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Death Ride to Dickville
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Death Ride to Dickville is a creative-writing thesis that combines the gritty headlines of true crime with the hyper-realism of gonzo fiction. Hiaasen’s Florida _noir_, a volatile mixture of flawed protagonists doing battle against depraved antagonists and the hired killers they employ, is the inspiration for Dickville’s Southern California _noir_. Dickville is heavily influenced by Hawthorne’s mistrust of natural law while breaking with a Puritanical reliance on civil authority. Jake Elliott, Dickville’s protagonist, is an anti-hero with a post-9/11 edginess, exposing the dominant class’ self-congratulatory immunity to superstition and its hypocritical splendor. Salem had witches. Dickville has mystic migrants who live in the canyons. Elliott is further indebted to Hester Prynne’s rebelliousness as he hooks up with other outlaws in his self-imposed media hell. A former television reporter, Elliott lives and works in San Diego, a target-rich environment for a satiric look at the media and popular culture, hitting the big themes of fame, wealth and power. Elliott is a cowboy; his fidelity to an agrarian ideal echoes the narrators in Ellison and Fitzgerald. Inspired by Momaday’s Native culture, Elliott maintains his ethnic authenticity, if a Paso Robles pedigree and cowboy culture qualify as a heritage. Dickville is a _Bildungsroman_; its exploration of transitional spaces draws on Momaday’s kinetic desperation.

Keywords: agrarian, _Bildungsroman_, Hawthorne, Hiaasen, hyper-realism, _noir_, post-9/11.
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Florida has Carl Hiaasen, a novelist who has published fifteen books. One of them, Strip Tease, became a movie starring Demi Moore and Burt Reynolds.

California has Kevin Cox, the aspiring novelist who will attempt to amuse his thesis committee. No movie deals are pending.

Really, whom would you rather read?

My answer is Carl Hiaasen, mostly because he’s my literary antecedent. Writing about contemporary themes, with the requisite amounts of sex and violence, he provides the modern-day flash and trash to guide my fiction. But it’s a nineteenth century novelist, Nathaniel Hawthorne, who demonstrates the proper way to be influenced by a mentor. His friend, Elizabeth Peabody, who also served as his one-woman marketing department, wrote to William Wordsworth in 1838, praising Hawthorne. In Romantic Dialogues (2000), Richard Gravil quotes from a second Peabody solicitation in 1839, when Hawthorne was working at the Custom House on the Salem waterfront:

“When I asked him what he did—he said he was from sunrise to sunset quarrelling with sea captains & owners—about measuring out their cargoes of salt & coal & potatoes—according to the laws—and then he went home to his room & read Wordsworth. What an alternation!” (118).

Last summer, following a tour of the Hawthorne museum in Salem, I stood in front of the Custom House and looked at the water. I was less than a month away from the start of Duff Brenna’s 600-level workshop for fiction and poetry. Though I had started and abandoned various creative-writing projects over the last twenty-five
years, there would be no more excuses. If Hawthorne didn’t let his day job get in the way of his dream, my part-time load as an adjunct professor of journalism at San Diego Mesa College wouldn’t stop me, either. I would start writing a novel, and I would finish it.

During that summer vacation to the East Coast, I ran out of books. In Camden, I bought a paperback copy of Hiaasen’s *Skin Tight* (1989). Dr. Lance Newman had already recommended the author’s Florida *noir* style to me. Hiaasen has a day job, too—a column at *The Miami Herald*. He also has a dark worldview that is quite funny, even when people die. In *Skin Tight*, a hack plastic surgeon botches a nose job and kills his patient. The surgeon, Rudy Graveline, is also greedy, eager to feed his patients’ insatiable appetite for cosmetic perfection. But unlike Dr. Graveline’s medical practice, there are no volume discounts on vice. Hiaasen’s fiction pays it off in full—the surgeon dies in the same way that he killed his patient. There’s one big difference; Hiaasen withholds the anesthesia so Dr. Graveline knows exactly what’s happening to him. Florida *noir*.

Yet it’s Hester Prynne and *The Scarlet Letter* that serve as the inspiration for my fictional outlaws. When I began my graduate studies two years ago, I took Dr. Newman’s course in Transatlantic Romanticism. That semester, I renewed an acquaintance with Ms. Prynne that began in an AP English course at Clovis High School. I have been digging this chick for about thirty years, as the protagonist of my novel might say. My narrator pays homage with two references to her, one of
which comments on her beauty. Hester is a hottie; “dark and abundant hair, so
glossy it threw off sunshine with a gleam” (Norton 1361).

Physical attributes aside, I am smitten because she’s the bad girl of Boston,
sticking it to the magistrates. Hester even inspired me to become an outlaw myself.
As a journalist, I got hauled before the Puritans in San Diego—Superior Court Judge
William Mudd was the best I could do—to answer a contempt charge for my
magazine article about the David Westerfield murder case. Unlike Hester, I
managed to avoid imprisonment for my sin, a refusal to reveal a confidential source

In my novel, the transgressions against civil authority are much more lurid
and flagrant than a courtroom scrum. Protagonist and TV reporter Jake Elliott gets
interrogated by the feds and then fired by his station for tossing his cell phone at the
President of the United States. It seems the leader of the free world wouldn’t take
questions during a contrived media event and our hero took it personally. Jake, like
Hester, has violated civil authority in a rather spectacular fashion. As a tenacious
journalist in the pursuit of truth, Jake is adhering to natural law over civil authority,
as well as engaging in a little petty vengefulness. Hey, nobody’s perfect.

Hester Prynne could pose for a natural-law swimsuit calendar. In an attempt
to justify her tryst with Rev. Dimmesdale, she tells him in the forest that “what we
did had a consecration all its own” (Norton 1438). For the Puritans, this was a sin
greater than the adultery preceding it, because it argued the tryst was only subject to
natural law and not civil authority, as Brook Thomas writes in “Citizen Hester: The
Scarlet Letter as Civic Myth.” Thus, Hawthorne agrees with legendary Puritans such as John Winthrop, sharing a mutual distrust of too much natural liberty, but breaking with Winthrop’s belief that civil liberty depends on absolute submission to civil authority (187).

In my fiction, this Hawthornian ambivalence is demonstrated by Jake’s discomfort around the licentious Jenny Kawakami. What will happen to their relationship isn’t clear by the end of the thesis, or, regrettably, in the mind of the author who created their characters. It’s also not clear if their hubris in flouting civil authority and journalistic conventions with twenty-first century excess will be punished. Hawthorne punishes Hester and her lover by denying them a new beginning, according to Brook Thomas, but not because they violated the existing civil authority:

It is instead to imagine alternative possibilities for human relations within the civil order by drawing on the power to sympathize. Both that capacity of the imagination and the power to sympathize flourish best in Hawthorne's world in the space of civil society not directly under state supervision, a space prohibited in the Puritan theocracy at the beginning of Hawthorne's novel (189).

Substitute Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for Puritan theocracy and the distinction is still relevant today. Jake Elliott demonstrates this extra-legal sympathy for the undocumented immigrants of North County San Diego, a sentiment that is not shared by ICE or his neighbors; my narrator describes the
suburbs as a reliable source of cash and indifference for the Mexicans. In "Los Indocumentados," a magazine story I wrote about illegal immigration, Jake’s real-life role model is Jane, a suburban woman who hires the migrant Ricardo. They both operate in Thomas’ "...space of civil society not directly under state supervision," to the point of asking me not to use their real names in my article:

Jane and Ricardo want to remain anonymous, because they’re both breaking the law. For Jane and her husband, who might not pad expense accounts or kick golf balls out of the rough, hiring an undocumented immigrant is more like civil disobedience (Cox, 108).

Undocumented immigrants are perhaps the ultimate examples of twenty-first century marginalization in Southern California. They are also the last stop in the progression of my graduate studies, from eighteenth century England in Mary Wollstonecraft’s Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman; to nineteenth century America in Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave; through the twentieth century in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man and in N. Scott Momaday’s House Made of Dawn. Though different genres and geography separate these literary works, they share a common element: main characters suffering because of disparate legal, racial and economic influence wielded by the dominant class of their respective cultures. In my novel, los indocumentados offer opportunities to explore these disparities when the in-group ventures into the canyons of San Diego County, chasing a mystic migrant named Alfonso. It’s a target-rich environment for a satiric
look at the media and popular culture, hitting the big themes of fame, wealth and power.

These are Hiaasen’s themes as well, which I borrow for my fiction. In *Sick Puppy* (1999), Twilly Spree is an eco-vigilante who cruises the highways, looking for litterbugs. Anger-management classes haven’t cured his need to avenge the despoilment—from McDonald’s wrappers to a massive residential development on an environmentally sensitive island.

One of Spree’s antagonists, Mr. Gash, is a true psychopath. He’s a sexually deviant hit man who likes listening to 911 tapes. He gets off on the terror in the callers’ voices, but that’s just one of his fetishes. Mr. Gash’s violent death, in the context of his rapacious life, is grimly satisfying. Hiaasen’s dark-comedic genius is crushing only the lower half of Mr. Gash underneath a bulldozer, so the hit man can live long enough to make his own 911 call. But it’s unintelligible because part of Mr. Gash’s tongue was shot off before the bulldozer got him. Thus, the gods of fiction restore order in Hiaasen’s universe, using a vigilante version of natural law, not civil authority.

His novels don’t preach; there’s no need for divine intervention when karma seems to work just fine. Yet an unmistakable morality tale glides along the surface of Hiaasen’s texts, like a Florida gator, playing out with savage efficiency. In *Sick Puppy*, the antagonists, greedy for profits and the sybaritic lifestyle, seek to destroy the environment. These member of Hiaasen’s dominant class, engorged, fulfill a similar prediction about stomach-bursting racism in *Invisible Man*. 
"I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (Random House16).

The descriptive writing in Invisible Man serves as a model for Jake Elliott because Ellison's narrator is from the South, a biographical trait that sets him apart in the urbane world of New York. There are reminders of his agrarian roots as he attempts to navigate the Harlem streets, such as the nostalgic smell of hot Carolina yams he buys from a street vendor (262-3). When he handles a link of a chain that shackled Brother Tarp in the racist South, the narrator describes its authenticity with tactile precision:

I took it in my hand, a thick dark, oily piece of filed steel that had been twisted open and forced partly back into place, on which I saw marks that might have been made by the blade of a hatchet. It was such a link that I had seen on Bledsoe's desk, only while that one had been smooth, Tarp's bore the marks of haste and violence, looking as though it had been attacked and conquered before it stubbornly yielded (389).

I hope my readers are flooded with equally powerful sensory cues, from the splash landing of my protagonist's tobacco juice to the cadence of his boots on asphalt. With his Paso Robles pedigree, he is an outsider in Southern California. Like
Ellison’s narrator, Jake Elliott maintains his ethnic authenticity, assuming the cowboy culture qualifies as a heritage. But it’s precisely this fidelity to an agrarian ideal that enables both Ellison’s narrator and my protagonist to renounce their privileges and position with dominant-class institutions that purport to embrace them. In *Invisible Man*, it’s the noxious Brother Jack, who is ruthless in advising the narrator to abandon his Southern identity. For Jake, it’s the dominant media class and its guise of ethnic authenticity, personified by the stooges who wear costumes as reporters for the Rainbow News Channel. (The media’s journalistic authenticity is also highly suspect—as my narrator observes, it takes no imagination to shove two dozen microphones in somebody’s face.) Jake forcefully separates himself from this hypocrisy with his background and behavior, frustrating his in-group girlfriend, Cynthia Castaneda; her own ethnic authenticity is undercut because she doesn’t speak Spanish. Arguably, he’s more Mexican than she is, because the cowboy forges a kinship with another agrarian out-group, *los indocumentados*.

This theme of ethnic authenticity is also central to N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*. Bernard Selinger writes that Abel’s return to his home and a stable center near the end of the novel is tied to tribal rituals and ceremonies, which themselves are linked to harmony with nature and the land. The title of Selinger’s “*House Made of Dawn: A Positively Ambivalent Bildungsroman*” refers to the 1795 text *Wilhelm Meister* by Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe as the inception of the genre, novels of development or formation. After wondering aloud why Momaday and
other Native authors would be attracted to a European bourgeois form, Selinger provides an explanation:

Given that the Indian world has been in a state of often brutal transition for many years, one can see why its best writers would be attracted to a genre that traces the space between things, the dark transition...we can see why the *bildungsroman*, with its disquieted exploration of transitional spaces prompted by a search for a pure, undifferentiated origin, is such a suitable form (Selinger 42-3).

This is reminiscent of Brook Thomas' space, prohibited by the Puritans, where the power of sympathy operates; not surprisingly, it exists in the forest of *The Scarlet Letter*. For Abel in *House Made of Dawn*, the search for Selinger's pure, undifferentiated origin is found on a horse:

You could see the earth going away under you, and you could feel and hear the hoofs. It was early enough, and the heat was holding off; and the black horse carried you just hard enough into the slow morning air (HarperCollins 148).

Abel has reconnected with the land atop the very symbol of the boundless and expansive West: the horse. He is no longer confined to Los Angeles, isolated and intoxicated. When thunderstorms roll across the reservation, he can witness the power and majesty of nature, not the nuisance of urban rain when his roommate leaves the window open in the apartment (156). Both weather shots might be
necessary in a screenplay based on *House Made of Dawn*, but Selinger knows which one the cinematographer would prefer:

And the visual, cinematic quality of the text is unmistakable: panoramic views; contrasts between dark and light; close-ups; cinematic cuts juxtaposing a scene from the past with one from the present and fading from one character to another; long tracking shots that reassert the authority of the setting, of nature... (Selinger 45).

The death of Abel's grandfather connects the authority of nature as a source of ethnic authenticity and the context for conducting rituals, including the race with the dead. Selinger notes mimicry of regeneration and the renewal of nature (57-8), but the powerful imagery at the end of *House Made of Dawn* creates a sense of kinetic desperation:

He was alone and running on. All of his being was concentrated in the sheer motion of running on, and he was past caring about the pain. Pure exhaustion laid hold of his mind, and he could see at last without having to think. He could see the canyon and the mountains and the sky. He could see the rain and the river and the fields beyond. He could see the dark hills at dawn (185).

In a different universe, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* makes significant use of this kinetic desperation, using imagery that parallels Momaday. On the novel's last page, Nick sums up Gatsby's doomed quest to repeat the past with Daisy:
He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night (Scribner 159).

For Charles Egert in "Love and Homicide in the Jazz Age Novel," Fitzgerald and other contemporary American novelists of the 1920s and 1930s are imitating the realization of their genre’s agrarian ideal:

Through the Agrarian ideal a heroic figure can bridge, in a sense, a cognitive gap between the inner self and the homicidal anti-hero. As the perennial popularity of these novels demonstrates, the axiomatic propositions of the genre were recognized by audiences aware of the importance of these contradictory creative and destructive inclinations (79).

I'm striving to replicate these contradictory inclinations with my protagonist. Jake Elliott isn’t a homicidal anti-hero yet, but he does have a nasty temper and some anti-social tendencies, which lead to destructive behavior. Yet his heritage, wardrobe and ranch manners set him up as my version of Egert’s agrarian ideal. My readers will decide if this gives Jake complexity and depth.

The evolution of Jay Gatsby is another source of inspiration, mechanically and thematically. Writing to John Peale Bishop four months after he published The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald makes a confession about his main character. In The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald (1963), editor Andrew Turnbull describes Bishop as
Fitzgerald’s friend and mentor from his time at Princeton (xvi), so the author’s candor is not unexpected:

Also you are right about Gatsby being blurred and patchy. I never at any one time saw him clear myself—for he started as one man I knew and then changed into myself—the amalgam was never complete in my mind (358).

If F. Scott Fitzgerald can get away with this admission, there’s hope for the rest of us. Charles Egert agrees that Fitzgerald is not just chronicling an era with the detachment of a sideline reporter:

But, in addition, Fitzgerald reveals his personal involvement in the themes of his novels. Writing of himself in the third person he tells us that the Jazz Age "bore him up, flattered him and gave him more money than he had dreamed of, simply for telling people that he felt as they did, that something had to be done with all the nervous energy stored up and unexpended in the War" (Egert 55).

Sounds pretty good, especially the part about money, but I feel a more visceral connection to Fitzgerald’s nervous energy. I am attempting to replicate a post-9/11 edginess with my characterizations of the federal agents and their interaction with Jake. In these passages of my narrative, I have become Jake Elliott, just as F. Scott Fitzgerald became Jay Gatsby. In a critical context, Jake is my version of Fitzgerald’s amalgam, influenced by Brook Thomas’ power to sympathize in the space of civil society not directly under state supervision, as well as Charles Egert’s agrarian ideal with contradictory creative and destructive inclinations. I can easily
imagine our hero doing something highly inappropriate to sabotage the tabloid photo-op arranged by Cynthia’s agent, throwing away easy money in a naïve attempt to embody an agrarian ideal.

In a post-9/11 world, Jake’s involvement with undocumented immigrants and the accompanying border security implications provide an opportunity for social commentary, not just a plot complication. When the migrant Alfonso demonstrates his mystic power over coyotes and brings a dead cat back to life, imagining the variety of hysterical responses from civil authority offers rich possibilities for the narrative. *Perhaps he’s linked to al Queda. Maybe he’s the anti-Christ.* Alfonso becomes the modern-day equivalent of a witch in Salem, complete with his own smear campaign. In *The Scarlet Letter*, as Hester is led back to prison, “it was whispered, by those who peered after her, that the scarlet letter threw a lurid gleam along the dark passage-way of the interior” (*Norton* 1370). The letter’s supernatural quality is a consistent theme: “It was reported, and believed by many, that an Indian had drawn his arrow against the badge, and that the missile struck it, but fell harmless to the ground” (1421). One of Hawthorne’s ancestors was a judge at the Salem witch trials, and the author admits he is haunted by it in “The Custom House.” While the tone is whimsical and protectively light, Hawthorne is taking the judge’s guilt upon himself (*Unger, American Writers* 223). But this guilt at his ancestors’ complicity in the imputation of evil is not resolved in the obvious way, by distancing himself from their hypocrisy. Rather, he shows how easy it is for his society (and
ours) to find a Hester or an Alfonso of our own and do it to them, as we congratulate ourselves on our immunity to superstition (Gravil 131).

It is this self-congratulatory smugness that I hope to expose and ridicule with my fiction. As a working journalist, I tried to piss off somebody every day. My goal as a novelist is much the same. I’m taking on all of them, from law-and-order types to drug addicts, from media clowns to corporate buffoons. I hope to extend Carl Hiaasen’s genre of Florida noir by importing it to Southern California and filtering it through TV reporter Jake Elliott, the rebel who self-immolates in the first chapter and keeps playing with fire. In his media hell, there are plenty of other outlaws with gas cans.

I’ll end this introduction with a short description of my title. It came to me one day as I reflected on my life as a journalist. It foreshadows the sense of kinetic desperation that I find so compelling in Momaday and Fitzgerald, along with a pinch of agrarian ideal tossed in at the end:

Death Ride to Dickville.
Works Cited:


Jake Elliott wasn’t really trying to kill the president, but the feds didn’t believe it.

“How many firearms do you own, Mr. Elliott?”

“Legal or illegal?” Jake replied.

For about two hours, it had been going like this. Two guys with military haircuts and business suits, a short one and a tall one. They should be Secret Service, Jake thought, but with the knife fights going on at Homeland Security, it could be anybody with a submachine gun and a decent clothing allowance.

“You boys have a copy of the Geneva Convention?” he asked. “I’m hungry.”

“Left mine in Afghanistan,” one said, “and it’s not dinnertime in Kabul.” He was the short one, with a scar on his cheek. Not a bureaucratic war wound. The guy probably stitched it himself.

“We could hang you for treason,” he said. “Or you could hang yourself. With a bed sheet in your jail cell.”

“Only if it’s satin,” Jake said. “Cotton gives me a rash.”

The short one with the scar—Jake thought of Freddie Krueger—didn’t answer, just scowled and made fists with his hands. He kept them under the table in the interrogation room, but Jake saw his arms flexing under his suit jacket.

Monitoring muscle-group activity was a desirable skill for Jake, who tried to piss off every Freddie he met, while avoiding reconstructive surgery. Jake was a TV reporter, but he played journalism like a contact sport. It was more dangerous that
way, which was the whole idea. But Freddie wasn’t coming across the table, no matter how much he wanted to smash Jake’s face. Those were the rules.

Jake had done this before, telling the local cops to stick it when they wanted him to give up a source. He could always let the station’s attorney handle it, but what fun was that? Jake always made an appearance to taunt them, to see if he could redline their systolic numbers.

Freddie wasn’t much of a challenge. He tugged on his shirt collar and cuffs, a pit bull in poly-wool.

His partner, the tall one, didn’t say anything. He kept taking notes with a gold pen, pausing every few minutes to set it diagonally on his legal pad, the same way each time. He probably had extra ink cartridges in his pocket. Jake couldn’t decide which was worse—being annotated to death or taking shrapnel from Freddie’s exploding buttons.

When the president’s security detail had taken him down, cuffed him and pushed him in the back of a Suburban with blackout windows, Jake was feeling pretty good. He especially liked the hood they pulled over his head before driving away. He figured he was going to Guantanamo on a Gulfstream.

They thumped over some train tracks right before stopping the car. But when they took off the hood, he was sitting in an interrogation room at the San Diego Police Department headquarters. He recognized the carpet: low-bid blue.

This was not an encouraging development. It might even be one of those law enforcement partnerships between the feds and the locals, the kind with grant money
and PowerPoints. The kind where the chief of police smiled and shook hands with
some undersecretary from Washington at the press conference while the local
Indians were pulling their arrows out of the cavalry.

Jake was a training exercise.

Freddie was an orphaned SEAL or some other special-forces reject, recruited
to fight terrorists in San Diego. Jake was the best they could find.

“We could take you right now as an enemy combatant,” Freddie said. “What
will it be? Langley? Leavenworth? Or an undisclosed location?”

Jake was supposed to be intimidated, but he was embarrassed. Freddie was
trying way too hard. This was not the way it was supposed to end, outsourced to
some apprentice. Jake had the perfect chance to torch his TV career, and he screwed
it up.

The president was in San Diego for a campaign event: Mexican
Independence Day. But some bright press aide decided to combine events and honor
a U.S. company that opened a plant on the other side of the border. Mexican
Financial Independence Day, the media advisory said.

The best the advance people could do was a family-owned corporation called
Cat Swipe, named for a brand of kitty litter.

Cat Swipe’s revenue was growing at a record pace, which the press office
publicly attributed to the lower cost of doing business in Mexico. It was a nicer way
of saying that safety and environmental regulations for U.S. companies were
virtually non-existent south of the border, but there was no sense in complicating it for the local media. The lapdogs just needed to be fed.

But Jake knew the real story. The drug cartels were buying Cat Swipe by the truckload. One of their hit men, always looking for novel and terrifying ways of murdering people, put an informant face down in a litter box one day. The fad caught on, but the killers were getting some nasty scratches on their arms, waiting for asphyxiation to occur.

The breakthrough job was the federal police station in Ensenada, whose officers constantly whined about bigger kickbacks. A crew of hit men simply loaded them into a bus—supposedly headed to Vegas for gambling and girls—and drove it to a quarry. A bulldozer pushed the bus into a pit and buried it with Cat Swipe. In a month, the cartels had filled a dozen pits with cops, informants, unfaithful mistresses and incompetent attorneys.

Just to make sure the message got through, the assassins delivered new litter boxes to the front doors of all the missing people. The plastics division of Cat Swipe also had a growth spurt, which resulted in a record quarter for the privately held corporation.

The president’s people almost canceled the event in fear of the kitty-litter jokes from late-night comics, but the generous campaign contribution from Cat Swipe provided the necessary political courage. The de Doltier family owned the company, so France sent its Mexican ambassador to stand behind the president and nod with approval. Next to the ambassador stood Richard de Doltier III, who was as
about as French as Disneyland Resort Paris. Dick de Doltier preferred to be called D3, which sounded slick and important to him. Most people called him Little Dick.

The kitty-litter empire had exacted a heavy toll on the family. After a rival company spread vicious rumors about Cat Swipe’s purity, the patriarch, Dick de Doltier II had gone on a nationwide speaking tour. He’d ended every public appearance—no corner grocery store was too small—by ripping open a bag of Cat Swipe and eating a handful or two.

Sales had gone crazy, and the company had to open three more plants in Mexico to keep up with the demand. Dick II was famous, but the pressure of constant public appearances and irritable bowel syndrome had caused him to drink heavily. He’d dropped dead in a Topeka mini-mart, but his liver was healthy enough to transplant. The pathologist’s report said it was because of the seven-pound lump of Cat Swipe in Dick II’s stomach.

After the autopsy, Dick III had refused to try even a spoonful, so the family hired an outside CEO to run the company and continue the nationwide tour. The family-controlled board then purchased three TV stations to give Dick III something to do. He’d wanted a luxury car dealership, but that was serious money, not chump change from filling litter boxes. The board threw in a seven-million-dollar estate and a fancy title: Richard de Doltier III, Senior Executive Station Manager. None of the de Doltiers had any experience in television news, but figured it couldn’t be that much different than making cat sand.
Little Dick de Doltier was a cheap bastard, so he was always bumming free advice from the station’s appearance consultant. As a joke, she told him to wear a guayabera to meet the president. When he didn’t laugh, she had to fly to Miami with him for a personal fitting with a Cuban tailor, the same one the president used. He had started wearing guayaberas to court the Latino vote. Standing there on stage, D3 and the commander-in-chief looked like a couple of divorced frat boys on their way to Tijuana.

“Viva la familia de Doltier.” The president managed to butcher two languages in one sentence. A Mexican dance group performed and then hung around to form a human shield between the stage and the television crews. A mariachi band fired up, trumpets facing the cameras, to discourage any shouted questions. One of the president’s staffers was skipping to the music. Get the old man in his limousine and it would be over. He could change that ridiculous shirt on the way to a fundraiser in Rancho Santa Fe.

Then the president turned toward the dancers.

He was moving along the outside edge, shaking hands and posing for pictures. Still thirty yards away, too far for questions. Jake needed another five yards at least.

“Come on, baby,” he whispered.

“Hey Elliott, don’t do anything stupid today or I’ll lose the pool,” said another reporter. The media in San Diego had a running bet to predict Jake’s last day at the station. No one expected him to make it to the end of his contract, which
was three months away. Plenty of time to total another news car or break a few more camera lenses.

The car was Jake’s fault. He rolled it trying to catch up to a police pursuit. A slimeball eye surgeon and his attorney broke the lenses in separate on-camera confrontations. They both took swings at Jake with their PDAs, hitting the glass instead.

It was great TV when the screen convulsed, then went black.

While the spike in the ratings covered the cost of the lenses, it didn’t even put a dent in the undisclosed amount required to settle the surgeon’s entrapment lawsuit. Jake had been hearing bad things about the eye doctor at his free monthly clinics at the rescue mission. So he had convinced his new executive producer to hire a stripper and dress her up like a bag lady.

She showed up with the transients for a consultation on LASIK surgery. Her appointment lasted two hours, which included a breast and pelvic examination. It was all caught on tape by a camera hidden in her shopping cart.

The doctor was not happy to see the video, which Jake played for him on a small TV in the street outside his office building. Jake did the same for the doctor’s attorney, who had started dating the stripper.

Her career took off. The hidden-camera video played non-stop on the cable shows, and she got booked in Vegas. But Jake took some hits from the elite journalism schools around the country, who put pictures of him on the covers of their journals with a scarlet J on his chest.
Jake was thrilled, because he always thought Hester Prynne was hot. But Richard de Doltier III, who was Jake’s boss, announced that his contract would not be renewed. The de Doltier commitment to upholding the highest ethical standards was only exceeded by cowardice. Instead of paying Jake to go away, Little Dick kept him working.

Jake had met him once, in a meeting with the lawyers about the stripper and the eye surgeon. His teeth shined like his cufflinks, two more suggestions from the appearance consultant. Jake didn’t know which looked more ridiculous. He glanced from one to the other as D3 lectured him on the sacred trust between the station and its advertisers, one of which had been the eye surgeon—before the hidden-camera video. Turned out he was a member of D3’s country club, too.

“I lost a good friend because of you,” he had said to Jake, vaguely annoyed.

It was one of Jake’s proudest moments as a reporter.

The president had finished up with the dancers. The mariachi band had stopped playing, so he headed over to greet the musicians.

Jake started his question before the old man reached the trumpet player. So did all the other local reporters, going on about the economy and judicial appointments. They were all trying to impress the network crews, which attached themselves to the president like skin lesions, in case something really bad happened. A question about contract killers and kitty litter—Jake felt a little foolish putting them in the same sentence—gave the story to the competition. But the chance to jam Little Dick and ruin his big moment with the president was just too perfect.
“Why are the drug cartels buying all the Cat Swipe?” Jake shouted. His voice was too nasal for serious studio work, but it cut through even the most crowded media events. D3 stared at Jake, not even recognizing him. The president looked over Jake’s head, a neat trick to appear responsive but not actually engaged. The old man learned it from all the pro-life protestors who followed him around.

The press secretary stepped in. “No media,” she said with a hard look. The president put his arm around D3 as they walked away. The bottoms of their guayaberas swayed unevenly.

Jake grabbed his cell phone off his belt and tossed it in a perfect arc toward the president.

“Call me when you can talk,” he yelled.

Two agents lunged at Jake. “Grenade,” they screamed. The phone was the cheapest one-piece unit the station could find, and the rounded rectangular shape created wonderfully unpredictable bounces on pavement. It skipped past two agents trying to make a diving catch. Another agent short-hopped it, but couldn’t hold on. Three more finally covered it with their bodies. The rest had piled on the president.

The dancers trampled the mariachi rhythm section, slowed down by the bulky instruments.

It took eleven minutes for the video to start running on the cable channels. Then the wire-service photos appeared on the Internet. A few hours later, the local newspaper published a special edition, using a full-page shot of the phone—and the agents—suspended in mid-air.
“Dropping The Call,” the headline said.

Jake saw the paper when the president’s chief political strategist brought it into the interrogation room. He was a retired general who ran the campaign like a war. The Civil War. Lining up the troops to get shot was getting old in the battleground states.

“We’re making progress,” Jake said. “Now I’m a political prisoner.”

“It was so much easier when we could just execute people like you, Mr. Elliott,” said the general. “But perhaps you’ve saved us the trouble.”

Jake didn’t react when the president’s man tossed an envelope on the table.

“It’s your official notice of termination, effective immediately. Mr. de Doltier was nice enough to give us the original.”

“You mean Little Dick?” Jake asked.

The general ignored him. “Nobody else will touch you, either. Not after your little stunt.”

He tossed the newspaper on top of the envelope. “As much as I’d like to shoot you myself, we’re going to release you, Mr. Elliott. There’s just one condition: no media. If you do interviews, those pricks have an excuse to show the tape again.”

Jake picked up the paper and admired the photo. “And what if I don’t play along?”
“Then we file charges. Mutually assured destruction. It worked just fine during the Cold War.”

Jake smiled at Freddie, an aneurysm waiting to happen.

“I prefer to quote Rodney King. Can’t we all just get along?”

Jake wasn’t doing any media, unless the transients were doing interviews. They were the only ones hanging out on Broadway.

“Hey, don’t I know you?” one of them asked.

“That’s original,” Jake said, looking at the face. Unshaven, but not bloated.

In San Diego, even the street people looked good.

“You’re Jake Elliott,” the man said. “I saw you on the news tonight. You’re as crazy as I am.”

“Crazier, my friend,” said Jake. “But thanks for the compliment.”

“Hey, could I get your picture?” the man asked. He pulled out a camera. On the third flash, Jake realized the guy was a pro. Probably shooting for the tabloids.

Jake didn’t care. It was a public sidewalk.

It was right after the seventh flash that a female transient popped out from behind a parked car and fired a Taser into the photographer’s neck. He went down hard. She pulled out the darts and picked up his camera.

“I thought you used wine bottles on each other,” Jake said.

“I’m not robbing him,” she said. “I’m just borrowing his memory card.”
It was already in her pocket. Jake noticed how cute she was, even in greasy coveralls seven sizes too big.

“You don’t want to be on their cover,” she said. “They’re still doing space aliens. You want a sophisticated audience. Glossy paper, too.”

Jake tried to keep up. “You just electrocuted your competition for a lousy shot of me?”

“No, I just seared him, like ahi,” she said. “I finally got it right. You should have seen the last two.”

She offered her hand.

“Let’s get out of here before Charlie Tuna wakes up.”

She flipped the car keys to Jake. “You drive. I’ll change.”

Jake got in. There was a shotgun mounted above his head, a Remington 870. Jake liked shotguns, especially 870s. He got one for Christmas 35 years ago. He grew up hunting birds on his grandfather’s cattle ranch outside Paso Robles.

But this shotgun had a short barrel, for hunting people.

“You know how to use this?” Jake said, pointing.

“Haven’t shot anybody yet. Racking it is good enough.”

Jake laughed. The sound of a pump-action shotgun, roughly translated in the universal language of low-lifes: oh, shit!

She climbed in the back, and Jake heard the snaps on the coveralls. He looked straight ahead. Ranch manners, and an 870.
She came back to the front seat, wearing jeans and a loose sweater. Her dark hair was long, caressing her shoulders. Jake guessed late 20s.

He was driving out of downtown, toward the interstate. “I don’t even know your name,” he said.

“Jenny Kawakami,” she said, dialing her cell phone. Jake waited until she stopped.

“Where are we going?”

Jenny said, “Your old station. That’s where they’re fronting the story.”

Jake knew the competition wouldn’t miss the chance to stick it to Channel 13. The other reporters would be going live at 11 o’clock, leading into the tape of Jake in federal custody.

Jenny listened to her voice mail. She deleted messages like she was killing ants.

“The tabloids like that stuff about the stripper and the eye doctor,” she said.

“How do they know about that?”

“I told them. I made some calls on the drive down from Santa Monica.”

Jake would have done the same thing. “What else do you know about me?”

“Just the basics. No felonies in California, no marriages, no bankruptcies. You paid about two hundred fifty thousand for a house that’s tripled in value. A good PI could get the rest, or I could just ask you.”

Jake played along, because Jenny was a lot cuter than Freddie, the orphan SEAL.
“Who are you working for, exactly?” he said.

“Myself. I’m a media broker. I sell people like you to the networks, the cable shows and the tabloids. On a story like this, I count the number of satellite trucks and multiply by five grand.”

Jake said, “Don’t tease me. What do you think I’m worth?”

He watched her eyes move down his body. “Ever done any modeling?”

Jenny asked. “Boxers, Speedos, Playgirl?”

“He ignored him. “If you’re hot, the tabs will do a photo spread. You’d make a cute terrorist, especially with good pecs and a six-pack.”

“But I’m not a terrorist.”

“Maybe not the Islamic kind, but you’re still dangerous. Gives you an edge, makes you more marketable. ‘A regular suicide bomber in bed.’ Got any girlfriends that will give us a quote like that?”

“Maybe a couple.” Jake thought of one immediately: Cynthia Castaneda, now a network correspondent. Last time Jake tuned in, she was filling in on the morning show. Took her just fifteen months to rip through San Diego. She tore through Jake in about thirteen.

As an anchor at Channel 13, she had worked the early shift, but Jake always slept right through the shower and the blow dryer. Once or twice a week, right
before leaving the house, she’d wake him. When she hiked up those little skirts, he
got hard in no time.

With his hands, he’d find that spot where her hips began. Perfect curves, like
a road course. The race to the finish, holding nothing back. Then they argued.

“You’re incredible,” he would say.

“No, you are.”

“No, you are incredible.”

“No, no. Not me. You.”

In the van, Jake realized he had mouthed some of the words. Jenny stared at
him.

“Post-traumatic stress syndrome? From such a brief detention?”

“Something like that.”

She was unrelenting, like a flexible sigmoidoscope. “Ever date that stripper
you hired? Ever date a lesbian? Or a lesbian stripper?”

“Yeah. Triplets. Identical birthmarks, even.”

“Try and be serious. We need to trash you up a little. Drugs and alcohol are
good, even if you’re in recovery. Mental illness is a definite negative. Ever taken
any psychotrophics?”

“Yeah, and I’m not supposed to be driving,” Jake said. “I killed ten people
last week. Ripped open a bus headed to an Indian casino. Blue-hairs all over the
pavement. Your background check should have caught that.”

He took the off-ramp a little too fast and the tires chirped on the curve.

"Not since I beat up the triplets’ boyfriends."

"Look, you don’t have to like this. You just have to give me twenty-five percent."

"So you’re my pimp?"

"No, I’m your partner." She stuck out her hand.

Jake gripped the wheel.

Jenny said, "It’s free money, and you’re going to need it. You might get some work doing true-crime or syndicated stuff, but that’s it. Better take it, daddy-o."

Jake was feeling a lot older. But Jenny did have a certain rough charm.

Jake took her hand. "Cut it to fifteen percent and you’ve got a deal."

She hesitated, then said, "Only because I like you."

They shook on it. Jenny squeezed hard.

They rolled up to the station and parked across the street from the entrance. The competition had live trucks lined up on the curb, masts up, a skeletal high-five. The LA stations had sent their satellite trucks, covered with multi-color logos and slogans. Jake’s favorite was “Satellite NewsCenter 3,” as if the white cereal bowl on top didn’t give it away. Jake loved promotions departments. Mensa chapters, every one of them.
It was some marketing genius that came up with Rainbow News Channel. With the slogan, “Ethnicity You Can See,” anchors and reporters at one of the local stations dressed in native costumes, like a Halloween party at the United Nations. Each week, the station featured a different country. Jake had seen yarmulkes and kaffiyehs, loin clothes and Kente cloth. San Diego’s forgiving climate meant that the Amazon Indians wouldn’t freeze to death during the winter, but anyone from the South Pole would be dangerously overdressed for the rest of the year. Countries such as Antarctica, with no indigenous population, were tricky. But technicalities weren’t enough to stop the campaign, now beginning its second trip through the alphabet.

Outside Jake’s station, an RNC reporter wore a parka, hood up. His face had turned to lava under the television lights. His photographer hooked up one of those giant warehouse fans, but it mashed the fur on his hood like a bad Afro.

“What’s with the Eskimo?” Jenny asked.

“Ratings,” Jake said, as if that explained voluntary heat stroke.

“Locals. They just get in the way.”

“Yeah, but they’re entertaining.” The wardrobe malfunctions were Jake’s favorite; ceremonial clothing wasn’t designed for breaking news. A reporter in a kimono tripped and fell as she ran away from a squirrelly brush fire, saved only by a Nomex suit she wore underneath. Another reporter in a sarong got too close to the high-speed letter sorter during the annual Christmas rush story at the post office. She was doing one of those walk-and-talk live shots, where reporters show artificially
high levels of enthusiasm by gesturing as if they’re choking to death. During a basic pointing maneuver, the machine ate the sarong, overheated and caught fire. The overhead sprinklers contained the damage—letters to Santa that would forever remain unanswered—while the reporter suffered minor bruises from the machine’s repeated attempts to give her a bar code.

“Why didn’t you go network?” Jenny asked. Everybody wanted to know why Jake was still in San Diego, hanging out with the Village People. Guys like him didn’t stay local, unless there was something wrong.

“I never had overcoat envy, and I think safari shirts look stupid,” Jake said. “Chasing earthquakes, floods and fires as a junior correspondent, so I might get a shot at doing stuff I liked? I’m too old to compromise.”

Jake put his cowboy boots up on the dashboard. He wore them everywhere. Didn’t matter what the station’s consultants had said. They didn’t like his button-down shirts, either. Straight collars looked better on the air, they told him.

Screw it.

Jake didn’t care how he looked. He cared about busting up somebody’s latest scam. That was the other problem, the consultants had said. On the air, he looked like he actually enjoyed it. They were wrong. He enjoyed the hell out of it. Jake Elliott was the angel of death—or at least very bad publicity.

Jenny opened a small cooler and tossed him a bottle of water. “Let’s have a toast. To outlaws.”

They knocked the plastic together and splashed each other.
“Look, you made me wet,” said Jenny. She pouted for effect, then blew Jake a kiss. “I have to change again anyway. I want to go outside and take a look.”

She handed her cell phone to Jake. “Order some pizza. Reporters will eat anything free.”

She waited for him to dial, then got up and motioned for him to follow. In the back of the van, all the seats had been removed. There were cabinets mounted on both sides. Jenny opened one and pulled out a uniform.

She pulled off her sweater as Jake tried to concentrate on the pizza order. She was wearing an underwire bra. Not that she needed one. But Jake’s eyes went to the tattoo of a snake, wrapped around her torso. All the young ones had tattoos, which Jake took as just another indication that he was old-fashioned. Bare skin worked fine for him.

“That’s some snake.”

“It’s a man-eater.”

She buttoned the shirt, then took off her jeans. No more ink, just a black thong. Jake was willing to make some concessions to progress.

Jenny buttoned the dark blue pants, which contrasted nicely with the off-white shirt, complete with thin red stripes. The nametag said Katie. The outfit said minimum wage.

“Where’d you get it?” Jake asked.

“Bribed a dry cleaner. Got some nice police uniforms, too.”

Jake wondered how many laws they could break in one day.
When Jenny hung up her jeans and sweater, Jake saw a nun’s habit.

"Get kicked out of a convent?"

"No, I bought it off a pickpocket in Rome. It was my first big score as a media broker, when the Pope converted to Islam."

Jake remembered the story. The announcement caused a media plague of Old Testament proportions. The Vatican wasn’t letting any journalists inside, but somebody managed to score an interview with the pontiff’s valet, sobbing as he packed up all the vestments and skullcaps.

"The easy part was getting in," Jenny said. "But then Aljazeera wanted a sit-down interview. We had to get the valet past the media outside. So I ordered pizza."

She opened another cabinet. It was filled with drugs: Vicodin, OxyContin, Clonazepam. Not the little orange prescription bottles. The big white ones that the pharmacies have in the back. There was enough to knock out entire suburbs in San Diego.

"I had to dose them all at once," Jenny said. "I prefer a tranquilizer gun for one or two people, but I can’t reload quick enough in a crowd."

She pointed to the Rohypnol.

"I crushed it and sprinkled it on the pizza, like Romano. Tastes about the same."

When most of the journalists passed out, the church had called it divine intervention. A few vegan reporters—network sissies, but the only ones still conscious—swore they saw the Virgin Mary passing out the pepperoni, halo and all.
“I even blessed the pizza boxes,” Jenny said.

Jake felt a little queasy. Jenny touched his arm.

“Don’t worry. No comas this time. I’ll just give ‘em the pizza and hang out.”

They went back up front to watch Jake’s station, NewsBeat 13, get hammered by the competition. It was 11 o’clock, and the puppets had come to life at the end of their microphone cables. Jake and Jenny couldn’t hear them, even with the windows down, but it was enough to see their stern expressions. Jake thought they just looked constipated.

NewsBeat 13 couldn’t send one of its own reporters to stand out there with the rest of them. To say what, exactly? That the station didn’t have any comment about the terrorist incident involving Jake Elliott because it was a confidential personnel matter. The NewsBeaters, as they were also known around town, had to stay inside and pretend it wasn’t happening. Jake was the top story, and there wasn’t anything his station could do about it.

Someone knocked on the side of the van.

Jenny said, “Here, you pay for it.” She handed Jake some twenties.

Jake went to the front. He looked out the driver’s side window and saw Salvador Reyes, his favorite photographer from the station. Jake opened the door.

“I knew I’d find you here,” Sal said. “A good arsonist always shows up to watch the building burn.”
“Get in before the rest of them see you,” Jake said.

Sal noticed the shotgun right away. When he climbed in the back, he saw the Rohypnol and the other drugs.

He wanted to laugh, but he didn’t even smile. Jake’s lips were pressed together, too, pinching off the usual smirk. Sal knew that look. It was their secret code, their prearranged signal to start rolling tape. The miniature deck was in Sal’s pocket, hooked up to a tiny microphone and camera lens hidden in a hollow cell phone on his belt. He was so good he didn’t even need a viewfinder to frame the shot. He carried it everywhere, even when he was off the clock.

“Want to know what I did today?” Sal asked. Jenny looked away.

“Jury duty. I’m waiting around at the courthouse, watching TV. And there’s Jake, breaking into my favorite soap, the one with the supermodel on life support. Damn. I bet today’s the day she woke up.”

Sal had dark curly hair and a moustache. He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt with what looked like arugula floating in Pepto Bismol. Cargo shorts and hiking boots completed the outfit. He was a big boy, and had been for years. Nobody in his neighborhood ever went on those glossy bestseller diets.

“You must be a photographer,” Jenny said evenly.

“And you must be the most popular delivery girl in town.”

“It’s a disguise. Didn’t they teach you anything in journalism school?”
“I went to reform school,” Sal said. “I got kicked out of St. Anne’s in sixth grade for swearing, moved on to stealing cars and got sent to one of those junior-convict work camps. One of the counselors had a video camera. It saved me.”

Jake never got tired of the story.

“I know some people who could move those roofies,” Sal whispered, “if you’re interested.”

“No thanks,” Jenny said. “They’re for medicinal use. And you can shut off the hidden camera now. It’s the cell phone, right?”

Sal reached into his pocket. “You’re good. Who are you?”

“I’m Jenny, Jake’s new partner.”

Sal pretended to be hurt. “You’re leaving me for her?” he said to Jake.

Jenny pointed to a cabinet.

“Hand me a wireless microphone,” she said to Sal. “You two can listen while I chat up your friends outside.”

She unbuttoned the shirt, clipped the mic to her bra and put the transmitter in her front pocket. Sal looked at Jake, who just shrugged.

“In case anybody’s curious, it’s an iPod,” Jenny said. She pulled a pair of earphones out of the glove compartment and put them around her neck. She buttoned both cords underneath her shirt. There was another knock on the side of the van.

“It’s like they say,” Jenny said. “Call 911 and order pizza. See who shows up first.”
Around town, Newsbeat 13 was a running joke: *Who's Beat 13?* Jake’s investigative reports and the sports guy, Bobby Jay Williams, were the only segments people watched. On the consultant’s overhead graphs, the ratings shot up twice, then flatlined. The Grand Tetons, Jake had called them during a station meeting. Everybody else leaned forward for a better look. The consultant, who had run out of original ideas three years earlier, turned to face the crowd. More Tetons, he had said, spreading his arms.

The consultant also had a solution to the Rainbow News Channel. He’d arrived at the station two months ago with hundreds of paint samples from the hardware store and research on galvanic skin response to certain colors—stolen from a graduate thesis on the Internet. Jake saw him huddled with Little Dick in the station’s conference room, holding the strips against video of ethnic faces on the television screen. There was a stack of tapes on the table. Jake paused long enough in the open doorway to read a label: *Hispanic Females, Birthmark, Right Cheek.*

NewsBeat 13 wouldn’t rely on ethnic costumes to compete with the Rainbow News Channel. The station would do a nationwide search for on-air talent with the perfect skin color. To make sure they got the right shades, the consultant sold the Doltiers on focus groups.

A dozen housewives with three dozen donuts couldn’t be wrong.
But none of the paint samples excited them. Jake learned this from a cute assistant in the research department. He’d considered dating her, but he exceeded her standard age deviation by nine years. She was pretty sharp, so he thought of pointing out the obvious: good stories bring in viewers. But after paying off the eye surgeon, the de Doltiers were running scared. They had gutted the investigative unit, reassigning Jake’s producer to a lame series called Pet Smart.

The producer’s latest report: the danger of holding small dogs near steering wheels. The explosive force of an airbag had launched a Teacup Chihuahua named Pepe sideways through an open passenger window. Pepe might have survived with a bad case of road rash, except his owner had rear-ended a garbage truck on top of the Coronado Bridge, two hundred feet above the San Diego Bay. The results of the necropsy were inconclusive, but a veterinarian told Channel 13 that Pepe probably shook himself to death before he hit the water.

Nine hundred people attended the Chihuahua’s funeral, carried live by Jake’s station. That same week, the deaths of seventeen Mexican migrants packed into a van got lots of coverage, but only because the highway patrol’s investigation had closed the interstate and made thousands late for a Padres game. The bodies lay unclaimed at the county morgue, while Pepe’s ashes had been entombed in a crypt overlooking the Pacific—technically not the same ocean as the bay, Pepe’s grieving owner had assured mourners.

In the Channel 13 newsroom, watching the live coverage of the service, Jake was the only one who had laughed.
Then he figured out the perfect memorial for the dead Mexicans: their own color strip. He’d found some moldy cheese in his refrigerator and put it on the kitchen counter. He’d snap a digital photo every few days. When he had a nice progression of browns, he made a perfect forgery on his computer and slipped it into a stack on the research assistant’s desk when she wasn’t looking.

He couldn’t call it Cheese Mold (eleven days, non-refrigerated). So he called it Oaxacan Village.

The housewives loved it. The research assistant said the shade reminded them of bare-chested heroes in romance novels, but the station couldn’t find any real Oaxacans to match. Nobody thought to visit the morgue.

Inspired, Jake made a new color strip: Storm Runoff. This time, he’d ripped off some images from the station’s library of old news tapes. Every time it rained, the news director ordered a bunch of weather stories. Last winter, San Diego had record rainfall, so there was plenty of muddy water flowing into the ocean, along with shots of umbrellas and car wrecks.

Jake needed a new title for this strip, so he went deeper into Mexico and scored some old Aztec names. That should get the housewives really excited.

Over a speaker in the van, Jake and Sal could hear the LA reporters hitting on Jenny. They all gave her business cards, which she handled like religious artifacts.

“I’ll give you a personal tour of the station,” said one. Totally gray, he looked early sixties. His chin looked twenty years younger.
“I could stay with my cousin in the valley,” Jenny said. She sounded young and eager.

“Oh, you could crash at my place,” said the old guy. He tried to sound spontaneous. “Hollywood Hills. At night, the view is the ultimate aphrodisiac.”

“What’s an aphrodisiac?” Jenny asked.

In the van, Jake jabbed Sal’s shoulder.

“She’s grandpa’s worst nightmare,” he said.

Jenny said, “Hey, where are the network guys? I’ve always wanted to meet a big TV star.”

The reporter looked around for help, but his photographer had deserted him. Jenny didn’t let up.

“I collect autographs. I even have a couple from dead rap stars. Well, they were alive when I delivered their pizza.”

Jenny grabbed the reporter’s arm. “Hey, you could introduce me to those network guys. What time will they be here?”

“In a couple of hours,” he said as he backed away. “You should wait right here for them.”

Jenny twirled her hair as some local reporters walked up. It reminded Jake of castration time at the cattle ranch.

“I need to go back inside the station,” he said to Sal.

“You’re crazy. Little Dick is there. You’ll get arrested. Again.”

“I need the plug from that Hawk missile. You know who gave it to me.”
Sal knew it wouldn’t do any good to argue. He and Jake had followed some
Marines to Yuma for a training exercise. They were spinning up for the first Gulf
War, and putting on a little show for the media.

They had great toys. HAWK anti-aircraft missiles at mach two-plus, blasting
drones out of the sky. Sal really dug it. He liked explosions more than porn.

To settle a losing bet about an eighties rock singer (Greg Kihn) over beers
that night, a corporal gave Jake a part from the missile—the machined aluminum
plug that pops out for the telemetry data link. When the corporal got killed in action,
Jake tried to give it back to his widow at the funeral. She told him to keep it. Jake
wasn’t going to let the station’s incompetent security guards lose it when they boxed
up his desk.

“You’re coming, right?” he said to Sal. Outside the van, Jenny collected
more business cards.

“The rodeo queen can take care of herself.”

Jake and Sal were inside the station now. They had to run inside the
mechanical gate as the night shift got off work. They went in the back door, which
all the photographers used to load their gear into their news trucks. They weren’t
worried about those guys, who all liked Jake. He always carried the tripod.

They ducked in and out of offices on the second floor. A few of the women
were crying.
Sal appeared in a doorway and flipped the missile plug at Jake. As they walked down the hallway, they saw Bobby Jay Williams, the sports guy.

“Elliott, you asshole,” he said. “I saw you on CNN today. You even made ESPN’s Top Ten Plays.”

Bobby Jay didn’t look like he could be pissed off about anything, with his curly blond hair and droopy eyes. The aging surfer look, plus nine seasons as a free safety with the San Diego Chargers, got him hired at Channel 13 when he stopped playing. With the sports job and the money he made from car commercials, he could afford a house in Del Mar with a blue smudge of ocean in two windows upstairs. He had a Porsche, a Toyota pickup and a Harley parked in the garage.

But Bobby Jay wasn’t happy, because he wanted a network sports job. All the quarterbacks he had put on the disabled list had their blazers—which, it killed him to admit, looked really sharp with their artificially tanned faces. Bobby Jay saw them on national television every Sunday during football season, but he was stuck in San Diego, preparing for his local post-game show. They had the damn coats and he didn’t.

What could have been dismissed as petty jealousy from a defensive grunt had a frightening neurological dimension, all of which was detailed in Bobby Jay’s lengthy medical history. After five concussions in the NFL, he had the mental capacity of a forty-nine-year-old crack baby. Just enough intellectual ability
remained to read scores off a Teleprompter, but not enough to form a credible conspiracy theory about why he never got a network sports job.

So Bobby Jay did the best he could. He told everybody that national news stories were like the ozone layer. With disappointment in his voice, Bobby Jay explained it was a finite resource. Soon, there wouldn’t be any left because Jake had depleted the supply. When a story in San Diego made the networks and the cable shows, Bobby Jay experienced his own private greenhouse effect. His face got red and he was breathing hard.

“It’s just like nineteen ninety-seven, all over again,” he said in the hallway.

“All those dead Moonies and that guy who shot John Lennon.”

As many times as Jake had corrected him, Bobby Jay still confused his cults and celebrity murderers. It was the Heaven’s Gate mass suicide in Rancho Santa Fe, and it was Gianni Versace’s killer who went to a private high school in La Jolla. For hand grenades and headlines, that was close enough to San Diego. The city had been hot for a few months, and so was Jake. He had scored a lot of exclusive interviews and information, so everybody wanted him. His record was eight satellite shots in one day.

In the week that followed, Bobby Jay had thrown five coffee cups through windows and four security guards through windshields at the station. His doctor called it residual ’roid rage, even though Bobby Jay hadn’t juiced for years. His lawyer argued the Americans with Disabilities Act applied to former NFL players with anger-management issues, so Dick de Doltier III just shrugged and put a glass
company on retainer. As long as the ratings stayed high, Bobby Jay guy could take a sledgehammer to the Crystal Cathedral.

In the hallway, he danced like a boxer. Jake glanced at Sal, who had already reached into his pocket. The hidden-camera video might be worth a few grand to one of those reality shows if things got ugly.


Bobby Jay waved him off. “This is between me and Jake,” he said.

Jake shifted his weight forward to block the first punch as Sal circled around to the side, but Bobby Jay suddenly looked between them. It had to be an intern. Every spring and fall, the station got a new assortment from San Diego State University. College girls, individually wrapped.

“It’s OK, sir,” a female voice said. “I’ve got him.”

It was Jenny, who had changed into a light blue uniform shirt. She had slipped a pair of sunglasses with gold frames through an epaulet and put on a ball cap with SECURITY on the front. Her hair hung out through the back like a bad mullet. A toothpick in her mouth eliminated any residual IQ points.

“I asked for a little doll, and look what I get,” Sal said. He smirked at Jenny, who handcuffed Jake’s hands behind his back.

“I’ll get rid of this one for you,” she said to Bobby Jay. “I don’t think the fat one is much of a threat.”
Jenny rubbed her foot on the carpet. She looked up at the sports guy and took the toothpick out of her mouth so she could chew her lower lip.

“If it's not too much trouble, Mr. Williams, could I have an autographed photo? Maybe something in a Chargers uniform?”

Bobby Jay missed his playing days more than two flight attendants in a Denver hotel room.

“I've got some old pictures in my office,” he said. “Wait here.”

He gave Jake a hard shove. Jenny and Sal grabbed him before he fell.

Bobby Jay winked at her and jogged down the hall.

“I'll be back after I secure the prisoner,” Jenny called after him.

She took Jake’s arm and walked him down the hallway. Sal followed.

“Listen, sugar,” he said. “Any time you want to guess my weight, don't be shy.”

“You two lovebirds can borrow the cuffs,” Jake said. “I've had enough for one day.”

Jenny said, “You’ll learn to like it.”

“We’ve got company.”

In the van, Jake had been watching the same set of headlights since they left the station. From the passenger’s seat, Jenny studied the side mirror. Jake knew it wasn’t Sal, who had peeled off a few miles back and headed home to his wife and kids. The other car was still there.
“This guy’s alone,” Jake said. With only one vehicle, it was almost impossible to stay close enough to somebody without being spotted. When they followed people, Jake and Sal had been lucky with a few clueless shitheads, but most of them were too smart. Like the cops, Jake preferred to use several cars, a luxury that the cheap-ass de Doltier family rarely allowed.

“Time to have a little fun,” Jake said. He cut across the freeway to an off-ramp, then veered back to the left. The other car followed.

“Probably one of the locals, trying to horn in,” Jenny said. She went to the back of the van. Jake heard the thin vibrato of sheet metal.

“I’ve got some caltrops back here somewhere,” she said.

“Caltrops?”

“You know, those sharp things to flatten tires.”

Jake said, “You’ve been watching too many Bond movies.”

“No, they really work. I ordered ‘em from one of those mercenary websites. Hardened steel, Rockwell rated. Guaranteed blowouts. They’ll even stop an armored car, if you’ve got a terrorist operation to finance.”

Jenny chatted away like a hostess on a shopping network.

“You sound like the feds.”

“Well, we are trying to sell your story, and my cell phone’s not ringing, if you hadn’t noticed. We still might need a sexier bio on you.”

From the back, Jake heard a burst of laughter, followed by a sybaritic sigh. Jenny closed the cabinet door.
“Cool. Now I get to try them on a little job first, before I trust them on a big story.”

“So I’m just a little job to you?”

Jenny came back to the front. “That’s not what I meant, baby. I take care of all my clients. You’ll see.”

She held out a caltrop. “It’s the deluxe model. Once it gets in, you’ll never get it out.”

Its jagged grin reminded Jake of his childhood orthodontist, but even that guy wasn’t as sadistic as this. He instinctively put his hand over his zipper, in case she dropped it.

“Princess Diana should have used these against the paparazzi,” Jenny said. “If she wasn’t such a humanitarian, she’d be alive today.”

“But you could have been chasing her that night.”

“Nah, I hire out those jobs. That’s what photographers are for.”

Jenny headed to the back and Jake heard the rear doors open.

“Slow down so they don’t go all over the highway.” In the side mirror, Jake watched the other car change lanes.

“Don’t you have rockets on this thing?” he yelled.

“Funny. Just get me lined up again.”

Jake moved over, but the other car swerved and accelerated. A black Corvette with a dealer plate appeared out of the darkness.
Jake recognized the driver. At eighty miles per hour, Rick Ramage was doing a dance routine behind the wheel. Jake guessed B-52s, or maybe it was just methamphetamine. He had heard Ramage was terminally ill, but he didn’t look that sick.

“Who’s that clown?” Jenny was back in the passenger seat.

“Old friend,” Jake said. The words came out low and quick, rather than hang in the air and invite inspection.

Jake didn’t know how to describe Ramage, whose talent for self-destruction was legendary. He had ended his television-reporting career during the annual Children’s Hospital Telethon on Channel 12. In between his heart-wrenching live segments from the rooms of terminal cancer patients, Ramage stole their painkillers. The heist could have used a little more planning, especially the getaway phase. Nurses found him hiding under a hospital bed, with a kid’s IV needle stuck in his arm.

When the hospital added up all the missing morphine and announced it was prosecuting Ramage for grand theft, Jake had called to cheer him up. At Paso Robles High, Jake had watched a veterinarian’s son struggle with an addiction to animal tranquilizers. He felt sorry for Ramage, who wasn’t a bad reporter when he was sober. Maybe a little too eager, like a Labrador in heat, but at least he went after a story. Jake couldn’t stand the emotional detachment of the younger reporters. Inflatable dolls had more personality.
In the Corvette, Ramage had formed a pair of pistols with his hands and was firing at the van.

“Is he psychotic?” Jenny asked.

“Relax. He only shoots at people he likes.”

“Is everybody in this town nuts?”

Jake laughed. “Since we met, you’ve been a transient, a pizza girl and a security guard. Who’s schizophrenic?”

Jenny sniffed. “I could have been an actress, but I wound up here.”

“Time to meet the rest of the cast,” Jake said. He waved at Ramage and pointed to the next off-ramp.

Once the media got through with him for stealing from cancer kids, Rick Ramage couldn’t even go to the grocery store. Angry suburban mothers, fresh from their morning Pilates workout, recognized him in the aisles and rammed his shopping cart. Others hurried to the parking lot and waited with tomatoes and eggs.

Ramage tried to change his physical appearance, but it wasn’t easy. Tall and thin, with shaggy brown hair, his growing meth habit gave him the appearance of an anorexic Hollywood starlet. He needed a costume, preferably one that would soften his loathsome public image. So he shaved his head, put on pajamas and bedroom slippers and started pushing around a walker with an oxygen tank. He thought about getting some purple markers to create some blotchy skin, like Kaposi’s sarcoma, but he didn’t want to overdo it.
It was the perfect disguise. Everybody assumed he’d contracted AIDS from dirty needles and unprotected sex. They never asked any questions that might have blown his cover. A few people—vengeful Christians who thought a lingering death was too good for promiscuous drug addicts—smirked triumphantly when they spotted him in public. But the same women who had abused Ramage at the grocery store were wracked with guilt. They offered to bring him chicken soup and clean his toilet. He graciously declined, so they pleaded to walk him to his car. He always waited by an old wreck in the parking lot until they drove away, then folded up the walker and dashed over to the black Corvette.

The car was a gift to himself, because his new freelance career was taking off. Three months ago, Ramage had been driving back from Tijuana in a fruitless search for a more reliable dealer. He took the back way, through the hills near the border. Near the Olympic Training Center, a soccer mom had passed him. He watched as she dialed her cell phone. As she drifted onto the shoulder, she ran over the entire men’s cycling team, out for the morning ride. The poor bastards had such low body fat—and such skinny, space-age bikes—that the woman’s monstrous SUV thumped over them like so many reflective markers.

Ramage had pulled over, grabbed his pocket digital camera and walked right up to the SUV. When the driver emerged, still clutching her cell, he managed to frame a shot of her and the hulking vehicle’s unmistakable tailgate. He couldn’t believe his good fortune, even in status-obsessed Southern California. In her
manicured fingers, the woman held the latest designer flip phone as she leaned heavily against the biggest, most fuel-inefficient SUV on the market.

To hell with freelance journalism, Ramage had thought. Extortion pays a lot better.

The next day, a courier delivered envelopes to the corporate offices of the carmaker and the wireless company. The demand letters were very simple. The companies had twenty-four hours to wire two hundred fifty thousand dollars each to an offshore account. Otherwise, the photo—which validated the exhaustive efforts of their marketing departments—would be posted on the websites of eco-terrorists and anybody else looking for capitalist pigs to firebomb.

The companies had briefly considered going to the FBI, but decided two fifty was actually a bargain. The CEOs told accounting to route it through the death-and-dismemberment budget, which would make them seem more contrite to any nosy reporters. To offset the expense, full-page newspaper apologies that showed bikes draped in black crepe had been quietly shelved.

Ramage’s high school photography teacher in San Diego would have been outwardly horrified by the stunt. But as a cycling fanatic, who despised both SUVs and cell phones, he would have been secretly pleased. His algebra teacher would have collected a one-hundred-dollar bet from the vice-principal over which member of the class of nineteen eighty-nine were most likely to become a felon.

A rich felon.
Ramage wasn’t greedy, but he needed enough cash to flee the country. If those housewives at the grocery store found out he were impersonating an AIDS patient, they would beat him to death with frozen food. He figured he had a few more months, but he didn’t know how long a terminal illness was supposed to last, even with miracle drugs. Ramage decided to take the risk so he could afford to buy a poor Mexican village and hire the locals to make meth for him.

A few more multiple fatalities should do it.

“Life’s a beach, Jakey-boy.” Ramage slapped him on the back. It was his only response to questions about the Corvette. Counting the opening hug, Ramage had touched Jake five times in three minutes.

“I thought you were dying,” Jake said.

“I’m in remission,” Ramage said. “Experimental treatments. Ever heard of shark dick?”

“I thought they used cartilage,” Jake said. The quacks in Mexico were famous for their weird cures.

“Same thing.” Ramage’s face was covered with meth bugs from compulsive scratching, but Jake thought they could pass for complications from AIDS. He looked awful, especially under the yellow sodium lights behind the strip mall. They’d found one next to the freeway and parked there.
“Sharks don’t have dicks,” Jenny said. “They use an adaptive fin, called a clasper, to pass the sperm. The male bites the female to hold onto her. Talk about rough sex.”

She shuddered and closed her eyes, but she was smiling.

Ramage leered at her. “If you’re a marine biologist, why are you dressed like a security guard?”

“My name’s Jenny and I’m neither. I just study predators. It helps me prey on the weak, like local television reporters.”

It was Jake’s turn to slap Ramage on the back. “If you pretend like you’re dead, maybe she’ll leave you alone.”

Jenny put her hands on her hips and tilted her head back. “How’d you know to follow us?”

“Night vision. Using the other door was a good idea. Nobody else was over there. The security guard outfit had me fooled, until I saw Jake’s photographer. I figured he had something going, so I tagged along.”

In the station parking lot, they had piled into Sal’s car. Jake lay across the back seat so the other reporters wouldn’t spot him. After dropping Jenny off at her van, they met at a gas station around the corner for the switch. Jake felt like a hostage.

Ramage kept pushing his glasses back against his face, like bad stop-action animation.
“I can’t believe you tried to whack the president.” Every time Ramage said it, he held up his hand. Jake responded with a progressively weaker series of high-fives. Ramage had seen the media coverage, like everybody else. Jake had stopped trying to explain.

“The next time you do something stupid, amigo, you gotta clue me in,” Ramage said. “It’s worth beaucoup boatloads of cash.”

“Oh, how’s that?” Jenny’s question almost sounded conversational.

“You’ve heard of product placement? Companies pay me to make their stuff disappear.”

Jenny leaned forward.

“Remember that guy who killed all those kayakers last month?” he asked.

The asshole from Phoenix had never been on a Jet Ski before, so he rented one and ran it wide open on Mission Bay, right through a Japanese tour group. All the San Diego affiliates uplinked their video of the medical examiner’s crew and the body bags; local stations around the country grabbed it off the national feeds and showed a few seconds on their newscasts. It was worth ten seconds of airtime, even in Buffalo.

But the real story took a little digging. A private investigator told Jake that the Jet Ski driver was a retired United Auto Workers goon, convicted of blowing up a couple of Datsun showrooms in the seventies. Changed his name when he moved to Arizona, but Jake still tracked down the old court records, plus a couple of recent DUIs and some domestic violence.
The local cops had decided that killing the kayakers wasn’t a hate crime, because the goon was riding a Japanese Jet Ski. Hell, they’re all Japanese, Jake had told the flak at the police department. Even without the race card, the station’s assignment editor thought it was still a nice little story, because the anniversary of Hiroshima was approaching. Not exactly a direct comparison, but close enough for television news.

Richard de Doltier III had panicked. The station owner didn’t care about agitating the Japanese or the anti-nuke crowd, but he was deathly afraid that the Jet Ski dealers would get pissed and pull their sizeable commercial buy. He killed the story.

So Jake just fed it to his friend at the alternative newspaper in town. It embarrassed the cops and gave Jake another favor to collect. All the best print reporters in town owed him. There were worse things.

Jake might have given it to Ramage, to help him out. But he had a scam of his own.

“Who’d you say you were working for?” Jake asked.

“Nobody. I heard it on my police scanner, and I got there before the harbor police boat. I used my new twelve hundred-millimeter lens to get the money shot. The dope is just sitting there on the Jet Ski, with the emergency kill switch still hanging off his wrist. I framed it right above the brand name on the side. That shot was worth five hundred large to the company.”

There was genuine pride in Ramage’s voice. Jake had already figured it out.
“Now that you’re unemployed,” Ramage continued, “I could really use some help.”

“He’s already got a new partner,” Jenny said. She moved toward Jake.

Ramage ignored her. “I’ve missed some easy kills, like that officer-involved shooting in City Heights.” Two months ago, the cops had blown away another mope who pointed a pistol at them. Jake had sniffed around, but there was nothing else there.

“I never make any money off the gun makers,” Ramage said. “They always ignore my letters. But I know the dead guy was a gang-banger, wearing some pro sports jersey. Those billionaire team owners love their logos. They always cave.”

He paused to mourn the lost income, then said, “Think about it, Jakey.”

The two of them were really not that different, Jake thought. Both outlaws. Rick Ramage just had a head start.

“Get any death threats yet?” Jake asked. He had been looking around. A contract killer could put three or four rounds through Ramage’s eye socket with a silenced twenty-two. He’d be dead on his feet, and all they’d hear was the action cycling for the insurance shots. Or maybe some C4 with a timer on the gas tank. The pathologists would need dental charts to make positive identifications.

Jake edged away from the Corvette, but Ramage kept talking. “Nobody’s threatened me, but I went to one of those evasive-driving courses for bodyguards, just in case. When your girlfriend opened the rear doors, I responded to the threat.
We covered that on the second morning, right before one hundred-eighty degree
turns with the parking brake. Burned more rubber than sorority sluts in Cabo.”

Ramage rubbed his hands together. “That’s where I’m headed soon, so they
can meet their rich uncle. There’s still time to sign on, Jakey-boy.”

“I got a better idea. You just hang back and watch our tail.”

Jenny jabbed Jake in the ribs, but he kept talking.

“Cut off anybody who gets too close. They taught you that stuff, right?”

Ramage thought for a moment. “The Corvette won’t cut it. I’ll buy a
Hummer in the morning.”

Jake pulled up a block away from his house, on a hill in Carmel Mountain
Ranch. No ocean view, but late at night, after a few beers, the traffic on I-15
sounded like surf. Still, it was close enough to the water that the marine layer turned
the sky into a sonogram, thicker than usual for September. Jake loved the cool air,
but his jacket was back at the station.

“You have an old windbreaker or something?” he asked.


“Aren’t you afraid of getting caught?”

“Nah. I only use them around trailer parks and slums. Those people never
ask questions.”

Jake said, “Does this look like a poor neighborhood to you?”
“No, but the feds have been here, sniffing around. You’re just leftover alphabet soup.”

“No thanks.” Jake had had enough government hospitality for a while.

“How about one of the networks or cable channels? I’ve got ‘em all. I impersonate field producers all the time.”

“I’m not a logo kind of guy.”

“You will be. I feel another Camp OJ coming on.”

It was a game that reporters played, impressing each other with big stories they’d covered. Jake had missed the first Simpson trial, along with the riots, because he blew out his knee playing rec-league basketball. But he caught the finale of the media circus: the civil verdict in Santa Monica. Jake got his sound bites at a nearby bowling alley—Rhodes scholars, compared to the lower primates gathered outside the courthouse—then went live alongside Bakersfield’s best as the satellite trucks shot their immortal images into the heavens. Channel 13’s consultants called it presence. Jake wondered what Marconi would have called it.

“What’s the Italian word for bullshit?”

“Vaya la merda.” Jake pictured Jenny outside the Vatican, dressed in her habit. “Why’d you ask?”

“Just wondering if OJ ever looked for the killers in Tuscany.”

“Nobody cares anymore.”

The news chariots always drove on, gloriously. After helping to create countless media events, it was Jake’s surreal privilege to star in his own.
“I won’t even be close to OJ,” he said, “and probably not even Westerfield.”

The pervert had kidnapped a seven-year-old girl who lived two doors down in a San Diego suburb. At two o’clock in the morning on Day Four, the sat trucks squatted at the curb, generators already throbbing like gas-powered vibrators so the East Coast could have breakfast with Danielle’s desperate parents.

“I loved that story,” Jenny said. She was wired, even without any overpriced coffee drinks. “Mom and dad turned out to be swingers. The tabloids ate it up. I made some decent money.”

Jake didn’t want to be reminded. His usually reliable sources had given him nothing on Westerfield, certainly not the swinger angle. So he got stuck outside the little girl’s house with all the media pukes, waiting for something to happen. Shoving a few dozen microphones in someone’s face took no imagination.

“You were in the neighborhood?” Jake asked.

“Only a few times. Don’t you recognize me?” Jenny took off her ball cap and shook out her hair.

Suddenly Jake flashed on the image of the cleaning woman at Westerfield’s door. While the rest of the media were distracted by a sidewalk press conference, she made her approach. Jake saw it happening, but by the time he and Sal could break away, she had walked back to her car. The rest of the media had only caught a glimpse her, dropping two buckets filled with brushes and spray bottles into her trunk.

“The outfit was a little too domestic for you.”
“It was pretty lame, I know. So I came back in the middle of the night, dressed like a schoolgirl.”

“How’d you know he was into that?” The highlights of Westerfield’s porn collection hadn’t been released until his trial.

Jenny rolled her eyes. “They’re all into that.”

“So you came on to him.”

“I would have, but he never answered his door. I know he would have talked. Pedophiles are the easiest.”

Jake Elliott had known a lot of high-priced talent, anchorwomen with voodoo power over men, but Jenny Kawakami was the first one who scared him.

She reached out and stroked his chin. “Want me to dress up for you?”

He took her hand. “What happens if nobody shows up? You’re done with me. This is just an act.

Jenny looked away. “Okay, you got me. But it’s more complicated than that.”

“Oh, this should be good. Either you want to screw my brains out or you don’t.”

Jenny kept staring out the window. “I do, but not yet. I made that mistake at the MTV Music Awards.”

“You’re comparing me to those guys?”

“OK, I know a lot of pretty boys. There aren’t a lot of real men left.”
“Darlin’,” Jake said with a slight drawl, “you got that right.”

“Don’t saddle up yet. If the magazine shows don’t bite, you’re still a twenty-four hour wonder.”

It was Jenny’s clinical tone that hurt the most, but Jake didn’t blame her. He’d spent a career doing it to other people at story meetings.

“So, what do you want from me?” he heard himself asking. “Embarrassing Polaroids? I was a bad boy way before digital.”

Jenny bounced in her seat. “I knew you had it in you.”

“How about me in a Nazi shirt, like Prince Harry?”

She frowned. “You’re not royalty, love. You’d be just another fascist.”

“Growing up in Paso Robles?” Jake laughed. “Try the Klan.”

“Not the Klan. But a Timothy McVeigh kind of thing, homegrown, with that shadowy Islamic connection. The media love conspiracy theories.”

Jenny used the vanity mirror to put on lip-gloss, then turned to face him.

“Time to take a look around. If anybody asks, I’m the security guard you hired to watch your house.”

“I don’t need a security guard,” Jake said. “I have dogs.” Lance and Martha, a pair of Australian Shepherds, nipped at all kinds of strays—sheep, cattle and children. The neighborhood kids had stopped ringing his doorbell for school fund-raisers. The Aussies also took care of less persistent visitors, such as Mormon missionaries.
“Well, you need multiple layers of protection.” She turned off the dome light and cracked the passenger door. “Just like the president.”

For about two minutes, Jake waited in the van, just as Jenny had instructed. Then he figured it wouldn’t hurt to go through the alley to the back of his house. Alleys were great inventions, perfect for trash trucks and weenie waggers, but they had disappeared from San Diego’s newer neighborhoods.

It took a frantic series of gestures to convince Ramage to stay in the Corvette. Jake felt like a sign-language translator at a speed-metal concert.

When he got to his yard, he heard water running. The damn fountains. They’d been Cynthia’s idea, during her feng-shui phase. Jake had wondered how the six incontinent cherubs—Judeo-Christian to their ceramic souls—fit in with a bunch of black rocks and dark slate. He really didn’t care what made the noise; all the splashing just reminded him of an endless drug test. After she left, he’d wanted to rip them out, but Lance and Martha used them as water bowls. Cynthia strictly forbade that when she was still around. To honor her memory, Jake never turned them on, but he made sure they were always full for the dogs.

He always plunged the garden hose deep below the surface so it didn’t make any sound. Otherwise, he would be reminded of her on top of him as the chorus gurgled outside. The windows were always open and the fountains were always running.
The carnal quality of their relationship held it together. She loved to shop, but he hated the malls. She ate a few bites of her dinner and he cleaned the plate. She was ambitious, but he didn’t trust her agent. When Jake flat refused to cram himself and his dogs into an apartment in Los Angeles, New York or Chicago, she moved out. Got a hotel room, put her stuff in storage and was working in Manhattan in time for the important November ratings period.

Jake whistled softly for the dogs, but didn’t hear anything. Jenny must have let them in the house. Lance and Martha didn’t like uniforms, so she must have drugged them into cooperating. Another possibility troubled him even more; she could charm animals as well as men.

Jake was worn out from all the adrenaline dumps over the last ten hours, starting with the Secret Service. He was ready to crash and forget about the networks. The back door was unlocked. He opened it silently and slipped into the kitchen. Women’s voices came from the living room.

One belonged to Jenny, his new security guard. The other belonged to Cynthia Castaneda, his old girlfriend.

Jake remembered that Cindy had a key. She had given back the diamond earrings, which he promptly sold to pay for a rock-climbing trip in Utah. Keeping the key struck him as a sentimental gesture at the time, but now he understood.

She wanted to get back into his life anytime she felt like it.

“How awesome,” he heard Jenny say, “being on the news and stuff.” Jake recognized her GED voice, the one she used while passing out pizza at Channel 13.
“Oh, it’s not that glamorous.” He almost choked. In San Diego, Cynthia had always bitched about having to do her own hair and makeup. Now she had a staff of stylists with obsessive-compulsive disorder over eye shadow.

Jenny stayed in character. “So, when’s your crew getting here to set up the lights and everything?”

“My people are waiting back at the hotel, like I told you.” Cynthia also complained about her fans’ lack of intelligence. Jake had resisted the temptation to point out that smart people didn’t watch television news. They already knew most of that stuff, and were too busy curing cancer or building rockets to Mars.

“You’re not worried about, like, getting scooped?”

Cynthia didn’t answer right away. Jake knew her competitive pride wasn’t insulted because she didn’t concern herself with the actual labor commonly associated with newsgathering. That’s what field producers were for. When Cynthia had started working at Channel 13, Jake had written a couple of scripts for her. He was a sucker for beautiful women in distress, feigned or otherwise.

“Let’s just say that Jake and I have a little history.”

Yeah, Jake thought, right there on the couch in the living room. He looked around the kitchen. There were a couple of hot spots on the counter.

“Oh, I get it,” Jenny said. “He is kinda cute, isn’t he? I love that picture on the bookshelf, the one with him on the horse.”

“Don’t let him fool you with that cowboy act, honey. Desperado, my ass.”
“Don’t worry about me, Ms. Castaneda. My security company has rules about sleeping with clients. Fraternization, they call it.”

Cynthia said, “You’re really young, aren’t you?”

Jenny didn’t need to be rescued, but Jake had heard enough. He opened the kitchen door and closed it, then walked into the living room.

Cynthia was on her feet. She gave him the full lover’s hug—pelvis, chest, and even her ears brushing against his own.

“I got here as quick as I could,” she whispered. “Are you OK?”

She let go and Jake got a good look at her. Dark hair, dark eyes. That smile. It was her dusky ore that still tore him up inside.

“I’m fine. I may have sprained my career, but that’s it.”

Lance and Martha lifted their heads, looked at Jake and went back to sleep at Jenny’s feet.

“Not funny. You’ll never go network after this.”

“It’s better this way. I’m in touch with my inner terrorist.”

Cynthia looked hurt. She pointed at the boar’s head mounted over the fireplace.

“Where’s the seascape we picked out in Maui?”

Jake’s trophy—the biggest animal ever taken on his grandfather’s ranch—was back where it belonged, bad underbite and all. Blood sports didn’t bother Cynthia. It was the yellow teeth she couldn’t understand. Why couldn’t the taxidermist have just whitened them?
“Sorry,” Jake said. “Since you left, I’ve gone feral.”

“It’s all my fault.” A tear rolled down Cynthia’s cheek. “You’re crying out for help.”

Jenny spoke up. “I need to check the perimeter. If you need anything, Mr. Elliott, I’ll be outside.”

She walked behind Cynthia. Jake watched her for exactly two steps, long enough to confirm that he had a Latin-Asian triangle working. Diversity rocked, it really did.

Cynthia studied his face, which revealed none of his symmetrical delight.

“You’re right,” he told her. “I guess I’ve been feeling vulnerable lately.”

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s go to bed.”

“Aren’t you going to buy me dinner first?”

Cynthia squeezed his arm. “Ever slept with a metrosexual?”

“Can’t say I have.”

“It’s like driving a hybrid. The performance sucks.”

Jake said, “It’s nice to know you haven’t been too depressed to date.”

“What about your security chick in those tight pants? I bet she’s guarding your perimeter. Since when do you need anybody to protect you?”

“She’s a highly trained professional.”

“She’ll never hear a thing.”

At his bedroom door, they saw the wreckage. Six-point-zero earthquakes did less damage. Dresser drawers were piled in a corner, like rocks in those silly
roadside shrines. All his clothes were scattered on the floor. The bed frame was flipped over. His laptop was gone, but Jake had a backup drive. Nobody would ever find that.

He knew they could have tossed the rest of the house, so it wasn’t a real search. The mattress wasn’t ripped up; the plaster wasn’t punched out. This was just to piss him off.

“Oh, I should have told you.” Jenny had walked up behind him. “It was like this when I got here. Somebody was looking for something, Mr. Elliott.”

Like any self-respecting anchorwoman, Cynthia Castaneda had a stalker. His name was Reginald Robert Edwards, the son of a famous jockey. Reggie’s father was both accomplished and cursed, winning the Triple Crown and dying the following summer in a freak accident at Del Mar. Following the third race, a robust society matron had fallen on him in the winner’s circle while trying to squeeze into a photo. Sharp chest pains, accompanied by stern warnings from the track’s medical staff, hadn’t stopped the jock from riding in the seventh race before collapsing. During emergency surgery, surgeons discovered a twenty-four karat shiv had nicked his pulmonary artery. The gold had come from a scale replica of a starting gate the matron often wore to the track; the ponderous bauble hung from her like a third breast. In the fall, her impressive girth had crushed it, propelling three inches of miniature girder downward with such force that it pierced the jockey’s equestrian flak jacket.
By the time his father died, Reggie had developed several debilitating allergies—peanut, dairy and college—which indefinitely postponed adulthood. The comfortable inheritance had forever freed him from the demands of a real job, or pretending to look for one. Like the children of so many rich people, dead or alive, he had way too much time to kill. He tried to get hooked on sports betting, but it was too much trouble figuring out the point spreads—forget about the addition skills required for an over-under wager. Reggie needed a destructive hobby that would waste entire days without too much effort. He became a stalker.

His early fixations had ended in disappointment—a female cop and a firefighter calmly punched him into unconsciousness and a brief obsession with a male transvestite couldn’t survive the heart-breaking truth. Mature adults had proven to be too much of a challenge. He decided to try TV chicks.

Reggie figured younger women in starter media markets would be thrilled to have a truly dedicated fan. On a scouting trip up the California coast, he had discovered Cynthia while watching television in a Santa Maria motel room. Easing into their relationship, he had sent her only five dozen roses in the first ten days and left nine romantic voicemails in a strained voice.

The small fortune wasn’t the only legacy his late father had left him. Reggie looked and sounded as if he were twelve, a definite handicap for a stalker. The idea that appearing as a harmless adolescent might actually prolong the intoxicating creepiness with Cynthia would have been too humiliating to consider. So he risked permanent damage to his vocal cords and talked like an extremely young Mafioso.
The flower shop on her desk in the newsroom had flattered Cindy to the point of embarrassment, though the jealous stares from the other women were worth it. She had always secretly enjoyed all forms of inappropriate attention from men, as long as it didn’t get too rough. Psychologists might call it oppositional-defiant behavior, possibly the result of her strict upbringing in a traditional Mexican family.

She was born in Fresno, the daughter of two illegal immigrants. Her parents worked in the fields of Central California and were fiercely determined to make a better life for their five children. Cynthia and her four older brothers had all received a Catholic education and then been awarded scholarships by the United Farm Workers Union to attend Fresno State University. She was strongly in favor of the Eucharist and collective rights, as long as her needs came first.

Though Cynthia had been the hottest Latina at FSU—half the football players had asked her out—she wasn’t allowed to date without an older brother tagging along. This was a serious impediment to sex. Her brothers would have been glad to leave her alone for a few hours with the quarterback in exchange for a twenty or a case of imported beer, but they knew Grandma would find out. She lived with them, and possessed a supernatural ability to detect impurity, from lies by her grandchildren to a weevil in the corn meal. It didn’t help that she insisted on buying the fifty-pound sacks from the Mexican grocery store. Grandma was constantly harping about the family’s indifference to their cultural traditions. She would have demanded an exorcism had she discovered a stash of tight jeans and halters that her
granddaughter kept hidden in an old Toyota, changing every morning at the mini
mart on her way to college.

When Cynthia Castaneda had arrived in Santa Maria, her lack of journalism
experience was only exceeded by her limited exposure to men and alcohol. In the
first six weeks, she went drinking every night after work and slept with the news
director, the chief photographer and the weekend anchorman. But a growing
reputation as a nymphomaniac and an alarming thirst for margaritas weren’t her only
problems.

She wasn’t fluent in Spanish. Her father, a proud ESL student, had insisted
that English be spoken at home. She’d picked up a little espanol from Grandma,
mostly curse words and obscure Catholic liturgies. When Cynthia had interviewed
for her first job, the station manager had been so busy fantasizing about the brown
volcanoes underneath her new silk blouse that he forgot to ask any follow-up
questions. In his stilted memo to the staff, which had announced the new hire from
Fresno, the GM simply assumed she was bilingual.

If Reginald Robert Edwards hadn’t been quite so persistent with his romantic
voicemails, Cynthia Castaneda might have been quietly terminated from her first
television job. Out of original material, Reggie had ripped off the lyrics of an old
Mexican love song, which he had just left as a message. He spoke decent Spanish,
which he had learned from hanging around the migrants who worked at racetracks.

An especially gruff assignment editor had given Cynthia a tape to translate—
an interview with some obscure poet from Honduras, speaking at the local
community college—when Reggie called back with more lyrics. She grabbed the receiver on the first ring.

Even as an inexperienced stalker, Reggie was fairly certain that his intended victim was not supposed to negotiate. In exchange for his services as an on-call translator, Cynthia would allow him to follow her everywhere, even to trysts. For a few months, Reggie allowed himself to be cuckolded, but then started acting out. When he dropped off an envelope containing one of her publicity stills, her ambitious smile yellowed by some promising forensic stains, she called the cops.

The DNA matched and Reggie was looking at some serious prison time. His attorney had merely produced a studio-quality tape of a young reporter’s desperate pleas for his services as a translator, which Reggie had faithfully recorded. The tape also contained some graphic sexual banter; her reluctant participation had been forced by sheer panic over the station’s heavy promotion of her sit-down interview with the visiting Mexican president—in Spanish. Reggie’s resulting plea agreement spared the embarrassment of a trial, which one of the cable channels had planned to carry live during Molester Month.

Reggie only got five years, but it had not gone well; the other inmates constantly traded him for cigarettes and other pitifully inexpensive items. He channeled his rage at Cynthia and his new prison boyfriends by doing thousands of pushups and sit-ups on the floor of his cell. Released early on parole, he went straight to Nordstrom. He didn’t have to shop in the boy’s department any more.
As she looked at the mess in Jake’s bedroom, Cynthia assumed it was about her.

“It could be my stalker,” she said, “sending me a message.”

“Isn’t he still in prison?” Jake lifted a corner of the overturned dresser to rescue his favorite baseball hat. He knew the Santa Maria story, but Cynthia had neglected to tell him about Reggie’s other skills as a translator or audio engineer.

“He got out a month after I moved to New York.” She had been receiving photos of herself every week in the mail with a bullet hole in her forehead, but at least her teeth were still white. The feds had questioned Reggie, but seemed less enthusiastic when his attorney played the tape for them.

Lance and Martha plopped down on a pile of clothes. “I don’t mean to hurt your feelings, sweetheart,” Jake said, “but somebody threw this party for me.”

Jenny said, “I could protect both of you.”

“Thanks, but I only use former Mossad.” Cynthia folded her arms.

“Former what?”

“Forget it.”

Jenny absorbed the abuse like a box of tampons. “Where’s your bodyguard? Maybe he could teach me some tricks.”

Cynthia looked down. “He doesn’t travel with me. I only get him when I’m home. Budget cuts. It was either that or lose one of my appearance consultants.”

Jake said, “At least you’ll leave a pretty corpse.”
That should have set her off, but she just sighed. “You don’t seem happy that I’m back.”

“I’m feeling like my furniture right about now. I want some answers, starting with what you’re really doing here.” Jake motioned for the two women to follow him and headed back to the living room.

He stood under the boar’s head and they sat on the couch. “Since we’re telling the truth now,” he said, “this isn’t my security guard.”

Jenny introduced herself and stuck out her hand. Cynthia held it like a Gucci knockoff and then let go.

“This is really low,” she said. “I thought we were bonding, like sisters.”

“I’d go for a threesome,” Jenny said, “as long as it’s all cash.”

“You know we don’t pay for stories. That’s checkbook journalism.”

Cynthia expected them to believe the happy horseshit that the networks fed the public about their purity. Jake preferred the honesty of the tabloids. Information has a price, and they weren’t shy about negotiating. The prissy networks also paid, but passed it off as consulting fees or photo rights.

“Call it whatever you want, as long as it’s green.” Jake was starting to enjoy life as a mercenary.

Jenny looked at Cynthia. “I thought you had a crew back at the hotel.”

“I lied. My executive producer doesn’t know I’m here. Friedman flew us out in a private jet.”
“David Friedman, the big talent agent?” Jenny’s voice was full of money.

Cynthia nodded.

Jake rubbed his forehead. Friedman had represented all the network stars in his long and lucrative career. At eighty-one, he refused to retire. He attempted to hide his advancing age with a ridiculously dark shade of hair dye, but had to wear thick glasses to see anything. The frightening combination was nursing-home Goth. Jake had lunch with him once in Beverly Hills, at Cynthia’s insistence. Friedman largely ignored him as he worked through an endless line of sycophants, who hung around the table like shower mold.

“David says I need a bad-girl phase. He wants me to be photographed with Jake in public, holding hands. Kissing would be nice, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“How much is he worth to you?” Jenny framed the shot in her head as she added zeroes to the price.

Perfect, Jake thought. His living room was the frigging Chicago Mercantile Exchange and he was a cattle future.

Cynthia focused on him as if Jenny had disappeared beneath the cushions, like loose change. “I was hoping you’d do it as a favor to me.”

He leaned back against the fireplace, resisting the old pheromones as they curled around him.

“You’re joking, right?” Jenny glared across the couch.

“According to David, it would do a lot for Jake’s image, and might even get him on a talk show. He said he’d waive his usual fee for the first booking.”
“I’m not waiving anything,” Jenny muttered.

“But we have to go to LA in the morning so we can make the lunch run. If nobody famous shows up to eat in West Hollywood, David thinks the paparazzi would take a few shots of us.”

“I’m not going to any celebrity hangouts.” Jake proudly considered himself the anti-trend.

“I’ll let you clean my plate. It’ll be like old times. Please?”

Cynthia and Jenny waited for his answer. The dogs had returned to the living room and sat next to him with their ears up.

“LA isn’t happening,” he said. “But I will go to La Jolla and hang out at that place on Prospect. Movie stars have been there before, so it’s good enough.”

“David isn’t going to like that.” Cynthia had learned to pitch some ferocious anchor fits in New York, even as a fill-in, but she resisted the urge to start throwing things.

“I don’t like it, either,” Jenny said. “We haven’t agreed on the money. Besides, your girlfriend is right. None of the photographers will drive down for such a low-percentage shot. Not in San Diego.”

Jake said, “I’ve got a photog. Ramage.”

Jenny punched a throw pillow. “Not him. Let me handle it. I know a few who might be hungry enough.”

Cynthia reached over and took it from her. “I bought that, and this is my shoot. I make the rules.”
“Okay, make us an offer.” Jenny grabbed another pillow and slowly folded her hands on top of it. Cynthia made a face, like she tasted some cheap champagne.

“David takes half, if I can ever sell him on La Jolla.”

Jake spoke up. “Thirds. One for each of us.”

He sat on the arm of the couch, next to Cynthia. “I want to know one thing. When you were taking me to bed tonight, was it just your bad-girl phase? Or did you really feel something for me?”

Jenny moaned. “Too much information. Who do I look like, Dr. Laura?”

Cynthia put her finger on his lips. “Two-thirds of me were bad, and the rest wanted you.”

She got up and lingered by his side. “I’m going back to the hotel, so nobody has to fight over the couch.” She looked down at Jenny. “Or you can share the guest bedroom. I hope Jake didn’t get rid of those nice sheets I picked out for him.”

He walked her to the front door. On the porch, she turned to face him.

“You know what I said about the two-thirds? Make it fifty-fifty.”

Jake woke up and looked at his watch. Five-fifteen. Jenny was wrapped around him, making little popping sounds with her mouth. He’d only slept with one other woman without doing it. Her incessant chatter about each of the forty-six times she’d seen an aging country singer in Vegas had convinced him not to screw her. Then came the hot tub and a steamier shower. As they were climbing into bed,
it was the story of how she lost her diamond earrings that finally did it. She threw them at her former husband. One at a time. At night. In the snow.

It was way too impractical for Jake, cheap bastard that he was. He still drove his old BMW 633csi. Bought it new in 1989, the last model year. The body style was getting a bit dated, but it still looked good to him. It was one of the things that made Cynthia crazy, that he wouldn’t go out and buy a new car like everybody else. She refused to ride in it.

He heard a noise outside. Too early for The Los Angeles Times. Jake loved real newspapers, ignoring the lesser varieties except for the local headlines.

There was the noise again, a light tapping at the front of his house. Temporarily freeing himself from his latest entanglement, he got up and looked out the window.

No sat trucks. Just Alfonso, an illegal immigrant who lived in the canyon behind Jake’s house. He stood there, holding a swollen carpet sample. Jake opened the door. The white shag was actually a female cat named Snowball. Jake recognized her, even comatose, from the missing posters on light poles in his neighborhood.

“Que paso?” Jake was almost as bilingual as Cynthia was.

“Coyote, Senor Hake.” Like all the migrants, Alfonso used the Spanish pronunciation.

“Un hombre? Jake knew a smuggler would run down his own mother to escape the Border Patrol.
"No, coyote." Alfonso made paws with his hands and let his tongue hang out. He looked more like Scooby Doo, but Jake appreciated the effort.

Lance and Martha growled, but the cat was too sick to notice. It didn’t make any sense. Jake had seen carcasses from coyote kills. There wasn’t much left.

"Vaya con Dios," Alfonso said, handing the cat to Jake and making the sign of a cross. He walked to his mountain bike on the sidewalk and waved goodbye. Jake didn’t bother to ask any more questions. Alfonso was headed off to do yard work or some other hard job in Jake’s neighborhood, a reliable source of cash and indifference for the Mexicans.

The dogs sniffed at his hands, then started barking. Rick Ramage hurried up the driveway. Jake had forgotten about him, waiting all night in his car, but the photographer seemed distracted, not angry.

"Who was that guy?" Ramage’s voice was uncharacteristically subdued.

"Just one of the boys." Jake mowed his own lawn, but he helped out Alfonso and his friends in other ways. During rare outbreaks of winter weather in San Diego, he’d let the migrants sleep in his garage. The rest of the year, he’d give them twenties or buy them food at the closest strip mall.

"What did he say about the cat?" Ramage glanced around.

"A coyote got it."
“That’s all?” The photographer held out his camera and jabbed at the digital image frozen on the screen.

“You’re not gonna believe this shit.”

There was still some savagery left in suburbia, and Jake was glad. Not publicly, of course. He had looked appropriately dismayed when Snowball’s owner stopped her new Mercedes in the street to deliver the tragic news. He’d had plenty of practice, because Snowball was just the latest in a series of cherished pets that had disappeared in his neighborhood. Coyote snacks, Jake called them, but only when their owners weren’t around. Some were small dogs, which he detested. The little yippers were more like overgrown rodents. He felt vaguely sorry for the felines, who were simply overmatched. With thirty extra pounds, they might make a fight out of it.

Snowball’s owner had tearfully explained how she’d tried to make a pet out of the coyote, which preferred mesquite turkey from the deli instead of the pre-packaged brands. But when she left the French doors open to answer the phone, the predator had crept in and grabbed the sleeping cat—survival instincts dulled by years of overeating and inactivity—right off the leather recliner.

Snowball had awakened in time to utter a few primal cries, and might have been rescued with some frontier spirit and a rifle bullet up the varmint’s ass. But this was suburban San Diego, where guns were as welcome as stretch marks. The
housewives certainly didn’t trouble themselves to master the less-demanding tools in
the kitchen, such as colanders or measuring cups. That was the nanny’s job.

The cat’s other problem was a six-figure retaining wall, which pushed the
back yard to the very edge of the canyon and stayed low for an unobstructed view. It
also allowed the coyote to hop over it and disappear. Snowball was toast.

That was three days ago, according to the missing posters. Yet here was the
cat in Jake’s arms, if not exactly dancing like the ones in the television commercials,
least not fertilizing the manzanita bushes in the canyon.

The first image on the Ramage’s camera screen showed the coyote holding
Snowball in its mouth as Alfonso reached out. The next frame showed the migrant
holding the cat in his hands. In the third frame, Alfonso was cradling the kitty so he
could pat the coyote on the head.

Ramage looked as if he’d seen a second gunman on the grassy knoll. “It was
weird, like the illegal dude put a spell on the German Shepherd.”

Jake laughed. City boys thought coyotes looked like dogs, but the pointy ears
gave them away. Coyotes also had a certain lupine swagger that domesticated
animals couldn’t hope to match.

“What’s so funny? I’m still kinda rattled about the whole thing.”

“It was a coyote, not a dog.”

“Get out.” Ramage studied the image on the screen as Jake gave him a quick
nature lesson. The photographer’s eyes widened.

“The dude’s some kind of witch doctor.”
“I think they call them shamans.” Jake knew the migrants believed in some weird stuff, but the resurrection of house pets was even better than Scientology.

“He should have his own reality show.” With a profit motive, Ramage snapped out of it. “Think I should go legit and pitch it to Animal Planet?”

The cat yawned. Jake and Ramage looked at each other. They could stage an on-camera reunion between a fully recovered Snowball and her owner, shamelessly exploiting the emotional moment. The ratings would go even higher. Jake was already storyboarding the pilot, interspersed with the owner sobbing about her lost pet, right up until the final segment. The formula was stale and predictable, like chick-lit. But women still bought it.

“Go find Alfonso.” Jake wondered how the migrant would respond to being tailed by a black Corvette, but hoped he had developed some sort of immunity to opulence.

“The illegal dude? How do you know his name?” To Ramage and a lot of other people around San Diego, Mexicans were invisible.

“I’m Jake Elliott, remember?”

Ramage shook his head. “Yeah, you’re a terrorist and I’m a thief. Who’s gonna believe us?”

“Just get more proof. Got a video camera?”

“Yeah, but stills are usually all I need.”

“Stop thinking like an extortionist. Roll tape if he performs any other miracles.”
Ramage didn’t leave. “There’s one more thing. Are you gonna give your security guard a cut?”

Jake couldn’t have kept it from Jenny. Not because of Ramage’s big mouth, but because cattlemen kept their word.

“Half each for you and me, and she splits my share. You shoot, I write. Deal?”

They shifted the cat and the camera around to shake hands. Jake waved good-bye, then scratched Snowball’s ears.

“Want to be on TV?”

Jenny was wearing his shirt, sitting on the couch watching television. On the screen, the president was back at the White House. The old man spoke in a halting voice and gripped the dais with both hands. The crawl announced that the two justices he appointed to the Supreme Court had died while fly-fishing in Alaska—mauled by a grizzly they’d surprised on the trail, out for a pre-hibernation meal. The animal had swatted aside a security detail to get to the corpulent stalwarts of the court’s liberal bloc, whose well-publicized devotion to catch-and-release practices and hunting moratoria apparently didn’t impress the bear.

“Their timing really sucks,” Jenny said. She pounded one of throw pillows.

“Why couldn’t they have escaped with a few scratches?”

The cable network switched to its national-security correspondent at the State Department, who somberly ruled out terrorism. Given their fascination with
improvised explosive devices, he intoned, any reputable jihadist would have rigged a trout with a bomb and detonated it by remote control. Or maybe some boulders by the river. Igneous formations would be best, but even fragments from sedimentary strata could be as deadly as carpet nails.

“What is this, a fucking geology lesson?” Jenny whined.

In response to a rambling question from a blond anchor who looked about twenty-five, the correspondent patiently explained that even the lamest martyrs wouldn’t consider dressing up in a bear suit.

Next was a political science professor, placed in front of the obligatory bookcase. He noted that while the tragedy was very unfortunate, the timing couldn’t be better for the president. The embarrassment of yesterday’s cell-phone incident with the local television reporter—the cable channel showed the tape of Jake while the academic droned on—had been dramatically overshadowed by this breaking-news story.

“Don’t rub it in, dickhead,” Jenny growled at the screen. She turned to Jake.

“Your ex-girlfriend probably won’t come through, either.”

“Hey, don’t worry,” he said, holding up the cat. “I got us covered.”

The effects of Snowball’s trip to the other side had worn off. She finally noticed Jake’s two dogs and squirmed in his arms. He snapped his fingers. Lance and Martha, heads low, slunk off toward the kitchen.

“So what? It’s a cat.” Jenny aimed the remote at the television and executed the blond anchor.
“I thought you liked predators.”

“That’s not a predator. Too soft and decadent.”

“Leninism? I had you pegged for a Sun Tzu girl.” He put Snowball on the couch.

“Who says I can’t go both ways?” Jenny and the cat ignored each other. It was détente, or at least mutually assured disinterest.

“I love it when you talk realpolitik.” Jake always thought he had a little Bolshevik in him.

He told her about the photos of Alfonso rescuing Snowball and his ideas for a reality show. Jenny frowned every time she heard Rick Ramage’s name.

“I’d even take your fat friend over the skinny one,” she said.

“Sal? Nah, he’s gotta keep the day job. Ramage is perfect. He’s an eyewitness.”

“He’s also a drug addict.”

Jake shrugged. “It just adds another story line—redemption, once he renounces his dark past. We’ll get him cleaned up in time for the interview.”

Jenny thought for a moment. “Forget the cable channels. Go straight to the networks. We’ll have a bidding war. It’s way better than those cheesy D.B. Cooper shows. We got evidence.”

She pulled up a leg and held it against her chest. He could see her thong, a bright red number, and it wasn’t even Christmas yet. Then he remembered she was wearing a black one when he saw her changing in the van.
“New underwear?”

“I found some in that pile on your bedroom floor. Thanks for noticing.”

The thong could have belonged to the chatty country-music fan or one of several other women whose names and annoying personality traits he’d forgotten. Jake had a Salvation Army bin of clothing that had been inadvertently donated in haste by ex-lovers, accompanied by mumbled excuses about being late for work, school or dental appointments. Even on Sunday. To discourage those who were still dazzled by his cowboy charm and stubbornly determined to make breakfast or engage in other lame attempts at intimacy, he broke out the Copenhagen. That usually did it, along with several empty beer bottles strategically placed around the house for spitting.

It occurred to Jake that Jenny would simply take a pinch of chew for herself. She was fearless, even when it came to wearing another woman’s dirty underwear.

“Listen,” he said, “about last night. I was pretty tired.”

“I would have fixed that in a hurry.” She pulled up her other leg.

Jenny wasn’t making it any easier for him. Jake couldn’t open up to women, especially ones that were flashing him. As a sensitive male, he was useless as tits on a boar hog, as his grandfather used to say.

“I wanted to make love to you, but…” It was Cynthia. He could handle her on television, with the safety glass between them, plus three thousand miles. But up close and personal, she could still bust his balls.
"Hey, I understand." Jenny got up and put her arms around his neck. He smelled his cologne on the shirt. "Watching your old girlfriend leave was good enough for me."

"She won't give up that easy."
Jenny kissed him on the lips. "Neither will I."

"So it's not just the money any more?"

"That's the best part. You could have kept the cat for yourself, but you didn't."

Jake looked away. He didn't want extra credit for chivalry. "We're partners, right?"

She grabbed his chin and turned his face toward her. "I was standing behind the door when you made the deal with your friend. You didn't even hesitate."

"You didn't trust me?" Jake pulled away from her.

"Oh, I trusted you. But I wanted you to prove it to me." She came back around and stood in front of him.

Jenny played hard, just like he did. Maybe they'd make a good team, if they didn't strangle each other first.

"Where are you taking me to breakfast?" he said.

Jake insisted on driving his BMW. The old car stood out in his neighborhood—even the cleaning ladies drove newer models—but he didn't care. It
would be a good lesson on anti-consumerism and a positive self-image for his kids, if he ever had any.

As he rolled out of his garage, he noticed a blue mid-size sitting across the street. An undercover cop car. Jake cursed himself for not spotting it earlier that morning. Freddie, one of his interrogators at the police department, sat in the passenger seat.

“Watch this,” he said to Jenny.

Cutting the wheel sharply, he almost scraped the blue car as he backed around and stopped next to it. Jenny smiled at the trapped driver as Jake jumped out. Freddie was already moving, and the two men met between the bumpers.

“That’s obstruction of justice,” Freddie said.

“Actually, it’s double parking. Write me a ticket.”

Freddie stuck out his chest. “Want to go back downtown?”

“No, I just want to eat, and you’re not invited.”

The driver of the blue car—Jake recognized the tall one with the gold pen—had managed to crawl over the console and get out the passenger door. He dwarfed Freddie like Kareem Abdul Jabbar.

“Okay, boys, let’s see some identification.” Jake loved to borrow the cops’ procedural manual and use it against them. They’d skipped the formalities yesterday, and he didn’t object. But payback was hell.
Freddie reluctantly drew first. His real name was Bartholomew Matthew Markson, looking as uncomfortable as ever in a dark suit and tie and the standard FBI grimace. Picture day at the field offices must be a hoot. *Okay, don’t smile!*

“Mind if I call you Freddie?” The G-man worked his jaw. Jake knew he’d lost points for originality with the nickname. Bartholomew Matthew Markson had heard it before, but it still got to him.

“That’s Special Agent Markson to you.”

Kareem, Freddie’s partner, handed over his black leather case. Jake opened it. No ID card. He snapped it shut.

“I suppose you’re John Smith.”

“Very good, Mr. Elliott.”

Jake had heard about those guys, the ones with matching biceps and combat boots. When forced to interact with the civilian world, they each used the same name. Kareem didn’t fit the prototype.

“So you’re a spook, fighting the war on terror.”

The tall man held up a long finger. “In case you’ve forgotten, Mr. Elliott, the president says we’re all foot soldiers.”

That campaign shit was getting old. The president had been talking tough about extra vigilance against terrorists infiltrating the U.S. from Mexico. But not too tough. He didn’t want to alienate the Chicano activists on the far left who had urged his administration to give California back to them, but would settle for open borders. Or the right-wing extremists, who had demanded guard dogs, gun towers and a high-
voltage fence. There had been some welcome political cover from Hollywood; movie moguls had received some highly publicized death threats from al Queda after casting a Jewish comedian to play Mohammed—the fact that it was only a cameo didn’t seem to lessen the outrage—in a zany spoof of the Dark Ages.

Jenny had wiggled out through the driver’s side. Kareem looked down at her and smiled.

“Good morning, Miss Kawakami.”

She didn’t bite. “How tall are you?” Jenny squinted and moved sideways, using the man’s shoulder to block out the morning sun.

“That’s classified information.” Jake was starting to enjoy himself. Freddie flexed his arms.

“Can I tell him so I can kill him?” the short man asked. John Smith sighed and pulled an envelope from his suit jacket.

“More fan mail from my old station?” Jake opened it and read the letter. “I’m a target of a federal investigation involving conspiracy and money laundering. I thought I was bin Laden, and you’re treating me like Al Capone. Can’t you guys do any better than this?”

“Give us time.” Kareem looked at his watch, a massive Rolex that could be used to club seal pups. “By the end of the day, you might be appearing in front of a grand jury.”

“You tried that with the ELF, remember?” Jake knew the feds were still sore about their failure to sweat the Earth Liberation Front in San Diego. They’d jailed a
few environmentalists for refusing to testify about a multi-million-dollar arson job.

A judge had released them. No testimony, no break in the case.

“We don’t comment about on-going investigations.” Freddie repeated the line perfectly, just like a media flak.

Jake tried a different approach. “Hey, did you see me on TV this morning? Can’t help it. It’s my fifteen minutes of fame.”

Kareem gazed at his shoes, so shiny they could be used to signal search aircraft. “It appears you’ve abided by the spirit of your agreement with the president’s campaign manager. If you don’t do any interviews, that matter is closed.”

He looked up. “But this target letter is an entirely different matter. I’d advise you to seek legal counsel.”

Jenny spoke up. “Oh, you’re the good cop and your partner is the bad one. For a while, I couldn’t tell. But that line about legal counsel, that was a feigned attempt to appear human, right?”

Kareem blinked a few times. “If you move your car right now, Mr. Elliott, we won’t arrest either of you. See you in federal court.”

Jake walked to his car and stopped before getting behind the wheel. “When do I get my cell phone back?”

“That’s classified.” Freddie’s rushed delivery made him sound like the class pet.
Jake rolled forward so Jenny could get in. As he shifted into second gear, she could see his right hand shaking.

“You are scared, aren’t you?”

“Hell, yes. But I wasn’t going to let them see it.”

“I guess we’re not going to breakfast just yet.”

Jake accelerated through a corner. “Looks like I need a legal defense fund. Guess who’s making the first contribution?”

At Channel 13, the piles of broken glass roughly coincided with two chronic and reoccurring disappointments in the life of Bobby Jay Williams: Jake’s triumphant return to national television or another rejection from a network sports department. Nobody cared about Bobby Jay’s ferocious hits or acrobatic interceptions when he played for the Chargers. The former free safety was famous for saving a ferret from a size 13 EE death during a playoff game against the Seattle Seahawks.

The enormous cleat belonged to LaDangle Dingle, the Seahawks’ star running back. The ferret belonged to a breeder in Reno who planned to disrupt the primetime broadcast just before halftime to protest California’s ban against *mustela putorius furo*.

It had been up to Musty, a particularly athletic and mean-tempered female, to run around the field long enough for people to fall in love with ferrets. When they realized they couldn’t legally own them in California, they’d find the breeder in
Nevada, and just drive them back across the state line. This furry form of civil disobedience had been occurring with alarming regularity for the California Department of Fish and Game, but the breeder wasn’t happy with his modest profits. He wanted to open his own brothel, *The Frisky Ferret*, and that required some serious money.

The breeder had been a passable subversive who stole a media field pass, but he was a woefully inept fan of professional football. He hadn’t read the sports section, or he would have known the Chargers had trash-talked LaDangle all week, saying he ran like he had the Space Needle up his ass. Just before halftime, the Seahawks were up by four touchdowns (LaDangle had three) as the team had broken the huddle. Musty was already on the field when the breeder had realized Seattle’s quarterback wasn’t taking a knee to run out the clock; he had given the ball to his pissed-off running back. The ferret had arrived at the Chargers’ fifteen-yard line the same time as LaDangle and Bobby Jay.

Still fuzzy from LaDangle’s right knee smashing into his helmet on the previous play, Bobby Jay had thought the ferret was the football. Dumb bastard doesn’t even know he fumbled, Bobby Jay had said to himself as he tripped LaDangle and snatched Musty without even breaking stride.

The director of the broadcast got fooled and stayed with Bobby Jay, who had realized he was carrying the ferret when she bit him on the dislocated middle joint of his right index finger. The cameras zoomed in as he fell to his knees. Millions of
people swore they saw Bobby Jay attempt to give Musty CPR through his facemask. He’d never admitted that he pinned the damn weasel to the turf to get his finger back.

The stadium fell silent as the ferret ran off. The tears on Bobby Jay’s face, visible on the Jumbotron when the trainers removed his helmet, had been immediately mistaken for unspeakable joy at saving a precious life.

Musty bit a Chargers cheerleader and two security guards before she’d been euthanized with athletic tape in the home locker room. A shitstorm of negative publicity had followed, which the team privately welcomed as a distraction from the Seattle blowout. Bobby Jay’s lack of culpability for the ferret’s death only confirmed his new celebrity as a gentle giant; the Chargers’ media guide had conveniently exaggerated his six-foot height by several inches. Those eighteen seconds with Musty, which had been replayed endlessly on television for five days, eclipsed all his accomplishments as a player.

He had appeared on all the talk shows and magazine covers, playing along because of all the ferret-loving pussy that came with it. These weren’t the usual groupies attracted to pro football as a perpetual source of violence and free painkillers. But the new chicks had smelled like weasels, and Bobby Jay couldn’t stand it anymore. He’d take sweaty shoulder pads or socks any day.

He had learned to tolerate the constant harassment on road trips with the Chargers—pranksters left ferrets in his lockers and hotel rooms—but two concussions that season forced him to retire. He had assumed he’d get that network
job, but his agent couldn’t get anybody to return phone calls. Bobby Jay Williams couldn’t shake that fucking ferret.

In his desperation, he had talked Channel 13 into an on-going series on adventure sports designed to reassert his machismo and mental instability. He’d gone rock climbing without a safety rope, slipping and sliding seventy-five feet down the sheer face and breaking an arm and a leg at the bottom. An unsuccessful motorcycle jump had crushed vertebrae and bruised his internal organs. A face plant without a helmet off a ski ramp had broken his nose and jaw, which made his often-indecipherable delivery even harder for viewers to understand.

After all those injuries, his doctor had recommended water therapy, so he’d gone down in a steel cage with Great Whites in Australia and went for a swim outside. The bite-sized flap of skin on his right shoulder had required one hundred eight stitches to close. But the results of the audience research had never wavered, even after he punched the shark into submission with his good arm. Television viewers in San Diego thought Bobby Jay Williams was a PETA poster boy.

He had realized it would take a stunt more violent and extreme to change his image. There would be blood, and lots of it. But this time, he had vowed to himself, not his own.

Life in San Diego had its advantages. Not that sun-and-surf bullshit the chamber of commerce kept pushing. America’s Finest City was still a border town, and the drug cartels created a market for all kinds of illegal stuff in Tijuana. Jake
didn’t need any shoulder-fired missiles, but he could use a handheld police scanner so powerful that it violated FCC regulations. For no extra charge, it had been programmed with all the secure channels for various law enforcement agencies, including the FBI. Digital cell phones weren’t a problem, either.

The scanner chattered away as he and Jenny drove south. They heard Freddie checking in the legal advisor in the field office, discussing which federal judge would be easiest to roll for a wiretap. So Jake would be getting a party line, like his grandfather had on the ranch. He made a mental note to make up an Arabic-sounding name and accent when the telemarketers called his house. He’d even ask the callers if they’d like to join his mosque.

Like any good news junkie, Jake had learned to filter out the routine scanner traffic, an endless series of en-routes and copy-thats from the local cops. It was the high-pitched voices that got his attention, breathless from chasing somebody or jacked up on adrenaline during a shootout.

“Montgomery Tower, Air Thirteen. Mayday, mayday, mayday!” It was the helicopter owned by Jake’s old station. This was a real emergency, because the NewsBeaters would lose money by dumping the rest of the sponsored traffic reports during the morning commute. Under the direction of Richard de Doltier III, Channel 13’s station manager, advertisements covered every inch of the JetRanger’s fuselage. The damned chopper looked like NASCAR with rotor blades.
“Bird strikes, three of them. Make sure you write that down.” Another voice, which sounded as if it didn’t belong in the cockpit. Jake thought he recognized it. The tower acknowledged and offered to roll the emergency equipment.

The second voice again: “Did you get the part about the bird strikes?”

“That’s another affirmative, Air Thirteen.” Air traffic controllers were a testy bunch, especially with all the weekend idiots who shouldn’t have licenses.

“Are you part of the flight crew?”

“No, just a friend.”

Jake slapped his hand against the wheel. “That’s Bobby Jay Williams’ voice.”

“Who?” Jenny opened one eye as she leaned her head against the window.

“The sports guy, the one you hit on last night.”

“Oh, yeah, he was kinda cute. Crazy, but cute.”

He pushed the speedometer past eighty. “He’d be thrilled, I’m sure. But what’s he doing up there?” Since 9/11, the FAA had cracked down on passengers in the news choppers as a security risk. Too bad. Jake used to bum rides, and he knew one local traffic stud who had traded the back seat for blowjobs from every waitress he met.

Jenny yawned. “Who cares what Bobby Jay does? He’s just an ex-jock on local TV. Every NFL city has two or three of them.”

Jake looked around, trying to spot Air Thirteen in the sky. “Don’t underestimate him. If there’s a chance of dying in a really stupid way, he’ll figure it
out.” He told her about Bobby Jay’s history of hospitalizations and the resulting spikes in the ratings.

“I still don’t get it,” Jenny said. “Outside of San Diego, he’s worth two paragraphs on the sports page, even if he leaves a smoking hole.”

She had a point. Jake told himself it wasn’t personal, but maybe he just wanted to jam Little Dick de Doltier one more time. He glanced at the scanner and wondered if he would become another freelance loser, working as a day-hire, chasing brush fires, police pursuits and other local stories that didn’t matter. Or worse, become a channeler for a mystic migrant.

“All VFR traffic hold at Torrey Pines and Lake Murray.” The tower guys were getting into it. Jake exited the interstate and jammed down Aero Drive. He could see Air Thirteen, flying perpendicular to the runways, heading for the helicopter ramp. There was a large tumor on the Plexiglas.

“What the hell is that?” Jenny bobbed around in the passenger seat, trying to get a better view.

“I think that’s Bobby Jay.” The dark mass had sprouted human appendages, along with a red accent mark. Jake downshifted and the BMW ripped around a curve.

“What is he doing?” Jenny was still skeptical, because the story tentatively offered only one of the four media food groups: death. Sex, drugs and celebrities were not yet in evidence.

“I think he’s putting out a fire.”
They could see Bobby Jay waving the red extinguisher with his right arm. The rest of him was splayed against the bubble like roadkill. His feet were balanced on the skid and his left arm was hooked inside the open passenger-side window. As the chopper descended behind a hanger, he pounded the Plexiglas with the canister.

“Maybe you were right about him,” Jenny said quietly.

“Locals. What can you say?” Jake slid up to a security gate and punched some numbers on a keypad. “I’ve got a camera in the back somewhere.” He wasn’t a great photographer, but it didn’t take Ansel Adams to grab some shots of a downed chopper.

She reached behind the seats. “I’ll go look for some amateur video,” she said. “Maybe somebody got that midair routine.”

He drove through the hangers toward the tarmac. The cops hadn’t set up a perimeter yet, but he didn’t push it. He stashed the car next to a Beechcraft Dutchess with For Sale signs covering the props. Jake figured he was the first prospect in months. He felt sorry for the old girl, her paint faded and cracked. Sun damage and varicose veins.

Jenny handed him the camera and jumped out of the car. “Say hello to Bobby Jay for me,” she yelled.

Jake got out and shoved the scanner in his back pocket. In television newsrooms all over town, assignment editors had started yapping like a pack of poodles. Their crews were scrambling to get to the airport, but the closest one was still about seven miles away. The photographers’ voices, subdued by years of dumb
stories and not enough morning caffeine, only served to increase the ferocity of the ass-eds. A pity nobody called them that—at least not to their faces—preferring the monolithic assignment desk, or simply, the desk. Jake had always thought of his putative minders as the brain trust.

Channel 13 had rolled Salvador Reyes from home. Jake listened to the conversation as Sal’s smirk cut through the static. “Let me get this straight,” the photog said. “You want me to shoot our helo on the ground, like some wounded duck?”

The response from the desk was as authoritative as eighteen months of TV news experience could offer. “Right now, you’re documenting the incident for insurance purposes.” The punk wasn’t more than twenty-five.

“I’m a news photographer, not a fucking claims adjuster.” Silence. Jake had enough time to walk up to the chopper and shoot twenty seconds of video before the station responded.

“This is Richard de Doltier. Call the desk immediately.”

It was one of the most nauseating times in the newsroom, when station managers showed up during a big story. Some had the good sense to huddle briefly with their news directors and then go back to their offices, but Little Dick always planted his fat ass at the assignment desk and gave orders. Never mind that the last crisis he managed was in a sand trap.

“Ten-four,” Sal replied. Perfect. The station manager, who lived far away from truck stops or scanners, would have to be reminded about what that meant.
Jake got a tight shot of Bobby Jay, who was wearing an oxygen mask and signing autographs for the paramedics. Behind him, the front of the chopper was banged up like a Mexican taxi.

“Hey, Elliott, thanks for coming.” With the mask on his face, Bobby Jay’s voice resonated somewhere between a severe head cold and Mel Blanc. “How does it feel, Mr. Network? This time, it’s all about me.”

Jake kept recording. “You win, Bobby Jay. Climbing out on the skid to fight a fire took a lot of courage. No burns, just smoke inhalation?”

“Halon.” Commercial aircraft used the colorless gas as a fire retardant, even though it was nasty stuff in confined spaces. The chopper’s airspeed and downwash would have dissipated the fumes, but Jake figured the oxygen was standard medical protocol and good TV.

“What was burning?”

“Methanol.” Bobby Jay almost sounded authoritative. “Invisible flame. Indy cars burn it, too. Haven’t you ever seen a crash?” It was an amusing sideshow during the race, watching drivers and rescue workers putting out fires that nobody could see.

The chopper’s turbine burned kerosene, but Jake didn’t want to spoil the chemistry lesson.

“Fuel lines run up there?”

“Small auxiliary tank.”
It didn’t take a schematic to know that aircraft engineers tried to keep the gas away from things that ignited easily, like pilots. But Jake decided to play along. “You emptied the fire extinguisher, but you could still feel the heat from the invisible fire. So you knocked the tank loose before it could explode and kill everybody on board. Brilliant.”

Bobby Jay looked grateful. His cover story had included hostile space aliens armed with a ray gun.

Three cameramen sprinted toward them, trailed by female reporters wearing short skirts and high heels, stiff-legged as shore birds. The imminent arrival of the media meant the airport cops got busy, draping yellow caution tape around the chopper and guaranteeing themselves a few seconds of airtime. Everybody got into character, but Jake never followed the script.

“Where’s the auxiliary tank?” he asked Bobby Jay. “I didn’t see anything falling off the chopper.”

“It burned up, reentering the earth’s atmosphere.”

Jake looked up from the viewfinder. “If I were you, I’d shut up and get a lawyer. Have the station rent one for you.”

“Bite me, Elliott.” Bobby Jay sneered, but the thick plastic muted the menacing effect. He turned to face the local media, who were asking him if he felt like a hero.

Jake tucked the camera under his arm and looked for Air Thirteen’s flight crew. In the latest display of cost-saving brilliance, Channel 13 had dumped its
longtime pilot, Duff Keehn, a Vietnam vet who had more flight time than aerial beer
banners. In his place, the station hired kids trying to build hours for their helicopter
instructor ratings.

One of them had just disappeared around the side of a hanger. He was easy
to recognize; the top of the cockpit headset had flattened a spike-strip of his hair. As
he opened a car truck, the sound of Jake’s cowboy boots on the asphalt startled him.

“Oh, Elliott, it’s only you.” All the pilots knew him. Between the evening
traffic reports, they watched TV in the air. “Why’d you try to kill the president,
anyway?”

“I don’t like Mondays,” Jake said. The kid was way too young to remember
the classic line from the San Diego teenager who had shot up a school. She’d told
the cops her week started off too slowly.

“But yesterday was Tuesday.” The pilot checked his watch to be sure.

“I don’t like those, either.”

Pretending to be a borderline psychopath had its advantages, as Jake was
beginning to realize. The intimidation factor alone was worth it.

He pointed at the trunk. “Where’s the tape?” Air Thirteen had a record deck
for the two on-board cameras, as well as a microwave transmitter for live shots.
Whatever they were doing up there, Bobby Jay’s ego undoubtedly demanded the
video backup be rolling.

“What tape?” The pilot clicked a silver tongue stud against his teeth; the
urgent cadence sounded like a blind man in a cemetery.
Jake Elliott smiled. "You've got a lot to learn about covering your ass."

Once the pilot started spilling his guts, it was like an episode of Oprah.

"I panicked up there with that mayday shit. I practice my radio technique all the time in the shower. Why couldn't I have stayed cool, like an airline captain?"

Jake could have pointed out those guys didn't look like circus freaks, but he didn't want to destroy the fragile remnants of the youngster's self-esteem. The whimpering was pathetic, but it wasn't all Junior's fault. Dick de Doltier had turned Channel 13's helicopter into a day-care center.

"My parents got divorced when I was ten." The kid was starting to cry. Jake wondered if a spark plug-sized piercing in the pilot's cheek was stainless steel.

"It was all Bobby Jay's idea," the pilot blubbered. "He said he would throw me through a window if I didn't do it."

"Do what?"

"A drive-by from the helicopter."

Given Bobby Jay's history of aggravated battery, assault with a deadly weapon wasn't much of a stretch. There would be lots of names on his hit list. The sports guy's most recent tirades at the station had included starchy dress shirts, arrogant Porsche mechanics and the entire legal profession.

"A drive-by on who?" Jake hoped that prolonged neurological trauma—courtesy of a ten-year career in professional football—made it difficult to get a good sight picture.
“Coyotes. We were avenging the death of Marsha de Doltier’s Pomeranian.”

“Why didn’t you just shoot her instead?” The pilot thought it was a joke, but he’d obviously never been introduced to the nasty bitch nor attended the last company Christmas party. At the formal event, she had publicly humiliated a floor director for wearing a bolo tie, then tried to strangle him with it when he mouthed off. He’d agreed not to file criminal charges in exchange for a new pickup and a bass boat. Channel 13 never hosted another party for its employees, not even a picnic. Now the de Doltiers had commissioned a death squad over a lousy yip dog. It was just like them, Jake thought, retreating into their money.

“Where were you flying?” Inexperienced shooters cut loose at anything that moved and sometimes got lucky. Bobby Jay could have gunned down Rick Ramage and Alfonso, the mystic migrant.

“Fairbanks Ranch.”

Jake exhaled. The Ranch was one of the richest zip codes in San Diego. At least ten miles and three zeroes separated the palatial estates from the tract houses in his neighborhood.

“We were on a covert mission,” the pilot said. He wiped his runny nose, irrigating the dense foliage on a full-sleeve tattoo of the rain forest, complete with endangered species. “That’s what Bobby Jay kept calling it. He insisted on pre-flight briefings about survival techniques behind enemy lines.”

“Let me guess,” Jake said. “Find a sympathetic villager and ask to borrow the spare Lexus.”
“No, just deny everything, especially our relationship with the de Doltier family and Channel 13.”

“That would be difficult, with the station’s logo on both sides of the fuselage.”

The kid nodded. “That’s what I told Bobby Jay, but he was really into the commando thing. He got pissed about breaking radio silence to do the traffic reports.”

“So how many coyotes did you kill?”

“Just one. We flushed it out of the brush and chased it until it couldn’t run any more. The dumb bastard turned and tried to fight the helicopter.”

Jake was no fan of coyotes. He’d shot one himself as it stalked a newborn calf on the ranch. But this sounded more like a snuff video.

The pilot started to tear up again. “He just kept shooting. He made the camera operator stay tight to get all the blood.” Diagnoses of post-traumatic stress syndrome and the resulting medical claims would make Channel 13’s HR department long for the old days, when aging photographers had complained about bad backs from carrying first-generation video cameras.

“You got this all on tape?”

“Yeah. Bobby Jay ordered us to keep switching to the cockpit camera and him shooting the rifle.”

“What kind?”

The pilot shrugged. “Long and black.”
“Where is it?”

“He dumped it in a canyon after the accident.”

“What accident?” It was like interrogating a first grader.

“Three bullet holes in the Plexiglas.”

“He shot up the chopper?” Jake whistled. Duff Keehn, Air Thirteen’s former pilot, would love this story. “Did you guys bother to get your stories straight before you landed?” The rhythmic beat of silver against tooth enamel again.

“I didn’t think so,” Jake said. “Bobby Jay’s over there right now, talking way too much. Let the feds practice on him, and you show up when the rehearsal is over.”

He patted the pilot on the shoulder. “Cop to the unauthorized flight crew member. You may get a ninety-day suspension, but they’ll probably cut it to thirty if you appear contrite. Trust me, it usually works.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“It’s my new freelance career,” said Jake Elliott, “and I’m making it up as I go along. Give me the tape.”

The pilot didn’t hesitate. He opened the trunk and handed it over.

“I already switched it out.” The kid forced a smile. Even rookies knew enough to carry a damaged tape to pop in the chopper’s record deck. All the FAA got was snow.