

**The Unicorn Evils**  
**by Emma Bull and Elizabeth Bear**

*Faith in their hands shall snap in two,*

*And the unicorn evils run them through;*

--Dylan Thomas, "And Death Shall have No Dominion"

**ACT I**

**J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D. C.**

**Tuesday, 12 May 2009**

**0430 hours EDT**

Daniel Brady walked through the silent bullpen, over an hour still to go til sunrise, a mug of coffee engulfed in his right hand. He paused before the hallway door, nerving himself.

*You should have been there.*

Rich plumes of steam rose from the mug. Absentmindedly, he began to raise it to his lips, but arrested the motion when he remembered that the coffee wasn't for him.

*If you had been there, you could have taken care of them.*

He passed through the door and turned right, to Hafidha's dark and silent Sanctum Sanctorum. The ribsprung yellow couch hulked against the wall, what looked like a heap of dirty laundry huddled on it.

*You could have taken care of her.*

Brady paused in the door of the office. "Rise and shine, Duke."

One gray-blue eye, blearily squinched, emerged from under the zippered edge of a jacket. "From Hell's heart I stab at thee," Todd grated. "Team back?"

"Not yet."

"Is it the end of the world?"

Brady didn't need a mirror to know what his face said. Todd's expression was the only reflection necessary. "Pretty much yes. Coffee's on. The team will be on the ground in forty-five minutes and there's not time to do much except refuel and turn the plane around. As much of the team as came home."

Todd jerked upright, an adrenaline response if ever Brady'd seen one. "What do you mean?"

Brady held out the coffee, which Todd accepted gratefully. "Hafidha didn't show up for the flight."

Brady'd put a little more milk in the mug than usual to cool it for fast drinking--to which Todd applied himself. Between sips, he said, "And they didn't go looking?"

"Worth and Nikki stayed behind. We don't know yet--" Brady stopped. The anxiety and fear in his stomach swirled like water going down a drain. *We can't be certain the worst has happened.* He didn't need to say that to Todd. Todd could fill it in already. "She's gone off the rez, and we don't know why."

Even as the words were leaving his mouth, he cursed himself for choosing them. But at this point, all he could do was continue. "Reyes, Chaz, and Falkner are on their way home. The plan is we meet them at the airport and trade off. Reyes and Chaz will come back here to coordinate both teams. We'll fly back out with Falkner."

Todd held the mug to one side, rolling his neck against the familiar cramps of the couch sleeper. The corduroy windbreaker he'd been huddled under slipped down as he hiked himself up a little further. "Reyes is grounding Chaz?"

"Or maybe protecting him. Celentano wants him where he can be seen." Brady felt the strain in his neck, the sting in his eyes as he turned his head sideways, pulling against the hurt that wanted to turn into crying. "We're dropping Pete Pauley off in Ohio along the way, Sol."

Todd nodded. "So we're not going after her."

"No. We're headed to North Dakota. Falkner says she's fit enough to come with us."

Todd gulped one more long swallow. When he looked up again, his gaze was clearer, but he winced like his neck still hurt. Brady hunkered beside the couch in pity. "Falkner will make herself fit."

"If it kills her."

Todd nodded. "I bet she was one ballbreaker of a good LT. And god in Hell, I know I'm going to hate myself for asking, but what's in North Dakota?"

Brady's hands flexed in the fabric of his trousers. "Somebody poisoned one hundred and sixty-seven students and teachers at a junior high school on a reservation in Rolette County. They're asking for Federal help and Celentano thinks it's one of ours. There's nobody else but us, Sol."

"Reservation school." Todd said. He stood up, one hand on Brady's shoulder for a prop, and moved past him toward the hall. Brady followed. Out in the light, glancing into the bottom of his mug to assure himself that it was empty, Todd must have twisted that around in his head until it made a kind of horrible sense. "Indian reservation. One hundred sixty-seven dead. Requesting our help?"

"Yeah." Brady said. "This is gonna be bad."

Once through the doors, Todd headed straight for the coffee machine, scrubbing his free hand through his hair. When he spoke, it wasn't a complaint. It was just a naked assessment of fact. "We can't do this."

"No," Brady said. "We can't."

## **Somewhere over Virginia**

**Tuesday, 12 May 2009**

**0500 hours EDT**

The plane had always been a haven for them. Now it vibrated with emptiness and tension. Falkner sat at the port side four-top, staring out the window at darkness and feeling like the third-party mediator in an acrimonious divorce. Reyes occupied the most forward seat on the starboard side, his back to the cockpit bulkhead, head bent over his laptop as if he were actually reading. And Chaz lay on his back on the couch across the aisle from her, eyes closed, knees drawn up so his legs fit, either feigning sleep or attempting it. Whichever, he was having no success--the brown flesh pulled pale across the knuckles of his left hand where it rested on his chest, revealing tension and tribulation as he squeezed his fist on nothing again and again.

Falkner wanted badly to cross the aisle and take that hand in her own. But he wasn't either of her daughters; he was a grown man, with the scars to prove it, and the last thing

he needed was the kind of support he might interpret as a vote of no-confidence.

Not when he was already smarting from Reyes pulling him out of the field, and from-- from what Hafidha had done.

He'd wanted to stay behind and help Lau and Worth look for Hafidha. Reyes had refused to allow it. By the time Falkner intervened in the argument, it had escalated to an actual shouting match, and was well on its way to screaming and possibly blows. Falkner scrubbed her hands across her face, trying to get the ring of raised voices out of her ears. It didn't work; the raised voice that had ended the utterly predictable brawl and sent both men to their corners like kicked dogs had been her own, and she hadn't had the time to be gentle.

She couldn't reach out to Chaz without suggesting she doubted his strength. On the other hand, it wouldn't do any harm to suggest to Reyes that she doubted his. She unfolded carefully from her seat, swung into the galley and made two cups of tea, soft-footed down the aisle to set them both on Reyes's table, and slid onto the gray cushions across from him.

The engines made enough noise that a quiet conversation at one end of the cabin was inaudible at the other.

"You were right. We were out of control," said Reyes, without looking up from the laptop screen. She kept silent to make him raise his eyes. When he did, she pushed a cup toward him. He raised his eyebrows at the teabag tags hanging over both rims. The creases in his brow furrowed the darkening scars in his hairline.

"I like tea," Falkner answered the unvoiced question. "And it's a good beverage for civilized conversation."

"Which of us needs the civilizing?"

"You think one of us doesn't?" She sipped hot liquid across the cup rim and her tongue. She was no judge of tea, but it was leafy and earthy and just astringent enough to suggest it was a serious beverage for serious adult persons. "And have you noticed that right isn't any easier to take than wrong?"

Reyes sucked his tea, mixing it with air to cool it. Falkner wondered if his new dental work was sensitive to cold and heat. "He's the last person who should be on her trail."

"Because he'll fuck it up? He'll let his feelings get in the way?" The obscenity would startle him, coming from her. As she meant it to.

Reyes turned a level look on her, his black-coffee irises like pistol bores, and Falkner imagined a world in which Stephen Reyes was a tenured professor, using mere eye contact to say things like, "Did you wake up this morning planning to be stupid?" Falkner held her ground.

"Because he'd succeed if it killed him. And it likely would. Neither he nor I are going after Hafidha."

His lips pressed hard together, and he swiveled his head to stare out at the suggestion of dawn through heavy clouds. He hadn't meant to talk about himself.

When Falkner had shouted them down, back on the ground in Ohio, Chaz and Reyes had drawn apart, then drawn together, suddenly shoulder to shoulder. She wondered if either of them had been conscious enough of his actions to realize they were covering each others' flanks--unconsciously, instinctively, when a minute before they'd been at each others' throats. "He thinks you don't trust him," Falkner said, and swallowed more tea.

Reyes snorted. "I'll never outrun that, will I? It's me I don't trust. He..." Reyes's nails clinked on the glazed surface of the mug in a pattern Falkner didn't recognize. "If it came to a crisis, he wouldn't compromise. And I would. And we'd both be wrong. Neither of us should have to live with that."

"Depends on the crisis, doesn't it?"

Reyes looked down at his laptop again, but Falkner doubted he saw anything there. "I brought her in," he said finally, so softly she could barely hear him over the steady whine of the engines. "I told her she'd have a place and a purpose and a future, that she could keep doing the things she loved where the need was greater and the stakes were higher." He rubbed the inside corners of his eyes hard, pushed his fingers along his eyebrows and the bones of his eye sockets, and she could see the pressure in the graying of his skin where he forced the blood from the vessels underneath. "High stakes, high stress. Arguably the worst thing I could have done to her."

Chaz and Reyes both blamed themselves, of course. Blamed themselves for not seeing, not intervening, not being somehow superhuman enough to work some magic and make everything all right for a woman they both cared for deeply.

"Would it have been better," Falkner asked, "if you'd made her decisions for her?"

His expression was bare as a dead tree, and his eyes dull and weary.

Chaz sat up and fumbled behind him for one of the restraints in the cushions of the couch. A moment later, the prepare-for-approach chime sounded in the cabin. Reyes ducked his

chin and made much of securing his lap belt. Falkner took the cups back to the galley.

The tragedy was that Reyes and Chaz were licking the same wounds, aware that they were feeling the same pain and could be helping one another with it--and too busy hurting and withdrawing to take those first steps.

Falkner slid back into her seat and clicked her own belt as the plane banked and began its approach. It would come. She had faith in them, and in their relationship. If everybody lived long enough, it would come.

## **Dulles International Airport, Washington, D. C.**

**Tuesday, 12 May 2009**

**0515 hours EDT**

It was raining when the Gulfstream touched down at Dulles. What staggered down the plane's boarding stairs bore little resemblance to the honed professionals who had embarked a few days before. Todd fought the urge to rub his eyes. Brady, who stood on Todd's left side, the in and out of his breathing as soothing as that of a big quiet animal, couldn't hide the twist of his mouth around a frown of frustration and despair. The brimmed hat clapped on over his yellow hair dripped water front and back. A gray-beige raincoat, belted around his bulk, collected beaded droplets at the hem.

Chaz was first down, his shirt untucked, the flesh of his cheeks already drawing tight over the bones. If Worth could see him, she'd slap a burger with fries and a milkshake into his hands, and Todd figured after Miami, he might have a little of the same latitude. He hadn't thought far enough in advance for the milkshake, but he glanced at Brady in apology and said "Hey, Platypus! Heads up!" as Chaz hit the bottom of the stairs.

Reyes was appearing at the top, but Todd didn't think that was why Chaz's head snapped around with an alacrity that suggested active hypervigilance. His hands were already coming up as Todd tossed him the plastic Subway bag that had been tucked under his left arm. "You look like you could use that."

Brady didn't protest. Instead, he waved Chaz off as Chaz splashed forward, trying to hand back their improvised breakfast. "You need it. We don't. There's plenty of food on the plane."

Peanut butter crackers and oatmeal packets, but Todd wasn't going to complain.

"There's plenty of food on the ground," Chaz retorted, but he didn't have the heart to put

up much of a fight.

Reyes hit the asphalt with Falkner on his heels. His go bag was shoved under one arm, Hafidha's fuzzy monster laptop case over the other shoulder. Todd found he couldn't actually look at the thing with its great googling eyes without wanting to construct elaborate metaphors about their accusing stare.

Chaz stepped close to Todd before Reyes and Falkner caught up. He started to say something, but whatever it was didn't get all the way up his throat before he closed his mouth and swallowed it again, voicebox bobbing in his striated throat like a small animal kicking in a trap. He stared down at his feet, so crumpled under the weight of his emotions that Todd was looking at him more or less on eye level.

"I want to go to her, too," Todd said. "But we don't know right now if Nikki and Daphne are any closer to her than we are. We don't know where she is, and the place you can help her most is here."

Chaz looked up. Todd wondered if he knew he'd bitten his lower lip bloody. "I know where she is," he said, so quietly Todd understood him mostly by lipreading. "She's in the wind."

That same wind scarfed Chaz's hair across his cheek, strands catching on his lips as he spoke. It raised the hairs on Todd's nape, where chilly rain trickled.

Behind them, the whir of tires on wet asphalt, the sound of an opening door. Crisp footsteps squeaked across the tarmac, two sets rather than the one Todd had expected. He didn't turn; he already suspected, and he'd know soon enough. *Don't hand away your advantages by letting them see your surprise, Solomon.*

Reyes flicked water off the tight, short coils of his hair like a cat. The rain spattered his immaculate suitcoat, spotted the pewter-colored silk tie. He didn't say anything, just took one deep breath and sighed. The space between him and Chaz spoke volumes. He didn't turn to greet the new arrivals either, but he was facing in the right direction to see them. Falkner touched his sleeve with the back of her hand.

*Everything functioning as it should. Even the fights. We'll hold the fort no matter who comes.*

Pauley and Celentano became visible in Todd's peripheral vision before he realized that he was thinking of them as the enemy. Todd caught Reyes' eye and the usual silent understanding passed between them. This was the handoff; tag team eff bee eye. In the wake of Hope Mitchell, Reyes was getting better at delegating, or maybe he was just too

fucking tired to do it all himself anymore.

Brady cleared his throat thoughtfully. "That's a hell of a metaphor when you stop to think about it."

Chaz smiled the most painfully anhedonic smile Todd had ever seen. Apparently he, like Todd, was past playing the game where they pretended to be surprised that Brady had a liberal arts education. He didn't speak, though, just shook his head, and Todd noticed Falkner moving up on his left side to support him. And, incidentally, put her body between Chaz and Celentano.

Todd nodded and held Chaz's gaze, since he had it. "Pretty, isn't it? Every cop's a poet."

That smile, if possible, grew harder and more bitter until Chaz looked away. He turned and walked toward Pauley and Celentano, sweeping Reyes in his wake.

Falkner almost started after them, but Brady put a hand on her arm. "Reyes can handle Celentano."

She scowled at him, but nodded. "It was a bad ride home."

"Gonna be a bad ride out, too," Pauley said, coming within earshot. He looked underslept and barely-tidied, his hair sticking in unwashed locks where he'd combed it. Beyond him, Chaz had reached Celentano and stopped him, and from everything Todd could see, he'd also amended his body language into something professional, polite, and welcoming. *How much of that is him and how much of that is Boy Wonder?*

As if there were a difference. "How can you tell the dancer from the dance?" he muttered under his breath.

Celentano's body language was pretty articulate, too. He outweighed Chaz in both mass and physical authority, but he couldn't match his height. Still, he didn't stretch to try. He leaned a little forward and tilted his head, examining Chaz and Reyes as if he were dickering over a car and trying to get a discount for dents.

When Todd turned back, Pauley and Falkner were looking questions at him. "Never mind. Come on; we'd better hurry or we'll miss that plane."

Unlikely, since its departure was dependent on them. And Falkner shook her head.

"We're still waiting on one," Falkner said, as a second dark sedan purred across the approach to pull up beside the one that had disgorged Pauley and Celentano. The driver stepped out before the wheels had quite stopped turning and opened the rear door.



It was all very John Woo until a pair of stubby female legs in sensible slacks and shoes slid out, and Madeline Frost, MD, levered herself from the passenger compartment, wearing a blue slicker and holding an umbrella. She dusted herself fussily before turning to retrieve a gray tweed rolling bag.

All activity stopped as she trundled it across the concrete. Celentano, Chaz, and Reyes lifted their chins and watched like antelope wary at a water hole. Todd saw Brady take a deep breath. Falkner and Pauley turned shoulder to shoulder, so they almost looked welcoming.

"Oh," Brady said. The stony outline of his jaw told Todd that Brady was seeing one hundred and sixty-seven dead people laid out in rows in a parking lot, on the painted wood of a basketball court. Sixteen rows of ten, plus seven left over. Or thirteen rows of twelve, with eleven left over. Yes, that was the way they'd do it. People liked things to be orderly.

Todd touched his elbow. "Want to offer to get her bag?"

## **Somewhere Over Virginia**

**Tuesday, 12 May 2009**

**0545 hours EDT**

Todd was settling into his chair at the four-top when Brady leaned across him and placed a cup of coffee between his hands. He dropped two packages of peanut butter crackers and one of Oreos on the table beside it. "Good work."

"Good work?" Falkner and Pauley were at the front of the plane, heads bent. *Liaising*, Todd thought wryly. Or working out a strategy. Frost was in the last seat before the galley, her head tipped back, neck supported by a horseshoe travel pillow. Todd wondered if she were actually dozing, or simply isolating herself from other primates in close quarters.

Brady lowered himself into the chair opposite Todd. "The guilt will make him eat it." He picked open his own package of crackers with a thumbnail, and Todd fancied for a moment that the crackle was the sound of the worry lines drawing themselves between his eyebrows. "He wouldn't otherwise."

Todd picked up the coffee cup. Brady'd brought it how he liked it this time: real milk, medium-brown, no sugar. "We do what we can."

Brady took a deep breath and let it out, cleansing himself of something. When he looked up, he was Special Agent Daniel The-G-Stands-For-G-Man Brady, solid as a rock and twice as impermeable, all tailored suit and Eliot Ness stare. "And we're damned good at what we do."

**J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D. C.**

**Tuesday, 12 May 2009**

**0550 hours EDT**

Reyes could have set up Hafidha's laptop in her Sanctum and started work on it there. Or he could have parked it on the extension of his own desk. But he found that, in the echoing emptiness of the space normally occupied by his now-scattered team, he wanted the companionship of another working body. The desk by the window, beside Lau's, was still untenanted, piled with overflow files and non-confidential paperwork. Reyes could claim it for a few days without inconveniencing anyone.

He refused to contemplate the possibility that this would take more than a few days to resolve. Just as he refused to believe they might not have even those few days.

While Villette pretended not to watch, Reyes cleared off three square feet of desktop and plunked the laptop there. He plugged it in, made sure the wireless switch was in the off position, and unceremoniously powered it up.

It booted fast, and Reyes found himself staring at a password prompt layered over Hafidha's current Krazy Kat desktop image.

He heard Villette's chair whisk across the carpet, and the soft footsteps that followed. Villette was light on his feet again, athletic and effortless as he crossed the bullpen to stand over Reyes's shoulder, something Reyes would normally never permit--just as he'd normally never put his flank to a room like this. Outside the windows, a gray sky was beginning to show the silhouettes of the surrounding rooflines, and the cold overcast light fell in a blurring diagonal across the laptop screen.

"She's hacked the firmware on that," Villette said, hesitantly. Reyes could hear the desire to repair their earlier argument in his tone, and welcomed it. "It's customized for her, um. User interface."

"Which means nobody else can use it," Reyes encouraged. He didn't turn to look at

Villette, because Villette sounded understandably skittish, and it was too bright outside to get much from the reflection in the window. But he could guess at Villette's expression, the stretched-thin weariness and worry that would grace the cantilevered bones of his face.

"Accidental byproduct," Villette said. "She uses her laptop as a portal to the FBI computers, because it's easier than modifying them, too."

"We need to know what's on it."

"Even if we *could* use that, we wouldn't find anything. Hafidha knows about data security, for God's sake. Yes, she's probably got incriminating stuff in memory. The one she's got with her, at the end of her neck. You can't crack the files on this one, and you can't crack the files on that one."

"Of course we can."

Reyes felt Villette's stare on the back of his neck. He took a deep breath, aware that this was his shot at getting Villette focused and working, rather than despairing. He looked up and caught Villette's eye, ignoring the discomfort craning his neck caused these days. "We're behavioral analysts. It's what we do. It's what you and I *can* do, to help Hafidha and the rest of the team."

The thing Villette's mouth did was expressive, if ambiguous. "If you won't let me go after Hafs, at least let me follow the team to North Dakota."

"What can you do there that you can't do here?" Reyes asked.

"They need me. I'm the closest thing to a First Peoples agent in the BAU. Even if I'm mestizo rather than M&eacute;tis, my presence could help take some of the edge off."

He jittered with tension, hands twisting in his pockets. He desperately needed to be doing something, anything, preferably physical. And Reyes could not give him that. But he could at least give him direction.

"Bonding is what the local law enforcement liaison officer is for," he said gently.

"They *need* me."

"I need you." Reyes raised one hand, stilling Villette's protest. "Falkner's going to call when they hit the ground in Cincinnati, and she'll need anything you can get her on mass poisonings and the local political background."

"Hafidha will be able to tap that phone call," Villette said.

"She'll be monitoring your web searches, too, and everything anybody does with the entire FBI network--unless she's decided to cut all contact. We have to run with the assumption that she's keeping an eye on us. Now get to work."

The contemplating look Villette gave him was a reflection of the thought process going on behind those mismatched eyes. He wasn't angry anymore. Reyes was pretty sure it had been referred aggression anyway, and was prepared to forget anything Chaz had said if Chaz would forgive him back.

Reyes didn't imagine it was forgiveness that Villette was processing now. Instead, he had just grasped the practical applications of what Reyes had told him--and not told him--and was considering ways to use those searches to influence Hafidha's actions.

"I see," he said, and went back to his desk, head a little higher.

Villette could have entered the Sanctum Sanctorum and used Hafidha's webcam to communicate with the team on the plane. But Reyes didn't blame him for just liberating the webcam and a second flat-panel monitor and working from his own desk. It didn't have Hafidha's wall of monitors and massive array of under-desk power, but Villette didn't need seventeen simultaneous access points.

And, Reyes thought, Chaz's desk and chair were tall enough for him, and it didn't break his heart to sit there.

He put his head down and worked while Reyes started profiling Hafidha. Eventually, he'd have to bring Villette in on this; he knew her better than anybody. But Reyes could buy him a little time to get square with the idea.

When Falkner called, Villette was ready. Reyes came around behind his desk now, so the webcam would pick him up also, but he let Villette do the talking. Falkner's camera showed Brady and Todd behind her, as well. Frost was not in evidence.

Falkner leaned forward, framed in the narrow borders of the video conference feed. "Assuming the local authorities are right, and this is a mass poisoning incident, how sure are we that it isn't a terrorist attack?"

Villette licked his lips. He held the coffee cup in one hand, but didn't drink. Reyes wondered if it were nervous thirst, or something to clench his hand around. "According to research at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, it's incredibly uncommon. There have been 365 confirmed cases of malicious food contamination in the world since 1950. People deliberately contaminated a water supply seven times, which

resulted in a total of three deaths. There are only four cases total of deliberate contamination of a food supply, and in none of those cases was anyone harmed."

Falkner's eyebrows rose. "Those numbers don't add up, Chaz."

Villette shook his head. His hair was still flattened in the back from sleeping--or feigning sleep--on the plane. "The numbers don't add up because seventy-two percent of the reported poisonings were absolutely normal everyday generic acquaintance murder attempts. Strychnine in the coffee, cyanide in the tea. And only sixteen percent of these cases resulted in five or more casualties. Nineteen cases claimed ten or more lives. Four of *those* involved serial killers operating over a time frame of years.

"Among gammas, we have Clemson McCain, who does not show up in the Singapore study for obvious reasons. But I'm not sure direct action upon the victim qualifies under the parameters of the study, in any case."

Todd, Reyes noticed, did not react. Brady ducked down to get more firmly in frame and said, "We don't know how the UNSUB is causing these deaths. It could be direct action."

"It could," Reyes agreed. He brushed a hand by Villette's shoulder, not quite allowing the contact he would have used to cue a less touch-prohibitive individual to keep talking.

With Chaz, the motion was enough. "There are also intentional group poisonings in a controlled environment. These are most often the result of a mass suicide linked to religious cult activity, as with Jonestown or Heaven's Gate. Those cases must be considered separately because of the more or less willing participation of the victims."

That cracked Todd's stoneface. "Not all of them are willing. Cooperation can be coerced."

Villette set his coffee cup down between his body and the keyboard. "Twenty-three percent of cases occurred at a food service level, and a little more than a tenth of that twenty-three percent resulted in one hundred deaths or more. Forty-four percent resulted in none. By far the most common agents used in these poisonings were conventional toxins such as cyanide, lye, or mercury. There were nine incidents involving biological agents, among which the study includes botulinum toxin, ricin, salmonella, and fecal matter, and eight cases of radiological poisoning, most of which are poetic justice meted out to former KGB agents and so on. There's also a case or two of suspected or confirmed intentional poisoning with dioxin. I'd hate to be the guy handling that stuff."

"So what you're saying here," Todd said, his voice thin and wary over the connection, "is that mass poisonings are awfully hard to manage."

"That's what I'm saying, yes. Poison is a tricky way to kill: tolerances vary, which is why

we talk about an LD-50: a lethal dose for fifty percent of the individuals exposed. Which is, by definition, not lethal to the other fifty percent. So something like this, where there are absolutely no survivors?"

"It's anomalous," Brady said, as Falkner turned her head to look at him, lips pursing in consideration.

Chaz nodded. "*Damned* anomalous."

"Good work," Falkner said. "What have you got on the political situation?"

"It's a mess," Chaz said. "You're walking into a worst-case scenario in terms of Federal versus Indian relations. Emphasis on the word *versus*. Details are in the dossiers I sent, keywords Leonard Peltier and Russell Means. The population of Rolette County is more than seventy-five percent American Indian, by the 2000 census, and it and the surrounding areas are some of the poorest regions in the United States. Unemployment and the diseases of poverty are rampant.

"The Metigoshe Reservation maintains its own elementary schools, junior high, and high school. There is some manufacturing industry on the reservation, and a fair amount of tourism. The reservation's population is around nine thousand; there are about twenty thousand enrolled band members, but--obviously--most of them live elsewhere. Unemployment on the reservation is close to seventy percent, and life expectancy under fifty.

"The good news is that the tribal lands where the killing took place have their own independent police department. They requested assistance, and it's been handed to us, primarily, as a mass murder. So that's one *less* jurisdiction to deal with, although you can bet the local BIA will want in on the collar. If there is a collar. If it's a cluster, they'll be just as happy to let us take the fall."

"Walk on eggshells," Falkner translated. "Don't carry any stick at all."

Chaz said, "The chief of police is Winona Spencer, 55. She is a returnee; educated in Ann Arbor, she served twenty-one years on the Minneapolis police force. Her service record suggests a pretty good cop."

Falkner said, "If the gamma is *not* a tribal member, will that be worse or better?"

"If they are," Reyes said, "jurisdiction becomes more complicated. If the gamma is not an Indian, he or she is our problem. If he or she is... tribal authority trumps state and federal, although as a major crime this will still be tried in Federal court. I do note that the DEA

doesn't always abide by those guidelines."

"Neither had the FBI, historically," Chaz said. "That's part of what we're up against here."

Reyes did not miss the reproachful glance that said, *I could be helping them.*

"They asked for help," he said. "Help is on the way. Offer full cooperation, Esther, and we'll sort the details out with Celentano as necessary. He's promised to make sure the BIA is kept as far away as practicable."

"How far is that?"

Reyes swallowed. "Depends on if anybody calls up a Senator, I guess."

## **Yardston, Ohio**

**Tuesday 12 May 2009**

**0730 hours CDT**

Pete Pauley looked like he'd been driving all night, and Daphne was pretty sure it wasn't an artifact of the crappy fluorescent illumination in the Yardston Denny's. The sun was up, the sky a funny lumpy gunmetal color that boded ill for anybody with picnic plans on this particular Tuesday. Daphne hadn't had a chance to check Weather Underground yet, but she was pretty sure the Midwest was about to treat them to one of its legendary thunderstorms.

Lau caught her looking. "Maybe we'll get a tornado," she said, half-hopefully. She pushed her eggs around her plate with the edge of her fork. Daphne wasn't sure any of them had made it into Lau. "Ground some planes."

Daphne cupped her coffee cup between her hands, more for comfort than because she wanted any more coffee. Any more of *this* coffee, anyway. She'd kill for a cup of T.'s home-ground brew. "If she's flying, she's already gone. Long gone."

"Not necessarily. The question is going to be how she decides to travel. Airports, they're bottlenecks." Pauley was knocking back the brown, burned water like it was nectar and ambrosia, but then Daphne had seen him drink out of the Down The Hall pot at three in the afternoon when it had been stewing since eleven. And he'd already flown from DC to Cincinnati and driven in this morning. She was half-surprised he hadn't parachuted out of the Gulfstream over a cornfield, though she supposed the cruising altitude was really too

high.

"Train stations, bus stations, also, though less so. Car rental agencies." Lau leaned forward. She was drinking watery hot cocoa from powder, and Daphne was relieved to see that those calories, at least, were getting into her. *Mother hen.*

Nikki noticed her looking and patted her arm. Daphne caught the fingers and gave them a squeeze. "Computer records won't be useful. And whatever we find, we can't get it back home except in person." *We're on our own. No safety lines.*

"Nothing by digital means," Pauley said. "Which means sneakernet if we need to report in. Celentano knows we'll be running on radio silence. The North Dakota team are going to make it look like we're all with them."

"The plane stopped in Cincinnati to pick us up." Lau smiled a tight, professional smile that didn't do a thing to settle the wrenching in Daphne's gut. "Good thing I've got enough cash for breakfast."

"I've got cash," Pauley said. "Victor didn't kick us out to drown."

"Of course not," Daphne said. "He wants her back as bad as we do."

"In one piece," Pauley said in the tone of one who is reinforcing a point he does not expect to have believed. He pushed a flat palm across his worried forehead and good-boy haircut. "We need a strategy."

"We have one," Lau said. "Old fashioned footwork. We've started already, but it's grim. Still, she was on foot when she left the hotel, and she's not precisely a nondescript individual. Somebody saw her."

"Or if somebody didn't see her, it's because she went to ground *fast*. And stayed there." Daphne forced herself to eat two more forkfuls of cottage cheese. It tasted like sandy lard, and she wasn't sure she could blame the restaurant for that entirely.

Pauley reached for the coffee carafe, unfazed by the fingerprints liberally salting its chrome surface. No wonder he and Todd got along so well; they both raised phlegmatic to the level of performance art. "You sound as if you like that version of events."

"Chaz couldn't find her," she said. "And he *looked*. So she had to have a bolt-hole located and planned on using it, because we were after her in under ten minutes, she was on foot, this town doesn't have prowling taxis, and nobody is outrunning Chaz Villette when he's in a hurry to catch up."

"So she might not have that much of a head start," Lau said. "She might be counting on



us overshooting her."

"She might still be in Yardston, and if she's not, the trail might not be cold," Daphne confirmed.

Pauley nodded. "How much time have you ladies devoted to this footwork already?"

"All day yesterday," Lau said. "Most of the night."

"Check the bus station yet?"

Daphne smiled, although it felt drawn and pasted across her cheeks like white glue drying on skin. "If you're done with your breakfast, that's where we're going next."

#

The bus station consisted of a counter in the lobby of the Holiday Inn Express. The man behind it was thick-waisted, pink-faced, and smelled of cigarettes. He hadn't sold a ticket to a tall, slender black woman.

"Only two buses a day, so it's not hard to remember," he said with a shrug. "One to Cincinnati, one back. Eleven-fifteen a.m. and five-twenty p.m."

I was with her at five-fifty-one, Lau thought. "Was the bus on time yesterday evening?"

"Yes, ma'am. Officer. Nobody boarded, neither."

"Thank you." Lau flipped open her card case, thumbed out a card, and handed it across the desk. "If you do see a woman matching that description, don't interfere with her; just call that number immediately."

"Sure thing."

Lau squared her shoulders and turned to meet Worth and Pauley in the middle of the lobby. Their faces were report enough, as she supposed hers was, but she waited until Pauley held the door for his fellow agents and let it settle closed behind them before she said, "Not the bus."

"The desk clerk hadn't seen her, either," Worth said. She jammed a blunt-fingered hand through her hair, knocking her growing-out bangs askew. Outside, the morning's threat of rain had blossomed into full-blown warfare, a crackling electrical storm that backsplashed water eighteen inches off the pavement and made the windows shake against their frames.

"Right." Lau lowered her voice and her head, feeling as if the rain pushed her shoulders down. She turned close into Worth and Pauley to close the triangle and create a kind of intimacy between them, in defiance of the size of the room. "So we're doing this all wrong. We're fucking behavioral analysts. Can we think like Hafidha? Come on, Daphs, you know her better than any of us--"

"I--" Worth's mouth did that crumpled-paper thing it did when you were right and she hated it. "Yeah. We're friends. This isn't right."

"None of it is right." Hesitantly, Pauley put his hand on her shoulder. Worth didn't step away, but neither did she give any sign she'd noticed it. "You're trying to help her, Worthie. She's going to appreciate that eventually, if not today."

Worth managed a pinched smile. "Thanks. All right. Chaz quartered the whole area on foot, and if he'd seen anything that so much as *suggested* Hafidha was anywhere to be found, he would have been all over it like a dachshund down a badger sett. So she evaporated, and she planned on evaporating, which means she reverse-profiled *us* and went for something that we would never think of.

"She's got to know we'd think of public transit, but all Yardston's got--it's got buses, barely, and they're not regular. And it's *hard* to hitchhike these days. I've tried to flag down roadside assistance, and you know, nobody bloody stops even for that."

The sick-sharp sensation coming up Lau's throat was desperation. "But after the first heat was off she'd move, and move fast. She'd know we'd comb the immediate area as soon as we could organize. And she wouldn't leave any clues there, anyway. So where does she move *to*? She needs transportation, no matter where she's going. What's in range of a strong woman on foot with her stuff in a pillowcase?"

"So she's on foot," Pauley said. "Where does she go to hide on a Monday in the middle of suburban Ohio? What are her options? The housing development, a Staples, an industrial park."

Lau looked up. "Industrial parks have service roads, landscaping, electronic security systems. Industrial parks in depressed rust belt towns have empty buildings."

Worth nodded. "It's a place to start. We'll hit those. Maybe a security guard saw somebody out walking? Those kind of places aren't really havens for pedestrians, except on the lunch hour."

"Let's go back to the hotel and start working a spiral out again," Lau said. "In a few hours, we'll have burned enough daylight that it'll be about the same time of day as it was when she took off. We'll recanvass; the right people, the ones who might have noticed

something, will be home."

Worth's eyes met hers. The communication that passed between them was grounded in solid acquaintanceship and too many life or death situations. Lau wondered if she dared call it a friendship, too.

Worth nodded. "Let's do it."

## **Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, North Dakota**

**Tuesday 12 May 2009**

**1000 hours CDT**

It was not raining in North Dakota--a small blessing, Esther Falkner thought.

Two women met the Gulfstream on the dusty tarmac of the reservation's airport, its one runway so short that even the ex-Navy pilot must have pulled some serious black magic to land. Both were tall. One was spare, almost bony, with an outdoorswoman's crow's-foot, tanned fair skin, and brown-black hair as dark as Falkner's, but cropped short and shot with more gray. Silver rings laddered both ears from lobes to cartilage, glinting against the salt-then-pepper of her hair. She had a gunbelt strapped on over an indigo uniform with a gray-blue shirt open at the collar, a badge on the breast and the shoulders decorated with an embroidered patch bearing the reservation's seal, a red star, and the words *Tribal Police*.

The other woman was broader, darker-skinned, and lighter-eyed, a medium brunette who wore her hair in a single thick braid like Falkner's. She wore sunglasses pushed up onto her head. A gray shirt girded by a dark blue tie peeked out the collar of her blue Gore-Tex patrol jacket, and a yellow stripe decorated the outside seam of her navy trousers.

"Who ordered the Mountie?" Brady said, paused beside Falkner at the top of the stairs. The metal scaffolding settled under his weight. It gave a little additional squeak of protest as Todd stepped out behind them, but she couldn't help but consider it *pro forma* with Brady already loading the structure.

Frost waited until they were all on their way down the stairs to step out. She followed silently except for the brisk tapping of her shoes.

"The reservation crosses the international border," Todd said, tiredly. "If they invited us, it makes sense that they invited them."

Brady grunted. "Well, that's a jurisdictional clusterfuck. You think she knows about the anomaly?"

Falkner shrugged. "The chief or the constable? The tribal authorities probably don't love the Mounties any more than they love us Feds. The history's just as bad, and just as muddy. Let's just remember that we're guests, and the goal is finding the gamma before anybody else dies."

She descended, knowing the men would follow, and watched the Mountie and the tribal cop come up to meet them. "Chief Spencer?" she asked at the bottom, extending her hand. "I'm SSA Falkner of the Anomalous Crimes Task Force. My colleagues are Supervisory Special Agents Daniel Brady and Solomon Todd, and Dr. Madeline Frost, who is a forensic pathologist. We're very sorry to meet you under such circumstances."

Up close, some of the tribal officer's pallor could be attributed to the exhaustion that also left her cheeks hollow and her eyes settled into grim caves. Nevertheless, Chief Spencer gave Falkner a firm handshake before handing her off to the Mountie. "Good of you to come, Special Agent. Welcome to the Metigoshe Reservation. This is Constable Robin Spears of the RCMP. She's our liaison officer on the Canadian side and an old friend. I have to admit, I'm surprised to get you folks all the way from Washington and not the BIA."

"We're specialists, Chief Spencer," Falkner said, shaking the constable's hand while Spencer dealt with greeting Todd and Brady. Frost stayed back, her hands full of luggage, conspicuously unavailable for physical contact.

Chief Spencer snorted. "So're they. Call me Winona, would you?"

"Esther, then," Falkner reciprocated. "Will we be meeting a BIA liaison?"

"When we get back to the house," Spencer said, meaning the station house. "Please, follow me to the car."

Falkner let Spencer and Spears lead her team toward the waiting Chevy Tahoe, white with round tribal police seals on the doors and a red and blue lightbar across the roof. They walked in silence. Falkner watched the hitch of Spencer's stride as she compensated unconsciously for the weight of her utility belt. Everything about her said *career cop, career officer*.

It was comforting, even when Spencer's hand came out and she said, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask for your sidearms. We don't allow non-band members to go armed on tribal lands."

Falkner tried not to let her surprise show in her expression, but she thought Spears caught a glimpse of it. She laid a hand on her holster and unclipped it without a word. Todd's face betrayed nothing but amicable cooperation as he divested himself of his weapon. Brady looked grim.

Falkner weighed the sidearm in her palm before extending it. "This is an expression of great trust on our part. How much do you know about what we call anomalous crimes?"

"I'm guessing," Spencer said, "that you don't mean mass murders?"

"I don't mean mass murders," Falkner said. "Have you heard of a popular crime writer named Rupert Beale?"

"Sure," Spencer said. She placed the weapons in a locking toolbox in the back of the Tahoe. After pulling a receipt book from her pocket, she wrote out a ticket for Falkner's service weapon, then Todd's. "Used to be a Chicago cop before he got shot up, didn't he? I was in Minneapolis when that happened. We all heard about it. I'd rather not wind up in one of his case studies."

"You may already be," Falkner said. "The thing is, these crimes--there's no easy way to say it."

"Try me."

Based on Spencer's level look, Falkner figured it was worth the attempt. "The perpetrators have an extraordinary resistance to physical trauma. Think of somebody on PCP; the brain chemistry or something causes them to tough up like you wouldn't believe. If he or she has not committed suicide, which sometimes happens, when the UNSUB can no longer avoid capture, they will seek a violent death and try to take as many of us with them as possible."

Spencer glanced at Spears. "You ever hear of this sort of thing, Robin?"

The Mountie nodded. "Not formally. But it's come up now and again."

"We'll have to clear an exception with the Tribal Chairman," Spencer said. Reluctantly, Brady handed her his holster. She wrote him a claim ticket. "He wants to see us today anyway."

"I'm not armed," said Frost, as Spencer extended her hand to her. Something of the aura of chill that always surrounded Frost must have reached Spencer, because Spencer blinked before lowering her hand.

Falkner intervened. "Has your investigation turned up anything new while we were in the

air?"

Spencer looked at Constable Spears. Spears' face remained impassive behind her sunglasses. Spencer sighed. "We're a little overwhelmed," she admitted. "I have no suspects at present. We're still identifying the dead and trying to figure out if there is anybody who should be counted among them who isn't. This is--" she shook her head, leaving Falkner wishing she didn't have the experience to fill in the rest of the sentence. *Beyond description. Paralyzing. Mindboggling.*

"Awful," Spears added. By her accent, she was as local as Spencer, leading Falkner to reassess her assumptions about the women's relationship. Maybe the Mounties were smart enough to send a constable back to her own turf to play liaison officer. "You won't mind my saying that I hope it turns out this is one of yours."

Todd huffed amusement, and Falkner would bet from Spears's expression that he had just shot her a sympathetic smile. (Standard Issue, Solomon Todd, One Each.)

*Yup. Definitely from around here.* When Spears said *yours*, she meant American and non-First Peoples: the FBI's lookout. Neither Spears nor Spencer craved final jurisdiction on this perp, and Falkner couldn't blame them. She'd seen this in cops all over America. You *wanted* the bad guy to be an alien, and barring that, at least an other. An outsider, somebody you could tell yourself wasn't like you.

Falkner sure as hell did. Only the brutality of long experience kept her cognizant that all the bad guys were like her: human monsters, blood and bone, every one made of the same meat and brain and tendon as she.

Even when it made her want to shed her skin and crawl out the other side as a songbird or a fluffy bunny or maybe a flatworm of some kind.

"I just hope we catch up with them," Falkner said, wincing at the gender-neutral singular *them* even as she was careful to use it. "I know how much bad blood there is" -- hopefully, mentioning it would be better than letting it fester in silence-- "but the ACTF's mandate is to support local authorities where we can." She saw the doubt crease Spencer's brow and knew it wasn't concern over who would get credit for the collar.

Verbal assurances were worthless when there was this much justified distrust and painful history. Spencer had been desperate enough to call for help; now it was up to Falkner and her skeleton team to earn her respect.

Todd cleared his throat. "Have you had the opportunity to do any canvassing yet?" Nothing accusatory in his tone; just the suggestion that of course Spencer intended it, as

soon as time and manpower permitted.

Spencer chirped the doors. "We've just started, now that we've borrowed some emergency responders from the Oglalla tribal authorities, the BIA, the Turtle Mountain Chippewa, and from surrounding towns. We don't have the personnel for something like this."

To Falkner's surprise, it was Brady who stepped up beside Spencer. He held the driver's side rear door for Falkner, but she could tell where his focus lay. "Don't sweat it," he said. "*New York City* doesn't have the personnel for something like this. You do what you can with what you have, okay?"

For a second, Falkner thought he'd misjudged, and Spencer was about to bite his head off. But he must have sounded sincere, because Spencer's shoulders came back down and she nodded. "You've done this sort of thing before, I take it?"

"That's another one of the things we mean when we say *Anomalous*," Todd said, climbing in past Brady. To Falkner's surprise, Constable Spears clambered into the wayback beside him, leaving the middle seats for Frost and Brady.

"You ride up front," Spears said to Falkner. "I've had the briefing already. I can live without hearing it twice."

"If you are going to the crime scene," Frost said, "I would like to examine the victims. May I be dropped off along the way?"

"We haven't moved them far," Spencer said. "We didn't have enough morgue space for everybody."

## **J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington DC**

**Tuesday 12 May 2009**

**1100 hours EDT**

From his temporary desk in the bullpen, Reyes could hear the phone in his office ringing, the double buzz of an internal call. He glanced around; no sign of Chaz, who he'd sent off to get some sleep anywhere he could--and hadn't brooked arguments.

Reyes leaned in his office door long enough to identify the extension flashing on his phone and bite back a heartfelt sigh. It was an inevitable conversation, and one he thought he'd just as soon have in person.

Down The Hall, he passed through quiet desks and bowed heads on his way to Celentano's office. Stanley Murchison was there, fiddling with a Zodiac-looking cipher it would have taken Villette thirty seconds to decode. Reyes walked past him, past Pauley's unoccupied desk closest to the coffee machine--the same one Todd had sat at, during his tenure here--past Dr. Lisa Marshall's occupied station. She had crime scene photos spread all over every flat surface in her cube, taped to the monitor, propped up on the keyboard. They were the usual bloody, exhausting fare, and she looked grateful to have an excuse to glance up and wave. Tiny silver clasps bobbed on the ends of her pixyish sisterlocks, leaving Reyes suddenly, profoundly homesick for Hafidha and her clinking beads.

"How is he?" he asked under his breath, tipping his head at Celentano's office door.

She sighed and rolled her eyes, winning an unwilling smile from him. "In," she said, apparently considering fair warning carried on the semiotics.

"Thanks."

Five more steps took him to Celentano's office. The door was open, the blinds closed. He tapped on the frame and leaned in. "Missed the call," he said. "Thought I'd just walk down. What do you have, Victor?"

Celentano was already looking up; of course, Reyes's shadow passing across the blinds and the soft sounds of his conversation with Marshall would have alerted him.

"I was about to ask you. Come in. Shut it behind you." Celentano closed the folder on his desk and laid it to one side, as if Reyes were a junior agent who wasn't cleared for a glimpse of a case file.

Reyes honestly hadn't expected the kind of conversation they could have with the door open, but it would have been nice to be surprised. He did as he was told.

"What's the status of the Ohio investigation?"

Reyes felt his breath stop momentarily. Not North Dakota, with its unspeakable hill of dead, but Ohio. "They've ruled out search areas. But there's nothing positive--no records, no eyewitnesses. Not unexpected at this point, however. I'd say we're progressing on schedule." Defensive, Stephen. He didn't ask you that.

"Not unexpected." Celentano plucked the pen off his desk--a luxurious fat ballpoint with gold fittings--and swiveled it back and forth between his thumb and forefinger. "Not for pursuit of a suspect." Reyes's tea curdled vilely in his stomach as Celentano continued, "But strange for a Federal agent in the field, don't you think?"



"Until we find Agent Gates, we're making no assumptions about the cause of her disappearance."

The pen stopped swinging. "Don't bullshit me, Stephen," Celentano's voice was soft, nearly gentle. It put Reyes on high alert. "I've been running interference for you since this hit the fan, but the calls I'm getting and the offices they're from-- I need better answers than 'We're working on it.'"

Reyes considered Celentano's relaxed, open expression, his widened eyes. The trust-me-I'm-here-for-you look. Until you have to toss someone out of the sleigh. Because you won't cut off your career to feed the wolves.

Celentano pinched the bridge of his nose and tapped the pen on the report in front of him, the one revealed when he'd moved that top file away. "And what was Villette doing questioning a subject who had already requested a lawyer?"

Poor Sandy Cramer, who'd managed to kill herself in a police station in the presence of two ACTF agents. "He wasn't questioning her," Reyes said.

"He was in an interview room with her. It looks pretty damned bad even if I don't consider the fact that he *brought her a fucking weapon*, Stephen."

Reyes found himself scowling at his superior officer, which was only very rarely a good idea. With an effort, he smoothed his expression. "This isn't about Villette. This is about Gates."

"If--*if*, Stephen--both our anomaloid employees were affected preferentially by the same gamma, it's a very scary precedent. We can't plead mind-control in front of a review board, you know. Gates is likely to lose her badge over this. And that's if mind control is *all* it was."

Reyes couldn't help but notice the ease with which Celentano said those words-- *anomaloid*, *gamma*. Said them as if they were familiar. They flowed trippingly on his tongue.

He'd been saying them a lot, and it hadn't been to Reyes. But he'd also said *our*, not *your*. Which could be an honest clue as to whose side Celentano believed himself to be on, or it could be intentional manipulation.

"And what about all the times when a manifestation affected everyone *but* the betas? What about Villette's handling of the Frank Scott case? Or Gates singlehandedly taking down the John Doe in Chillicothe?"

"It's prejudice," Celentano admitted. He pinched the bridge of his nose again. "Plain and simple. But that doesn't affect the fact that it exists. Or that we have to maneuver around it. Where's Villette?"

"I told him to get some sleep." It wasn't an outright lie. He'd been nodding over his desk when Reyes last saw him. The fact that Reyes was morally certain he hadn't left the building didn't change what Reyes had said.

"Bring him in. I want him interviewed."

"We need him working this case, Victor. Not sitting in an interview room."

Celentano's hand gesture ended discussion. "Bring him in."

## **ACT II**

### **Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, North Dakota**

**Tuesday 12 May 2009**

**1015 hours CDT**

The ride from the airport to the junior high school took under a half hour. Brady spent it staring out the window, listening to Chief Spencer brief Falkner in the front seat.

The Chippewa land was beautiful in the morning, a rolling countryside rich with blue lakes that glimmered between the deep green stands of willow and cottonwood. But it was a beauty punctuated by poverty; most of the houses Brady saw were shaggy-roofed and peeling. Here in this harsh interior continental climate, he saw evidence of uninsulated trailers heated with kerosene, and an entire tract of ranch style bungalows that looked like they'd been built and then abandoned to the wild.

"What happened here?" he asked, when Spencer paused in her explanations.

"These were supposed to be affordable housing," she said. "They're uninhabitable. Black mold, and the builder did not do the toxic waste remediation they were contracted for. We've been tied up in court ten years trying to get our money back, but--" he saw the rise and fall of her shoulders on either side of the seat back "--he went out of business. We tried to bring criminal charges, but no luck."

"Damn." Brady craned his head over his shoulder to catch Todd's attention. They were approaching the outskirts of a small block-and-clapboard town. The ring of EMS vehicles

around one long yellow-painted building identified it as their destination. For a moment, he missed Daphne Worth; this was the sort of scene that she would handle as if she'd been born into it. But Daphne had her own problems, problems she would probably be more than happy to trade. He said, "And the unemployment rate out here is two thirds?"

"Worse than that, in the current economy." Spears leaned forward, reluctant to press on the back of Frost's chair. Frost, thankfully, seemed disinclined to small talk. "Suicide rates are four times the national average, Special Agent. One in four seventeen-year-olds is an alcoholic. This is not an easy place to live."

"I didn't imagine it was," Brady said. "Thank you for clarifying." He knew from Todd's mild expression of interest, however, that Todd had caught the same implications that he had. They wouldn't have to look far for cracks and stressors in this environment.

Nor, he thought, staring at the back of Chief Spencer's head, would they have to look far for guts and smarts. Thank God for small mercies.

## **J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington DC**

**Tuesday 12 May 2009**

**1115 hours EDT**

The couch in Hafidha's Sanctum was unoccupied.

At the sight of that expanse of shabby chrome-yellow velvet, Reyes felt his heart rate kick up like an engine revving in neutral, felt sweat prickle his neck, heard his breath rush back and forth through his nose. Breathe in on five. Hold for five. Breathe out on five. He was not going to pass out in the hall and leave his team without whatever help he could give them.

Of course Villette wasn't on Hafidha's couch. This was the last place he'd go. And just because he wasn't here didn't mean he'd headed home after all, or--think it, because nothing is unthinkable to a rational mind--bolted when Reyes's back was turned.

He crossed the hall soft-footed and stepped into the briefing room, then waited for his eyes to adjust. Light from the hallway fluorescents streaked a reflection across the bare table and made the gray commercial carpet look like rough-finished concrete. He flipped the switch by the door to be sure, but this room was empty, too.

The bullpen was silent and still, the pattern of half-wall barriers around the desks like the broken structures of some mountaintop ruin centuries old. Reyes imagined he could hear

the wind singing around the abandoned furniture, but it was only his breathing. In on five. Hold for five.

It was so like a nightmare that he wondered if he'd actually had it and forgotten it until now. The empty chairs, the silence, the missing team.

Reyes found Chaz at last in the copy room. He'd turned his go bag into a lumpy pillow and draped his jacket over his upper body. He lay on the harsh carpet with his knees drawn up, his arms wrapped around his ribs, and in spite of physical discomfort and mental turbulence had fallen asleep.

His hunched shoulder and his hip made peaks as sharp as young mountains. The dark hollows around his closed eyes looked like ham-fisted Hollywood zombie makeup. Let him sleep. He's not going anywhere. And as soon as Reyes broke his news... I do murder sleep. Good thing I don't want to be king.

Reyes crouched far enough away to seem unthreatening. "Chaz. I'm sorry, but you have to wake up."

Villette's eyebrows pinched brown skin between them; his eyelids squeezed tight. Then they snapped open, because he would hear "have" and think of Hafidha, Worth, the team. Never himself first. Reyes was startled to realize that jab of feeling was anger. He swallowed it.

Chaz pushed himself up on one arm, a lopsided A-frame. That put his bicolored eyes almost at a level with Reyes's. "What is it?"

Reyes sucked at his teeth cautiously, considering the options. "Celentano wants you brought in for questioning."

They were so close together that Reyes couldn't help but see Chaz's pupils widen. Another person's first response would be to burst out with protests, questions. Chaz's instincts were more feral: silence, and behind it the overclocked brain running scenarios. Finally he said, his voice choppy and flat, "We can't be trusted."

"We" meaning jammers. Just by drawing the line, Celentano had shouldered a space between Chaz and Hafidha and the rest of humanity. But now wasn't the time to make notes on the origins of intolerance. "I let him believe you'd left for home. I also told him it wasn't in anyone's best interest to have you locked in an interview room."

Chaz filled his lungs and emptied them, hard. He broke eye contact with a dip of his chin, levered himself up over his feet, and unfolded to stand upright. He swept up his jacket with one hand; with the other he caught the strap of his go bag and dropped it on his

shoulder. He'd had more expression when he was sleeping. "I guess that's it, then. Any chance you can give me an hour's head start?"

"Don't be an idiot," Reyes snapped. Chaz's mouth opened, but before he could say any of the angry things forming in his head, Reyes added, with as little heat as he could manage, "I'd like you to consider the possible outcomes of going on the lam."

Chaz's eyes were still narrowed and dangerous. "I might be able to find her."

"You might. Then you're both on the run, and convicted by your own actions. Of course, if you don't find her, you've still made her look even more suspect."

Chaz's jaw worked. He glanced toward the door, but his shoulders dropped; he wasn't going to push past Reyes immediately. "So I'm supposed to turn myself in? As a good-faith gesture?"

"I suspect Unit Chief Celentano has considerable discretion in how far he lets the ACTF range, and how thoroughly he reports on our actions. But he doesn't have the final say on this. If someone above him panics and orders the beta experiment terminated, and you're in custody, you might stay that way. And if you're considered at large when that happens, it might be terminated with extreme prejudice."

That snapped Chaz's head around. He swallowed. "That... Is that likely?"

"You can't use your ability continuously." Reyes had stumbled only a little over the noun, but a little was more than he wanted. "If you were in range of a sharpshooter with a high-powered rifle, would you know?"

What Chaz did with his shoulders suggested either "No," or "I don't know." "Hafs wouldn't, either," he said, his voice half-strangled.

"The clock is running. And we don't know how long we've got."

"Celentano will send someone to my apartment."

More likely two someones. No, Celentano would send four agents to bring Villette in, because he'd learned his lesson about taking anomalous individuals into custody. And they might even be ordered to take no chances. "I suggest you not be there."

Chaz blinked. "But you just--"

"There's food in the kitchenette, and there can be more. You've got clothes in that bag. And I think we can improve your sleeping arrangements. Would you mind very much living right here for the duration?" Reyes tilted his left hand palm-up, offering without, he

hoped, insisting.

Chaz turned slowly, surrounded by copier, networked printer, cartons of paper, file boxes, the supply cabinet, an extra desk chair. At the close of the circle, he stared down into Reyes's face. A grin slowly stretched his mouth. "Hiding from the FBI in the Hoover Building. I'm the Purloined Letter."

"Let's hope it's been a while since Victor read Poe." But Reyes smiled back. The clock was always running. They'd beaten it before.

### **Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, North Dakota**

**Tuesday 12 May 2009**

**1100 hours CDT**

It wasn't that Solomon Todd hadn't seen this sort of thing before.

It was that he had.

Behind the walls of the school, inside the media perimeter, the bodies had been tidied away, but the photos Spears and Spencer handed out showed how it had been. One hundred and sixty-seven bodies were not tidy. Somewhere, those children and teachers and administrators had been straightened out and lined up neatly, but as Todd wandered from classroom to classroom, it was his job to imagine them as they would be if they were not yet covered with clean white sheets, not laid out in rows, not yet removed to whatever gym or community center or other staging area had been requisitioned for processing and identification.

It was not his job to imagine the families identifying their dead. He was damned grateful for that.

In mid-May, North Dakota was not yet experiencing the summer extremes of heat and humidity that would summon thunderstorms and tornados. But inside the un-air-conditioned school it was hot enough to send sweat trickling between Todd's shoulderblades, and the stench of bodily fluids lingered.

It was still nothing like a rain forest. The similarity was all in the photographs, and in Todd's mind.

Human brains were particularly good at remembering trauma, and making the associations that warned of incipient danger. *This place is like this other place, where you were hurt badly.* It was, evolutionarily speaking, selective. Avoiding places like the places that nearly killed you was a good way of staying alive long enough to pass on your genes.

Not exactly idly, Todd wondered if he'd ever managed that. Youth, inexperience, the Seventies... if he had, nobody had ever gotten in touch with him about it. It was a little sobering to realize he could plausibly have a kid out there somewhere who would be, now, Brady's age.

He snorted. The way his luck ran, it was probably Brady.

*You're avoiding the subject at hand,* he told his recalcitrant brain, and brought it back to the photos and the vivid reality of the present crime scene. The school wasn't big, but there were six classrooms, and a gymnasium and a cafeteria completing the C-shape that enveloped a dusty playground. The construction might not reflect wealth, but the playscape--hammered wood and half-buried truck tires--indicated PTA dedication.

The whole thing was cinderblock outside and linoleum in, and every single person--students, teachers, administrators, support staff, the portly security guard--who had been here yesterday was dead now.

Todd forced himself to stare at the dead people in the scene photos and compare them to the classrooms and hallways he reconnoitered. The victims did not quite lie where they had fallen, because paramedics had come among them, turning, checking, walking on. Every one of them bore a black tag, evidence of triage. They lay in puddles of vomit and urine and the froth they'd died in. One or two clutched cell phones; one was draped halfway out the window.

There was no sign of fire, which was a kind of grace--for Todd, at least. But most of the dead were very small, which was no grace at all.

Todd made himself look at their faces, appreciate each one as an individual, imagine their lives. He made himself soft and open, laid himself bare to the death laid just as bare all around. It was difficult; the instinct was to close yourself, get glossy and hard, and he'd done that in the past. But when you got too hard you chipped, and when you closed yourself too tightly you missed things.

And so he'd learned to let the pain flow through. It left traces, it wore channels. You couldn't keep it from eroding away parts of who you were. But if you let it flow rather than damming it, you could choose where you directed it, and what you kept above the flood.

Brady had wandered off somewhere--no doubt constructing elaborate scenes and blocking in his head--so Todd stole a glance at Falkner, who would have looked serene and professional if he hadn't noticed the set of her jaw. This was her second building full of dead children in a week, and while Todd hadn't been present to see how she handled the first one, at least this time it wasn't a surprise. *She* looked set like concrete, graven, old. He knew she dyed the gray out of her hair--hard enough to be a woman and taken for a professional in your forties without looking like the job was aging you--but this was the first time he ever remembered seeing traces of silver roots showing at the temples and part.

They were all, he thought, as he followed Falkner into the small cafeteria, working too fucking hard.

Including Chief Spencer--who was standing by the outside doors, apparently having just returned from guiding Frost to wherever Frost had needed guiding to--and Constable Spears, beside her. After less than twenty-four hours, both women had already acquired the drawn, wary looks of front-line fighters.

Falkner had wanted to send Todd along with Frost and Spencer--to liaise, Todd understood, though it hadn't been spoken out loud--but Frost had simply sniffed and trundled off, drawing Spencer in her wake, before Falkner and Todd had gotten themselves organized. They were all off their stride, the whole team, and while the gaps might not be showing to outside observers, to Todd they glared as if somebody was shining a laser through them.

Still, he judged from Spencer's more than previously taut expression that she'd gotten a full dose of the old Frost magic. He let the back of his hand brush Falkner's. When she looked at him, he made his face friendly, mouthed "beat it," and changed course directly toward Spencer.

Falkner suddenly got very interested in the milk machines.

Spencer looked up as Todd arrived, shuffling across the dirty floor in his bootie-wrapped brown loafers, careful to step around the evidence markers. He put himself kittycorner to her and Spears, opening their path toward Falkner and the doors to the rest of the small school.

Some things, it was best to get out of the way right quickly. He filled his voice with wry commiseration and asked, "How'd it go with Dr. Frost?"

"Tell me she's good at her job."



"She's the best I've ever seen," Todd said, believing it. "She rattled you."

Spencer rubbed the back of her neck left-handed, like it hurt. "She asked if we had any 'taboos' about how she handled the bodies."

Todd huffed amusement. "Vintage. What did you tell her?"

The neck-rub turned into a shrug. Spencer's hand fell down by her side. "I asked if she was afraid of offending tribal superstitions, to which she responded, 'I am not afraid. All tribes have superstitions, and it's polite to observe them.' She sounded so damned clinical." She shook her head. "The creepiest thing about her is the lack of ego. Unless it's the lack of malice. She actually doesn't think of herself as part of the same species, does she?"

"Dr. Frost," Todd said, "is what happens to the baby Rhesus monkey who doesn't even get a wire dummy to love."

"Christ," Spencer said. "That poor woman."

"At least she's found someplace in the world to make herself useful," Spears retorted. "Pity the guy who hasn't. He's the one who spends his time cruising around in a pickup truck, working on his daydreams of something like--" Her gesture took in the empty school, Falkner ducking down to inspect the refrigeration unit under the milk dispensers now, the gray-painted steel double doors and the echoing hallways beyond. "Killing off a whole bunch of reservation Indian brats before they can grow up and take advantage of the massive welfare benefits the government hands them. *Bastards*."

It was unexpectedly fervent, but Todd thought he knew what was behind it. "You think it was a local racist? A political act?"

Spears folded her arms over her chest and sighed. "Somebody who drank the Kool-aid. Metaphorically speaking. And got these babies to do so literally. Do you know what mortality rates were at the Residential Schools my government ran for First Peoples children up into our lifetimes, Agent Todd?"

"Sol," he said. He did--at least he had an idea--but he shook his head. "I don't."

"Sixty-nine percent," she said, unconsciously picking at the sleeve of her jacket. "They said they were killing the Indian in the child, but what they were really doing was killing the child. Outright. Rape, beatings, starvation, filthy living conditions, intentional exposure to tuberculosis. The USA hasn't done any better. They--" Todd heard the hesitation when she didn't say *you* "--they've always been intent on genocide. That won't

change until we're dead or assimilated."

"And you became a Mountie." It could have been the key to an explosion, but he must have got the tone right: a little awe, a little compassion. Because she checked, and looked at him, and took a deep breath of the count-to-ten variety.

"I think this is an act of terrorism," she said. "You should talk to some of the local whites on the American side."

"Is that where you'll be focusing your investigation?"

She smiled painfully. "Not to the exclusion of other candidates. Sol."

Todd nodded. "I'm not saying it's not a hypothesis worth testing."

"You're saying don't go drinking that Kool-aid myself." Spears looked at Spencer.

Spencer's gaze rested on hers for a moment longer than you'd expect from a casual acquaintance, and Todd made sure his eyebrows did not rise. *Oh. Well then.*

He rolled his shoulders, wondering if Spears was somehow reading his mind with all this talk of Kool-aid. *Gamma power: evoking the victim's most traumatic memories.* A shiver danced across his skin: he had more or less just described what he'd overheard Chaz doing to Reyes in Miami.

He made his voice soft. "There's a whole *lot* of flavors of Kool-aid. The hard part is not drinking it when it tastes sort of like something you believe in."

## **Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, North Dakota**

**Tuesday 12 May 2009**

**1100 hours CDT**

This was where Brady could be useful. He was grateful for the opportunity.

He walked slowly along the off-white linoleum of the hallway, noting smudges from students who had apparently not observed the age-old proscription against black carbon soles.

Those students were lined up in a morgue somewhere, and Madeline Frost was poking at them. They wouldn't, Brady thought, his jaw flexing so hard he thought his teeth should creak, be worried about detentions or footwear again.

In one hand, Brady held the sheaf of terrible photos, which he consulted with each few footsteps, comparing them to the lay of the land. Photos made the set seem flat, two-dimensional. They removed the dimensions of space and time; they made movement seem simple.

When he walked the hall, and looked at how the bodies had lain, he started to see a pattern.

The first victims had been taken by surprise, felled almost instantly. They had dropped in their tracks, clutching their faces and throats, in attitudes that made Brady wonder about nerve gas. But further down the hall, people had had time to turn and stare: they all fell facing the initial chaos, as if the noise had summoned their attention and death had caught them while they stood, transfixed like deer at a twig crack. Another ten feet, and the bodies had faced away.

These had had time to run.

It had not helped them.

*He started there*, he thought, turning back to scan the end of the corridor closest the outside double doors. *He just walked in and started killing.*

If Chaz were here, he could have glanced at the photos and stared at the hallway and told Brady exactly what the gamma's effective range was. Brady just knew he had one, that it swept before him like a wall of death, and that nobody it touched lived to tell the tale.

*What kind of a manifestation is sudden total death? What do you do about a gamma who walks down a hallway, just killing everyone in sight? Even if they're on the other side of a closed door? How does he do it?*

Well, maybe Frost would be able to tell them something.

Brady devoutly hoped so. Because as he stood in the bright morning in the empty school, hearing only the sounds of brother and sister law enforcement agents moving out of sight, a sensation like dripping icewater trickled down his spine.

*We can't do this*, he remembered Todd saying.

He was desperately afraid that Duke was right.

## Yardston, Ohio

Tuesday 12 May 2009

1000-1300 hours CDT

The three agents had shared out a trio of aged walkie-talkies that Lau had picked up from the Army-Navy store (good, old-fashioned, short-range radio signals; not a microchip in sight) and split up, driving slowly along patched asphalt streets. Worth thought the semi-suburban wasteland where the industrial outskirts of Yardston met a raggle-taggle housing development had never seemed so depressing. The rain came down in waves, soaking her hair and the shoulders of her soft wool plum-colored suit jacket (*Hafidha picked that out for her, and the iris pin on her lapel too*) every time she got out of the car to run up to a front door and speak with the occupants.

As was becoming a theme, no one had seen anything.

These roads were either lined with untrimmed trees framing brick or clapboard houses that had seen better days, or cut straight through concrete and cinderblock commercial zones notable for a predominant fauna of titty bars and liquor stores scowling out through grimy windows. No-tell motel, sporting goods store, Hooters, pizza joint, Chinese Cuisine To Take Out Or Eat Here (with no apparent facilities for eating here), Mickey's Drive-In, bowling alley. A classic slice of Americana.

"It's enough to turn *me* gamma," Worth said to the damp air in this damned Subaru, wishing for the thousandth time that her passenger seat were miraculously full of Chaz Villette and *his* head full of maps, working the geographic profile. She tried to imagine Hafidha hoofing it along these streets in her chartreuse velvet swing coat without attracting a flock of locals, and shook her head.

*She never made it this far.*

Turn back, look harder. Hafidha hadn't had more than ten minutes and probably closer to five between when she and Lau had left the room and when Chaz had lit out after her. Which meant a possible travel radius of something like a third of a mile, if she hadn't wanted to attract attention by running.

Which meant the housing development or--

"Oh, for the love of willy pete," Worth said, not caring for once that she sounded like Danny Brady, one-man linguistic meme. "We got snookered."

Misdirection. How does the magician work? She gets you looking over there, where the magic is supposed to be happening, and she does it all right under your nose.

Worth pulled over, because she imagined that the safety statistics on attempting to operate a walkie-talkie while driving were probably right up there with combined chauffering, texting, and macrame. The air was full of static, making Lau's stroke of walkie-talkie genius a little less effective, but maybe it would work. "Worth to Lau and Pauley, do you copy?"

A crackle, and Lau's voice came back, thin and flattened and fuzzy with storm noise. "Copy." A moment later, Worth thought she heard the tinny echo of Pauley's distant answer.

"I think I figured it out," she said. "Meet me back at the motel. Um. Over."

"Again?" Lau said. "Okay, be there in five. Lau out."

"Worth out," Worth said. *I hope Pauley heard me.*

He had. He had been closer; he was waiting for her and Lau in the lobby when they walked in, Worth walked in clutching the bulky black walkie-talkie in one hand. She swept her team mates up with a hand gesture as she walked past, head shaking.

They tramped back down the corridor to the corner where Lau had tripped on Hafidha's go bag and fallen; Worth stopped them there with a hand gesture. She turned and looked left; looked right.

The wall to the left was blank; a niche ten feet on led to the ice machine and vending. On the right--

"Room 126," Lau said. "Fuck me gently."

"Card lock," Worth said. *Computers.* That stuff with the window was a decoy."

"She still in there?" Pauley asked, his right hand resting lightly on his pistol butt.

Worth shook her head. "Would you be? She waited us out here. After we left, so did she. No fuss, no muss. She probably stole a car out of long-term parking. Something new, with an electronic ignition and remote locks. Lots of microchips. If not a luxury car, maybe a Prius. She drove that for a while and stole or bought another. She could be anywhere by now."

They stood together, shoulder to shoulder, staring at the door for enough time that Worth started to feel a little light-headed. Then Lau cleared her throat. "I'll get the manager. She

won't have left anything behind, but we'll check anyway. But the more important thing is getting everybody in the hotel to check their cars so we know what she's driving."

Pauley rubbed his eyes. "I'll get down to the cop shop and see if anybody in the neighborhood filed a report already."

"Oh, good idea," said Lau. "You'll like Sheriff McKinley."

## **J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington DC**

**Tuesday 12 May 2009**

**1345 hours EDT**

"Reyes," Villette said, his voice just loud enough to carry the length of the bullpen, "I have--" a breath like a decision "--something."

"Bad or good?" Reyes was already on his feet, walking away from the suitcoat he'd left draped over the back of an office chair, hearing Todd's response in his backbrain as if the man were in the room. *There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison.*

Too many damn years working together.

"Yes," Villette said, scooting his chair aside so Reyes could get a direct look at the monitors.

It was a YouTube video, which Villette had restarted from the top for Reyes' benefit. The first footage was of people walking, shot from head height, most of them preteens. The focal length was fixed and so was the point of view; so those at the near and far sides of the corridor were blurry and out of focus. There was no sound.

With no warning those people--children and adults--began to run. A moment later, they began to fall.

Reyes watched in silence as they died. It was quick, at least. So quick he almost couldn't accept what he was watching; might not have, if he hadn't seen the scene photos.

They dropped out of frame, and the camera did not follow them down. It was an utterly impassive observer, which Reyes found more terrible than if there had been someone behind it to react.

Another few seconds passed--he heard the whisper of Villette counting under his breath--and then another figure crossed the frame. A white-clad shoulder, dark brown or black hair long enough to move across it, a sharp nose. A woman, Reyes thought, but the figure was blurry and half out of frame and gone before he had time to really get a look.

"That's our gamma," Villette said.

"Can you download that? Freeze frame?"

"There's capture software," Villette said. "I'm working on it. I'm not--"

--*Hafidha*. From the way Villette's bitten lips thinned, that reminder was unwelcome. "So who the hell uploaded it?"

"I'm working on that too. And the gamma's effective range, which I'd say is about thirty feet."

That was something, at least. "Webcam, do you think?"

"Webcam in somebody's locker," Villette agreed. "Pinpoint lens poked out one of the ventilation slots. Wireless uplink to a computer. That's pretty good tech for a student in a poverty-riddled school district. Somebody wanted to see who was passing him anonymous notes?"

"Somebody was sending the feed to somebody who survived," Reyes said. "And that somebody was enough of an asshole to post this to the internet."

"Asshole," Villette said, his hands moving over the keyboard with confidence. "Adolescent. Same difference. We'll have to pull a warrant to obtain the server logs."

"Pull it," Reyes said, sliding his hand into his pants pocket so he could clench it in frustration. *Hafidha* would have had the information in a heartbeat. Would, if she wanted to, as soon as Villette filed the paperwork. If she was watching Chaz.

"Good work," Reyes said, shoulders cold in the air conditioning as he walked back to his temporary accommodations. "Let the away team know what you've got and what you're doing about it. Get them to find out whose locker that is; it might be faster than the warrant."

"On it," Villette said. "Also going to check if the school has any security cameras at all, and once I can cap that image, I'll get it to the team for use when screening witnesses. Somebody has to know who the gamma is."

"And where she's gone." Reyes shrugged his jacket back on. It wasn't just the air

conditioning making his shoulders cold.

Wherever Hafidha was, she was watching Chaz.

## **Yardston, Ohio**

**Tuesday 12 May 2009**

**1400 hours CDT**

The range on the walkies didn't reach from the cop shop back to the hotel, but Pete Pauley figured it was likely fairly safe to call the main front desk number from a cop shop landline. Hafidha might conceivably be monitoring every outgoing call from one (or incoming call to the other) but she'd have the Carnivore Problem--too much information in too many formats, and while it was conceivable that she was offloading some of the processing to outside systems...

Well, he just wouldn't say her name. Or his, or Worthie's, or Nikki's. Or the words *Federal Agent*. Or--

Yes. This could get tricky.

He settled for bending the truth hard enough to make it squeak, and hoped he wasn't betting his cowboy boots on an already losing hand. "Good afternoon. I'm calling from the Yardston Sheriff's Department. I understand you have some officers there speaking with a manager?"

Social engineering; they taught that at Quantico too.

A moment later, he had Nikki on the line. "It's Pete." Common name, not one on Hafidha's immediate watch list: again, it should be safe. "I've got something. Meet me here. Pack up."

"We're on our way."

Nikki Lau was almost always as good as her word. Despite the rain, still coming down in a gully-washer that did Pauley's Montana heart good, she and Worth met Pauley at the house in under fifteen minutes. Pauley waited for them at the side door under a little bit of an awning, the concrete step under his feet marred with the burned smudges of crushed-out cigarettes: this must be the smoker's point of exile. From his elevation, he could see the women's go bags tossed in the back seat as they rolled past, cruising slowly down the line of parking spaces to an empty one. Nikki was driving, which was always a



smart choice; she made a lousy passenger.

Faint steam rose from the agents' clothing as they stepped out of the warm car. Worth huddled under an umbrella; Nikki just hot-footed across the wet pavement in her size six red-and-black Danskos. A nice thing about field agent women; they wore shoes they could run in.

She drew up beside Pauley out of breath and shaking wet hair out of her eyes. He tried not to stare, instead keeping his eyes on Worth until she caught up.

Worth ducked under the awning. "What do you have?"

"Car stolen in the neighborhood near our hotel, reported this morning," he said. "Turned up parked in the service area of a Nissan dealership on the other side of town half an hour ago. I was sitting right beside the officer who took the call when it came in." He shook his head.

"Phew." Worth shook her umbrella out--pointing it away from Pauley and Nikki--before folding it. "Sometimes you get lucky. We could have missed that for *days*. Did she buy a car?"

Pauley held the interior door wide. "My car's around the other side. Just in case we get a hot lead, grab your go bags and let's go find out, shall we?"

"Great," Daphne said, looking back at the rental car, a hundred yards away through driving rain. "Now he tells us."

## **Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, North Dakota**

**Tuesday, 12 May 2009**

**1050-1400 hours CDT**

Eventually, Madeline Frost would have at least some of the patients brought to the Pierce County hospital in Rugby for autopsy. The Metigoshe Indian Reservation had a small infirmary and emergency services, but trauma and any lengthy hospitalizations were outsourced. It was also the site of the nearest autopsy suite that would suit Frost's needs, however minimally--but all the morgues in Rolette County would have needed to be pressed into service to handle 167 dead. There was no way, in any case, that she or anyone she deputized--assuming she were willing to trust some local ME or coroner with the responsibility for *her* dead--could conduct 167 autopsies fast enough to be useful to

an active field investigation. She would need to be selective.

She could have proceeded directly to Rugby, but that would have prevented her from seeing the bodies in situ--or as close as possible. It also would have prevented her from conducting at least a superficial examination of the majority of the patients. Just because she didn't have time to go inside all of them was no excuse for sloppy work.

She waited until the police officer had left the basketball court, and then she waited another ninety seconds, exactly, before crossing scuffed varnish to where the dead reposed, laid out under worn, mismatched sheets that must have been donated willy nilly by community members. Puppies, autumn leaves, sunflowers, geometric patterns, some plain white and one set decked with gaudy rainbows. Both the flat and the fitted sheet from that set were in use; as she paused beside one she could see its mate tucked around another still form about fifteen feet away at the three-point line.

Pathologists and medical examiners on television were inevitably eccentrics. They talked to their patients, slept on autopsy tables or in morgue drawers, ate their lunches while conducting postmortems. Frost found these characterizations disrespectful, inasmuch as she considered them at all. Disrespectful of the patients more so than the pathologists, when--after all--the patients had so much more invested.

Frost drew on gloves before she crouched beside the first rainbow-wrapped body. It was as good a metric for random selection as any, and more satisfying than flipping a coin. Gently, she drew the sheet back, exposing the face of a boy of thirteen or so, his dulling eyes open, his lips caked with the dried residue of yellow froth. Around his mouth, Frost could see the angry marks of alkaline burns. His own vomit had seared his skin.

Because there was no one else present to whom she must convey information, she didn't feel the need to nod. Rigor would have locked his jaw by now, but she imagined what she would eventually see inside his mouth was similar: alkaline burns, traces of empty-stomach vomit. His burned lips showed no sign of cyanosis; his complexion was a healthy, blood-flushed nut-brown that hinted at some percentage of African-American ancestry.

Frost's hands were steady, firm but gentle as she lifted his right hand and pushed up the sleeve of his gray-and-red rugby shirt. Rigor was not so advanced as to immobilize the arm. The underside, where the livor mortis had settled, did not show the bright, unmistakable cherry-red flush she might have expected on a paler-skinned patient. But his hand had been curled up, the fingernails down, and in the nail-beds the color showed dramatically.

Over the next two hours, she examined eight more patients chosen through the same metric of the brightest, most childish and colorful sheets--the other rainbows, three

different designs of cartoon unicorn (a set and two singletons), a pair in a clouds-and-stars pattern, and one single fitted sheet with orange and green polka dots--revealed the same symptoms. One boy was pale-complected enough to reveal the classic diagnostic: a sharp boundary of livor mortis that might have been outlined with a red wax crayon and colored in.

There, surrounded by her dead, Frost stood. She stripped off her gloves and dropped them into a trash bag. The number she keyed into her phone came from memory.

"Special Agent Brady," she said, when he answered. "This is Madeline Frost. While I do not yet have anything conclusive, my preliminary impression is death by chemical asphyxia. Ingested per orum, I would say."

Brady hesitated. "They suffocated from... swallowing?"

Not everyone, Frost reminded herself, understood plain English. She spoke calmly, clearly, and politely. "They suffocated because of something they swallowed. An agent which interfered with their ability to process oxygen on the cellular level. There is an unmistakable hallmark: candy-apple red discoloration of the blood, mucosa, and internal organs. I will be even more certain, of course, when I can complete some autopsies."

She heard him clear his throat, the scratch of a pen as he jotted hasty notes. "Bright red blood. That's carbon monoxide poisoning. Oral carbon monoxide? Fatal to one hundred and sixty-seven people? Simultaneously?"

"Unlikely in the extreme," Frost allowed. She shifted the phone to her other hand. "Agent Brady, I don't suppose you have the genetic predisposition to smell hydrogen cyanide? It purportedly smells of bitter almonds, as any murder mystery will explain."

"I don't know."

She sniffed in disappointment. "A pity. Because I do not, and in cases of an ingested rather than inhaled chemical asphyxiant, cyanide is the prime suspect. But you see, when cyanide salts come into contact with acid, they react to form hydrogen cyanide gas. The human gastrointestinal tract is quite full of hydrochloric acid."

"Oh," he said.

"So I should like to undertake some precautions," she said.

"I'll talk to Falkner." He hesitated and she waited, because the quality of the silence hinted that he had more to ask, and she did not wish to encourage him to waste her time with further calls when he had nerved himself. "Doctor Frost. How likely is it that you

could get one hundred and sixty-seven people to take cyanide simultaneously?"

"Even if you did," she said, "it would not kill them all within fifteen minutes, let alone five. There are burns around the patients' mouths suggestive of the swallowing of a strong solution of potassium or sodium cyanide, with concomitant vomiting. Ingested cyanide salts are only immediately fatal on an empty stomach. Otherwise, it can be minutes--as long as an hour--before acid concentrations in the stomach are sufficient to convert the salts to hydrogen cyanide."

Brady muttered something she didn't quite catch.

"I beg your pardon?"

"So much for the movies," he repeated. "Thank you, Doctor Frost."

"My pleasure, Agent Brady. Please ask SSA Falkner about her sense of smell, and call me back. Have a good day."

She lowered the phone from her ear, tight across her chest from the necessity of dealing pleasantly with another human being. Three long breaths eased the tension. She was safe here, surrounded by the dead.

## **J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington DC**

**Tuesday 12 May 2009**

**1430 hours CDT**

"If she has wheels," Villette said, staring blank and hollow-eyed at the fax on his desk, "she could be headed anywhere on the continent."

His hands gripped the sides of his chair cushion, like a man in a carnival ride with a broken seatbelt. But it was his voice more than his face that hurt Reyes like a thumb on a bruise: uninflected, as if he breathed in enough air to push the words out his mouth only under duress. You should have sent him home, Stephen. Even he can't think when he hurts this bad.

Hafidha could have hidden Villette digitally while Villette handled the physical disappearance. But if she hadn't gone AWOL, no one would need to disappear. Instead she was using her countermeasures for her own benefit. The anomaly is inherently

selfish.

He kicked himself for anthropomorphizing, for being helpless in the face of his team's pain, for everything he'd done and not done that led here. "Villette. That's enough."

Chaz swung his head around as if it weighed too much, as if he were a captive bear goaded and turning toward the source of its torment. Before he could snap at him, Reyes continued, "She cannot be anywhere. You know better than that. She isn't moving at random. She's going away from something, toward something. Tell me what it is."

Chaz looked down at the fax again, then raised his gaze to the windows across the bullpen. Reyes had time for two determinedly-slow breaths before Chaz's eyes closed tight. "I don't know. All I know is, she won't come here."

"Good. One destination we can mark off the list." Reyes wanted to scrub his hands over his face, but it would look like frustration. What Chaz needed from him now was steady confidence, direction. An anchor. I thought that was what Esther was for. "If she's driving, you can determine a possible range of travel to start with."

Reyes tapped his index fingernail once on the desk. Focus, said the sound, and End of discussion. He stepped away, toward the doors to the corridor outside the bullpen. Villette didn't ask where he was going, and he was grateful for that, because he didn't want to say it aloud.

But someone had to search for the gamma in the things she'd left behind.

## **Yardston, Ohio**

**Tuesday 12 May 2009**

**1400 hours CDT**

Worth walked the parking lot while Lau and Pauley talked to the salesguy. She'd probably drawn the short straw, and given the occasional, not-too-distant rumble of thunder, it was possible that using her umbrella wasn't the brightest idea ever. But she was surrounded by light poles and banners and large metal objects, and at this point, she was willing to take her chances.

Somewhere back East, Chaz and Reyes were bent over Hafidha's laptop. And Hafs herself was who knew where, in who knew what kind of danger. Daphne folded the arm that wasn't holding her umbrella up across her belly, a self-comforting gesture that reminded her of the way Chaz hugged himself when he was nervous or cold, and so

wound up not being very comforting after all. *If I were Hafidha--*

It didn't help. Her profiler-brain was too full of spinning wheels and an endless litany of circular thinking that more or less boiled down to *Please please please don't let this be what it looks like.*

She turned in patent relief at footsteps behind her. Even Nikki had accepted the need for an umbrella now, though she was letting Pauley--with his eight-inch height advantage--carry it for both of them.

"Salesguys didn't sell her anything," Lau reported, when they were within calling range. Pauley nodded confirmation.

Daphne unwound that arm from her belly and waved vaguely at the lot. Even the new-car part of the dealership looked seedy. "Let me guess; the dealership is missing a vehicle out of inventory? Something that was parked at the back of the lot?"

"A 2007 king cab truck," Pauley said. "Four wheel drive, maroon paint. They had to do a visual inspection to figure out what was missing--they just took it in trade two days ago and it's not in the computer yet. They said."

And if it had been, well, easy enough to delete a database record. No sweat at all.

"Even money she's already swapped the plates." Lau shook her head. "The time for subtlety has passed, guys. The only way we're going to do this is to issue a BOLO covering the midwest and find that damned truck. If she hasn't already crossed the border into Canada we might have a chance."

"A BOLO," Daphne said. "You know those systems are all computerized now?"

## **Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, North Dakota**

**Tuesday 12 May 2009**

**1400 hours CDT**

Outside the cinder-block tribal administration building, in a square of grass flanked by parking spaces, an American flag snapped and stuttered in the wind halfway up its flagpole. Falkner noticed Winona Spencer watching her across the roof of the car.

Section 7m of the Flag Code didn't mention the mass murder of one hundred sixty-seven schoolchildren and teachers. But the law was no match for this kind of human suffering,

and Falkner wasn't sure it should be. She ducked her head in something Spencer might or might not read as a nod, and followed her up the cement walk to the doors.

The building's central hall was floored with a scuffed linoleum mosaic: a circle divided in four colored sections, around a smaller circle that held the tribe's motif, four arrowheads pointing outward like a compass rose. The steel-and-glass door on the right-hand wall sported a sign with the same motif, and "Metigoshe Tribal Police" in capital letters.

It looked like a lot of small-town copshops she'd been to in the course of her Bureau career. But in spite of the American flag displayed outside, this was another nation, with its language and sovereignties and feelings about foreigners trampling through its most painful scenes.

Children have no nation, Falkner reminded herself. They're the world's responsibility.

Chief Spencer opened the door, and Falkner passed through close behind her, so Spencer wouldn't have to hold it.

The woman in civvies at the desk nodded at Spencer, and might have said something, but the desk phone rang just then. Spencer led the way to an office that, according to the plastic name plate beside it, was hers.

Two men rose from the metal folding chairs along the wall when they entered. Spencer leaned her head and one shoulder toward them. "Tribal chairman Noah Curtis, and Lucas Sorensson of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Supervisory Special Agent Esther Falkner of the FBI."

Curtis was heavy-set, in the way of a man who got used to the calorie demands of hard physical activity and now wasn't active. He was still broad through the shoulders, however, and his pearl-snap chambray shirt pulled snug over his chest. His salt-and-pepper hair was cut short. His mouth was thin and hard in his round face, and his eyes were red and puffy. When he stepped forward to shake hands, Falkner noticed the sharp tock of cowboy boot heels on the hard flooring. "Agent Falkner," he said, his voice hoarse. "Thank you for coming."

Sorensson was white, in a Wonder Bread way, if first impressions were to be believed. His no-color hair wasn't thick enough to protect his scalp from sunburn, and the pink extended to his forehead, nose, and the tops of his ears. His blue eyes looked over-diluted, and his tan suit, white shirt, and light-blue tie contributed to the impression that he was camouflaged for some other ecosystem than this one.

"SSA Falkner," Sorensson said in a rush. "Are you certain this is a homicide?"

It startled her, before she stepped back mentally and saw it from outside her job. She was certain because her team had different standards for what was possible than anyone who hadn't tangled with a gamma. Which was why she had to lie to Sorensson. "We believe this is likely to be a homicide. Our investigation should turn up information one way or the other very soon."

"I don't want to interfere in your investigation. But if this turns out not to be murder, my office needs to look into the possibility of environmental hazard, building code violation--" He stopped his headlong monologue, and his telltale skin flushed, then paled. "I'm sorry." Sorensson hunched one shoulder, stared past Falkner to Spencer, then turned to Noah Curtis. "I'm sorry. This isn't the time--it's not right to..." His throat bobbed as he swallowed.

Curtis reached out a big, rough hand and laid it on Sorensson's shoulder, then let it drop. "This is the time to do our jobs. Nothing else we can do."

Sorensson swallowed again and nodded. "Agent Falkner's work takes precedence. But if I could send in investigators to do preliminary studies, it would give us a jump on things if it is in our jurisdiction. If it's groundwater contamination, something that could happen again--"

And you have a superior back in Aberdeen who wants this cleared up before it starts to stink, Falkner thought, pushing her disgust down her own throat. Lau was better at these things, or at least, made a better pretense of not wanting to throw bureaucrats out windows. And it wasn't Sorensson's fault. "This is Chief Spencer's jurisdiction. My team is here at her request to help evaluate the situation. Right now my concern is preserving and collecting evidence, and the school grounds are still a secured crime scene." She saw a muscle jump in Sorensson's tightened jaw. "But we could use your perspective in our investigation. Does your office keep records on builders' liens on reservation property, and civil court cases involving reservation residents?"

"Yes, it does." Sorensson's body language was already less poker-like. Good.

"The tribal police wouldn't have any of that on file. It would be a great help if you could find any case files pertaining to the school, school personnel, toxic materials, or any other dispute that seems connected."

"I can do that. Thank you, Agent Falkner." He met her gaze, and she had the shaming suspicion that he knew what she was up to, and had his own reasons to be glad of it. He pulled a card case out of his jacket pocket, slid out a card, and passed it to her. "You'll keep me informed?"



"I will."

Sorensson left the office, and Chief Spencer waited until his coattails disappeared around the doorframe before she muttered, "Go boil some water."

Falkner bit the inside of her lip to keep from smiling.

"Sit," Spencer ordered, and Falkner dropped into the chair Sorensson had occupied as Curtis sagged back into his. "What do we know so far, and what can we expect?"

Falkner gathered herself, laid her hands in her lap one on top of the other. This was no different from any other police briefing. "You know the person who did this. You've seen him. He was able to walk into the school without provoking comment."

"Someone from the rez?" Spencer asked, tight-voiced.

But Curtis shook his head. "Plenty of people from outside come and go on tribal land. Deliveries to the store, utilities service guys, post office. All the schools have some teachers and staff come in from town."

"Chief Spencer can start following up on regular deliveries and service calls to see if they intersect with the time of the murders. And we need a list of everyone who would ordinarily be at the school today who wasn't."

Spencer raised her chin. Falkner recognized the pose; her team members did it, as if it helped a new idea take root. "Because one of them might be the killer. Or someone the killer didn't want to target."

Falkner nodded. "The person who did this may have personal or political motives, but this is about an obsession. The method used in the homicides--poison--will have some connection to that obsession. This is not the first time the UNSUB has poisoned someone. He's killed before, though not on this scale. Review any previous poisoning deaths, especially any that seemed accidental or self-inflicted."

"We see a lot of alcohol poisoning." His voice was flat and bitter. "It'd be easy to miss a murder in there."

This wasn't the time for emotion. As Curtis himself had said, the work needed doing. "These will also not be the UNSUB's last murders. I know you've closed the schools and tribal offices. You should cancel any other events that would gather a crowd, because the UNSUB will be drawn to them."

Spencer and Curtis exchanged a look. "Friday night," Curtis said. "We have a bingo game in the community center every Friday night. We can't afford to build a casino, but we've

got that."

They had too small a sample to build on yet, but a community bingo night could have something in common in a jammer's mythology with a junior high school. How was it possible to have so many deaths, and still have too small a sample? "Can you cancel it?"

"Nobody'll like that. Folks come in from town. And if they think it's dangerous to come on the rez..."

"It's our way of letting the locals have a chance to give some of the state back to the Indians," Spencer said, dry as paper. "We don't have a lot of income stream."

"We'll have to identify our killer before Friday, then." Falkner pushed herself up out of the chair. She was conscious of wanting to do exactly the opposite, to sit and sit, blank-minded, letting someone else take up the reins and the responsibility. You need sleep, that's all "Chairman Curtis. Chief Spencer tells me we have to apply to you for permission to go armed on tribal land."

Curtis replied with a slow nod. "My people have a lot of history of being tried by a bullet. And some of the people doing the shooting have been FBI."

"I understand. But I'm sending my team out to face someone who has killed one hundred sixty-seven people. I can't send them out unarmed."

Curtis's face pinched at the number. He drew a long, harsh breath, and said, "Two of them--they were my daughters. Nina and Cindy." He pressed his lips even tighter together and turned as if to look out the little window behind Spencer's desk. Falkner didn't think he was seeing the outdoors.

"I have two daughters," Falkner said, letting the words fall softly. "I'm so sorry for your loss." It might not be a welcome sentiment coming from a Federal agent. From one parent to another, it was simple human decency.

Curtis swiveled his head back to study her face, and nodded. "Your agents can carry. But we have enough grieving."

"Yes, sir." As Spencer rose and stepped around her desk, Falkner wondered if there was any way she could say, We'll keep him from killing again. No, there wasn't. "Chief Spencer, let's figure out who wasn't at the school."

**J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington DC**

**Tuesday 12 May 2009**

**1500 hours EDT**

Hafidha hated it when Reyes--or anyone--leaned over her shoulder while she worked. Reyes knew it, and tried to remember not to do it. But absorption tended to hunch him forward like a waiting vulture, whether the business he was absorbed in was his or someone else's.

What would she say to someone actually sitting in her fancy Aeron chair? He rolled it back gently from the desk, across the extra-large carpet protector she'd demanded from Facilities so she could kick off and sail from one end of her work area to the other without drag from the gray tweed olefin.

Something like: Out there you're El Queso Grande. In here, I'm the queen. And you're sitting in my throne. She was independent and territorial. Not a team player? That depended, didn't it, on what kind of team it was?

One knew one's friends and co-workers as well as one needed to, or happened to. After that, knowledge was a gift or an accident, to be used--or not--accordingly. What he was about to do was a violation of trust, which was why he had to be the one to do it.

But the self-loathing was almost enough to keep him from sitting in that chair.

In pursuit of an Unknown Subject, an analyst gathered information from current behavior, combined it with a history of characteristics of other individuals, and constructed a picture of the crime and the criminal. And the word "subject" freed the analyst from the assumption of criminality: the focus of the investigation moved away from assignment of guilt. The techniques could be applied to suicides, hostages, the mentally ill.

Steve, he could hear Todd saying, move away from the whiteboard. They each had their sanity-saving distancing methods. Reyes was not unaware of his own.

Hafidha was a subject, though not unknown. But he had two entities to profile, didn't he? Hafidha, and the anomaly. That last was his UNSUB. Whether they were a team, or a kidnapper and its hostage, remained to be discovered.

Reyes lowered himself into the chair and rolled it up to the desk.

Except for the bare spot the laptop would occupy, the room was just as it was when she used it. A green glass dish in easy arm's reach sparkled with foil-wrapped chocolates; the manufacturer's name was in French, and not one Reyes recognized. The jar of jelly beans

on the filing cabinet was half-full.

Reyes could see Hafidha's height in the angles of the flatscreen monitors, the sight lines to the photos, postcards, clipped magazine pages, and posters on the walls. (The bottom four panels of The Gashleycrumb Tinies were half obscured, for Reyes, by the rightmost monitor.) He could feel it in the way the backs of his thighs pressed the chair seat with his feet flat on the floor.

She'd hung a sweater on the back of the door; like Chaz, she was sensitive to cold. Unlike Chaz's blending-in sport coats, the sweater was purple and peacock blue freckled with red-violet. A tall person drew the eye. Chaz preferred to duck out of sight. Hafidha wanted the world to keep looking.

Sometimes that was another way of not being seen.

You know these things already. But they were things a host could build a mythology out of. Everyone had a mythology--"I never win raffles," "Always take the first parking spot," "My parents love my brother more than me." Everyone tried to impose order on entropy. The anomaly only increased the chance that a mythology would have dangerous consequences.

Hafidha hated entropy. She'd sought a place in the Secret Service in spite of her family's doubts. Her anomalous abilities were directed toward communication, consistency, making things work. The identity she inhabited was of a person who maintained order, who held the world together a little bit longer, who stopped people who wanted to see it broken. It was what Reyes had seen in her, that made him bring her into the ACTF.

He swiveled the chair to face the three posters over Hafidha's bookshelves. A photo of Stephen Hawking, taken around the release of A Brief History of Time. A copy of the "I Want to Believe" poster that had hung behind Fox Mulder's desk on The X-Files. Robert Smith of The Cure, his hair like a black explosion of thorns and smoke, his eyes paint-ringed in a pale face.

Reyes knew what they stood for: the team's theories about the nature of the anomaly. Science, the supernatural, and bracketed by those two, the nagging doubt that neither explanation seemed universally adequate. They also described categories for cases: Down the Hall could deal with straightforward applications of physics, however extreme. The ACTF sorted out the questionable events, and dealt with the anomalous ones.

But these were Hafidha's particular symbols. Hawking, Smith, and Spooky Mulder. The power of science trapped in and limited by a frail container. Darkness with an alluring aspect. Powerlessness in the face of uncertainty, and an uphill battle against forces that

hid the truth.

He realized his hands hurt from his grip on the chair arms.

The desk drawers were full of ordinary things: pens, rubber bands, paper clips, restaurant takeout menus, spare cables, a soldering iron. Hafidha's laptop was probably the only wireless connection in the Hoover Building, since the Bureau subscribed to the theory that wireless was inherently less secure. Had he been foolish to assume that Hafidha's internal encryption was uncrackable?

There were some novelties: a heart-shaped black thumb drive tucked inside a heart-shaped tin box; an angel duckie fob that lit up when Reyes' hand brushed it. It was the mate of the devil duckie that lived on Todd's keychain; Reyes could imagine Hafidha's delight at its flamboyance and silliness, and Todd's delight in sharing it with her.

His misery threatened to rise up and drown him. But he was not entitled to that; it was not his place to feel hopeless or helpless or heartbroken. He wouldn't impinge on Chaz's grief that way, even if Hafidha had not needed him focused and smart.

He tucked the thumb drive into his pocket. He'd check it later. It would amount to nothing, but he would check anyway.

It wasn't until he tugged on the bottom file drawer and found it locked that it occurred to him to wonder about the contents of the drawers. Perfectly ordinary. They were exactly what a stranger would expect to find in them.

Why would Hafidha need to lock a file drawer? Any sensitive material would be on her laptop, not on paper in her desk. Reyes fished his own keys out of his trouser pocket and began to fiddle them in the drawer lock. Yes, I am a bad human being. I'll apologize to her when we find her.

One of the file cabinet keys fit well enough to shift the latch; pushing down on the drawer handle and yanking hard did the rest.

The drawer was mostly empty. He was baffled at first. Then he remembered Hafidha's go bag, found in the hotel hallway in Ohio. As he did, the smell of gun oil reached his nose. Yes, there was her cleaning kit, and a left-side holster in brown nylon, businesslike but not very Hafidha.

She would lock the drawer she kept her weapon in. But her weapon was with her now. Did she lock it whenever she closed it out of habit? He reached into the far back of the drawer, into shadow. His fingers brushed something hard, an edge, a cylinder... He slid it

out into the light.

Like the empty space in the drawer, it initially made no sense. A pencil-thick wooden dowel, one end thrust through a black rubber grommet, the grommet filling the hole of a compact disc. Someone had written on the disc in black felt-tip, "TAXES 07." Fuzzy red-orange thread wrapped a tidy cone around the dowel on one side of the disc, pulled taut over the disc's edge, and knotted around the wood on the other side.

A spindle. Homemade out of parts that, when disassembled, would be unremarkable stored with the other contents of Hafidha's desk.

Strictly speaking, what was wound around the dowel would probably be called yarn rather than thread. Reyes fingered the the fiber where it spanned the space between the disc edge and the dowel. "Frog hair," he murmured. Where had he heard that expression? But it fit this stuff that sliced thin and bright as the beam of a ruby laser.

Surely one didn't produce this tiny, even strand without a lot of practice.

Reyes knew there were things about his team he wasn't privy to, simply because he was the boss. He also knew they held a mostly unvoiced belief that he knew everything already anyway, and didn't need to be told about anyone's personal life. Hafidha was not necessarily hiding her hobbies, just because he didn't happen to know about them.

So he stepped across the hall back to the bullpen.

Villette was in the kitchenette, eating Breyer's vanilla bean ice cream from the half-gallon carton as methodically as a plane refueling in midair.

"What does Hafidha do for fun?" Reyes asked him.

Villette blinked and frowned, trying to derive context from text. "Dancing. Buying vintage clothes. Baking. Swimming. Ice skating. Snowboarding."

"Does she spin?"

The line between Villette's brows deepened. "Stationary bicycle?" he said. Reyes wondered if he knew how much his expression revealed his opinion of riding a bicycle without going anywhere.

"No, yarn. Have you seen her spin? Maybe making things with yarn?"

Villette's head swung forward, as if it were weighed down with memory. "No. I take it she does?"

"It seems so." I'm sorry, Reyes wanted to tell him. I'm sorry there's anything about her you don't know. I'm sorry I had to tell you she didn't share everything with you.

Why didn't she? But as soon as he asked the question, he knew. You kept secrets so you'd know there were things that belonged only to you. If knowledge was power, then knowledge of you was power over you. Withhold enough, and you could slip the leash.

I ought to know. Reyes clenched his teeth and felt a dart of pain in his jaw. It's the way I've always lived.

### **ACT III**

#### **Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, North Dakota**

**Tuesday 12 May 2009**

**1500 hours CDT**

Amos Sainawap's trailer was at the end of a dirt road that led into the woods off a gravel road. Once it starts to snow, he must be more isolated than Ted Kaczynski, Brady thought. Then he saw the outline of a snowmobile under a blue tarp on a two-wheel trailer, and junked the idea. Welcome to North Dakota. He wondered if anyone remembered to wear a helmet.

When he stepped out the driver's side of the borrowed Blazer, he heard a steady, muffled thump, even as a bridge construction piledriver. It seemed to bounce off the surrounding trees and come from everywhere at once. The sound of the truck door closing didn't make a dent in it.

As Brady approached the greenish treated-lumber stairs and deck before the front door, he could tell the thumping was coming from behind the trailer. He could make out a rising and falling human voice as well. On impulse, he turned away from the steps and followed a flattened path through the grass around the end of the trailer.

A man sat spraddle-legged on an upturned log in the midst of a scraped-bare patch of ground. He hunched forward over a round, flat drum pinned between his knees, and swung the wooden beater in one hand with almost inhuman regularity. His shoulder-length black hair fell forward to hide his face, but Brady knew the chanting voice belonged to him. Almost at his work-booted feet lay a shallow pit, where a handful of wood sent up a little flame and a thread of sharp-scented smoke.

Brady walked forward and stopped when he could see around the man's hair. A twitch of

the head told Brady the man had seen him, too, but the chanting and drumming continued for a good sixty seconds more. The drumbeat accelerated to double time and stopped.

Without looking up, the drummer asked, "Do you go to church?"

Brady hoped he hadn't looked startled. "Yes."

"Do you interrupt the prayers there?"

"Do you always pray in places where ignorant white guys can interrupt you?"

The drummer blew through his lips, like a horse, irritated.

"Amos Sainawap?" The drummer nodded, once, and short. "I'm Supervisory Special Agent Daniel Brady of the FBI. I'd like to ask you some questions about the events of yesterday."

"Events," Sainawap echoed. His eyes pinched closed under a creased brow, over cheekbones pitted with acne scars. "You mean there was more than one?"

"Depends on how you're counting. You teach history at the junior high." It wasn't a question, but again, Sainawap nodded. "But you didn't come in yesterday. Where were you?"

"I was sick."

"You went to the clinic?"

"No, I went to the bathroom, threw up, and lay down on the couch."

As conversationally as you could say a thing like that, Brady observed, "A lot of the kids at the school threw up, too. They aren't here this afternoon, though."

Sainawap's shoulders rose and his head hunched a little between them, as if he were about to throw a punch. His eyes narrowed. Then the whole pose drooped slightly like a candle in a sunny window. "I've got chronic stomach and liver trouble. I guess...I guess it saved my life."

"Looks that way. How did you hear about the deaths at the school?"

Sainawap jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the telephone junction box on the back of the trailer. "Ever live in a small town? News travels fast. Bad news travels faster." He set the drum down, leaning it against the log, and propped the beater against it. "Which is



why I already heard the Feds were on the rez."

"You were expecting me?" Brady made his face bland, his eyes open and innocent. It never looked anything but ironic at his size, but that was useful sometimes, too.

Sainawap scrubbed his hands over his face and said nothing.

Brady squatted on his heels in the dirt and laid his hands over his kneecaps. It looked casual, but he figured the space between them at about twenty feet, and a fit man could move fast from a crouch. "I would have thought it would be tough to get a teaching job when you have a record," he ventured.

Brady counted two beats and admired the man's dramatic timing before Sainawap swiveled his head to glare at Brady. "I was an alcoholic by the time I was fourteen. I was busted for fighting, shoplifting, vandalism--underage drinking too damned many times to count. The night my buddy and I got lit up and thought we could walk home from Bottineau in January--I had two toes frozen off. He died of exposure. It took me four tries, but that was the night I swore I was done drinking. And you know what that makes me, Agent Brady?"

It was Brady's turn to shake his head, because he didn't want to interrupt the monologue.

Sainawap jabbed out his left arm, toward the road and the direction Brady had driven in from. "It makes me just like those kids. They don't listen to me much more than they listen to anybody else, but at least maybe I have a better chance at telling them what they need to hear." His voice shook at the end of the sentence. "What they needed to hear. They don't need anything now."

Brady let the silence hang, let Sainawap gather his self-control. He wanted information at present; if he wanted emotion later, he knew how to bring it back. "What did they need to hear?"

After a little more breathing, Sainawap let out a humorless snort of laughter. Brady thought he was changing the subject when he said, "We've got satellite TV and DVD players now. You can rent movies at the rez store. You know what the moneymakers are?" When Brady shook his head, Sainawap replied, "Gangsta shit. And you know why? Because compared to here, big-city street gangs look like they've got some kind of choice."

"Agency," Brady said.

Sainawap looked startled, as if he'd forgotten he was speaking to someone who could

speak back, or would. "Fancy word for a G-man."

"Or for a junior high teacher." Brady pointed his chin toward Sainawap's drum. "Did you teach them about that?"

"I tried to teach them things that already belonged to them. To give them pride in themselves. But hell, the whole point of the reservations and the Indian schools and the assimilation was so Indian culture would die off. We're reassembling it from books written by white anthropologists. Put that up against what they learn from MTV and juvie..." Sainawap lifted his hands and let them fall, as if they were everything he'd tried to do.

Because what was left of his work if the kids he'd given it to were dead? "Can you think of anyone on the reservation who would benefit from what happened at the school? Anyone with a point to make, say, or a grudge to work out?"

"You mean, was this political?" Sainawap said it as if the word tasted bad.

"Not necessarily. I'm with the Anomalous Crimes Task Force. The cases we work involve a twisted worldview--what we call a mythology. An individual with a certain kind of mythology might feel personal resentment toward the school, or see it as a threat, maybe. Does that ring any bells?"

Sainawap gave it serious consideration. Whatever he thought of Special Agent Daniel Brady, he cared more about the dead. "No. Our schools are hope for the adults. There aren't a lot of ways we can give the children what we didn't get, so the schools are important. Some of the kids are hard cases. Some of 'em just don't have anyone at home who can make them come to school and study. But the ones who hate the school and the teachers--they just skip. They're not like this."

Brady filed that away for further study. Sainawap braced his hands on his thighs, and Brady thought he was about to stand up. Instead he said, "You know the statue, 'The End of the Trail?'"

"Yeah." It was reproduced, mostly in silhouette, in almost every tourist trap gift shop in the West, on t-shirts, mugs, keychains, ashtrays, tote bags, and coasters. An Indian slumped on an exhausted horse, his spine curved in an arc, his legs hanging limp along the horse's flanks, his spear at an aimless tilt.

"That's a picture of learned helplessness. When you're convinced nothing you do can change anything. White men made that the image of the noble, defeated Indian, and damned if the Indians didn't buy it. These days the women are our best warriors. They believe in change. They're like the men used to be. But most of the men are like little

children." Sainawap shook his head. "What you're talking about, that kind of anger? Learned helplessness tells you even something big, a mass murder, won't help you. You're better off turning the gun on yourself."

"Are you helpless?"

"No." Sainawap said in a hard voice, without hesitation. "But I know that what doesn't change, dies. And I don't want to die. It's why I stopped drinking."

"But you want to teach the old ways to the kids."

Sainawap threw back his head, stretched out his arms to either side to indicate the trailer, the snowmobile, the trees, and probably a slew of things around them that Brady couldn't see. "I'm not living in a bark lodge cooking venison over an open fire and trading with other tribes for pipestone, am I? The past is our strength, but it's still the past. You can't live there." Sainawap smoothed his hair back as if his scalp hurt. "Damn. I seem to be having this argument a lot lately."

"I'm not arguing," Brady told him. No, you couldn't live in the past. Even if that was the neighborhood where you'd meant to put down roots. He stood up. "Thank you, Mr. Sainawap. I or one of my team will let you know if we have any more questions."

"Even at the school, nobody called me Mr. Sainawap."

Brady paused. It was a personal question--but he'd gotten away with quite a few of those already. "Amos is a pretty unusual name for our generation."

Sainawap gave Brady a hard, hostile grin. It made him look like a wicked pixie, and Brady was sorry he'd never get to see the real thing. "Back when I was born, when an Ojibwe woman went to the hospital to give birth, the nurses would hand her a list of white names to give her baby. I don't know where the hell they got those lists, but they weren't exactly full of Kelly and Jason and Brad and Mindy. If the Indian woman couldn't read English, she'd have to just point."

Brady considered the possibilities. "There's probably worse ways to get the job done. But I'm not coming up with any right now."

"Nope," said Sainawap. "I guess that's also part of our culture."

**Rolette County, North Dakota**

**Tuesday 12 May 2009**

**1700 hours CDT**

If Todd had thought the roles of good cop and bad cop would be self-determining, working with Spears for ten minutes disabused him. He'd volunteered to take the preliminary canvass of the approach roads. Undermanned as they were, he'd expected to go alone, and that was all right. He figured he could handle most of what he was likely to find out here. Spears had volunteered to come with him, and despite momentary misgivings about her agenda, he'd accepted. How often did you get to work with the Mounties?

But she'd surprised him. She had no jurisdiction on American soil, of course, and he couldn't help but imagine Reyes in the opposite situation. Todd knew he'd get a chance to find out how he handled it when they started on the Canadian side. But what impressed him most was the way she handled each interview as if it she had no personal investment in the case, as if their preliminary canvass were as neutral as a robbery investigation. *Just another day on the job*, Todd thought, flanking her as she led the way up cinderblock steps to their fifth widely-spaced stop along the dusty side of State Route 20.

Five houses, and they were already seven miles from the sign that had once read, "You Are Now Leaving The Metigoshe Indian Reservation. Please Drive Carefully And Come Back Soon." Todd's eyes felt like somebody had rolled them in sand and shoved them back into their sockets ungreased. His joints ached in a manner that left him thinking longingly of hotel hot tubs and his own memory-foam mattress. Who said not being in pain was a luxury? In his line of work, given the inexcusable torments of short sleep and long travel, consideration for his much-abused body was the sort of thing likely to keep it functional enough to stay alive for another week or two.

The house--or improvised dwelling, if he was being precise--that he and Spears climbed towards didn't look as if it offered much in the way of comfort *or* luxury. It had started life as an Airstream trailer (Todd thought about North Dakota winters and shuddered; the bales of straw heaped around it might be some insulation, but he doubted they were enough) and had been expanded haphazardly, with cinderblock and salvaged lumber. It reflected ingenuity, Todd thought charitably, if not skill.

Spears, lifting one hand to knock, turned over her shoulder to raise her eyebrows at Todd. "Building codes don't apply if the homeowner does the work himself?"

Todd raised his back. "And here I was thinking he hired the same contractor who built those condemned houses on the Rez."

She snorted and shook the laugh out before turning back to the door. This time, she

knocked without hesitatingly, an experienced cop's hard, sharp rap.

The whole structure rattled alarmingly as someone crossed the interior, to the point where Todd saw Spears' hands twitch forward as if to catch the trailer before it could fall on her. It took the occupant two good jerks to get the door open. Todd found himself wincing at each one.

The man who stood framed in it was white, heavysset, and sun-faded. He wore a plaid shirt unbuttoned over a cotton undershirt, and his belly hung over the belt that dragged his stained jeans up to half-mast. The mottles on his denuded scalp didn't look cancerous, but it might be only a matter of time. Don't judge, Todd reminded himself. Poor and rural does not mean dumb or vicious.

In this case, however, it didn't take long for him to accept that sometimes it could expand to encompass both.

"What do you want?" The resident--Todd corrected his brain when it wanted to go with denizen--snarled more than spoke. Todd made a conscious effort to lighten his expression, to keep his face serious and pleasant. There was a tax roll list on the clipboard tossed in the behind-the-seat well of his and Spears's borrowed pickup, and he'd glanced at it before they got out. "Mr. Jackson Black? I'm Special Agent Todd, with the FBI." He extended his ID folder, flipped open. "This is Constable Spears, who is assisting my inquiry."

She rolled her eyes where Black couldn't see it, but of course that was technically correct.

"I ain't done nothing," Black said. "If you got a warrant, show me it now."

"You're not under any suspicion," Spears said smoothly. "We're investigating an incident that took place on the Metigoshe Reservation yesterday. We're canvassing area residents who might have seen anything unusual, anyone leaving or entering the Reservation yesterday morning? Anything you might have noticed between seven and noon?"

Black was either a better liar than Todd gave him credit for, or he didn't listen to the local news. "Some goddamned skin get drunk and set his wife and kids on fire again? No, that wouldn't bring out the feds. So what happened?"

Todd would normally ask to step inside, but with a sideways glance at Spears--her thumb hooked casually in her gunbelt, which currently didn't have a weapon on it--he decided he'd be just as happy doing this on the porch.

She said, "There was a massacre at the junior high."

That got a slow blink, and no sassy comment this time. "Fuck, another school shooter?" Black shook his head, the corners of his mouth drawing hard lines down from his nose, and then seemed to recollect that these were the Feds and he was supposed to be running them off his property. "I didn't see a damned thing. Those damned blanket-asses can go the hell back where they came from, and you two can get the hell off my lawn."

The lawn in question was more a rutted mix of dust and tussocks, but it was the thought that counted. Todd nodded and held out a business card. "If you think of anything, give me a call? Farm folks are usually more observant than your average city-dweller. They have to be; they live close to the land."

Black had been about to shut the door in Spears' face, but Todd's blithe comment stopped it halfway. He took the card and squinted at it as if he'd left his reading glasses on top of the TV. "You ain't farting Dixie. What do you know about farms?"

That it's an exercise of extreme charity to call this one. "My mom and dad had a farm," Todd said. "They sold it off before the bank foreclosed, back in the 80's. But I grew up on it. It's a hard way of life to let go of."

"Huh," Black said. He tucked the card into his pocket. "All right, Agent Todd. I'll call you if I think of anything."

"Thank you," Todd said, and waited until the door clicked shut before he let his dismay show in his face. Spears was too disciplined to stomp down the cinderblocks, but she swept past him with a leggy stride, and he had to hustle to catch up. As she slid into the driver's seat, he opened the passenger side door.

She waited until the door was shut and he was belted in before mocking, nasal and sharp, "Those damned blanket-asses should go back where they came from."

Todd smiled down at his hands. "I don't think he'd like that one bit."

He caught her turning the key, glaring at the dusty two-lane blacktop they were parked alongside through a worn windshield. She convulsed and stalled it. Hands on the wheel, she heaved up sharp bursts of laughter like it hurt. "God damn, Todd. You could sell frybread to Indians." She paused. "Actually, considering, that's not too hard, if it's good frybread. You think he did it?"

"I think he's got enough poison in him to kill hundreds by spitting in a watershed area," Todd said. "But no, I don't think he did it."

"Well, that's disappointing. Neither do I." This time, the engine caught and stayed caught. She slid it into first and rolled forward so gently he never felt her touch the gas. She

floated it into second as they turned onto the state route, and Todd wondered if she was trying to impress him to make up for the stall. It was working, either way.

"Illinois Nazis," Spears muttered under her breath. "I hate Illinois Nazis."

"Try coming from Indiana," Todd said. "And how did you know that was my favorite movie?"

"I didn't," she said. "It's mine."

## **J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington DC**

**Tuesday 12 May 2009**

**1900 hours CDT**

"I found her," Villette said, and sat back in his chair. "Or at least, I found where she was six hours ago."

Reyes had known it was coming. He'd been checking the contents of the thumb drive he'd retrieved from Hafidha's desk drawer--Black Heart Procession's Six and extras, nothing else--and the spindle CD with its TurboTax files just as advertised, when he'd seen the stiffness enter Villette's spine; the way his eyes had scanned the monitor three times, even though the information the screen contained was already indelibly recorded in his mind. He'd seen Villette take the breath and steel himself.

He'd tried not to look like he was staring, but given the blank look on Villette's face, he wouldn't have noticed if Reyes had spun his appropriated chair around and glared. "Tell me."

Villette just waved to the monitor. He stood up, balancing with both hands on his desk, and straightened with an effort. "I need coffee."

Reyes could give him the time. He crossed the bullpen to take Villette's place behind the keyboard, having to duck only slightly to see the taller man's monitor clearly from a standing position. The top tab in the browser displayed a newswire report timestamped some fifteen minutes previous, the lede--a word Reyes never would have known, prior to sharing fifteen years of his life with Solomon Todd--mentioning the shooting in Des Moines, Iowa of Michael Randall Cross, a banker who "had been repeatedly questioned regarding allegations of child sexual abuse." The second paragraph, however, provided the relevant information.

*Cross, 43, was shot dead in his driveway by an unknown individual after pages of documentation regarding his alleged abuses were anonymously uploaded to a Des Moines sex offender watchdog site around 10 AM this morning. The information, which included emails and video files apparently retrieved from Cross's home computer, contained explicit content involving at least twelve pre-adolescent children....*

Chaz's voice floated from the kitchenette, over the sound of brewing coffee. "Des Moines is a little over nine hours from Yardston by car if you observe the speed limits. A straight shot along the 90."

*West Coast boy*, diagnosed that part of Reyes' mind that drew conclusions from the use of a direct article. "She would have been observing the speed limit," he said. "Or no more than five miles over. So she left Yardston no later than midnight, headed west, and was in Des Moines by nine, where something set her on the trail of Michael Cross."

Chaz appeared in the doorway, cradling a coffee cup. "That's how I knew it was her, Reyes. She-- she keeps an eye on these kinds of cases. She looks for ways to nudge them. When she can."

Reyes closed his eyes. "And she was watching Cross."

He didn't need to watch to know how miserably Chaz nodded. The smell of coffee reached him and he swallowed hard. "Can I have a cup of that? Black?"

"I can make you tea--"

Now Reyes opened his eyes, and looking at Chaz's dog-worried face with a stab of pity. "Medicinal purposes," he said. "I'm Cubano, I can take it." He smiled even though it hurt. "Now solve me a hard one, Boy Wonder: we know where she is, or where she was going, as of eight hours ago. So how the hell do we get that information to the away team?"

Chaz shook his head. "Western Union stopped sending telegrams in January of 2006-- wait. Fax to the Cinci field office. Have them send a runner. That would work, wouldn't it?"

"We can risk it," Reyes said. "We have to do something."

**Rolette County, North Dakota**

**Tuesday 12 May 2009**



## 2100 hours CDT

Somewhere in between the thirty-sixth and thirty-seventh house, on State Route I Don't Remember Anymore, without turning her head, Spears said to Todd, "So what kind of a name is 'Todd', anyway?"

"English," he said, leaning back on the head support and closing his eyes. Just resting them. Just for a minute. "Just like Spears. Unless it's Scottish. Apparently there's a minor geneological bunfight over whether it's Scots or Middle English. I'm actually more Ohio German, percentagewise. I've got a little Cherokee on my Mom's side."

She snorted. "Why does every white guy who wants to claim Indian heritage say he's part Cherokee?"

Todd snorted back, smiling despite himself. "At a guess? Because the Cherokee Christianized and intermarried a lot, before the people who'd previously been their neighbors decided the damned heathen Indians needed moving on. Off their good farmland, incidentally."

This time there was a longer hesitation, and a question that could have been mocking, but instead came out a little lost. "Do you think it makes you special?"

"Not any more than the German," he said. "I wonder sometimes, if that great-great grandmother hadn't stayed East--well, I wouldn't be me. But there'd be somebody else with those mitochondria, living some other life. If the English had stayed home in Manchester or wherever. Same thing."

"Unless they were Scots."

"Unless they were Scots." Now he sat up, rubbing his hands together, and grinned. "I did use to work with a guy who claimed he was full-blooded Apache. I think he was really Puerto Rican, but hey, if it made him feel like he was more cut out for the work we were doing..." He knew what he'd meant to say next, but his voice trailed off. He swallowed. "I guess we all develop mythologies that help us cope."

She glanced at him sidelong as a truck passed going the other way, headlights flashing across her face. "I'm going to regret this," she said. "This work you were doing. What was it?"

"Wrassling salt-water crocodiles in the Mekong Delta." Todd held up his left hand, showing the missing fingers. "You have to hold the mouths shut--they're not as strong that way--but everybody starts off a rookie. You know, crocodiles are extinct there now."

You have to go to Myanmar if you want to wrassle in Southeast Asia now."

She groaned. "And your full-blooded Apache friend?"

"Crocodiles," Todd said sadly. "Sometimes, all a mythology does is fool you."

Two beats, and then suddenly the truck skewed sideways as she downshifted and jammed on the brake. It skipped along the verge of the road for a second before stopping, and Todd was dead certain she was going to order him out of the cab. He hoped she'd at least let him ride in the bed; it was dark, and a long walk back to the rez. But instead she folded over the steering wheel, guffawing until she choked.

He would have reached for her, but she waved him away. When she finally stopped, gasping between little wheezing whickers, she pushed herself back from the wheel and shook her head. Her right hand shot out to take hold of the gearshift, and the truck bumped back onto the road.

It was at least ninety seconds before she said, "Your family weren't really farmers, were they?"

He shrugged. "What the hell else is there to do in Indiana?" He wondered if this was a good time to ask her when the Residential School she'd attended was closed, and decided that maybe it was enough for him to know that that was one of the things driving her without rubbing her nose in it. Cold-reading people's triggers was his job, but you didn't have to get all Stephen Reyes about it unless they made you.

"Hmph." Another pause, another oncoming truck. She sighed and said, "I've got a little German, too. My grandfather's father."

Todd looked out over the hood of the truck at the night and the grass and the trees and the stars behind all of it. "Halten Sie sich darum fuer etwas Besonderes?"

"You better goddamned believe it."

**J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington DC**

**Wednesday 13 May 2009**

**0030 hours EDT**

At the sound of footsteps on the hall carpet, Villette wavered and vanished like smoke. Reyes even turned his head to stare at the apparently empty seat behind the apparently

unused desk, but there might as well have been tumbleweeds blowing across the half-height cube.

Reyes wasn't supposed to know that his team referred to the BAU's Agent Murchison as Blaze behind his back--and quite possibly to his face, given that Reyes was certain to court-testimony tolerances that Hafidha had been behind the nickname. But two-thirds of Reyes' job was knowing things he wasn't supposed to know. For a moment, he paused, blinded by the unanticipated sting of missing Hafidha.

Grief took its own time, but how long was every thought going to lead him to this knifeblade sensation? It couldn't be worse than a divorce.

And then Stanley Murchison pushed through the hall door, and Reyes got up from his chair, buttoning his suit jacket as he stood. Sometimes you needed that extra inch of authority.

"Hey." Murchison didn't actually cross the threshold. Like a vampire, Reyes thought. He just leaned his medium-brown head and the ex-Marine shoulders in their Bureau-blue suit through the door, braced on the frame and on the door handle. Reyes had always thought the Leathernecks bred a totally different subspecies of asshole, when they bred 'em, but Murchison was pure salesguy smarm. He was also, unfortunately, damned good at his job, and even better at getting people to underestimate him.

It just goes to show, Reyes thought, you can't rely on stereotypes. What he said was, "Special Agent?"

"Victor asked me to check on the status of your investigations."

Reyes lowered his chin and pinned Murchison with a stare. First-name status with the Unit Chief. Pull the other leg, it's got bells on, he thought, and knew by the sudden opening and closing of Murchison's mouth that the message had been received.

Murchison cleared his throat and added, "He also suggested I might offer to help, since you're understaffed and spread thin."

He made it sound like a peace offering rather than the imposition of a political officer. Reyes smiled. "Good plan," he said. "I can use the extra hands. Victor wants Dr. Villette in house for the duration. Why don't you head over to his apartment and pick him up? Tell him I need him back at the office."

Murchison gave him a considering look, but Reyes's poker face had stood up to worse scrutiny. "Alone?"

"You're not there to arrest him," Reyes said. "Just give him a ride to work."

"...Right," Murchison said, and winked. "So let's don't give him any reason to suspect otherwise. Tell Celentano where I'm going?"

"Call me before you go in," Reyes said. He shaped it like an order. He wasn't in Murchison's direct chain of command, but he had the seniority and the will to use it. And Murchison, ex-military, had the tendency to follow any order delivered in a confident tone. "And bring some backup in a second car. I don't anticipate any trouble, but it's better to be safe."

As Murchison vanished back Down The Hall, Villette reappeared without fanfare. Perhaps it wasn't even right to say he reappeared: he just suddenly stopped not being there. It should have been surprising, but somehow it felt more as if an unnoticed void had been filled. "Wild goose chase?" he said, sotto voce, as he rose from his chair to raid for more snacks.

Despite himself, the thrill of adrenaline pumped through Reyes's veins made him grin, just a little. "It won't do him any harm. Or whoever he drags along with him."

"Frost's first autopsy report is in." Villette gestured to his screen. Reyes also hadn't heard his email alert. *Interesting*. It's not just invisibility. It's a complete aura of Somebody Else's Problem.

Reyes let his eyebrows do the talking.

"Cyanide," Villette said. "Hydrocyanic acid, to be exact, and some of its salts. Real detectable hydrogen and potassium cyanide--KCN and HCN--massive quantities. Hundreds of times the LD50, which is only sixty milligrams or so. So it's not another Clemson McCain, mimicking the symptoms and leaving the poison home."

"There's cyanide in the environment," Reyes said. "Cigarette smoke, household objects. Most of the compounds are nontoxic. What if the gamma can free and concentrate lethal amounts of it?"

Villette rubbed his face in exhaustion. "Cyanide. From the Greek *kyanos*, 'dark blue.' The same root as cyanosis, did you know? Ironic, because cyanide kills by asphyxiation, but it turns you red, not blue. Cyanosis is caused by the circulation of deoxygenated blood. With cyanide, according to Frost, the blood gets absolutely saturated with oxygen, because your cells lose the ability to process it. Death is caused when the cyanide ion halts cellular respiration by inhibiting a mitochondrial enzyme called cytochrome c oxidase."

That last sounded like he was quoting the email directly. His voice had that distant packed quality, and he was free-associating, synthesizing wildly. He did it all the time, as far as Reyes knew: the pattern software without an off switch. But he usually filtered it more successfully. Reyes didn't need any better evidence of Villette's profound exhaustion. Especially since he could always compare his own.

"So... how did it get its name?" Reyes asked, because he wanted to keep Villette talking, engaging.

"They refined it from Prussian blue," Villette called as he vanished into the kitchen. "You know, the dye pigment? Go figure, because it's what the Germans used in the gas chambers during the Holocaust, too."

## **Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, North Dakota**

**Wednesday 13 May 2009**

**0100 hours CDT**

Falkner had not been sleeping, but she had been trying, spread out on the worn quilt of the tribal chairman's guest bedroom. Her team were quartered like unwelcome Redcoats at neighboring houses; the closest motel was near the minimum-security prison forty-five minutes south. When her phone jangled with the opening bars of "Cold Ethyl," she winced. The joke had been in remarkably poor taste all along, but she'd never quite gotten around to pulling rank to force Hafidha to change it. Now she wondered if she ever would.

She kept the pain out of her voice as she lifted it to her ear and answered. "Hello, Dr. Frost. Brady asked me your question, and it turns out I can. Scheduling may be a bit tricky, though."

"It won't be necessary," Frost said. "It turns out the diener at the hospital morgue can smell it, and we have already completed the first three post-mortems. But thank you for offering. I have, however, another issue to bring to your attention."

"I'm all ears," Falkner said. She straightened her shoulders, pulling the tension out of her spine. *Stand up straight*, she scolded herself. *Engage your core*.

"Would you consider volunteering to help with the relief efforts to be a means of injecting one's self into the investigation?"

"Possibly." A cracking sound rewarded her as she rolled her shoulders. She bit down her

sigh; Frost would think the irritation was directed at her.

"I would recommend asking Chief Spencer for a list of everybody who donated materials for shrouds. Some of them were... peculiar."

"Peculiar?"

"Inappropriate," Frost said. She considered it, as if it were a foreign word she wasn't quite certain of. Falkner could almost hear her nod in satisfaction at the nuances before she said once more, "Inappropriate."

## **J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington DC**

**Wednesday 13 May 2009**

**0430 hours EDT**

When Murchison poked his head around the corner again, Chaz made sure he was invisible. Reyes still knew he was still there--the giveaway smell of vanilla and garlic hung on the air. He should mention that to Chaz--apparently his mythology automatically encompassed sight and sound, but not aroma.

It did cross his mind that that piece of knowledge could serve as a secret weapon, but he dismissed the thought almost before it formed, and not just because of the disapproving spectre of Falkner frowning at Reyes from inside his own head. Chaz had earned trust, and Reyes was going to learn to treat him as a willing ally rather than a pawn if it killed him.

"Murchison," Reyes said, spinning his borrowed chair. "I told Celentano everything I know about Villette's habits and possible whereabouts already."

This time, Murchison came through the door. He stood just inside it, arms folded as if he blocked the throne room door from interlopers bent on overthrowing the rightful monarch. "Does he have a girlfriend?"

"In Las Vegas, as far as I know," Reyes said. "I already asked Marshall to check flights and hospitals, but he knows he's on call. He wouldn't have gone far."

"If he wasn't going to go far, he would be answering his phone," Murchison said.

"Maybe he went to a double feature."

"Do they still have those?" Murchison rocked his head back, less than a nod, and smiled through a whuff of air. "Celentano wants a BOLO. And he wants you in his office in thirty minutes with updated statuses."

The resultant click in Reyes's head sounded so loud he couldn't believe Blaze didn't hear it. He caught a breath around the thumping of his heart, and said "He'll have 'em both."

"Excuse me?"

"He'll have 'em both," Reyes said. "Do the BOLO--no, get Lisa to do the BOLO. You take over the airports. Tell Victor I'll be in his office in five minutes."

Murchison stood staring for an instant, obviously boggled by Reyes's sudden and unconditional capitulation. Reyes, channeling his grandmother, half rose from his chair and made a shooping motion with both hands. "Go, go! Tell Victor I'll have everything he wants, but I can only get it for him if you leave me alone to get it finished."

"He'll be ecstatic," Murchison said dryly, and vanished back the way he had come. Villette appeared a moment later in the door of the kitchenette, cupping a giant mug of coffee with cream in both hands.

"Isn't that Lau's mug?"

Villette drank from it. "I'll wash it. You know, my friend in Vegas isn't exactly a girlfriend. It's more what you'd call a...fluid situation."

"Kids these days," Reyes said. "What Murchison doesn't know--"

"Is going to get somebody killed sooner or later. You're letting them put a APB out on me? That's embarrassing."

"It serves our purpose," Reyes said. He wanted tea, suddenly. When he got up to make it, he had to move past Villette.

Villette frowned at him. "The last time I saw that expression on your face, the night ended with Brady pointing a gun at my head." Apparently, enough exhaustion and stress and a big enough external threat could make him treat Reyes as a peer and a team member. That could be useful, one of these days.

But even as he was filing the data away for later consideration, Reyes winced. He deserved that. He dropped a sachet into a warmed cup and ran boiling water over it from the spigot on the side of the coffeemaker. A welcome, astringent smell rose with the steam. The Darjeeling would take about three minutes, five if he wanted to drink it with

milk. "Bullet used in the Des Moines shooting was .30 cal."

"Not Hafidha," Villette said, relief swelling his voice.

"Not Hafidha's gun. Do you really think she didn't incite it?"

I think she can't go to jail for it, Villette's mismatched eyes said, but he knew as well as Reyes did that that was a matter open to debate in the courts.

Well, he was going to be furious anyway. Might as well get it all out of the way at once, clear the air and get on with it. Are you really contemplating a policy of honesty, Stephen?

Shut up.

Reyes parked his butt against the counter and laced his fingers through the handle of the cup. "We can't afford to follow her around the country, waiting for her to pull this again. And we don't have any means of finding her. So the only available solution--"

"Is to bring her to us."

Deliberately, Reyes nodded.

"You know she's monitoring for my name."

Again, Reyes nodded.

"If she thinks you're going to put her little brother in Idlewood for what she's done--"

"She'll try to take the heat off you. She'll try to organize a scenario where her disappearance is justified in retrospect. The most likely way for her to do that is by assisting the investigation in North Dakota. If she has any control over her actions at all-- which she may. Evidence suggests that she's operating much closer to the Susannah Greenwood or Clemson McCain end of the model than the Joseph Hakes or Eileen Cho end."

The coffee slopped on Villette's fingers, the heavy cream content rendering it the same shade as his skin. He lifted the hand and the mug and slurped the fingers clean, then hastily drank the coffee down so it wouldn't happen again. "Evidence. You mean, that she didn't kill us all in Yardston."

One last time, Reyes nodded.



"You sick, manipulative son of a *bitch*."

Villette kept his voice from rising, but he couldn't stop the way it scratched and cracked. Reyes thought if his grip on the coffee mug got any tighter, it might just shatter in his hand.

Reyes said, as calmly as he could manage, "We study human behavior. Do you honestly believe that, having studied it, we won't use it? Manipulation is our God-damned day job. I am trying to save a woman's life here, Villette, and the lives of everybody she and the thing in her head may decide is in need of killing. You can cut me a little slack on the ethics."

Villette's left hand came up, flat-palmed. The universal human gesture for *please, for the love of God, stop*.

Reyes let his voice grind to a halt. Villette nodded, starkly defined muscles bulging on each side of his cadaverous jaw. He turned his head and stared toward the door to the office, toward escape. His feet followed the gaze; wordlessly, he turned on the balls of his feet and was gone.

A moment later, Reyes heard the scrape of a desk chair. Villette was back at work.

It was just about time to take his teabag out. Three minutes was a long, long time.

## **J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington DC**

**Wednesday 13 May 2009**

**0500 hours EDT**

When Reyes got back from delivering his report to Celentano, Villette was gone. Not just "nowhere to be seen." Gone. No longer in the bullpen, not in the kitchenette or copy room, not in Hafidha's sanctum, not in Falkner's office--and not holed up in Reyes's office, where Reyes had offered the use of the brown leather couch for future napping.

In the wind, Reyes thought, echoing Villette's earlier sentiment. He crossed to Villette's desk, pulled out the bottom file drawer. It was unlocked and there was no go bag evident. Even dirty clothes were still spare clothes. Somebody had cleaned the handfuls of Clif bars out of the top drawer, too.

Reyes straightened, one hand pressing the small of his back. He knew where Villette was going. The only question was how he'd get there.

Reyes thought he might know the answer to that one, too.

He pulled out his phone and thumbed speed dial. Celentano answered immediately. "You have something?"

"Maybe a lead on Villette's whereabouts," Reyes said. "Maybe nothing. I'm heading out for an hour or two."

He heard the hesitation, heard Celentano think about asking after his destination. There was a long pause, and Victor said, "Call if you need backup."

Maybe he was still on their side after all.

"I will."

"And Stephen?" The hesitation dragged out even further. "...Go. Just go. Get them back."

Reyes took a breath. "And if we can't?"

"That's not an option," Celentano said, and cut the line.

Reyes was more accustomed to being hung up on by soon-to-be-ex-wives than by colleagues. He stared at the phone for a second to be sure and then slid it into his pocket. One brief pause in his own office to pick up his bag of dirty clothes and a few other items of gear, and then off to Dulles.

He wondered how long he had before Celentano came after.

## **Dulles International Airport, Washington DC**

**Wednesday 13 May 2009**

**0545 hours EDT**

Reyes arrived at Dulles as nautical twilight was shading into civil twilight, the last bright stars fading into the blue but the sun not yet encroaching on the horizon. He presented himself and his credentials immediately to the security office and identified himself as a

Federal Officer, qualified to fly armed. The uniformed woman behind the counter was petite and tired, medium brown hair stripped back in a Serious Business ponytail that made him brutally homesick for Esther Falkner. He thought she had at least a couple of kids, which made him pity her working the graveyard shift.

She said, "How can I help you, Special Agent Reyes?"

Reyes made himself confident, competent, and calm. "Another FBI agent would have presented himself to you in the past half-hour. Charles Villette. Tall man, Latino, very thin? He'll be flying as an air marshal this morning. It's a matter of urgency that I get a message to him."

She looked down at her monitors, or possibly her hands. "I can't tell you what flight he's on," she said. "For security reasons, I don't know, and it's not in the computer."

"That's okay," Reyes said. While he was pitying, he spared a moment of pity for the unsuspecting airline passenger who was about to get bumped so he could cover the backs of his team. "It's six o'clock in the morning. If you can provide me with a list of the first few flights with a possible connection through to Grand Forks, I should be able to find him."

"That," she said pleasantly--tiredly-- "I can do."

#

As Reyes had expected, Villette had chosen immediacy over subterfuge. He was parked in a corner of the gate waiting area, sitting out the first-boarding frenzy of a 6:15 Northwest flight that would connect him through St. Louis and Minneapolis to the wilds of the glacier-scoured upper Midwest, reading a copy of TIME magazine with distracted irritation.

"You could have called," he said, as Reyes settled down beside him. He didn't look up.

"Would you have answered?"

Villette shrugged. It looked like he was disarticulating every joint in his upper body. "I'm not coming back with you."

Reyes dropped his go back with a thump. "I'm coming out with you," he said, in a polite tone that brooked no argument.

"You're lucky I didn't make the 5:35."

"You're taking the long way around. The 6:30 gets into GFK at 10:30."

Chaz smiled. "You think she's checking flights to St. Louis?"

Reyes pulled a P.D. James paperback out of his go bag, but left it closed on his lap. "By the way, your vanishing trick?"

Villette nodded. Now he lowered the magazine and met Reyes's gaze.

"It doesn't work on sense of smell."

Villette's forehead crinkled. "Huh."

"Yeah," Reyes said, "Huh. Smart of you to make sure your name wasn't on the passenger manifest."

"Could be flagged," Villette said, leaving it open who might be doing the flagging.

Reyes's teeth gave him trouble when he forgot himself and ground them. Consciously, he relaxed his jaw. He didn't say I hope Hafidha still wouldn't bring a plane down. Because you didn't hope things like that where the anomaly could hear you. Superstitious? Sure. But you still didn't.

"I brought the bug zapper," Reyes said, touching his belt opposite the usual home of his sidearm, where the amped-up TASER Villette had once used to electrocute himself was concealed under his sportcoat. "Just in case."

Villette made a sound like a frustrated pony, but he didn't protest. Instead, he changed the subject--which contained within it tacit permission for Reyes to ride along. And when, Reyes wondered, had he started looking for Villette's permission?

"I don't think we can kid ourselves anymore. Either the anomaly is evolving, or we've been missing a lot of its potential for ick for a long time now."

"You're the synthesist. Do you think it's sapient?"

Villette stretched out his long legs uncomfortably. "If it is, I'm not sure it's just one sapience."

"Demonic possession?" Reyes couldn't keep the archness from his voice.

At least it made Villette chuckle. "Oh, we're back to that, are we? I'm not even sure it's sentient, honestly. But evolution and trial and error often result in something that looks

suspiciously like intelligent design."

Reyes snorted.

"And I don't know if you've considered this," Chaz said, "but organisms often evolve faster when experiencing selective pressure."

"Us," Reyes said, unwillingly.

Chaz gave up and stuffed the phone into his coat pocket. "Not to put too fine a point on it. We're punctuating its equilibrium."

Reyes leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "We'll worry about that after we have Hafidha back home in one piece. When we're on the plane, get some sleep, Vilette. I'll keep an eye out for tigers."

"Some air marshal."

"Some fibbie, if you pass out on top of the UNSUB."

"Right. If you promise to sleep between St. Louis and Minneapolis," Vilette said. "I got more of a nap than you have." He paused and reached into his pocket. "Here."

Reyes put out a hand without seeing what Vilette had palmed. It was smooth and warm from body heat, about the size of a big pack of gum. When Vilette lifted his hand off Reyes's, Reyes smiled. A prepaid cell phone. Light blue.

"Don't you need this?" he asked.

Vilette held up a matching phone in red. "I bought two."

**Somewhere in Eastern Iowa**

**Wednesday 13 May 2009**

**0530 hours CDT**

Daphne stretched her legs across the back seat of Pauley's Bureau wheels and leaned against the driver's side rear door. Wadded up behind her, her jacket took the edge off the armrest; the shoulder belt cutting into her trapezius and the side of her throat was a

reminder that this wasn't the safest position on earth, in the event of a crash.

Lack of sleep was more likely to get her killed at this point than poor seatbelt discipline.

It was a good thing you'd have to work hard to get lost traveling westbound all night on 90. They had been running without GPS and with their cell phones turned off, the highway outside a wall of water and orange construction cones that appeared and disappeared through the tumbling curtains of rain with every lightning flash. Lau and Daphne had gone so far as to pull the batteries; Pauley had just powered his down. "She might not be looking for me," he'd said. "And if we do need to get a call out fast--"

It had been Lau who nodded. "Acceptable risk," she said, and dropped the pieces of her own handset into a mesh pocket on her go bag.

Now she was driving, windshield wipers twitching back and forth on 'interval,' the radio tuned low to a classic rock station, and Pauley was passed out cold in the front passenger seat, a travel pillow tucked into the corner between his neck, his chair, and the window.

The sun was still below the horizon, the road ahead black with rain, but when Daphne glanced over her right shoulder she could see a paler band along the horizon, and the underside of livid clouds lit purple and rose by the hidden sun. *Let that be an omen*, she prayed. *Please take care of her. I need my sister home.*

It seemed selfish to ask on her own behalf, and presumptuous to ask for Chaz--*she's the only family he has*--or Hafidha. But prayer was a focus for intention, and Daphne's intentions were all bent on one thing.

*Bring her home safe. Bring her home safe. Bring us all home.*

In the front seat, Pauley stirred but didn't waken. Daphne was glad he could sleep: one of them being rested might keep them all alive. Nikki drummed her nails on the wheel, a habitual nervous gesture. Daphne couldn't see, but she would bet Nikki was chewing on her hair. She sighed, only half-aware that a sound was escaping her.

"You okay back there?" Lau asked, softly.

Daphne opened her mouth for the facile answer, and then paused. "No," she answered, surprised at herself and surprised at Lau's generosity in asking.

Lau's glossy head bobbed. "Me either."

Daphne raised a hand, reached across her body, and touched Lau's shoulder. In the end, she thought, it was always the EMT training that came back to her in times of crisis, and she was glad to have it now. "We're doing everything we can," she said, as Lau's shoulder

shivered tense and worried, muscular under her fingertips. "We're doing everything we can."

## **Des Moines, Iowa**

**Wednesday 13 May 2009**

**0830 hours CDT**

Des Moines, Iowa, was not large enough for a Field Office, but its Resident Agency occupied a suite in an office building on the Westtown Parkway. The broad brick structure in the middle of a wide lawn, otherwise occupied by law offices, looked low and sprawling to Daphne's East-coast eyes. She slid their Bureau car into one of a selection of unoccupied spaces and put it in park, grateful to Lau's facility with AAA road maps in the absence of their GPS. In the passenger seat, Lau looked up from considered study of her folded hands.

Pauley was asleep in the back seat, and parking hadn't wakened him. In a decision made through eye contact, Daphne and Lau opened their doors, slid out--rumped and blinking--and crossed a grassy strip dotted with trees that in this Northern clime still hadn't quite assumed their full summer plumage to arrive at a glass airlock door. She held this exterior one for Lau; Lau held the interior one for her. They crossed into a small, gray-carpeted lobby with a prominent directory on one wall and no security or reception desk.

"When was the last time you saw a government office like this?" Lau said, the sweep of her small hand taking in the unhardened whole of the building.

"Sometime before Timothy McVeigh," Daphne answered.

"I wonder if there's a lot of competition for Resident Agent to Des Moines?"

"Thinking of finding a less stressful posting?"

Lau just grinned. "Suite 302. Race you."

The third floor was the top floor, which made Daphne muse about sprawl, out here in a land where buildings were flat and had big lawns, and there was a lot of prairie but not so much bedrock to build on. Neither she nor Lau were out of breath when they topped the flight, despite having taken it at a thoroughly undignified run. Daphne allowed herself a brief smile of satisfaction. *Not bad for a couple of old broads in their thirties.*

There was little enough to smile about these days.

Ahead, the familiar FBI seal decorated a glass door, and Daphne was pretty sure from the weight when she opened it that this one, at least, was bullet-resistant. A white, redheaded receptionist glanced up as Lau entered, Daphne on her heels. "May I help you?"

She looked dubious, and Daphne could imagine how they looked--travelstained, crumpled, tousled, and bruised under the eyes. Even Lau looked scuffed around the edges, her usual polish abraded and chipped. She said, "I'm Special Agent Nicolette Lau. This is Special Agent Daphne Worth. We're the BAU representatives SSA Reyes faxed Special Agent Krohn about."

"Oh, of course," she said, her face lighting up. "I'm Angie Bakker. You look tired. It's a long drive from Yardston. Please help yourselves to coffee while I let Paul know you're here." She gestured to the pot in the corner, brimming and obviously fresh, and Lau's exhaustion-grayed complexion brightened visibly.

"Thank you. So. Much." Lau turned on her heel and made a beeline for the pot. She had just come back with mugs for both herself and Daphne (who mouthed thank you thank you thank you over the rim of hers) when Ms. Bakker returned.

"Just let me check your ID and you can go right in," she said, with a grin. "Not that I doubt you--"

"Just doing your job," Daphne said, and produced her folder.

The back office Bakker led them through was clean and organized, featuring a few bright touches among the inevitable beige of copy machines and printers. There were four desks, one of which looked unused, but only one of them currently boasted an occupant. A clean-shaven, shirtsleeves Standard Issue Midwestern Fibbie in his forties, he looked up as they entered, then stood with a red paper folder in his left hand, extending the right. "Paul Krohn," he said, as Lau shook it. "All I've got for you is a relayed phone message, I'm afraid."

Lau accepted the folder while Daphne shook Krohn's hand. She flipped it open while Daphne finished the introductions, and Daphne saw her react. "What is it?"

Lau blinked. "Reyes says to meet two at the Grand Forks airport, Northwest flight 3578. 4:42 pm."

"Sorry," Krohn said. "I'd offer you breakfast, but that's a nine-and-a-half hour drive if everything goes right. You'll be shaving it fairly fine."



Bakker cleared her throat. "There's a Panera on the way back to the highway."

"Oh, damn," Lau said. "I am *never* gonna get the creases out of these pants."

"Or your butt," Daphne said, finishing her too-hot coffee in a swallow. "Come on, Thelma. Time to make the cowboy drive."

## **Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, North Dakota**

**Wednesday 13 May 2009**

**0900 hours CDT**

Donna Kakenowash's smooth-skinned round face looked as if it ought to be smiling. The photos on her refrigerator backed Todd up on that: Kakenowash and two other women clowning at a softball game; with half a dozen kids dressed in cardboard and crepe paper costumes; with an elderly man and woman at what looked like a rodeo.

"That's my grandma and grandpa last year," Kakenowash said, when she saw where his eyes had gone. "Grandpa passed this winter. And that--" she touched the photo of the costumed kids with a fingertip. "My social studies class. We put on a play, on Columbus Day, you know..." Todd heard her breath grab in her tight throat, a painful-sounding moist click.

"I'm sorry," Todd said, because he was.

She studied him across the horizontal ledges of her cheekbones. The frown sat wrong on her face. "So Winona called in the FBI."

"Yes, ma'am," Todd said, thinking himself inoffensive and acceptable. *Only a very small Special Agent, ma'am. I won't eat much at all.*

Kakenowash shook her head, but led him through the cheerfully messy kitchen of her double-wide trailer to the cloth-draped card table and wood folding chairs in the dining alcove. The chairs were softened by round crocheted cushions in bright colors that spiraled out from the center, like the peppermints beside a diner cash register. "I like these," he said, nodding at the cushions. "Your work?"

She shook her head. "My grandma. She makes afghans, too. She puts them in the raffles at the church."

Todd had seen enough of the community already to know "the church" was either the

Catholic church in Bottineau or the Methodist one on the reservation. Nothing in Kakenowash's trailer suggested religious obsession--or any obsession, for that matter. He knew he couldn't gamma-hunt on hunches alone, but he was almost sure enough to drop his guard that Kakenowash wasn't their poisoner. She was plump and deep-bosomed, and while that wasn't a reliable part of the profile anymore, Todd thought the dozens of diet soda cans in the recycling bin by the kitchen door were a strong argument against gammahood.

She sat in the chair nearest the kitchen counter, leaving Todd the one with its back to the window. He hoped the backlighting didn't obscure too much of his expression.

"Ms. Kakenowash, you weren't at the school yesterday at the start of classes, were you?"

She looked down at the bright checked tablecloth, and her lips gave a little twist. "The day before, my grandma--she lives with me--slipped on the steps. I took her to the infirmary. They said she had a broken ankle and might need surgery, so she had to go to the hospital in Rugby."

"You went with her."

Kakenowash nodded, drew a sharp breath, licked her lips. "I called the school office and left a message to tell 'em I'd be late. It's probably still on the machine. I don't know if anyone even played it." The pleasant rising note of Kakenowash's sentences climbed out of control, until the last word was a high-pitched whistle of air. Tears coursed down her cheeks as if someone had pulled a cork out of the ducts.

Todd reached across the table and laid his hand on hers, because, professional demeanor be damned, you didn't ignore pain if you could help it. She turned her hand over and gripped his hard, and made a half-wailing, half-choking sound.

Sometimes all you could say was nothing at all. All you could do was be there.

At last Kakenowash pulled her hand away and snuffled, wiping the tears off her cheeks with both palms. Todd looked around for a box of tissues (Used to be that a gentleman never left home without his handkerchief), but Kakenowash fumbled half-blind for the magazine rack beside her chair, came up with a handful of Kleenex, and blew her nose. "It hurts to think about it," she said. No "I'm sorry" or any other suggestion that what she'd done was weak or embarrassing. Todd was surprised suddenly at how rare that was.

"When you came home and headed for the school, what time was it?"

"It was... I remember thinking I was going to miss the start of second period. So I guess

maybe just before nine."

"Do you remember seeing anyone or anything unusual as you drove in?"

Kakenowash rubbed her face again. "There's not a lot of traffic until you get pretty close to the school. I saw Joe Saquash--he's one of the bus drivers--coming from the parking lot where they leave the busses. And Felicity, I gave her a ride because her car broke down."

"Who is Felicity?"

"Felicity Tabor. She's a student teacher. We get lots of 'em, and thank god, because we never have enough teachers. She lives outside. In town."

Todd took a moment to adjust the picture that drew in his head; "outside" meant "outside the reservation." "So you went to town to pick her up?"

"No, her car broke down on the way. I saw her by the road. Everything's pretty far from everything else out here, you know? If anybody's hitchhiking, somebody stops and picks them up."

Which would have made it a dependable way to leave the crime scene. Felicity Tabor was heading toward the school; still, plenty of UNSUBS returned to the scene. "Do you know Ms. Tabor well?"

"She's a good kid. When she got here last fall, you could tell she had all that Dances With Wolves, Thunderheart stuff in her head about Indians. We get lots of that in the student teachers, too." Kakenowash shrugged, and for the first time Todd saw a hint of the smile she wore in the photos. "We don't worry about it. The kids take care of that pretty quick." The smile cracked, fell, was sucked back into her mouth by a dragged-in breath. "Shit." She swallowed hard and clenched her hands in the tablecloth.

"Did you see anyone else?" Todd asked, as much to give her something to cling to as to get the answer.

"No--oh, yeah. Sam Fredeaux, one of the eighth graders. He was at the end of the old logging road, maybe getting to school late, too. Sam doesn't usually come in late."

"Not the tardy sort?"

Kakenowash snorted. "No, he just doesn't come in at all. He's ADD, does pretty bad at most subjects. He looked scared that I saw him, so maybe he thought he was going to kind of sneak in."

To Kakenowash, it would be impossible for one thirteen-year-old boy to kill one hundred

sixty-seven people. Todd wished he thought it was impossible, too. "Which was was he headed? Toward the school, or away?"

"I thought toward. I'm not sure." Kakenowash frowned across the table. "You think maybe he saw--that he saw something?"

"I don't know. We'll ask him, and see if he can help us." Todd stood up. He liked the crocheted cushions even more; his spine smarted where the slats of the chair back had dug into them, and he could imagine what the seat would have done to his poor aged ass.

Kakenowash's hands clutched, twisted, and she stared down at them. "We're gonna bury our kids," she said, and her voice was thin and high. "Here, in the cemetery. We're gonna bury all those kids. How can that be possible?"

Yet another circumstance in which there was nothing to say. "Thank you, Ms. Kakenowash. Again, I'm so sorry for your loss."

All changed, he thought, changed utterly. But someone forgot to bring the terrible beauty.

## **ACT IV**

### **Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, North Dakota**

**Wednesday 13 May 2009**

**1000 hours CDT**

Sam Fredeaux sat sullen on the sagging plaid couch in his grandmother's pre-fab house. At least, it looked like sullen. But Brady remembered a little about being thirteen. "Nice haircut," he said gravely.

Sam ducked his head self-consciously and swiped his palm across the close-shaved scalp over his left ear. On top his hair was longer, clotted in messy spikes. It clashed with the last childish roundness in his face. He looked too small for thirteen. Brady had a disorienting moment of feeling like Esther Falkner: a pinch at his heart that this kid was determined to fight his way out of childhood too soon.

Sam's grandmother, Doris Jeviss, perched on the other end of the couch. She murmured, "The sister of one of his friends did it. She cut all his friends' hair one day." Her voice dried up suddenly. Brady wondered how many boys with fresh hip-hop haircuts were lying under sheets now.

"Sam, my name's Danny Brady. I'm with the FBI. I'm here to find out who killed all those people at the junior high school."

That got Brady a quick look. Like his hair, Sam's eyes seemed too old for his face. But his gaze dropped back to his sneakers before he said, "Okay."

Brady leaned forward in the brown upholstered chair and crossed his forearms over his knees. "Do you like school, Sam?"

"Nope."

"Sam!" his grandmother protested. Sam shot her a guilty sideways look before focusing on his shoes again.

"Still, you're better at some subjects than others, I'll bet." Sam shrugged, and Brady added, "Sports?" He straightened up, held his arms a little away from his ribs, let his shoulders occupy their natural space. "I played football. Not like you'd ever guess."

His deadpan got him an eyeroll and a twitch of the mouth from Sam. "I like hockey," he replied, in a soft growl that broke upward on the last syllable. "Summer sucks."

Mrs. Jeviss's mouth pursed, and she frowned. But she may have felt Brady at work; she didn't speak this time.

"I hear that. How about fixing things? Was that a dirt bike I saw out front?"

Sharp nod. "It runs pretty good now." Sam flushed, just a little, and Brady thought it was with pride.

"So you like doing things you're good at. That makes sense. You're not good at English and history and social studies?"

Sam met his eyes. "Nope."

Brady gave a one-sided shrug. "Teachers just don't understand stuff like that."

The kid looked at him up and slantwise, doubtful. But the man-to-man approach seemed to reach him.

"How about computers? Digital video?"

The response was so quick Brady was shocked, and he'd been expecting something. Sam's eyes dropped; his face went blank and hard; his hands lay like dead things on

either side of him on the couch cushion.

Doris Jeviss opened her lips, but Brady raised his hand swiftly and said to Sam, "You spend a lot of time in the computer lab, don't you? There's a note in your school record that says you have some pretty hot skills in electronics for a kid your age. Written by a...Mr. Bello."

Sam pushed back with his toes, dug his butt further into the couch padding.

"Did you like Mr. Bello?"

Sam's fingers clenched.

Suddenly Brady wished he weren't here. Falkner could have done this. Todd could have, genial ice man that he was. This kid had been sideswiped by life over and over; he didn't deserve to have his nose rubbed in this new head-on collision. But he was halfway in already. The harm's done, Brady told himself. You can't make it worse.

"Sam, there was a video camera in a locker in the school hallway. Lucy Mishenene's locker. Someone took the feed from that camera and uploaded it to YouTube, three hours after the killings. Do you know anything about it?"

Of course, Sam shook his head. So hard there was no way to doubt it was a lie.

"Why was the camera there, Sam? What was it recording?"

His chewed, grubby nails dug into the fabric of his jeans. "We were making a movie," he blurted, the words tumbling like rocks in a flooding wash. "We wanted to show what it's like being a kid here. People give us shit: clothes, blankets, toys. You can tell--they don't know who we are. So we wanted to tell 'em. We only told Mr. Bello, so we could borrow the cameras." He gulped back a sob, and squeezed his mouth shut tight.

Brady leaned a little further toward the boy, his head a little lower. "Why did you upload the video to YouTube?"

"I didn't know what else to do." Sam raised his eyes to Brady's face. They were full of tears. "I was watching it streaming, to make sure it was working right, and I saw--" He squeezed his eyes shut, which forced the tears down his cheeks. "I didn't know what to do. I ran to go to the school, but I was scared."

"What were you scared of?"

"That...it would happen to me. That I'd see something. So I went home. And I posted the video, because I thought maybe somebody would see and know what to do." He wiped

the tears away angrily and sat staring at his lap.

There was nothing Sam could have done. That didn't mean he could live with that. He'd watched it happen. "You did the right thing," Brady said softly. "Another agent at the FBI saw the video. It helped us figure out a lot of things about what went on."

Sam didn't lift his face, but Brady thought his shoulders loosened just a little.

"Did you recognize the person in the video, the one who seemed to be..." Brady found he couldn't finish the sentence, not to the kid.

Sam shook his head.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Who knew about your movie project, besides Mr. Bello?"

Sam gave another hard shake of his head. "A lot of the teachers would have complained that we were doing it instead of schoolwork. Ms. Shoemaker--Mr. Bello said she might not want us using the equipment. Ms. Tabor doesn't want us doing anything fun. I don't think anyone would have told."

"All right. Thank you, Sam. If I think of any other questions you might be able to answer, may I come back?"

After a pause, Sam said, "I guess. Yeah."

Brady stood up and caught Mrs. Jeviss's eye. She understood. "Sam, you go down to the store for me. The list is on the counter. Get some money out of my purse."

When they heard the screen door slam, Mrs. Jeviss asked, "Is he in trouble?"

"No, ma'am. I meant what I said, about the video. I'm just sorry he saw it."

She swallowed. "I saw on TV when the Towers were hit. Children shouldn't know these things." She rubbed her eyes, and Brady realized she'd wiped away tears, too. "They told you he has trouble in school? The doctor said he probably has fetal alcohol spectrum. His momma--she was killed last year by a car, walking home from a party late. Since then, he lives with me. I try hard. But some things you can't protect them from, you know?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Brady.

After all, trying to protect people was his day job. So he knew a little about not being able to do it.

## **Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, North Dakota**

**Wednesday 13 May 2009**

**1030 hours CDT**

Falkner pushed the end button and frowned at her phone for at least three seconds, until Todd's name and phone number and the call duration blinked to black. She rubbed her temples and tried to guess at the source of her headache for purposes of successful treatment--exhaustion? Glare? Ponytail? Lack of caffeine? Too much caffeine? Dehydration?

"All of the above," she muttered, stuffing the phone into her pocket as Chief Spencer came across the tiny, cluttered main office of the tribal police station to perch on the corner of Falkner's borrowed linoleum-top desk. "Winona."

"Esther," Spencer said, and handed her a sour cream doughnut wrapped in a paper napkin. "It's not much, but it's calories. The whole damned rez is on a physical fitness challenge to combat diabetes. These things are worth their weight in gold around here."

"Bless you." It was worth its weight in gold to Falkner, too. She took it reverentially, broke off a piece, and tucked it into her mouth. She had a coffee cup around here somewhere. Right, on the other side of the phone. Thank God. She washed the doughnut down with a mouthful and closed her eyes in thanks.

"I've maybe got something," Spencer said, when Falkner's mouth was clear.

Falkner looked up, grateful for the weight of her service weapon on her hip where it belonged.

"One of the Oglalla volunteers canvassing in town turned up an eyewitness report of 'a skinny girl with long black hair' leaving the junior high at 7:14," she said.

It was amazing how definite a trigger response you could build up to a common, nondescript word like skinny. Falkner drank more coffee rapidly, to lubricate her exhaustion-dried mouth for speaking. "That's ten minutes after the video the DC team located was shot."

Spencer nodded. "Which shows a girl with long dark hair apparently orchestrating the



slaughter. Of course, we have our share of women--and men--with long dark hair around here." She ran a hand through her own short locks. "Esther, I've been wondering something."

"I'm here to give answers, when I can," she said.

"Your team keeps talking about stressors and cracks and manifestations. You guys hunt serial killers. There aren't any serial killer Indians outside of fiction."

"Sherman Alexie," Falkner said. "It's a pretty good novel, although I wouldn't recommend it as a textbook on behavioral profiling. Gammas--are both like and unlike serial killers. Not all gammas kill. What they all do is cause enormous suffering, and they also seem to arise from it."

Spencer stood abruptly, rocking the desk. Falkner kept her coffee from capsizing only through skills acquired in combat. "We've got that," she said. "Look. I have to ask. Not to put too fine a point on it, and I'm not saying I want this to be one of mine. There's something else that suffering breeds. Gang culture, and we're starting to have it in spades. The kids take names from West Coast gangs, or they call themselves things like 'The Skins.' They talk about embracing warrior culture, but really they're getting into knife fights and selling each other meth--"

"I don't think it's a gangbanger," Falkner said softly. She reached out and touched Spencer's arm, drawing her attention when Spencer seemed inclined to turn on her bootheel and begin to pace. "Cyanide, like that--I'm not sure yet what that implies about the killer's mythology, but there's not much to reflect a culture of machismo in poisoning a bunch of kids."

"Some of those kids were probably in the gangs," Spencer reminded.

Falkner nodded. In gangs, and dead, and more or less the age of her own daughters. "Gangbangers think about bullets," she said. "Who thinks about poison? That's what we need to figure out."

Spencer pressed her hand to her mouth and bit at the back of it, hard enough to leave marks. It had the look of a longtime nervous habit. Falkner thought of a parrot pulling its own feathers out from stress and wondered how many years it had been since Spencer quit smoking.

Spencer said, "Oh, that list of names you wanted. I have it. The donors and volunteers for the... the casualties."

Good, clean, military word. Cop word. A solid euphemism. Falkner admired it even as

she nodded, and Spencer handed her a photocopy of a sheet of paper that had been folded lengthwise and written on in meticulous Catholic-school script.

Falkner's eye caught on a name. "There's a name on here that's already on our interview list. Felicity Tabor."

"She's a student teacher from off-rez," Spencer said. "Lives with her parents out in the county past Rugby, if I remember the interview notes. That's a long drive for a student teaching gig. You'd think there would be schools closer. You want to bump her up to today's schedule?"

"I do," said Falkner, ignoring the premonition that spidered chilly fingers across the small of her back. "I really think I do."

## **Rugby, Pierce County, North Dakota**

**Wednesday 13 May 2009**

**1200 hours CDT**

The town of Rugby, North Dakota, had a modern-art sculpture of the Northern Lights, a stone marker proclaiming it the Geographical Center of North America, and a two-lane Main Street with diagonal parking along the sides and no overwhelming need for traffic signals. It had a senior center and a sport shop and it probably had a Wal-Mart somewhere that was not evident to casual inspection of the downtown.

Felicity Tabor's home--her father Bradley's home, according to her files; her mother Alicia had been dead since the previous year--was not at all what Falkner had expected, and Falkner had expected anything from a nice old family home to a weed-courted doublewide. Instead, the Tabors' house was squat and curved and honey-colored, with an old-fashioned turf roof, as if it had grown up out of the ground. A row of conifers shaded it on the windy side, a grove of cottonwoods clustered around it otherwise.

"I'll be damned," said Spencer as they turned into the driveway. "She lives in the Hay House."

"Excuse me?"

"Hay House," Spencer repeated. "It's a local landmark. The whole thing is built of shaped straw bales covered in mud and sealant. It's supposed to have a ferocious R-value. Damned hippies." She said it affectionately, like a Minnesotan. "I wish I were getting to

see the inside of this place under better circumstances."

The cop's curse, Falkner thought. You came and went in all sorts of interesting places, and never when you were in the mood to stop and look at them.

She opened her door and Spencer followed, quickly catching up and then passing her so as to be the first one at the door. It opened as they approached, revealing a man of medium height with deeply tanned skin and well-cut black hair. Closer up, Falkner could see the spreading net of wrinkles at the corners of his brown eyes, and the white hairs scattered among the black ones. His spectacles rode the tip of his nose like a cowboy about to lose contact with the bull. His green brushed-twill shirt was tucked into tan chinos, and both fit him well.

"Chief Spencer," he said, the fear in his voice enough to curdle doughnut and coffee in Falkner's stomach. "I recognize you from the news. I'm Brad Tabor. Have you found Felicity?"

It was a wash which of them checked harder. Spencer looked at Falkner, her jaw dropping open. Falkner recovered a little faster, but she put it down to jadedness rather than reflexes. "Actually," she said, "we were hoping to speak with your daughter, Mr. Tabor. I'm Supervisory Special Agent Esther Falkner with the FBI." Producing her ID, Falkner added the gestures that completed her incantation. "I'm helping the Metigoshe Reservation police with their inquiries into Monday's mass murder. But I take it she's not at home?"

"She never came home last night," Tabor said. "I reported her missing to the Sheriff's department this morning. But she was terribly broken up about the killings--we both were. She only missed being there by a matter of minutes when it happened." He stopped and seemed to recollect himself. "Please, come in."

He held the door wide, Falkner stepping carefully as she came up the smooth-edged stairs to a roof-shaded stoop high enough to compensate for a fairly significant drift of snow, come winter. Tabor stood aside to let them enter, then shut the door carefully.

Inside the Hay House it was cool and still. The walls had been painted in creams and russets, and Falkner could see the hand-smoothed clay behind the colors. Benches scattered with bright cushions were molded into parts of the living room, and the windows set three panes deep in two-foot-thick walls. There were family photos and an Apple computer in evidence on the coffee table, but no television in sight. "You have a beautiful home, Mr. Tabor."

"Thank you," he said. "My late wife designed it. She was a sustainable-building architect. The house has its own well, solar panels on the roof--" he went on for a little, but Falkner

was looking at the photos. Late wife, certainly, and moreover, beloved wife. The pictures while she was living showed a family together--blonde mother, dark father, blonde daughter, all tanned and wearing clothes that tended towards the breathable and durable. The photos without her, however, did not show Brad Tabor at all, and the girl--the same girl--had allowed her hair to grow long and ragged and dyed it an unrelieved black.

The photos also made it plain what Alicia Tabor had died of. Falkner could see the telltale signs of cancer and chemotherapy and eventual resignation to the inevitable in her ravaged face.

The photos were not too old. Falkner swallowed, suddenly glad that it was Spencer in the room with her and not Worth. Not that Worth couldn't handle it. Not that Falkner was happy about the reason Worth was busy somewhere else.

But she hated the way that muscle in Worth's well-defined jaw would jump while she handled it just fine.

"When did she pass away?" Spencer asked, with a glance at Falkner.

Falkner encouraged her with the barest possible nod.

"Last May," he said. "I told Felicity she could take a year off college, but she insisted. She wanted to finish for her mother." He sat down very gently on the edge of one of those sinuous, hand-smoothed hay-and-adobe benches and leaned his head against the wall. "It's--we find ways to cope," he said. "We find ways to cope. Alicia would have wanted us to find ways to be happy."

He looked anything but, his expression drawn down so sharply it didn't take a great stretch of imagination for Falkner to picture tiny weights dangling from various bits of his face. "Mr. Tabor," she said, remembering Brady's report of his conversation with Amos Sainawap, "are you Indian?" It was getting easier to say *Indian* and not *Native American*, the churching of education and media aside.

"Half," he said. "My mother was Chippewa. Turtle Mountain Band. We're not enrolled, though." He swallowed and folded his hands together. "Felicity was after me to do the paperwork, before Alicia died."

And then she stopped mentioning it. Falkner didn't shoot a glance at Spencer, and Spencer's chin jerked slightly as she didn't shoot one back. Instead, the police chief said, "May we see Felicity's room?"

He seemed to struggle to recollect himself enough to answer. "Of course," he said,

standing. "Follow me."

The hallway was long and as sinuous as the benches and the outline of the walls, and Felicity's bedroom was at the end of it. Falkner imagined after a while, you might go mad just looking for a straight line. When Tabor nudged open the door, however, all her snide thoughts evaporated and were replaced with something like horrified wonder.

It didn't look like the bedroom of a 22-year-old Education major. It looked like the bedroom of a twelve-year-old girl.

Those curvaceous walls were painted grey and lavender, what you could see of them. Every bulwark and bulkhead, however, was all but wallpapered with images, until you could not see the Hay House's hobbit-hole structures behind.

They were mostly commercial-art fantasy posters in airbrushed pastels. Several dozen of them, and every single one featured the same subject matter. They were posters of unicorns. Prancing, threatening, bowing. Pawing, leaping, galloping with their foals alongside. Dipping their slender, spiraled, prismatic horns into bodies of water. Rearing atop mountain crags. Over the head of the bed hung the most impressive of all, jet-black on dusty black velvet, with a gold foil horn that caught splinters of sunlight from the window.

There were stuffed unicorns on the unicorn-patterned quilt, and ceramic and molded plastic unicorns on the shelves along with books about unicorns. Crystal and blown-glass unicorns decorated the window ledge. Falkner found herself turning the Look she would normally shoot to Reyes at Spencer, and was relieved to find Spencer shooting it back, with a little extra body English on the eyebrows. Tchotchkes. As far as the eye could see.

"She collects them," Tabor said apologetically.

What wasn't unicorns was crystals--mostly purple--amethyst, maybe? Now, Falkner wished that Worth were here to ask, and to ask what they were supposed to be good for--dreamcatchers, Zuni fetishes carved from stone and cottonwood root, badly-leather-burned Medicine Shields. A string of pearls wrapped around the base of a silver candlestick.

"There's a diary," Spencer said.

Falkner glanced at Tabor for permission. He nodded, twisting his small hands together again, and she tugged on one blue nitrile glove before lifting the cloth-bound book off the carefully made bed. *Two guesses what the pattern is.* It was lavender, and the unicorn was stamped on the cover, and in gold on every page. When Falkner raised it, it fell open to a

page marked with something too thick to make a proper bookmark.

A plain silver ring, very slender, set with a tiny diamond solitaire that sparkled as it tumbled through the air and bounced off the quilt. Spencer picked it up with the corner of a handkerchief when it settled. "Purity," she said, reading the inscription inside. "It's a promise ring."

"It must belong to a friend," Tabor said. "Felicity would never lower herself to that evangelical nonsense."

Falkner did not let him see her glance at the tawdry dreamcatchers with their bright plastic beads. "Did she have any boyfriends? Girlfriends?"

His eyes widened with shock, but he shook his head. "Not serious ones."

"Felicity colored her hair black after your wife died. Did she tell you why?"

"I-- No. It was maybe a month after the funeral. Her hair was so much like her mother's--I thought maybe it reminded her too much of her. But she kept it up."

"Why do you think your daughter stopped encouraging you to get on the tribal rolls?"

"There was so much else on our minds. Alicia-- There at the end, we were with her all the time. I was just-- I was dazed, I think. Felicity had school. She was so upset, she got so skinny and her skin and hair--" Tabor frowned, focusing inward, into memory, looking for the dropped thread of a father-daughter project. "There was so much else to do."

Reyes would ask the next question without a qualm. Falkner found she wasn't quite so cold-blooded. "Were you and your daughter close before that? Did she usually share her feelings with you?"

"Yes. She did. I'm sorry, what--" Tabor stopped short and shook his head like a horse shaking away flies. Falkner could see him gathering up dignity and anger to shield himself from the thing he couldn't look at. "How is this going to help you find my daughter?"

"Knowing her state of mind might allow us to determine where she would have gone."

"She's just lost. She might be out there, hurt. She's lost." Tabor's voice rose, staccato, insistent. Falkner and Spencer stood silent and professional under the weight of it, until it broke. "Oh, God. Oh, my God. You're not...you don't think Felicity would--would do..." Tabor turned his head, back and forth between the police chief and Falkner. Hoping for the denial. Knowing it wouldn't quite come.

Spencer laid a hand on Tabor's forearm. "We don't judge ahead of the facts, Mr. Tabor. We just want to find your daughter. She may know something that can help us."

Tabor groped behind him for the white-and-lilac checked upholstered chair and sat carefully on the arm. The world was loose at the seams. Treat it carefully, or it might give way beneath you.

The only way out is through, for all of us, Falkner thought. "When was the anniversary of your wife's death?"

He grimaced, but said "Tuesday."

Standing there in Felicity's room, she asked him all the usual questions--change in behavior, change in appetite, change in outlook--and got the usual answers. And felt herself sagging more and more under the weight of it as she did. This is all he has left. This is his daughter.

If you thought about it for too long, it could shake your faith in anything.

"Thank you," she said. She and Spencer didn't even need to share that look this time; she could feel Spencer on point like a good bird dog. They worked well together. Pity she was too old for the FBI, but Falkner was pretty sure her tribe needed her more, anyway.

Falkner lifted the diary. "May I borrow this? I'll sign a receipt. It may help us find her."

He leaned against the chair back, eyes half-closing in relief. His hands at last untwisted and hung by his thighs. "Please," he said. "Take it away."

Feeling like the biggest heel that ever lived, Falkner slipped it into an evidence bag and found another one for the ring. "Thank you," she said.

#

Outside in the police 4x4, she flipped her cellphone open and called Madeline Frost while Spencer gloved up and opened the diary. Frost answered on the first ring. "Madeline Frost speaking. Hello, Special Agent Falkner."

"Hello, Dr. Frost," Falkner said. In the driver's seat, Spencer held the ring up in its bag to catch the light that fell all over and between them. The seats were warm against Falkner's back and thighs. "I won't take too much of your time. Those inappropriate donations. Can you tell me what exactly was inappropriate about them?"

"Rainbows," Frost said promptly. "Unicorns. Childish patterns that most people would

consider incongruous for covering the dead."

"Thank you," Falkner said. She hung up the phone and looked at Spencer.

Spencer looked up from scanning pages. "This is," she said, "some crazy shit."

She raised the book so Falkner could read. In violet ink, the first page said *colonialism is a poison everyone here is sick with it they puke it up in video games and wanting to be hockey stars and buying cigarettes and gasoline they don't even know they're sick they think they're in the FUTURE but they're getting small and dry and shriveled I can hear them rattle when they talk because of the dried-out hearts how long did it take a hundred years? for them to give the land to the poisoners and not take care of it anymore the way they should the strength the innocence all gone even A he's a big plastic poison lie he doesn't care about saving the kids EVERYONE is SICK*

"She's a transmuter," Falkner said tiredly, with the bone-deep certainty of knowledge that only the mother of an eleven-year-old girl can field as a scholar of unicorns. "Unicorn horns turn poison into clean water. That's why the unicorn dips his horn in the spring, to make the water safe to drink."

Spencer touched the ring in its plastic pouch. "They only like virgins, don't they?"

"And their horns can heal any sickness. They're magical cures."

"For cancer?" Spencer asked.

"For everything," Falkner answered. "Except that didn't work out so well for Felicity. Her mother still died. And she still wasn't magic."

"And neither was her father." Spencer curled her fingers hard around the steering wheel. "Did I hear that right? She blamed him? Because he was Indian? No, she dyed her hair black."

"I think," Falkner said reluctantly, "because he wasn't Indian enough."

"To cure her mother's cancer? Crazy Horse wasn't that Indian."

Falkner sighed. "Remember when I talked about the killer's mythology?"

"God damn." Spencer shook her head. "Which piece of herself does this girl hate more, the white part or the Indian?" Her hands spread as if to express the enormity of the misery she perceived and could not articulate. "Every way you look at this, it's awful."

"A selection of equally awful options are part of what we mean when we say



'anomalous.'" Falkner knew she was taking refuge in Todd's catchphrases. Except sometimes Todd's catchphrases were more like mantras, and sometimes mantras were all you got.

Because Spencer was one of the best cops Falkner had ever seen, because good cops were bulldogs as well as confessors, she came back to the question again, even though it had spikes and she winced when she picked it up. "So she dyed her hair black. To look more like the noble savage she wanted to be?" Spencer scrubbed both hands across an exhaustion-rutted face. "Did you catch all that tourist Indian plastic shaman shit in her room?"

Falkner shook her head. When her eyes closed, she still saw the silver-blue airbrushed highlights on the awful black velvet unicorn over the head of the bed. "Yes. I mean, I saw it. But she wasn't trying to look more like a Hollywood Indian, or at least that wasn't her only motivation. So, Winona. If a white unicorn heals the sick and cures the afflicted... What do you suppose a black unicorn is for?"

## **Grand Forks International Airport, Grand Forks ND**

**Wednesday 13 May 2009**

**1700 hours CDT**

Pauley was fairly certain that Grand Forks International Airport deserved that designation on the basis of a daily flight to Calgary. Its sole terminal was a red brick building with a shaded exterior walkway running along the front. Pauley wondered if the whole thing was actually even twice as long as a 747. The long late-spring evening was balmy and soft as he stepped out of its slanted light and through the glass and brushed-aluminum doors.

He looked around for baggage claim, and instead found Stephen Reyes.

"Meet two?" Pauley said.

Reyes let one corner of his mouth curl up, stretching the fading scars from that awful case in January into creases. "Villette's grabbing trail rations."

Involuntarily, Pauley glanced over his shoulder, but the mobile fire-watch tower of SA Charles Villette was nowhere in sight. "Celentano let you spring him?"

"I told you he did," Reyes said.

Pauley opened his mouth to protest, and Reyes held up a hand.

"Pete. At this point, what the hell are you going to do about it? You know he's our best chance of getting Gates in with no loss of life." This time, he glanced over his shoulder. Pauley, following the gaze, caught sight of Villette's unmistakable silhouette in the Hudson News.

"Holy shit, Reyes!" A matron nearby shot the two men a scathing glance. Pauley quickly modulated his voice. "You're using him as bait?"

Reyes rubbed his cheeks with one hand. His fingers rasped in his unshaven beard, silver prickles showing bright among the black against his chestnut-colored skin. "Desperate times."

Pauley felt the corners of his mouth twist down into a scowl. Tracking Villette out of the corner of his eyes, he dropped his volume further and asked, "So, Reyes. Have you asked yourself yet what could Hafidha do to cause the most pain? To give the anomaly the most... satisfaction?"

Reyes, too, checked over his shoulder again. Villette was just coming toward them, two bulging plastic sacks swinging from his right hand. He closed his eyes, his complexion ashy-looking with exhaustion. "Die."

#

Daphne woke with a horrid start, clapping her right hand on her sidearm before she realized where she was (scrunched down in the driver's seat of the musty-smelling Bureau wheels) and what that noise was (Chaz Villette, who had been knocking on the window and was now backing away slowly, in mock horror, both hands raised). In the back seat, Lau lifted her head and looked around.

As Daphne opened the door, Lau said, "I am so not sitting on the hump." And then, as Daphne held the keys out to Chaz, "Oh, don't you dare."

Daphne looked over her shoulder. "Are you fit to drive?"

Lau let her head fall back expressively. "Just tell me you brought the Scooby Snacks."

"Are you kidding?" Chaz said, looking from Daphne to Lau, as Pauley and Reyes materialized behind him. "We killed and ate Fred and Shaggy somewhere over Missouri."

## **Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, North Dakota**

**Wednesday 13 May 2009**

**2200 hours CDT**

Brady was a mile down the gravel BIA road when his phone gave its text message chirp. Twenty-eight percent of accidents occur during cellphone use, Brady thought, and dug his out of his jacket pocket. If you'd grown up driving back roads in Texas, you ought to be able to drive on gravel one-handed.

The message was from Falkner.

COME IN. SUSPECT IDENTIFIED.

He felt his heart rate tick up, his breathing quicken. This must be how a hunting dog feels when the boss takes the twelve-gauge out of the gun safe.

#

The conference room in the tribal police office seemed too small to contain the five of them, but Falkner was certain it was meant to hold at least twice that number comfortably. Perhaps it was the adrenaline, hers and theirs, that made the walls seem close.

She spoke mostly to Winona Spencer and Robin Spears, but she also wanted to ground Todd and Brady, remind them of the likely outcome of this one. "What I'm going to tell you now will sound impossible. Unfortunately, it's not. We've investigated crimes like this for years, and in some cases gotten up close and personal with the people who commit them. If you don't believe what I'm about to tell you and act accordingly, there's a good chance innocent people will die."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Todd shift his weight. He knew why she'd said "innocent."

"Felicity Tabor will be much stronger than she looks. Her reaction times will be faster than normal. But most important, she's deadly at a distance. Approximately thirty feet, according to our analyst's conclusions on watching the video footage. He also believes she needs to see her victims. Since there's no way to test that, I suggest you not count on it."

Spencer met Falkner's eyes, and Falkner thought she saw grim comprehension there. "We just have to figure out where she's gone. My guys are watching for her car. They've got

orders not to approach."

Spears frowned. "So how do we bring Tabor in?"

"We don't," Todd said, his voice as gentle as a parent telling a child he has to turn the bedroom light off.

Falkner watched comprehension rise in Spears's face, her lips part, her eyes widen. Spears shook her head. "That isn't...we don't operate that way."

"We," in this case, being the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Todd could have probably listed for her the times when the RCMP did, in fact, operate that way. Instead, he said, "One of the things we confront in anomalous crimes is that some of the perpetrators are impossible to keep in custody. How do you put Tabor in jail?"

Spears frowned. "I-- Sedatives? Some sort of drugs?"

Falkner stepped up, because she didn't shift the dirty jobs onto her reports. "Tabor's metabolism will burn through them at a phenomenal rate. We'd have to keep her in a near-coma to prevent her killing every doctor, guard, or prisoner who came within her range. The risk to facilities staff if we underdose, or to her if we overdose--" The explanation dried up in her throat. Because, as she said the words, she saw Hafidha lying in the white bedding of an Idlewood cell, the IV stand beside her sending slow poison into her veins.

Spears's jaw firmed as she stared at Todd. "I guess it's not just Indians the FBI executes summarily. I'm sorry. I thought you were different."

Falkner kept her voice calm. "If we see the opportunity to bring her in alive, we will. We have made arrangements to hold prisoners who are equally dangerous. But please don't risk your own lives or those of my agents to do so, and accept before we go out there that it may not be possible."

Spencer and Spears traded a look. Slowly, painfully, Spencer nodded. She didn't need Falkner to explain how dangerous Tabor was. She'd been one of the first in the school.

Brady had picked up Tabor's diary from the conference room table, and a pair of nitrile gloves from his pocket. Falkner knew when he got to the entry Chief Spencer had shown her from the narrowing of his eyes.

"A," he said. "Amos Sainawap." Brady looked down at the page again and read, "Even A

he's a big plastic poison lie."

"Would she call him by his first name?"

"According to Sainawap, everyone did."

"This reservation is a small town," Spencer said. "Everybody's on a first-name basis."

Brady's expression seemed to condense, until he looked like a stone bust with ice crystals under the eyelids. "Sainawap also said this is a small town. 'News travels fast, bad news travels faster.' What if Tabor knows about that YouTube video?"

Spencer's breath hissed in through her nose. "And Sam Fredeaux dodged her first pogrom."

"We'll have to split up," Falkner ordered, hating the necessity. "Todd, you and I will cover Sainawap. Chief Spencer, Constable Spears, take Agent Brady with you to check on the Fredeaux boy."

Spencer plucked a digital radio from the row of chargers on a shelf and tossed one underhand to Falkner. "Cell reception is crap up here. Besides, this is quicker than dialing." She passed one to Todd, and one to Brady.

After a quick look to make sure she knew how to operate it, Falkner dropped it into her jacket pocket. "Good. Call in when you arrive. If there's no sign of Tabor, bring the boy and his grandmother here where we can harden a perimeter."

Spears and Spencer went out the conference room door first. Brady gave her a quick nod (because he would never say "Watch yourself out there" out loud) before he followed them, taking up his tail gunner position for his temporary unit.

"Separation anxiety," Todd murmured, too softly for anyone but Falkner to hear.

Another division of the team. "I think we've all got it," Falkner said. "Come on, guard dog. Let's do our stuff."

#

They rolled up to the front of Sam's grandmother's pre-fab with the headlights off, but the light spilling between the front window curtains was enough to show the Honda civic parked out front. Spencer killed the engine, but held up a hand to Brady and Spears. "Hold on." She pulled a mini-maglight off her belt, held it against the windshield, and clicked it on. It spotlighted the license plate. She clicked it off again.

"Tabor's car."

Brady squinted through the darkness at the front of the house. "Door's ajar." Just a hairline of light around the frame. He remembered that living room, the layout, obstacles between the front door and anyone inside.

"I'll call," Spears murmured, taking the radio from Spencer. While he studied the house, Brady listened to her saying, "Unit One to Falkner, suspect's vehicle outside one-twenty-seven BIA Road Four. Suspect may be inside. Over."

He didn't have to listen to the response. They were going in. Because sitting outside and waiting for Tabor to finish killing Sam Fredeaux before they shot her just wasn't happening.

Spencer slid out of the driver's seat, with Spears a second behind on the passenger side. Brady came out behind Spencer. None of them needed to remind the others not to shut the doors. They approached the house in a loose triangle, weapons at low ready. Spencer stopped outside the door, and Brady and Spears flanked it.

Inside the house a female voice demanded, "Tell me! Is anyone else here?" The voice wobbled, as if the speaker was doing something physical.

"Fuck off!" That was Sam Fredeaux, his voice cracking into childhood treble halfway through.

Hang on, kid. Keep fighting.

How were Spencer and Spears at marksmanship? Brady was good, but good enough to take the head shot past a hostage, if they needed to? Hafidha is. He kicked the thought behind him, hard.

He held up three fingers to Spencer and raised his eyebrows. She shook her head and pressed her left hand down, palm toward the ground. Go in soft.

And Brady cursed himself, because he should have worked this out before they arrived. He'd forgotten how much Spencer didn't know. He frowned at her, but she shook her head again and turned toward the weather-scoured front door.

"Felicity Tabor," Spencer called, carrying but easy, no threat implied. "It's Winona Spencer. Don't be alarmed, Ms. Tabor, I'm going to open this door now."

Brady leaned in, preparing to shove Spencer out of range if Tabor hit the panic button. If Tabor's panic button didn't work faster than Brady's reflexes.

Spencer pushed the door lightly with her left hand and let it swing open as she resumed her two-handed grip on her pistol. She didn't raise it from low ready.

Brady's heart beat so hard he could barely breathe. He edged up to the doorframe and got the living room in his peripheral vision.

A skinny woman--a girl, really, though malnutrition was sucking her dry of youth--with ragged black hair and sunken, bruised-looking eyes stood pressed against the back wall. She wasn't tall, but she still had to crouch to hold Sam Fredeaux in front of her. Undersized, because of his mother's alcoholism.

Tabor's grip on his upper arms was so tight his flesh bulged the cotton jersey of his maroon shirt around her fingers. Sam's eyes were squeezed closed, his mouth open and panting, and tears smeared his cheeks.

"Ms. Tabor, let Sam go. He hasn't done anything." Spencer's voice was calm, but Brady could see the pulse in her throat, as fast as his own. Spears shot a look across the doorway at him, but all he could do was return it. Damn it, we can't take her alive.

The distance from the back wall to the door was maybe fifteen feet.

"Yes, he has." Tabor's face was fierce, but her voice was creepily reasonable. "And it'll get worse. He's poisoned inside. I have to clean it off, burn off the weeds. Then maybe the pure ones will grow again."

Spencer stepped forward, into the house. Brady nearly reached out to drag her back. But sudden, violent motion could panic Tabor. He settled for mumuring, "Spencer, pull back now."

He might as well have given the order to a goddamn lamp post.

Brady could hear the tension in Spencer's throat when she said, "Ms. Tabor--Felicity. Are you one of the pure ones?"

Tabor's eyes seemed big as a pair of hubcaps. "That's not what I'm here for. I have other work."

Spencer said, "Were you supposed to heal your mother?"

Tabor jerked back, and Sam cried out; her tight grip must have got tighter.

"Spencer," Brady said, warning. But he was impressed in spite of himself. Hell, she sounds like me.

"Felicity," Spencer said gently, drawing her left hand away from her gun and down in a calming gesture. "Unicorns aren't real. But you are. Sam, there, is. Did you know his mother died, too? About a year ago."

Tabor stole a quick glance away from Spencer to the top of Sam's head. It wasn't enough for Brady to act on.

"Let him go now, Felicity. We'll help you make everything better. But you have to let him go."

Felicity looked around--at Spencer, at the room, at Brady and Spears at the door ready to blow her head off. And Brady swore he could see her eyes clear, as if she'd been drunk and was suddenly, horribly sober. He slipped his finger onto the trigger and wondered what would happen if he didn't make the shot.

"No! He's coming with me. If you try to hurt me or stop me, I'll kill him." She began to drag Sam backward toward the entry to the kitchen. Sam struggled, but that just made Tabor scoop him up (a frail, skinny girl holding a fighting thirteen-year-old) and clutch him to her, where he blocked Brady's line of fire.

"Felicity, don't--" Spencer began. But Felicity screamed at her, a wordless, angry animal noise, so loud it shook the window glass, and lunged backward into the kitchen.

Spencer leaped after her, with Spears and Brady on her heels. The kitchen was empty, the back door open.

None of them bothered with the three rickety steps down from the door to the overgrown back yard; they jumped from the stoop to the ground and landed running. They all saw the figure plunging into the woods that started, sharp as a stage curtain, at the edge of the yard.

Maybe it was because Brady was tail-end Charlie, and was watching Spears and, beyond her, Spencer, rather than focusing on Tabor. But he caught the motion out the corner of his vision, on the right. A movement in the scrub at the treeline, just a little lighter than the trunks of the pines.

The shade of a maroon shirt in the darkness.

Sam lay curled in a ball at the foot of a tree. Brady reached him just in time to witness his last convulsion. The smells of loam and pine needles were overwhelmed by the stink of acidic vomit, and Sam's mouth was smeared with foam.

Brady dropped to his knees and fumbled for a pulse in Sam's neck as he yanked out the



radio Spencer had lent him. "All units, need medical behind one twenty-seven BIA Road Four. Thirteen year old boy, symptoms of cyanide poisoning..." No pulse. Brady swept Sam up in his arms and bolted back to the edge of the yard where he could lay the kid flat. There beside the dirt bike, he started chest compressions.

It wasn't going to help. And Spencer and Spears were chasing a gamma through the darkness behind him, with barely a clue what they were tangling with. Where the fuck are the medics?

Tabor wanted to know who else was in the house with Sam. She could have killed the kid when he opened the door. But she wanted to know who else was there.

She had a hierarchy for her targets. It was Sam's turn; he was supposed to die in the school. And his grandmother's turn, maybe, for failing to make Sam what Tabor wanted him to be. That was why the teachers died, wasn't it? And Sam hadn't told her where his grandmother was. He'd never, Brady thought bitterly, still working, know he'd died a fucking hero. Was that why she hadn't snuffed Spencer, Spears, and Brady as soon as the front door opened? It wasn't their turn?

Maybe that would keep them all alive long enough to take out the gamma.

He heard the siren rushing down on him, saw the party lights reflected off the side of the house and the trunks of the trees. "Here!" he yelled as the first paramedic rounded the building.

He waited until the responders crouched next to Sam's body. Then he drew his gun and set off into the woods, following the trail of flattened brush.

## **ACT V**

When Falkner's phone rang on an "unknown caller," she almost didn't take it. But Todd was driving, and she had a minute. And a window of cell signal, apparently. "Falkner." She winced when she heard her own voice: brisk and curt. Well, it was the time for it.

When she heard Stephen Reyes's voice, she was unassailably glad she had answered. "Falkner," he said. "I'm on the rez with four other agents. We believe our target is looking for your target. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said, while Todd looked at her curiously. She held up a hand. Drive, Sol. I'll explain later. "We're in the endgame. If she's here--"

With Hollywood timing, two radios buzzed with Brady's voice just as Todd made the turn onto the rutted dirt track that led to to Amos Sanaiwap's home. "She's at the Jeviss place.

Sam's been poisoned. She's out in the woods and we need backup five minutes ago. Brady over."

"Crap," Todd said. He turned an axle-shuddering three-point reverse in the driveway, bouncing hard over ruts. Falkner bit her lip on a squeak of pain; she wouldn't have wanted Todd to take it any easier. One-handed, he grabbed the radio, thumbed it, and said "Copy. Backup enroute. Todd over."

One more crackle. "Brady out."

That was it, then. Brady was out there in the dark with a gamma and two good, untrained cops. There was no way Falkner and Todd could move fast enough. But they were all they had.

"Re--" She remembered at the last minute not to say his name over the cell phone, choked it off as Todd bounced them back to the gravel road. "Brady's in hot pursuit of our UNSUB. We're going to support. Meet us there, and be careful." She rattled off the address, amazed as always at the sharpness of the trained human memory in crisis. She'd never have remembered that if adrenaline wasn't snaking through her veins. "Falkner out."

She turned to Todd. "Reyes brought the cavalry."

"There is a God," he answered, and didn't take his eyes off the road.

#

It was a slow, painstaking quartering through the woods, a hunt by ear and hand-shielded flashlight. The radios crackled back and forth. Headsets would have been better, but Falkner hadn't thought to hand out extras to Spears and Spencer before they split up. This wasn't a well-planned FBI raid. It was street-cop seat-of-the-pantsing, and Brady was intimately aware that he didn't know Spears and Spencer well enough to anticipate their moves. And they didn't know him, either.

He had a headset, though. And when it gave him Falkner's voice, he almost said Hallelujah.

"Brady," he answered softly. "She's still out here somewhere. I keep hearing movement where Spears and Spencer ain't."

"We're here," Falkner said. "With the cavalry. Watch your target discipline, okay?"

"Copy," Brady said, and wondered what exactly she meant by cavalry. Not the Reservation police, he hoped. They seemed like pretty good cops, under Spencer's

leadership, and he didn't want to carry the bodies of any good cops out of the wood tonight. He turned to Spencer, who was closer. "Falkner's here. Positively identify any target as Tabor."

"Got it," she said, a voice in the dark. "Are we waiting for her?"

"She's coming to us."

In the silence that followed, he heard Spears' "shh!" clearly. And the slow, cracking footsteps that followed. Tabor didn't have a light, or was afraid to use it if she did. That was an advantage, in the thick trees and filtered moon.

"Spread out," Spencer whispered.

Brady went wide to the left, watching Spears and Spencer's lights. "Felicity Tabor?" Spencer called. "Felicity? You need to come out now. Your father is worried, Felicity. He's scared sick, and he wants to see you. I can take you to him. I can make everything okay."

A crunch. "He's not my father. He's poison too."

Voices echoed in woods. Bounced strangely. But Brady thought he had a sense of where Tabor was now. He squinted through the darkness, trying to see her outline rather than imagining he saw it. If we can keep Bloody Larry in a box, why not this one?

Of course, what Todd and Reyes had done to get Joseph Lawrence Hakes into that box was the stuff of FBI cowboy legend, and a really good case study in *How Not To Catch People Who Can Kill You With Their Mind*. The inconvenient fact of Hakes' survival had taught them a good deal about gamma toughness.

"My father is the Gitchie Manito," Tabor said. The gamma's voice was threadbare and exhausted. Brady could hear her teeth chattering, chopping the words to pieces. "The sun is my grandfather and the moon is my grandmother. Gitchie Manito made woman and put her on the earth, who was her mother, and he made man and put him on the earth who was his mother. To the wind he gave the power of direction. To the water, he gave the power to purify and renew."

"That's what you're for, Felicity," Brady said into the darkness. "You came to renew the earth, didn't you? To clean the poison off it?"

"The poison," she said, with sickening conviction. "We've poisoned the world. And now it's poisoning us. Why do you think everybody has cancer? Why do you think everybody on the rez is dying of sugar poisoning? They were supposed to protect the Earth, to keep

it pure, and they didn't. So they have to go so somebody else can do the work."

Sure, Brady thought. Blame the Indians for not saving the white people from themselves. That makes a lot of sense.

But it did, with the horrible toxic Ouroborous logic of a gamma's mythology.

Footsteps behind him, the flicker of lights. Falkner minced cautiously up on one side, Todd on the other. Brady saw Spencer turn in the backglow of her lowered flashlight, saw the eye contact with Falkner, saw Falkner nod. "Go get her," Falkner said.

Spencer and Spears faded back into the darkness, their lights dimmed behind jackets. Tabor would still see three lights here. She might not realize that the people who were familiar with the terrain were slipping around to flank her.

"Keep her talking," Todd said into his headset. His light clicked off. "Keep her on us."

"Gitche Manito," Brady said. "Is that like Gitche Gumee?" Somewhere back in his head, the opening stanzas of "Hiawatha" rolled. "The shining big sea water?"

"The great Manito," Tabor said. "He made all this. He is my father. He made me to take it back for him."

There. She was there. And moving. Picking through darkness. Brady was sure of it. He could almost hear her over the hammering of his heart. Todd was sure too; he leveled his pistol one-handed and tilted his eye to the sights, moving his light well off to the side.

Crunching from uphill. Brady shielded his light so it illuminated only the area before his feet and inched toward it, through the dark and treacherous wood. "Felicity?" he called. "The water that purifies and renews? Can you do all that without help?"

There was a crash, then, the sound of running feet. Tabor's, from their lightness and irregularity, and then heavier and more certain footsteps in pursuit. Shit, Brady thought, as the sound of a gunshot cut the woods. Shit. She bolted.

Daniel Brady ran. Feet thumping hard against the leaf-slippery earth, scrambling up the wooded slope with the moon a big waning three-quarters overhead. It stained the sky like clerestory glass and still didn't get under the trees worth anything. Off to his left, he heard Todd, scrabbling through the underbrush like a wounded deer; on the right, the flicker of Falkner's light cut through the trees occasionally. More crashing, a woman's voice shouting--Spears, he thought--and a sudden, sickening melon-ripe thump.

A second burst of gunfire followed, closer this time. A double-tap and a third shot following, a forty-caliber pistol by the sound--and a woman's scream. Something crashed

and tore through the trees; something else crashed after, and Brady felt his already painful breathing accelerate, his heart hammering unhelpfully against the inside of his ears while he strained to hear through the noise. He kicked things in the dark. You couldn't help it. Even his boots did nothing to protect his feet. He was going to wind up blackening toenails on this one if he didn't break toes.

There were other people in the woods, and he couldn't tell how many. But the brightness through the trees ahead was a clearing, and the noise of a fight was coming from that direction. Falkner's light had vanished; Brady no longer heard Todd. But they were out there, to either side of him, trusted support--and they all knew how to do this.

Brady dropped to his belly, found cover in the understory, and crawled. He made it quick; there was no way to hide the rustling noises, and somebody out there had a gun. But he also wasn't about to fire at a random silhouette: Spencer, Spears, and too many of his own people were out here, and he didn't know who else. Chaz says the gamma's range is no more than thirty feet. Chaz says she has to have line of sight.

Then the darkness was an ally; perhaps the best one he had.

It wasn't the first time Brady had bet his life on Chaz Villette's superpowers. It might have been the first time he was quite this aware of making a conscious choice to do so.

He stopped within the treeline and levered himself to a runner's crouch behind a thick-boled tree. Quiet now; he smelled gunsmoke and heard someone panting, and it wasn't him. He held his breath to be sure.

A big bright flashlight, someone backlit, the glow coming from across the clearing. Brady risked a peek around the tree and saw the brilliance of a beam reflecting off swirling mist, rising from a position on the ground to splash tree limbs overhead and wash out the light of the moon. It *did* silhouette something, and for a moment Brady had a crazy-quilt adrenaline flash of horror-movie dreadlocked alien monster, swinging tentacles and massive shoulders looming against the trees in splintered light.

And then the monster said, "Are you okay? Did she get you?" and Brady's whole heart came unmoored in his chest cavity and tried to wiggle up his throat.

*Hafidha.*

The figure in the clearing stepped back, a Glock held in a low safe position in her left hand, and now Brady could see a woman in a puffy jacket too warm for the season--unless you were a jammer--with her mass of weighted braids swinging free. Her boots crunched over twigs and she crouched beside whoever had the flashlight--Spears--still keeping her attention on a huddled shape on the ground in the clearing's center that had to

be the downed gamma.

"It's okay," Hafidha said. "I'm Special Agent Gates. I'm with the Federal team. How's your partner?"

"Breathing," Spears said. "Not conscious. Tabor hit her with a fucking tree branch. And I broke my fucking ankle. I'm Robin Spears, RCMP. Where's your backup?"

*Hafidha, Brady thought. Here. To the rescue. A save at the buzzer, no less.* She had followed them here, he understood. Whatever had driven her away from the team, she hadn't gone far. She had monitored them and taken care of them and arrived like the cavalry, in the nick of time.

That emotion shoving his heart up his throat like a too-big cork was hope.

And what if it wasn't Hafidha? What if it was the anomaly out there in the dark, talking calmly to the wounded woman, keeping cover on the gamma?

Well, there was only one way to find out. And Falkner and Todd had his back.

"I'm here," Brady said, and sidled out from behind the tree.

"Brady, baby," Hafidha said. "You're a sight for sore eyes. Where's the team?"

"Still coming," he said, without glancing at the bushes where Todd or Falkner should be hidden by now. "Good thing you were here."

From the way the shadows jumped across her face, he thought she smiled. He kept edging into the clearing crabwise, his firearm leveled at the presumed gamma lying dead on the ground. "Did you secure her weapon?"

"Couldn't find it," Hafidha said. "If she had one. No pulse, though. But I'd still keep her covered."

She holstered her Glock and ran long fingers down Spears's calf and ankle. Spears hissed. "Congrats, honey," Hafidha said. "You've made a good diagnosis. You have a cell phone on you?"

"No signal out here," Spears said. Her voice was thin, stretched out and wavering along the lines of strain.

"Don't you worry about that," Hafidha said. "Just call; it'll go through. Danny and I could

probably carry both of you out of here, but I've seen too many horror movies to leave the bad guy's dead body just lying on the ground."

Spears dialed; Brady saw her surprise as the connection completed itself, heard her voice giving the EMS team directions on where to find them.

"Hafs," he said, "what happened in Yardston?"

"Later," she said, standing. She nodded to the woman on the ground. "Little pitchers. Check the baddy again, would you? I have you covered."

*God please let it be Hafidha.* He was more than half-convinced. It was a misunderstanding, some complicated or crazy ruse she and Reyes had cooked up between them. It wouldn't be the first time.

He still said, "I've already got her covered. You go."

Near-silent, small and ghostly, Todd stepped out of the shadow of the trees. His pale face glimmered in the darkness; the pistol in his hands gleamed darkly. He kept his weapon pointed at Hafidha.

"Hey, Hafs," he said. "Don't take this personally. But I'd like you to step away from Constable Spears, there. And then I want you to take your gun out with two fingers and toss it over there by Brady. Easy and slow."

She lifted her hands very slowly. "I'll do that. I'll do that. Just let me go check the bad girl for Brady first? Can you see why I might want my weapon for that?"

"Did she have a gun, Hafs? When you shot her?"

"She didn't need a damned gun, Todd. She was armed and if she ever got line of sight on Constable Spears or her partner here, you know what would have happened." Hafidha's elbows dipped, as if she wanted desperately to hug herself, As if she could ward off potential bullets with the embrace of her arms.

Spears said mildly, "Two of those bullets are mine, Agent Todd."

"Todd." Brady's gun dipped towards the ground. "Go easy." But it was an act, at least in part. He knew what Todd was doing--engaging her, challenging her, assessing her. Trying to see if she reacted like Hafidha, or like... something else.

Falkner was there too, slipping out of the darkness, Lau and Worth unexpectedly flanking her. Their feet went whisk-whisk-whisk through leaves and grass. Pauley, too, appeared, and Reyes a half-step back, his hands empty and open, his dark complexion nearly lost in

the shadows.

"Hey," Hafidha said. "The gang's all here. Except my baby brother?"

"I'm here," Chaz said. He stepped from the shadows behind Hafidha, not four feet from her shoulder, and Brady, whose gun barrel had dropped to a low safe position, nevertheless cursed quietly. Trust the kid to get in everybody's line of fire--

Unfair, Brady realized. He was doing it on purpose.

"Platypus," Hafidha said. "Tell them it's me. They'll believe you."

He looked at her the way Brady's Grampa Gilmer had looked at the coffin that held his wife's body, just before the tight army-green straps loosened and it drifted into a hole in the ground.

"We know about Des Moines," he said. "We know. There's nothing to hide now."

The only sound for long seconds was Spears' sharp intake of breath, and then Hafidha's strained laughter. Brady lifted his firearm again and leveled it at her chest. Daphne made a sound of sharp, hopeless denial. Brady tuned it out. Hafidha might be wearing a trauma vest. She might be very hard to kill.

Maybe he should be aiming between the eyes.

"Oh, man," she said. Her hand went to her weapon. Her off-hand, and she drew it cross-body. Slowly, *slowly*. She pulled it out just as Todd had directed, but she didn't toss it aside. "Des Moines? What happened there? Guys, don't shoot, for serious. You have the wrong end of the stick about me--"

Her voice trailed off, though, drowned out by another. Also hers, a woman's flexible contralto, but not the reassuring, worried tones she had been using. Something strained, hard, frantic, full of manic dips and falls. "--*they're all in on it every one of them they're going to kill you lock you up you have to stop them nobody can save you but you you have to stop them get away get free and they're all in on it they want to lock you away and cut up your brain--*"

"Stop it!" Hafidha snarled, whirling. "Stop it, it's not true, it's not *true*."

Chaz just stood facing her, unarmed, hands hanging at his sides, mouth still open. Tears streaming across his cheeks, unchecked, unremarked, like what he had just done had hurt him physically. Brady heard Lau, watching, grunt with the effort of locking her arms out against their trembling.



"It's true," he whispered. "Come on, Wabbit. Let me help you."

She stared. Chaz looked down. He held out his arms as if coaxing a child or a puppy.

"You can't help me, platypatootie," she said.

He looked at her. He didn't speak. Slowly, unwillingly, as if ensorcelled, she took a shuffling step towards him. On Brady's right, Pauley strained forward, pushing his service weapon out before him as if tugging at an unseen collar. Reyes laid the back of a hand against Pauley's upraised arm.

Pauley was the only person Brady knew who was a better shot with a handgun than Hafidha.

Hafidha walked into Chaz's embrace, the pistol still dangling from her hand. He ducked down from the knees, getting under her, his right arm cradling her as she laid her head against his shoulders. Even from here, Brady could see her shivering, trembling all over her body like a small, kicked, starving dog.

That sound, he realized distantly, was Worth sobbing. But when Brady stole a glance at her, she was a rock, her mouth opening and closing like a dying fish's, her gun steady in a modified Weaver grip.

Chaz put his left arm down and took Hafidha's sidearm from her limp right hand. "Shhh," he said, into Hafidha's ear. He pressed his face into her cheek so that Brady could barely hear his voice. "I'm going to take care of everything."

He lifted up the Glock and nosed the barrel through her braids until it pressed against the side of Hafidha's head, right behind the indentation of her temple.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa--" Brady didn't realize he was moving until he *had* moved, his pistol re-holstered, stopping three feet from Chaz and Hafidha with his hands spread wide, wondering if he could jam the web of his thumb under the hammer before Chaz got up the nerve to pull the trigger.

Worth was a half-foot and a half-second behind him, but she caught Brady's eye and checked, set her foot back in the footstep and jerked him forward with her chin. Alone on the team, Brady had the physical power to manhandle Chaz and Hafidha apart, if it came down to it. Falkner hissed "Reyes!," and Brady heard those footsteps stop too, but he couldn't turn right now and see what had happened. She was right, anyway. If he tried to walk up on Hafidha with that bug zapper, Chaz would pull the trigger.

Chaz's head was tucked tight into Hafidha's shoulder, her face pressed into his neck. She

leaned into him like he was the only thing holding her up, her arms linked loosely around his narrow waist. If the bullet that splattered Hafidha's brains all over the forest didn't keep going into Chaz's skull, the second one would.

"Danny," Hafidha said, her words mushy against skin, "leave us alone."

Chaz's eyes weren't closed. He was watching, Brady's feet, not his face. His finger wasn't registered. It rested on the trigger. Even in the dancing, angled flashlight beams, Brady could see that clearly.

"Chaz," Brady said. "Chaz, man, think about this."

"This is the right thing," Chaz said. "This is the right thing to do here."

Brady took a breath. He stepped back, a half-step, two. Unwilling, but taking the pressure off Chaz. The team was behind him; he could hear them breathing. He could hear the little noise of distress that Spears made low in her throat, and Spencer's groggy, awakening moan. He thought he heard Falkner praying under her breath, or maybe that was Lau cursing. It was too soft to be sure.

"It's what the anomaly would want," Brady said. "You're listening to the wrong voice in your head, man."

Chaz shuddered, a deep straining that looked like it came up out of the core of his body to wrack him. Brady stepped back again. The wry part of his brain, the one that liked gory novels and sarcasm, supplied a Chuck Palahniuk quote, exactly as if that were somehow useful. *No matter how much you think you love somebody, you'll step back when the pool of their blood edges up too close.*

"Don't you think the fact that there are voices in my head at all kind of indicates this has gone farther than I should have let it?" He breathed hard and painfully, blowing like a man fighting through agony, like a horse run until it couldn't run any more--each exhale strong enough to swing Hafidha's wire-thin braids. "How long do you think a gamma can keep pulling the trigger with a bullet in its brain, Danny?"

"Chaz. *Think* about what you're doing." Brady glanced over his shoulder. He trusted the team; he trusted all of them. But they had not lowered their guns.

Except for Reyes, who was standing there like an unmanned puppet, both hands empty and down at his sides.

Slowly, gently, Brady spread his arms wide, blocking any possibility of a shot from Pauley or the others with his own body. "What are you doing, man?"

The words came out staccato, one to a shallow breath. "What you'd do for me."

"Chaz, you do not want to do this thing." *Just keep him talking, keep him engaged. Say anything. Get him to say anything.*

"You don't think I can?"

*...okay. Maybe not that.*

Intellectually, Brady knew there was a whole night forest stretched out around them, the whole night sky stretched overhead. Nine people watching.

He wasn't aware of a single thing, except Chaz's breathing, Hafidha's trembling, Chaz's finger on the trigger of Hafidha's gun. "I am not going to--Chaz. Look at me, Chaz."

Chaz's hair shivered, but his chin didn't untuck. "I have to save her." Was his finger a hair less tense on the trigger? Brady couldn't tell in the dark.

Softly, the leaf-rustle revealing the shift of her weight as she leaned forward, Daphne said, "Please, Chazzie. Please don't kill my family."

That brought Chaz's chin up. His face clenched like a fist. "What if they're already dead?"

The longer the conversation lasted, the better chance all three of them were walking down this hill in the dark. Suicide took commitment. Time could wear commitment away. He got half a breath in him and kept talking. "Chaz, we don't know it's permanent, okay? We don't know she can't be helped."

"Don't *bullshit* us, Danny." Hafidha jerked against Chaz's shoulder, moaning. Brady saw her hands clench on his shirt. His arm tightened too, pulling her closer. "I can't leave her in there with *It*."

*Anything. Say anything.*

*As long as it's the right thing.*

*Fuck!*

"Killing her, killing yourself. It's what a gamma would do and you're not a gamma, Chaz. How could you hurt anybody more than that? What if we can get her back? Let Reyes have his chance."

"Let Reyes have his lab rat."

Reyes, off to Brady's right, jerked like *he'd* just soaked up a bullet. In an act of supreme bravery, or maybe cowardice, he tucked his chin and took it, one to the body, and neither took a step nor made a sound.

But that was okay. because -- *There. That.* There wasn't so much conviction in his voice, and Chaz's hand was trembling now, as if Hafidha's Glock had suddenly grown unbearably heavy.

Deep down, Chaz didn't want to die. He'd fight harder for life than anybody Brady had ever seen. And deep down, Chaz still respected, trusted, and admired Stephen Reyes, no matter how hard he might have worked to convince himself otherwise.

Brady exhaled softly. It felt like the first time in an hour. "Fine. Let *Hafidha* have her chance."

Silence.

"You *promised*," Hafidha said.

Silence again.

Slowly, painfully, as if it hurt more than Brady cared to imagine, Chaz registered his finger along the barrel. He raised the Glock to safe, and lifted his other hand from Hafidha's shoulder.

He held out the gun to Brady. Brady took it.

Hafidha whispered, "You *promised*."

Chaz let his empty gun hand curl into her hair. Brady watched the braids dent under his grip, and looked down. The Glock in his hand felt like a feather. "I know, Wabbit. I know. I'm sorry."

Behind him, Worth's footsteps crunched across the clearing at a run. That shuffling sound would be the rest of the team as they followed.

#

It should have been Daphne, but she was on her knees in the leaf-litter, doing what she could for Spencer and Spears until the helicopters got there. And so when Nikki noticed that Chaz had vanished from the erratic light of the clearing, it fell to her to go after him.

*Duke would be better at this*, she thought. *Falkner. Somebody who isn't me.* But Duke was with Daphne and Falkner, Brady and Reyes were with Hafidha, and that left one

agent free and capable. And sometimes you did the work that wound up before you, whether you were the best choice of the job or not. So Nikki held her Mag Lite low in her hand, illuminating just her feet, and set off into the darkness to find him.

There was a trail, and she knew where he'd been standing when he faded into the blackness. She didn't let herself dwell on the fact that she was searching for the Invisible Man in something good enough to pass for a primeval forest to a California girl in the middle of the night. If Chaz didn't want to be found--well, he wouldn't be. She wouldn't go so far she couldn't hear the others' voices and see their lights. But there was the chance that he needed to be found and didn't know how to ask for it.

Which was probably the case, since he was only a few steps off the trail, as if he'd walked as far as he could without a light of his own before sitting down on the first rock he came to. As she picked her way closer, making no attempt at quiet, she smelled the faint trace of blood. He cradled one hand in the other; she wondered if he'd fallen and skinned it.

For a moment she worried it was something worse, that Chaz had harmed himself, but he was breathing, and if his shoulders were rigid and shuddering, well, so were Nikki's.

She walked up behind him and said his name. He didn't turn.

Chaz hated to be touched, but maybe this was special.

Gently, she laid her open hands against his trapezius muscles, closed her fingers, and squeezed.

Chaz slumped like a pile of laundry, as if Nikki's touch had severed whatever reserve of pride or ferocity kept him upright. But as he folded, at least she felt him sigh and start breathing. Until that breath became a deeper shuddering, a horrible silent sobbing gasp. His diaphragm spasmed; his neck arched; his hair brushing the backs of her hands as he convulsed in grief. He cried silently, except for a thin keening sound that wasn't his voice, but just air whistling through the constriction of his throat. She would have pulled back, but his hands came up and covered hers, pressing down until she understood and leaned on his shoulders, pushing hard, holding him to the ground while he rocked against her strength and heaved air in and out like a man who was dying.

After a moment, he flickered in her vision. Like a ghost, like a stutter in the camera shutter. She'd never seen it before, only read Todd's report, and she would have jerked away, gasped, let him vanish. But when she would have snatched back his big cold hands wrapped her wrists painfully, clutched tight. She leaned harder, all her weight, fingers claws in the fabric of his shirt. She gave him a deathgrip and her voice, not saying anything useful, just stupid things, jokes she told her kid cousins, jokes she wouldn't let her mother know she knew, jokes that would make Brady blush violet. Leaning on him.

Holding him down. Anything to let him know she got it, she had his back, it was okay to take whatever he needed. Saying something. Saying *anything*.

"I got you, Chaz. I got you."

She got him. She got *it*. He was jerking and juttering like that because he was fighting with all his heart and energy. Trying *not* to vanish.

## **Metigoshe Indian Reservation Infirmary, Delia, North Dakota**

**Wednesday 13 May 2009**

**2300 hours CDT**

Pauley followed Falkner into the hospital room to find Spencer sitting up, an icebag pressed to the side of her head, her eyes closed. She opened them and straightened as Falkner walked up to the bedside. "How's the cabeza?"

"They're transporting me to Rugby when the ambulance gets here," Spencer said. "CAT scan. I told them I have a cat at home, but no cigar."

"It's the smart thing to do," Pauley said.

Spencer nodded, then winced like she regretted it. "Sure. I could have a big old hematoma happening in there and I'd never know it until I pitched over in the saddle." The things her mouth did told Pauley she was holding on tight to something that maybe needed saying, however much she didn't want to say it.

He looked at Falkner. Falkner nodded. "She didn't kill you," Pauley said. Bad cop, since Falkner had an established relationship, and it paid off in future camaraderie and cooperation and goodwill to protect such things.

Spencer said, "She had me dead to rights. Why kill Patty Birdsong and not me? She has a baby. She just came back to teach this semester. Not that I expect you to have an answer...."

"I do have one," Pauley said. "But you'll hate it."

Spencer's fingers whitened on her icepack. Pauley could see the pinkish stains feathering it--blood in her hair. "Hit me," she said, and he liked her. It took a certain kind of grit to joke when the room was spinning.

"Tabor saw you as a warrior. A real hero. Somebody who was fighting the good fight and protecting the tribe. She would have changed her mind eventually, but the avenging unicorn wouldn't destroy a virtuous woman."

"Oh," Spencer said. "That's crazy. That's just--"

"Yeah," Falkner said. "I'm sorry. That's all it is."

#

Nikki Lau was Daniel Brady's best friend for all kinds of reasons. Way, way high up on the list was because after the nurse practitioner came to tell him that Doris Jeviss was on the infirmary premises, she spent fifteen minutes helping him look for her, although Nikki was swaying on her feet with exhaustion. When they finally found Jeviss out in the infirmary parking lot under a light, more chewing the cigarettes than smoking them, Lau stayed by his side.

He needed her strength, because the thing Jeviss's face did when she saw them coming was enough to send him running in the opposite direction, otherwise. Her mouth opened. She shaped a single syllable, but made no sound.

In a situation like this, hesitancy was nobody's friend. Brady took a breath and plunged. "Sam made it to the hospital in Rugby. Alive."

Her eyes closed. The hand with the cigarette dropped down beside her round hip. She dropped back against the stained lamp-post and gasped. "I don't--" she said.

Lau took her wrist, leaning close, offering body warmth without controlling her.

"They intubated him on the scene," Brady said, painfully aware that Daphne would be better at this. But Daphne was with Hafidha. Speak plain English, you idiot, not cop talk. "They put in a tube so he could breathe. They gave him activated charcoal, provided pure oxygen, and administered an antidote. It's called Cyanokit. His heart wasn't beating when I found him, but they got him back in the ambulance. He's not out of the woods yet" -- fuck, it really was his day--no, there'd been a night in there, though he barely registered it--his two days for thoughtless metaphors-- "but right now he's still alive, and he's in Rugby."

He didn't say that they'd had the Cyanokit because Frost had had it FedExed, morning delivery, from Baltimore. Doctor Frost saves another human life. The irony.

Jeviss turned her arm over, caught the hand that Lau had laid on her wrist for support, squeezed hard. "I don't have--a car."

Lau looked at Brady. Brady nodded.

She said, "I'll drive."

#

Outside in the hall, as he had expected she would, Falkner fell into step beside him and without turning, said, "About what happened in the woods, Pete--"

She used his first name, carrying with it the suggestion that this was a personal request rather than a professional one. He slowed his stride and lowered his voice. "Villette and Brady handled that better than I would have, Esther. It was a unique situation, and I'm not going to say anything to Victor that would force him to shitcan somebody's career." Or make him toss away the key, but Pauley didn't think that part needed to be said.

Her sigh of relief was still a sigh. "Chaz walked right up to the edge," she admitted. "But you're right. I was going to plead special circumstances and beg for your mercy. I owe you one, Pete."

He chuckled and tapped her shoulder with the edge of his hand. "You don't owe me a damn thing. Which doesn't mean I won't take your note, but--I turned Reyes down when he was putting the ACTF together, and I'll tell you what. Tonight proved to me I did the right thing. I couldn't do your job."

"Don't be si--" Her voice dropped off mid-syllable when she turned and saw his face. "What do you mean?"

"In Villette's shoes," Pauley said, "I would have pulled the trigger."

#

Todd let himself into Spears' treatment room at the infirmary with the sense that he was doing something deeply illicit, although there was no reason the Mountie couldn't have visitors. He hesitated inside the door as Spears looked up from her magazine. Her broken ankle was propped up on a rest. She surprised him by speaking first.

"Sol. I'm sorry."

He blinked. "I don't understand."

"I said--for what I said. You are different."

It hit him so hard he almost gasped out loud. He looked away for a moment; when he looked back, he thought he had his face under control. "You did well out there," he said.



"Really well. I just wanted to say that."

"Thank you."

"Thank you," he said right back. "For saying that I'm different."

She smiled when he paused. "It was unfair of me."

He shook his head. "No," he said. "No, it wasn't. But thank you for forgiving me."

## **Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, North Dakota**

**Wednesday 13 May 2009**

**2330 hours CDT**

There was no way to bring her home except under sedation. Every possible mode of transportation they could have used relied on computers, microchips, whatever. Even if it was only in the goddamned traffic signals.

Madeline Frost wrote the prescription and measured the dose. But it was Chaz who checked Frost's math, took the needle and the tourniquet and the alcohol wipes, and brought it to Hafidha.

She waited in the home-built Faraday cage in the vocational electronics classroom at the junior high school, her hands cuffed behind her. Daphne sat in the cage with her, all her personal electronics on a tray on the teacher's desk. Reyes sat at the desk behind a triangular name plate that said Mr. Bello, his gamma-stopping TASER on the blotter next to a book called *The Devil's Hatband*. It was a good title. He wasn't reading it, just tapping a drumbeat on the desk-edge with his left index and middle fingers.

He nodded to Chaz. Chaz nodded back and walked up to the cage. "Daphs?"

She stood, not turning her back on Hafidha. Chaz gave her the capped hypodermic, the strip of rubber, the alcohol wipes, the sterile pads of gauze.

Chaz took out his gun. In her cage, Hafidha pressed her elbows to her sides as if she would be hugging herself, if the cuffs permitted it. "I should have known," she muttered. "I was never going to make it to Witch Mountain all alone."

Chaz kept his eyes on Daphne, who shook her head infinitesimally. He knew, but the reminder helped anyway. That thing that was talking, pushing his buttons--it wasn't

Hafidha.

"I'm going to give you a jab, sweetie," Daphne said. "It's to make you sleepy so we can bring you home."

Hafidha neither moved nor acknowledged Daphne as Daphne opened her cuffs and refastened them in front of her, then prepared to administer the sedative into the vein in the crook of her arm. She looked over Daphne's head to Chaz, instead. Her eyes were deep brown, but the overhead lights revealed the topography of her irises. He saw her wince from the cold of the alcohol, but not when the needle went in.

She said, "Life is a meat grinder, honey. We just try to be brave and beautiful while it's chewing us up. And I wasn't brave or beautiful enough."

"You were braver and more beautiful than anybody," Chaz answered. "We'll find a way to fix this. You and me. I'm not giving up on you."

"You never quit," Hafidha said, and smiled. Daphne released the tourniquet; the rubber made a snapping sound. She stroked Hafidha's braids back from her face and secured a gauze pad over the pinprick with paper tape.

Hafidha's voice was already blurry when she said, "You just keep on trying until you run out of cake."

It brought him up short. So Hafidha, and so wry. He watched her hiding her face behind the beaded curtain of her braids and wondered, is that her, in there, sending me coded messages from behind the monster?

Or is it just the monster, twisting the knife a little?

He could reach out again, reach into her, let the mirror unfold like a canopy and confirm what he already knew. Or feared, or hoped for. He should have pried; he should have reached out to her; he should have checked on her more.

*Am I my sister's keeper?*

Later, maybe. Later. Right now, he couldn't bear to know.

A swirl of red like cardinal wings caught his attention. He turned, but whatever it had been--flicker of movement, hallucination--was gone.

*I should have--*

He should have.

It was too late now. Hafidha slumped forwards into Daphne's arms and Daphne laid her down. Gently, gently. She crouched beside Hafidha, still stroking her hair, murmuring something that sounded like, "Wabbit, wabbit."

Chaz felt Reyes come up beside him. It was a good excuse to turn, to stop looking when looking had become an invasion of privacy. "You performed exceedingly well," Reyes said. "Under exceedingly difficult conditions. I think you should know that."

Chaz nodded. There were times when he could meet Reyes's eyes. This was not one of them.

"You'll accompany Hafidha and Worth to the airfield immediately," he said. "The plane is waiting; you'll return to Virginia without delaying for the rest of the team. We'll follow tomorrow. I want you to get Hafidha settled in Idlewood. And I've made arrangements for you to spend the night there as well."

"You're putting me in Idlewood?" He heard his own voice as if it belonged to a stranger, and analyzed it dispassionately. Numb, like he only deserved and expected it.

Reyes, however, shook his head. The smile he offered was hesitant and hopeful, not an expression Chaz was used to associating with Reyes--and weary, which was all too common. "No. I'm putting you to bed. To sleep. Where somebody can come by every fifteen minutes and make sure that's all you're doing."

"Oh," said Chaz's mouth, Chaz himself registering the words a split second later. "I guess that's smart. And where will you guys be?"

"Here," Reyes said. "Until very early tomorrow, when the plane comes back to get us. I suggest you and Daphne move quickly; there's a car on its way from the airfield now, and I'd like you to be in the air by the time I'm done stalling its occupants."

It was a game designed to draw him out, but Chaz decided it was okay to let himself fall for it. "Occupants?"

"Dr. Rupert Beale and Unit Chief Victor Celentano," Reyes said. "And while you and Worth are returning Hafidha to the east coast, I will be explaining to them in excruciating detail how we wouldn't have caught Hafidha without your help, and how you were instrumental in her capture--decoying her to you and convincing her to surrender her weapon."

Chaz closed his eyes. "And if I think I should be in Idlewood?"

Reyes touched his arm, fleetingly. "Kay and Ramachandran will be waiting when you arrive, to perform an evaluation. For your peace of mind, Chaz. Not mine."

## **Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, North Dakota**

**Thursday 14 May 2009**

### **Midnight**

"You look good," Rupert Beale said. He was the first one through the door, and he paused to hold it for Victor Celentano, though Celentano was ten years younger and didn't limp. Celentano's self-conscious sleekness contrasted oddly with the air of professorial clutter that followed Beale around like a mantle of office. "I mean, you look like you're recovering well."

He smiled when he said it, and it was fair enough. One cop injured in the line of duty to another, and so Reyes nodded rather than cutting Beale dead with a look. He wondered what Beale had been like as a beat cop, or as a homicide detective. He'd seen photos--in Beale's books--of a barrel-chested young man in a Chicago cop's dress uniform, and it was important to remember that that guy still lived inside Beale's body, softened shoulders and a limp or not. Weird to think he'd been pounding Chicago pavement while Reyes was going to high school and sweating scholarships in the same city.

For a second, Reyes wondered if Beale had ever busted his father. Not that he'd remember if he had; one D&D musician was pretty much like another. You only, as Beale had said in one book or another, remembered the weird ones.

And what if they're all weird ones?

With Hafidha's transportation accomplished, Reyes had hoped never to see the junior high's electronics shop again. But he had been unable to arrange to receive Celentano and Beale in the tribal police station's conference room. He'd just about had to ask Brady to sit on Falkner to get her to let him handle this on his own. "If anyone's taking a fall for this one, it's me."

Better, for now, if she were on the other side of town.

The glare she'd given him was not unlike the one he was currently restraining himself from offering Celentano. Even as he forced the welcoming smile onto his face, Reyes found himself immensely grateful that no matter what else happened, his reports never felt the need to bullshit him. "Victor, Dr. Beale. We get pretty good benefits," Reyes said,

touching his mouth self-consciously. "It only hurts when it rains."

"I know the feeling." Beale said. He dropped his carry-on on the desk and swung the door shut with the other hand, then rubbed his hip for exposition.

Apparently, the small talk was going to be Beale's job, while Celentano sized Reyes up and planned his attack. Beale settled himself in one of the rickety chairs, wincing, while Celentano paced. Reyes remained standing; the condemned man shouldn't look too comfortable. He did not, however, scruple to imagine Celentano stomping about like that in jodhpurs and shiny boots, a swagger stick thrust under one arm. Too many late-night M\*A\*S\*H reruns.

Reyes, looking for anything to notice that wasn't Celentano debating his fate, found himself staring at the logo on Beale's carryon. The bag was maroon leather, masculine and luxurious without being ostentatious about it; its apparent softness invited the touch of a hand. The tag was silver, discrete. The brand name was Gamma.

He raised an eyebrow at Beale. Beale, fair-skinned, blushed crimson. "I have," he said, shamefaced, "a deeply inappropriate sense of humor. A year ago, that was funny."

"It's a nice bag," Reyes said, more charmed than he'd expected. It was his first piece of evidence that Beale had a whimsical side, and the man's apparent mortification over it made Reyes want to let him off the hook.

A courtesy that Celentano was not about to afford Reyes. So Reyes could use all the karma he could get.

As if their low voices had drawn Celentano's attention back, he turned and folded his arms, leaning back on the wall beside the tall whiteboard at the front of the room. "So you followed Villette out here?"

"It was the logical place for him to go," Reyes said. "And once I was sure he was on Gates's trail, I didn't have the means to relay information back without alerting her." He shrugged. "As you can see, his analysis of the situation proved correct. Lives were spared because of his actions, and at least one of those lives was that of a federal agent."

"The fact remains that he went rogue. The BAU is not a Dirty Harry shop, Stephen, and I'm not going to run it like one."

Beale's chair creaked, but when Reyes glanced over, he was just watching, hands folded in his lap.

Dirty Harry, on the other hand, was a San Francisco cop. "He got results."

"Through insubordination." Celentano uncrossed his arms and came striding into the room like a comeback pugilist leaving his corner.

"So give him a suspension and a note of censure in his file. It'll balance the commendation I'm going to write him." Reyes sighed. "If you fire him--"

Celentano turned. "There are other options."

And there it was. On the table now. While Reyes was framing his response, the chair creaked again. This time, Beale levered himself out of it. He didn't make a sound, but Reyes marked the faint sheen of sweat across his forehead, though the room was full of late-night chill. Here it comes.

But Beale surprised him. "Victor, forgive me for being so blunt, but if you let political pressure turn you into a witchfinder, you're not the public servant I think you are."

There was a pause in which Celentano quite obviously framed and discarded several retorts. Finally, he sighed and said, "So, what? So we just wait around and see if Villette grows up to be a dragon?"

Reyes glanced at Beale. Beale nodded. Your witness. "We still don't imprison people for things they might do one day."

Celentano shook his head, but there was a lot of irony in his tone when he said, "We don't?" A deep breath and a single sigh followed. "You know there were elements in the last administration that were very excited about the potential military and espionage applications of our anomalous agents, Stephen."

"Knowing," Reyes said, "is not the same thing as having confirmation."

"Spoken like a scientist," Beale said. He stared at Celentano until Celentano was forced to look back. "Victor, I've met Charles Villette. I've read the casefiles on what happened in East Texas. And I've read his publications. It's my professional opinion that nobody is going to get anything out of that young man through duress. You lock him up, you're going to be building yourself the eventual anomaloid equivalent of an Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. If he ever gets a pulpit, you'll have made the kind of enemy that topples regimes."

Reyes cleared his throat. "And what about the current administration?"

"There's been no official word from the top," Celentano admitted. "They may be reserving judgment. They like to do that. There are elements within Congress and the Justice Department that are more than a little scared of the whole thing. In the absence of

a strong policy..."

Reyes nodded. "And whose side are you on, Victor, really?"

Celentano folded his arms again, a more defensive gesture this time. Reyes could tell because he caught himself doing it and forced them down to his sides again. "The Bureau's," he said. "But you have to know that's a complicated proposition."

Reyes smiled without warmth. It sat slightly better on his face when he turned it from Celentano to Beale, his unexpected and welcome ally. "Then you have to know there are things that would send me to the press."

The staring contest lasted the better part of a minute, and it was Celentano who looked down first. "You're going to die in that job, Stephen."

The smile felt less like it was glued on and flaking now. "Oh, I know it."

Having won, he considered, he could afford a little magnanimity. He picked his paperback up off the blotter, slipped it into his coat pocket, and said, "Come on. I'll buy breakfast. The all-night diner down the block is actually pretty good."

"Thank God," Beale said, reaching for his carryon. "I was ready to eat the duty sergeant." He fell into step beside Reyes, a few feet behind Celentano. When the Unit Chief preceded them into the corridor, he leaned over to Reyes and murmured, "He's projecting his fears, you know."

"Classic presentation," Reyes answered, his tones equally low. He paused with his hand on the doorknob, and turned back to take one last look at the classroom with its piles of clutter and salvaged materials, give-and-take circuit boards and disassembled printers: evidence of a teacher who had devoted everything to his students, trying to show them some kind of ladder out of poverty. "It doesn't stop him from being right."

Beale smiled. "I've read your work too, Dr. Reyes. Call it an old cop's hunch, but I suspect you are going to outlast Victor. Too many people know this secret for it to stay a secret forever."

Reyes let his hand slide from the knob and turned away. It wasn't going to be him that locked this door.

**Dulles International Airport, Washington, DC**

**Thursday, 14 May 2009**

**0415 am**

It was supposed to be still raining at Dulles, which suited Brady's mood just fine. It had been a fast and quiet ride home, the Gulfstream sailing eastbound through the night, its occupants feigning sleep or aimlessly turning the pages of books they were not really reading. Falkner was playing hostess to Beale and Celentano, so Lau had roused herself to bring coffee and tea around and check statuses, which was usually Mom's role. Noticing, Brady got up and helped with blankets and pillows, though it was a little weird with so many outsiders on the plane, and so much of the team missing. Yes, he was a territorial son of a bitch, thank you for noticing.

Beale, who had been finding excuses to get up and down every twenty minutes or so, thanked him profusely and took an extra pillow. Falkner already had one stuffed behind her for lumbar support. *Should have got the Gulfstream with the orthopedic seats.*

Madeline Frost, showing no signs of fatigue, nodded with an excruciating correctness and said, "Thank you, Daniel. I am quite comfortable as I am."

"You're welcome," Brady answered at random. "There's extra if you change your mind." He stood to tuck those extra away and met Lau coming in the opposite direction.

"Thank you for flying Fibbie Airlines. Your cabin crew is armed," she stage-whispered.

"You think I have the legs to make it as a stewardess?" Brady answered. Taken all together, it was the longest conversation of the flight.

Lau smiled a pinched pallid little smile and went back to sit beside Pauley, who patted her shoulder absently. She leaned into it, prompting Brady to wonder if that was on again. But no, it was just two people who were comfortable in each others' presence sharing a little warmth in a cold time, which was good. It suggested Pauley might be moving on, finally. Lau could be as prickly about her personal space as Chaz was.

They weren't the only team that used the plane, and various members of the Critical Incident Response Group had long ago worked out a plan for sharing locker space for foul-weather gear. Brady retrieved his hat from amid the trenchcoats, parkas, and fuzzy cardigans before the doors opened, and was the first one down the steps. Home, he thought, shower, food, bed. Or maybe just shower and bed; he wasn't sure he'd really ever be hungry again.

He was opening the passenger door of his truck to toss his go bag behind the seats when sense-memory offered what seemed, in the rainy dark of morning, like it might be a better



idea. Cold water dripped down his neck while he considered. One memory led to another, and he closed his eyes against a flash of a tall, angular female form leaning over his desk, murmuring "Hmm. Cedar, amber, and nutmeg. Whoever you're not seeing, I like his taste in smells."

He climbed behind the wheel and reached for his cell. It rang just long enough for him to start regretting his decision when a groggy voice answered.

"Gray? Hey. Danny. Sorry to call so early--"

The it's-never-good-news adrenaline of the four a.m. phone call must have kicked in, because Gray's voice was sharp and crisp as he said, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." A patent lie, but-- "Well, not nothing. But no crisis. I'm home. I'm at the airport, I mean." God damn, he sounded like he was in shock. Good diagnosis, Special Agent. "Gray, I need to see you."

He'd never been to Gray's place. He couldn't quite bring himself to ask. But he couldn't face going home alone, either.

Gray's breath came out on a whistle. "Bad?"

"Classified."

"That bad, then. Look, I'm up. I was just going to go for a run--"

"In this? Don't lie to a cop, Putnam. We can smell it."

Gray laughed. "Come on over. I'll make you some scrambled eggs. There's always room for breakfast." He hesitated. "You need directions?"

"I'll use the GPS." Brady turned the key in the ignition. The engine purred alive. "Gray?"

"Still here."

"...thanks."

"De nada, stranger. I'll leave the porch light on."

**Silver Spring, Maryland**

**Thursday, 14 May 2009**

**0445 Hours**

Esther Falkner stood in the darkness of her younger daughter's bedroom, the door all but shut behind her, watching Deborah outlined in the faint glow of the clock radio on the nightstand. She was sleeping and breathing, that was all, her dark hair stirring in each exhale and her slight chest rising and falling under the off-white blanket. She'd kicked off the green and gold counterpane and burrowed her pillows all over the floor; it was an exercise of Falkner's self-control not to go and straighten them.

It seemed like no time at all since Deborah and Bekk had shared a bedroom, since Deborah had relied on Bekk to translate her toddler gurgles into grown-up English.

No time at all.

Falkner sighed through her nose and picked across the toy-scattered carpet barefoot, easing herself onto the edge of her daughter's small bed. Deborah was warm and heavy; she still slept like a child, imperturbable, and it was easy to edge her over and curl up against her back through the covers.

She'd only spend a few moments here, she promised herself. Only a few and then she'd go in and wake Ben. She should go in to him now.

But she was so heavy, and the bed was so warm.

As she closed her eyes, breathing in Deborah's scent, Falkner had a suspicion that, however good her intentions, Ben would find her in here in the morning. Later in the morning; it was already morning.

**Washington, DC**

**Thursday, 14 May 2009**

**0445 Hours**

Daphne Worth unlocked the front door of the brownstone and pushed it open carefully. The hinges still gave out their haunted-house groan. Thank god for real plaster walls and old solid oak interior doors; it probably wasn't enough to wake Tricia.

She stood in the hall at the bottom of the stairs and wondered what she should do next. Set her go bag down, that was a start. It made a faint scuffing against the wood floor.

Some creature instinct sent her to the kitchen after that, because the kitchen was where the food and heat and light were.

She flipped the switch for the under-cabinet lights; she didn't think she could stand the cheerful blaze of the overhead tracks. At the kitchen sink she ran a trickle of water, squeezed dish soap into her palm, and washed her hands, then splashed her face. She scooped water into her hands and drank it. Then she turned the water off and leaned elbow-locked on the counter, waiting for some clue as to what she should do next.

That was where Tricia found her when she came in wrapped in her terrycloth bathrobe. Daphne realized her arms were tired. How long had it been since she got home?

"Sweetie?" Tricia said, her head cocked. "Are you okay?"

Say yes. Nod. Don't make her worry. But it was too late now.

Tricia's arms closed tight around her. "Oh, honey. Oh, honey. Come sit down."

That person making the horrible hoarse gasping noises--it was Daphne. She didn't know how long she'd been doing that, either.

Tricia got her to the couch and pulled Daphne's head into her lap. The terrycloth was wet under her face by the time she could breathe normally.

"Hafidha...?" Tricia said.

"We brought her in," Daphne replied, and was proud of herself for not breaking down again.

"Then she's alive." Tricia sounded so relieved.

"She's-- She's not our Hafidha anymore. Not only her. The thing in her head, the anomaly..." Yes, she could say it out loud. She could. "It's in there with my sister."

Tricia tightened her arms around Daphne, and Daphne clung hard to the support of those muscles and bones, that heat, that human care. That love.

"But she's still in there," Tricia said at last.

That made it worse, didn't it? No. Alzheimer's was horrible because the body looked like the one you loved, but the person inside was gone, and you would never talk to them again. You could only talk at them, and get an answer, maybe, from someone using their voice.

But Hafidha could still look out of her eyes, still use her lungs and larynx whenever the Thing had its back turned. Maybe that would be enough.

Maybe they could still hang onto her tight enough that the anomaly couldn't have all of her. Her friends would grip with all their might, with their imagination and inventiveness and love, and pull, and maybe, maybe, Hafidha wouldn't slide completely out of their grasp.

Daphne dragged Tricia's knuckles to her lips and kissed them. As I will, so mote it be.

So mote it be.

## **Seven Corners, Virginia**

**Thursday, 14 May 2009**

### **0445 Hours**

Solomon Todd didn't go straight home, although he should have. He didn't have a single clean article of clothing in his jump bag, he hadn't slept more than three hours out of twenty-four in the past seven days, and he was old, old, old this morning. But that was the problem. The fish could fend for themselves for another day; he needed endothermic company.

He called a cab and went to Mehitabel's little blue house in Virginia, prepared to wait on the front stoop until the neighbors called the cops or she came home, if it was necessary. It turned out it wasn't--for the first time in what felt like living memory his luck was running in his favor. She had probably just finished a late shift at the women's shelter, because she was walking up her stairs when the cab pulled up to the curb amid cold drops of rain as big around as a newborn's fist, and when he called her name softly she heard him and turned. She let her face light up when she saw him, too, a gift he desperately needed. It lasted until she caught his expression, which meant until he was under the porchlight. He ducked under the roof and pushed the water off his face with a palm. Right-handed, because his go bag was in his left. Even a brief stint in the Army taught you to keep the right hand free to salute.

"Bad case?"

"I can't even say." He took her arm; they finished the steps together. She fitted her key into the lock. "But would you mind a little company? I've got two days off and I plan to spend them sleeping."

"Sleeping is always nicer with a friend," she allowed.

She let him into her cluttered, cozy house and locked the door between them and the world; she made him eggs over easy and bacon and fried potatoes and home-made hot chocolate. All things he probably shouldn't be eating, given the way the blood pressure and cholesterol count kept creeping up at every yearly checkup. But it was all good, and it tasted like home, and right now he wasn't really sure he cared if he died of it tomorrow. She put him in the shower and threw his wet and filthy clothes in the washing machine and found a pair of her late husband's too-big pajamas for him in the boxes in the attic. It wasn't the weirdest thing Todd had ever worn.

She tucked his head under her chin and wrapped her arms around him when he asked her to hold him. He cried himself asleep in her arms, and she treated his complete emotional collapse as if it were a goddamned wrapped and personalized birthday present, a gift he was giving just to her. It had been a long time since 1953, and Todd was as glad as anyone that the decade of Valium and poodle skirts was buried and on its way to becoming long-forgotten. But he knew he still carried enough of his childhood socialization to find her acceptance of him as a human being with human frailties stunning. Healing.

Always find the right word.

When he woke up with the bright morning filtering in around her blackout drapes only an hour or two later, she was still sleeping heavily. He lifted his head from her breast, which rose and fell with soothing regularity, and pushed a tangled strand of gray-brown hair off her face, and he thought *Solomon Todd, what the hell is wrong with you? You're fifty-six years old. She's a goddess taken mortal form. She deserves garlands of roses and Indian motorcycles placed reverently at her feet. You will never in a hundred lifetimes do better than this. Right here. Right now. This is your chance. The one you will most likely never get again, son. This is as good as it gets.*

*So why the hell can't you figure out how you're supposed to fall in love?*

**Adams Morgan Neighborhood, Washington, D.C.**

**Thursday, 14 May 2009**

**0445 Hours**

Nikki Lau had grown up in the low, wide architectural landscape of Southern California. So of course, as a kid, she'd always longed for a house with stairs. Her favorite stories

had had stair risers, bannisters, balustrades, landings. Sometimes they'd even offered steep, narrow attic stairs, that led to a high-peaked dusty room inhabited by old trunks holding clues to mysteries or magic waiting to be awakened.

She hadn't been able to afford the attic, but her public servant's salary had stretched to make the down payment on a two-story condo. Her staircase wasn't the antique one with a carved lion face on the newel post that she'd dreamed of as a little girl, but it was hers.

And when you were a little girl, you never imagined being too damned tired to walk up it.

But having a routine didn't just keep her on time and under budget; it made this life, at the edge of her strength and mental agility, possible. If she stepped into the routine of homecoming, momentum would carry her along.

So she trudged through the kitchen to the closet where her stacking washer-dryer combo lived. She dropped her go bag on the tile in front of it, dug out the laundry bag of shirts, underwear, and nightclothes, and tossed the contents in the washer. Then she skinned out of the things she was wearing, added the washables to the load, measured soap into the machine, and started the wash cycle. Her jacket and two pairs of trousers she folded to take to the dry cleaner's tomorrow.

She sort of wanted to burn them instead. But she couldn't justify being trigger-y about a damned Ann Taylor blazer.

She left her go bag on the floor--it was as easy to repack it there as anywhere--gathered her wallet, phone, and holster, and padded into the darkened living room and up the stairs.

In the bathroom, she dumped her gear on the flea-market magazine rack. "Hi, boys," she said to the two painted Scotty dogs that formed the uprights. She used the toilet, washed her face, and brushed her teeth. Always brush your teeth before going into the bedroom. Lest you pass out face down on the bed and wake up with sewer breath.

Yep, routine and momentum. She could count on them.

Her bedroom smelled unused. Not musty (she'd changed the sheets the day before they were called to Ohio, so that was all right), just empty, like a motel room that hadn't been rented in a long time. She went back out to the hall closet where she kept the ironing board, stood on tip-toe, and felt around the top shelf until her fingers found the lavender-oil linen spray. She used that to mist the bedclothes, then gave the rug a few shots for good measure.

She reached for the pajamas she'd left on the foot of the bed--how many days ago?

Weeks? Longer than that? How had everything changed since she was last in this room?

No. Don't go there. Routine, remember?

But she found herself pulling out the bottom drawer of the dresser and digging through the layers until she found a corner of cotton fabric, light blue, black, white, a flash of red. She pulled it out.

Dana had made them for her: pajamas decorated with penguins, in beanies and wrap shades, snowboarding. The fabric was creased from lying undisturbed at the bottom of the drawer for so long. They were worn and washed thin and soft, and Nikki was stingy about wearing them, dreading the day they'd tear.

She put them on and climbed into bed.

On the night her divorce was final, she'd given the penguins names. It kept her from crying herself to sleep, or worse, calling Richard. She'd made up entire stories about them. Javier, with the red hat, the bad boy. Susanna, Olympic hopeful in green. Molly, in blue, who ran a penguin ashram in Antarctica. And StanBird, in yellow, who was a famous film director, but who always wore a baseball cap and sunglasses so no one would know he was a penguin.

She was so goddamn alone.

Everybody was, really. She knew that. But sometimes she wished she still had someone to share all that aloneness with.

She eyed her phone on the nightstand. She was not going to interrupt Daphne's reunion with Tricia, and besides, Daphne was probably sick of the sound of her voice after days in the car. Brady, she hoped, was having his own reunion. If he had as much sense as she thought he did.

I want to call Hafs.

Hafidha's parade of Boys had been not unlike her own abortive parade of What Was I Thinking?. They'd had a mostly-unspoken understanding about Dating Hell, and Nikki had always made sure Hafs was supplied with cookies or wind-up toys or postcards in thoroughly bad taste when the signs of Boy-dumping appeared.

When Erik the Notaboy died, Nikki felt as if she'd had a double-handful of toys and postcards turn to ash and sift through her fingers. She felt like that again now.

Times like these, you should only call people whose numbers you have memorized.

There was one she'd had memorized for a long, long time. Yes, she thought. It's the right thing to do. She picked up her phone and punched it in, just to prove she could.

It took eight rings, but at last she heard a sleep-rough voice say, "Hello?"

She swallowed down sudden, surprising tears. "Hey, Dad. It's Nikki."

"Nikki? You okay? It's--" She thought she heard a rustle as he rolled over, checked the clock. "--Are you all right?"

"Yeah, Dad. Sorry to wake you up. I just...I got home from a tough case, is all, and--"

"You wanted to know if your revered father was sleeping the sleep of the just and innocent?"

She could see his grin in the sound of his voice. "Well, I wasn't expecting miracles."

He chuckled. "You used to wake me up when you'd had a nightmare. Remember?"

Nikki had to swallow again before she said, "I guess some habits are hard to break."

## **J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington, DC**

**Thursday, 14 May 2009**

### **0445 Hours**

Stephen Reyes meant to go straight home from the airport. So he wasn't sure why he found himself in the first floor of the Hoover Building, being nodded through the metal detector by a heavy-eyed security officer. He reclaimed his weapon and badge on the other side of the scanner and headed for the elevator. He stumbled from pure weariness on the smooth tile floor, but caught himself before the guard could comment.

The cleaning staff was finishing up Down the Hall; he glanced in that direction as he came out of the elevators. Once, this would have been as far as he had to go to get to work. If that were still true, he would probably be at home, asleep. He thought about calling Delphine--it was a decent hour, in Amsterdam--but even if she hadn't realized yet that her six-month artist-in-residence gig was going to evolve into a permanent relocation, Reyes knew. And she didn't need the weight of his concerns on her straight shoulders.



He continued along the corridor and shouldered through the doors into the bullpen.

Now there wasn't even Chaz sleeping in the copy room to sweep away the sense of perfect silence around the desks. The overhead lights were still in energy-saving mode, a twilight sufficient to navigate between the furniture. He trod slowly past each station with its empty chair and black monitor screen, headed for his office. Perhaps he'd just sleep there, on the couch. No one would wonder where he was.

He stopped beside the last desk, brought up short by the sight of a thing out of place. Hafidha's laptop, still plugged in.

The team would come in, see it there. It would throw them off their stride. He unplugged it, coiled the cord, and trudged back down the aisle to the door, across the hall, and into Hafidha's sanctum.

He placed it carefully, square to the edge of the tabletop, centered in front of the chair. People were picky about their workspaces. Territorial. If one had to disturb their turf, it was only right to restore it faithfully.

He plugged the laptop into the power bar at the back of the desk. To make sure it was as it ought to be, he opened the lid. It booted, to show the angular surreal desert landscape of Krazy Kat's reality, and the password prompt.

No one was ever going to enter that password.

Suddenly Reyes found the real world--the solid, constricting, entropy-ridden real world--around him. It echoed with a silence so loud it seemed as if it could shatter his bones and pulp the heart in his chest. But of course, it wouldn't. That would be too easy.

Instead he'd have to live, and hurt, and heal.

Gently, slowly, he folded her laptop closed.

**Idlewood Psychiatric Institute, Idlewood, Virginia**

**Thursday, 14 May 2009**

**1000 Hours**

They were building her her very own burrow.

They hadn't consulted her on the specs, of course, but she knew what the design features

would be. Surfaces uncluttered by cables or jacks or outlets. A peaceful communications-free environment. Discreetly functional metal-mesh shielding in walls, floor, and ceiling.

Jesus fuck, they wouldn't even trust her with a television, would they? Her sentence was to die of boredom.

Would her manifestation go away if she didn't use it? Corrode, seize up, shut down? Maybe she'd go back to being a real girl again. Then they'd trust her. Because they were scared to death of anything but real girls.

Real girls were the rightful prey of people like her. She'd rather be a monster, even if it meant staying in here forever.

"Shut the fuck up, Bug," she whispered, even though she knew they were listening.

Without the Bug, there was nothing to listen to at all. Her temporary wire cage shut out the signals she was used to passing through her head and filtering for keywords, source, message frequency, visible and invisible attachments that rode the data like lampreys. Sensory deprivation. They'd left her nothing but her meat, the boat anchor her real self dragged behind it.

They'd reduced her to something like them.

They were watching as well as listening, so she made it look casual when she curled her left hand around her right wrist. She kept her face calm and her breathing steady as she dug her nails into the underside of her forearm, where the cameras couldn't see. She felt the skin break, felt blood well up warm around her fingertips, felt the nerves shriek with pain.

A girl had to feel something, didn't she?

They'd erected her hasty cage inside a larger room. The clunk of the door bolt made her jump and gasp and squeak. She was ashamed. But she felt so weak without the data. So vulnerable.

The orderly--what was his name? Nathan--poked his head into the room. "Ms. Gates? You have a visitor."

"Tell 'em I'm busy." The sound of her voice startled her. So harsh and tuneless there in meatspace.

"Wabbit?"

She would not cry, she would not she would not because the Bug would be all over it,

squealing and bouncing and sucking up everybody's hurt. But that meant she couldn't say his name, because she could feel the tears waiting for that one chink in her defenses. She sat on her bunk in its welter of bedclothes and tightened every muscle until she shook, so she wouldn't move, wouldn't speak.

The distance from the room door to her cage was two paces of those long Chaz feet. He walked them and stopped. After a bit, during which she kept her eyes on his chest, he said, "I'm...here."

"I noticed." She wasn't going to talk. Why was she doing it?

His long nose, his long face, his eyes like spare parts for two different dolls, his hair drooping in front and sticking up in back, his hands limp at his sides, and hell, the only reason his clothes fit him was because she'd gotten tired of watching the scarecrow flop around the bullpen--

"Bug, shut UP," she said, and thrust her right index finger between her teeth and bit down.

Chaz gave a little strangled noise and hurled himself at the wire, trying to poke his fingertips through the too-small diamond openings. "No! Wabbit, no, no, no. Don't do that." He must have seen the blood marking her forearm, because his mouth dropped open and his eyes closed. "Promise me you won't hurt yourself anymore."

Promise. The way he did. But she'd counted on him, and he'd let her down. She could be more honest than he was. "I can't promise, Chazzie. Sometimes...sometimes there's just too much Bug."

He bit his lip and nodded. "I'll come see you as often as I can."

"What if I don't want you to?"

"Then I'll come twice as often."

She was so surprised, she laughed. "That's so you."

He drew a deep breath. "I love you, sis."

I love you, too, she thought. She couldn't say it. All the things she was allowed to say, had to say, and that was the one that was off limits.

But she could stand up and walk the ten feet from the bunk to the cage mesh. She could lay her palms against the wire right where he'd laid his on the other side. And she could rest her forehead between her hands, so when he kissed the wire she could feel his breath

warm at her hairline.

*"Brave hearts and clean. And yet--God guide them--young!"*

*---Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Merlin and Vivien"*