it's hard going. I double back about ten times. I see the glimpse of orange and the teeth of the loader bucket, peeking out. Now it's a matter of whether I can move the slabs at all. I try lifting, pushing, pulling and hitting. It turns out you can spin the excavator on its base and swing the grapple sideways into the slab. It's not the intended mode of operation, but I'm not worried about maintenance. There's a crash and one of the slabs falls. The other settles and slides to the side. The same technique keeps it sliding. It's off. I do a fair bit of delicate work, moving smaller chunks. They're too small for the grapple but too big for my hands. The loader is emerging from the rubble, a new layer of dust over the cab. That's about as good as it's going to get. I back the trackhoe off and jump down.

“Zeb?”

I can see Zeb under the dust. The snow globe is still glowing, it's light almost invisible in the light of the rising sun. I reach in and grab his arm.

“Zeb. Wake up!”

He grunts and moans.

“Come on, Zeb. No time to snooze. Lend a hand.”

I grab his arm and try pulling on it. He opens his eyes and blinks in the light. Then he starts shifting, trying to get clear. We work away at it. He's making progress.

“Ben. Stop for a minute. My foot's caught.”

He's exhausted.

“Cover your eyes, Zeb. I'm going to try something.”

I get back in the hoe and maneuver it until I can get the grapple onto what's left of the loader's cab roof. I'm getting better at this, but delicacy and gentleness are not the strong points of the equipment. I need to lift the grapple gradually, working it from side to side without losing the cab. There's a shriek of tearing metal. I increase the pressure a little. It's coming. I feel a sudden release. The remains of the loader cab, with Zeb inside, is dangling from the grapple. I lower it as carefully as I can, before it tears away and falls off. I get down again.

“Damn, Ben, that was a bumpy landing. How long you say you been a pilot?”

The cab is crushed in against Zeb's foot, but we can see it now and reach it. It's swollen into place, but it comes. Zeb is out. I haul and he pulls himself, and he's out.

“Can you walk, Zeb?”

Zeb leans on my shoulder and tries putting weight on the crushed foot. His face goes pale, then green, but he keeps on trying.

“Stop, Zeb. It's busted. Come on. Into the digger.”

We turn toward the hoe and something moves, back toward where the tower used to be. Security troops? There's something crawling in the snow. Someone who survived the fall? It hauls itself to its feet and staggers a few steps. A gaunt, ashen face, sunken eyes, a skeletal frame, draped in lime and magenta paisley pajamas. It's a prisoner. There's another movement. And another. Somehow, some prisoners made it through the explosion and the tower collapse. They move erratically, blinded by the light, their limbs atrophied.

One of them stumbles across a body in the snow. He falls upon it, sinking his teeth into the flesh. They're out, but they're starving. No time to help them. And they don't look sane.

Somehow we get Zeb up into the cab of the hoe. I back up and start looking for a way out onto the street. Progress is slow but we're making some headway. When we're on a steep incline I have to extend the grapple boom for balance. Occasionally I stop and haul something out of the way.

“Anything else broken, Zeb? Any other injuries?”

“My fingernails are ruined. You?”

“I'm ok. Where are we going?”

“Away from here.”

Zeb is sitting on the cab floor, holding on to try and ease the bumping. Every vibration is hurting him, but he's not saying anything. He's dropping off to sleep, and then a lurch sends pain shooting through his leg and wakes him up.

“Ben, you left that dongle? In my postbox? White's?”

“Yeah?”

“It worked. I opened up his tabula with it. I got in. It's all there.”

“What's all there?”

I spin the dozer on its base and knock a chunk of concrete out of the way.

“White. His logs. His accounts. He's the lynch pin. He was running Garner and Santa. Garner doesn't seem to know. Garner thinks he's paying a security outfit to outsource all his grievous bodily harm. He doesn't know White's at the head of it. White is running security troops and vigilantes. He has a hundred private armies. If he doesn't like one, he sends another after them. It goes back twenty years, Ben, to the beginning. White orchestrated the whole Uncomfortablism takeover.”

“But Santa found out.”

I take another run at a steep pile of wreckage, and the momentum carries us over the bump.

“Santa sends some of his tithes upstream. He thinks it's going to some rep of Garner's, but it doesn't. It goes to White. Santa gets a lot of information in. When Monk started to pick up noises about the vigilantes being used,

Santa went looking and found White. Not the whole story. Just enough to know that White was running murder squads on Santa's patch. Santa thought that sounded untidy, so he sent us out to tap White. He still doesn't know the full story."

I back the dozer up and try another way around the edge of some broken girders.

"He sent Roy first, Zeb. They sent Roy out on a blind date with White, followed him to find White. White almost killed him."

Zeb stares at me.

"You knew this. Monk told you?"

Zeb shakes his head.

"But that's not what killed Roy, Zeb. Roy went to get Beamish to stop him naming the Ultraspammer. Why was that such a big deal? Why die for that?"

I can see Zeb making a decision.

"Something I got to tell you, Ben."

I'm just concentrating on getting through the morass. I'll have to hear this, but maybe I won't process it. Maybe it won't reach my brain.

"I was freelance for a long time before I was getting regular funding. I took jobs as they came. Hard times, Ben, a lot has improved in ten years, you wouldn't think it to look around you. So I take this one. It's an all points bulletin. First come first served. The Ultraspammer. Dead or alive. Bonus for dead. Ritual first degree."

"What's that mean?"

"Eyes and heart."

"Like Beamish?"

"Yeah, I guess Roy was making a comment there. I had nothing against the Ultraspammer. It was just work for me. I didn't even try to follow the story. I just wanted to get paid for the contract. Steady."

I realize I'm not going to get through this tangle of reinforcing steel. I've been smashing into it repeatedly and shaking Zeb around. I pull back and look for another way.

"I had a description, some history. I found him. He was hiding in a hotel."

"And what, you just killed him? Someone you didn't know?"

"I got into the room without him noticing. I was pretty good, if I do say so. He knew he was gone. And he didn't strike me as a fighter. Not really paranoid enough. He was just hoping no one would find him. He was holding his gun in his hand, but he didn't even raise it."

"You could have walked away."

"If I'd known, I might have. But how could I know? You can't walk away. It's survival, Ben."

"So that's it?"

"He asked me not to take his gun. Said he wanted his kid to have it. Said it was all that his son would have of him. A Colt snubby. I recognized it that first night you came to group."

I've been trying to avoid knowing this for a long time.

"You killed my father."

"I left the gun with him. I would have been doing you a favor if I took it. You would have had to get a better gun. But the gun was really important to him, Ben. It was like a message to you."

I can't get through this. There's no surface. No way forward. I start pounding things flat at random. Zeb isn't saying anything. This must be very awkward for him.

"And his big secret, Zeb? The terrible thing that was worth killing him over? Did you find out what that was?"

"I don't even know if there was one. I'm sorry, Ben. It was White. I found it in his records. The contract. He put it out."

"Did Roy know about this?"

"I don't know. He didn't come to me. Roy and I didn't speak. He never forgave me for being who I was. He wanted someone else. I don't know who he wanted. He loved you. I know that."

“So Roy was trying to save me from knowing that my father was the Ultraspammer? Who asked him? That was something I needed to know.”

“Roy didn't want you hurt. Things would get him mad. He was already fighting with that bastard Beamish about their thesis. Collaboration was never his strong point. Beamish wanting to hide the truth. Beamish was going to destroy all of Roy's work and then he threatened to destroy you as well. When Roy saw red he saw red. And he wasn't good at forgiving.”

“Yeah. And then he tangled with White. White has a way of making you feel like you have nothing more to lose.”

It feels like I've lost my dad and Roy all over again. And now I've lost Zeb as well. We've broken through the last of the wreckage. We're on level ground. No danger in sight.

“Can you drive, Zeb?”

“You need a spell? Maybe. Help me up.”

We get Zeb installed in the operator seat. He can manage it with one foot. I leave him with the Colt Commando. I keep the Glock.

“Ok. See you later.”

I get out of the cab and start walking.

“Ben. Ben!”

Zeb's voice fades behind me. I'm headed home.

Chapter 34 - Agenda

The streets are mostly deserted. That could be natural causes. It's still early, not much after eight I'd guess. And it's Solstice. I'm coming round every corner with an eye out for police of security troops, but there's no sign of them. This could be good, but it might mean they're gathering somewhere.

The roads are plowed, and there are big piles of banked, frozen snow blocking the pavements, so I'm heading down the middle of the road. No cars or trucks.

They could be waiting for me at home, but with the tower gone, they might have other concerns.

I open the door. Ma is there, dressed for Solstice. She doesn't say a word. She's probably trying to decide whether she's lost her mind or not.

I go over and hold her. She'll believe that. She puts her arms around me and squeezes until I'm worried she'll snap a rib. She pushes me away. She takes my face in her hands. She still hasn't said anything.

"Ma, the gun. I need the snubby. All my stuff."

She nods. She walks straight out. In a minute she's back with the backpack, the snubby, and the Barrett. The ginger cookies are still there. I try one. A little soggy, but it tastes good.

"How come they didn't find this stuff?"

"They tried, Ben, but I wouldn't tell them anything. I can keep a secret."

Yeah, she can, now I come to think of it. Like who my father was, or what goes on in this world.

I take the snubby out of its holster. I turn it over and over. What's so special about it? What's the message?

I break it down, looking for signs, symbols, scratches. I go and get a screwdriver, and take off the grips. Nothing on the right grip. The left grip has a little service sticker, with an old date on it. I've noticed it before when I've had the gun apart. I try and decided if there's some code about the date. I pick at the sticker with my fingernail, and get enough unstuck to peel it off.

There are words penciled on the back. They don't make any sense. And they're all misspelled.

Mastobation pornogarphy gymnatsic godess

"Is it a code?"

Ma is reading over my shoulder. I've tried to train her not to do that.

I'm staring at it as if it's going to reveal its secret. Reassemble itself into the ultimate blinding truth. I let the letters float around in front of my eyes for a minute or so. It's not an anagram. I just know it.

I open up the tabula. I type in the words. The search finds a single page.

The Agenda

While other parties conceal their intentions for fear of electoral disapproval, we make no secret of our policies. It is not our job to be popular. At the core of our agenda is the tenet that a policy, whether or not it makes any sense or does any good, must make people uncomfortable.

Abortion

We will sidestep the entire debate, devoting resources instead to a massive reduction in the frequency of unwanted pregnancies. We will mount a cross-media promotion of oral sex and mastobation: Give a Friend A Hand, Use Your Head.

Underaged Drinking

See above. There is a limit to the number of things you can have in your mouth at the same time.

The Obesity Epidemic

See above.

God

We will launch a merged state religion, with at its head the only universally respected religious figure, Santa Claus; at his right hand, the Easter Bunny, symbol of fertility; at his left, the virgin Barbie, goddess of elective surgery. All rites, convictions and practices, however oppressive, archaic or contradictory, will be embraced and vigorously

defended. The church will be evangelistic, highly profitable and eventually universal. There will be entertaining ceremonies, colorful frocks and funky music. Its motto: "People can believe anything".

Gays

We will widen the scope of the marriage contract to embrace all relationships. Not only may any person marry any other person, regardless of age or gender, but other barriers such as species, biological status, and absence of concrete existence will be lifted. A woman may marry her job, a man may marry his car, a child may marry her guinea pig, and a bigot may marry his prejudices.

Guns

Guns will be compulsory. All citizens will learn from kindergarten age to correctly maintain and operate a wide range of firearms. High noon contests will dominate the sporting arena. Make my day.

Law and Order

See above. Unchecked vigilantism will work hand in hand with a corrupt and decadent police force to maintain the status quo.

Drugs

We will just say yes. All drugs, however pointless, dangerous and destructive, will be legalized, and regulated with the same delicacy, sensitivity and responsibility as are alcohol and tobacco today.

Health

Smokers will be required to wear an airtight helmet. Office managers will lead all workers in calisthenics or community singing four times daily.

Education

We will encourage children to think. We will tell them what we know of the truth. We will honor idle curiosity. This will make everyone uncomfortable. We will assist universities by funding a great many ill-considered studies into matters of doubtful importance.

Foreign Policy

Other countries are a rich source of unease. We will let them go about their business unmolested. We will draw attention to their practice of doing things differently and not caring what we think about it.

The Environment

Parking will be illegal. Only self-composting pit toilets will be permitted. Showerheads will be blocked. Toxic plumes will be returned to sender. A costly research project will examine the viability of supplying all energy needs with methane captured by cunningly designed underwear.

The Economy

We will instigate a variable random regulatory regime that keeps them guessing. No one will become comfortable with the loopholes long enough to scam them. Consumerism will be discredited by a wide range of practices and promotions. For each advertisement for a product or service, the advertiser will be required to fund a campaign of equal penetration explaining why you're better off without it. Party members will wear shabby clothing and be transported in poorly maintained, inexpensive vehicles. Ostentation will be ridiculed.

Taxation

Against.

The Arts

All art is propaganda. All art is pornogarchy. The more the merrier.

Spam

Death to spammers.

I stare at the page for a while. There's a date on it. More than forty years ago. I try to find where the page came from. I check the source. There's no information. It's just hanging there, a relic of a lost culture. It's not on a government server. It one of those things that survived the purges, maybe because the robots couldn't tell what they were reading. They didn't get it. I try going to the root of the directory tree. There's an index page.

Harvey's Hilarious Humor Pages

Text in clashing fonts and sizes and colors on an intrusive background of badly rendered smiley faces that makes it just about unreadable. There's a bunch of lightbulb jokes and riddles. I go back to the agenda page and stare at it.

“What the fuck is it?”

Ma is still reading over my shoulder.

“It's a thing they used to have. It's called a joke.”

“But it's the way we live.”

“Yeah.”

“It's not all that funny when you're living it.”

“No.”

“What does it mean?”

I go back to the home page and scroll down.

We welcome your humor. The more the merrier! Upload your own jokes.

There's a form. I scroll further down. There's a long gap, starting in the late 1990s. No one adds anything for decades. Then there are two lines. One is dated ten years ago.

“Expect the worst.”

The other is from a few months back. Just a few months.

“I keep thinking it's Tuesday.”

“What is this?”

“It means our lives are bullshit. It means that sick fuck White decided to make us all part of his joke.”

“You've lost me.”

“Where do you think this Uncomfortablist bullshit came from, Ma? Do you think it came from God? From fucking Pythagoras? Some prick made it up for a joke. Then White was looking for something, some dressing for his totalitarian takeover. He happened on this, decided it would be just the thing.”

“White? What are you talking about?”

“White. The man with the highly developed sense of humor. The man who controls Garner, and Santa, and the police, and the vigilantes. The man who destroyed Beamish and ruined his mother's life. The guy who gave me the black eyes, who drove Roy to do what he did. The man who had dad killed. Who contracted Zeb to kill him. Never heard of him?”

Ma's mouth and eyes are wide open. She's horrified and fascinated. I don't know if it's hearing about White or hearing me talk like this.

“It's funny. This is White's world and nobody's heard of him. Maybe they never will. As far as I know he's under a thousand tons of rubble.”

“What?”

“So, Ma. All dressed up for Solstice? Wait a minute and I'll go and get changed. We'll go together.”

I find the funeral suit. It doesn't feel right to take off my body armor, so the suit goes on over it. It's all pretty bulky, but I could use a little bulk after my crash diet. I go back out. Ma has cooked some breakfast. I think she must have cooked everything in the house. At first I can't imagine eating anything. Then I take a bite and the next time I look it's all gone.

“Is it safe for you to go out there, Ben?”

“I think it's over, Ma. I think it's all over.”

But I take every weapon I have. Just in case.

Chapter 35 - Wheel

Temple Square is thronged. The Big Wheel looms over the crowds, turning slowly, lights flashing and rippling all around it. There's a long queue snaking backwards and forwards through the crowd, marked by dividers and burly event officials. The Wheel takes ten or more in one of its enormous gondolas, but the queue keeps growing. It turns a few degrees, then stops, the families and groups file out of the bottom gondolas, others enter, the wheel turns again.

The music comes from everywhere. There are small brass groups honking out traditional Solstice songs, electric groups bashing out classics, carolers and percussionists ranting and whirling. Through all the noise you can hear the bleating from the pen behind the altar, where the little white she-goats are waiting for their few minutes of fame.

Further toward the center, the bonfire is burning. Children bring sticks, lumps of wood, fuel, but the bonfire is too big, they shrink from the heat, and big volunteer firemen take the fuel and throw it on. The fire is giving off heat you can feel from the edge of the square.

At the other end of the square is the big tree. Bee and Flo had to do a lot of shouting on the phone to get that organized. They spent a little while trying to talk Santa into a smaller tree but that got them nowhere. They ended up having to get a special trailer built and there were some stretches of road up north that had to be repaired. It's showering pine needles everywhere. They've got a cherry picker, one that can reach all the way to the top. They're adding decorations as people bring them in. There's the buzz of a chainsaw. Maybe they're still lopping limbs.

Kids are filing past the altar adding their little sigs. I used to spend a lot of time on mine, trying to make the face look alive. You have to get the eyes right. Some of these kids are good. The faces on their figures have expressions that really make you laugh.

People are wearing red cloaks, red hats. The women flop the peaks backward over their shoulders, the men flop them forward. There are kids running around playing pranks. Getting old ladies to sit down on cakes. Stealing people's hats. They're supposed to give them back, but we used to have a competition and you had to keep them to know who won.

The temple is decked with holly wreaths and sheaves of dried wheat and corn. Most of the outside is covered, except for the band of mazy carvings near the ground. The rusty stains from last year are almost faded to nothing, washed away, just a little still visible in the cracks. They'll be getting freshened up in a few hours.

The sun doesn't really stand still. It just reaches its lowest point in the sky and starts rising again. It keeps on moving. Except that the earth is what moves. People didn't know that when they started doing this thousands of years ago. They didn't even know what the sun was.

I never did get it all straight though. The earth is moving around the sun, but the sun is a star. It's moving around too. There's nothing to hold it down. It's revolving around something, the center of the galaxy I suppose, and the galaxy is moving too. Maybe it's revolving around something. How can everything be revolving around something bigger when there's no center? I'd talk to Roy about this and he'd explain as patiently as he could. But what it amounts to is that nothing is fixed, nothing stays the same. It's a dynamic process. It's all about movement. You can't rely on anything. Sometimes you have to narrow your focus to something you can understand.

There's a ripple going through the crowd. It's too early for true noon. Santa won't come out for at least another hour. People are forming little knots, putting their heads together, breaking up, forming other knots. A guy in a floppy red felt hat, a flaring red robe and huge curling red slippers is hurrying past me, looking very serious. A man with gossip that must be passed on. He catches my eye. I'll do.

"The tower. The tower is down."

"Down?"

"Fallen. They say Garner is dead."

"No shit? Wow!"

I turn around, just like everybody else, and look in the direction of the tower. You can't see it from here anyway. He rushes on. News to spread.

"Ben!"

It's Ted. His eyes are like the Big Wheel.

"Hey Ted."

"I heard you were..."

“Nah.”

“Wow! Did you hear? The tower is gone!”

“That right?”

“You ok, Ben? You don't look so good.”

“No? You look fantastic.”

“What are you wearing? Is that body armor?”

“This old thing? I guess the suit's just gone a little baggy.”

“What's in the case?”

“Lunch.”

“You been on the Wheel?”

“Not yet.”

“I'm going again. Want to come?”

“Why not?”

Ma is chatting to someone she knows. I give her a wave and head off with Ted.

“Where did you go, Ben? We didn't know who to believe. People were saying you were dead, or in prison.”

“What were you saying?”

“I said you'd be back, and people better stop talking bullshit about you.”

“Good one, Ted.”

“May talked to your Ma.”

“Yeah?”

“But she wouldn't tell anyone what your Ma said.”

“No?”

“She said it was none of their fucking business. She's really quiet, Ben. Not talking to anyone much. She's going to be really glad to see you.”

“You think?”

“Definitely.”

The queue is long, but there are jugglers and jesters and singers and acrobats walking up and down, and everybody is excited and happy. I keep hearing snatches of conversation about the tower. There's always someone whose job is to know all the answers, and someone whose job is to feed them questions. They could swap roles if they wanted. Nobody has the faintest idea what they're talking about.

“There'll be a synod. They'll select a new secretary. Nothing will change.”

“What about the tower?”

“The foundations were undermined. No doubt of it. Seepage. A tragedy, but all too common when maintenance is ignored. I've been saying this for years. Desdemona will back me up on this. You must conduct regular inspections and act immediately at the first sign of damp. Well, Garner learned that lesson the hard way. I can put you in touch with a reliable inspection service.”

I guess if there's a little money to be made out of the misery, someone has to do it. We reach the end of the queue and the wrangler ushers us into a gondola. Seepage man doesn't make the cut and his party has to wait for the next one. This day is turning out all right. It jerks and we swing up, the crowd receding below us. We're over the top of the temple. You can see the solar panels in their sunburst pattern, and the machinery that keeps them oriented just visible underneath. Santa probably designed it himself. There are hints of rainbow glittering deep in the indigo glass. There must be something to keep the snow off them, but it's not obvious how it's done. Maybe heating elements.

I always loved the gargoyles. They add new ones from time to time. There are people who don't do anything but carve gargoyles. Not a bad job. From here you can see that for all their fangs and claws and spreading wings, they're mainly to catch the rain and channel it into the holding tanks.

And there are gardens up there. Spinach, broccoli. He's even growing some corn. Come to think of it, Santa is pretty self-sufficient. At least he has plenty of water and power.

The city looks different. It's not just the light, or the perspective. As we climb higher I'm waiting for a view of the remains of the tower, but we keep stopping and starting. We're not even at Spring and we'll probably have to reach Summer at the top before we can see it. It's hard to judge the sight lines.

I look down at the crowd and my eye catches on three heads. Lock, Clytemnestra and May. Lock's head is bobbing around, even more excited than usual. He wants a honey cake. Clytemnestra is fussing around, looking for money in her bag probably. They're good, those honey cakes. You have to have one at Solstice.

The gondola jerks and we're rising again. I lose sight of them. Ted is giving me a meaningful look. We're almost at High Summer. The docklands are in sight, and you can see that the tower isn't there. There's a gash in the snow, blackness in the whiteness, but from here it's so squashed in perspective you can't get any impression of the size. The other people in the gondola are pointing things out to their kids. A big blond guy has his little kid on his shoulders so he can see. The kid's red hat is falling down over his eyes, so he can't see anyway. We never said a word about that tower when it was there. Now it's gone there's no other topic of conversation.

I'm trying to catch a sight of the trackhoe. My eyes are programmed for bright yellow. Part of me feels guilty about leaving Zeb, and part of me feels this nearly uncontrollable fury. Most of me wants to not think about it. At all.

There's movement down there. Not just the bobbing red caps of the holidaymakers on their way to Solstice. Snaky, shadowy forms, appearing for a moment and then vanishing.

“Ted, do you see this?”

He's been watching them too.

“Shit, Ben. Troops. Or cops.”

He's right. Single file columns, in gray or white or blue. Hundreds of them, from all points south. They dart out from cover near a wall or under an awning and run down the street to the next cover. They're coming this way. The gondola jerks to a stop at High Summer. The other passengers have seen them.

I pull out a snow globe.

“Santa, this is Ben. Hostiles headed this way. Hundreds, possibly more. Repeat, hostiles approaching. Calling Buckminsterfullerene Zephyrinus Fisher. Repeat. Hostiles headed this way. Suggest get the kids into the temple and form barricades.”

I have no way of knowing if the Listeners are even on the job.

“I've got to get down there and warn Santa. Ted, do you know how to use one of these?”

I open the case.

“Some lunch. Is that Beamish's Barrett?”

“It's got a hell of a kick, Ted. Can you handle it? Use the scope. Close shots and precision shots are too risky. Ok?”

“Sure, Ben. You go.”

The other passengers are getting their kids to sit down on the floor of the gondola. The metal floor and sides give a little protection, I suppose. They're taking out their weapons and checking them. There's some decent equipment, but it's just handbag carry. No automatic rifles, not on a public holiday.

There's no time to wait for the Wheel to turn. I smash a hole in the perspex and turn the handle outside the door. It swings open and there's a straight drop down to one of the girders that forms the inside rim. I climb down and hang from the door sill, but my feet can't reach it. Ted grabs my right arm, and the big blond guy grabs the other. Other passengers grab their legs and lower them until my feet are on the girder. I can grab one of the tensioners. I wave them a thank you and Ted and the blond guy get hauled feet first back into the gondola.

I don't look down. I'm just taking a walk on a narrow path. There are some hand holds, but I have to take a few short bursts without them. It takes a fair bit of concentration. I can't afford any mistakes. The angles keep changing as I move down the curve. What I'm walking on plunges away and I have to start climbing on the cross girders and going hand over hand along the rim. It's like a floor turning into a wall. I can't hear any shooting yet, but there's no doubt in my mind what's going to happen. Someone sees a power vacuum that needs filling, and Santa is the competition. Santa won't go quietly, and it's not too likely they're going to be delicate about non-combatants in the way. It's everyone in. I'm yelling with every step, breathless and hoarse.

“Hostiles! The hostiles are coming. Prepare your defenses. Hostiles!”

I'm at Autumn and I can't help looking down. That's the direction I'm going. The crowds are looking up and noticing something. They're watching me. Don't watch me, watch the entrances to the square. Watch the rooflines of the overlooking buildings. That's where they'll be coming from.

“Kids to the Temple! Kids to the Temple!”

They can't hear me, or they can't work out what I'm talking about. Suddenly there's only one face in the crowd. It's May, her eyes looking straight into mine. I'm hoping she can read my lips.

“Hostiles! Kids to the Temple!”

She understands. She turns to the people around her, gesticulating and shouting. She points to the entrance to the square, and the rooftops. She points to the Temple. She grabs Lock and starts moving him, fast. He's dragged off his feet. Other people start hurrying their kids to the Temple. Clytemnestra has taken over spreading the word. She's grown to twice the size, and every gesture demands instant attention and obedience. The crowd starts organizing. People are moving, but they're not running over each other. There's an outer ring of defenders forming, pushing over floats and stands to make barricades. Clytemnestra strides along the barricades, issuing orders. The gaps are closing, the lines are tightening.

Troops are appearing on the roof of the Temple. They're in red and green, and well armed. Santa has done some preparation. They take up positions behind gargoyles. The gargoyles are dual purpose. They work as turrets. These guys are sharpshooters.

Defending the Temple's all very well, but they need to garrison the buildings that command the perimeter of the square. We need to take the high ground. I'm trying to get down fast, but it's not fast enough. Any faster and I'll fall and that won't do anybody any good. I'm concentrating so hard on my hands and feet I don't even hear it coming.

“Ben. Need a lift?”

It's The Bunny.

Chapter 36 - Resistance

The cherry picker bucket is hovering next to me. At the controls is the Bunny, in full ceremonial costume. She hasn't even paused to take off the ears. She maneuvers over. The bucket's on a flying jib and she brings it in between the Wheel infrastructure and the rim, just beneath me. I take a breath, let go and drop in. Flo pulls the bucket back and rolls the cherry picker away. She can drive the whole thing from up here.

“Where to, Ben?”

“The buildings around the square. We have to take them and keep the hostiles off those roofs.”

The Bunny touches her ear and starts talking. There's a radio in there.

“Flo here. I have Ben. We need teams on the buildings around the square. Twenty teams of four?”

She raises her eyebrows at me for confirmation. I shrug, then nod.

“More if possible. Reinforcements may be required later.”

I don't know how many troops Santa has. I wish he'd told me the whole story. There's never a good enough reason not to tell people the whole truth. Sometimes I think the whole world is about running around trying to repair the damage caused by lies.

Down below I can see the four man teams coming out of the Temple. They're made up of one of Santa's Elite Guard, in red and green ballistic gear, and three regulars in Solstice robes. Just anyone who was handy. They have automatic rifles though, so Santa must have had plenty of equipment stashed away for a rainy day. They move through the barricades and jog over to the other side of the square, one team per building. I hope it's enough. The main thing is to get there first.

“Over there!”

There are security troops on top of the old bank building, snow camouflage, six or more. White's troops. One of them is leaning over the parapet, drawing a bead on the barricades. He jerks upright, arms outstretched, and falls backward. Santa's Temple sharpshooters have seen them.

“Here.”

Flo hands me an M-110. Turns out she has a tool chest full of guns and ammo up here. She takes an M-110 herself. I might prefer a bolt action myself, maybe an M-24, but she's right, it's no time to get into a debate about accuracy. We're just trying to get as many shots down range as we can. A bullet pings into the bucket safety rail. Not much cover up here.

The Santa team appears on the roof of the bank. With a little help from me, Flo and the sharpshooters, they clear the hostiles from the roof. The Santa team gives us a victory salute. Little early for that, guys.

There are Santa teams on all the roofs I can see now. I can see one of the Elites organizing a team to barricade the entrances to the roof with whatever they can find up there. If we can hold the rooftops we might stand a chance.

There's fire from ground level. The hostiles are appearing at the wide road leading into the square, taking cover behind buildings and vehicles, trying to pick off the teams at the barricades. The rooftop teams are taking a toll on them, but meanwhile the no-mans land outside the barricades is impassable. We can't get ammo to the rooftop teams that way. We can't get reinforcements up to them.

“We can resupply them with the cherry picker.”

Flo look down and shakes her head.

“We can't get close enough.”

“We'll get them to move the barricade out in the middle. Then we can stay behind it and still get close to the buildings.”

She's already talking on her ears. A few more Santa teams come out of the Temple, carrying ammo boxes. One of the Elites starts talking to the people at the barricade, pointing at us and the rooftops. Clytemnestra strides up and takes over. The barricade starts to bulge out. They drag over more stands and material to extend it. It's going to give them a better field of fire that way, too. They'll cover the entrance from more angles.

It's ready. Flo moves the cherry picker slowly over. This thing feels surprisingly stable, but it wouldn't be hard to unbalance it with a sudden move. Even a gust of wind. I guess that's why the bucket has only thin safety rails. A solid skin might act like a sail. Without armor, though, it's not the best sniper platform. Bullets are whistling past and whanging into the rails and the boom, but mostly the security troops are too busy ducking fire from the

barricades to worry about us. We drop down to the ground, smooth as silk. I jump out and help them load ammo into the bucket. They can reach the bank roof from here, and they'll probably be able to resupply the other roofs from there. I catch Clytemnestra's attention.

“Give the cherry picker a lot of covering fire. It's vulnerable.”

There are two entrances to the square. The one near the Wheel we can defend, but we don't want to be defending both. I run to the entrance at the other end. The tree towers over it, but I don't see us filling the tree with sharpshooters. Thousands of candles are burning in the soil at its base. There's the chainsaw. It's warm and it starts up easy.

“What are you doing?”

A defender runs up, wearing the cap, carrying a small pistol.

“Get everyone out of the way. Move them away. Now!”

He runs off and starts moving people.

I can only guess how this works. I do what Zeb did with the little tree on the mountain, and hope it scales up. I start working on a V-shaped cut on the opposite side to the entrance. The pine smell is like a drug. I'm getting flashes of May, and Zeb, and the stars. The V is about half way through. That should do it. I make a level cut in from the side facing the entrance. I get about six inches in and there's a crack like a gun going off. A shower of pine needles falls on my head. Another inch and it goes. The tree groans and creaks then crashes down into the entrance, showering me with dust and dead insects and pine needles and decorations. I have to fall backwards and roll out of the way to avoid getting hit with flailing limbs.

The tree crashes, rolls a little, and settles. It's covering the entrance and all the buildings on this side of the square. That's done. They can't come in that entrance. I head for the Temple.

The decorations are still up all around the walls and ceiling, and the colored light is pouring in through the stained glass, but the floor has been swept clean of pews. There are stations set up for handing out protective gear, guns and ammo. There's a first aid station too. Just one. It's dealing with some minor injuries. I have a feeling it won't be enough as the day progresses.

Bee has them all forming queues and behaving themselves, and she's flashing and sparkling everywhere at once, in a dazzling emerald green off the shoulder number. It has a spectacular train, but as I watch she gets tired of dragging it around with her. She sweeps it up and rips it off in a single movement that takes most of the skirt with it. She's moving even faster with bare legs, and on balance she's even more likely to get their attention. I run over.

“Where have you put the kids?”

“Downstairs.”

Downstairs, as well as the living quarters, there are half a dozen smaller chapels, for receptions, births, deaths, marriages, made to handle five hundred or so. They're at well over capacity. The kids are already losing it, and the carers are starting to show the strain. I finally find May and Lock.

May is in the center of a big circle of kids. She's teaching them a hand-clapping song. Lock already knows it and he's showing them all how it's done. Even the big kids are joining in. May catches my eye and looks a question. I give her a nod with reservations. We're doing the best we can. She hands over to Lock, and he keeps singing the song and clapping away, with a big grin, while the other kids follow.

She comes over to me.

“How many of them are there?”

“I don't know. I don't know who they are. Some of them are definitely White's troops, private security, some of them are ex-Garner, cops.”

“What do they want?”

“I'm assuming they want Santa. He's the threat. He's the competition.”

“Why don't we give him to them?”

As long as I live, no matter what I do, I will never be as tough and hard as May. The realization comes as a kind of relief. Here I am, worrying that I'm turning into one of these gnarled old murderers before my time, but May can always spark the self-knowledge that tells me where I really am. I'm just too soft for this game.

“We need food and water for these kids. Now.”

“Turn on a tap.”

“They cut off the supply.”

“There are tanks full of water up there. We might have to switch the supply over somehow. And there's food. Honey cakes, toffee, noodles. A lot of it's out in the square. The people who go to get it need armor and an escort. I have to find Santa.”

May turns to the other carers and starts handing out tasks. Lock is heading up a funky clap over there. He's teaching them a different song now.

As I turn into the corridor to the Listening Room the traffic hots up. There are Elites and Listeners running back and forth. I pass the door to my old room. That was another life. There are a couple of Elites at the door to the stairs.

“Ben Hollins. I need to see Santa.”

They send a runner down and after a minute he comes back up and leads me in.

Santa is on the platform at the far end, bending his ear to one question after other, making snap decisions, watching ten screens at once. His voice booms over the hubbub, every bellow scattering runners on a new set of priorities.

He sees me coming but doesn't pause until I'm right there.

“Ben. Good to see they got you out safely. What about those vigilantes of Zeb's? Not subtle, but reliable. Any of them get out? No? Too bad. We could use them right now. Good work on the rooftops. I need you back on that, we're seriously outnumbered and we can't afford to lose that ground. Flo can help.”

“You were expecting this, weren't you?”

“Always be prepared, Ben.”

“Did you plan it?”

“I planned to win it if it happened. Not a lot of time to talk, Ben, any questions?”

“Did you plan it for today? So you'd have the Solstice crowd to protect you?”

“Better get back to those rooftops, Ben.”

“Why don't you talk to them?”

“Talk?”

“To the hostiles. Whoever they are. Arrange a truce. Save some lives.”

“Ben, you're either with me or against me. Make your mind up. Fast.”

He turns away and starts bellowing. An Elite appears on either side of me. Seems I've outstayed my welcome. I go upstairs. I grab an M-16 from the Temple arms supplies and head for the square. The Elites peel off when they see I'm not going to cause any trouble.

The fighting in the square has settled in. The hostiles can't breach the barricades, and the defenders can't stop the stream of new troops from arriving and keeping up the pressure. The cherry picker is working constantly to resupply the rooftops, but there's constant attrition. It can only just keep up. A few times the hostiles make it as far as a rooftop but they don't manage to take it. It's a delicate balance and it wouldn't take much to swing it either way.

They don't seem to have anyone working on strategy. They have their objective, to take the square, but there's no one working on how. If it was me, I'd disable the cherry picker. That would swing the balance. The rooftops would go next, and then you'd take the barricades. It's just as well they haven't figured that out.

I start working my way along the barricades, trying to see an angle that could help us swing it the other way. We need to stop the inflow somehow. Cut off their lines of supply. And we need backup for the cherry picker, in case it goes.

I'm looking for Clytemnestra when I find Gomez and Braddock. They're shoulder to shoulder. Gomez looks surprised and glad to see me. I'm glad to see her too. Braddock hasn't been surprised for a good long time. She narrows her eyes and ducks her chin. Gomez gives me a grin.

“What's today's word, Ben?”

I give it a moment's thought.

“Resistance.”

“Amen.”

She turns back to the fighting. Braddock hasn't given up her Magnum. I'm thinking I don't like her chances of hitting anything, but then I see her bag a fully armored hostile who peeks out from behind a van. She doesn't even sight it. Just sort of flicks it up. Gomez has an M1 and she knows how to use it. I join them for a few minutes, picking off

hostiles as they sally out into no-mans land, trying to get a feel for the battle, but I have to try to find Clytemnestra. Gomez and Braddock have it under control.

When I find Clytemnestra she's with Ma. They're toe to toe, nose to nose, deep into a strategic discussion. Ma is all for rushing them head on and taking the entrance to the square. Clytemnestra is pointing out very reasonably but firmly that even if we took it there's no way we could hold it.

“Ma.”

“Ben. Are you sure you're not too warm in that?”

“We have to push the barricades out all the way to the bank. Supply the rooftops directly, in case they take the cherry picker out. If we can get enough shooters on the rooftops we can push them back at the entrance. Use the pews. Cut boughs off the tree. We can do it.”

Clytemnestra and Ma like arguing better than almost anything in the world, but they see what I'm saying and declare a truce long enough to start organizing it. Ma is scouting for more material to extend the barricades and I head back to the Temple to try to arrange reinforcements.

Chapter 38 - Payback

Finding reinforcements isn't easy. The irregulars who can shoot are already out there doing it. We manage to round up a few extras, but it's a matter of convincing Santa to let me dip into his listeners and runners and Elites. I'm about to head down again, not sure what kind of reception I'll get, when there's a sound from the square that I don't like at all. It's a deep rumbling, more than one vehicle, and it's coming closer.

Bee is supervising the first aid station. It's taken over the whole area in front of the stage and it's spreading back down the sanctum. She's got her hands full with triage, making some tough decisions. She's still the one to ask, though.

"Bee. Do we have any rocket launchers, grenade launchers? Any anti-materiel weapons, anything?"

"Not that I know of, Ben. Although Buck was too paranoid to tell me everything. Even me. Now he's paying the price. Not that one. We can't save him. Put him over there."

I haven't got time to go through the rigmarole of asking Santa. I have to get out there. Just as I'm heading out the doors there's a long, rapid burst of heavy automatic fire.

The hostiles have an armored car with a .50 caliber gun. That first burst flung four defenders aside, crumpled and motionless, and blew a hole in the barricades big enough to drive through. But the armored car is hanging back. Waiting. Something black is gliding in mid air from around the corner behind them. It's suspended from a yellow boom, and followed by a pair of tracks. It's the trackhoe, and there's a man dressed in black hanging upside down from the grapple.

"Ah. Hello everyone. Thank you for coming."

The huge voice bounces around the walls of the square.

"This is Secretary Garner speaking. Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated. It is time to put an end to this unfortunate misunderstanding. There is no need for anybody else to be hurt. We ask that you put down your weapons and allow our special forces peacekeepers to enter. All hostilities are to cease."

Nobody moves.

"Any resistance prolongs the suffering of the injured and may result in more fatalities. We come in peace. We will be detaining two known spammers. Ebenezer Hollins and Buckminsterfullerene Zephyrinus Fisher have committed crimes and will be helping us with our enquiries. All others will go free. There will be no reprisals."

Still nobody moves. Either they're not buying it or it's just that standard thing of nobody wanting to be first. Well, it's not going to be me.

"We have captured a third suspect, Zebadiah Kelly. If you give up Hollins and Fisher, Kelly will be treated for his injuries and released. If you do not surrender immediately, Kelly will be summarily executed on a charge of spam in the first degree."

The square is silent. Then I hear Zeb's voice, faint but with feeling.

"Fuck you, Garner!"

There's an even fainter echo from the walls of the square, then someone picks it up.

"Fuck you, Garner!"

That makes sense to somebody else.

"Fuck you, Garner!" "Fuck you, Garner!"

It grows into a wave of sound that washes from one side to the other. There's a deafening screech of feedback and Garner's voice cuts in.

"The fall of the tower is a tragedy but nothing has changed. Lay down your weapons. That is a direct order. There is nothing to fear. Life will go on exactly as before."

That last line may have been a mistake. There's a loud crack, from up near the top of the Wheel, and the armored car lurches as if a huge fist has struck it. Three more shots, and fluid starts pouring out. They're trying to elevate the gun but it won't go that high. Then a shot shatters the gun. Ted throws a few more rounds into the car for good measure, then he starts on the trackhoe. I don't see what he's trying to do there. He can disable it, if he's lucky, but what then?

But Clytemnestra and Ma have been smuggling defenders up onto the rooftops behind the new barricade. Suddenly they open up, raining fire down on the hostiles at the entrance. The hostiles start to fall back. They're not defending anything, not their kids, not their lives, just Garner's idea of how the world should work. Some of them are actually surrendering, and the others are running.

Braddock leads a charge from the barricades, waving her Magnum in the air and screaming at the top of her lungs. She's not even shooting at anyone, she's just showing them all how it's done. She's used to getting her way, and the defenders rise up and follow her. The hostiles don't wait around to find out what Braddock has in mind for them.

I see now what Ted was doing. From up there he could see which way it was going to go, and he wanted to make sure if they pulled out they didn't take the trackhoe with them.

We surround the trackhoe and the armored car. I get in the cab and lower Zeb gently to where the others can support him. Then I help them get him free from the grapple. He's barely conscious.

"Zeb. How you doing?"

"Ben. You ok? What about Garner?"

"Fuck him."

"Better make sure."

They carry Zeb off for treatment at the Temple. I check the armored car but I don't expect Garner to be inside. He's not among the bodies. I move off to search. I'm looking for a vehicle with a powerful P.A. mounted on it and it's not long before I see it. It's an ordinary van, not built for rough terrain, and it's trying to pick its way through the mess of bodies and debris in the roadway, making no headway.

A group of us runs toward it and the door opens. Garner gets out and starts running, the tails of his old green suit flapping behind him, but he stumbles and falls. He's climbing to his feet when some of the bodies around him start to move. Ragged bundles of lime and magenta paisley, they sway upright and move towards him. They've been crawling up the hill to the Temple, looking for fuck knows what. Kindness? A moment of peace? They're exhausted and starving. Maybe there's enough left of their minds to recognize him, and make the connection. Garner is on one knee but they fall on him and bring him back down. There's one long, gargling scream, abruptly cut off.

I turn away. Back to the square.

They're carrying the wounded into the temple, repairing the barricades. They're bringing out the dead, to lay beside the bonfire. It's still burning well. I guess the goats are off the hook for this year. May has a team collecting what food can be found in the overturned booths and floats. I go over.

"Garner is dead."

"I've heard that before."

"I saw it. He's not coming back this time. He got eaten."

"Ew. Glad that wasn't my job."

"Escaped prisoners."

"The condemned men ate a hearty breakfast."

"Brunch of Blood."

"So what now? Do we just continue with the Solstice celebration?"

"I don't know. Some of them might regroup, but..."

It's a sound I've only ever heard before on old movies. Roy somehow found them. There was nothing he couldn't find. At first I think it's rapid gunfire, but then the Doppler starts to phase it, and it's chopping up and down the scale. I know what it is, but I don't believe it.

It comes over the top of the bank building, spraying machine gun fire, then sweeps around to hover over the center of the square. I didn't know there were any left. People are dropping everything and running for the Temple. The chopper guns follow them, casually picking off one or two. They lie in the trampled snow, twitching, while the helicopter growls over them. I run away from May, heading for the outer edges, trying to put distance between myself and anyone vulnerable. I fire a few rounds into the chopper but there's no sign of a hit. It swings and lazily turns towards me. I run, heading for the shelter of the buildings, but there is no shelter. Bullets whip up the snow ahead of me. I swerve and dive, but I can't outrun this thing. And I can't hurt it.

Then there's a crack from above. Ted has a few rounds left. The helicopter swings back, then climbs toward the top of the Wheel, firing as it goes. That Wheel is full of children. Ted is firing calmly, a round every couple of seconds. It reaches High Summer and fires a burst into the top gondola. There's another shot from Ted, then nothing. The helicopter swings back towards me, but then it can't stop spinning. It's going round faster, and dropping toward the square. It swoops to the side and crashes behind the deserted barricade.

I'm expecting it to burst into flames and explode. That's what they do in the movies. But this one doesn't do anything. It just lies there, a broken bird. These machines they used to make were so amazing when they worked,

but when they don't work, they're just enormous piles of expensive junk. Just clearing up the mess is going to take days.

The square is quiet again. People start to raise their heads and step cautiously out. May rises to her feet from her hiding place under a capsized stand. I had no idea she was so close to where the chopper fell. She's tempted to take the few steps toward the wreck, but she has too much sense for that. It could still go up. She turns and begins to walk towards the Temple.

There's a flash of movement from behind the wreckage. Someone darts out and seizes May. It's a tall man in dark gray camo. His hair is white. He locks her arm behind her. I'm running towards them. He holds an automatic to her throat and I skid to a halt.

“Fisher. That's all I want. Just bring me Fisher and it's all over. The girl can go. You can all go back to whatever you're doing. Just Fisher. There are more troops coming. Hundreds of them. Thousands. They're on their way. You've lost, all of you. You never even looked like winning. You don't even know what winning is. You've never tasted it. Never so much as a whiff of it. I want Fisher.”

May strains against him.

“White! You prick!”

He turns towards me, recognizing my voice, points his gun and fires. Then I'm sitting down. I don't remember sitting down. I'm watching in a detached sort of way. There's not much I can do now. I'm not really expecting to come out of muscular spasm by the time I need to take another breath. White has all the time he needs to take a few more shots and finish me off.

May rakes her heel hard down his shin and stamps with all her weight on his foot. She spins toward the shoulder of her trapped arm to ease the pressure, then slams the heel of her other hand palm up under his nose.

White's reflexes save him from instant death with his nasal bone embedded in his brain. He bends back and to the side and deflects the blow just enough. Blood spurts from his nose. He brings his gun hand around and smacks May on the side of her head. She falls to the ground. White points his gun at her, straight armed, cupping the butt with his other hand.

“Gary!”

His shoulders slump. Mrs Beamish has him covered with a double barreled shotgun. White lowers his weapon.

“Evelyn.”

“It's time to stop all this nonsense, don't you think?”

White shrugs, then drops his gun, and turns to her, arms outstretched, empty palms forward, like he's asking for a hug.

The first barrel takes him in the chest and knocks him a few feet backwards. He's lying there, arms still spread, staring up at the sun, like he's studying its position. It's almost at its zenith. She walks deliberately over and without hesitation gives him the second barrel in the face. Then she drops her shotgun and sits down beside him. She takes his hand in both of hers and places it in her lap, while the echoes of her last shot slowly fade.

I take a deep, shuddering breath and get to my knees, then my feet. I help May to stand and we walk away, propping each other up, leaving Mrs Beamish to make whatever peace she can with her memories.

Ma and Clytemnestra rush over. Ma hugs May and Clytemnestra hugs me. Didn't see that coming. She's got some strength in those shoulders.

They've started the Wheel again, and they're unloading the gondolas one by one. There are surprisingly few casualties. They swing down the one Ted was in. The blond guy comes out, holding his son in his arms. He shakes his head at me. But the kid's all right, he's just sleeping. His face is rosy and puffy, and there's a little bit of drool at one side of his mouth. Just worn out. The last of the passengers is out. I get them to hold the Wheel and we go into the gondola.

Ted's on the floor. He's not moving. The color of his face is not good. But then it never was. There's a rent in his shirt, right over his heart. The Barrett is lying beside him, smashed. You can see where a couple of bullets must have hit it.

“Ted?”

Nothing. I put a hand on his chest and shove down hard. His eyes spring open.

“Fuck, Ben, that hurts.”

“Whoa, Ted, you made me jump. I mean fuck!”

“Oh, hi May. You ok?”

“Never better. You?”

He starts feeling himself. He fishes something out of the ruins of his shirt pocket. It's a twisted piece of thick metal on a ribbon. It must have taken a bullet that deflected off the gun. It couldn't have survived a direct hit.

“Shit, Ben, I busted your medal.”

“Your medal.”

He closes his eyes. A few guys come and help us carry him to a first aid station. Inside the Temple the light is beaming down.

“Where's Santa?”

Nobody knows. I head backstage and down to the Listening Room. The Elites and Listeners are wrapping up the operation, writing up logs, shutting down equipment. I ask them if they've seen Santa. They shrug and go on with what they were doing. I try the chapels one by one. There are carers with sleeping kids. No sign of him.

I head upstairs to his office. It's empty. The bookcases, boxes of snow globes, all just as before.

Back down below. I check the sleeping apartments. Nothing. The bathroom. Back to the Listening Room. The last of the Listeners is carrying a briefcase and a bundle of papers out. At the far end of the room, behind the raised platform, there's a door. I've never seen it open. I try the handle. It opens.

Behind it there's a store room. Shelves, stationery. The middle of the floor is full of empty boxes. In one of the corners there are no boxes at all. I fling boxes aside. There's a trap door in the floor. I pull it up. A shiny new ladder, a sharp smell of recent construction.

At the bottom of the ladder is a concrete tunnel. There are light tubes along the curved ceiling, temporary looking, just enough to make bright stripes in the gloom. There's a smell of fresh cement, paint, chemicals. It's hard to look down the tunnel. It vanishes, perfectly straight, the pattern of dark and light merging into a single point.

I start running down the tunnel. My boots are making rhythmic sucking sounds on the floor. The stripes of light flow past, regular, unchanging. I feel like I'm in a cheap animation. I can't really tell if I'm moving at all. I'm pedaling the tunnel back behind me. I'm a hamster on a wheel. I'm afraid to stop. If I look back it will look the same as looking forward. I could lose my sense of direction.

I start changing my pace, altering my step, anything to avoid hypnosis. I'm so busy doing that I don't notice the change ahead. The quality of the light is changing. It's bluer and more even. The tunnel is sloping down. I slow a little. There's something up ahead on the floor. Something bulky and red. It's Santa.

It's just his suit, boots, cap, beard. He's taken a moment to arrange them so they form a complete Santa. Maybe he wanted to give us one final laugh. One final shock. A few steps further and the tunnel ends. I stop at the entrance. It's the abandoned quarry. A loose pile of shale spills down from the end of the tunnel. Nothing moves in the wide expanse of cut rock. The quarry walls climb up and away. The green water pooled in the pit is like a mirror. Santa hasn't left a ripple. He meant to be gone and he is gone.

I pick up the outfit and head back.

Chapter 39 - Noon

“Ben! You have to do it!”

The crowds are waiting in the great sanctum. They've brought me the suit they had made for me. I'm trying to remember my lines, any lines. They won't be expecting a standard Solstice ceremony. I don't have to give them the whole thing. We'll all be cutting ourselves a lot of slack. They just want someone to lead them in expressing their grief, their hope that it's over, their need for the future to be different. All the same, why me?

Someone should tell them it's all bullshit. They deserve the truth. The truth my Dad died for, that Roy died for. I suppose in a way Beamish died for it. It's all just an endless struggle to shift a little power one way or another, to make a quick grab for a bit of comfort here, a bit of gratification there, and never mind the trail of devastation in our wake. If that's the truth, they all died for it. All those quiet, still people waiting in their neat rows beside the great fire.

The images that dress it up, a child's daubings. The words that trick it out with some semblance of meaning, a joke. The music, the songs, just rhythm, breaking time up so it passes more easily. Until there's no time left.

Somehow I'm wearing my Santa suit. The Virgin Barbie opens up the front and shoves both hands down deep inside. She's putting in more padding. The Bunny is drumming slowly, building the suspense. The Virgin Barbie joins her and they build up a solemn, powerful beat that draws me forward.

I walk to the altar, slowly, no movement wasted. The blinds are drawn across the great windows, and only a dim light filters through the pupil of the all-seeing eye above. The faces are turned towards me, silent, expectant. Most are standing. There's the blond guy, his son raised on his shoulders. The kid still can't see through his hat. The wounded are lying at the foot of the stage. May is holding Ted up with an arm around him. Lock is sitting cross-legged beside her. Ma is sitting with Zeb's head on her lap. Clytemnestra leans across to whisper something to Braddock, who nods but lifts a hand to shush her. There's a final unison drum beat. Then they're all still. Waiting.

I look up to the source of the light, then at the clock on the altar. I adjust my pace. I reach the altar and raise my hands high. There's a beat, two beats, and then the rays of the true noon of Solstice strike through the all-seeing eye, focus in the heart of the great globe of the world, and flare on my face and fingertips. A deep voice swells from me, a voice I did not know was mine.

“The Sun dies...”

Their heads lift and their faces catch the light. Their eyes open wide.

“...and the Sun is reborn.”