



The White Room

The Fall of Icarus

by Helene Baron-Murdock



Abalone divers found the body floating in the surf tangled up in bull kelp. The call landed on Detective Jim Donovan’s desk. He called down to the Weston County Sheriff’s dispatch and talked to the shift supervisor. “Do you have a deputy at scene? I can’t feature driving all the way out to the coast if it’s just a 10-55.”

“Let me check the log. . .appears like it came in as a 10-54 from one caller at Acropolis Cove. Someone else called it in as a 10-32. With all the divers out there, that sounded about right. Then the local volunteer fire and rescue got on scene and when they pulled the body out of the water they thought it might be a 10-71, but definitely a 10-55.”

“Ok, dead body, possible drowning, and a definite coroner’s case, but a shooting? Whose jurisdiction is that out there?”

“That’d be Mount Oly Volunteer Fire Department.”

“Baxter?”

“The same. He’s even saying that it might be a 187.”

“Murder? Figures, he’s such a drama queen. Where’s the coast deputy? Is he on days off?”

“No, he’s handling a 415 domestic right now at the Sparta Creek Beach trailer park. It got pretty dicey for a bit. They’ve got the abuser in custody but he’ll be tied up for a while.”

“Alright, I’m on my way.”

“Look on the bright side, you’ve been freed from paper work in a stuffy office and you get to enjoy a nice pleasant drive out to Weston County’s gorgeous coast.”

Donovan grunted, not all that convinced. “I’ll 10-97 when I get there. Advise the coast deputy I’m on my way and have him meet up with me when he clears the domestic.”

Donovan headed south out of Santa Lena on the main four lane. He exited the freeway at Corinth Bay Road and drove west. He could tell by the mass of gray clouds on the horizon that the coast was fog bound, so much for enjoying the gorgeous scenery. It would take him forty minutes to reach the coast highway and another quarter of an hour to reach Acropolis Cove.

Traffic slowed as he approached Dardanelle, the little up-scale arts community astride the Corinth road. The tiny burg with its one way streets tended to be a bottleneck but as he got closer to town he saw a fire and rescue unit and Highway Patrol directing cars around a demolished piebald junker, windshield trashed, twisted like a candy wrapper. The meat wagon was just revving up to head for the hospital and let out an ear splitting howl as its siren screamed down the road back toward Santa Lena. A yellow tow truck was parked at the shoulder with a disgruntled but not too severely damaged tinted window black Suburban on the flatbed. Once clear of the wreck and west of Dardanelle he followed a caravan of cars all in a hurry to get to the coast and the fishing village of Corinth Bay, the coast highway, and points North and South.

Traffic thinned out the further north he travelled as the highway got windier, steeper, and narrower, cornering around sheer cliffs and then whipping down gullies into hairpin turns and then back up again only to repeat the same course again in the next few miles. By the time he reached Acropolis Cove with its distinctive escarpment of eroded columns resembling those of an ancient Greek temple, his arms were cramped and his neck was stiff. The parking lot was crammed full of RVs and pickups with camper shells.

Donovan notified dispatch he was at scene and parked behind the red Fire & Rescue rig and the bright yellow ambulance. A stiff breeze hit him with a frigid seaborne slap as he exited the sedan and he regretted not bringing a heavier windbreaker. He could tell from Baxter's expectant expression that he was not a happy camper.

"You took your damn time!" Baxter accused. He was a short man with a ruff of curly gray hair escaping out from under his fire department ballcap. He had the dark and weathered complexion of a man who lived his life outdoors. Donovan seemed to remember that he was a cattleman or a sheep rancher when he wasn't being the volunteer chief.

"Someone should have been out here sooner but apparently the coast deputy was delayed on a domestic."

Baxter nodded in resignation that that was all he could expect in the way of apology for taking up his time. "Yeah, heard that on the radio this morning. Sparta Creek is a cesspool of surfers, druggies, and the homeless. The county needs to clean out that rats nest. It's a blight on our coastal community."

Donovan had heard the spiel before. "That our customer?" he asked looking down the embankment to the beach to where a blue tarp bulged over an elongated shape. The wide stretch of sand was dotted with men and women in their black wet suits and snorkel gear, some emerging from the surf with mesh bags and pry bars. The oppressive overcast like a lead plug gripped everything in its gray light accompanied by the tang of cold ocean air and rotting seaweed.

Panoramas of sheer red cliffs, seaweed littered dingy beige sand, spray dashed craggy monoliths, roiling surf, wave after choppy wave all the way out to the swelling shimmering steel gray horizon seemed somehow dreary and unsettling.

Baxter led the way and pulled back the tarp. Donovan made a mental picture of the prone figure before crouching down for a closer look, taking note of the clothing, complexion, hair, and any signs of injury or unusual markings such as tattoos: pale blue coveralls, one tattered sneakers, white, brown, and contusions around the forehead and jaw. He guessed male by the body type. Appeared to be wearing a harness of some sort, straps from the shoulder crossing the back to a belt cinched at the waist.

“Looks like one of them hang glider types. They like to jump the cliffs a little further up Sparta Creek ways,” Baxter offered. “They use that long stretch of Sparta Creek Beach to land.

“No helmet.”

“Yeah, saw that. Banged his head on the rocks a bit, I’d say.”

“The wounds look clean. Could have been washed in the surf.”

Donovan straightened and gazed out at the field of guano covered monoliths splashed in stolid indifference by breakers. A stiff icy breeze pushed against him and he resolved to get back in his sedan as soon as possible. “Where’d they find him?”

Baxter pointed to a pair of almost identical smaller crags closer to the shoreline at the foot of a precipice topped thick with conifers. “Wedged between those two, tangled in the kelp. The divers like that spot beyond the furthest twins where it drops off deep to an underwater cliff jammed packed with sea slugs. They call that spot the New York City of abalones there’s so damn many!”

“You go out there and pull him in?”

Baxter looked at him like he was crazy. “We had the divers run a line out to the body and pulled it to shore.” Then, “What? They were already wet!” And as if to change the subject, he pointed at the left side of the body. “What d’you make of this?”

Donovan had noticed the ragged hole in the jumpsuit just above the waist and below the harness belt. It was surrounded by a large area of discoloration. “Could be blood. Or grease.”

“I think it’s a bullet wound.”

“You looked.”

Baxter didn’t deny it.

“You didn’t happen to find his wallet or identification while you were looking, did you?”

“Nope, not that I could see, and he’s completely nekkid under that jumpsuit.”

Donovan noticed two men descending the path to the beach with a gurney. “Coroner’s van is here, you can release the

ambulance and your boys. Thanks for the help.” Then he saw a deputy peering down from the edge of the parking lot. He recognized him as a kid name of Royce. “Did you get details on the guys who found the body?” he asked Baxter.

“Yeah, a couple of guys from the valley. They’re in their trailer. I told them you probably want to talk to them.”

Donovan headed back to the parking lot after he’d watched the coroner’s assistants turn the body over and load him onto the gurney. Facing up, the corpse did nothing more than confirm that he was a white male. Royce met him at the top of the path.

“Sorry about the delay, Donovan, but I had a live one. Some dirtbag using his woman for a punching bag. Again.”

Donovan nodded sympathetically. “All in a day’s work. I get paid the same sitting on my ass in the office or freezing my ass off in the fog. Baxter here has the info on the guys who found the body. They’re in a trailer here somewhere in this parking lot.” He pointed with his chin. “Probably those two guys in wet suits over there looking like they have more than a casual interest in what’s going on. Get the story from them and file the interview so I can add it to my report.”

“No foul play like I been hearing on the scanner?”

“Naw, straight up accident. Some people just have an over-active imagination. He’s got some contusions and probably other injuries related to getting banged against the rocks. We’ll let the ME sort that out.”

“Ok, I’ll get to it.” The deputy turned to Baxter whose face had gone a bright red and then as if he’d forgotten to ask something. “Any truth to the rumor that you’re thinking of retiring?” He said it with a boyish expectant grin.

Donovan made a wry face. His retiring would open up the ranks to promotion for certain ambitious young officers. He remembered when he was one of them. “Still in the thinking stage. Been there for the last couple of years. Could be a couple more years before it stops being a rumor.” He laughed at the transience of the deputy’s disappointment.

“Retire? You gonna retire?” Baxter acted indignant to cover his irritation at the slight. “You don’t want to retire. Man, that’s the last thing you wanna do!”

Donovan and the deputy turned their attention to Baxter to hear his reasoning.

“I knew this guy, worked for Fish and Feathers, put in thirty years. Up and retired, dead in three months.”

“Now there’s a happy thought.”

He didn’t often dream of the dead although in his line of work he’d come across his fair share of corpses. Every once in a while he

was awakened by a vivid dream of a dead body, the images lingering in his consciousness as he transitioned to a wakeful state. Sometimes he was in the uniform of his early days as a deputy, other times in his civvies as a detective, and often the corpse belonged to someone he knew or had known even if they were not currently deceased. And at times he had had conversations with them as if being dead was the only way they could get his attention. Always he had the feeling that he was being guided or escorted in these encounters by an accompanying shadow or shade.

The images were still with him as he drove into the office the morning after his trek to the coast. He was on a beach crowded by large crags on all sides anxious to avoid getting doused by the cold ocean spray. There was a covered body hovering at his feet, a long dark barely discernable cigar shape. There was also a party in progress, drinking, and drunks raising a ruckus, getting soused, shouting it seemed, and singing. The beach transformed into the interior of a bar, and stretched out on the table surrounded by votive candles, the body of someone he knew, someone from long ago. He'd awakened with a start at that moment of recognition. They had been in the same class at the Academy, Lopes, Larry Lopes, aka "Lucky" Lopes.

Lucky had been hired as a patrolman for the better paying Santa Lena City PD upon graduation which was how he got the name "lucky." They weren't necessarily good friends but buddy enough to grab a beer or two on occasion. Donovan remembered him as wild, cowboy impulsive.

Lopes had responded to a domestic on the west side near the city limits. Protocol demanded that he stage and wait for backup. It had been a busy night for the PD and all their other units were tied up elsewhere, Dispatch had called for mutual aid from the County Sheriff. Donovan had been the closest County unit and was there in five minutes, but it was five minutes too late. The radio had crackled with alerts of shots fired, and then the dreaded triple 9, officer down. Later it came out that Lopes had advised dispatch he was going in alone, not that that had lifted the weight of residual guilt from his shoulders, and it revisited him from time to time.

Deputy Royce's report was waiting for him when he signed in. It tallied with what Chief Baxter had said. Hector Royas and Charles Yu, both from the burbs south of the Capitol, had suited up and gone out for their first dive of the day, approximately 0900 hours. A large raft of bull kelp obstructed their passage to their dive spot. In moving it out of the way, they discovered the unidentified victim. Originally believed that it was another diver but on closer examination saw that the subject was not wearing diving gear. They hailed someone on the beach to call 911 and stayed with the body until Fire & Rescue arrived. They assisted the volunteers in bringing

the body to the beach and awaited the arrival of law enforcement. Dispatch log shows the first report of possible 10-32 at approximately 0913.

The medical examiner had filed a preliminary report cc'd to him and the shift commander. He always marveled at the obfuscating bureaucratse they were couched in. You had to crack them like a walnut just to get at the meat.

The still unidentified decedent, white male, 5 foot 7 inches, 200 pounds, approximately 30 years of age, died in a manner consistent with drowning. Because he was in the water for an indeterminate amount of time, the TOD was between 12 to 36 hours prior to recovery. Contusions on the head and hands were post mortem. Entry and exit wound to lower right side of torso consistent with gunshot was not.

He had to assume the wound would have been fatal had the subject not drowned. That made him primary on a possible homicide. He hated to admit it, but Baxter was right.

Toxicology report indicated traces of amphetamine, cannabis, and a few other as yet unidentified residues, possibly psychotropic. The harness found on the deceased appeared to be nonmanufactured for its specific purpose. Identity via fingerprinting and facial metrics still pending.

Donovan knew he'd need another cup of coffee if he was going to continue to read the passive voice mind mush. He made his way to the breakroom and immediately realized that he had been elected to make a fresh pot. As he was banging around, tossing out the old grounds and looking for the filters, Nina Vaughn, the Violent Crimes Unit SAO and de facto den mother, looked in smiling and asked, "Anything I can help you with, short timer?"

Nina had one of those husky sassy voices that made you pay attention.

"What do you mean, short timer?"

"You know exactly what I mean."

"I'm just looking for some coffee filters."

"Don't change the subject."

"What was the subject?"

"Don't play dumb."

He smiled at her. "I'm only as smart as my pay grade will allow."

"That is definitely a short timer attitude." She smiled back at him in a rather flirtatious den mother way. "Did you get the message that Chief Baxter called early this morning. I left the number on your desk. He said it was important."

"If it's from Baxter, it's self-important. No I didn't, but then you know the state of my desk."

“Not only are you a short timer, but you’re short sighted as well. I put the pink sticky note right in the middle of your keyboard.”

“ You should’ve put it on the mouse. I avoid the keyboard whenever I can. In fact, I hate the keyboard so much once I’m retired I’m never going to touch another keyboard again.”

“Aha! I was right!”

The phone answered after the second ring. “Mount Oly Volunteer Fire Department, Chief Neil Baxter speaking, how can I help you?”

“Baxter, Donovan, what you got for me?”

“Hey, detective, yeah, thanks for calling back. I found something, or rather one of my boys found something yesterday when we were out on a call for a cliff rescue. Some damn tourists, like they always do, think they can climb down to the beach but never think about how they’re gonna get back up. And then the tide comes in. . .”

“Cut to the chase.”

“Well, like I said, the boys were doing a cliff rescue and one of them found your victim’s wing.”

“Wing? I’m not getting what you’re talking about.”

“Well, going on the assumption that he was a hang glider, this would have been his gear.”

“You’re the only one going on that assumption. What makes you so sure it belongs to the deceased?”

“Remember that harness he was wearing? I’ve done a lot of hang glider rescues and I never seen one that looked like that. Theirs are more like cradles. And if I don’t miss my guess, that guy’s harness looked DIY.”

“Do-it-yourself?”

“Right, and this wing we found is definitely homemade. What you wanna have me do with it?”

Mount Oly volunteers had brought the wing back to the station in Orcala, a coastal community of the retired well to-do with prized coastal vantage just off the main highway consisting of a post office convenience store gas pump, a hotel restaurant, a driftwood souvenir shop, and the volunteer fire station. Numerous dwellings dotted the steep hillside overlooking the Pacific like the nests of sunset worshippers.

“Not like any hang glider sail I’ve ever seen.” Baxter had propped the wing up against a wall in the engine bay. A collection of odd fabric squares resembling a quilt was stretched over most of a lattice made of interlaced bamboo lashed with fine wire. It had suffered some damage in the surf but was still remarkably sturdy for something that appeared so delicate. “And I think it had a twin. If you look at the design, it actually looks like a bird’s wing. And see

this little do-hickey here, with the handle? I'll bet if you pull on this mechanism it makes the wing flap at these hinges."

"Can you show me where you found it?"

"I can take you there or I can show you on a topo in the office."

"Whatever's most convenient."

Inside the small office with a desk, a radio squawking staticky incomprehensible chatter, and a jumbled assortment of firefighter turnouts and helmets, Baxter pointed to the wall map. "This here is our jurisdiction. We go as far south as Argo State Beach and as far north as the county line." He placed his finger on a spot on the map. "This is Acropolis Cove where we found the body. And here, less than a mile up is where we found the wing."

Donovan stared at the map. It meant a whole lot of nothing to him, and even though he had a general knowledge of the county's topography he once again thanked his lucky stars that he'd never been assigned coast duty. Nothing said out in the middle of nowhere as this stretch of coast did.

"This up here is Sparta Creek Beach, right?"

"That's right, and right there in that bow in the hillside is the Sparta Creek drainage and where the trailer park is nested."

"So if I was a hang glider, where would I launch from?"

"This highpoint here at the south end of the beach."

"Why not from up here? The elevation's considerably higher."

Baxter grinned. "Right there is an abandoned Girl Scout summer camp, Camp Wannaseeme, as the locals used to call it cause the gals liked to go skinny-dipping in the dammed up feeder to Sparta Creek and weren't particularly shy about it. That's a hush-hush restricted zone of the Area 51 variety now."

"You pulling my leg?"

Donovan followed Delphi Road up the lee side of Mount Oly. The narrow paved road wound around the base of the coastal peak still shrouded in fog. Vistas of dry yellow grass and oak woodlands, dotted in the near distance by grazing animals, stretched on either side broken occasionally by a trailer home set back under a cluster of trees or a barn and some farm machinery. Driveways were indicated by rural mailboxes and posts marked with large red reflector buttons. Some areas included sheds, corrals, and chutes indicating working ranches. Then a manicured hedge, stone or stucco wall and large wrought iron gates spoke of money that could afford to live that far out and not worry about the commute.

Baxter had remarked when he'd pulled up to the fire station, "They got you driving an unmarked patrol ride now?"

He could have offered the explanation that his assigned vehicle was in the shop for routine maintenance. “It’s a nostalgia ride,” he’d answered instead. And that it was. It certainly rode heavier than his sedan and just tapping the accelerator said that there was more under the hood, much more. It had taken a few miles on his return to the coast to get used to the dashboard mounted shotgun in his field of vision again. And the heads-up display mapping the road ahead along with speedometer and a variety of indicators that he didn’t want to bother deciphering, made him feel like he was in the cockpit of a fighter jet, or what he imagined that would be like. The radio was a new high end digital voice activated model that did just about everything except talk for you. At least the rig was still equipped with a push bar on the front end, a pit bull bar to tactical drivers, that hadn’t changed. It was a familiar space, nonetheless, one he had not been in for many years, more high tec than he remembered, but the sense of identity as law enforcement, of purpose at its most elemental was still there. Gadget porn was not his thing yet there was also something to be said for its effects.

Curious, he’d checked his console mounted computer for the County GIS topo before leaving the fire station. There in big red letters was the warning, *Restricted Area*, hashed over with wide red bars obscuring the topographical features along with the small print Federal Code citation. He’d switched to satellite image and encountered a blur no matter how far down he zoomed in. It didn’t make any sense, and that bothered him.

Baxter had laid out an old site map of Camp Minnoknosso across his desk. “This is what it used to look like before the feds took over.”

Donovan followed as the fire chief’s finger conducted the tour. “These squares here represent the tent platforms scattered along the main trail kinda like in a maze. Back then, the site had a functioning fire lookout staffed by the gals here at the high point in a structure they called the Mini-Tower. It’s the highest point on this part of the coast. Unobstructed view all the way to the east side of the county. Of course, no telling what it looks like now.”

“When did all this happen? Was it in the news? I don’t recall it being disseminated in operational bulletins.”

“Oh, probably ten or so years ago. There were protest by the local tree huggers when the land was handed over to the feds.”

Donovan remembered vaguely. He’d been in Narcotics at the time and his focus had been mainly on gangs and drugs. “No one’s been up there since? Folks around here must be curious about what they’re doing up there.”

Baxter shook his head. “There’s some who’ve tried. Met with dogs and armed patrols on ATVs. Scared the bejesus out of most of them. They’ve got a helipad up there and occasionally

there'll be heavy duty whirlybird traffic flying in and out. Road up's been blocked and according to some when you get up close all of a sudden your GPS and digital gadgets stop working or go glitchy like there's a big electronic shadow over the whole area. Once you get passed the second cattle guard up on Delphi you're playing by their rules. Some folks report being harassed or being run off the road by security vehicles." Baxter didn't hide his disgust. "It's like someone took a dump on your living room rug and won't let you get near it."

Donovan had just bumped over the first cattle guard as the road began winding up through a switchback toward the summit. The landscape had changed from rolling yellow hills to a mix of a tangled foliage, pine, and fir into whose upper reaches the coastal fog lapped. He encountered the first yellow and black road sign, *Not A Through Road* and *Turnout Ahead*. He passed the turnout and a few hundred yards later rumbled over the second cattle guard. There followed a red and white sign with a more forceful message *Do Not Enter Restricted Area Ahead Authorized Personnel Only*. The road had stopped climbing and around the next curve he encountered the barricade with the same red and white sign and an even more dire warning *Lethal Force Authorized*. The road at that point was too narrow to make a three point turn and he had to back up to a break in the thick roadside understory.

Once he nosed the front end into the gap, he saw that it was the beginning of an obscured fire road. He steered around the rutted unpaved path several hundred yards in to a clearing and a cyclone fence topped with razor wire. Along with an identical red and white sign threatening lethal force and the specific Federal Codes that allowed the authority was another official sign.

He stepped out of the sedan, following with his eye the fence as it disappeared into the woods on either side of the gate, and walked up to the sign. Large letters stated *Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency* followed below by an even larger set of initials, *IDA*, the acronym revealed by the third line as *Institute for Dynamic Application*.

"There's a name that says a whole lot of nothing," he muttered to himself. Requisite fine print followed, restating the prohibition on trespass and the likelihood of death by armed guards.

Before getting back into his rig and returning to Delphi Road, he took a picture of the sign and the fence with his smart phone, and peered through the diamond links at the road continuing further on into an overarching tunnel of trees.

He didn't noticed at first, occupied with mulling over the implications of the restricted zone, on auto pilot as if he were in his own sedan. The heads up display was showing just a row of meaningless blank squares, the GPS was flashing like it was trying to

establish a link to a signal, and the readout on the radio console scanned furiously from one end of the band to the other.

He'd had the training on the new Voicue radios. "Manual" he spoke. The readout scanning stopped and showed a set of red zeros. "Channel 3," and the frequency flashed on the display once and then read *Channel 3*. Nothing but static from the speakers. So much for high tech. At least the mirrors were still working.

Donovan glanced in the rearview again. Now the hint of vehicle he'd noticed earlier as a vague shadow rounding a bend in the road behind was gaining steadily and soon was close enough to make out the blocky front end of a government issue Suburban. Then it was in tailgate range.

He maintained his speed anticipating the road ahead while considering his options and any evasive action he might need to take. He gripped the wheel. With a high powered roar, the dark hulk overtook him and passed close enough to cause his ride to shudder and almost leave the pavement. Then the tinted window Suburban was in front and no longer accelerating as the road made a gentle curve in its decent into the switchbacks before the straightaway to the valley floor.

Another glance in the rearview and his suspicions were confirmed. There was another Suburban drawing up behind. Whoever they were, they weren't playing around.

"10-BOY-9, what's your 10-20" It was a long shot. The SUV behind was closing fast. He was about to try the coast deputy again when riding a garbled static wave came the transmission, weak, distant, ". . .oy-ni. . .elphi. . .oad. . . ." Whatever he'd said, it sounded like Greek to him.

Donovan started down the switchback in among stands of eucalyptus, thick foliage on the upside and the downside of the narrowing road. The vehicle in front was slowing, brake lights flashing. He was in a pocket, and it was making him sweat. The adrenaline had kicked in. "BOY 9 confirm you are on Delphi Road."

"Victor 5, affirm," the radio crackled.

As the vehicle ahead started into the outside turn, he closed on it. "Code 30. I've got two 11-54's, one on my tail and one hindering forward progress. Code 3 to my location. Evasive tactics in progress."

He took a breath. How long ago had he taken that advanced tactical driving course? Something you don't get much practice doing once you become a detective. He closed on the bumper, aiming the bull bar for the right rear. Current speed dropping to 30 MPH, he had to hit it just right. Activating the lights and siren as a distraction, he wheeled a sharp turn. The bull bar made contact with the outer edge of the Suburban's bumper. He accelerated, pushing the large SUV off center to deprive the rear wheels of traction. The

Suburban went into a skid, swerved to regain control but only ended up facing the way it had come, what Tac drivers euphemistically called a “committed lane change,” both side wheels dangling over the steep drop.

There was enough of a gap on the inside heading into the next turn. Low branches and shrubs scraped the driver’s side, snapping the sideview mirror. Donovan pulled a hard right as he approached the bend, engaged the emergency brake long enough to fishtail, cant on two wheels, and come down facing an unobstructed road. Punching the accelerator he skidded around the last switch-back at top speed. Out in the clear he had a good view of the road snaking its way up the gentle curve of the coastal hill and the flashing lights of the patrol unit speeding in his direction. A quick glance in the rearview and it appeared that his pursuers had given up the chase.

He pulled over to the side of the road adjacent a sagging rusty barbed wire fence holding back a large field of tall dry grass. And waited for the patrol unit to arrive. He was shaking, breathing hard, the adrenaline sending his heart rate through the roof. His eyes were watering and he had to step out of the vehicle. He held the door open and used it to steady himself.

Royce pulled his unit to a stop and shut down the flashing lights. He stepped out and jogged over to Donovan. “You alright? What’s going on?”

“I had a couple of dreadnaughts on my tail, they tried to get me in the pocket.” He took a breath. “And they weren’t at all friendly about it.”

Royce was nodding, a look of concern in his eyes. “You gonna be alright?”

Donovan laughed. “Yeah, yeah. Just as soon as my asshole unpuckers.” He laughed again, looking back the way he’d come. “I’m good.”

“I thought you knew about the top of Mt Oly being off limits. That’s why when I heard you going 10-8 to the old Girl Scout camp I thought I’d head up to warn you off. But I was all the way down at Argo State Beach coordinating with the new Park Ranger down there.”

“How long’s the restriction been in effect?”

Royce shrugged. “I don’t know. It was that way when I took up this post. That’s what it says in the procedure manual for the coast district. The feds want hands off, no peeks, no peeps, their personnel handles everything up there. It’s their own private country. They get to do what they want and how they want was the way it was explained to me by the coast deputy I replaced.”

“Baxter says there’ve been complains of threats, intimidation by their security?”

“Yeah, I’ve taken complaints, sent them on for review. Next thing I know the complaint’s been dropped. Word comes back to me to warn potential hikers in that vicinity to steer clear. The ranchers round here know the drill so I don’t hear from them too often.”

Donovan’s head shook in disbelief. “No, this is bullshit. I’ll be looking into this.”

Royce smiled in return. “You mustn’t be planning to retire any time soon. You’re gonna run into an avalanche of paperwork that’ll keep you in the courts till you’re pushing a walker and dragging an oxygen cannister.”

“You’re probably right, but what the hey, if I’m on my way out, why not stir a little shit, light a fire under some bureaucrat’s ass.”

Royce’s radio squawked. “10BOY9, status of VICTOR5?” He keyed his epaulet mic, “Code 4.”

“Request VICTOR5 10-21 SAMOCEAN1,” dispatch returned. “10-4.” Royce answered and then to Donovan, “Sounds like the Sheriff wants a word with you.”

“Won’t be the first time,” Donovan said as he looked up from his device. “Finally got an ID on the flyer, and not coincidentally, a frequent flyer.” He held up his device so Royce could see the booking photo. “Dwight Carey.”

“That’s Ike! Or ‘Ikey’ as he’s known at the Sparta Creek Trailer Park.”

“You know him?”

“I’ve had interactions with him, 5150, disorderly conduct mostly. He gets a little manic when he’s off his meds. Not violent. just what you might say, too happy.”

“That scares people.”

“Apparently.”

“I’d like to go to Sparta Creek Trailer Park and ask around about Ike Carey. Interested in being my tour guide?”

“Follow me.” Royce started toward his unit. “Aren’t going to call the boss?”

“Why bother, he’s only going to chew me out,” Donovan said, getting back behind the wheel, “and after what I did to his brand new tactical rig, can’t say I’d blame him, but I’m not interested in getting my ass chewed over the phone. If it’s going to happen, I’d rather it be in person, and later in the day. Otherwise, I’ve got work to do.”

The gravel road into Sparta Creek trailer park ran along a wide dribble of questionable water between sand dunes and beach grass, and was accessed from the paved road that wound up to the parking lot of the overlook popular with hang gliders. A few bright colored sails had drifted down onto the wide beachfront as he turned off the

coast highway and followed Royce down the narrow track into the nest of antique trailers, really tiny homes, rusty camper shells, and lean-to's, most supplemented with one or more blue tarps. He didn't want to guess how many vehicle violations were parked in front of the dilapidated aluminum dwellings. A profusion of surf boards, either atop of dune buggy type vehicles or leaning against old board fences, spoke of the occupants' preoccupations.

Royce said he wanted to check up on the victim of the domestic from the previous day. Being a long time resident, she would likely know Ike Carey. Her name was Heron. "Like the bird," he'd added.

The women who stepped out from under the awning of the trailer had a young face struggling to stay that way framed by a tangle of grey and blond deadlocks. A bruise burnished one cheek and above the other, a pale blue eye contained by purple lids engorged with blood. Skinny tan arms clustered with tattoos jutted out from an oversized mauve down vest and across her chest, pale thin lips turned downward, licked by a nervous tongue.

"I wondered where he'd got off to." She dropped her head and shook her mane, "So sorry to hear. I just thought he'd gone off with Dad." She paused to give Royce a meaningful look. "Besides I had other things to deal with." And addressing the deputy "They gonna let Billy go? I ain't gonna press charges. He was just mad cause I loaned his car without asking."

"Dad is his father, his next of kin?" Donovan wrote in the battered notepad he carried in his jacket pocket.

"Uh, no, don't think so, just an old guy everybody calls Dad, kinda looks like that poster of Einstein, you know, big floppy moustache with the tongue sticking out? He stays mostly up in the parking lot with the hang glider schleppers. And so does Ikey. Kinda funny, they are almost like father and son, the way I've seen them argue and get on."

"Schleppers?"

"The guys the hang gliders hire to carry their gear up to the highest point above the overlook." She pointed up toward the top of the cliff, scrawny wrist bespangled with bracelets. "We call them schleppers, kind like Sherpas, because they have to cart the sail outfits up a skinny dirt trail to the higher point and help with the setup. Course they can't go to the highest point because of the dogs and barbed wire."

Of course. The other residents knew about as much as Heron did about Ike Carey, or even less. They all agreed that Dad did not live in the trailer park but showed up every once in a while to watch the hang gliders. He didn't have wheels according to one resident because he had asked to borrow his Datsun station wagon. "Said he'd give me a hundred bucks, he just had to get to Santa Lena for a

doctor's appointment. I wanted his driver's license for collateral. That stopped him. But the next day, he shows up with this out of State drivers id. So I said what the heck, a hundred bucks is a hundred bucks."

"Remember what the name on the id was?"

"Well, it wasn't Dad, that's for sure. Daniel something. Something weird like Ailess or Ailuz, I don't know."

Donovan sat at his desk where the real work got done unlike how it was portrayed on TV cop shows. Detective work was essentially paperwork, scanning the details, sorting the facts, gathering the evidence. He had a friend who was a program analyst for Social Services and she had put together a timeline spreadsheet template for him. All he had to do was fill in the cells with approximate times and dates, add a few notations, and look for any patterns that might emerge.

Working backward, 12 to 36 hours prior to the discovery, calculating the dates which placed the TOD within a two to three day period. He had interviewed a few idling schleppers in the overlook parking lot. No one had seen Dwight Carey for at least two days prior to his drowning. When informed of the young man's death, one of the schleppers had mentioned something about going into a "white room."

He consulted his notebook. A "white room" was the interior of a cloud and a very dangerous place to be as it was disorienting to the hang glider. Entering the white room was also a term used to signify someone who had died while hang gliding.

Had Ikey gone into the white room and had that led to his demise? Not unless someone else had also been in the white room and gut shot him. The bullet had entered the abdomen above the hip. Whoever shot him would have been positioned lower or below the subject assuming that he was in the air and attached to a pair of homemade wings. He examined the stick figures drawn and numbered in his notebook. Number one was the victim, number two, the assailant. Obviously #1 was in the air. Where was #2 standing when he or she fired the shot? He had a hunch.

Quizzing the schleppers and the gliders waiting for what they called "magic air," Donovan had learned that there were three spots to launch from: the overlook by the parking lot where mostly beginners were "chucked off the hill" by their instructors, and the next highest point on the bluff overlooking the beach some three to four hundred feet further up where the "sky gods" might "glass off" and no "launch potatoes" were allowed. The third level was for the advanced "airborne," as they were sometimes called, high enough that sky gods or goddesses might catch a "bullet thermal" and "speck out," but it was no longer accessible because it was in the restricted

zone. That had been the most frequent gripe in all the interviews, that the government was spoiling their fun.

The phone on his desk warbled. He stared at it, distracted. He had a good idea who it might be and let it go to voicemail.

Looking over Carey's arrest record, he came across an old booking entry, almost a dozen years prior. His first, in fact. Resisting arrest at a demonstration by the local environmental group, EAF, Earth Action Front. He'd required hospitalization and had been released on probation. There'd been a lawsuit, dismissed. All subsequent arrests had been for disorderly conduct, nothing criminal.

Donovan paused his finger on the keyboard and then with a few deft pokes called up the EAF file. It was password protected. He paged back through his notebook. He wondered if they had changed the password since the last time he'd accessed a secure file. They hadn't.

The EAF dossier was mostly routine. Court orders for communication monitoring, CI interviews, a few audio files indicating listening devices. He was surprised at the extent of the coverage. EAF (the D is silent, as the cops liked to say), once a fairly radical militant group, had not made the news cycle in quite some time, now mostly affiliated with more mainstream enviros, limiting their activities to leafletting and demonstrations. He scanned the membership list. No surprise, there was Dwight Carey's name.

Dad had come up in the interviews about Ikey with a few of the schleppers. No one knew where he lived. Not at the trailer park, that had been confirmed. He'd show up out of nowhere. Some suspected he was camping up the hill near the old waterfall. He always dressed in the same ratty blue coveralls. Ikey followed him around like a lost puppy. Nor had Dad been spotted in the last few days. One of the schleppers had mentioned that he thought that Dad might have been going somewhere. The last time he'd seen him was the same morning that Ike's body had been found. He looked different, too, shaved off his moustache, slicked his hair back, might have even cut it, wearing a sports jacket and slacks.

Donovan stared at the notebook where he had written Daniel "Dad" Ailess followed by a question mark. What was his connection to Ike Carey's death, if any?

Donovan knew he had to face the music sooner or later. Later found him sitting across from Sheriff Phil Collins, a big man behind a big desk—they had served as deputies together, but ladder climbing and a regular diet of ass kissing had added a puffiness to the Sheriff's face and midriff making him look overinflated. He leaned back in his large red leather office chair looking through half closed eyes before pointing a finger and raising an inquisitive eyebrow. "That's your story?"

“It’s a murder investigation, Phil, plain and simple, body, gunshot wound, a potential crime scene I’ve been denied access. . . .”

“You’re not going to get anywhere with that. Even if I wanted to help you, my hands are tied. These people have a lot of clout. I have budgetary concerns to look after and I can’t risk someone stepping on the supplementary funding pipeline, too many jobs at stake. If this was strictly a law enforcement matter, you’d have your search warrant, but it’s not, it’s political. Technically, it’s an accidental death. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Someone’s shitting on your turf, Phil.”

“I’m not saying I’m happy about it. I’m up for reelection in eighteen months. I can’t piss the wrong people off. Besides I had nothing to do with it. It was signed off by the Board of Supes and the State before I became Sheriff. Until now I’ve had no cause to complain. Put together a case file on it. Maybe after I’m reelected I’ll have another look.” He gave that shit eating grin he was famous for. “You could even be retired by then.”

“I don’t know how that rumor got started.”

“Well, now that the hiring freeze is over so I can now hire a chief of detectives instead of handling the job myself.

“I don’t think I want the responsibility.”

“Like you had a snowball’s chance.” Collins chuckled. “And maybe promote a couple of deserving young officers into your slot. I can hire two for what I’m paying you.”

Donovan canted his head rolling his eyes, as if he cared. “It was never enough.”

“It works for me, movement in the ranks is always good for the department. It’s trickle-down theory, you’ve heard of trickle-down theory, haven’t you?”

“I have. I learned it from a plumber.”

“A plumber?”

“Yeah, ‘Shit flows downhill.’” Donovan rose from his chair, the ass chewing obviously over. “I’ve got a couple of angles to look at before I file this one away. Just to make sure the paperwork’s in order and we can cover our asses if something goes sideways in the future.”

Collins made a face. “It won’t, but go ahead, as long as it doesn’t impinge on any other ongoing investigations. And once I hire the new COD, it’ll be his call.”

Donovan was on the road back to the coast and Sparta Creek Trailer Park the first thing next morning. There was a gap between the approximate time of death and the time the body was discovered that might never be completely filled in. He’d stared at the timeline spreadsheet, checking off each item, time of his dispatch, travel time

to Acropolis Cove. The vehicle accident, a junker versus an SUV had slowed traffic on Corinth Bay Road. He recalled the demolished older model sedan on the shoulder of the highway and the near pristine Suburban, tinted windows, on the flatbed of the tow truck thinking it odd and that the junker should have had priority if the intent was to clear the roadway. He'd accessed the accident on the Highway Patrol incident log and noted the case number. Logging in to the incident file with his interagency LEO password, he read the at-scene officer's notes. 11-80, major injuries, driver of a pre-millennium Mercury GM transported to Santa Lena General. Vehicle info: registered owner William Bailey Yates, current address Site 11A, Sparta Creek Trailer Park. That the vehicle information on the Suburban was simply Federal Government Fleet gave him pause. He recognized the name of the reporting officer, Zara Valdez, and left a message on her voicemail to call him back.

It was another grim gray day at the coast in the shade of a huge fog bank. And windy, flags and pennants rippling furiously like they wanted to break free and fly away. The awning on the battered trailer at site 11A was shuddering from the gusts and sand was swirling around the aluminum steps leading to the door. A head peeked out the narrow doorway to register his presence and then closed. Either the wind or those within made the trailer shake slightly from side to side.

After Donovan 10-97'd his 10-20, and as dispatched acknowledged, he answered the incoming call on his phone. "Officer Valdez, thanks for returning my call."

"What's up, Donovan, run into some more highway trouble?" She was a perky little number he remembered. It had been a Charity Slow Pitch Softball Tournament, street cops versus highway cops. He'd gone from home plate ump to UFC referee. The street cop catcher was talking trash to the batters, but whatever he'd said to her, she erupted and almost took the guy's head off. He'd stepped in, cautioned the catcher, and assessed her one strike. The pitcher, a tall gal who worked in city dispatch and a former amateur player, couldn't stop from laughing. Once she caught her breath she threw a fast ball and Valdez hit a line drive right at her head. Later he'd learned that the catcher had made disparaging remarks about what he thought her sexual preferences were. "The V stands for Volcano," she'd told him.

"Word gets around fast."

"That's why we have radios. What can I do you for?"

"That TC outside of Dardanelle two morning's ago? An 11-80 involving a Suburban. . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, I remember. What about it?"

"The Suburban belongs to. . . ."

“It was Fed fleet. The driver badged me, Deputy US Marshal.”

“You used to get those in cereal boxes but since the world went granola. . .got a description?”

“Of the fed? Yeah, universal soldier, definitely military type, by the haircut at least, high and tight. Impressive, imposing, and full of himself. Name was Brick or Dick something. Tiller? Tillis?”

“How about the other driver, the transport?”

“A mess, older guy, lotsa blood, fire and rescue had to use the can opener to extricate.”

“What was it? A 102 or a 103?”

“I don’t think it was a 2. A 3, maybe, but on the other vehicle’s part.”

“Oh yeah?”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say some tactical driving was involved, at an unsafe speed, and the driver looked like someone who might have had the training. The Merc flipped a couple of times according to witnesses.”

“No take on the vehicle assignment?”

“I wanted to take a picture of the registration but he wouldn’t let me. Some weird agency I never heard of.”

“What about the transport, description?”

“Like I said, old guy. Despite the blood, my impression was leathery, like he’d been out in the sun a lot, like forever. No ID on him, wrote him a citation for driving without a license, not the vehicle’s registered owner from the DMV database photo, wrong age, too. He was out the entire time. Even in the hospital, they couldn’t ID him to see if he had insurance. But from the car he was driving, I’d say he didn’t.”

“What happened to the vehicle?”

“County impound yard, why?”

“I’m looking at the registered owner right now. He might want to know.”

“Oh yeah? I hope he has insurance because it’s totaled.”

An angry face surrounded by a shaggy bush of salt bleached hair stared at Donovan through the windshield of the sedan. When he stepped out, the mop retreated toward the trailer atop a wiry frame, feral in posture, mean-eyed as a cornered rabbit. “What you want?” a near soprano voice demanded. “I ain’t done nothing!” And then as a last recourse, “She ain’ta gonna press charges,” pointing at the woman named Heron cowering in the doorway of the trailer looking more harried than the last time he’d seen her.

If Donovan’s glare had been a thumb, it would have crushed the man like the insect he was. He addressed the woman in the doorway. “Ms. Heron, I have a few more questions concerning Dwight Carey.”

“She already told what she knows!” The boyfriend puffed himself like a bantam rooster and moved to block Donovan’s path to the trailer.

“I’m not here to talk to you. Get in my way and I’ll arrest you for obstruction of a murder inquiry.”

At the word “murder” the tenor of the man’s aggressiveness changed and his mouth opened and closed like a gasping goldfish undoubtedly mimicking his sphincter. He stood frozen with his arms stiff at his side, fists clenched.

“Ms. Heron, I would like to speak to you in private if I may.” He beckoned to her to step down out of the trailer. A few of the neighboring residents were drifting over to satisfy their curiosity.

Heron, her head down, eyes on the ground, came to stand next to him. “When I asked you about Dwight Carey yesterday, someone named ‘Dad’ came up. Do you remember?”

She nodded and cast a glance over her shoulder at her boyfriend.

“What else can you tell me about Dad?”

She shook her head, “Nothing I ain’t already said.”

“He’s a dirty old man and I’ll kick his ass when I get my hands on him!”

Donovan gave the boyfriend the practiced hard cop stare. “I’m not going to tell you again. Stay out of this.”

“He stole my ride!”

Donovan nodded and addressed Heron. “Did you loan Billy’s car to Dad and that’s why he beat on you?”

Heron whimpered and nodded her head.

“Did he tell you why he needed to borrow the car?”

“Said he had a doctor’s appointment in Santa Lena first thing in the morning but he’d bring it right back before Billy even knew it was gone. I ain’t lying, but he never did.”

Billy had got some of his nerve back and had edged closer, anger contorting his face. “This stupid bitch traded that old bastard my Merc for a stupid medal. Said it was worth a lot of money when it’s just a cheap piece of crap. Ain’t worth nothing and now I ain’t got wheels neither.”

“You have this item he gave you?” Donovan pointed a finger at Billy. “You stay where you are. If you wanted to file a stolen vehicle complaint, I’ll have the deputy come by and take the report.”

Heron reached down the front of her blouse and pulled up a round flat object attached to a thin leather cord. “It’s bronze, he said,” she spoke quietly, reverentially, “said it was ancient, magic, s’posta ward off evil spirits.” She looked at Billy. “Guess he was just making all that up cause he wanted me to let him borrow Billy’s ride. He’s a real slick talker when he wants to be, really smart, used a lot of big words. Talk anybody outta anything. I seen it. Said if he

didn't come back I could sell it to a collector for enough to buy a new car *and* a trailer. . . .”

“It's a piece of junk!”

She handed it to Donovan who asked, “Did the thong come with it?”

“No I added that, There's a little hole for it at the top.”

He held it by the length of rawhide and examined it closely. It was the size of a cast belt buckle although solid and crude in its depiction of a face, what looked like a tongue protruding below a bushy mustache, the eyes round with terror or menace. The weight of it belied its size, encrusted in hues of coal black to greenish blues, there was nonetheless something intriguingly authentic about it.

Donovan set the medallion on the hood of his sedan and took pictures of the bronze medallion with his phone. He retrieved a plastic evidence bag from the driver's door pocket.

“That's mine!” Billy challenged and started toward him. “You can't take that!” The nosey neighbors were joined by additional onlookers, curious, grim faced, but not their first police action.

“What did I say about staying put? This is evidence in a criminal inquiry. It'll be returned to you as soon as it's declassified. Step back or I'll take you down and take you in!”

Someone in the crowd asked loudly, “Can you keep him longer this time?” A titter of laughter and grunts of approval rippled through the crowd of onlooker, some with smart phones recording the proceedings. A woman at the front of the neighborhood watch group held up her phone to get a better angle and yelled “Don't let them take your property, Billy! You got your rights! They'll be coming for your guns next!”

On cue Billy launched himself at Heron, punching, slapping and kicking, screaming “See what you did! This all your fault!” Heron cowered, screeching in surprise and pain.

Donovan moved quickly, grabbing Billy's arm before the next blow landed and twisting it up behind his back in one swift practiced motion, knocking the man's feet out from under him. Face down, Billy struggled to get up but Donovan, with a knee on his spine, snapped the cuffs on one wrist and final caught hold of the wildly flailing loose arm to brace the other. The wind, in a furious gust, whipped them both.

“Put your knee on his neck!” the woman filming with her phone yelled as if she were the director of an action movie.

Donovan stood up slowly, his breathing heavy. Two days running his adrenaline had kicked in and he could feel the cool itch of sweat breaking along his brow and under his eyes. He bent down again catching the glint of the medallion he had dropped in the wind shifting sand. For a moment he had the impression that it was

mocking him as he hooked his finger through the leather strand and dropped the sturdy amulet into the evidence bag.

A couple of concerned neighbor women were comforting Heron, helping her sit on the wood bench outside the trailer. One of them glared at Donovan as he approached. "You need to keep him in jail," she said indicating Billy thrashing on the ground demanding his rights and the return of his property, "he's always beating on her."

"Do I need to call for a medic to take a look at you?"

Heron, sniffing between sobs, shook her head. "No, I'm ok," she spoke feebly, "Are you gonna arrest him?"

Donovan pursed his lips. "He didn't give me much choice. I witnessed an assault. I'm going to arrest him and leave it up to the DA to charge him. If he's got a record for this kind of behavior it's likely he'll be doing some time. It's the law and I have to enforce it." He held up the evidence bag. "I'll have you sign a receipt for the medallion. It's interesting enough that I want to have the lab take a look at it. When we're done with it, I'll get it back to you. Promise."

Heron looked up at him with tear reddened eyes and nodded. "Ok," she said weakly.

Why connecting one dot made him feel like a bloodhound hot on a trail he couldn't say although it did energized him. He could draw a line from Ike Cary to Dad Ailess by association and by the odd coincidence that Carey was wearing a blue jumpsuit two sizes too small for him, a blue jumpsuit that was described as Dad's usual attire. Now he had a link between Dad and the vehicle accident the morning Carey's body was discovered. His next stop was Santa Lena General to learn what had become of the driver of the totaled Mercury. Once he reported his 10-15, the coast deputy arrived to take custody of Billy and await transport to the county jail.

The security guard at the ER recognized Donovan and nodded as he held the door open for him. He paused at the receiving counter for one of the nurses in blue scrubs to notice him. A young nurse, severe dark framed glasses, dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, walked up to the counter.

"Hi, Jim Donovan with the Sheriff's Office. I'm inquiring about the victim of a TC brought in here two days ago, mid-morning?"

"I'm sorry, do you have a warrant for that information?" She looked around and called for the attention of another nurse with their back to them. "Maria?"

Maria turned and then smiled. "Jim Donovan. I have not seen you in a while. I thought maybe you have retired." She was a sprightly slightly rotund Hispanic woman with streaks of gray in her otherwise jet black hair.

“I don’t know how that rumor got started.”

“If you ask me, I think Phil Collins start it in hope he get rid of his bad boy detective.”

“You might be on to something.”

“Jim, this is Tess, she is new here.”

Donovan gave an affable smile and claimed to be pleased to meet her.

“Have you heard from Marion recently? How she is liking Baltimore?”

Donovan scratched his chin. “Not in a while, but last time I talked to her she was liking it just fine.”

“Tell her ‘hi’ from the *SaLeMo* gang next time.” She addressed Tess. “Marion was one of the top ICU nurses here and a frequent companion of the Sheriff detective and we adopted him as ‘our guy’.” She beamed a big smile, warm and affectionate. “So what bring you down to the ER, Jim?”

“He wanted information on a TC admit. Doesn’t he need a warrant for that?”

Maria looked taken aback. “Why he need that? He need a court order to get private medical information, sure, but information on a patient status is entirely appropriate, especially if it is in the course of an investigation.” She turned to Jim, “I assume it is, yes?”

“Absolutely. I merely need to determine the victim of the traffic collision. . . .”

Tess looked confused. “But the others showed me a warrant and said. . . .”

“Others?” Donovan and Marie asked in near unison.

“The others came shortly after this man, the one who was in the vehicle accident two days ago. We had him as a John Doe, admitted him for assessment. They said they had a warrant for him but the on-call emdee said he was too fragile to move and they’d have to wait till he regained consciousness. Then later, I was off shift but I learned from Miguel, the late shift nurse, that they brought in their own doctor, a woman, and he said he didn’t think she was an emdee, but she had a lawyer with her, and they were going to transport him to another facility, and even the director of operations had to be called because the old guy had never recovered consciousness and the on-call refused because he was already tied to in-hospital life support. . . .” She paused as if out of breath.

“So that what that was all about,” Maria nodded sagely. “I am looking over the shift note and here is this whole kerfuffle about the transport. They want to send their own helicopter to medivac. So we get him ready to move. But wherever it was come from, there was a weather delay, so he have to wait.

“A cluster kerfuffle, you might say,” Donovan interjected.

Maria chuckled, "Jim, you always make laugh." Tess gave a tentative smile and added, "But they got it all resolved this morning. The helicopter medevacked him to another hospital I'm assuming."

"Ugh!" Donovan shook his head. "Was there any identification made on the patient, his name? Anything?"

"There was a name on the warrant. I saw it when they showed it to me." Tess made the helpless gesture. "But I don't remember it. Sorry?"

"Could it have been Daniel Ailess or Alaz?"

"Mmm, I don't think so. It was the full name, you know, first, middle, last."

"I should have acted on my hunch yesterday," he groaned.

"Wait," Maria said, "there must be a copy of the warrant if the hospital authorize the release." She held up a finger. "The director of operations! I will call his office," she smiled picking up the hospital phone.

Donovan addressed Tess, "Can you give me a description of the patient, anything you can remember about him that might have struck you as odd?"

"No, not really, just that he seemed really old, you know, his skin was dark but the intern checked Caucasian on the admittance form."

"Anything else?"

"Just that there was a lot of blood on his clothes. From the accident, you know."

"What were his injuries?"

Tess shrugged. "I don't know. I wasn't part of the triage team. But I remember Marcus, one of the nurses on the team, saying he didn't know where the blood came from."

"It didn't come from the injuries?"

"I didn't ask him what he meant. We had a busy patch right around then. The on-call had him transferred to ICU almost immediately so it must have been pretty serious. I don't think he regained consciousness, at least not under our care."

Maria hung up the receiver shaking her head. "He is in a meeting and cannot be disturb." She stared at the phone set. "The problem with hiring the children of the board of directors as receptionists is that they do not know anything and they do not care that they do not know anything." Her eyes narrowed. "Tess, who was the on-call that day?"

"Meridan."

"Oh, Merry Dan? That is disappointing."

"No, wait, it was Fatima! Meridan was working another incident. Like I said we were slammed that day."

Maria nodded. "Fatima Fattah. Now Doctor Fattah I know we can trust. She is not on call today. But!" with a spark in her eye,

“I can review her patient log. If I know her, she counted the buttons on his shirt.”

Donovan and Tess exchanged a hopeful glance as Maria manipulated the mouse, and a few keystrokes later nodded her head and said “Ok, here we go.” Her eyes scanned the screen and she frowned. “I have not seen that one in forever, a BOP billing code.”

“BOP? Bureau of Prisons?” He nodded his head. “Ok, that gives me something to chew on. Anything else?”

“Here, his name is Philip Andrew Nichols.”

“No joy there, and I’m almost back to square one.”

“This is odd.” Maria pointed to the screen. “Dr. Fattah could find no injuries that would account for the blood on the clothing.”

“The clothing? Any chance that they would still be around?”

Maria shook her head, “No, they were his effects, they probably were pack up with him when they transport.”

“Can I get a look at his room in the ICU? Maybe something of his was left behind.” He shrugged. “I know it’s a reach.”

Maria put the phone to her ear. “You will have to mask and gown, but I will ask Debbie.” She smiled. “You remember Debbie, don’t you?”

Donovan remembered Debbie and Debbie hadn’t forgotten Donovan. Debbie had had a huge crush on him and had made a move on him at a Christmas party, one that Marion hadn’t been able to attend because she was working that evening. That had been some years back when he was still working Narcotics. Nothing had ever come of it mainly because Debbie had been very drunk. He’d driven her home, helped her find the keys to her front door, end of story. Except for the ones wagging tongues were tempted to tell.

Debbie talked a lot when she was nervous and that made Donovan nervous. “The room was scrubbed soon after they transported, I doubt you’ll find anything. There’s already a new patient in there. And even if I did I could get in serious trouble if anyone found out I’d let you in. Privacy rights, you know. I don’t know what Maria was thinking.” They were standing by the double doors that led into the ICU. She had her mask pulled down under her chin, a large sterile cap covering a pile of blonde hair, and a full blue gown and matching booties.

“How about blood or tissue samples?” He felt stupid. He knew the answer as soon as he asked the question.

She answered anyway, “You’d have to have permission of his custodian or a court order, or both.”

Donovan looked around, a security guard was hurrying the nurses station. “You’re right, of course.” He sighed, “Grasping at straws.”

Debbie had a nice smile even if it had a little edge of smug superiority to it. She tucked a stray strand of blonde hair under her cap and asked, "Have you heard from Marion since she moved back to Baltimore?"

He was about to give his boiler plate answer when an angry voice erupted at the nurses station. Another security guard was hurrying down the corridor crowded with idle machines, gurneys, nurses, orderlies, and patients hobbling along grasping their mobile IV poles or in wheelchairs. The loud voice belonged to an older woman. "I can't believe this! How can you lose a man who can't walk?"

The nurse, embarrassed and flustered, was losing her patience over the presumed lost patient. "Please, calm down! I'm certain it's just a mistake. He's here in the hospital, I'm sure of it."

The loud woman was accompanied by a younger woman, likely her daughter, and a young girl not much older than five who was tugging insistently at the young woman's jacket. The young woman tried to shush the girl but looked up in the direction the girl pointed as she announced in the clear voice of a precocious pre-adolescent, "That man has a hat just like Uncle Jimmy's." That caused the loud woman to whirl around. "Someone's wearing my brother's hat?" Then she screamed pointing at a now empty wheelchair in the cluster that had gathered to view the ruckus. All heads turned, including Donovan's, to catch a leg disappearing behind the corner of the corridor. The security guards looked at each other perplexed. They had no idea what had just happened. They'd been called to quell a commotion. They weren't at all certain they were supposed to chase someone down the hospital corridor even as the woman screamed "He stole my brother's hat!"

Donovan was around the corner in a couple of strides. A gurney with attendant IV pole was waiting to be loaded on the elevator at the far end of the hallway flanked by two orderlies in pale green scrubs. Other than that, the people in the hallway looked like they belonged there, their demeanor professional, some flashing him questioning looks. Then he saw it on the floor between a soiled linen hamper and a medical waste disposal, the uncle's hat. He bent down and with the pen from his pocket lifted the ballcap to take a closer look. There was an unusual logo on the front of the hat, a lower case *i* framed by a pair of wings.

The storefront's narrow glass doorway was papered over with flyers and announcements. Two large plate glass windows, one painted with a depiction of the globe and the initials EAF, and the other featuring a representation of the scales of justice circumscribed by a large peace symbol and the words *Justice Means Peace* had greeted him as he'd exited his sedan. Like EAF, JMP, or JuMP

as they liked to style themselves, had come up in various briefings on local leftist radical groups prone to civil disobedience so he knew exactly whose den he had stepping into.

Among the array of framed protest placards and posters urging respect for Mother Earth or face the dire consequences, the one that caught Donovan's eye read "Braless & Lawless" superimposed over an artfully distressed representation of three women giving the power salute. Another wall was painted sky blue bisected by the darker arc of an image of Earth seen from space against which stood a set of bookshelves lined with somber spines and a sign above it that read *Earth Consciousness Library* crudely carved into a wide weathered plank. A patchwork of worn and frayed Indian rugs covered a slab floor around which were deployed a variety of mismatched secondhand couches and armchairs and centered on a redwood burl table piled with slick conservationist magazines.

The young woman with the green and purple dyed hair at a small desk off to one corner of the large storefront space looked up from her laptop and smiled. Then her cop radar kicked in and she frowned. "Can I help you?" The tone wasn't friendly.

"Hi, Jim Donovan with the Sheriff's Office." He held out his identification and the young woman peered at it like it was repulsive. "Are you in charge here?"

Her blue eyes behind stylish retro frames shifted left then right and back again as she considered how she would answer the question. "Uh, no, no, uh. . . ." Her voice sounded fearful, panicked. She licked her lips and glanced at the passageway leading to the back of the building. "Can. . . can I ask what this is about?"

"I'm inquiring about one of your members, Dwight Carey?"

She seemed relieved. "Oh, I'm sorry, I'm not familiar with that name."

"I am." A woman in her late forties, dark graying hair cut short below the ears, stood at the entrance to the rear space calmly studying him. She held out her hand. "Ionna Gunn, I'm the director of Earth Action Fellowship." She smiled and then motioned him to follow her. "Why don't we talk in my office." And then to the young woman, "It's alright, Regina."

Ionna Gunn's office was a small cramped space lined with bookshelves and file cabinets. She removed a pile of papers and file folders from a sturdy looking chair with a dented seat cushion and cast around for a place to put them before deciding to stack them in front of one of the file cabinets. "Please, have a seat."

She wasn't what Donovan expected even though he had viewed her booking photos. She looked older, maybe more mature, less defiant. And her complexion was not as dark as in the photos. Dark eyes above high cheekbones considered him after he'd introduced himself again. On the wall behind her desk was a collage of

photos featuring Ioanna and associates at protests, at speakers podiums, with bullhorns, and with garden implements in what appeared to be urban community gardens beneath a banner that read *Earth Action Fellowship*.

“Ike Carey,” she spoke shaking her head, “I read about his accident in the paper just yesterday. So sad.”

“What can you tell me about him? When was the last time you talked to him?”

“I don’t know, years? Maybe about five, maybe more. He was one of our original group when we started Earth Action Front. Always very enthusiastic. Then the beating at the hands of the Santa Lena PD put him in the hospital. He was the youngest of our group with the passion of youth.” She paused as if remembering. “He wasn’t the same after that. He’d always been happy go lucky, up for anything, a trickster of sorts. But after that time something rattled loose and. . .,” she looked down at her hands, “Well, he never recovered that playful impish quality that we always loved about him.” She sighed then fixed him with a penetrating gaze. “You’re being here would lead me to believe that it might not have been an accident.”

Donovan read her short stature, broad shoulders, knit mauve vest over a gray t-shirt, and a man’s gold wristwatch that spoke of a certain assertiveness. Square northern features softened by equatorial curves, not noticeably made up, suggestive of a lack of pretention and her readiness to engage intelligently marked her as truthful so far.

“Purely routine. At this point just paperwork. I didn’t have a current address for him on file and I’d like to get an idea his movements before he ended up where he did.”

“The article in the paper seemed to imply a hang gliding accident. Isn’t that the case?”

“That’s what we believe. There seemed to be some kind of homemade glider involved.”

“Homemade glider? And at Acropolis Cove? That sounds dangerous.”

“The launch point was probably closer to Sparta Creek Overlook.”

She leaned her chin on a forefinger, considering. “That’s quite a distance.”

“You’re familiar with the area?”

“I had a boyfriend in high school who was a surfer.” She smiled at the memory. “According to him the waves at Sparta Creek Beach were gnarly.”

“I’ll take your word for it. Is there anyone you can steer me to that might have had contact with him recently, maybe friends in the radical conservationist network?”

This time it was a chuckle, genuine in its incredulity that the question had been asked. “No, Detective Donovan, there is no radical conservationist network that I’m aware of. We’re Earth Action Fellowship now, no longer a Front. Letter writing, phone banking, community gardens, neighborhood beautification, and legitimate political action and education are what the Fellowship is all about. And no, there is no one I can refer you to.” The smile had left her face.

“Just thought I’d ask.” Donovan removed a business card from his identification case and wrote on the back of the card.

“Here’s my card in case you remember something. That’s another number you can reach me at.”

Ionna accepted the card and glanced at it frowning. It wasn’t a phone number, just the letters U and R followed by a circle with what looked like multiple legs and a plus sign.

Donovan stood up at her questioning look angling his head toward a corner of the ceiling of the small office. “Thanks for your cooperation.” He checked his wrist. “That time of day already. Know a good place around here where I can grab a cup of coffee and maybe a bite to eat?”

“You might want to try Sole Sister Diner down at the end of the block.” She nodded knowingly. “I can guarantee the coffee.”

Donovan remembered when the place had been a paint store and even before that an auto parts store. Now converted into a hip diner, part of the gentrification of the old industrial west side of Santa Lena where they’d paved over the railroad right of way and featured art galleries, antique stores, and trendy boutiques. He’d picked a booth off to the side of the narrow service area by the door to the kitchen. The counter stools were crowded and the spindly two person tables always made him feel naked, unprotected. He sat facing the front of the building looking out the wide window to the street.

The waitress had a large gold stud through the top of one nostril. The way she was made up he could assume that she was on call to perform under the big top. She smiled and it was nice. “Coffee?” and handed him a printed menu with the Sole Sister logo across the top when he nodded yes.

He checked his phone messages, missed call from Helen in HR, otherwise routine random bullshit. He had to ask himself why was he even concerning himself with this investigation when it was going nowhere. Fingerprints having turned up nothing, his request for DNA analysis of the sweatband on the ball cap he was told was going to be slow tracked to the contract lab considering not enough of the boxes had been checked on the request form. The hair sample stuck to the inside of the crown of the cap came back as non-human.

The tech had guessed when he'd called for clarification, "Yeah, goat, or an animal like that."

The ballcap, he'd also learned, was a one of a kind, a gift to James Lidlaye from his friends, fellow hang gliders, who had given it to him after he had fractured his back on a particularly hard landing. The logo depicting wings signified the hang glider fraternity and the lower case i was a pun on his last name. He'd got that from Lorrain, Uncle Jimmie's sister when on a hunch the hang glider connection became evident, and he'd claimed the hat as evidence. And evidence of what, a stolen hat, but also of a missing or misplaced person. He pictured a helicopter lifting off the helipad at Santa Lena General and not realizing their mistake, not that anyone would ever learn of it. Besides, Uncle Jimmie was an office nerd, no contact with a goat or animals of that type was likely.

The lab had also referred him to someone he remembered as a lecturer from his academy days, Duncan Betalle, professor of Forensic Archaeology at Weston County Community College aka Wheesies, or Dubya 300 to the hip crowd. He didn't seem all that imposing twenty plus years later, his beard showing only streaks and patches of the original red color, but still hanging on, semi-retired, at the pleasure of the administration. He'd weighed the medallion in his hand, opened the evidence bag and stuck his nose in the opening, slipped the medallion onto a blank piece of paper on his desk and examined it with the magnifying app on his phone. He'd snapped a photo and sent it to an artifact recognition app as he explained, staring at the rapidly shifting shapes on the screen.

"There, I knew I'd seen it before." He'd held up the phone for Donovan to see. "Pre-Hellenic, early Bronze age, unearthed, it says here, in the ruins of a temple to Penelope in Ithica. Apotropaic uses, to bring good luck and ward off the evil eye, probably a replica." He brought his nose close to the medallion and tapped it a few times with a metal letter opener. "You won't miss a few atoms. My nose tells me I would like to examine this closer. If it is a copy, it's a very old copy, a depiction of the Greek god, Pan."

Evil eye. That's what Heron has claimed Dad Ailess had told her about the medallion, it would ward off the evil eye. His coffee appeared before him and he hadn't even looked the menu over.

"Can't make up your mind?" Ionna Gunn slid onto the red vinyl bench across from him. She held him with her dark eyes, hands crossed on the Formica tabletop. She had brought her own cup. Faint wisps of steam passed up in front of her face and suddenly she was as beautiful as a photograph. "What I'm wondering is why?"

"Maybe I had questions to ask that I didn't want overheard." "You don't want your people to know what you're asking me." He eyes narrowed. "Is this some kind of harassment?"

“First, they are not my people, not the Sheriff’s Office, directly at least. Our intelligence operation is one guy who doesn’t shower which may be the reason he’s the only guy. He just makes sure to grease the skids for the guys who get the electronic surveillance court orders. In exchange they share any pertinent intelligence which is almost never.”

She had cocked an eyebrow. “And just who are ‘they’?”

Donovan took another sip after blowing across the scalding brew to cool it some. “I have a friend who knows how to do these things and I got her to trace the chain of authority on the court order. When you trace it high enough that you don’t want to know anymore, you say ‘it’s in the clouds’”

“It’s in the clouds.”

“And that makes me curious as to why someone that high up has their eye on you and how that fits in to my murder investigation.”

“Murder is it now?”

“Just a technical term. Ike Carey was a dead man one way or the other. I’d like to hear what you know about him and I have an idea that it’s more than you wanted to spill in your office.”

“It should come as no surprise that I’m not surprised that my phone is tapped. In more radical times,” and her body language said they were behind her, “we always operated under the assumption that we were being watched, that we had to be discreet about what we were saying. . . .”

“Did you talk in code?”

Ionna laughed as if remembering something. “We did for a while but people kept forgetting what the codes were so it just got to be that we didn’t say anything of any consequence over the telephone. Now that everything is digital I guess the same precautions and etiquette would apply, maybe even more so.” She held up her smart phone and showed him the blank screen indicating that it had been turned off. “Snitches I can understand, but a listening device seems a little much. What are they going to hear, my berating of inept corrupt politicians, intimate conversations with friends, my indigestion?”

“I’m baffled as well. What does it have to do with Dwight Carey? And EAF. As far as I can make out you have yet to sprout into a national security threat. But I did come across something in your file. The protest that Ike was injured at was over the acquisition of property on Mount Oly by a government contractor. EAF and a number of other conservationist groups were opposed to it, demonstrated against it. I didn’t understand the reasoning, an obscure chunk of property out in the middle of nowhere?”

He eyes were focused with a deep reflection as she stared at the cup in front of her. “You could possibly be right, and Ike may be the connection, but not in the way you think.”

Dwight Carey, known from the very first as Ike or Ikey, was the son of an old family friend, the nephew of one of the original group around EAF. His father, who had disappeared around the time of Ike’s birth, was a legend among a small group of avant-garde intellectuals and artists, an older man, easily twenty years older than Ike’s mother, respected for the breadth of knowledge and creativity, his impish sense of humor and cleverness. Ike had been raised in a radical environment of talk should be accompanied by action. To show that they meant business as a community focused action group, EAF saw an opportunity to secure the long shuttered girl’s camp on Mount Oly and return it to its original purpose as a summer retreat, but for under privileged and disadvantaged girls.

Ionna herself had attended Camp Minnoknosso, or as she called it, Camp Me-No-Know-So, as a young girl and into her late teens.. She became the driving force behind the project to obtain the property, writing grants to philanthropic foundations and conservationist trusts, consulting with a local contractor that was part of their group to assess the property and estimate the extent of repairs needed to bring the old property back into shape to house thirty six girls in three six week sessions across the breadth of the summer months. They had heard through back channels that their prospects of obtaining at least some of the funding were very good. The group rallied around the project, everyone on a positive high. Then the phone call ahead of the official letter of rejection and its oddly apologetic tone. The news was demoralizing. There was much recrimination within the group, power politics demanded that she resign.

“Yet years later, I am still here. To make matters worse we learned that the property had been transferred to a holding company, a shell corporation that no one had any information about, IQ Dynamics. They didn’t waste any time, they had heavy equipment razing the place in a matter of weeks. And the property was heavily guarded so without a satellite photo or a camera drone, which didn’t exist back then, there was no way of knowing what they were doing. We tried court orders, injunctions, all of which were denied. Years later I uncovered evidence that it was funded through proprietary companies working through the highest level of the Defense Department.”

“What was Ike’s father’s name? Did you ever meet him?”

The smiley faced rainbow waitress appeared ready to take his order. “I recommend the sausage, eggs, and yam fries,” Ionna said pointing at the menu.

“Yam fries?” Donovan raised an eyebrow. “That may be too earthy for me.” He ordered two eggs over easy, bacon and English muffin

“I never met the father though I’d heard a lot about him from the old guard, some kind of natural genius, jack of all trades, and apparently a champion surfer.”

“No name?”

“Peter.”

“Peter Carey?”

“No, not Carey, that’s the mother, Inanna’s name. Ike took her name. I think his last name began with an N. . .Newton? Something like that. Everyone referred to him as ‘the goat’ though?”

“Goat?”

“Yeah, like ‘Greatest Of All Times’?” Ionna leaned her back against the back of the both. “Does this have anything to do with the father?”

Donovan shook his head. “Maybe, but I don’t know why. There’s someone named Dad that Ike hung around with at the trailer park and the overlook. Could that his father?”

“Oh, the crazy old guy?”

“You know him?”

“Know of him. I have friends who were part of the movement and who still surf out there and live in the trailer park. In my last years at Camp Me-no-know-so, I and a few of the older girls would sneak out at night to go hang out with some surfers we met at the beach or the trailer camp. Some of those guys never left.”

“The trail from the camp to the trailer park, is that the one the hang gliders use to get to their highest launch point?”

“No, that one’s too steep and dangerous, especially in the dark. There’s another trail, a secret trail that only few of us knew about. Further down by the old waterfall. You would never find it if you didn’t know where to look.”

Donovan nodded as something clicked into place. In the interviews someone had mentioned the old waterfall in association the man they called Dad.

“Anyway. Ike’s name comes up once in a while, mainly his antics and acting out. It’s like time stopped for him. He was still locked into the old Front ways. He could get very. . .vehement at times. I’d heard was that he was hanging out with this crazy old homeless guy who lived in the woods up the creek, someone they all called ‘Dad’ and that Ike actually believed that he was his father.” Donovan looked up surprised as the waitress placed the plate in front of him. “That was fast.”

The waitress grinned, “The cook’s a psychic, she had you pegged as a bacon and eggs man.” She laid the guest check at the edge of the counter and smiled at Ionna.

He cut into an egg and watched the yolk spill out. “How many people know about this secret trail out of the camp?”

“At first it was only a few of us older girls, but someone blabbed, and soon everyone knew about it including the Camp Director and they had the passageway blocked.”

“Passageway, you mean like a tunnel?”

“More of like a long trough that had been eroded by the waterfall into the hillside, and then when they diverted water into the swimming pond for the camp, that part of the channel dried up and was overgrown with brush and brambles. They filled the trough with rubble and large boulders and it was no longer passable.”

“I don’t imagine a mere pile of rocks would keep some girls from the lure of a good party.” He looked up to catch the gleam in her eye and pull of cheek into a smirk.

“A lot of the rubble was washed down the sluice after a couple of years of heavy winter storms. The big rocks stayed in place and created vents and spaces that the adventurous might find challenging but not daunting.” Ionna laid a hand on the table next to her cup and engaged his eyes. “So I’ve been told.”

Donovan stared at the bacon on his plate and wondered how he could get it all in his mouth without appearing like a ravenous wolf. He also wondered about the trail by the old waterfall. How had perimeter security missed that. Just plain sloppy? Or sloppy on purpose? “Do you know if the camp property is still accessible up through the secret trail?”

Ionna leveled him with a long look, gauging his trustworthiness before she spoke. “About nine, maybe ten years ago when the construction of the facility was going on up on Mount Oly I snuck in to take a look at what they were doing. Since we couldn’t get any answers from the county planning department of what exactly was going on up there, a few of us decided to find out for ourselves. We crawled up the ravine to the site of the construction, Ike was among the group. It wasn’t completed yet, but it looked like row upon row of container vessels and a large landing area for helicopters.”

Donovan solved the problem by making a bacon sandwich with the English muffin.. “Would you be willing to show me the access to the secret trail?”

He eyes narrowed. “Are you asking me to break any laws? Like trespassing?”

He shook his head and swallowed another bite. “You won’t be breaking any laws. I just want to determine if access to the Mount Oly compound can be made through this trail you’re talking about. I have a hunch that it’s been used or in use since the last time you went up there, possibly by Ike Carey.”

She nodded her head thoughtfully. “Yes, that seems likely. Ike was particularly affected when we lost the bid for the property.

He'd wanted to sabotage the construction while it was underway. He wasn't the only one," she added with a smile. "But I have to warn you, it's a maze, and some spots might be a tight fit for someone your size."

Donvan looked down at where some of the egg yolk had dribbled down onto the napkin tucked under his chin and then back up at Ionna. He didn't want to admit he was wearing his Kevlar. "It's just the jacket, it makes me look bulky."

"If you say so."

"County Sheriff! Keep your hands where I can see them!" Donovan leveled his weapon at the man with the dog just stepping into the clearing. The mastiff strained at its leash. "Heel your mutt or I'll shoot!"

The dog lunged forward, growling. "Put your gun down and get on your knees," the guard commanded. "You are trespassing on US Government protected property in violation of the lawfully posted warnings! I have authority to use lethal force!"

Donovan hesitated. It was either shoot or be shot. The rote response of the guard struck him as oddly dispassionate, mechanical. He wasn't going to waste any time thinking about it because he knew it was coming and that the decision was going to be made for him. He was just buying time. He didn't have long to wait. He felt the cold prod at the base of his skull.

"Drop the gun, asshole, on your knees."

Donovan held his arms out away from his body and let his weapon drop to the ground. The dog was on him immediately as with the force of the blow knocking him down. Then the jolt shooting through him like a fully body funny bone motor lock up shock and the dark pit of forever falling.

Slowly he caught his breath, the pounding of his heart jackhammering in his head. His arms were jerked behind his back and he heard the familiar sound of a zip tie pulled tight, a snarling snout filling his blurred field of vision. His jacket yanked down over his back, he felt a sharp jab in his shoulder as his face was pushed into the dirt until he floated away in a pale inflated softness.

His first thought was of Ionna as he slowly pieced himself back into consciousness followed by the spike of panic not knowing if she had escaped the dog patrol. They had agreed to meet at the Sparta Creek Overlook the day after their conversation at the Sole Sister Diner. She would show him the waterfall access up to the old summer camp but would take her own car. She didn't want to chance being seen in his sedan by friends or acquaintances. She'd mentioned that she had already had rides in squad cars but mostly in the

back and handcuffed, and wasn't eager to revisit the environment. One thing she wanted to do was protect was her reputation.

He'd spotted her watching the hang gliders launch off the bluff, drifting like bits of engineered debris down to the pastel beach runway below. A good wind blustered off the expanse of ocean pushed by a formidable line of gray fog on the far the horizon, otherwise the noon sun in complete command. He'd parked as unobtrusively as possible among the SUVs and camper shelled pickups. She'd joined him as he was lacing up his patrol boots and he followed her to a service road leading off the parking lot.

Beyond the large green storage container belonging to the State Park, the road petered out, and they'd followed a foot path down around a large granite outcropping that led along the meager creek. The trail looked well-trodden with debris and signs of encampments along its meandering to where the gravel beach hemming the watercourse expanded to the edge of the narrow brook and then abruptly stopped at the base of a twenty foot megalith and a large swimming hole.

Donovan gave the open space a three-sixty. There didn't seem to be any way forward. He tilted his head back and took in the sheer granite cliff that loomed above him and assumed that at its top sat the old Mount Oly summer camp and the now off limits compound.

"You come here often?"

Ionna laughed, cocking her head, "I think I've heard that line before."

Donovan raised an eyebrow that said "Ok, you got me."

"But to answer your question: I used to come out here all the time but not in a long while, not since a group of us snuck into the construction site.. That's when I realized that you can't fight them on their own terms, otherwise they'll always win. They have a bottomless source of money and all we have are donations. So I chose the path of productive nonresistance." She glanced around, wistful, nostalgic. "The creek's changed some, lower than I've ever seen it. Climate change, you know." She looked at him, a knowing smile wrinkling her high cheekbones. "Around here Sparta Creek has always been known as 'Party Creek.' It might even be in your intelligence dossier on EAF, but some of the earliest discussions we had as fledgling earth activists about saving the planet from this industrial age capitalist runaway train destroying the ecosystem were around campfires down here, setting our world saving agenda, away from the spying eyes of the military industrial complex, the man." Ionna chuckled. "Or so we assumed." She turned, looking up at the embankment of wild willow and dune grass edging the gravel creek bed, and pointed at a hillside populated with coyote brush, anemic pines, and stunted oaks. "That way."

“So are you a surfer as well?” Donovan small talked choosing his footing carefully across the larger unstable rock field beneath the embankment while she scampered up to the barely perceptible opening in the brush like a mountain goat.

“When you are in the arms of mother earth,” she turned to wait for him to catch up, “you realize how precious she is. The waves are her breasts from which we suckle the pure joy of being. The air is her perfumed breath through which we glide.” She saw his bemused look. “Don’t worry, I won’t turn into a wood nymph and fly away!”

“Hang glider, too?” he said under his breath and she continued up the deer track toward the hillside behind the massive boulder overlooking the creek.

She’d heard hm. “Of course. I’ll try anything if it looks fun or thrilling.” She turned to catch his eye. “Or dangerous.”

They’d agreed, she was only supposed to show him the old waterfall access up to the compound.

At first his eyes adjusted to a wide band of light, bright but also indistinct. A shadow crossed the luminous field. It moved from side to side, growing larger and then smaller. His eyes followed it the way a frog’s would tracking a fly. Another fly appeared to one side.

“He’s coming back,” a muffled voice spoke and he realized that he was sitting, his shoulders slumped forward. He tasted the bile, raised his head and tried to swallow, and felt nauseous, gagging.

“Give him some water.”

A straw was placed in his mouth and he was given a metal cylinder to hold. His eyes began to focus with the first cool sips of liquid. There were two of them, maybe more he couldn’t see just yet. The light came from a wide observation window set in the thick walls of an ovoid space. He took another sip from the straw realizing that his hands were no longer locked behind his back. Tension painfully gripped his shoulder muscles and those in his neck, and his head was pounding so hard it could be heard into next week.

He looked up to bring into focus a beautiful face wreathed by a lustrous mane, predatory gaze looking down her aquiline nose at him as if she were deciding what to serve him with. “I’m Doctor Ida Quinn, director of the IDA Project. You no doubt understand that you’ve just stepped into a black hole. This is my chief of security, Dak Tillis. He’ll explain it to you.”

The other shadow came into focus as a square faced tiny eyed crew cut action figure and fit the description the Highway Patrol officer had provided, a universal warrior type. “Welcome to Calcutta, loser, the very fact of your being here constitutes a breach of national security. Pursuant to the provisions of section 20 of the

internal security act of 1950 in accordance with the directive issued by the Secretary of Defense on the tenth of December 2005, I have the authority to hold you indefinitely without habeas corpus. Think Guantanamo, the government's own Club Med, and you'll get the idea. You might as well take a pill because you're not ever going anywhere again."

Donovan looked back at Doctor Quinn, wet his whistle and rasped, "Does he have an off switch?"

"Spare us your Hollywood dramatics, Detective Donovan, we are not amused."

"Then spare me the phony legalities. You can do whatever you want with me so why the drama?" Donovan leaned back and found the support of an armchair. His blood was getting to all its proper places and the gears engaged behind his eyes. "I am here as a sworn and duly authorized officer of the law investigating a murder that possibly occurred on these premises."

"Two things, Detective, a court order, and good luck with that. Federally administered property is outside your jurisdiction."

"Tell me something I didn't know. But it is still my job to proceed while potential evidence is still actionable to make my case. What the DA does with findings isn't really my problem."

"You're a rogue cop, a cowboy. I thought you'd all left and got jobs in television."

"Meanwhile you're still talking."

Tillis made to strike him but Quinn held him back. "That would be unproductive at this point. I think our unwanted guest may have become a solution to the unfortunate incident with Professor Nimoi's shift into another time dimension."

Now would be a good time to wake up, Donovan told himself.

"If someone hadn't sounded the alarm with your location, you'd have been found floating in Corinth Bay as a result of a party boat accident." Tillis growled as if it were a personal affront.

"Someone, Detective," Doctor Quinn continued, "female by the voice, transmitted a Code 30 on the emergency frequency, officer in distress at the top of Mount Oly at the abandoned girls summer camp, an accomplice, perhaps, one of your officers waiting for you to return within an agreed upon amount of time? Someone who remembered that there had once been a summer camp up here years ago. Your device was compromised as soon as you crossed into the advanced electronic faraday shadow around our perimeter so you obviously weren't able to transmit your location."

He'd stopped listening. He felt relieved, Ionna had made it back to the sedan and called for help. Now it was up to his boss to let him twist in the wind or call out the cavalry. He was angry with himself

for being so foolhardy. He'd put a civilian's life in danger just to prove he was right, to satisfy his self-righteous ego.

When they'd reached the base of the old waterfalls he couldn't at first see any way up the wall of rock without climbing gear. Ionna had led him to a narrow fissure off to one side of the rock face. Out of the beating sun it was dark at first, then points of sunlight seeped into the angled shaft onto a field of brush, rubble, and gigantic boulders climbing more gradually toward a ragged glimpse of sky. She'd pointed toward the edge of light. "At the top is a little gulley that takes you up behind the mini tower lookout and toward the highest point on Mount Oly." He'd been reconsidering his options when she said, "Come on, I'll show you the way up. Steer clear of the poison oak and watch out for rattlesnakes."

A few narrow crevasses were a squeak for him to twist through or crawl under. The rubble field was not very stable and had a tendency to slide. But he'd made it, a little out of breath from the unaccustomed exertion. When they'd reached the top of the narrow overgrown gulley following another deer track, she'd insisted that she just had to see for herself what they'd done with the place. By then it was late afternoon and he was too winded to argue. They followed a dirt track that led to a clearing, staying to the shadows of the forested hillside. They were looking down onto a hollow in a crease of the hillside at the center of the camp and its cluster of dark green roofed cabins among a grove of tan oaks and oleander.

"Wow!" she'd exclaimed under her breath "This is crazy! The last time I was here there was not a stick standing, totally leveled, and now it's like they rebuilt it exactly like it was when I attended camp." She'd thrown him a look of disbelief. "Except for that!" She'd stepped forward to point at a squat ovoid tank tower outfitted with an array of dishes and antennae. "That's not the mini tower I remember."

They had likely set off a motion detector alarm at some point. He could faintly hear a buzzer pulsing and barking dogs in the distance. He didn't have many choices. They could retreat together and try to outrun the dogs. Unlikely, as he was still catching his breath from the slog up the old waterfall. Or he could buy Ionna some time. He quickly explained how to operate and what to say on the sedan's radio, handing her his keys. And to repeat the code and location until she received an acknowledgement from dispatch, then to make herself scarce.

He'd unholstered his weapon and run up toward the highest point on Mount Oly. He could hear the dogs behind him, barking, as he took a path that led upward to a cluster of large lichen covered crags. On the other side was nothing but a straight drop off and the long flat expanse of surf battered beach. The wind pushed against him like a sail. He didn't wonder why the hang gliders coveted this

spot, but could Ike Carey have launched from this spot in his home made set of wings? Had he fashioned the wings himself? Or had some else helped, someone with a sardonic sense of humor? Too much didn't add up.

Ida Quinn was talking to him like she could read his mind. She had a classic beauty that could have sold a trillion shares, hypnotic in its allure, and whatever it was he would have been a subscriber, yet behind those eyes was a seductive intelligence that was both remarkable and terrifying. "Your little investigation is meaningless, especially since the prime suspect has already flown the coop. We thought we had recovered him after he had been taken to the hospital after his, shall we say, accident. . . ."

"When your bruiser here pulled a PIT maneuver on the old Merc. I thought I recognized your trademark g-rig on the flatbed. It's a tricky one, you have to be careful someone doesn't get hurt, land in a ditch. . . ."

He could feel Dak Tillis's glare. "You could have killed one of my men with your stunt!"

Quinn glared at him. She didn't like being interrupted. ". . .but he proved too clever, switching his identity with another patient whom we took into custody before we were aware of the subterfuge." She seemed almost embarrassed. "Sometimes the contractors are not always the most thorough."

"Does this *he* have a name?"

"Not a name that you would recognize, but it belongs to one of the most talented geniuses in the history of science, rivaling Feynman, Einstein, Newton, Archimedes, and Pythagoras. Professor Pavel Anton Nimoi, is one of the greatest men of science in any century. As are many men of extreme intelligence, he is a little eccentric and has a particularly troublesome quirk. He is a murderer."

"You've got my attention." Donovan shrugged and shifted his shoulders to work the stiffness out and felt the presence of movement behind his field of vision. "You're saying he killed Ike Carey?"

"There have been others over time."

"Over time? How old is this guy?"

Doctor Quinn shrugged it off. "His mind is ageless, it transcends time. Physically, he is typical of men in their later years."

"You must have a photo of him. A physical description?"

"That Detective, I'm afraid, is above your pay grade. You will never find him because you will never have any idea where to look. Professor Nimoi believes that he is a trans-dimensional being who has developed a method of time travel that insures immortality and that requires the death of someone close at hand, a ritual sacrifice if you will, what he terms 'a cutout' to another time dimension, such as the one formerly occupied by the person whose death he's caused. You see it is his theory that we each inhabit our own time

dimension while we are alive. But we can stay forever young by traveling through the time dimensions of others.”

“You know this about him and you go along with it?” Donovan leaned forward to read her, find some hint sadistic taunting. “This is nuts! Do you actually believe this theory?”

“It’s a matter of national security. Professor Nimoi is ultra-secret. No one can know about him, especially hostile governments or predatory corporations. His inventions, innovations, theoretical breakthroughs are immeasurably useful to certain clients with whom we contract for research and development, some are so astounding and spectacular that they must remain under wraps until the groundwork has been prepared for their eventual presentation. Think internet but something exponentially more advanced and life changing.

“High security for the IDA Project was necessary in part to secure the perimeters and keep out interlopers, both innocent and the overly curious, some with malicious intent. But it was also to make sure that Pavel Anton Nimoi did not wander away to satisfy his homicidal urges. Ninety percent of the time he was preoccupied with his work, a perfectly well behaved human, for a raving genius, and we had no reason for concern.”

“But that ten percent was murder. Ever hear of ankle bracelets?”

But she wasn’t listening, looking up as if she were hearing a voice and then with a finger to her ear she said, “Yes, Senator, this is Dr. Quinn,” and began to walk away, “I certainly was not aware. . .yes, we’ll form a search party right away.” She tuned to look back at Donovan.

“What do we do with the cowboy?” Dak wanted to know.

She shrugged. “Like we do with all the others, package him.”

His arms were pulled behind his back, the water bottle tumbling to his feet. Another pair of hands in disposable gloves kneaded his left shoulder muscle and he felt the jab. Tillis grinning mockingly and holding up a rectangular device no bigger than a paperback saying, “Smile for the birdie,” blinded him with a double strobe.

He didn’t remember much although at times he thought he recalled a detail, but it just wouldn’t reveal itself, peeking from behind a synaptic partition, like a word on the tip of his tongue that could never be brought forward into consciousness no matter how he tried.

He remembered what he’d been told. A search party from the Mount Oly compound had found him unconscious on a rock ledge overlooking Sparta Creek Beach. IDA Project personnel had used their own helicopter to medivac him to the hospital. Half a dozen hours later he regained consciousness, wondering how he’d got there. He’d been given a medical evaluation and they’d found

no signs of trauma except for a nasty bruise on his shoulder. When he couldn't tell them what happened, they said that it was probably temporary amnesia and his memory would return eventually. So far all it did was tantalize. He spent the next twenty four under observation and then was sent home and told to take some sick days to recover his equilibrium. It didn't include an exemption from an ass chewing.

The Sheriff started off the phone call with "I'm not even going to ask what you were thinking" and it went downhill from there. One morning he woke, got dressed for work, figuring he'd spent enough down time, and got as far as the back door with his keys in his hand before he paused and went back into the kitchen, had another cup of coffee, and did the math.

And he wanted to thank Ionna even though she wasn't having any of it. He hadn't mentioned her and feigned ignorance when they questioned him about who might have known to transmit the Code 30 using his radio call sign. It was part of his voluntary amnesia, that and how he knew to access the compound by the abandoned falls. He would keep that to himself, and he wanted to assure her of that pact. A phone call, an email, a visit to her office would all have been more than just coincidence. There couldn't be any links between them other than what might have been recorded on the listening device in her office in conjunction to Ike Carey's death. Something was nagging at him and he couldn't put his finger on it.

That morning he drove to Old Town Santa Lena and the Sole Sister Diner for breakfast. On his second cup of coffee, she slipped into the booth to face him. "I blame myself," were the first words she spoke. "If I hadn't shown you the way up, you'd still be trying to figure out how to get there. I saw it on the news, *Sheriff's Detective Recovered In Daring Cliff Rescue*. . . ."

"Just the opposite, it was irresponsible of me to involve and endanger a private citizen." He was going to offer more excuses but her smile stopped him. It said terms of agreement met and mutual responsibility accepted.

"You're not the ordinary copper." She stared across the table at him, hands placed on either side of her cup. "I mean that as a compliment."

"Most cops are ordinary. I don't see that I'm any different."

"You should know I have strong opinions about the organization you work for."

Here it comes, he thought, the civilian fantasy of how to fix, defund, dismantle the police, and make the world a better place for kitty cats. He rolled his eyes up and watched the ceiling fan spin over the empty late morning tables of the diner, the few stragglers nursing coffees at the counter. She wasn't angry, just insistent and he didn't mind the sound of her voice.

“The judicious enforcement of the law is crippled by a disease known as mission creep. Law enforcement is getting funded for work that is outside their purview. Sheriff Departments are the most susceptible as besides being an independent law enforcement agency they are also a political entity by dint of popular election and subject to outside influence and financial considerations. To generate additional funding that the tax payers can't provide, they are ready to take on additional duties generally outside their initial mission to protect and serve.

“Why should a cop respond to a mental health emergency. That's a mental health professional's job. Most of the times it's the police who escalate the violence. Racism, sexism, ethnic prejudice have no place in the judicious enforcement of the law. And I don't blame the individual cops although they could probably do with more sensitivity training.”

If she only knew what the rank and file thought about “sissy” training, as it was known, her idealism would be sorely disappointed. He smiled and shook his head.

“And typical of any top heavy government agency, administrators keep adding more busy work that would be better accomplished by NGOs or at least social service agencies, not because they think they can do a better job, but because it feathers their nest, makes them appear to be wheelers and dealers in the competition of more power and politics. Money talks and the more funding for supplementary programs in the form of grants and transfer of military surplus equipment only makes the administrator, the Sheriff, in this case, seem more able and effective. Unfortunately it also relegates the policing force to an occupying body with no relation to the community they ostensibly serve and protect and setting up an us-versus-them mindset among the civilians, as you call them, and the ranks, essentially enforcers of a police state.

“You are an agent of oppression whether you realize it or not. You are just a factotum, a straw man, a straw of the straw man. The real police state is accountants, publicity agents, and AI surveillance networks that keep ordinary folks poor, distracted, and distrustful. Most elected officials, your boss included, are congenital hypocrites, and those that aren't don't last long.”

“Wow, just like 1984 except that was almost forty years ago.”

“This country was a police state long before that date, keeping people of color in their place has a long long history, but the realization that we are under the thumb of big corporations and the corrupt inept governments they own is now catching on! The architecture of oppression is the same with all the world builders throughout history erecting their edifices on mountains of skulls.”

He listened to her ramble and felt sorry for her and her delusion. He'd heard a lot of it before, from an ex-wife, from girlfriends, including Marion, who'd suffered indignities because she was a black woman, constantly being pulled over for imaginary traffic infraction. "You never know if they gonna give you a ticket or ask for a sexual favor," she'd told him, and it gave him grief to remember her weary voice pronouncing those words.

Ionna reached across the table and touched his arm as if sensing something. "But I want you to know, Donovan, I really appreciate you going the extra mile to get justice for Ikey."

"Unfortunately I failed, miserably," Donovan sighed letting his hand fall open next to his coffee cup, "and those responsible will never be held accountable."

She nodded, her intense eyes focused on his, "Welcome to my world."

As he got up to leave, she stopped him. "One more thing. Maybe you can tell me the name of the person who is informing on EAF."

Donovan shook his head. "They're not identified by their real names in the report. Most of the time though, it's someone close to the top. Otherwise what use would they be?"

The morning of his "performance review," as Phil Collins called it, he'd driven out to the Sparta Creek Trailer Park and found Heron sitting on the bench outside her weather beaten trailer watching a couple of young surfers in the space next to hers wax their boards. She frowned when she saw his sedan pull up. He smiled and waved at her as he approached, pulling a plastic bag from his coat pocket.

"You can have it back now," he said, returning the bronze medallion. She lit up with a genuine smile that acknowledged her gratitude. He pointed to the bag. "There's a business card of an antique dealer in there, too. Give him a call if you ever want to sell it. The amulet has been appraised and old Dad Ailess was right, you could probably buy a proper mobile home overlooking the ocean, a couple of cars to go with it, and still have some mad money left over for what that hunk of metal is worth."

On the return to Santa Lena, he got a text from Debbie inviting him to a charity auction for the hospital volunteers. Why not, he could use some charity. Logging in at his desk there was an email waiting from the new chief of detectives wanting him to close out the Ike Carey case so he could review his notes pending any disciplinary action. He knew right away he was going to *love* this guy. He stared at the spreadsheet on the screen in front of him and retraced the timeline. Someone, presumably one of the guards at the IDA compound, had likely shot at Ike Carey as he launched from a point high enough that he could safely land on Sparta Creek Beach

even with the homemade hang glider. Something bothered him about that scenario, it sat cockeyed in his head but he couldn't understand why. Could it have been Dad, or the name that had been on the warrant, Philip Andrew Nichols? But why? He entered the initials into the cell, color coded red for NFI, Needs Further Investigation. Ike Carey's initials, of whom he had a fairly complete picture, occupied the green cell adjacent. He accessed the spreadsheet macros menu and clicked on the one labeled *Final* to run it.

The phone on his desk warbled. He'd been expecting the call. It was Helen from HR.

"Am I speaking to Detective James Donovan?"

"That's right."

"I can send you the material as an attachment over email. There are FAQs that'll likely answer all your questions. Just follow the guided questionnaire."

"Filling out a questionnaire is only going to make me more undecided."

"There are seminars you can attend. Let's see, you just missed one so the next one won't be till after the first of the year, that's only four months away. I'll send you the registration info, OK?"

Something had caught Donovan's eye as he glanced at the screen, dissatisfied with the way the conversation was heading. "Uh, yeah, ok, thanks, Helen," and hung up.

He stared at the bottom of the page and the report, the red and green cells adjacent to each other read, PAN IC. The time and date stamp pulsed, 10:04 AM on 10/4, a Monday.