

THE CLIENT

A Thesis by

Kevin A. Christinat

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I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

Richard Spilman, Committee Chair

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Richard Spilman, Committee Member

Steve Hathaway, Committee Member

Christopher Brooks, Committee Member

DEDICATION

To those of you who helped;
you know who you are.

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The room looked like a magazine advertisement, filled with items placed in such a way as to be instantly attractive to whoever might gaze at it. The items evoked wealth or careless spending: a plasma-screen television on a cherry-wood stand; a navy sofa and loveseat set surrounding a glass coffee table; a hand-produced silkscreen of a blue banana on the left wall with Warhol's signature chicken-scratched in the lower right-hand corner. The room was an image of a perfect living space, designed by one who could afford originals yet avoid pretense. Behind the room, separated slightly by a waist-high bar/serving area, was the dining room: six oak chairs around an ironwood table, clean except for a glass bowl containing six orchids. To the left of the table was a window with the blinds half-drawn; through the bottom half could be seen an obelisk rising up into the sky with a long pool at its base, as well as much more of the city from this height of forty-two stories. A hallway led out of sight, presumably to the kitchen and the rest of the apartment; the door to the outer hall was protected by three locks: a reinforced chain, a hand-bolt, and a deadlock requiring a key. The latter two were engaged, the chain hanging neatly down. The room sat quiet, oblivious to the noise of the city far below, waiting.

This quiet, expectant atmosphere was soon broken by the sound of an unhurried key in the top lock, smoothly clicking the bar back. A pause, then the procedure repeated itself on the middle lock, and the knob swiveled. A blond-haired man wearing a black overcoat and gloves let himself into the room. He shivered as he turned and shut the door, again engaging the top two locks; he left the chain alone. The blond man walked to the sofa and sat down carefully, as though he was weary with a long and tiresome job. He left his overcoat and gloves on, even when there was a muffled sound of gas igniting and a soft hiss from the vents in the ceiling; he sat on the sofa, not shivering now, not moving at all. He did not reach for the television remote

control, did not pick up the glossy *Playboy* magazine on the coffee table, did not turn to look at anything in the apartment; he merely hunched his wide shoulders, burying himself in his coat, and crossed his arms. Eventually, he closed his eyes as if to fall asleep, but he did not recline his head back onto the sofa; he seemed almost to be meditating. He moved only when, forty-two minutes later, there came the sound of a key sliding into the top lock of the apartment door.

The blond man opened his eyes and rose from the sofa with no sense of urgency. He paused long enough to examine the place where he'd been sitting; the cloth was rumpled, and the foam of the cushion had taken the impression of his body. As the key rattled into the second lock, the blond man pressed on the sides of the cushion, forcing the center up. He smoothed the fabric with his gloved hand and walked around the sofa and into the hallway, taking something from his overcoat pocket as he went. The second lock's knob turned vertical, and the door opened again.

The man who came through was very different in appearance from the blond man; he was brown-haired, and his camel-colored overcoat bulged around the chest and stomach. This man also wore gloves, and his cheeks were red and chapped with cold. He huffed as he shut the door, reengaging the top two locks and sliding the chain into its place. He grunted as he shrugged off his overcoat and tossed it onto the loveseat, revealing an Armani suit that was straining to conceal the man's ample gut. He flopped down onto the sofa where the blond man had been sitting and leaned forward, looking from the television remote to the *Playboy* magazine and back again. He finally picked up the remote and turned on the television, settling into the sofa as he ran through the channels, pausing on each one long enough only to see what the program was and then moving on. He sighed and smiled.

The blond man entered the room slowly, coming up behind the man on the sofa. His face was expressionless, more bored than anything else. He did not seem anxious. In his hands was a coil of wire, attached at each end to a wooden handle. The wire was thin metal, like piano wire, but there was a glinting spiral pattern on it, and the blond man was careful to not let it snag anything, especially his clothes or hands. He arrived at the couch just as the fat man apparently reversed his decision, leaving the television on *Judge Judy* but leaning forward (with great effort) and snatching up the *Playboy*. As the fat man bent, the blond man behind him became still, not even moving his eyes. His face remained impassive, but the cloth of his coat shifted slightly as his muscles tensed, ready to move. The fat man rolled back into his place and opened the magazine, flipping directly to the centerfold spread. The blond man did not move until the fat man turned the page. The blond man then moved four inches farther forward into position, stretched the wire taut between the handles, and paused. When the fat man turned the next page and began reading the centerfold's profile, his hands descended, bringing the wire down past the fat man's face and pulling it tight against his flabby throat.

The fat man jerked as though he had been electrocuted. His hands flew out, knocking the magazine from his wide lap onto the floor, the centerfold falling partially open, the panoramic photo showing the woman's face gasping in fake ecstasy but stopping just at the swell of her breasts. The fat man's hands jerked up to his throat and scrabbled at the wire but could not find it amid the folds of flesh at his neck. He tore at his neck, making gurgling sounds deep in his throat, his fingernails scraping skin. He yanked forward, trying to rise, but the blond man calmly placed his knee against the back of the sofa and yanked back, pinning the fat man against the sofa by his throat. Lines of blood ran down onto the fat man's blue shirt collar from where the wire had already cut into his neck. The blond man's face had not changed. He leaned over and

whispered something into the fat man's ear, and when bloody hands came up to grab, the blond man rose away from them, tightened his grip, and jerked the wire sharply to the right. The wire slid smoothly and effortlessly through the flesh of the fat man's neck, cutting through carotid, tendons, muscle, and trachea as easily as through warm butter and stopping only when it lodged against the fat man's spine. The fat man uttered a wet, harsh, muffled bark and spewed blood from between his lips as blood jetted from his neck, soaking his shirt, coat, and pants and raining down on the immaculate glass tabletop in front of him, as well as the magazine at his feet. The man's last, desperate gasp sent a fine mist of blood out. His body twitched a few times and was still.

The blond man stayed where he was for another minute, keeping pressure on the wire. Finally, he released the handles, leaving the garrote in the fat man's neck. He rolled his shoulders and swung his arms twice. He twisted his head to the right and grunted softly when he heard a small pop in his neck. He looked around the room for two minutes, his eyes touching each place he had been, surveying these areas. Finally, he nodded, walked over to the door, disengaged the three locks, opened the door, and left the apartment without a glance back. After a moment, a key slid into the bottom lock, and the knob swiveled from vertical to horizontal. A pause, then a key slid into the top lock and shot the bolt.

On the sofa, enough blood had collected between the fat man's legs to spill over onto the carpet, and this made a small pattering sound. Eventually, the runoff stopped as the blood began to cool and thicken. The room, no longer looking like anything out of any magazine, again sat, oblivious to the noise of the city far below or anything else.

He didn't do this very often; he'd never been caught, but, given his father's normal disposition, let alone the way his voice got during these times, he could imagine that the price of being found out would be high.

Very high.

Even with this trepidation, however, Joseph was drawn to the voices downstairs, even though the urge to pee had been what woke him up. He had risen, walked yawning down the hall to the bathroom, and gone, flushing the toilet and washing his hands as his mother always insisted he do. He heard the voices as he left the bathroom, flicking off the light and leaving the door open. They were coming from the kitchen, and though Joseph wanted simply to go back to his room and slip back into his bed, he moved to the staircase, sitting on the top step and leaning forward so he could catch as much of the conversation as possible.

As with the few other nights he'd heard them, his mother's voice was loud and shrill, his father low, barely audible. Joseph had long since learned that this soft quality to his father's voice meant he was furious.

"We've got to do something about this." His mother's voice was losing power, softer now than it had been only a minute before, and Joseph could now discern something else about her voice: his mother was crying. Right then, he felt like he should get up and go back to bed, regardless of the pressure in his chest that told him his father's voice had that cold quietness to it, and he should be afraid for his mother. What he was doing now, listening in while his mother cried, felt dirty, like watching her undress. But he stayed.

"Honestly, Selena, I don't know what the hell you're talking about." His father's voice was completely calm, assured, and ice cold, the words spoken with frosty sarcasm. Now his urge

switched to the other extreme; his feet itched to run down the stairs, his throat longed to yell his mother's name, his arms tensed to throw themselves around her waist and *squeeze*. He felt he should be there, that his mother needed him, but again, he stayed where he was, and his face flushed red with shame at his cowardice.

His mother laughed, a harsh sound with no sense of humor. "My God, Warren, if you don't know what I'm talking about, you're much stupider than you let on." Joseph's eyes widened, and his heart began beating faster; his mother should not have said that. And when he heard the sound of a chair being shoved back along the floor (presumably his father standing up), his fear both broke and overcame him, and he ran down the stairs, almost pitching head-forward down them, and skidded into the kitchen doorway.

He looked at his parents, his mother with her hands plastered behind her against the refrigerator, his father standing in front of a chair that had been shoved back so hastily it had flipped up the edge of the throw rug under the kitchen table; his parents looked at him in the doorway, a small boy in Transformer pajamas, his eyes wide, his face flushed, his hair in swirls and corkscrews. They looked back at one another, not moving, in their minds the possibility of what might be happening right now had this new player not come into the scene. Then his mother turned away from Joseph to wipe her face, and the freeze was broken. His father retrieved the chair, flipping the rug back into place with his foot, and sat down again, speaking with a stern tone. "Joseph. It's past your bedtime. What do you need?"

He was visibly, audibly angry, but Joseph, for the moment, ignored him and went to his mother, wrapping his arms around her waist and squeezing. His mother laughed, albeit with a shaking voice, and smoothed down his hair with her soft hands. "Hey, honey," she said, and even Joseph could hear she was not over the anger and fright. "What are you down here for?"

Joseph lifted his face from where he had pressed it into the soft flannel of her nightshirt where it covered her stomach; she smelled like dry flowers. “I heard you and Dad; you were loud.” Joseph kept his eyes on his mother’s face; he was not quite brave enough to look at his father yet.

“Dad and I were just talking; it’s all right.” She smiled down at him, and when she lifted her head to address her husband, though her face did not change visibly, Joseph could tell that the smile was fake now, cold, like his father’s voice. “Isn’t it, Warren?”

“Of course it is,” his father answered, but Joseph still didn’t look at him, because his voice was flat, like a robot’s, speaking the words that he knew were required of him with no feeling at all.

His mother looked back down at him, her smile warming as she did. “See, baby? Go back to bed, OK?”

Joseph reluctantly let her go and shuffled back toward the kitchen doorway and the stairs. He was almost there when his mother’s voice, curiously tight now, called him back. “Joseph? Come here for a minute.” He walked back, and his mystification grew as his mother hunkered down in front of him, her brow wrinkled with concentration as she examined him, looking at his eyes, lifting his chin with a gentle nudge to look at his neck, even turning him and lifting his shirt to search his back; her fingers tickled him, and he giggled, though that stopped when his eyes caught his father’s face, as hard and stony as a statue, his eyes bright with anger.

Finally, she was done, and she smiled at him again, though her forehead kept that tight, worried wrinkle in it. Her voice was less warm now as she said, “Go to bed,” and, though she was not angry at him, Joseph scurried up the stairs; he intended to run back to his room, to try to go right back to sleep, but he paused again at the same place at the top of the steps, and he had a

curious feeling that time had circled back round to the same place again. He almost expected to hear the choked gurgle of the freshly flushed toilet. He leaned forward to catch his parents' voices, for even his mother's now was quiet.

“No marks, Warren.”

“What do you mean, Selena?” The name spit out in icy fragments.

His mother's cold, humorless laugh again. “What, don't know ‘what the hell’ I'm talking about again? A bit dim are we? A bit—“

There was a brief, flat smack, and Joseph jerked like he had been shot, his face contorting, then he was hurrying back to his bedroom, his treacherous feet moving of their own accord, refusing his frantic desire to run down and help his mother, protect her somehow, and the shame was back, green, making him sick to his stomach. Then his bedroom door was shut, the voices beyond lower than murmurs.

Joseph, breathing heavily, looked at the chair in front of his desk, then back at the closed door, the brass doorknob that glowed a bit in the moonlight filtering through the window above his bed. He'd seen it in a movie once; it was easy. All he had to do was wedge the chair under the knob, and for some reason (he didn't quite understand why), nobody could come in; the chair would stop them somehow. Should he try it? Or would that make his father angry? Angry enough to do something worse?

Tears of frustration spilled down his cheeks, and he had a crazy, wonderful idea. He would go out right now, go right down the stairs, return to the kitchen, and tell his mother. Not everything, of course; he'd put it simply. He would tell her that they must leave, must leave now and never come back. His father wouldn't care; he hated them both anyway.

Joseph wiped a hand across his face in an angry swipe. It was a stupid dream. He would never do it, and his mother would never just take his advice. He might not understand the adult world yet, but he understood enough that what he wanted to ask would be too much. He climbed back into bed, eyes on the wall to his left, not looking at the door, afraid to watch it, to wait for the knob to turn slowly. He closed his eyes and listened for noises that didn't come, the sound of feet coming up the stairs, the soft creak of his door, breathing.

He fell asleep listening for these things and slept the rest of the night.

Minister stopped at a Texaco station an hour outside of Washington D.C. to fill up the car and get a large traveler's mug of coffee. Normally, he had no taste for the stuff; he had always likened the taste to something rotting. However, he was still a good three hours from the city, and, though the job had gone well, the fact remained that such work was stressful, the drive was long, and it was dark, his brain telling him it was time for sleep. He could ignore that voice all he wanted, but if he let his eyes slip close going eighty, his return for the job would do him no good, except perhaps to buy him a nice funeral. He doubted his employers would even offer that.

Walking back out to the 1998 Buick LeSabre, dark green under the buzzing halogen lights, Minister took a sip of the coffee (which he had loaded with cream and sugar to cover the taste), grimaced, and got back into the driver's seat. From here, it was a straight shot into the city. As he drove, Minister turned on the radio, keeping the volume down (he didn't really listen), and started the process of ridding his mind of Edward F. Jackson.

He knew very little about Edward, really; Minister had written the name down, as well as the city in which he resided and his address, on a slip of paper and put it in the glove compartment of the car that was provided for him by his employers. It was still in there right now, and Minister had no intention of removing it; it would be dealt with later tonight.

Aside from Edward's name and place of residence, Minister knew almost nothing else. He knew the man was single and childless (elements that might complicate his completion of the job), but he did not know what he did for a living or even what he did to come under the eye of the Association. Minister, in truth, liked it that way; it was part of what he insisted from his employers. In his line of work, the less known about a client (as Minister thought of his

victims), the better. This, of course, did not include information about physical appearance or whereabouts. The dossier given on Edward (only two pages in all) had no photograph, but it did contain a brief, blunt description: “5’9”, fat, heart condition.” Knowledge of anything else beyond that about the client offered that person leverage over Minister, something he never liked to allow. His job was to eliminate the clients, not to make moral judgments about them. Perhaps he should have been a priest.

Minister smiled at that thought as he entered Wilmington.

That was not to say that the opportunity did not present itself. On certain unfortunate occasions, the Association handed him an assignment where interacting with the client became necessary; these were always unpleasant. More often than not, the client thought him or herself clever and began bargaining with Minister (surprisingly, women begged much less often than men, and children hardly at all), offering him more money, sexual favors (in the case of both sexes), and sometimes even trying to get him to reverse his assignment, to find and kill the person or persons who’d hired him for the assignment.

To the first two, the answer was always no, though never actually spoken; Minister simply stayed as quiet as possible and proceeded with the job. He’d known other associates who had fallen victim to these traps, and, more often than not, that was the last anyone ever heard of them. A hitman who changes sides is a liability, taken care of rather quickly and, usually, in such a manner that communicates the poor quality of choice to everyone else. He remembered Fitzgerald from very early on in his tenure; he had never been completely found, though even now, fifteen years later, a finger, a toe, nicely preserved, would be found and identified.

Minister himself had encountered a few clients who had tempted him with reverse assignments, and this is where his insistence on a minimum of information on all involved

parties came in handy; even if he had wanted to perform a turn-around, Minister would have no clue of who to kill. Minister never received the names of people who sought out the contracts; this was all dealt with through the Association, a group whose members he had not even met, and on the very few instances that he had been approached in a private capacity, by people who somehow found out his profession and skipped the mediator, Minister politely declined and then did a special, private job of his own.

As he sipped his coffee, Minister went through everything he knew about Edward F. Jackson, every piece of information he had gained about him over the last two days during his two trips to and from D.C., and as they went through his mind, Minister discarded them, forced his brain to shut out the information, a trick he had learned many years ago. In forty minutes, he had gone over everything he knew about the man he had just killed, and at that moment, Minister stopped thinking about him; he knew that after a night's sleep, all knowledge of Mr. Jackson would be erased.

Edward F. Jackson completely gone from his mind, Minister turned up the volume on the radio; on a local classic rock station, Pink Floyd sang about running like hell as he drove the rest of the way.

* * *

Minister arrived at 82nd and Parkway at 8:34 pm, and many eyes, most not observable, watched the car pull to the curb. The neighborhood was what Minister had come to think as a borderland; just two blocks south were brightly-lit streets, shops, apartments, cars like the one he was driving right now. The people who lived there experienced a decent life, with relatively little problem from the slums two blocks to the north; they walked on errands, drank their

coffees, and unanimously ignored the bad part of town that was, literally, next door. It was like living at the edge of an abyss.

Here, life was much different. Gang graffiti littered the walls of the buildings, gunshots were a nightly occurrence, nearly all windows facing the dark streets consisted of iron grates covering broken glass, and the people who lived here, if they were not part of the various groups that ran things, lived in constant fear that any number of locks on their doors could cure. It was a neighborhood of gangs, murders, drugs, and, Minister knew, chopshops.

Minister leaned over and retrieved the little slip of paper with the address of his previous client and put it in his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. He got out of the car, a dim, tourist expression on his face of an out-of-towner who has taken a number of wrong turns. He left the keys in the ignition and called to a man who was leaning against a brick wall. “Hey, sir, excuse me?”

The man, wearing a blue bandana and smoking a cigarette, looked over at Minister with a nonchalant and annoyed gaze. “What you want, man?”

Putting out a beaming smile, Minister walked over to the man, leaving the car door open. He spoke in his best “aw, shucks” voice. “Well, I seem to have lost my way, and I can’t find a gas station or anything, and my tank’s on empty. Can you point me out a station?”

The man sucked on his cigarette and blew the smoke out of his nostrils, sizing Minister up. After a moment, he waved his hand in the general direction of 80th Street. “Down ‘bout two blocks.”

Minister bit his lip and looked back at his car, the door open to the street; by now, a few more people had come out onto the street to watch. They had appeared like magic, men and women standing around, talking, some leaning against walls, some sitting on curbs or steps. Had

he been an actual tourist or out-of-towner, Minister still might have known the danger he was in right now. However, Minister had lived here for nearly ten years, and he knew the situation exactly. He knew that he was in danger, but this caused him no fear or anxiety; he would get out of here intact, without a scratch.

Turning back to the man, Minister forced himself to blush, a man caught in an embarrassing situation. “Well, I don’t really think this hunk will make it that far.” He paused in a moment of feigned indecision, then widened his eyes as if receiving a great idea. “Hey, could you maybe look after my car here for a bit while I run and get some gas; I’d be right back.”

The man’s mouth dropped open, and when the cigarette fell out, he covered the sign of astonishment by grinding the butt out with his boot. He recovered quickly. “Sure, man, I’ll watch your car.” He smiled, and Minister saw his eyes flicker over Minister’s shoulder then back to his face. “It’ll be in real good hands.”

“Oh, thanks, sir, thanks a bundle!” Minister reached out and gripped the man’s hand in his own, pumping it up and down in a ridiculous show of gratitude. Minister felt the man stiffen when he was touched, and Minister knew the action was a risk, but he wanted to spread this charade over the entire street. Besides, he was having fun. He rarely interacted with people, and when he did, he liked to see just how convincing he could be as someone he was not. In fact, he could have simply left the car where it was and walked away, but he wanted to see if he could pull this off, and it looked like he was.

As he shook the man’s hand, Minister felt that the palm was scarred, a hand that had perhaps taken lives. Minister smiled wider. He wondered what the man in front of him would think if he knew just how many lives Minister was responsible for ending, and in what ways.

“I’ll be right back, OK?”

The man smiled and nodded.

Minister turned and began walking south, his coat wrapped around him against the bitter November wind. As he walked, he saw another man, skinny, with only a thin t-shirt and jeans on, emerge from an alley up ahead and start walking toward him, eyes on the ground. Minister smiled and slid his left hand into the pocket of his overcoat, thumbing out the blade of the folding knife that was there. The knife may have looked a bit like a normal jackknife, but Minister kept it sharpened to a razor's edge; he also knew the exact length, knew that its five inches would reach any and all vital organs in a human body.

Stopping near an alley closer to him, Minister waited, watching the man approach. He now wore no smile, and gone was the out-of-towner persona. His mind was calm, and his heart beat steadily. If he was going to be accosted by this crackhead, it was going to complicate things, and Minister would have to think quickly to make everything work; there was no fear, though, just a tense waiting in him to see how things would go. He would work things out, one way or the other. Again, the risk was enjoyable.

As the approaching man glanced up, Minister caught his watery, bloodshot eyes, and the man seemed to see what Minister had been thinking, what Minister was ready to do, and what Minister really was, because he dropped his head again and hurried past, his shivering breath trailing behind him in dissipating mist. Minister turned and watched him retreat, and he saw his car still sitting about a block back, its door still open, the other man still leaning against the wall, a new cigarette in his mouth. He smiled and waved at Minister. Minister returned both.

When he had crossed the street over to the second block, Minister heard the slam of a car door, the cough of a starting ignition, the squeal of tires against pavement, and his smile grew wider. He did not look back. He guessed that only about an hour or two would pass before the

car was stripped. If anyone came looking for a 1998 Buick LeSabre in connection to the murder of Edward F. Jackson of Washington DC, not only would nobody know anything about either that car or the man driving it, but that car would not exist.

As Minister stepped onto 80th Street, he saw a cab letting an elderly lady out onto the curb. He hurried over, helped her onto the sidewalk, and reached back into the taxi to get her bag. He handed it to her with a smile, accepted her thanks, and got into the cab.

“Where to?” asked the cabbie, resetting the meter.

“9th Street library, please.”

As the cabbie drove, Minister looked out his window at the town that, now at the drop of night, was just beginning to get interesting. He watched some in fine clothes walk briskly down the sidewalks, talking animatedly and, seemingly by instinct, weaving around and ignoring the occasional plaintive hand. Minister’s lips twitched a bit into a nearly unconscious smile.

The nature of the classes in this city constantly amazed him. That the well-off and the desperate were so close together, within only a mile or so of each other, fascinated him. The upper and middle classes did not stray into what they thought of as the “bad parts” of town for terror of being swallowed up, robbed, raped, killed, sometimes sold; who the hell knew *what* would happen if you walked across the wrong street? Better to stay in the light, just walk by whatever might be subsisting in the alleys. Even the policemen knew where to avoid and where it was appropriate to go.

On the other side of this card, these very same policemen kept those in the rundown parts of the city *in* those parts of the city. Sometimes a young crook with grandiose schemes in his brain would venture out into the world of the upper class, into what he or she saw as an untouched grail, waiting to be snatched. They were dealt with swiftly and brutally by the police,

who knew that if the unspoken and tremulous agreement between the two sides of this city were broken, all hell might break loose. The kinder cops sent the perp straight to jail. The unkind officers would send a message, dumping the broken, bruised, beaten body back into the slums for all to see. It was an unhappy, shaky situation, but revolution was far off, if it was on the horizon at all.

Smiling again, broader this time, Minister thought of the arrangement as like heaven built up next door to hell, ignoring each other by mutual consent; this may have been an odd image, but for Minister, the idea represented what he knew to be true: good and evil were just blocks apart.

“Here y’are. Eight bucks, twenty-five cents.”

Minister handed him a ten, ignored his “thank you,” and stepped out of the taxi onto the sidewalk in front of the 9th Street library. The library occupied half of its city block, and Minister often used it as his personal office. The wind whipped down the street and bit through his clothes, so Minister closed his coat around him and trotted up the steps.

As computers had grown in popularity, the third floor, which held a number of private rooms for study purposes, had been fitted with computers hooked up with a cable connection to the internet. Now, four or five years down the road, the computers were undeniably slow and outdated, but no more funding had arrived for the purchase of new ones, so the old ones stayed, and anyone with an hour or two to kill was more than welcome to them.

Minister walked up the staircase, admiring, as he always did, the reproductions of fine art that adorned the walls. From below, he heard a soft clearing of a throat, but other than that, the place was silent; Minister could even hear his own footsteps, and he was a man who often took great pains to be as soundless as possible when he moved.

The private rooms were not really that private; each room had wide windows that allowed anyone walking by to see who was occupying the room and, to an extent, what they were doing, be it reading a book, writing on a notepad, or typing on the keyboard. This window solved a few problems, chief among them the elimination of annoyance at someone constantly being disturbed by soft knocks from people who wanted to use the room (or rattles of the knob by those who were less courteous), but Minister also suspected that, at one point, a few too many librarians had interrupted teenagers getting frisky in a free room with a door that locked. The privacy of the room was audial, not visual, but even this suited Minister's purposes.

Entering a vacant room and locking the door behind him, Minister shifted the mouse and shed his coat while the computer warmed up from its standby mode. As usual, the monitor faced the longer side of the table, forcing the casual user to sit so that his profile was to the window; Minister solved this by shifting the monitor so that, over the machine, he could look directly out the window. He was not afraid, per se, but he was cautious. He turned his attention to the computer screen.

Minister logged into his Hotmail account. Hotmail accounts were notoriously easy to hack into, but Minister was not the sort of man who said anything that anyone could ever use against him.

He had one new message, from someone named Mort Plummer.

Johnson:

Hello there! How is everything on your end? Has your brother gotten any better since we last talked? By the way, I went by and checked on your safety deposit box; they wouldn't give me the exact number, of course, but they said

you could come by on Tuesday and talk with the manager.

Well, got to run. Talk to you later!

-Plummer

Minister read the code easily, having learned it many years ago almost like a second language. The code was specific to him, or so he had been told, and even another worker for the Association would have no idea what it actually said. His mind translated and gave him the information he needed:

Minister:

Hello. How did the job go? Is the target taken care of? Your money is in the usual account; the access number is-

Minister double-clicked the time in the lower-right-hand corner of the screen, pulling up a calendar. Tuesday was the sixth. December 6, 2005. 12/06/05. He added the month and the year, then put the day at the end.

-120506. We will be in touch.

-Association

Minister wrote the number down on a small slip of paper he kept in his wallet, replaced it, and opened up a reply window. He typed:

Plummer:

Hey! Good to hear from you. Yeah, Frank's doing just fine. Thanks for checking on that box for me; guess I have to do my own work, huh? Well, don't be a stranger; you know I'm always up for a poker game! How about sometime next week? Later!

-Johnson

Association:

Hello. The target is eliminated. Thank you for prompt payment. I will be available for another job in one month. Goodbye.

-Minister

Minister sent the message, then closed out of the program and sat back in his chair as the computer whirred softly. He smiled to himself; the clandestine aura of his communication with his employers might have seemed trite to anyone else, but this kept both ends safe. Tomorrow, he would go to a bank downtown, use the account number to access this account, and withdraw about eight thousand dollars, take it to another bank in the area, and deposit half of it into his own, personal account. The rest of the money he would keep. A week later, he would do it all over again. The routine was simple and anonymous, and Minister liked it just fine.

The computer blinked into darkness as Minister turned it off without shutting it down, a habit he'd acquired years ago, when he learned that doing so often caused a loss in memory. He knew that any second-class computer hack, therefore the police, could still see what he had written from this particular machine, but what would they find? Johnson? Plummer? Concern for a sick brother? If Minister knew anything, he knew how to be discreet, ambiguous. This remained true for everything in his life except his work. In that, he was exacting and precise, and that was the reason he was now thousands of dollars richer. Minister exited the room, switching off the light as he went.

Back outside, Minister hailed another cab, which drove him home. In the back of the cab, he thought of nothing; the money would go to normal expenses, as Minister was not much of a spender. He might stop by Barnes and Noble and pick up a few more books (his only real love), but, other than that, he had no real material desires. He did not think about the job the

Association would have for him next month, whatever it might be. If anything, he felt a mild relief that he wouldn't have to do any driving for a while.

His apartment was located in an upscale building on a quiet block, which suited Minister's disposition quite nicely. \$4000 per month had bought him class, peace, relative safety, and, most important of all, anonymity. The doorman, an elderly gentleman named Walter, opened the door and was polite enough to keep his conversation to a dry, "Good evening." Minister nodded in response and took the elevator to the twelfth floor, bathed in Mozart.

As Minister walked down the carpeted hallway, lit by 1920's art deco wall lamps, he noticed something on the floor in front of his door, number 1216. The closer he got, the more distinct it became, and he was still four doors away when he recognized the rectangular shape of an envelope.

His immediate urge was to look behind him. He turned, as if hearing a soft noise, and gazed behind him at the empty hallway and the elevator doors, already closed. He listened; his face was calm and unperturbed, but his pulse had quickened, and he disliked the coppery taste of adrenaline in his mouth. Satisfied that he was alone, he walked up to his door and looked down at the envelope, which was blank except for his name, printed in neat, large blocks.

Minister released his gun, bent, and picked up the envelope, then quickly let himself into his apartment and, still in the dark, searched it for intruders.

Then, he flicked on the lights, which revealed a neat, clean, if somewhat sparse living room. No pictures adorned the walls, and the tables held recent issues of various magazines: *National Geographic*, *Discover*, etc. The only thing of note in the room was a large mahogany bookshelf that spanned the entire east wall, overflowing with books.

Minister sat on the couch and examined the envelope. He sniffed it closely; no smell of grease or gas. He bent the corners, then the entire thing in various areas; no resistance, no firm or brittle material. He held it up to the overhead light; fairly translucent, apparently containing only a single sheet of paper with writing on it. He ripped it open to find exactly that, but he did not feel ashamed of his caution. He unfolded the note and read the script, his brow furrowing slightly as he took in the words:

Mr. Minister:

I require your services. Please meet me tomorrow morning; I am in room 411 of the Grantway Inc. building on 39th and Drake. Shall I expect you at 9:00? My secretary will, of course, be expecting you. I very much look forward to meeting you. Thank you for your time.

-Kobal

Minister let the note fall to the coffee table, and he sat back and looked at it with a slightly worried expression. How in the hell had this happened? There was no chance that the Association was to blame; they had never asked, and Minister was confident they had never known, where he lived, and he had no friends or associates who did, either. The only people who knew he even lived in this building were the owners, a husband and wife by the names of Harold and Geannie Heinitz. He briefly considered the idea that they were to blame, then rejected the notion; Walter had strict instructions to curb all visitors at the door, referring them to the office, and neither of the managers would have allowed a stranger up uninvited, let alone told him (or her) a resident's number. Regardless, people in the past *had* found out about him and his profession, and this letter might be yet another of them; already the slight annoying possibility that he may have to move soon began to gnaw at the back of his brain.

After a few moments, Minister shook his head, refolded the paper, and placed it in his coat pocket. He would figure this mess out tomorrow, as there was nothing he could do about it tonight. He would talk with the Heinitzs, then Walter, then keep his appointment with this Kobal. The only thing he was absolutely sure about was that if Kobal did not have a very good reason for seeking him out (and possibly even if he did), he would die tomorrow; Minister disliked surprises most of all.

He walked to his bathroom, shutting off the lights to the living room as he went. He showered, shaved, and brushed, then, naked, he crept into bed, shutting off the lamp on the nightstand.

He was asleep within five minutes.

As Joseph went through the day of his mother's funeral, he eventually began to experience a curious split of mind, a state where, at times, he was present at all of the strange occurrences that take place when a person dies and, at other times, he also relived the night when he found out that she had died. These shifts, during that day, took place without warning or provocation, and thus, Joseph remained in an almost constant state of shock and displacement, and by that night, after everyone had finally left and the only people in the house were his father and himself, Joseph had begun to wonder if he had, to use a phrase he'd heard before but only now come to understand, "lost his mind."

The funeral was strange to Joseph mainly because the people he saw there he had never seen before, had never even heard of; in fact, as his grandparents on both sides were dead, he knew virtually nobody besides his father. Even at the age of eight, though he could not expect to know all of his mother's friends and acquaintances, he still found it odd and unsettling that he saw none of them here. No, what made the day strange, nearly unbearable, was what these strangers said about his mother.

Not that anyone said anything to him; when any of these people, intimidating and sometimes terrifying in their black suits and dresses and sad smiles, attempted to speak to Joseph, his father would press him close to his leg, as if he was offended that his son should have any part of this day. At these times, his father would explain that Joseph was still in shock from his mother's death (true) and didn't want to talk to anybody about it (untrue). Eventually, people seemed to get the idea and spoke only to his father, leaving Joseph to feel as though he were the one who died.

What did these people know about his mother?

“She was such a wonderful person.” Well, yes, Joseph knew this to be true, but if she was so wonderful, why did they never visit? Why was this the first time Joseph had even seen them? Why hadn’t they come to comfort his mother when she cried softly at night, as Joseph had heard her do frequently the past few months?

“She’s with the angels now.” Joseph had been to church a few times, but even he knew that his parents were not religious people, so if she hadn’t gone to church, why did she deserve to be with the angels? That question made Joseph feel even worse.

“It was God’s will.” To this, his response was instant and as cold as winter:

Well, God sucks.

After more of these troubling remarks, Joseph finally came to the conclusion that to these people, the words meant nothing; they were empty, and if his father, smiling faintly and nodding his thanks, knew this (and Joseph was almost sure he did), then he was just as bad as the people talking to him. Every time he felt his father’s hand on his shoulder, he cringed.

And just then, when a fat, ugly woman who claimed to be his mother’s “best friend” at the office came up to offer her condolences, a split occurred; one second, he was staring at a large mole with hair growing out of it on this woman’s face, and then next he was back in his living room on that night two days ago.

“Oh, Warren, I always felt so much love for—“

* * *

“—Selena?”

The policeman’s voice is low, and Joseph knows that he can see him sitting at the kitchen table from the front door, which is obviously why he’s keeping his voice down, but Joseph hears the policeman just fine—Joseph has had experience in listening to conversations that are meant

to exclude him—and can hear his father’s response as well, though his father speaks in a similar hushed tone.

“Yes, my wife’s name is Selena. Where is she? Is she all right?”

“Mr.—“ and then the policeman stops, looking past to where Joseph sits; Joseph knows that the policeman knows he can hear the conversation, so the policeman takes his father’s arm and guides him gently out onto the porch. Joseph can see his father flinch; he is not a man who likes to be touched. The glass storm door wheezes shut behind them, cutting off the sound of their voices. Joseph leans forward so he can see them, but he can’t read lips, so what goes on before him is a pantomime without meaning.

Joseph is worried, though his father has been showing it more, showing it all evening, in fact. The clock on the kitchen wall, the one with a goose on it, shows 8:35 pm, and Joseph’s mother is not home yet; she usually arrives home from her office job at 6:15 pm, but she has not shown or even called. Joseph’s father has driven to his mother’s office building but didn’t find her car there, and he has been pacing the room, calling his mother’s phone number at work every five minutes.

All of this worries Joseph terribly, but a half hour ago, when he started to cry, his father gave him a hard glare, and Joseph swallowed his tears, so he now sits, wanting to cry but not daring.

And now a policeman is talking to his father outside, where he can’t hear them.

Suddenly, the policeman has descended the steps, and his father is walking toward him—

** * **

—and placed his hand on Joseph’s shoulder, bringing Joseph back to the present, back to this horrible day.

“Let’s go, Joseph, we need to get up front; it’s starting.”

Joseph saw that all of the strange people who had invaded his life today were taking seats, and the priest, with an odd rectangle of white at his throat had taken a place at the podium standing at the front of the room, where his mother’s coffin was. Joseph knew only that the coffin and something else were up there. His mother was not up there; his mother was nowhere anymore.

The man began to speak, but Joseph stopped listening before he had a chance to say more than “We come here today to remember. . . .” Joseph was not here to remember his mother; he was here because he was made to come by his father, to sit with these people who smiled and cried for his mother but didn’t know a thing about her. He didn’t want the last memory of his mother to be of a *thing* in a box, and, though he had been angry at the fact earlier, he was now glad that the casket had been closed.

Joseph concentrated on not hearing, not looking at anything but his own hands, and only moved when he felt his father’s hand on his shoulder again.

“It’s time to go, Joseph.”

He stood next to his father, but they waited to file out after the coffin. Outside, a line of cars growled softly, and six men were sliding his mother’s coffin into the back of the car in front. His father guided him to the car behind that one, a limousine; Joseph had never ridden in such a car before and found it almost funny that his first opportunity would be on a day like this. His father opened the door, and he climbed into the rear of the—

* * *

“—said she tripped on the top step and fell. She hit her head.”

Staring up at the speaking face of his father, Joseph tries to comprehend what he is saying. A fall down a staircase? What was this?"

"The security guard found her and called an ambulance. They took her to the hospital, and they worked very hard, Joseph, they really did, but she was so badly hurt when she came in, she might have been lying there for almost an hour." His father stops talking, and Joseph fights the urge to reach up and grab him. He bolts down this urge; he would never touch his father in such a way, and he can't imagine what would happen to him if he did. Still, the hate he has often felt for his father, smoldering within him, has been fanned and now flames inside. Instead of grabbing his father, instead of, screaming, like he wants to, he says, in a small voice, "Daddy?"

His father looks away from Joseph, and he does not look back into his son's eyes when he says, "She didn't make it, Joseph. She died while they were trying to operate."

Joseph can't seem to make the words hit his brain; they make no sense whatsoever, and all he can really think about is—

* * *

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," the priest was saying, and the words finally made sense; they had weight, and he felt them pressing down on him.

His mother was never coming back. He would never see her again; he had not even said goodbye, because the last time he saw her, he had not *known* it was the last time. His mother had, he felt, been stolen from him.

And there, at the edge of the earthen hole where the thing that was no longer his mother was to lay forever, Joseph finally began to—

* * *

—cry, but he does so into his pillow, so his father will not hear. His father, who is still downstairs, stayed there when Joseph ran up here to his room, threw the door closed, and flung himself on his bed; Joseph knows his father is on the phone, talking to people Joseph doesn't know, arranging things.

Though Joseph cries for real, with no theatrics, he also feels that this is the correct thing to be doing, and because it is correct, it will solve everything, that after this good cry, he will begin to go on with his life, even if he does feel curiously empty, like a stomachache with no physical discomfort. In two day's time, sitting by his mother's grave, when the reality of the situation finally hits him, Joseph will think of this day and become angry with himself for thinking that this infantile act would be the beginning and end of his grief.

Sniffing and raising his head from his pillow, Joseph hears his father's voice downstairs and, for the first time, wonders, with a twinge of fear and anxiety—

* * *

—what will happen now. The graveside service was over, and Joseph knew that he and his father had to go through much more today: something called a “wake,” then talking to people, meeting with others, but his thoughts were on what would happen after all of that, when everybody would finally leave the house, and his father would shut the door behind them.

They walked back to the cars, and as he climbed back into the back seat, Joseph had the strange feeling of being swallowed; his father slid in behind him and shut the door against the bright heat of the day. As the car pulled away and began the long, slow drive out of the graveyard, Joseph wanted so much to get out, to get away from this cold *beast* that had gulped him up and now was delivering him to more awkwardness, more grief, more misery. He wept as he had at the grave, short, hitching gasps of air that left him in pain.

As he had done at the interment, Joseph's father reached a hand over and squeezed his shoulder, a visual sign of comfort, but Joseph quickly sniffed and wiped his eyes, choking back his tears, and he was glad when his father's left him alone again. Joseph looked over at his father's hands, clenched on his knees into white fists. Joseph looked up at his father's face and saw the sweat on his brow, despite the air conditioning of the car, saw the pale color of his skin and the bright red of his cheeks.

Even now, here, during this day, even now, that excitement.

Joseph knew that his father would not look this way when they arrived at the house for the wake; he would be fine, smiling his sad, appreciative smile to everyone who approached him. This sweating, hectic look, this tense excitement was something that Joseph knew; he began to sense what kind of man his father was, and he had never been, nor would ever be, as frightened as he was in that moment.

He knew exactly what would happen tonight after everyone had gone, and this prospect, as well as the thought of the days and nights to follow, completed his terror.

He would live here, trembling in the belly of a monster that no one else could see and no one knew about, forever.

Minister woke at 6:00 am sharp the following morning, using only his internal clock, which he had trained over time. In fact, Minister owned only one timepiece, which was incorporated into his VCR; this, however, he ignored, and, though he had owned the device for three years now, since his other had broken, it still flashed “12:00” over and over again. Minister had no use for clocks; he kept time himself, and in his profession, he knew that if he kept his time sufficiently, he could be early to everything, at which point exact time became irrelevant.

Minister clicked on the lamp on the nightstand and was greeted with dark green painted walls and a navy blue, nearly black carpet. The room itself was hardly filled: a simple wrought-iron bedframe, a nightstand of dark cherry wood, and a dresser of the same wood. The walls, though spacious, were likewise sparsely decorated, with a mirror surrounded by the same wrought iron as the bed frame hanging above the bed and three Ansel Adams prints hanging in the center of each of the other walls. Minister had little appreciation for art other than photography, and black and white prints were the only kind he truly enjoyed; the stark contrast possible with them pleased him. The Venetian blinds, the same dark blue of the carpet, hung in front of the room’s two windows but were not closed; they were, in fact, never closed, and when the sun rose, the room got bright rather quickly, despite the dark paint.

This did not bother Minister, though he found it impossible to sleep with so much light; he had also trained himself long ago to exist on very little sleep, and he now usually required only three to four hours per night. Every so often, maybe once a month, this schedule would catch up with him, and he would have to sleep straight through for about two days; still, for a man in his profession, with such flexible hours, this was a luxury he could easily afford.

Minister left his bed and did fifteen minutes of crunches and pushups, moving quickly and achieving three hundred of each. He had done this for many years, and his body showed it; he was not a muscular man, at least not in a showy way, but his body had acquired a lean, tough look to it, with very little fat. Its only flaw was a long, jagged scar running across his right pectoral, a memento from a botched client seven years ago, a man with almost rat-like instincts, who had somehow heard Minister coming up behind him and reacted with a knife. Minister had quickly thanked the client for his lifelong reminder.

After his exercises, Minister walked to his bathroom and took a hot shower and shaved. His bathroom was of white and unadorned tile, with matching towels and accessories. A simple mirror cabinet held all of his toiletries, and a small white wicker shelf next to the toilet held his towels and other necessities. Minister cleaned thoroughly after himself, making sure the shower and sink were free of any hair or dirt. He detested having to clean after things became filthy, so his simple solution was not to allow things to get dirty in the first place. This was a habit but not a compulsion; by no means did he consider himself obsessive over the cleanliness of his living quarters.

Minister's kitchen and living room shared the same color scheme, as they were nearly the same room, as with most apartments in the city. He had chosen a deep maroon, offset with a high border of light tan that traveled around both rooms. Again, like his bedroom, he had put few adornments for the walls, but here, his appreciation of art was expanded to include several high-quality posters of the dust jackets of some of his favorite books.

To Minister, each of the books revealed human nature in a way he was impressed to see rendered on the pages of fiction. One of the books, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, spoke to him of the basic intolerance of humanity for those different from themselves. While he

admired Atticus Finch's efforts and morality, Minister saw the novel as, essentially, a tragedy; Mr. Finch and his family may have gotten off well, but Tom Robinson was still dead by the end of the novel, shot for being black, and Minister found truth in this scenario.

Another was an older cover of Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*. The author's depiction of basic depravity and the main character's desire to rape and hurt without thought or empathy represented what Minister believed lay just underneath the surface of nearly everyone walking around in the world. He of course did not overlook the irony of this rather high-handed judgment, given his profession, but the fact remained that humans were only a few steps from animal savagery, and Minister knew this from experience. The way he figured it, at least he had the guts to include himself as a savage.

Other posters hung on the walls. These also represented the books he read and reread almost religiously; a story, if worthy of being on his walls, was worthy of continued examination, and he never tired of reading the same books over and over again, though he always left time for new books. In fact, he was halfway through another of his favorites, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, right now, and this would be the seventieth time he'd read it.

Minister knew it was only about 6:30, and he was not required to deal with this Kobal for a couple of hours (he knew the Grantway Inc. building, and it was not far), so he put a pot of water on the stove for a cup of tea and opened a tattered copy of the Bible. Unlike most in his profession, Minister was not atheist but agnostic; it seemed foolish to him to close off any possibilities of thought, though he could not deny his essential skepticism. His experience with the human race simply did not support an all-knowing, loving God. Instead, Minister had settled

on the idea that things beyond his knowledge and control were unimportant, however much they might fascinate him.

This, however, had little bearing on why he read the Bible, and in fact, though he had read it through a few times, he focused mainly on the book of Revelations. This began nearly seven years ago, with a client he dispatched in St. Louis. Minister had been assigned a simple job for the client: simply walk up behind him and put a bullet in his head. The man, however, evidently had either been expecting someone or had been rather more perceptive than the ordinary client, because just as Minister had extended his arm, pointing his silenced gun at the man's head, the client had turned, elbow up, and knocked the gun from his hand, sending it clattering ten feet away. Minister had thought at the time that this was going to be trouble, that the man had training, but, as the client scrambled after the gun, Minister saw that the man had simply been lucky, and Minister had stepped forward, tripped the man up, and fallen with the weight of his knee on the man's arm; the bone snapped cleanly, incapacitating him. Minister had then walked calmly over to his gun and picked it up again. However, as he walked back and pointed it again, this time well away from the client, the man raised his head and looked directly into Minister's eyes, panting harshly. "When he broke open the fourth seal," he said, "I heard the voice of the fourth living creature cry out, 'Come forward.' I looked, and there was a pale green horse. Its rider was named Death, and Hades accompanied him. They were given authority over a quarter of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and plague, and by means of the beasts of the earth." Minister had waited for more, but when the man just continued to look up at him, breathing heavily with pain, Minister shot the man between the eyes.

This was not uncommon, clients quoting religious dictums or psalms, but Minister had been surprised at being quoted from Revelation, one of the more fantastic books of the Bible, and

he had gone to the bookstore the next day and picked up a copy of the Bible so that he could study that section. Since then, he found himself returning to those pages with a regularity that almost unsettled him. Not that this spoke to any true belief in him; he remained, as always, skeptical. Still, the story of Revelation remained a favorite of his, and the images in the text had situated themselves as permanently in his mind as any of his other favorite books..

Eventually, Minister closed the book and slipped it back into its place on the shelf. He took his mug and the orange rinds to the kitchen, and returned to the couch, his face now a mask of intense concentration and annoyance; it was time to consider his little problem.

He took Kobal's note from the coffee table and read it again, then again, then another time. He paid careful attention to the words, the tone, even the handwriting, and what he judged from all three made Minister's spine tingle slightly. The sentences were exact, surgical, their whatever meaning in as few words as possible, polite but distant; this man didn't want to be friends, but he did want to do business. The tone, therefore, was brisk, business-like, with no mistakes and no toadying. Finally, the handwriting was smooth and uniform, almost like a fancy font on a computer; no letters were above or below the invisible line Minister's eye drew for them. This told him that the writer of this note was confident, unafraid, completely assured of himself, and this worried Minister; in his experience men with confidence usually had someone of something backing them, making them more dangerous.

This led Minister to consider the second part of his dilemma; how the hell had Kobal found him? True enough, if someone knew his name, he could find where he lived. This shook Minister far deeper than he was comfortable with. He had always been a cautious man—his life often depended upon it—but now he found himself going over just how vulnerable he might be. As with any normal person, he went to the store, the dentist's, the doctor's office. He had a

credit card, a bank account, a social security card. However invisible he wished to be, the world in which he lived required some information as a price for allowing him to function without difficulty, and that information was available to any who knew how to obtain it; what worried him much more, however, was that Kobal knew his profession, even knew that Minister went by only his last name.

This meant that either he was getting careless or that he had been sold. The major problem was that both of these scenarios were, to Minister's understanding, near unthinkable. He always took great pains to cover his tracks after each of his jobs, and, though he could train himself to forget the job, his mistakes stood out clearly in his mind; none seemed likely to have revealed his identity.

Minister found it equally doubtful that the Association had caused this. While the Association maintained, as always, distance from Minister, the discovery of involvement in something nasty would not reflect well upon the group. Further, while it might be possible that the Association had decided to forcibly retire Minister, two main facts disputed this: first, Minister had given no reasons for the Association to be displeased with him. He conducted his jobs without errors, asked no questions, and played by the Association's clandestine rules. Second, had the Association desired his liquidation, he would be dead; they would not play games.

Folding the note, he slipped it into his pocket, grabbed his overcoat from the hook beside the door, and flipped off the lights as he left.

39th and Drake was only eight blocks away, and, despite the freezing wind whipping between the buildings, Minister decided to walk; he liked the cold and would rather freeze than bake. As he walked, he witnessed the scurry of the morning workers around him. This, too, was

his near-compulsion, to watch those around him, to observe their behavior. Today, with the cold and the wind to put extra bite behind it, the people on the streets literally scuttled, burrowed in their coats and scarves, their eyes peeping through cunning holes, and more than ever, humanity seemed to Minister like a large nest of insects who fled the outside to conduct their secret little affairs in the dark of some building. He saw no real human kindness around him at all; instead, he saw a woman shrieking at a taxi driver, a man who obviously understood few of the vulgarities she spit at him; he saw a man dragging a child along the sidewalk who was pointing at an item in a shop window, presumably begging for it; the man's face red from the cold but set in a colder defiance, and when the child continued, the man, obviously at the end of a very short rope, turned and struck the child hard across the face, then continued dragging the now weeping youngster along; he saw another man sleeping on the frigid sidewalk on a torn scrap of cardboard, wrapped in various layers of thin and scraggy clothing, and, though Minister kept walking, he trained his eye on the man's chest and did not see it moving up and down.

None of this bothered Minister much. It made his job easier.

The Grantway, Inc. building sat, squat and grey, a little south of Drake, and before entering, Minister looked at the façade. Featureless and bland, it stretched up above him for nine stories. He could not exactly bring to mind what Grantway, Inc. was involved in, though he had passed this building often enough over the years. The building was nondescript, and Minister assumed that its products were, as well, computer casings or ball bearings. Regardless, it housed Kobal, and Minister walked in through the revolving glass doors.

He instantly shed his coat, laying it over his arm as he headed for the door to the stairs. He did this quickly and was gratified that he had already slipped through the door before the

receptionist, a young woman with black hair and glasses sitting at a modest desk in the sparse lobby, had had a chance to raise her head; he did not want his presence announced.

Minister climbed three flights of stairs without breaking a sweat and made his way to room 411. The hallways were bland, pale blue with no pictures. There were numbers beside the doors but no names, and as he walked down the hallway, Minister reflected that this could have been an apartment building. At 411, he knocked lightly on a heavy wooden door. The surrounding rooms seemed empty.

After receiving no answer, Minister tried the doorknob and found it locked. This was little problem for him, and, after tripping the lock with a few slugs (the lock was simple, a cheap two-tongue system), he let himself into the room, shutting the door behind him with a small click. The room was empty except for a desk and three plush chairs, two sitting in front of it and one behind. On the desk, a blank blotter, nothing else. The only window was covered by dark blinds which let in just enough light so that Minister could see.

Satisfied, Minister took one of the chairs to a dark corner, one that would be unseen by someone entering the room, relocked the door, took out his Beretta, and made himself comfortable. He was mildly annoyed with a few things, such as the lack of the secretary whom Kobal had mentioned in his note, and the blandness of the room; it felt empty for a purpose, like it was only stage dressing. He thought about going through the drawers of the desk but decided against it; there was not much else he needed to know here, only that if Kobal did not have a good story, Minister would take care of the problem, find a back door out of this building, and be on the lookout for any other problems for the next few weeks. A change of apartments might also be necessary, and the thought of that inconvenience made his mood even fouler.

He had been waiting for about five minutes when he heard the clatter of a key in the lock. He sat up a little straighter but did not stand; his muscles tensed, but his pulse stayed low; his only conscious action was to tighten his grip on the gun in his hand a little. The door swung open, and the globe above clicked on, spilling soft light into the room. A large man in a coat walked into the room, swung shut the door behind him, and tossed a briefcase onto the bare desk, shucking his coat with a soft grunt. Minister waited for the man to realize that a chair was missing from in front of his desk, to turn around, surprised, and when he didn't, Minister pulled back the hammer on the Beretta. Kobal spoke. His voice was deep, almost a rumble, and it was calm, unhurried.

“Mr. Minister, if you please, the gun is absolutely unnecessary and may be put away immediately. Everything you desire to know you will learn in the next few minutes, and I think you will be pleased rather than concerned.”

A hot wire glowed briefly in Minister's stomach, then went out. Kobal had known he would be here, gun in hand, and he was unafraid, flip even. Minister crossed his legs but stayed sitting. The gun also stayed out, barrel casually pointed in the direction of the big man in front of him. He still felt in control.

Kobal sighed deeply, as if in regret. “Is there anything I can do to make that gun disappear?”

Minister smiled slightly, though he was annoyed that he was addressing the back of the man's head, as Kobal had yet to turn around to face him. “Does it make you nervous?”

Kobal finally walked around the desk and sat down at it, facing him for the first time; on his face was a smile very much like Minister's, which caused Minister another uncomfortable twinge. “Not at all. It's just foolish.” Kobal directed his attention to his briefcase, opening it

and extracting some papers, and spoke in an offhand voice. “Besides, the gun has no bullets in it, so you’d be better off holding a slightly larger rock.”

Minister, who knew that this gun was always loaded except for the one hour he spent every Sunday cleaning it, did not take the bait and check the weapon. Whatever this man was trying to do, it was not working.

Kobal was a large man, but not fat; he was heavy everywhere, with wide shoulders and a barrel ribcage. He was bald, and his pate shone like mellow brass under the globe light. His eyes seemed almost black. He was dressed in a light wool suit, and Minister could tell that the man had a sense of style; he had the feeling that if he were to rise and look at the tag on the neck of the suit jacket, it might read “Armani.”

Kobal, as if understanding that Minister needed a few moments to look him over, busied himself with his papers, then put them aside and gestured to the chair still in front of the desk. Minister walked over and settled himself, his gun still out and trained loosely on Kobal, who seemed not to notice or care. Kobal clasped his hands on the desk blotter and smiled. “My name is Frederich Kobal, and that is all you need to know about me. I know your name is Minister, and that is all I want to know about you. It has been my experience that men in your line of work prefer to know little more than is necessary to the completion of your work, so I will keep it that way. As my note indicated—“

Minister cut him off with a raised hand, and Kobal acquiesced with a shallow nod of his bald head. Minister, almost against his will, was impressed. However, Minister had felt a shift of power in the room and disliked it. He leaned forward a bit and cocked his head slightly to one side. “Actually, Mr. Kobal, there *is* something else I’d like to know. How did you come to find my name and my profession?”

“Suffice it to say that I came by your name through channels that you do not know about and will not know about. No one whom you’ve worked for or with referred you, so you may feel comfortable in that fact. I am affiliated with no one whom you know, and this is a completely independent offer that no one else will know about besides you, me, and anyone you may depend upon for information.”

“Still, you must understand that, for my own safety, I must know how you found out my profession.”

Kobal smiled again, and Minister saw that his teeth were bad, yellow in places, crooked, some even dull brown. He leaned forward and spoke softly, little more than a whisper. “How in the world could I guarantee you safety, Minister? What, could I say some random name and make you feel better? Face it, anyone can be gotten to at any time. I mean you no harm, I wish only your services, and beyond my word, what assurances would you believe?”

Minister tried not to let his surprise show, but he could tell by the way Kobal leaned back in his chair that it already had. The man was right. What safety could Kobal offer that Minister would not be suspicious of? Though he had intended to refuse the job outright, he now decided that he would hear what the man had to say. He waved his free hand slightly. “Go on.”

Kobal smiled wider, and Minister had the odd feeling that he had just passed some sort of test, that this man in front of him was pleased with his acquiescence. He felt his control over the situation slip again: *what the hell is going on here?* This was the first time in nearly seventeen years that anything about a job had unnerved him, and he did not like it. Still, he listened.

“As my note indicated, I require your services. Your client goes under the name of Tueri. This is, unfortunately, the only name he goes under, so you might find it difficult to locate him right away, as we suspect it is not his real name.” Minister brought out a small notepad and pen

and wrote down the name, Kobal spelling it for him as he wrote. “We have been told that he has men with him, but who, how many, we do not know. Despite this man’s arrogance, he has kept himself extremely well-hidden. If he had not, we would not require your services.”

Minister, who had put bullets through the heads of enough people to populate a small village, for some reason found this last comment eerily wrong, but he kept his reactions to himself.

“We do not require proof of the man’s death; we will know if the job has been done. The method is of no importance. That is not the case with the timeframe. We need Tueri dead before 5:00 pm on Saturday.”

Minister’s eyebrows raised, and he looked up from the pad, where he had been copying down this information. “Three days?”

Kobal answered with his own raised eyebrows. “Is this a problem?”

“That depends. Is he in the city? Or do ‘we’ know?” Minister was happy to see Kobal’s expression sour a bit at the sarcastic emphasis on his favorite pronoun. When the man spoke again, his gravelly voice was even and dull.

“He will arrive in the city tonight at approximately 9:00 pm.”

“So your time frame is really two and a *half* days, yes?”

Kobal shifted in his chair with impatience. “Is this going to be a problem or not?” and Minister smiled, his eyes dropping back down to his pad.

He considered this new oddity. Such a short time frame was certainly not orthodox. Often, when his Association provided him with work, the timeframe was open. Certainly, he was expected to get his job done soon; it was not as if he could take a vacation. However, even when he had been given a time frame, it was a month, or two, or sometimes even six, never

under two weeks. His job took time, time to sniff out his quarry, time to observe, time to plan. In his profession, jobs done quickly were often done sloppily, and sloppy men didn't last long. Still, this had the smack of a challenge to it, and Minister was smart enough to know that Kobal had arranged it this way.

He raised his eyes and said, "This will be no problem," ignored Kobal's smile of pleasure, and waited for more information.

"For this job, we will offer you one hundred thousand dollars, fifty payable now, upon acceptance of the contract, and fifty payable after the job has been done. In addition, we will include in the second payment any necessary expenses."

This was interesting. The absolute flat rate (in Minister's experience) for someone's life was thirty thousand dollars; this rate rose with extra duties and/or risks. However, Kobal had evidently anticipated this and jumped the price significantly. For a moment, Minister's paranoia, though not a common visitor, woke up, and he started searching the room for police wires. However, almost immediately he stopped. This was no cop; his gut told him so, and he was nothing if not an expert at judging people. What he was left with was an independent contractor who demanded a nearly impossible time frame for a job that had very little information up front; to Minister, the job was getting more interesting by the minute, though it was at this moment that he felt a small twinge, the sense that there was something he should be seeing but was not. He shut the feeling away. This job was worth it, at least for now.

Kobal pulled a thick manila envelope, folded once in the middle, from his briefcase, and slid it across the desk to Minister, who picked up the bulky package and opened it, extracting the banded stacks of one hundred dollar bills. He checked the serial numbers, and, satisfied that they

were unmarked and nonsequential, put them back in the envelope and slipped it into the inner pocket of his suit jacket.

“Is there anything else?”

Minister shook his head, standing and watching Kobal do the same.

“In that case,” Kobal said in a brisk manner, extending his large, slab-like hand, “it has been a pleasure dealing with you, and I have every confidence that our venture together will be a successful one.”

Minister still held his gun in his right hand, but instead of putting it back into its shoulder holster, he shifted it to his left and slipped his right hand into Kobal’s. Minister could feel strength there, dormant like a hibernating bear. He turned to leave the office as Kobal sat back down but turned back at the door. “How can I contact you if I need to?”

Back at his desk, Kobal smiled, and something, a trick of the light, Kobal’s size, increased Minister’s sense of wrongness tenfold.

Behind that smile is the thing Kobal really is.

“You know where this office is, and my secretary downstairs knows your face.” Minister thought of the mousy girl he had slipped past and smiled inwardly; fool him once, etc. “You may come here any time you like, and I will meet you shortly thereafter. Is there anything else?” Kobal’s smile had disappeared; he was getting annoyed at Minister’s presence, and that allowed Minister to shake off his previous misgivings.

“I’ll see you on Saturday.”

A brief, curt, “Good,” was Kobal’s reply.

In the hall, for just a moment, he felt the urge to walk back in, shoot Kobal once in the forehead, and leave the city. Then, as before, the moment was gone; now it was simply time to get started.

As he walked back down the stairs, Minister returned his pistol to its shoulder holster, and the pressure it made equaled the pressure of the money on the opposite side.

In the lobby, the girl at the desk was in the same position she'd been when he came, her head bent, a strand or two of black hair curtaining her spectacled eyes, but now Minister had no doubt that her eyes followed him, assessing, and only when he was through the revolving doors and beyond her sightline did Minister know that he was free.

The air had gotten colder while he was in the building, though the sun had come out. He breathed deep a few times and put his overcoat back on; he liked the cold much better.

Minister had walked nearly the whole way home before something about the interview (not the job; the job was turning over and over in his mind, and he was gearing himself up for a quick and effective hunt) began to nag at him. He quickened his pace, though he knew he had at least two hours before Kyle would be up and awake enough to do him any good; he wondered about something, wanted to find something out.

Entering his apartment, he shed his coat and jacket and slipped his Beretta from its holster again. Sitting down on his couch, he released the clip and slid it out of the grip. The small gleam of the metal spring caught the morning sun filtering through his kitchen window and glinted it into his eyes.

There were no bullets in the gun.

“Always remember this, this one thing.” The voice behind him is deep, as always, but breathy and excited as it imparts its knowledge. “Always erase fear. Fear is a blocker, a hinderer. Without fear, you can do anything.” The boy tries to consider this new piece of wisdom, but before he can even repeat the phrase in his mind, the pillow is pressed over the back of his head, stuffing his nose and mouth into the mattress, cutting off his quickening breath, and air washes over the backs of his thighs.

* * *

Joseph rose from his bed that morning with the same deliberate speed he always enacted after such a dream. He moved slowly, not quite sure if what he'd just experienced had been real or not but not taking any chances. He slid out of bed slowly, like an old man, gripping the sheet firmly and turning it back. He examined the groundsheet of his bed, the fabric a frantic explosion of colors and wild geometric shapes that he would not have picked in a hundred years; his father had brought them home and told Joseph to put them on his bed. Joseph had; he had long ago stopped questioning his father.

Joseph closely examined the area dented by his sleeping torso. He ran a hand over the spot to make absolutely sure. No, no blood. He straightened up and lifted his right leg slowly, wincing in anticipation of pain that didn't come. As a final test, he slipped a hand down the back of his boxer shorts and felt. No. It had just been a dream. He smiled slightly.

As he brushed his teeth, he contemplated the dream. It was not a shocking one; dreams that mirror real life rarely are. However, he'd never heard that particular phrase before, about erasing fear. He'd heard many, of course, and had taken to writing them down in a small black notebook that he kept hidden in his room. Since beginning this six months ago, he had filled

nearly three pages. Joseph remembered the first night that his father had begun in such a way, remembered that the pillow, now a part of the routine, had been, that first night, to muffle his screams of fear. That changed as time wore on, and, though Joseph would have never thought that he would get used to such treatment, he had.

Still, he could not recall that particular advice, and never before had he dreamt what he had not previously heard in real life. There was something else strange about that dream, and, though he attempted to puzzle it out, he came up blank. Joseph shrugged it off as he washed out his mouth; he figured he would try leaving it out of his notebooks for now, as putting new things in there made him feel as though this would never end.

As he raised his head from spitting into the sink, he caught his eyes in the mirror and stopped, a bit bewildered. They were flinty gray eyes, haggard, old, nearly dead from what he'd been through. He remembered a day last year when their history teacher, Mr. Murdock, had brought in a survivor of one of the smaller concentration camps during World War II, an old Jewish woman named Anna Horowitz. Joseph had listened, fascinated not only by the matter-of-fact way in which she recounted the horrors she'd been through—everything from dentistry without medication to cigarette burns to the most sensitive places on her body to forced intercourse with other camp members, some nearly dead themselves—but also by the look in her eyes; her eyes were dull, drained of color, and Joseph had the odd, cold feeling that the woman he was watching, was listening to, who was even now showing the class the blue numbers tattooed onto her forearm, was dead.

So how could his eyes could be so dead to emotion, so cold?

As he slipped back into his room to dress, he reflected that maybe this was closer to the truth than he wanted to believe. He had no friends at school, no one he even talked with during

breaks or lunchtime. Of course, being such an advanced student was to blame for some of this; a senior at fifteen, he was, to his fellow students, the freak of the school; even the teachers viewed him as some sort of genius, an educational bomb liable to go off at any second, but Joseph felt comforted they did not know the reason that he actually preferred it that way, that the secret of what was happening to him would stay with him, die with him.

He stopped thinking these things; it did no good. The only thing that would change the situation was coming in about three months. During the summer months, he was sure he would receive the final acceptance letter from Washington State, the college farthest away that would offer him a full scholarship (there had been many). He had no idea what he'd study there, and he did not care; the only thing he kept in front of him was getting out of this house and staying out forever. After that, he'd figure out what to do.

Walking downstairs, Joseph smelled the tang of espresso and knew his father had been up for a few hours. He walked into the kitchen, not speaking a word, and his father merely shook his newspaper and did not glance up. Joseph grabbed a bowl from the cabinet above the sink and a box of cereal, keeping his eyes on his father; what he saw intrigued him. His father was completely silent, reading the paper. This was not how his father acted after a night Joseph had dreamt about; usually he was smiling, congenial, almost obsequious. Then the dream had just been that, a dream, but where had that phrase come from?

The question buzzed around Joseph's mind as he began eating, and to make it go away, he studied his father's forehead above the newspaper. He was surprised to find gray scattered throughout his dark brown hair; when had those arrived? Likewise, though his father was still the thin but strong man he'd always been, Joseph noticed he slumped slightly as he read. His father was getting old. The thought made him feel simultaneously sick and elated.

The paper folded, and Joseph found himself facing his father's stern gaze. After holding his father's eyes for a moment, he said, through a mouthful of milk and cereal, "Meeting today?"

His father nodded. "This time in Houston. They've got me on a connecting flight through St. Louis, so it'll take longer than usual. I'm leaving at 9:00 and should be back before 10:00 tonight if nothing goes wrong, no delays or anything. Can I trust you to take care of yourself, to be in bed at a decent hour and not to pig out all night?"

This was an attempt at humor from his father and was delivered with all the life and vitality of a museum sculpture. Joseph smiled anyway and nodded. "Can I watch my show?" He enjoyed staying up to watch *The Simpsons* at 11:30 pm since the afternoon showing came on before he got home from school, but it was past the time his father usually wanted him in bed

His father held Joseph's gaze a few more seconds, then nodded. "That's all right, but you're in bed and asleep by midnight. If I get home and find you up, you're in trouble, you hear me?"

Joseph nodded, though he knew that trouble would only consist of being sent to bed with a sterner expression than usual. The worst punishments happened for no reason at all. "Thanks, Dad."

Joseph's father grunted and stood, draining his cup of espresso as if it were water. He took his suit jacket from the chair back and slipped it on over his blue work shirt, buttoning the bottom two buttons and, as always, looking down to make sure his tie was straight and the proper length. He grabbed his briefcase from where it sat next to his chair, and walked by his son. "Midnight, Joseph," he muttered as he passed, and slipped out the door. A minute later, Joseph heard the car start, reverse into the street, and drive off. Joseph let out his breath and finished his breakfast.

This cold relationship with his father suited Joseph just fine. His father either paid no attention to him or too much, and Joseph much preferred the first. When his father was in what Joseph called his off mode, Joseph could rob a store and shoot the proprietor and receive no more than a distracted lecture from his father; in his on mode, well, Joseph didn't think about those times.

Joseph's mind stuck again on the dream. Why that particular phrase? Usually, unless he wrote them down, his memory of a dream became distorted and fuzzy once he woke up. He knew that this was normal, that dreams were only a dumping ground for the short-term memory, a sort of waste bin for useless thoughts and memories, but why, then, had this thought stuck? Why had it come accompanied by something so horrible? Why, even now, was it still burned into his memory? What was so important that his mind was refused to let it go?

Now, he looked at the clock on the wall and saw he was running a little late. The school district had a bus that ran close to the house, but Joseph opted to walk the two miles to the high school, and since the walk was not through any terrible parts of town, he enjoyed the exercise and solitude. He grabbed his bookbag from the living room and headed toward the back door.

He was only about five feet away when he heard a key rattle in the lock. For a moment, Joseph thought that his father had forgotten something, but then the door swung open, and a man he had never seen before walked into the kitchen casually, as if this was his own house. He smiled at Joseph and shut the door behind him, locking it from the inside. When he spoke, his voice was calm and unhurried.

“Good morning, Joseph. I was wondering if we could have a conversation about your mother.”

When two o' clock rolled around, Minister put down his fork and stood up from his lunch—a hibachi-grilled lean steak, a salad of greens and asparagus, and green tea—and placed the dishes in the sink to be washed later. He got a small black leatherette pouch from a drawer in the kitchen, secured his shoulder holster (the gun was loaded again, and Minister was annoyed at himself and his nearly constant desire to check and recheck the pistol to make sure he had actually done this), made sure the money was in his other pocket, and grabbed his overcoat before leaving the apartment. He had a man to see, and he would most likely be up by now.

The sun glowed like a dying coal through the haze of smog and low cloud cover that sheathed the city, and every so often, one of the pedestrians struggling past him would glance up, mouth agape, at the meager glare. Mostly, however, they just surged forward, and Minister became one of them as he strode north toward Fuller Street.

The building on Fuller, which Minister arrived at nearly forty minutes later, was indicative of the neighborhood. Most of the windows had been broken, and, while some residents had been industrious enough to replace theirs with Plexiglass, most had just boarded them up from the inside. The brick was crumbling, though in its time, the building must have been, architecturally speaking, quite beautiful. Each window had a cement arch over it, and a similar arch overlooked the double doors into the structure, though its keystone was carved into the face of a somber gargoyle. A series of seven steps, all decaying, rose to the door, and on this afternoon, with temperatures in the low thirties, no one sat on these steps.

Minister went in through the grimy double doors. The lobby was nearly as cold as the outside. Like the façade of the place, the lobby had once been quite lovely, with a high ceiling and molding that was reminiscent of the art-deco style. Now, it was nearly black with grime and

layers of spray paint. Minister climbed to the third floor. There, he walked down the hallway to Room 365 and rapped smartly.

Silence was the only response, and Minister knocked harder, saying in a loud voice, “I know you’re awake, Kyle, answer the door.”

“Yeah? How do you *know* I’m awake?” The voice inside was petulant, childish.

“Just open up, Kyle.”

After a few moments, Minister heard the rattle and clicks of locks being drawn back, chains being removed, and keys being turned. Four locks were neatly stacked upon each other, and though this was not typical of doors in this building, Minister knew that Kyle had more reason than most for his caution; behind his door was a fortune, and not only in terms of material goods but also in information, and Minister was more than pleased that Kyle was still paranoid.

The door finally opened (though a chain was still on), and watery gray eyes peered out at him through thick glasses. “What do you want, man?” Kyle spoke in a whisper, as if Minister had twelve people outside with him, just out of sight, who were listening to their every word.

“What do I want every time I come here? Let me in, and I’ll be out of your hair in no time.” Minister drew a hundred-dollar bill from his pocket, one of the bills that Kobal had given him earlier. “Hundred bucks for one hour’s work sound about right?”

The magnified eyes regarded the bill with hunger, but Kyle’s voice was nonchalant. “Two hundred sounds righter.”

Minister had anticipated this, and a second bill was in his hand before Kyle had stopped speaking. Two long fingers snaked through the opening and snatched the bills from Minister’s hand. “Stay here for a sec,” and the door was slammed in Minister’s face. He waited patiently,

and after about a minute, the chain was removed, and the door creaked open. Minister went in and quietly closed it behind him.

“So who is it now? Hope you got something more than a fucking last name for me to work with this time.”

As he watched the skinny man pace back and forth, Minister reflected that Kyle Chalmers was not much to look at. About thirty, he was already balding, and what hair that remained on his flaky scalp was thin and blond, giving him a sickly look. His thick glasses accented this look, and, though he had attempted to grow a goatee, it had grown in thin and looked more dirty than stylish. Despite his baggy clothing, Minister could easily tell that he was painfully thin.

However, regardless of his looks, Kyle was one of the most skilled computer jockeys in the city. He had been arrested twenty-three times already for various computer crimes, the least among them hacking into low-level sites (mostly porn), the most severe resulting from a hack into a local bank. Kyle had squirmed his way free of all of these because, besides being frighteningly good at what he called his hobby, he was also meticulous at covering his tracks.

Minister had come across Kyle’s name and reputation totally by accident during one of his jobs and had instantly seen the potential in securing such talent for his own uses. He had followed Kyle for a period of two weeks, almost as though he was, himself, Minister’s client, and when Minister was confident that he knew the man’s patterns, he approached him, telling Kyle that he was a private detective who would “appreciate” his help. Through flattery, money, and a few well-placed vague threats, Minister convinced Kyle to help him find people; the added bonus was that Kyle preferred to know as little as possible about why Minister needed the information and was, usually, simply happy to get Minister to go away. Knowing he had a good

thing, Minister only consulted with Kyle for jobs where his client remained hard to place, and while he had no idea about this Tueri, he had a very small time frame on this job and decided he needed Kyle's expertise.

"Well?" Kyle insisted. "Who is it? Let's get this over with; I was in the middle of something!"

Minister pulled his notebook out of his pocket and flipped to the page he had written on earlier that day. "Name is Tueri, 't,' 'u,' 'e,' 'r,' 'i.' Will be entering the city at approximately 9:00 pm tonight." He flipped the book closed and returned it to his pocket.

Kyle stood where he was for a moment and looked at Minister expectantly. When Minister remained quiet, he spread his thin hands with a furrowed brow. "That's *it*? Jesus, do you even know where he's coming from or even *how* he's getting here?"

Minister's smile was answer enough.

"Fuck, man!" Kyle fumed. "What the hell do you expect me to find with that?" He slipped two fingers under his glasses and rubbed his eyes hard. After a moment, he said, "I'm definitely gonna need some time to—"

"I've got a deposit to make," Minister said, cutting him off. "I'll be back in about forty minutes."

"Forty minutes?" Kyle shouted, then winced and lowered his voice. "Why don't you give me a goddamn *day*, man? What do you expect me to come up with in such a piddly-ass amount of time?"

Minister already had the door to the apartment open, and he paused. He turned to Kyle, who looked hopeful, like he might actually have gotten through.

"I suppose I could make it forty-five." Minister closed the door on Kyle's curses.

The two stared at each other across the kitchen table, and the scene was eerily serene; the sun was filtering in through the thin curtains covering the window above the sink, and a bird sang a brief, high melody outside. For nearly a minute, neither of them moved: a fifteen-year-old boy dressed for school, tense but not frightened, and a man who might have been his mid- to late twenties with the calm and almost reflective countenance of one waiting for another to make a decision. Finally, Joseph broke the silence, and the man's face shifted imperceptibly; he seemed pleased.

“Who are you?”

The man walked toward the kitchen table. Joseph felt his muscles tighten, and he almost bolted to the front door, but the man simply pulled two chairs out from the table and sat in one. He then gestured toward the other; Joseph ignored that and spoke again, this time with a bit of anger creeping in.

“I asked you who you were, and how do you know anything about my mother?”

The smile on the man's face faltered for a second. “We will talk, Joseph, but it will be a *conversation*, a civilized one. That means that you will sit, and neither of us will bark questions at one another.” When Joseph backed away a step, the man's voice continued in the same tone but with a razor-thin edge of malice to it. “And if you run, I will catch you and sever the tendons of your ankles with this.” He brought out a small folding knife and opened it, placing it on the table in front of him; Joseph felt his pulse jump. The man continued. “Your smartest choice is to simply sit and listen to me, don't you think?”

Joseph weighed his chances of running anyway, but the man sitting at his kitchen table looked athletic, strong, and certainly cold enough to do what he threatened. Joseph moved to the chair and sat after shifting it farther away. The man smiled again and nodded.

He was dressed plainly, in brown slacks, black sneakers, and a blue, collared shirt rolled at the elbows. He was thin, but Joseph could tell from the wiry bulge of the man's muscles that he was strong. His hair was dark brown, almost black. His eyes were nearly the same shade as his shirt, and they sparkled, bright with secrets.

Joseph remembered everything he'd learned from hostage situations on T.V., and he knew he was screwed. He knew for sure that this man had something in mind that was not pleasant, and people like this did not release hostages who had seen their faces. This man had not only not tried to disguise himself, but he had intentionally shown his face to Joseph. The equation added up to death, and he felt himself begin to breathe faster.

The man in front of him chuckled a little, crossing his arms and regarding Joseph. He said, "Worried that you've seen my face, aren't you, Joseph? I'll make it worse for you. My name's Trent Carver." He laughed. "Now I'll just *have* to kill you, won't I?" He laughed harder as Joseph's face lost its color.

Finally, however, Joseph began to calm down. This man was in control, and if he wanted Joseph dead, then Joseph really had no way to stop it.

Again, the man, Trent, seemed to know what Joseph was thinking. "You don't have to worry. I don't want you dead, but I do want you to do something, and if I'm right, it's something that will make you very happy."

Joseph's confusion finally overflowed, making his voice a bit hoarse. "I just want to know how you know me and what you know about my mother, all right?"

Trent leaned forward, his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped together. “Do you know what I do?”

Joseph shook his head.

“I’m a hitman, Joseph, a killer for hire; I dispatch of people for money. What do you think of that?”

Joseph stayed quiet.

“Got any idea how my business works?”

A shake of the head by Joseph.

“Well, I work for a group of people, folks I’ve never even seen but keep me in good money and in touch with excellent supplies. Every so often, a profile, what some people call a contract, comes down to me, and I make sure that person, well, you can figure the rest of it out.”

“What the hell does this have to do with me?” Joseph shouted.

“I’m getting there, Joseph,” said Trent, his smile still calm on his face. He leaned back in his chair and paused a moment, as if trying to decide on a place to start. “People like me, we’re a bit competitive. Sometimes, we let things slide, maybe because we have respect for a certain individual, sometimes because we just like that person, but every so often, a real asshole will come along. When that happens, well, we retire him, if you want to call it that, and retiring a hitman has its perks. One perk is information, tons of it, especially if the guy you take care of is a packrat. I just so happened to have had the opportunity to retire such a person, and I found something very interesting.” Trent pulled a sheet from his pocket and unfolded it, sliding it across to Joseph. For a moment, he didn’t want to touch it, but when Trent simply sat and stared at him, Joseph finally picked it up and read it.

Name is Selena. Works as a secretary at Ren-Tech Corp, 9:30 am to 6:00 pm. Seventh floor. Stays late on Fridays to prepare for Monday. Janitors leave at 5:30 pm. Only guard is in lobby.

At first, Joseph didn't understand, but the pieces began to fall into place. Money exchanges hands, then a complete rundown of a daily schedule is delivered, maybe with a photograph, and then. . . .

Joseph's heart went instantly cold, but as fast as his mind was denying what he saw in front of him, it was also seeing problems with what Trent was telling him. He voiced one of these, being careful to keep his voice as steady as he possibly could. "How do I know that this is real?" He tossed the sheet back onto the table. "You could have just written that up." As he spoke, however, he could not think of a possible reason why Trent would do that.

Meanwhile, Trent was pulling something else out of his pocket, as if he'd known that he would have to provide more proof. "Joseph, I'm going to tell you something else about us, hitmen I mean, and then I'm going to let you in on why we're talking here today. Then I'm going to ask you to do something, and I'm pretty confident that you're going to do exactly what I want you to do." Trent paused and looked up into Joseph's eyes, held them. "What do you think of that?"

Joseph was thinking it might be better to run and take his chances.

Trent continued as though Joseph had agreed. "We're careful, Joseph. If you fuck up, the best-case scenario could be that you get no more jobs, ever, and the worst-case scenario is that you wake up one morning with a knife across your throat." He was unfolding two pieces of paper, thick, stocky pages that Joseph identified as photographs but could not see very well. "Anyway, a fall down the stairs, which is what was requested in your mother's case, is not a sure

thing; people have lived through some really awful tumbles, so if the hitman is smart, he'll make sure first: cave in the skull, then arrange the body." Trent looked back up at Joseph, and a nasty smile was on his face now. He spoke with deliberate harshness. "Here you go, Joseph, before and after."

He flipped the first photograph around so that it faced Joseph, and Joseph screamed; he could not help it, could not hold it in, not this. The photo showed a woman laying on concrete with blood around her head like a sticky halo, her forehead bloodied and battered, a section of her cracked skull showing through. She had evidently just been killed, because tears still glistened at the corners of her eyes, which had rolled up in their sockets. The woman wore a yellow sundress and had longish blond hair, now matted and stuck in the congealed blood around her head. There was no question; the woman was Joseph's mother.

Joseph's scream still echoed in the small room, and his eyes nearly bulged from their sockets. The photo in front of him was the most horrible thing he'd ever seen, but he felt powerless to look away from it. Trent then showed him the second photo, and Joseph looked away quickly. However, it was not fast enough for him to avoid seeing what was there.

The second photo was indeed an after shot, and the body had been arranged at the bottom of a stairwell. Joseph had only seen the photo for a split second, but it was long enough to see that her skull wound was so placed that it seemed she had done the damage on a corner of the bottom square; the assassin had even spread blood there to make the illusion all the more real. An awful thought occurred to him, and he finally looked up at Trent again, who had sat quietly through the outburst. "Was it you? Did you kill my mother, you bastard?"

Trent waved his hand dismissively and started to speak again. "See, the trick is, after the crash, to make sure—"

“I asked you a fucking question! Did you kill my mother?” Joseph screamed, his throat straining at the force of it. He had never been so angry in all of his life; if this man had killed his mother, he was going to find a way to kill him, here, with his bare hands. However, when Trent looked him in the eyes again, he shrank back in his chair with fear. There was nothing in that face but empty, cold rage, and he could have sworn that he saw Trent’s eyes darken a full shade.

“You interrupt me again, and I’ll pull out your tongue and make you eat it.”

Joseph trembled in terror and fury but said nothing.

“The man who killed your mother is dead, has been for almost three months now. What I think should be on your mind is this: who would take out a contract on your mother? Who would benefit from her death? Can you think of anyone, Joseph?”

In fact, Joseph could. He grabbed the sheet with his mother’s daily routine on it and looked again, confirming what he had suspected when he first saw it: this was his father’s handwriting. Joseph put the sheet back on the table, covering the horrid picture of his mother.

“Most hitmen like to keep things simple, quiet, with no trace, but this guy was an idiot, kept too much; that’s half the reason he needed to go down.” As he spoke, Trent refolded the pieces of paper and put them back in his pocket.

Joseph wasn’t even listening to Trent anymore; he sagged in his chair, exhausted by the knowledge he’d just received. What was he going to do when he got home, when his father got home? His father terrified him beyond words; would he be able to confront him, kill him, as he had been ready to kill this stranger in front of him? Another question occurred to him, and he spoke it without caring about the answer, talking only so that his mind would be somewhere else.

“Why are you telling me this? What do you want?”

Trent leaned forward again, as if pleased by this question. He spoke softly, with something close to compassion in his voice. “You haven’t got anybody, have you, Joseph? Your mother is gone, your father is your own personal monster, you make no friends at school; you’re alone, right? Isn’t that how you feel?”

“How do you know that?” Joseph looked with bewildered eyes at Trent.

“I know much about you, Joseph, almost everything. I know you sleep lightly so that you can wake up and prepare if your door opens. I know you’re only going to college to get away from this town, because you have no idea what you want to do with your life, but you know where you don’t want to be. I know you’re alone, Joseph.”

At this, Joseph began to cry. All the frustration of the past eight years mixed with the anger and horror of today’s revelations, and he couldn’t hold it back anymore. Sitting at his own kitchen table in a room full of soft morning light, Joseph hung his head and wept. After a while, Joseph’s tears began to slow, finally stopping, and he cleared his throat, absurdly embarrassed to have cried in front of this man.

Trent spoke.

“When I got this information, I was curious about you and did some homework. The more I found out, the more I started to have an idea.” He leaned forward again. “I have something to offer, Joseph, something I think will make you happy, but first, I have a test for you.”

Trent continued to speak. Joseph listened, a small smile dawning on his lips, and by the time they were done talking, the smile on his face was wide, cold, and joyous.

Outside, the sun, hazy as it had been, had fallen below the tops of the buildings, and while it was still technically day out, dusk seemed to have fallen, owing not only to the sun's position but also the clouds overhead that were responsible for a thin snow falling. The wind had picked up still more, and at times the scraggy snowfall came in at a biting angle, and the people on the street huddled against it, scurrying quicker to their various destinations. Minister faced upward as he walked, smiling a bit; he loved the snow, and if this was any indication of things to come, the people of the city were in for quite a storm. Even now, however, as he enjoyed the weather, his mind took it into account as a factor in his current job, and smile the disappeared.

Would the weather affect Tueri's arrival time? The problem with this, which was a problem with most of Minister's duties concerning this client, was that he had so little information. Would Tueri come in on a plane? Most likely, but who was to say he couldn't arrive in a car, on a bus, or even on a train? Minister had never before had so little information, and he silently uttered words of gratitude for having Kyle available to him.

Furthermore, this deadline was going to make this job unique indeed. He certainly would not have sufficient time to observe Tueri and record his habits, his patterns, which was going to make the final move much more difficult to time and achieve. To put more stress on the situation, Kobal had spoken of men with Tueri. This could mean many things. First, Tueri could be a man of some importance, an official, an actor, etc. Second, Tueri might be a military man. Third, for all Minister knew, Tueri could be a gang boss. Fourth, and certainly the most undesirable of all, Tueri might know that someone was after him. The list could go on indefinitely, but these possibilities added up to one thing: more difficulty, and with only two days left to effect a move, Minister was going to have to move quickly and definitively.

This all passed through Minister's mind as he walked to the bank, wrote out his deposit slip, and stood in line. This account was separate from the one he dealt with to receive his payments from the Association; this bank he used only for cash deposits and withdrawals and thus he had a smaller balance than in his other account, only around seven or eight thousand dollars at any given time. Each account was in a different name, none his real one, of course, and there was no way to connect one with another. When his turn came, he deposited eight thousand into his account and left, heading back to Kyle's building; it had been nearly twenty-five minutes, and he was sure that Kyle already had something for him. He was anxious to see what this was, and he reflected that he had never experienced this before, this time crunch, and it was not altogether undesirable.

The sky was spitting snow in earnest now, and though Minister enjoyed the cold, even he was forced to bundle against the driving flurries. The crowds on the street had slimmed somewhat as more and more risked themselves on the city's subways or in taxicabs, all to avoid a bit of snow. Minister rarely took public transportation, not for fear of being mugged but for fear of what he might do if such a scene arose; he sure as hell was not going to sit idle and let some punk take his money and possessions, even if those things did mean very little to him, and he simply thought it better to walk from place to place than let himself go too far and have a gutted body to explain to the police. He had fewer reservations about taxicabs and occasionally took those—he cared not whether they took him for too much money, as he had plenty of it and not much to spend it on—but he still felt that walking was, most times, the best option, as it kept him not only fit but constantly surrounded by life.

Minister arrived back at Kyle's apartment nearly five minutes late, a gift to his fine little worker, and when Kyle let him in, he saw a sheaf of papers sitting on a ratty couch; they had probably been printed about ten minutes after he had left.

"I got what you needed, man, but I ain't so sure it's what you want."

"What do you mean?" Minister asked as he removed five hundred dollars and placed it on the table; the bills disappeared into Kyle's filthy jeans like a magic trick.

"Guy's a nobody, man; check him out." Kyle gestured to the pages, and Minister picked them up, looking through them with cursory glances. Kyle was right; the man he was to kill was Mr. Normality, which made the only interesting document in the pile all the more strange: a name-change form Kyle had hacked and printed off. It seemed that Tueri used to be Richard Samuel Barnes. Why the name change, and why to such an odd name? Minister didn't dwell on it yet. The last pages were some sort of schedule; he held them up to Kyle, who was fidgeting on the arm of his couch, clearly wanting Minister out of the apartment. "What's this?"

"Well, I did a little more checking, 'cause you said he was coming in at 9:00 tonight. Well, I ran schedules for trains, charter buses, and planes coming in around that time. The first two turned up nothing, but if you'll look at that sheet, ten names down . . ."

Minister glanced at the page again and counted down to the tenth name. There, arriving at 9:00 pm on TWA flight 3145 at JFK international, gate A32, was a man with the initials R.S.T. Minister felt a smile creep onto his face; the coincidence was just too perfect. He looked back up at Kyle, who was also grinning.

"Thought you might like to go watch Mr. R.S.T. arrive and see what comes up, right?"

Minister nodded, folded the pages, and pocketed them. This was probably his man, though waiting another five hours or so to find out seemed a hideous waste of time, and he

promised himself that he would make up for it by staying up and searching tonight if this turned up nothing.

Looking at Kyle, fidgeting still more, Minister suddenly got a strange urge, something that happened to him very rarely. Kyle had been a great help, not only today, but many times in the past, as well, and Minister had the idea to finally leave him alone. He had put in his duty for Minister, and it was time to find another like Kyle to help Minister along. Such magnanimity did not come to Minister often, but this feeling had occurred to him with absolute and complete conviction: after today, Minister would never talk to Kyle again.

He buttoned his coat again and moved past Kyle to the apartment door. He opened it and paused long enough to utter a lie, just to keep Kyle on his toes: “Be seeing you, Kyle.” He walked out, closing the door behind him, and made his way back out into the frigid day.

* * *

8:15 pm found Minister sitting by himself in terminal A32 of the city’s airport, the pages concerning Tueri on his lap and a small pair of expensive, high-powered binoculars in his right coat pocket. He had checked the large blue digital boards when he had arrived about five minutes ago, and he was satisfied to see that flight 3145 was operating on schedule and was still due in at 9:00 pm; his concerns about the weather holding up the plane had disappeared two hours ago when the sun finally slipped below the horizon, seeming to take the snow and wind with it. It was still, dry, and frigid outside, none of which would delay the flight. Minister had chosen a seat that gave him unobstructed view of one of the boards, and he checked the flight and arrival time every so often.

As he sat there, waiting for his man to arrive, he rifled through the pages in front of him and, slowly, put together a picture of Tueri’s life. Barnes (as he had been born) had lived in

Seattle for a time before moving to Pinkerton, Oregon, a small town about seventy miles outside of Portland. There, he had married, had two children, and lived a quiet life that consisted mainly of teaching math at the town's only high school and being what neighbors called "a good family man." Barnes had, from what Minister could gather, been just this but not much else. In fact, Barnes only became interesting around 1985, when he chose to become Tueri instead.

At this point, Tueri became rather active in St. Peter's, the town's only Catholic church. He started slow, taking on a Sunday school teaching job in addition to his own duties. As the years progressed, however, he took on more and more volunteer positions, becoming a leader in the church's R.C.I.A. group, a class intended to instruct adults becoming Catholic, performing readings at mass, and even becoming an assistant to the parish pastor, Fr. James Reichmann. Tueri continued in this way for the next twenty years, and his wife had told neighbors and even the priest that she had considered pressing Tueri to study to be a priest, despite his family, something that was rare but not unheard of. Evidently, Tueri had resisted this, feeling that it was more important to revere God in his own way while still giving attention and love to his wife and children.

Minister flipped to a recent photo of Tueri, and he gazed at his target, taking in his features. The man was fifty-two, and the picture showed a hale man with only slightly silvering hair. His eyes were deep blue, even under the hood of prominent brows that made him look, despite his kind expression, almost Neanderthal. His nose was rather large and bulbous, and Minister could tell from its pocked and red appearance that Tueri had spent quite a lot of his life out in the sun. His lips were thin, and, had Tueri wished, he could have pulled off a cold and forbidding look. However, the smile on his face was warm, inviting—a countenance that one

could feel comfortable bringing problems to. On the whole, Minister decided, Tueri was a largely unremarkable man.

No matter how much he worked to suppress the thought, he could never help himself from wondering: why this one? What could anyone, especially a man like Kobal, have against this seemingly normal man that he wanted him dead? From what Kyle had gotten him, Minister could see nothing in the man's history that would offend anyone, and one hundred thousand was a steep price for a nobody. And why would this otherwise banal man have men with him? Who in the hell was he that he needed protection? Still, this was not Minister's concern, and he shook his head slightly. If he was not as normal as he seemed, Minister could still deal with him. If he was, then he was an amateur, one who would be easy to spot, easy to track.

Easy to kill.

Minister was summoned from his reverie by the approach of a small jet out on the tarmac; he glanced up at the clock and saw that the flight was early, and he walked over to the large window to watch the passengers deboard. He would, of course, try to get a visual confirmation of his client, but it was entirely possible that, if he had men with him, Tueri had also tried to undergo some sort of alteration to his physical features. If this was the case, Minister would follow the passengers to baggage claim and stand near the front of the belt; as the bags went by, he would check each one, a natural action that everyone else would be engaged in. Then, it was a simple matter of, once he had identified Tueri's, watching who picked it up, then following that man out of the airport. In fact, if the opportunity presented itself, Minister was sure he could finish the job tonight, using his belt, if necessary, and be done with this whole ordeal in one day.

The plane's door was now descending, the stairs affixed to the other side, and Minister saw the stewardess step into place to prepare to say thank you, come again, thank you, fly with us again. He glanced down at his schedule and saw that Tueri had a seat near the rear of the plane, so he could expect him to be one of the last ones out. He watched as the first few people stepped off the plane and walked toward the terminal; they looked tired, worn out, and he briefly wondered where they were from, where they were headed, if this was their destination or if they had another flight in their near-future. He had been on plenty of planes in his life; his profession made this a necessity. Still, he'd never gotten used to them, and he felt a small twinge of almost sympathy for these people. He might not have been above putting a bullet through any of their heads for the right price, but at least he knew how they felt.

Then this idle thought was shoved aside as the next man exited the plane. Minister took the binoculars from his coat and put them up to his eyes, adjusting the focus so that the man sprang into view. There was absolutely no doubt whatsoever; with the magnification, he could easily tick off the features on the man's face, his deep blue eyes, the friendly smile on his lips, the red, round nose. Silvered hair whipped back from his face as the wind picked up. Minister looked back down to his sheet to be absolutely sure. He looked back up at Richard Tueri. Tueri stretched on the tarmac but did not immediately begin walking to the terminal, and Minister quickly saw the reason for the man's pause; two men were coming down the steps after him, and Minister actually had to blink a few times and shake his head at the sight in front of him. The two men joining Tueri on the tarmac were nearly identical, tall blond men who looked like they worked out as a profession. They were bundled in coats, but Minister could easily tell that those coats hid broad, stony shoulders and barrel chests. Their faces looked chiseled from wood, expressions identically blank, square jaws, and rugged, awkward noses that on both looked like

they'd been broken and set a few times. Tueri hardly gave the two men his attention as they joined him, and as they scanned the tarmac.

Minister moved away from the window slowly and walked over to a pay telephone not far from the gate, picking up the receiver and inserting quarters. He dialed the weather line and let the automated voice speak as he glanced down at his plane schedule. There was no way of knowing which of the names on the sheet represented those two men looking after Tueri, and he saw no similar names, though they had to be brothers, or at least related. Minister knew for sure that the two men were Tueri's protection, but that was, above all, what bothered him; they were so damn *obviously* bodyguards that he smelled something wrong. It was almost as if Tueri was flaunting his protection, and this presented a problem; if Tueri had protection, obvious or not, that meant that he knew he was being hunted. He knew someone was looking for him, and now, the only advantage Minister still had was that Tueri did not yet know it was *he*.

As Minister saw the trio come through the door into the gate's lobby, he began to speak softly into the telephone, uttering random, one-sided responses to the machine-like, feminine voice reporting the time and weather. He kept his eyes on his sheets as they passed, but he was skilled at peripheral vision, and he noted that the two bodyguards did not identify Minister as a threat; their hard gaze noted him, then swept past, and Minister was pleased. He continued talking for almost a minute, mentally envisioning how far the trio was getting from his position, and when he finally hung up the phone and stood, he could just barely see them at the far end of the terminal walkway. As much as Minister wished that the two blond men did not exist, he was briefly glad for their large, obvious presence, and he began walking after them, keeping the same distance and keeping his eyes to their left. When one of the bodyguards looked back and swept the crowd behind them again, Minister caught it but did not have to worry about being caught off

guard and hastily redirecting his gaze. The man looked forward again, and Minister kept following.

The three men waited patiently with the rest of the crowd for the baggage to begin winding its way to them on the constantly moving conveyer belt. Minister walked to the duty-free shop and picked up a magazine, flipping through it, then replacing it and choosing another. He kept the men in his sight line but never watched them directly, and he was confident that the two guards did not think him a threat; in fact, the two men had stopped scanning the crowd and now merely stood behind their charge as Tueri waited for his bag, whistling softly and smiling a bit. When the buzzer sounded and baggage began appearing among the two or three forgotten pieces of luggage that had circled in and out for the past ten minutes, Tueri grabbed one of the first suitcases, checked the tag, and nodded slightly to himself. He turned away without looking at his men, and they followed silently, apparently not needing to wait for bags for themselves, which Minister thought odd but did not dwell on. He continued to flip through the issue of *People* in his hands, indirectly watching the three walk out of the terminal to where a line of taxis sat idling in the cold. He was about to put the magazine down and follow when Tueri did something unexpected, marking the real downhill slide of the situation.

As if in afterthought, Tueri stopped walking, placed his suitcase on the ground outside, and opened a small zippered pouch. He pulled out what looked like a blank sheet of paper and a pen, and Minister's brow furrowed; what was *this* all about? The two guards simply continued to wait, scanning the street with their grey eyes, their unhurried breath puffing from their nostrils; Tueri, meanwhile, had hunkered down to the sidewalk and was writing something on the paper. He straitened up with it and folded it twice; then, to Minister's surprise, Tueri wedged the folded paper between a bench outside and the terminal window, where it fluttered a little in the

frigid wind. That done, the three men moved toward the remaining cabs at the curb; there were two of them, and Minister walked casually from the store toward the door of the terminal; he would follow their cab for a while and possibly find out where they were quartered. However, before he was even halfway to the door, the trio outside had already split up, Tueri and one of the guards getting into the front cab and the other guard heading toward the second car. As the car doors slammed, both cabs occupied, Minister quickened his steps, hoping to catch the tag numbers of the cabs, but as his gaze passed over the cab with Tueri in it, he stopped, his heartbeat speeding up and an ugly throb in his stomach and throat.

Tueri was looking directly at Minister, and, as the cabs drove off, Tueri smiled.

Minister swore under his breath, dropping pretense and running the rest of the way to the door, arriving outside just in time to see the taillights of the two cabs disappear among the rushing lights of the highway that ran parallel to the airport. His angry breath streamed from his mouth and nose and was whipped away on the icy wind. He'd been spotted, and he could feel his hopes for resolving this job quickly and without complications vanish; Tueri was going to be twice as hard to locate and deal with now, and those two blond gorillas were going to quadruple the problem. He spent only another fifteen seconds being angry at himself; he had fucked things up somehow, but now that he had, the thing to do was to simply work from where he was, and he could easily remember more problematic jobs he'd completed in the past.

A soft rustle, nearly imperceptible against the roar of cars from the highway, caught Minister's attention, and he turned to see the folded paper Tueri had written on still wedged behind the iron bench. He walked over and freed the sheet, unfolding it and examining the two lines scribbled there in a hasty but elegant hand:

God is not with us.

We are on our own.

Minister looked down at the sentences, his face fixed in a contemplative frown. Judging from the sudden writing of the note and Tueri's smile, this note was meant for him, but whatever this was meant to convey, he did not understand it. Of course, it could be something to throw him off, but it did not feel like that; it felt important.

Minister folded the paper again, slipping it into his pocket. He hailed a cab and gave the driver his home address.

Joseph sat at the kitchen table, his hands clasped loosely in front of him, his eyes on the clock on the wall, his mouth a tight line. The time was 4:30 pm, and he had sitting at this table for around an hour. In that time, he had done very little; he had no idea what to do with himself. He felt out of sorts, with too much energy and no outlet for it. The only potential relief was more than seven hours away.

The conversation with Trent had not lasted long, but it had given Joseph enough to think on, so much in fact that Joseph had decided not to go to school; he couldn't have focused on anything. He had asked Trent what would happen with school after tonight, and Trent had smiled.

“You'll finish that up, Joseph. As I remember, you have only a month or so left anyway, and we'll take care of logistics later. Everything after that we can discuss then. Meantime, you've got a job to do, don't you?”

Trent had left at around 10:00 am, instructing him where to find the item he would need later. After Trent had left, Joseph had checked to see that it was there, then had gone to his room. For the rest of the day, Joseph had tried to busy himself but found that he could not focus on anything; the movie he tried to watch held no interest for him, no video games distracted him, no book was interesting enough. Night could not fall fast enough, and his nerves were on fire.

Then he heard his father's car in the driveway.

His father had arrived home early many times, and late still more often. It was nothing out of the ordinary, but it shook Joseph now. He understood that it was the airline, not his father, that had been unpredictable, but this night, above all, he wanted to go smoothly, with no surprises. He borrowed confidence from the man he had met earlier, the man who Joseph knew

had plenty to spare, and as his father let himself in to the kitchen, Joseph had the curious feeling that Trent was sitting next to him.

His father's eyes were on the mail in his hand as he entered, and he did not look at Joseph, even as he muttered, "Hello." Joseph answered in like kind. After a few moments, his father looked at him, his brow furrowed slightly. "What are you doing?"

Only then did Joseph realize that he probably looked a bit odd, sitting at the kitchen table and staring at nothing. He responded in a cool, flat tone. "Taking a break from homework."

His father held his gaze for a few moments longer, and Joseph wondered if his grey eyes were giving away what he was thinking: *You fucking bastard. You had my mother killed, and for what? So you could have your son as your own personal toy? You disgust me.* Certainly he no longer felt cowed by this man. His anger had become almost physical, not red, as he imagined it, but black, an amorphous thing that wrapped around his heart, his lungs, his stomach, and squeezed, making him sick. Would his father see this? Would he realize what was going to happen tonight?

Apparently not. His father walked over to the refrigerator and pulled out a can of Coke. "The meeting fell through, so they jammed us on an early return flight. What a waste of time." He could have been talking to himself, for all of the emotion in his voice. He looked back at the mail in his hand and walked into the living room. His voice drifted back. "What do you want for dinner tonight?"

"I'm not hungry; I ate something when I got home from school."

"Suit yourself," his father said, and the TV clicked on, the canned laughter from *That 70's Show* filtering in. Joseph looked again at the clock. 4:55. He smiled to himself and thanked American Airways.

Five hours.

* * *

Though the airlines could be counted on to be unpredictable, his father typically stayed close to his personal routine. As 10:00 pm neared, he began yawning, and at the end of *Cheers*, he stood, muttered, “Good night,” and walked upstairs. Joseph followed the footsteps, thumps, and various noises as his father went through his nightly ritual: bathroom, urinate, brush teeth, bedroom, strip, bed, check clock/radio alarm, lights off.

He had been waiting for this all evening, curled up in the armchair by the couch where his father sat, a book in his hands that was opened but largely ignored. He did not want to be there, of course; more than anything he wanted to be up in his room, where he would not have to be cautious. Still, he knew better than to allow himself this. He knew that he would have been unable to keep his mind off the item in his closet—or his hands, for that matter. He would have rationalized bumping forward his schedule, moving early, and he knew enough to know how little he knew about his task tonight. Better to deny himself the temptation, to wait. His father had noticed nothing, and this too was typical. Joseph had even turned the pages of his book a few times to avoid suspicion, but he felt that this action was unnecessary; his father was not paying attention.

Now, however, things would begin to happen. He remembered the last bit of the conversation with Trent:

“What time does he usually go to bed?”

“Around ten.”

“Does he snore?”

“Sometimes.”

“Wait until he does. When he starts, wait fifteen minutes, then go.”

“What if he doesn’t snore?”

“He will.”

“But how do you-“

“He will. Wait fifteen minutes, then go.”

“All right.”

Joseph muted the television but kept it on. The house was silent but for an occasionally creak here and there. His eyes again were on the glowing red numbers on the VCR. They read 10:36 pm before he heard the first soft, guttural intake of breath from upstairs. At 10: 51 pm exactly, he got up, turned off the TV, and walked upstairs to his room, moving slowly, though he felt the impulse to run.

He went to his closet and knelt, reaching his hand behind a stack of magazines. He had only one thing ever to hide in this house, and he had been keeping his notebook of “proverbs” behind this old, dusty stack for months now. The space behind it was choked with cobwebs and mouse droppings, and he figured that was sign enough that no one had looked behind here in some time. Now, he slid his hand back, moved aside his notebook, and gripped the nine millimeter pistol Trent had given him earlier. He brought it out and looked at it as if for the first time. It was of a smoky, oily metal, compact and weighty in his hands. He had, in actuality, never held a gun before in his life, and he now felt awed by the silent power he knew the gun held. He examined the gun from all angles, keeping it sensibly pointed away. He knew it was loaded, though he did not check; indeed, he did not even know how to check. He knew only two things: check the safety (it was off), aim it and pull the trigger. He smiled in the dark. At least he knew how to do that.

As he crept into the hall, something stopped him. He had trouble figuring out what it was, what had caused his heart to speed up, and then he understood: it was silence. His father had stopped snoring. For a moment, panic rose in his throat, and he had no clue what to do. Should he wait until he started again? Should he abandon the whole thing? The gun hung heavy in his right hand, and he switched it to his left. He decided to keep going; he wanted this over. Besides, the anger inside him had not died. He moved silently into his father's room.

For a moment, he thought his heart was actually, physically in his throat, that it would clog his throat, forcing him to cough it up. His stomach was sheathed in ice, and he wondering briefly and logically if he would vomit.

His father was sitting up in bed, and as Joseph entered the room, he was looking straight into his father's eyes.

In the moonlight filtering in through the blinds, Joseph saw that his father had been crying, and now a wide smile was on his father's face as he looked at him. He cleared his throat softly and spoke, his voice choked and uncertain. "I . . . I was going to come to . . . see you." He stopped for a moment, as if unsure how to continue, then said, "But you came to see me, didn't you?"

Joseph neither answered nor moved. His arms were straight at his sides, and he knew that, as he stood in shadow, his father could not see the gun against his leg in the folds of his jeans.

His father rose from the bed. Joseph could see that he was naked, and the urge to throw up became stronger.

"I knew you would come to me eventually, Joseph." His father spoke in a low, conspiratorial voice, an excited voice, and he began to walk toward Joseph. "You've wanted this

for a while, haven't you?" He walked closer, and as he stepped through a moonbeam, Joseph saw that he was erect, and the anger came flooding back, drowning the fear and disgust. He pointed the gun at his father as he turned on the lights with his right hand.

His father shielded his eyes with his hand, and Joseph knew that he could not see the gun yet. In the light, his father looked older, fatter, more hunched. Was this what he had feared for so many years? The terrifying figure he had had nightmares about for his entire life? Was this his torment, this pathetic old pervert? For the first time in his life, he was no longer afraid of this man. He realized that he was, finally, in control.

Meanwhile, his father had seen the gun. "Joseph, what are--"

"I know you had Mom killed, so I don't need you to admit that. All I want to know is why, why you did that." He felt strong, and the gun, though heavy, did not waver.

His father's arm came down, and he looked stern again, though Joseph could see the fear in his eyes. "I did it for us, Joseph."

Of all the things he had expected his father to say, this was not one. He tried to figure out what that might mean, couldn't, and pulled the trigger. The crash was unbelievably loud, and the gun kicked so hard that Joseph's arm was flung up in the air, but his aim had been true. There was a small hole three inches above his father's bellybutton that began to drip, and the bed behind him was spattered red.

His father looked down at this new orifice in his body with mild surprise, then back up at Joseph, as if curious. Then he fell onto his hands and knees, and Joseph saw what the bullet had done to his father's back. The hole there was the size of a teacup saucer, ragged, with ivory-colored slivers poking out. *That's his spine*, thought Joseph. His father looked up at him from the floor and tried to speak, but blood bubbled out instead. Joseph grasped the gun in both

hands, aimed it at his father's face, and pulled the trigger. With another ear-shattering roar, his father's face caved in at the nose and became a red mess. As he slumped to the floor, blood began to pool around his head.

Joseph still felt nothing besides the ache in his arms at the recoil and pain in his ears. He left the room without another look. Trent had told him to bring the gun with him to the location they had discussed. These directions came immediately to mind, and he left the house through the back door. He took nothing with him but the clothes on his body and the gun in his hand.

It was nearly midnight when Joseph stepped up to the door of a small, square one story building in what looked to be an abandoned factory yard. The walls were of grey painted brick, and the door was metal. A single light bulb, naked, threw a dim circle on the concrete in front of the door. No other light shone for half a mile in any direction. Joseph stood in the circle of light and pounded the door with his fist three times. The door was opened by Trent, who looked Joseph over, nodded slightly, and motioned him inside. The door rang shut behind them.

Minister woke at six the next morning. He had slept well, despite the setback last night. It did no good to worry; the emotion was as unnecessary as it was damaging. He felt confident that he would complete the job, and within the rather stringent time limit, as well. Still, he had hoped to have the job finished by now.

Stepping into his bath, he let himself relax in the steaming water. He kept his eyes open (force of habit), but he was supremely settled, and, as the hot water unknotted his body, his mind turned to the job he had on his hands.

At first, the job seemed simple, cut and dried: here was a middle-aged man who had no history of military or government service and was merely passing through the city. What could be simpler than making sure he never left? Then, the problems began to stack up. First, the protection. Minister had honestly never seen anything quite like the two blond men who were guarding Tueri, and their eerie similarity put Minister on edge. Who in the hell were they? For that matter, what would Tueri need with guards, anyway? What could he possibly be doing to warrant death? Still, that wasn't the worst part.

No, the worst part was that fucking note, and that smile.

Minister felt his face grow hot; he was embarrassed at being noticed. Being noticed not ten minutes after his client had stepped off the plane. Tueri had *known*; that was the kicker; the man had looked Minister right in the eyes and smiled, as if Minister had been some kid who was bad at sneaking up on people. All this added up and changed a simple job to one big clusterfuck of a problem.

The note did not worry him so much as intrigue him; Minister rarely paid much attention to communiqués from clients. However, this was different, and he found the text of the note

impossible to get out of his head. In fact, last night, after stepping through the door and eating his late supper, Minister had taken down his Bible again and looked over the Book of Revelations. This time, he noticed just how absent God was during the awful events that took place. Sure, He was up there, watching, but He did little to help those who made the wrong decision. As he sat on his couch, rereading the book, Minister grew worried. If Tueri knew that he would be followed, knew it so well that he actually made eye contact with Minister, what else did this man know about him? Had Tueri known about Minister's habit concerning the book of Revelations? That seemed preposterous, but what did the bastard know? In the space of one day, Minister's secure world had begun to show cracks, and he actually found himself fighting off a small panic.

This was going to be . . . a problem.

He shook his head and began washing himself; he would figure it out, and when he finally got his hands on Tueri, the man would not die quickly; Minister had some frustration to take out on him.

After he dressed and ate breakfast, the problem, tumbling in his mind like a rock, became smoother, easier to handle. All of the problems of the job were probably irrelevant; Minister did not have to figure out what this man was up to, but merely how to dispatch him. Thus, he must focus on simply finding the man. Not a small task in a city this size. Kyle had been unable to find any record of reservations, so Tueri could be staying anywhere. The one card that had been dealt to Minister was the fact that Tueri was still using his own name, flaunting that unsettling self-confidence. His first step was to see if Tueri had surfaced anywhere in a hotel registry. There were ways to do that, but he silently cursed himself for deciding to abandon Kyle to his own devices; he would be helpful right now, but Minister had made up his mind, and there was

no reversing that. Besides, this might be enjoyable. Difficult, yes, but enjoyable; half the fun of a hunt is the process, and he had had much more difficult hunts than this.

He looked at his watch. 7:30 am. He had to get moving; he had a great deal of work before him, and time was growing short. He finished his meal, placed the dishes in the sink, and donned his overcoat. There was only a grey glow outside, and he knew the day would be miserable. Patting his left breast to ensure his gun was there, he flicked off the lights to the living room and opened the door, his left hand digging in his overcoat pocket for his keys.

A great many things factored into his staying alive in the subsequent five seconds. First, his right hand, which was over his left breast, was in a perfect position to whip to his right in a sweeping gesture, knocking the blond man's gun hand off-target; had it not been for this instinctive and nearly unconscious maneuver, the bullet which blasted its way into the doorjamb, spraying Minister's face with bits of wood, would have exited the back of his head, pulling half his brains with it. Second, his left hand, emerging from his pocket holding his key ring, had gripped the four links of metal chain he had attached to it, allowing him to whip the keys across in a slashing movement, slicing across the face of the other blond man to his left who was raising his own gun; had he gripped his key ring by the cluster of keys instead, the chain would not have done as much damage, for Minister saw the keys tear into the man's right eye. The initial shock gone, a cold, hard anger took over and drove his next movements, so precise that they seemed choreographed.

The first man wielding the gun grunted at the strike, but with no real surprise, as if he'd been expecting it. Minister's hands shot out and gripped the gunman's hand just as he centered the barrel on Minister's head. Minister flung himself to the right and kept his arms stationary, the force whipping the man off his feet and around to Minister's left where he met the wall with a

crunch as his nose broke. The man crumpled to the floor, leaving an upside-down fan of blood on the wall where his nose had shattered. He rolled onto his back, looking at the ceiling with eyes that fluttered, half-conscious. Minister circled around the man, took two steps back, then stepped forward and kicked the man directly in the neck with all the force of a good punt. There was a muffled but distinct wet snap as the man's neck broke. His eyes flew open wide and his hand grasped at the wall, as if he were trying to pull back his escaping life. Then he lay still. Minister reached down and grabbed his gun, bringing it around to center on the second man, who was just now refocusing on the situation.

“Don’t move,” he said softly, his face impassive. However, to his surprise, the man indeed *was* moving, his gun hand coming up to point at his target. Minister moved quickly, lunging forward with a grunt of annoyance and grasping the man’s hand before the barrel could reach its point of aim. He twisted sharply to the right and heard the man’s wrist snap; the fingers went limp, and the gun fell to the expensive carpeting with barely a noise. Minister scooped it up and slid it into his overcoat pocket, stepping back and re-aiming the other gun. His voice was still calm but held a touch of impatience as he repeated himself: “Don’t move.”

This time the man obeyed, looking up at Minister and cradling his broken wrist. There was no fear in the face, nor much pain. He simply stared up at his target with a face as impassive as Minister’s, waiting for him to speak again. Minister scanned the hall quickly to see if they were still alone. The hall was empty; there had been no crash to accompany the shot the first man had taken at him, and Minister saw now that the man’s gun was affixed with a squat silencer. However, the scuffle might have drawn attention. He jerked the gun barrel up, indicating that the man should rise to his feet; he responded.

“Take your friend here and pull him into my apartment; if this isn’t done quickly, you’ll have more than a broken wrist to worry about. Now move.”

The man did as Minister asked, but his face still showed no fear at the threat; it was as if he had little or no interest in what was happening, only going along because he had nothing better to do. He let his wrist go, grabbed the shirt front of his dead partner, and dragged the body through the doorway into Minister’s apartment. Minister, who had stepped out of his way, covered him with the gun and silently marveled at the man’s effort: the body had to weigh at least 240 pounds, pure muscle, and was dead weight to top it off, yet this man was dragging as though it were no heavier than a sack of potatoes, and one-handed. Minister followed his captive into his apartment, closing the door with his foot.

Inside, the man had succeeded in dragging his partner almost to the kitchen, and Minister approved; should any of the blood from the body’s broken nose drip, it would be easier to clean off tile than carpet. This reminded him of the blood on the wall outside, and he briefly considered making the man go clean it off, but he decided against it. If need be, Minister could take off that section of wallpaper and have the building replace it, offering any story he would devise. The doorjamb could be taken care of, as well. For now, he had some time with his new friend here. He let the man get his partner’s head onto the tile of his kitchen floor, then spoke again.

“That’s enough; leave him there. Sit on the couch, and keep your hands where I can see them.”

The man obeyed, his face still blank, and sat, looking up at Minister, who took a moment to examine the two men, now that the situation was under control. The two looked exactly alike, a little above six feet tall, with blondish hair, clipped short, and eyes that were blank and grey.

They both appeared muscular, though their clothes—simple slacks, white collared shirts, and nondescript, black sports coats—did not emphasize the fact. Minister had seen identical twins before, even the ridiculous pairs who attempted, by their clothes and appearances, to look exactly like the other, but the two men in front of him matched much more than any set of twins he had ever come across.

He had a difficult moment in which he struggled to decide what to ask the man in front of him, and he ended up settling for the most obvious query: “Are you two brothers?”

The man smiled slightly but said nothing, and Minister let the issue go, trying another direction.

“What is your name?”

“Simon,” the man answered readily enough.

“And him?” Minister gestured at Simon’s partner.

“He has no name now; he is dead.”

“What does that mean?” But Simon only smiled again, and Minister found himself growing tired of whatever game they were playing.

“Where is he?”

Simon began speaking in a flat, bored tone, as if what was coming out of his mouth was rote. “I have been told that, in the event that we are unable to neutralize the threat you represent, Mr. Tueri wishes to speak with you face-to-face. He will be at Harrison Airport at terminal six this evening at 5:30. It is the same terminal you saw us arrive at.”

Minister knew the terminal; this was a smart move on Tueri’s part, as with today’s heightened security, it would be difficult to get even a metal pen past the checkpoints. Simon went on.

“He will be unarmed, as will you be. Mr. Tueri knows you are resourceful enough to bring some sort of weapon with you that will pass security, but he wishes only enough time to speak, and he has faith that you will want to hear him out. He has given me another piece of information he wishes me to pass on to you.” At this, Simon looked directly into Minister’s eyes. “You have the power to save us; if you choose not to, then everything is gone. God is not with us. We are on our own.” He fell silent.

Minister smiled a little. *How pleasant, he thought, a cryptic little message to throw me off-track. You really are an amateur, aren’t you, Tueri?* “Anything else?” he asked Simon, who nodded.

“Your mother was being used.”

The small, ironic smile fell off of Minister’s face, replaced by a hard, thin line of anger. His next words were a whisper, dangerous and low. “What did you say?”

“You heard what I said. Your mother was a tool in all of this; don’t be one yourself. You need only to open your eyes.” He sounded as if he was talking to a small, slow child.

Minister stood slowly, keeping the gun trained on Simon. He walked to the kitchen and took a serrated steak knife from the wooden block on the counter. He came back, sat down in front of Simon, and brought the knife down hard, jamming the blade between the man’s kneecap and the bone joint. Then he gave the knife a hard twist, opening the wound to the size of a nickel and forcing the kneecap out.

The smile on Simon’s lips grew tight as he winced, and his muscles twitched, but he did not scream, as Minister had hoped he would. After a moment, Minister sat back and said, “What do you know about my mother?”

“Very little,” Simon said, his voice thin with pain, “but Mr. Tueri will tell you more. I’ve said all I must.” And before Minister could do more than blink, Simon had snatched the knife from his leg, taken it in both hands, and rammed the blade hilt-deep into the left side of his chest. The strike was at an upward angle and angled in, and even though things were happening too fast, Minister realized that the man had just stabbed himself, with professional precision, in the heart. Simon shuddered, and his mouth opened wide, as though he were gasping for breath, then he slumped back, and his still-open eyes were staring at the ceiling. He was as dead as his partner.

For a moment, all Minister could seem to do was blink; it had happened faster than his reactions could prevent and was so unexpected that he was not sure exactly of *what* he had just seen. These two were obviously devoted to their cause, but to what, Minister could not fathom

The strangeness overwhelmed him, and he began to tremble; their mission had been to kill him, but when that failed, they were instructed to tell him exactly where his target would be, unarmed and waiting for the man they knew was an assassin. To top it all off, what were these cryptic messages about God? Why did they bring up in him an overwhelming sense of doom? He had felt uncomfortable around Kobal, even frightened a little, and it was clear that something was happening here beyond his ability to see.

And why in the fuck had Simon spoken about his mother?

For a brief moment, Minister felt a strong urge to run. He had never done it before, left a job without informing his employer, but this job was getting too close to him. He had no idea how these people who he had only known for fewer than two days knew so much about him.

Even as he thought these things, however, he knew he would not drop this job. The major reason, the one he would acknowledge and admit to himself, was that these bastards had

dared to intrude upon his life. He would eliminate anyone who did that, not only Tueri but also Kobal. Fuck them. He was here, and he was not moving.

However, the other reason, the one he knew but would not examine, was that for the first time, he was frightened of a client. There was too much wrong with Kobal, and his meeting with the man kept coming back to him.

—behind that smile is the thing Kobal really is—

kept crowding in on him, making it difficult to function efficiently. Though he didn't like to admit it, he was sure that Kobal would find him eventually if he *did* run. He needed to finish this somehow, and he would do it the way that was most familiar and natural to him.

With death.

Now, however, he had a mess to clean up. Luckily, there was very little to do. The still-nameless guard's blood had stained only his face and the wall outside and the floor, which Minister could take care of himself. Simon had hit his heart with the knife, stopping it cold, along with the flow of blood from his wounds, meaning there was only a small dribble on his chest and one down his leg from the knee wound. His biggest problem was what to do with the bodies, but in his line of work, even problems of that magnitude were easily solved.

He picked up the telephone and punched in a number. When the female receptionist answered, he asked for Craig and was put on hold. As he waited for the clean-up man employed by the Association to answer, his fingers unconsciously tightened on the dead man's gun, as though they couldn't wait to begin the business that lay before them.

“Where?”

“The spine.”

“But he’ll scream.”

“Not the tailbone, you fucking moron.” Not a change in cadence or tone, but Joseph knew he was angry now, disappointed, and he felt his face grow hot; had there been any light, his blush would have been visible, but there was not.

“How many?”

“Figure it out yourself.”

Joseph ignored the sarcasm and judged. Yes, two should do it. He turned the knob gently and heard two soft clicks, barely audible. He looked again. Yes, better. The wind gusted a bit up here, of course, but gusts were easy; he merely waited. The man he watched evidently thought he was in a movie because he paced, actually *paced* in front of the steel door of the warehouse. As Joseph watched, the man did a swift about-face and walked back the other way, taking short, measured steps.

What a dipshit.

Then the wind dropped; for a second, everything was still, even his mind, and the man he saw before him seemed almost to pause, like he was expecting this, and Joseph settled the black “T” on the base of his neck and squeezed the trigger.

The rifle kicked hard, but Joseph flexed the proper muscles and had the sight back where it had been in less than two seconds. When he again had a view of the guard, he saw the man swaying back and forth, almost like he was going to be sick. Then the man crumpled to the ground, rolling slightly, and Joseph could see the red, hamburger ruin that used to be his throat;

there had been no scream. Even without the massive damage to the larynx that the mushrooming bullet had caused, the guard had probably been dead before he had hit the ground, the spine severed and, most likely, his medulla turned to so much pudding.

“Good,” and the anger was gone, and Joseph breathed a small sigh of relief. He got up to see that Trent was already moving away, toward the door on the roof. Joseph turned back to his gun and had it broken down and in its case in less than a minute. He ran after Trent.

Their client tonight was relatively unprotected, a sign of how little those in charge had estimated the importance of keeping her alive. True, Trent and Joseph knew only the cursory facts about the job, but when an order came down from the Association with a large price tag affixed to it, that order was always serious business, a priority to be handled at once, and they had obliged; Trent had only received the information on the case two nights ago.

And now, with one guard to go, their job was nearly completed.

But not Joseph’s training; that was just beginning.

He and Trent, now back on ground level, crept toward the main building of the complex, staying in shadow almost instinctively.

They reached the guard Joseph had just killed, stepped around the large patch of gore, almost black in this dim light, and Trent reached over and slid a keyring from the guard’s pocket, unclipping the tether to his belt. He examined them for a moment, snapped open the ring, and handed Joseph a small, silver key. Joseph took it as Trent slid the rest of the keyring into a zipped pouch on his pant leg and secured it; the information gleaned from the keys would earn them an extra two thousand dollars or so and perhaps a few more clients in the future.

Joseph took a breath, his face setting into a hard mask of concentration. After he unlocked the door, consciousness seemed to disappear, and the last real thought he had was that,

after tonight's blunder, he must not fuck this up. He unsheathed a knife, seven inches long, carbonized black, serrated on both sides; he held it in his left hand in a stabbing position, then held his right hand, open, across his left arm. He stood, silent, ready, and when Trent looked at him, he nodded only the slightest bit.

Trent opened the door and immediately slid off to the right of it, behind it. They both stood silent, waiting. Nearly two minutes had passed before the final guard came into view, or at least his gun did. He was scouting his range of vision for threats and moving cautiously. He had been well-trained, but he was one against two. Trent, still behind the swung-open door, knocked on it slightly, and the second the guard's gun moved in that direction, Joseph, unnoticed on the guard's right side, grabbed his gun hand with his right and swung the knife in his left around in a hard arc, landing it right under the guard's chin. The knife sliced in at a rough forty-five degrees, ramming right up into the man's brain. Joseph gave the knife a sharp twist, and the guard began jittering on his feet. He finally lost control and fell to the ground when Joseph released him. He left the knife in the still-dying guard, kicked the gun away into the shadows, and followed Trent into the facility. He knew that this was the last of the guards, but his sense of caution was growing to be his specialty, and he took a few seconds to close the door and twist the bolts from the inside before moving on.

As he looked around, Joseph noted that this was certainly a ramshackle safe house, one that had only come to this purpose recently and with little forethought. The walls of the hall were unpainted sheetrock, and he had the idea they were attached only to corrugated metal. Sure, the building had been a warehouse, and it was desirable to keep that image to the outside world. Still, the inside was as flimsy as a kid's playhouse. *They don't even really need us*, he thought; *any idiot driving a well-made truck could just bash right through here*. He shook his

head and followed Trent; who cared if they were needed? A job was a job and, for him, experience.

Trent held up a hand, gathered his bearings, then pointed to the door on his left. Joseph opened it. As always, Trent's calculations were spot-on.

Inside the room sat an attractive woman in her thirties. She had curly blond hair that fell just below her shoulders and a slim figure that bespoke daily visits to the gym. She was well-dressed, and it was apparent from her outfit and her air that whatever life she had come from had been one of relative wealth. The only thing that marred her almost elegant appearance was the fear in her eyes; she clearly had little knowledge of why she was even here, and the appearance of Trent and Joseph had only made things more frightening. She was secured to her chair by straps.

Her room was slightly furnished: a cot, a table, and a chair, but otherwise, it was as sparse as the halls through which they had just come. The walls were of the same unadorned sheetrock, and the concrete floor had only a large area rug. This was obviously a temporary holding area, and Joseph knew now why Trent had been in such a hurry to scout and execute this particular job; another twenty hours or so and she would have been gone. Now, however . . .

The woman still stared at him as Trent walked around the room, checking for anything out of the ordinary such as listening devices or bugs, and anything that could give them any additional information for the Association. Joseph could tell that the woman was not only scared but confused. Perhaps she had been held for something she knew that was potentially useful to those who held her, an organization most likely attached to the government but one not given to public disclosures, but she probably did not even know *what* she knew. She'd seen the wrong person, read the wrong scrap of paper, overheard the wrong conversation, etc. Of course she had

no context for understanding what she knew and could not really use the info to damage anyone, but chances taken were risks invited, and so she was here. Unluckily for her, what she knew was also potentially damaging to the Association, and they had a much simpler way of handling problems like that.

“W-Who are you?” the woman finally managed to stammer, and Joseph could tell that good, old-fashioned hope had dawned in her mind. Perhaps she harbored thoughts of some elaborate rescue mission, a modern-day Batman and Robin. For a moment, Joseph felt deeply, powerfully sorry for the woman; he immediately quelled it. He would not give Trent further cause to ridicule him.

When the woman saw Joseph come toward her with the knife, her eyes flew wide open and seemed to bulge from her head. Joseph could see that her fantasies about rescue were gone now, and nothing remained but blind, animal terror. She began to shriek, loud, wordless blasts of sound, but Trent, who had moved behind her, yanked her head back by the hair and covered her mouth, turning her scream into muffled grunts. Joseph came forward and kneeled in front of her as she strained against her bonds.

“Be sure to get her carotid,” Trent said, and the woman screamed again from behind his hand.

Joseph ignored the veiled jab at what Trent considered ineptitude. Joseph knew what he was doing. He stepped to the side, away from where the splash would occur, and swung the knife in a tight, hard arc, ramming it deep into the woman’s throat and neatly slicing the artery in two.

Almost immediately, a spray of blood shot from the wound, and Joseph got his hand away from it just in time to avoid being doused. Trent also let go of the woman, and her screams

were now muffled by her own blood. She choked and coughed, more blood spilling from between her lips, and in the moments before she died, the woman's eyes once again met Joseph's, plaintive, wondering.

Why?

He felt nothing, and this pleased him greatly. He smiled, and the woman expired gazing at the cold, emotionless grin.

Trent grabbed his shoulder. "We're done here; move." They exited the same way they had come in and left the woman, the knife growing from her blood-soaked neck like a tumor, still in her chair.

* * *

Home was a three-bedroom apartment on the nicer, north side of the city. The rent, as well as all of the various bills, was paid by the Association, as Trent was, after all, training an employee. Joseph had his own room, and the day the two occupied the place, Trent installed a heavy deadbolt in the door to Joseph's room, then inserted the key and snapped it off in the lock, making it a permanent one-way lock, only accessible from the inside. Joseph knew exactly why Trent had done this, but he offered no thanks, nor did Trent expect any.

Now, with the night's work done and the morning sun dawning, Joseph lay on his bed, a Stephen King book open by him but ignored. Tonight's job had gone well, despite his small mistakes. He knew Trent was pleased with him. In fact, even his minor errors had amounted to merely a grunted, "Don't be so stupid next time," as they got back into their car to drive away, and Joseph knew that this was nearly a "Good job" in disguise.

Still, something was wrong about tonight. It was impossible to put into words or thought, but Joseph felt it, as a dog or cat might feel an earthquake hours before it occurs.

He kept getting the notion that he was not where he was supposed to be, or, more exactly, that he was not noticing something that should be apparent. The feelings were dim, subtle, but nonetheless maddening.

It had nothing to do with emotion; he had no problem with what he was doing and felt no guilt or sympathy, a fact that surprised him a little. The people who became his and Trent's clients meant nothing to him, were mere strangers whose deaths paid. Still, tonight's client had triggered something in his mind and a sense that something was askew.

He shut off his light and turned over; the sun was up now and edging through the shades, but this caused him no discomfort, as he was used by now to sleeping at odd hours under odd conditions. Even so, sleep would not come for hours.

Minister arrived at the airport at around 5:15 that evening and parked in the temporary area, paying his five dollars and picking a space somewhat removed from the terminal building. The mess at the apartment had been cleaned, and now, all that occupied his mind was Tueri. As far as he could gather, his client was now not only alone, but in a city that records had indicated he had never been to, a city that Minister knew backwards and forwards. On top of that, he had been reckless enough to request a meeting with the man he *knew* to be after his life. As Minister got out and locked his car, fighting the bitter wind to the terminal building, he reflected that, though everything about this job seemed simple and textbook, this was obviously a more complex job.

Cut the shit. Be honest with yourself.

OK, this was a more *disturbing* job, the more disturbing the more he found out.

The airport was crowded, humanity squeezing against itself to get somewhere. Minister didn't mind; in places like this, he drifted among the other people like a ghost, coming close to them and feeling their emotions without speaking to them or revealing himself. Today, however, it was impossible to lose himself in the crowd; his mind was on this goddamn job.

Too many oddities surrounded it: Kobal and his parlor tricks, Tueri's audacity, identical twin guards, and his mother brought into the mix. On top of everything was a feeling, vague and abstract as smoke but undeniable. Something was wrong. It pissed him off.

Minister bought a ticket from the airline window that was the least busy, and for the second time in one week, Minister went through the rigor morale of getting through airport security. He passed through the checkpoint with no problems; he was clean, leaving everything at home, even his pen. Tueri wanted to talk, and Minister was willing to give him that. There

would be other opportunities, if Tueri's lax attitude was any indication. The next time his guard went down, Minister would be ready. For now, he was only interested in what the man had to say.

As he approached, Minister saw that the next flight in at this particular gate was due in ten minutes, at 5:40 pm, and he smiled a bit; mark another one up for Tueri. The gate was half-full of people awaiting the incoming plane, and he knew that, after deboarding, the terminal would be bustling for twenty or thirty minutes. Yes, Tueri knew what he was doing.

There he was, standing at one of the wide windows, looking out at the runway, his hands clasped behind his back. Minister walked up beside him and affected a similar posture, not looking at him. Tueri spoke first.

"Hello, Joseph."

He hid his surprise better this time than he had in Kobal's office, only turning to look at Tueri slowly; he had heard no one call him by his first name in over twenty years, and, besides the man next to him right now, he did not even know of anyone alive who knew it.

Tueri was smiling slightly, but it was not a smug smile, only one of calm patience.

"Hello," Minister answered. Tueri turned to him and offered his hand; Minister took it and squeezed once, letting it go.

"Shall we have a seat?" Tueri gestured toward two unoccupied chairs, and Minister followed him over to them, settling himself comfortably and folding his hands in his lap. Tueri rested his hands on his knees, and, as they spoke, they remained in these positions, not looking at one another.

"I must apologize for my men, Joseph," said Tueri. "You must understand that it was entirely business."

Minister stayed silent.

“I hope it will be acceptable to you that I am honest with you throughout our conversation, even though I know you, by your nature, will distrust anything I say. However, I know that, for both of us, time is running short.” Tueri reached into his pocket and pulled out a slip of paper, laying it on the armrest between them. After a moment, when it was clear that Tueri wanted him to, Minister picked the paper and looked at it; it was an airplane ticket. Tueri was scheduled for a flight at 9:00 tomorrow night to Rome. Minister placed the ticket back on the armrest, and Tueri replaced it in his pocket.

“You see, I must be on that plane tomorrow night, and you . . . well, you need to have me dead by that time.”

“And I will.”

“Perhaps.”

They sat in silence for a minute.

Tueri said, “My stop here was primarily to gain supplies for what I need to do in Rome, but the risks increased because of that. And now, here you are. My side goal was to, in effect, take care of you so that I could get on my plane tomorrow night, but, sadly, I have failed in that.”

Minister smiled. “*You* didn’t fail, your *men* did. I could tell they were strong, but they weren’t trained very well.” He was surprised when Tueri laughed; he had meant the comment to needle.

“That’s quite true, but then, only a few of us were really trained for this sort of work.” Minister waited for him to continue, but he didn’t. He decided to try another approach.

“What do you need to do in Rome?”

“Murder a woman.”

Minister looked at the man hard, trying to detect the lie; it was not there. He knew liars; all of his clients who survived long enough lied, cajoled, bargained. This man was telling the absolute truth.

It was clear that this man was willing to give him answers. That the man wanted him dead made no difference; if Minister wanted to settle his mind, he must, albeit cautiously, open up to this man.

“May I ask why?”

“Of course,” Tueri said and looked Minister straight in the eye. His smile had not changed, but the look bespoke urgency and a hardness underneath. It fitted a man who had proved to difficult to bring down.

“I am going to kill a woman who will give birth to a man who will destroy the world.”

Again, no lie in his eyes, and now Minister didn’t know what to think. What came out next sounded stupid, and he was angry at himself the moment he had said it. “What do you mean?”

Tueri laughed a little. “This is where you start thinking I’m insane, right?” He shook his head. “I’m going to have a tough job of this.”

Minister stayed quiet. He did not feel like playing games. After a moment, Tueri continued.

“What I meant, in the plainest terms I can put it, is that I am going to Rome to make sure that the Antichrist does not get born.”

At that moment, the passengers from the airplane began to file into the terminal, some greeting friends and family, some opening cell phones and starting up conversations, some

merely walking away to baggage claim. The volume of noise in the room increased, and Tueri sat back, leaving Minister to process what he'd said.

This struck Minister in a way he was not prepared for. What the man had said was absolutely ridiculous, but Minister could not deny that it felt like the truth. He had no clue where this feeling had germinated, but upon hearing Tueri's mission, the hours he had spent looking through the book of Revelations poured back into his mind, and even though Tueri's statement was absurd, Minister believed in following instincts; indeed, instinct had been what saved his life a few hours ago. He trusted this feeling but not the story. Should he put his faith in a feeling or in the common sense that told him what he felt was impossible?

And, as always, the final question lingered behind everything: what should be done with the issue of this man's life or death?

Meanwhile, the terminal was thinning out, and an airport worker slid in the time of the next departure: 7:00 pm. Soon, Tueri and Minister were alone in the room.

Minister finally turned to Tueri, who looked at him calmly. "Look, I need to understand what is going on, and that means I need to ask you questions and get straight answers."

"I will offer whatever I know."

Minister opened his mouth and found that he did not know what to say; he was blank. Where to start? What was important? A question occurred to him, and as he had no way to phrase it so it would not sound ridiculous, he just came out with it.

"Who are you?"

Tueri's smiled. "Well, that's complicated, but the short answer is that I am basically you."

Minister shook his head, getting angry. "That doesn't make any sense."

Tueri rolled his eyes. “Listen, you’re not stupid, so I know what I said makes sense; you’re just not seeing it. Your training, your upbringing, your *profession*, that’s what I am.”

That was a little too obvious. “OK, you’re a—“

“—hitman, yes,” Tueri interrupted, “but only for this job, this one woman. This job is what my entire life has led to.” He paused, looking at Minister. “In fact, we could almost be brothers, bad twin and good twin.”

This cryptic bullshit was getting old, and Tueri seemed to know it.

“OK, let’s try this from a different angle. Do you remember the note I left you, outside this building?” Minister nodded. “Well, it’s mostly true. Those I work for are on the side of right, if you want to put it in simplistic terms, and God may be too, but He’s not going to help.”

Minister was confused, and this must have shown on his face because Tueri continued on a bit slower, as if he was talking to a slow child.

“About three years ago, I became involved in a group that has been together in one way or another for over three thousand years. This group’s mission has simply been to oppose whatever forces oppose God and what he stands for. I know that this raises more questions than it answers, but I have no time to really go into the whole implications of it. Instead, I’ll just focus on my part of it.

“The person who involved me in this was the local priest, Father Raker. Honestly, I thought him a dull sort of man until, one day, he asked me to stay behind after mass. He told me that he’d been watching me for some time—it must have been years at that point; my family and I were regular churchgoers and in the same parish for over a decade—and had begun to see that I was right to be told of this group. Evidently, the knowledge of this ongoing battle has been kept

from the general public but passed down through private channels, from generation to generation, and Father Raker said that he was passing it down to me.”

Minister smirked. “‘Ongoing battle?’ What battle is this, exactly?”

Tueri paused, seeming to think. After a moment, he continued. “Well, the battle has always been the same, really, hasn’t it? It’s a fight over the souls of those of us here on Earth. True, it sounds trite and almost absurd boiled down to a simple sentence like that, but it’s true. Father Raker told me that he needed help to complete a mission on behalf of this group, and he thought I would be useful in this completion.” Tueri snorted and looked about to smile but did not. “Of course, I didn’t believe him; what sane man would? I think he even knew that I wouldn’t, because he already seemed to have a plan. He pulled out a ticket to Rome and put it in my hand. ‘just go to Rome with me, all expenses paid,’ he said, ‘and if you still don’t believe me, at least you’ve gotten a free vacation.’ Well, I told him I’d think about it and went home.” He shook his head, staring down at his feet. “I did think about it and had decided to tell him that I couldn’t, but when I drove to the church later that night, I saw something that changed my mind.” Now he looked up, staring directly into Minister’s eyes. “I saw them kill him.”

Minister looked back at him and saw something that shook him a little: Tueri was frightened, and not of Minister. Just telling this story had scared Tueri badly, and that small fact alone lent credence to what he was saying. Tueri continued.

“I had parked in front of the church and walked around to the back, to the door that led to his apartment, but I could see through his window and saw that he had a guest. At first, I was going to just go ahead and knock anyway; Father was always a fairly accommodating person. But then I saw that this man was not a guest but an intruder. He had backed Father Raker into a corner in his living room, like he was an animal.” Tueri’s voice became low but did not shake.

“I remember thinking it was odd that he didn’t look frightened at all, almost like he’d been expecting this. Well, I watched them for a minute or so, and then the man just . . . just stepped forward and snapped Father Raker’s neck.” Tueri looked at Minister again. “I suppose you know how hard it really is to do such a thing, but this man did it with one hand; wrapped his fingers around Father Raker’s neck and simply squeezed. I could hear the snap outside. Then he just let go of Father Raker, let the body slump to the floor. He turned around, and I saw it.” He stopped, as if at a loss for words. Finally, Minister prompted him.

“Saw what?”

Tueri’s voice was nearly a whisper. I saw what that thing in Father Raker’s apartment really was.” As if that had opened the floodgates, the words poured from Tueri’s mouth. “Don’t bother asking what it was; I don’t know that I could properly put it into words, and I only saw it for a second, like a flash, then it looked human again, but when that man—that thing that had taken on the *appearance* of a man—turned around, its face was . . . beyond description, and it was the last thing Father Raker ever saw” He stopped again, breathing quickly, and seemed to calm himself. When he spoke again, he had regained his composure. “I’ve seen others since that night, and they rarely let their true selves show through, but I’ve noticed that you can feel them, like no disguise can cover what they are completely.”

Minister felt his heart skip a beat as he thought of Kobal, but his face betrayed nothing.

“Anyway, I ran back to my car and sped home, but I didn’t tell anyone. The next day, I went back to the church, but it was empty. No body, no assassin. Later, everyone just figured Father Raker had left for some reason and shrugged it off. The diocese sent another priest and never really asked anything about it, but that day, when I was leaving, I saw an envelope sitting on the pew that I always sit in on Sundays, and when I got close, I saw that it had my name on it.

He must have written it right after I left the previous afternoon, and I took it and left. When I read it at home, it told me everything I needed to know: what he was supposed to do, the girl he was to kill, what she would bring into the world if he—or *I*—didn't stop it, everything.

Basically, it said that the fight we are currently involved in is, to some extent, the one detailed in the Book of Revelations. It's the final fight to win control, and if this woman dies and does not give birth to this child, our side gains some significant ground. If I fail, this may be the strike that brings us to our knees; simply put, this is a key moment in this fight."

Minister was getting the feeling that Tueri knew everything about him, even his reading habits, and alarm bells were going off in his mind. He hid it, though, stayed calm; answers would come, he was sure of it, and his instincts told him that he was not in any danger that would preclude him from staying to get these answers. He finally said, "You're getting harder to believe."

"And yet no less truthful." The words were said without missing a beat and in a somewhat colder voice, as if this slow child had presumptuously cut off a teacher. "Listen, Mr. Minister. I have little care right now if you believe me or not; that may or may not come with time. What you asked for is information, and I am giving that to you. Look at me; do you honestly believe I am lying?"

Minister did just that, looked into Tueri's eyes, and could still find no lie. Either Tueri believed this was the truth, or it simply was the truth.

By this time, people were beginning to gather for the next flight, but Tueri paid them no mind, just kept talking in his slow, calm manner about these fantastic things. "The Bible can't really be trusted; it's mostly parable or simply fabrication, and the history in Father Raker's letter, and the resources it led me to, prove much more detailed. However, the Bible does

provide an outline of sorts, things that might happen, how events may turn out. This battle, perhaps because it is so important, has been foretold, but not its outcome.”

“Why fight at all?” Minister asked. “That same book says that God wins. Whether you kill this so-called Antichrist or not is really irrelevant, isn’t it?”

“Again, you remember my note, don’t you? *No* outcome is set because God is not behind us. This is something that our group has known for centuries. People go about in their lives thinking that God has a hand in everything, but the truth is much more complex.” He paused for a moment, considering, then continued. “Don’t get me wrong; God cares, but He doesn’t intervene; He loves, but He does not step in. God even saw the events in your life and cared, cared deeply, but He did not step in to stop any of them.” Tueri looked Minister in the eyes again, and Minister was struck by how much sheer will this man seemed to have. “The events of your life, God cared about especially but did not stop them. Simply put, we are on our own; human faith is the only providence that exists, and the lives we lead or don’t lead are those of our making only.” He leaned forward. “*Nothing* is destined or for sure, and that is why we must *fight*.”

“If this is true, why don’t all the Christians know this? Haven’t you told them?”

Tueri shrugged. “The proof is there, in front of all of them; even the Bible shows what I’ve said to be true. All anyone has to do is open their eyes. I can only guess that most people don’t want to; most would rather believe that something greater than themselves had a hand in their lives. Owning your own life is hard work.

Minister nodded. “OK, I see your point, but we’re getting off-track, Tueri. You aren’t answering my questions.”

“In fact, we’re exactly on-track, and your questions are being answered as best I can answer them. Now that you know, in essence, what we know, understand that the battle which would start with this boy’s birth four days from now does not have a resolution carved in stone as most believe; we will either win or lose, and both are equally as likely. While our side does not have God on it, the opposing side has great power on theirs. Call it the Devil, if you wish, but they will stop at nothing to achieve their victories.”

Minister leaned forward, a small smile on his face. Finally, a flaw in this man’s logic. “And you won’t? How can you be so righteous if you’re so eager to blow my fucking brains out, Tueri?”

Tueri did not falter, only looked directly back at Minister with the same calm eyes. When he spoke, his voice was not angry, but Minister detected the same coldness he’d heard before. “I don’t believe I remember saying that I was righteous. Let us understand each other, Minister. We are agents of opposing sides, whether you know it or not, and if I felt that I could achieve my goal easier by jamming a pen into your throat so I could make my flight tomorrow night, I would do it with absolutely no hesitation. However, things are, as usual, more complicated than that.”

Minister’s eyes had narrowed, his lips thinned, but he was almost glad for the rebuke. He had become too lax and forgotten his place; the man in front of him was, in no uncertain terms, an enemy, someone who was trying to kill him as much as he was trying to return the favor. He decided to let the issue drop, though he was not really clear on what Tueri had meant about sides.

“The group of which I am a part believes in God, of course, even though we know He won’t help us. In any event, it’s not really God we’re fighting for; we’re fighting for ourselves. The only information we have is what was gained thousands of years ago, which, of course, we

have no idea how that was gained in the first place, and what we find out ourselves, what we research, what we discover. Some of the most important things we've discovered are the date this child will be born, where he will be born, and you, Minister."

Minister stared back hard at Tueri. "What exactly do you know about me?"

"More than you will find comfortable. We knew that you were going to be given this job before you did, Minister. What is important now, though, is that I know your mind. For years you have worked with the understanding that the job rules everything; anything outside of the job is unimportant. But your mind, like everyone else's, is not set in stone. You may change, but that will be up to you."

Minister sighed. More cryptic bullshit; he was getting sick of this.

"I also know that your father routinely raped you for years as a child."

Minister's attention snapped back to Tueri, and only a passing pair of police officers gave him enough control to prevent himself from grabbing Tueri's throat. Instead, he decided on a warning, one he meant from the bottom of his soul. "If you say another word about my family, I will kill you here and now, no matter who is around. Do you understand me?"

Tueri nodded, his eyes grave. "Forgive me for that, but you were starting to disbelieve me again. Now you know that I am not lying, as no one knows of this. Isn't that correct?"

It was; the only person outside his family who had known this fact was dead, had been dead for quite a long time.

Tueri went on without an answer. "I already told you that if you stay your course and kill me, our side will take a heavy blow, one of the worst in centuries. If you agree to what I am about to propose, we will take a great leap forward. This all depends upon you."

Minister stayed silent, and Tueri went on.

“I propose for you to leave off your mission of killing me and instead kill your employer, the man who calls himself Kobal.”

Understanding filled Minister, and his lips tightened again. So that was it; the same old routine he'd heard dozens of times before: *I'll pay you double what you're getting now! Don't kill me; kill your boss! I'll make it worth your while!* True, Tueri had been much smoother about it, as most of the people who offered such a “deal” were crying and begging at the time, but it was still the same load of bullshit, a desperate ploy to save his own life.

“I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Tueri, but I don't make deals, shift allegiances, or accept bribes.”

“Oh, I know, Mr. Minister. I'm not offering you any money; I'm only offering you a chance to do the right thing, and after you perhaps exchange a few words with Kobal, you might feel much more inclined to accept my offer.”

“And why would I want to go and speak to Kobal without you already being dead?”

“Well, forgive me for bringing your family into this again—“Minister tensed a little “—but Kobal has a great deal of knowledge about your family, and I'm sure, if properly persuaded, he can tell you much about yourself that you do *not* know. He's been watching you a long time.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Minister asked, but Tueri shook his head.

“I think I'm done answering questions.” He paused as a bored voice announced the general boarding call for the 7:00 pm flight. People began filing toward the terminal door, again leaving the two men sitting alone. “Besides,” continued Tueri, “our time together should be coming to an end; I believe we may start appearing more conspicuous than either of us wants if we sit here much longer.”

Minister inwardly agreed. “So what happens now?”

“Now you consider my offer.”

Minister clenched his teeth, truly angry now at continually being treated like a kid.

“Listen, I told you—“

Tueri cut him off, as if what he was saying was not at all important. “I know your stance in this matter and don’t really need to hear it again. I’m asking you to put aside your somewhat rigid standards that you’ve relied upon for your work for so long. I understand this is not an easy task, but I’d like once more to lay out the facts, that which is obvious and undeniable.

“First, I and my group have been watching you for some time; that is how I am able to have information about you that, logically, no one could possibly have. Second, Kobal is in no way affiliated with the association or organization you work for, and I can guess that you’ve not informed them of this little side project, leaving you free to complete or abandon it at your will. Third, I assure that his death will elicit no response.” He smiled a cold, pitiless smile. “Those he works for care little for underlings like him.”

He leaned forward again, even though they were nearly alone again in the room.

“Finally, you have had serious misgivings about this job from the start; those doubts and ill feelings certainly have grounding to them, but to obtain the answers you seek as to *why* this job feels so wrong to you, I’m afraid Kobal is the only one who can provide them.”

Tueri leaned back and stood up, talking again in his brisk, nonchalant voice, and Minister was again struck by his similarity to a teacher addressing a student. “If what I’ve just said becomes something you choose to ignore, you will still have a chance to complete your . . . mission. I personally have faith that you will choose to accept my offer, and to demonstrate that faith I propose that we set our next meeting at 6:00 am in my hotel room at the Regent.” He looked at Minister. “You know where this is?”

Minister nodded, marveling at this freely given information. Tueri was either drastically overconfident, or he really did believe Minister was going to play along. *Fool*, he thought, but the more logical, clinical part of his mind answered back immediately: *That will depend on what Kobal has to say.*

Meanwhile, Tueri was writing on a small business card from the hotel. He handed it to Minister, who put it in his pocket without reading it. “I’m sure that you have the resources to discover that the information on that card is correct and whether or not I have laid traps for you, which I will not be doing; at this stage, they only waste time.”

Minister said nothing.

“If you attempt to contact me in that room before 6:00 tomorrow morning, you will not find me; I require that you speak to Kobal before you speak to me again; if you do not do this, I will not be in that room at all, and I *will* elude you until my flight tomorrow night. Likewise, if I think that you are following me as we leave the airport tonight, the same situation will occur; I will be on that flight, not having spoken to you again. Do you understand?”

Minister nodded.

“Good. Then, if you don’t mind terribly much, I’d prefer if you left first, Mr. Minister, but I must say that it was a pleasure to meet you, and I hope that this will end well.” He again proffered his hand, which Minister, now standing himself, took and pumped once; he could not help feeling a grudging respect for this man. He began to walk away, then turned back to Tueri, who was walking back to look out the wide window to the runways.

“Tueri.”

He turned, eyebrows raised.

“Your man at my apartment said something before . . .”

“Ah, yes, Simon,” and Tueri smiled affectionately. Minister ignored it.

“He said that my mother was being used, that she was a tool in this. What did he mean?”

“That, Mr. Minister, will likely be the most interesting part of the story Kobal will be telling you.” He turned back to the window. Minister considered for a moment and turned and walked away from the terminal.

Well, I certainly wasn't expecting it to go quite that way.

Minister's head was full as he walked back toward the lobby. Never before had he encountered a situation that pitted his logic against his devotion to the job. The facts he'd laid out at the end of their conversation were all truths; that was something he couldn't deny or ignore. He needed to talk to Kobal. He needed the rest of his questions answered.

As he walked out to the parking lot, the sun was already down, and he sat in the cold darkness of his car as he dialed the number Kobal had given him; he had a meeting to arrange.

Joseph left his room as quietly as he could, stepping in all the places that would lessen the sound of his passage. Trent was not asleep, he knew; in the time that he had been under the man's tutelage, he had never actually seen him sleep, though it occurred to him logically that, at some time, he had to. Now, as was his usual practice during the early evening hours after dinner, Trent was in his room, with the door closed, reading. Even to one familiar with the routine of Trent and Joseph, Joseph's actions tonight would seem strange. After all, Trent never was one to demand information about Joseph's comings and goings; in fact, the first time Joseph had requested to leave to go see a movie, more than a year and a half ago, Trent had shrugged and muttered under his breath that he couldn't care less. That incident had shown Joseph clearly that the lines of relationship between himself and Trent lay almost entirely in a professional vein.

Still, tonight, Joseph wanted very much for Trent to not know he was gone. A voice inside him, a voice that had awakened some months earlier and had not yet quieted, urged tonight's activities into secrecy, though Joseph still didn't know exactly why.

Joseph moved to the front door of the apartment, let himself out silently, and closed it behind him. He took the elevator to the ground floor, where he walked out into the slowly gathering darkness.

The incessant nagging that something was wrong had continued since the job on the female eyewitness. The night played through his mind with the maddening repetition of a song verse stuck in the head or a fever dream. Over the past weeks, Joseph had hoped that some part of the night would isolate itself as the main cause of his disturbance, and finally, four days ago, the dam inside him burst, and what was behind it was a night nearly six months ago. Trent, in teaching Joseph about the job, had taken him on what he called a "field trip." The purpose,

Trent said, was to learn how to make certain types of death look like others so as to cover one's tracks. As he had explained all of this to Joseph, they had driven to an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of the city; inside sat a man, naked, taped with duct tape to a chair in the middle of the room. His mouth had been likewise taped, and he gazed at the two entering the room with abject terror. Beside him was a tray full of instruments, some surgical—a scalpel, clamps, probes—and some not—a hammer, a handsaw, garden shears.

Joseph had not been afraid, sickened, horrified, or any of the normal reactions one might have upon being confronted with such a scene. Instead, he had looked over at Trent, who merely shed his coat and said, "Let's get started."

The portion of that long night that was now fresh in Joseph's mind was the lesson involving the skull and deaths that could be simulated with various forms of manipulation. The one in particular he remembered well involved removal of a section of the skull, and he remembered now working while Trent spoke behind him:

"Remember, Joseph, that humans work by symmetry; as our world and our bodies possess some form of mirroring effect, so does our self-conscious mind recreate these patterns in everything we do."

Joseph smiled to himself as he hailed a cab; it always amused him when Trent spoke this way, so different from his normal cadence of speech, as if he had suddenly been possessed by the soul of some expert. "35th and Harcourt," he told the driver and continued to replay the rest of Trent's dissertation as the cabbie drove on:

"Because of this, we need to work at being random, if the death in question calls for it. OK, your victim needs to die in a crash of some sort, and you don't want to just bludgeon away, so you're chipping away at the skull, but when you leave the body, what if you didn't watch

yourself? Now the forensics people see a hole in the head that couldn't have happened by accident, and things get complicated. They start looking for more inconsistencies, and hey, wow, here's a stray hair that they can trace! Then you're in the shit. So you work at randomness. For example, look at what you're doing, right now."

Joseph felt himself blush as he remembered that night. He had stepped back from the man, who was, for the moment, unconscious from pain, and looked at the hole he had been chipping. He remembered grimacing slightly when he had seen that, almost against his will, he had chipped a nearly perfect rhombus, diamond shape. It hadn't looked natural at all, and he had expected some sort of reprisal from Trent, but his teacher had merely stepped forward, taken the tools—a razor-sharp chisel and a small hammer—and taken over for a moment as he continued:

"Of course, everyone has their own method, but I find that a rough star shape with an extra, small point, does the job fairly well, looking just random enough but not patently so; in short, nothing that would normally be questioned."

Trent had stepped back and shown Joseph, who had seen just what Trent had mentioned: a small, star-shaped hole with a nearly imperceptible sixth point that was more crack than separation. It looked completely random and would, he suspected, have led any coroner to quite justifiably rule accidental death.

"Of course, you'll want to avoid leaving too much of a pattern; even cops have a few brains, but you will likely not need to approximate this exact type of death too often, so just keep this method in mind for when the eventuality occurs. Let's move on."

Next was removal of the eyes, a skill Joseph had shown surprising aptitude at, but this was where the memory of the night had begun to grow hazy; it was the lesson involving the skull

that Joseph's mind had trapped and would not let go, and that was the one he needed to investigate.

The cab had arrived at Joseph's destination, and he got out, handing the driver a twenty and a ten, ignored the man's thank you at the large tip, and turned to the building at 35th and Harcourt: the county's medical examiner's office. Inside this building were records of all the deaths occurring in the county over the past thirty years. After that date, they were transferred to an off-site facility in another state, but what Joseph sought was only about fifteen years ago, so his answer lay inside. He walked in.

The girl sitting at the desk was new, a night staff clerk who was getting minimum wage, maybe a little above. She had been hired two weeks ago, and from the look on her face at Joseph's arrival—a wide-eyed, somewhat blank stare—she was not yet comfortable with her duties. Joseph knew this because he had watched this office for some time. He had wanted the information inside even before Trent's discussion of cracked skulls, but that lesson had given Joseph's desire a new urgency. He walked up to the girl's desk and flipped open a badge showing his face; above it was a complicated card, small-type information crowding its surface. In the upper right corner was a staff with two snakes around it. He spoke in a brusque voice.

“Simmons, from Crawford's office; I need to look over some files about the Meyer case.”

The girl's eyes widened even more, and Joseph knew that none of what he just said had made any sense to her. This was what Joseph had banked on; the information that had come out of his mouth was complete nonsense, but the tone of voice was the important thing, a voice that said he had things to do and places to be, so hurry up. His gambit was a bit risky maybe; there was a chance that the girl might deny him entry, then remember his face and report his

description to her superior. However, he felt that simply confusing her into compliance might work.

And it *was* working. She took down the badge's number (a fake), and smiled at him sheepishly as she took a ring of keys from a drawer in her desk and motioned him to follow here. She let him into the rear of the building, into a long corridor with doors on either side. On each of the doors were plaques; the first read A-E, the second F-J, and so on. They stopped at the door marked K-O, and she let him in. The room contained rows of file cabinets and a small desk with a green lamp on it. It was exactly like a library, in fact, only the reading material here was somewhat more grim.

“When you're finished, please let yourself back into the lobby,” the girl said in a soft, unsure voice, then parroted a warning that was probably the only important part of her job: “Please remember that you may take no part of any file from these rooms, and doing so constitutes an offence punishable by—“

But Joseph had already left her behind and was walking among the file cabinets, ignoring her. She left silently, closing the door behind her.

What he was looking for, he had actually resisted thinking about; it was his subconscious mind that had made the connection, and now he was just here to disprove it. The possibility of such a thing would just change his life in too drastic a measure to even consider, so he felt confident that what he found tonight would put this idea to rest as mere fancy and not fact.

He finally found the file drawer marked Mid-Mit and opened it, flipping through the names on the various files in the “Min” section. There they were: Selena and Warren. He ignored his father's file—Joseph already knew the particulars about his death—and pulled Selena's file, walking to the desk and clicking on the light, which cast a softer, more comfortable

glow than the rather harsh glare of the fluorescents above. He opened the file and found the autopsy photos in the back. The photo he was looking for was third in the stack, a close-up of the head-wound that was cited as causing death.

A rough star shape with a small, almost undefined, sixth point.

He had expected rage. He had expected a red haze of anger to envelope him, and drive him to do terrible things. He had expected perhaps a feeling of horrible embarrassment, that he had not seen this, that he had not realized it earlier. He had even expected fear, terror that the man who was his mentor was the sole reason he had no family. He had not expected numbness, this icy cold in his stomach and heart, this dead feeling that something must be done.

Joseph picked up the file and replaced it in front of his father's, closed the file drawer, and walked out of the room, shutting off the light behind him. He walked out into the lobby, where the girl stood quickly and opened her mouth to say something, but he was already outside before she had a chance. He hailed a cab, muttered the address of his apartment building, and sat in the back of the car, thinking nothing.

He felt that this was a marker for him, this new feeling. He would take this and use it, and it would become him, what he was, what he would be.

This cold.

This numbness.

The cab drove Joseph through the evening as he sat silently, his mind devising a plan, his heart sheathed in ice, and he smiled a little, discovering that he would get to like this feeling.

Minister walked through the doors with a mild sense of déjà vu; just as with the first day he had come here to meet with Kobal the first time, the sky was spitting down sleet. Hardly anything had changed about the lobby of the place, and the secretary still sat at the same desk, her head bent over something on which she was writing. By rote, Minister walked softly over to the door that led to the stairs, but this time, he was stopped.

“You may use the elevator if you wish, sir; he’s expecting you.”

The woman’s voice was soft but by no means meek; it even had a bored quality, as if this bit of knowledge were something Minister should have taken into account, and he was acting foolish by trying to sneak around. In fact, however, this knowledge disturbed him, as he had not given Kobal any indication that he was coming. He had wanted this visit to be a surprise to him, but Kobal had found out somehow. Impossible, but there it was.

Minister gritted his teeth in annoyance as he stood with his hand on the stairway door; he would have to improvise his entire visit now, taking into account that Kobal was upstairs right now, waiting for him.

Goddamn it.

“I’ll take the stairs regardless, if you don’t mind,” he said to the secretary as he went through the door, but he heard her response before the door swung shut, and it sounded as if she were smiling. “As you wish, *sir*.” The last word had heavy colorings of sarcasm in it, but Minister ignored her and started up the stairway.

The hallway leading down to Kobal’s office seemed, if anything, a little older, a little more run-down; Minister noticed paint flaking from the baseboards, pops and snarls of loosened carpet, and near the end of the hall, an entire swatch of wallpaper that had come loose and was

hanging like a flap of dead skin from the wall. That end of the hall was buried in shadow as the fluorescent bulb down there had evidently burned out, and he was surprised to find that it made him nervous not to be able to see beyond that hanging flap of wallpaper to the doors beyond. His arms broke out in gooseflesh, and his eyebrows contracted in anger at himself.

What are you, five? Focus, for fuck's sake!

He turned his attention to Kobal's door and slipped a 9 mm. pistol from under his coat. He jacked a bullet into the chamber as softly as he could; it made a barely audible *click*. The snub-nosed pistol had a modified silencer screwed into the barrel, one that Minister had touched up himself. It would silence only three shots effectively, while a normal silencer could quiet perhaps twice that, but those three shots would be very quiet.

Three would be more than enough.

Kobal was sitting behind his desk and didn't look up from whatever he was writing when Minister entered: "OK, what are you here—"

Minister caught the side of Kobal's desk and shoved it as hard as he could away from Kobal, interrupting the man's annoyed words. The desk was on carpet and did not move very far, but Minister shoved it with enough force to leave Kobal far enough away that he could not reach it from his chair. This entire procedure had taken perhaps three seconds, and only another two passed as Minister swung the pistol around precisely at Kobal's expensive-looking shoe and pulled the trigger. The sound was of a hammer hitting a thick mattress, a soft, hissing *whump!* And a small semi-circle appeared at the tip of Kobal's shoe, as if a small animal had taken a bite there. Red began to bleed out slowly from where the man's pinky toe had once been.

Kobal kept his scream, but only just barely; it became a high, keening sound as his head jerked back, his teeth clenched, cords on his neck standing out. His hands gripped the armrests

of his chair, the knuckles white, and he stayed in this position long enough for Minister to calmly grab one of the chairs from the other side of the room and pull it in front of Kobal. In the moving, a drawer of Kobal's desk had come partially open, and he saw what he had expected was there: a small, almost dainty, .38 gun. He set his chair directly between Kobal and the drawer and sat down, his legs casually crossed, his gun on his knee.

Done with his scream, Kobal now glared at Minister with narrowed eyes. Sweat stood out on his forehead in visible beads, and he panted from an open mouth, but Kobal still looked as if he felt in control. Minister ignored it.

“What, no magical disappearing act with my bullets this time?” When Kobal did not answer, Minister got on with the main order of business. “Forgive my abrupt greeting, but I want our conversation today to be somewhat more frank than you may be used to, and I wanted to start off with a gesture that would let you know how impatient I am.” He gestured down at Kobal's missing toe. “Now that you know where I stand, I believe we can get down to real business. Do you agree?”

Kobal nodded. “A question, though, before you begin.”

Minister waved his hand to indicate that Kobal could go on.

“Have you completed the job?”

For a moment, Minister was too shocked to do anything but stare. Then he laughed, and laughed hard. “Are you kidding me? *That's* what you're worried about, the job? You are one dedicated man.”

“I'll take that as a no,” Kobal said, and Minister heard heavy contempt in his voice. Kobal shook his head. “We certainly made a mistake about you, Minister; you are absolutely worthless.”

The smile fell from Minister's face, and he leaned forward, placing his shoe over Kobal's wounded foot, pressing down on the bloody hole. Kobal jerked forward and moaned, but though his voice was choked with pain, he still sounded amused. "Sent two incompetent men to kill you, and he talks his way out of it? You're a fucking idiot."

Minister's eyes narrowed, and he felt anger and confusion stirring in his belly; he was no longer in control here, and that infuriated him. Kobal went on.

"We spent so much time on you, Minister, and you are so very inept. They barely taught him anything, and he's besting you at every turn. You are a waste of nearly twenty years of investment—" Kobal paused to look Minister directly in the eyes "—and we are not happy about it."

Minister answered in a low voice. "What are you talking about?" He leaned back and removed his foot from Kobal's; he wanted answers, and people in pain do not talk coherently. More unsettling, however, was the fact that he could tell that Kobal was not persuaded by pain in the slightest.

"Do you mean to tell me that you haven't figured all this out yet?" Kobal looked shocked, and Minister felt nineteen again. "We've always known that you were no genius, but we always credited you with *some* intellectual power."

Minister felt like growling from frustration; what the fuck was going on here? He spoke to cover his discomfort. "Tueri said you had information about my life that I would be interested in hearing. What interests me is how you know anything about me whatsoever. We'd never met before I came to your office for the first time, yet you knew my name, how to contact me, everything. Let me lay this straight for you." He leaned forward and decided he would play his final gambit. "You will tell me what you know about me and how you know it, or I will make

you experience the most intense pain of your entire life over the next three or four hours. I will make you scream, beg, and wish you were dead, and I urge you to believe me when I say that I was taught very well.”

Kobal looked Minister squarely in his eyes: “Who do you think taught you, you insolent little fuck?”

The night's mission, for the first time in a while now, was a long-distance kill, achieved simply by a sniper rifle and a conveniently lit window; in fact, Joseph had had to cajole, and swallow not a small amount of pride, just to get Trent to come along. He could feel his mentor's annoyance at being present at such a simple job.

And Joseph could certainly understand Trent's exasperation. The job was possibly the easiest a man in their profession could come across, which was why it paid so little. The client, they were told, would be coming into his apartment between 9:00 and 9:30 that night; his habit was to turn on the living room light, check his messages (he always had some, as the man was a notorious playboy), and move into his bedroom to change. Joseph and a rather unwilling Trent had gone to the roof of a building one block away, set up the tripod rifle, and simply waited. At 9:14 pm, the living room light had come on. Joseph centered the crosshairs above the man's right ear and put a bullet into his head as he was checking his answering machine. He slumped to the floor, still with the same, serene and expectant countenance on his face, a small splatter of blood and hair on his apartment door.

Joseph had given a small nod of satisfaction and instantly started breaking the gun down, replacing the parts into the leather case he had brought them in. Trent, meanwhile, had stood near the access door to the roof, tapping his foot impatiently, and Joseph had barely finished when Trent opened the door and headed down to the ground floor of the abandoned building Joseph had picked for the job. Joseph caught up to him on the fourth floor and followed his teacher silently.

Now, as they approached the landing for the second floor, Joseph gripped the handle of the case tightly and swung it in a hard, tight arc, catching Trent in the left temple with the case's

metal-covered bottom corner. This action, violent as it was, might have appeared casual and nonchalant, as Joseph's facial expression did not change in the slightest; his heart, however, was beating rapidly, and he could feel his forehead breaking out in sweat, for he knew that what was to happen would not be easy.

Trent let out a soft grunt, and his knees buckled, sending him head-forward down the last four steps, and he hit the landing hard. Joseph was on him in an instant, but despite the blow, Trent was already moving, attempting to buck Joseph off. He did it silently, and this, more than anything else, scared Joseph; he had begun something that would end badly, and now the next five seconds would determine who it would end badly for. Joseph moved almost without thinking, pulled a small, razor-sharp folding knife from his pocket, clicked open the blade and leaned forward, slicing cleanly through the tendons on the back of Trent's right foot. He could have easily slashed one of the many arteries in the ankle, but he wanted Trent alive. For now.

Another soft grunt, but Trent did not scream, and as Joseph struggled to reach the other foot, the tide turned. Suddenly, he felt Trent squirm beneath him, turning over, and a second later, Trent had his arm crushed against Joseph's windpipe. Joseph gagged, and his hands came up to clutch wildly at the strong arm that was cutting off his air. Black dots flashed before Joseph's eyes, and he knew that if he passed out, he would never wake up. The move he made was not conscious. What he had been learning over the last two years suddenly took over with calm, cold, ruthless efficiency. The hand still holding the knife swung up, past his head, and buried the blade hilt-deep in Trent's armpit.

The release of pressure was slight, but Joseph was ready for it and broke the hold, scrambling forward up halfway up the stairs before bothering to care about his throat, which felt like it was on fire. He whipped around to find Trent already up the first two steps, crawling

instead of standing, his cut tendon spilling blood on the floor. “Don’t move,” Joseph tried to say, but nothing came but a whisper. He coughed and stumbled as he drew a pistol from under his coat and pointed it at Trent. He tried again, and the command came out as a croak but at least loud enough to hear. Trent kept coming, though, his eyes burning. Joseph aimed down and pulled the trigger. The gun was horribly loud in so enclosed a space, and it seemed odd that such a catastrophic sound should put so small a hole in Trent’s right hand. “Don’t move,” he said again, and this time, Trent stopped, his hand cradled to his chest.

For a few moments, they didn’t move; Joseph stood where he was, still trying to get his wind back, and Trent lay-crouched on the stairs, staring up at Joseph with a strange half-smile and bleeding at both extremities. That smile bothered Joseph; it was the smile of someone for whom everything is working exactly according to plan. To make matters worse, when Trent spoke, it was in a voice that indicated the same thing, even if the question did not.

“And to what, exactly, do I owe this rather abrupt shift in our relationship, Joseph?”

Joseph opened his mouth and found that he had nothing to say. He had rehearsed this moment for over a month now, and while the circumstances were right, Joseph had the feeling that this was not what he wanted, that he was fucking up somehow, and in a big way. He was dismayed to discover that he was on the raw edge of sheer panic.

What in God’s name have I started?

Meanwhile, Trent didn’t even seem to be in pain, nor did he show any signs of suffering in his voice. “Well, I’m waiting, Joseph.”

“I went to the county’ medical examiner’s office a few weeks ago.” Trent looked amused. “Do you know what I was looking for, Trent?”

“No, nor do I care.”

It was this smug tone, that finally unlocked the rage Joseph had been bottling up for a month, and he screamed, even though it hurt badly to do so: “*You killed my mother, you fucking bastard!*”

The reaction he expected most would have been denial, but Trent’s laughter took Joseph completely by surprise. It was a long, hearty laugh, too, as if Trent had just heard a really fine joke; he leaned back and chortled for nearly half a minute, all the while holding his injured hand, now caked with blood, to his stained shirt. Finally, the laugh tapered off, and he looked squarely at Joseph.

“I killed her, Joseph.” His voice was soft, like the purr of a cat that had just killed the canary, perhaps torturing it to death. “I cracked open her skull and set her body up at the bottom of those stairs; then I waited. Waited years. Then I found you, told you what I told you, and you came to me. It’s all worked exactly as it was supposed to have, and we are here because we are supposed to be.” Joseph had a ridiculous urge to flee back up the steps; the only thing that kept him from doing so was that he did not want to turn his back on this man, whoever he was.

“This is normal, Joseph; when apprentices are ready, they take over their master’s profession. It is ancient, what you and I are engaged in, and that is right, that is appropriate. I die, you live. Step forward, take your place, and be quick about it.” Trent leaned back against the stairwell, his face wooden.

Joseph took a hesitant step forward, raised the gun, and aimed it at Trent’s head. Trent began to laugh again, and the action was reactionary; Joseph just wanted that laughter to stop. He jerked the trigger, as he was taught he never should do, and the bullet that should have entered neatly above the ear caught the top of Trent’s head, mushrooming and taking the top of the skull off and splattering the blood and brain along the walls of the stairwell. Joseph pulled

the trigger again and again, pumping round after round into Trent's inert corpse, and when the gun in his hand finally clicked empty, Joseph found himself with a body that was, basically, decapitated.

He got his breathing under control. Then he stepped past, avoiding the blood that was beginning to pool, and went down the last flights of stairs two at a time.

He felt better outside, after he had breathed in the night air. He returned to the car and drove through the night streets, heading back home. He was not really worried. He would, of course, need to report Trent's death to the Association, honestly, if necessary, but he was confident that it would not raise much fuss; perhaps, as Trent had suggested, they were expecting it.

Now, Joseph began to smile. For the first time, truly, he was free, his own person, able to do as he wished and answer to himself. This was a new feeling, and as he drove to what was now his own home, Joseph began to feel reborn.

He knew, somewhere deep in his mind that was not churning with chaos at what he had just learned about himself, that he probably looked quite foolish, sitting there with his mouth ajar, but Minister couldn't seem to remedy the situation at all; he could not honestly remember a time when he had ever felt so completely put-off. Kobal, meanwhile, seemed to be enjoying it, smiling widely, and for the first time, Minister realized that the man's teeth were yellow, some of them brown or near-black, as if he had not brushed in years.

"Died hard, didn't he?" He laughed again, and this time, in addition to fighting down the urge to cover his ears, Minister felt on the verge of a raw scream. He successfully battled both and stood up; he wasn't really going anywhere, but he felt he needed to move, to do something, if only to let off energy. Kobal's eyes followed him, waiting patiently and with great amusement. After a few moments, when he was sure his voice would not tremble in the slightest, Minister spoke.

"This is some trick, some con; this can't . . ." and then he stopped, because he knew his words were stupid. In response, Kobal chuckled.

"This is no trick. We've been cultivating you for this job for your entire pathetic life."

"Who is 'we'? Who do you work for, anyway?"

Kobal sighed, as if he was talking to a small, stupid child. "I work for the Association, the same Association you work for, the same Association that has watched you since birth, though considering how slowly it's taking you to digest all of this, I think they have been working with the wrong person."

Minister's head swam. The Association? His entire life? What was going on here, and how was it possible, if indeed everything Kobal said was true? Meanwhile, Kobal was continuing.

"Now listen, and listen carefully." He leaned forward and stared up at Minister. His face was pale from loss of blood, but his eyes sparkled with light and strength. "You were raised for this—and more. We picked out your family, and we set events in motion to bring you here, to this very special task. This, in essence, is your destiny, because we have *made* it your destiny."

That's impossible, thought Minister. Trent could not have been older than twenty-seven or –eight when Minister killed him, which would put him at around ten years of age when Minister was born. Out loud, he said, "Who are the Association?"

Kobal smiled. "That you will not find out from me, and you may never find out at all. In fact, if I were you, I'd hope never to meet them." Kobal's grin widened. "They are far less cordial than I."

Minister walked back to his chair and sat down in front of Kobal, keeping the gun pointed in his general direction. Still, even with the gun, even though Kobal was wounded, Minister felt unsafe. He wanted to end this, and quickly, but he had other things he had to know. "Who is Tueri?" He paused, wondering how best to ask what he was wondering. "Is what he says true, the mission he's on?"

A wave of contempt washed over Kobal's face, and he grunted. "Whether or not it's true doesn't matter, Minister. Even if it is true, he will fail because he's up against powers that he can't comprehend." Kobal paused and smiled briefly. "He had an upbringing very similar to yours, Minister; I'm sure he hinted at that, probably trying to use it to get you on his side. He, too, was targeted at birth and raised for this mission."

Minister blinked but did not answer; Kobal went on.

“Is he going to Rome? Yes. Is he going there to kill someone? Yes. Will he succeed? No, because you’re going to kill him before he boards that plane tonight.”

“And what makes you think I’m going to do that, Kobal?”

He had meant to throw Kobal off, but the man answered right back, as if he had expected this. “Tell me the last time you entered into a contract with an employer that you didn’t honor and bring to completion.”

Minister was silent; he knew of no such time.

Kobal nodded. “You’ll do this because you agreed to do it.” He smiled again. “You are locked into this by your own personality, a personality we have helped to create, but even that doesn’t matter, because as you’ve finally learned today, this kill is what you have lived for your entire life; it’s the reason you’re living, and you cannot deny what you are made for.”

Kobal sat back while Minister turned his words over in his mind. During this time, Kobal sat quietly. Finally, Minister raised his head and spoke to Kobal, who looked smug. He had one more question: “Why me?”

And again, as if he had been expecting it, Kobal answered immediately. “I honestly don’t know. If it had been up to me, you’d still be Daddy’s little whore. There are others, I’m sure, but right here, right now, you are the one—and you must succeed. If you don’t, you will die.”

“I hate to disappoint you, but if you want him dead so badly, your Association will have to find someone else; I’m through with you and them.”

“You’re wrong, in fact, Minister. You *will* do this, if not because your duty calls you to, because if you do not, you cannot conceive of what will happen to you.”

Sighing, Minister stood up; threats wearied and bored him, and raised his gun. “When I said I was through with you, I meant it.”

Understanding dawned in Kobal’s face only a second before Minister pulled the trigger, sending a bullet square between the man’s eyes, and he died with that same expression—dawning uncertainty and worry—on his face, the new hole in his head dribbling blood down his nose. The wall behind his head was stained with his blood, and Minister could hear more blood dripping onto the ratty carpet from the wound. He knew it was unnecessary, but Minister aimed at the corpse’s heart and fired another shot; the sound was a little louder than the other two but still quiet enough to be confined to the room. He sheathed the gun and stepped toward the door, pausing to look back only once. Kobal sat in his chair, still staring at him, bleeding from top, middle, and bottom. Minister nodded, satisfied, and turned off the office’s lights as he closed the door behind him.

Minister reached the lobby floor and slipped out quietly from the stairwell, hoping to avoid attracting attention from the secretary. He was pleased, then, to see that she was still engaged in work on her computer, arranged so that she had her back to the stairwell door as well as the door out to the street; the soft clatter of her typing filled the large, cavernous room. Minister walked softly to the door, his footsteps making very little sound next to the sound of typing keys, and it was on his way out the door that he heard it.

Giggling.

The secretary was giggling.

He turned back quickly, expecting the girl to be looking at him, but she was still turned, still working at her computer, and Minister was shocked to find that his arms had broken out in

gooseflesh. He suddenly and certainly decided that he would never come even close to this place ever again.

Outside, he hailed a cab and put Kobal, his revelation, and his secretary out of his mind; he had more important things to focus on. He gave the cabbie the address to a hotel near the airport and sat back, closing his eyes as evening fell.

The setting sun threw a mellow light over the face of the expensive hotel, and as Minister got out of the cab and paid the driver, it seemed that the shining yellow windows were the only source of warmth left in the evening; the relatively treeless land around the airport allowed the wind to blow with vicious strength, and even his \$1,000 dollar coat could not keep Minister from chattering. He hurried into the hotel lobby and paused a moment to let the heat work.

The debate over whether or not this was the right course of action had occupied Minister's mind all the way, and, though he felt confident in his decision, it sat uneasily with him. No matter what he thought about Kobal, the man had been right: Minister was a creature of habit, and this situation had put him outside of his comfort zone. Now, standing in a hotel lobby and readying himself to meet, again, with his quarry, Minister forced himself to take a deep breath and calm down. He had to focus. When that was done, he walked over to the first bank of elevators.

He got off on the fourteenth floor and walked down the corridor toward 1458. The well-lit, carpeted hallway was a welcome contrast to Kobal's building; there was something seriously wrong with that place.

He reached Tueri's door and knocked softly. Tueri opened after only a few seconds; he had obviously been waiting. Despite his earlier calm appearance, Minister could see that Tueri was nervous. This was, after all, a risky play, and there was no way Tueri could predict which way Minister would go; hadn't he admitted as much in the conversation at the airport? Minister ignored him and walked in, sitting in one of the armchairs by the window. Tueri shut the door and followed, sitting on the bed and watching Minister's face. After a moment or two of silence, he came right out with it. "Well?"

Still, he looked out the window at the dying sun for nearly a minute before answering; He had felt in control too infrequently lately, and he wanted to savor it for a while. Tueri, to his credit, sat silently, his fingers interlocked, and said nothing more. Finally, Minister turned to him.

“Kobal is dead.”

A small, cautious smile crept over Tueri’s face, but his eyes remained narrow. “Are you sure?”

Minister was taken aback for a moment. “Yes, I’m sure,” he said, a bit waspishly. “I put a bullet into his head and his heart; they probably still haven’t found him yet.”

Tueri let out the breath he had been holding. “That is very good news, Mr. Minister.” He rose and continued what he must have been doing before Minister’s arrival: packing. As he threw the last few items into his single suitcase, he addressed Minister but did not look at him.

“I’m extremely pleased that you decided to accept my offer. Whether you believe it or not, you are doing the right thing, and you will be happy that you did. I took the liberty of booking us both on a 9:10 pm to Rome; it’s going to be a long flight, so I hope you can find something in the airport store to occupy yourself.” Tueri picked up the room key and smiled sardonically. “1458.” Then he walked into the bathroom to grab his toiletries. He spoke to Minister from there. “I’m sure you know that hotels avoid calling this floor the thirteenth floor. Superstitious nonsense, if you ask me.”

Minister knew that Tueri’s sudden loquaciousness was simply an outlet for pent-up nerves. Therefore, he remained quiet and let Tueri work off the nervous energy; the only movement he made was to pull out his gun and rest it on his knee, the barrel pointed in the general direction of the bathroom.

Tueri was still talking as he came back in, and he was almost halfway across the room before he raised his head to look at Minister again. “I suppose having to stay in a room on the thirteenth floor *would* be . . . uncomfortable . . .” He trailed off as he saw the gun in Minister’s hand and realization dawned in his face. His lips tightened a little, and he said in a soft voice, “He’s not dead.”

“On the contrary, he is dead; you just overestimated the results of it.” Minister used the gun to gesture at the bed. “Please, sit again, and place your hands on your knees. No sudden movements, if you don’t mind.”

For a moment, Tueri stayed where he was, then he sighed and complied with Minister’s request. As he sat, his face took on a look of general disappointment but no fear and, to Minister’s interest, no real surprise.

“I killed Kobal because I dislike being under control of someone who insists on treating me like an underling, if you can grasp that.” A small lie, but neither Tueri nor anyone else would ever know why exactly Minister *did* execute Kobal, if he could even figure it out himself.

“However, you seem to have made a similar mistake, Mr. Tueri. I am on no one’s ‘side,’ nor do I want to be caught up in whatever situation you and Kobal are engaged in.” At this, Tueri smiled, and Minister decided to bite; it could cause no harm. “What’s funny?”

“You still don’t understand; you already *are* caught up in this, just as I am. You have been your whole life, just as—“

“Shut up!” Minister felt a childish urge to press his hands over his ears. “I don’t want to hear anything else about that, understand me?”

There was strength and confidence in Tueri's eyes, even though he must have known he was near death. "What, honestly, do you think you can do to me to keep me from saying what I have to say to you?"

Minister remained silent.

"You have made your decision, so I need not fear that; my only hope now is that you realize, sometime later, what a mistake you're about to make, and I hope that when you realize that, you decide to do something about it. After all, even large mistakes can be atoned for."

Tueri paused for a moment, and suddenly, his mask of composure cracked. He leaned forward and spoke rapidly. "Minister, please, reconsider. We can still make that plane, and the name of our target is in my jacket on the bed. You still have a chance to do the right thing!"

This, more than anything, served to solidify Minister's decision. After all the bluster and false bravado, here was what he'd seen so many times before; here was the sniveling, dealing victim who would say anything to save his life. It was now, as it always was, a bit sickening.

Minister raised the gun an inch and cocked it, not taking his eyes from Tueri's, and Tueri understood; he shook his head slightly, but there was still no fear. The time had come to end this whole mess. Minister stood up and moved away from the bed. "Mr. Tueri, please move down by the table and get on your knees, hands behind your head."

Tueri shook his head again, as if to say, *Such a shame*, and did as Minister asked, going down to his knees in front of the table Minister had just been sitting at. "I have proof, of sorts."

"Proof of what?"

"That this is something you are destined to be a part of."

Minister fumed. "I told you—"

But Tueri overrode him. “And since I am about to die, I don’t see any need to bend to your wishes.” When Minister did not respond, Tueri continued as he placed his hands behind his head. “Do you know that your surname comes from Latin?”

“Is that so?” Minister said as he moved behind him.

“Yes. The word does not mean ‘holy man,’ as one may think; instead, the word means “servant,” and from that, in fact, the word took on the meaning of a dupe, someone who is tricked.” Tueri half-turned his head. “*They* have banked on that your entire life, that you could be conned into doing as they want, and now you are proving that they have not misplaced their assumptions. You are their tool, and you always have been.”

Minister raised the gun and pointed it at the back of Tueri’s head, but he did not pull the trigger. The feeling of unease was upon him again, stronger than anything he had ever felt since the days after his mother’s death. He had no idea what to do, and he was so unaccustomed to this feeling that it frightened him, deeply. He nearly jerked when Tueri spoke again, even though his voice was soft and somehow compassionate.

“You can still do the right thing.”

Minister shook his head, baring his teeth. The moment was gone, and he was left now with hot shame. He steadied his hand.

“Sorry, but I control my own life.”

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful,” Tueri said, “if that were true, Joseph?”

The silencer was ruined from the earlier shots it had muffled that day, and the shot that killed Tueri sounded loud in the enclosed room. Minister gave the useless thing a hard spin, grabbed a pillow from the unmade bed, rammed it against the back of Tueri’s head, and stuffed the barrel against it, emptying the clip. His lips were pulled back in a grimace of white-hot rage,

and he came to his senses only when the smell of burnt feathers from the down pillow reached his nostrils.

Tueri's body lay motionless, a pool of red oozing from beneath the obliterated pillow.

Minister stepped back and looked down at the body for a long time. Then, abruptly, he turned and walked out of the room, placing the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the outside handle as he left. He rode the elevator down to the lobby, walked outside, hailed a cab, and got in.

"Where to?" the cabbie asked, clicking on the meter.

"Into the city."

"Yeah, but *where*, man?"

"Just drive, goddamn it!"

The cabbie snorted and muttered something under his breath that contained the word "fuck" and began to drive. Minister leaned back and closed his eyes. The headache that had been threatening to come ever since his last visit with Kobal overwhelmed him, and he let it come, gladly.

A cab arrived at Minister's apartment building at almost 8:00 pm, and he had never seen a more welcome sight. The ride in the first car had been steeped in cold indifference from the driver, even after Minister had finally given the address of an abandoned movie theater miles from his apartment, but Minister had ignored him; his pounding headache and overwhelming weariness had provided enough distraction.

"\$37.89," the cabbie snapped, and Minister threw two twenties into the front seat, slamming the door on the cabbie's cursing. He waited until the cab had pulled off before hailing another, giving this cabbie his home address; this caution was to ensure that no record existed that linked Minister to a hotel where someone was found murdered. Finally, the second cab arrived at his apartment building; he paid the driver and got out.

He walked into the building as the cab sped off, ignoring the doorman's soft greeting, and went to the elevators. The smooth ride and warm interior helped his throbbing head, and all he wanted to do was climb into bed and pass out. The doors slid open, and he walked down the hall toward his apartment. Halfway there, he stopped.

A normal, plain white envelope was leaning against his door.

Had he expected this? The innocuous envelope filled him with icy numbness, but he did not feel at all surprised at the message that lay in front of his door. Plus, he had a good idea who the message was from, even though he knew it to be impossible.

On legs that felt too rubbery to support him, Minister made his way to his door, reached down and snatched the letter, and tore it open along the top. The single sheet inside was a bit crumpled from Minister's savage extraction, but the words were perfectly legible, printed neatly in familiar script:

Mr. Minister:

Word has reached me that you have completed your assignment. Please come by my office at any time; your payment will be waiting there for you.

-Kobal

“Impossible,” he muttered to himself.

Tueri’s words came back to him: “Are you sure?” Yes, he *was* sure; a body didn’t take a bullet to the head and heart and keep living .

He was moving before he himself realized it, his feet taking him back to the elevator. The idea of returning to that office building now, tonight, seemed inconceivable, but he knew that this had to be resolved, and it couldn’t wait until morning. He had to find out what was going on, and the no-nonsense part of his mind dictated that he deserved to be paid.

He rode the elevator back down to the ground floor, exited the building, and turned right, toward downtown. Cabs passed him slowly, waiting for him to raise his arm, but Minister had had enough of cabs for one night; the building was only a mile away, and the cold air forced him to focus.

* * *

When he got to the address and saw that the lobby was completely dark, the street light under which he was standing only penetrating about ten feet inside, he wondered, perhaps, if he had gone down a wrong street.

The building looked completely different.

It had never looked good, even on his first visit, but now it had the aura of an abandoned property, and when he tried the front door, he was shocked and, at the same time, unsurprised to find it unlocked. He walked in.

Inside, it was nearly as cold as on the street, even without the wind, and Minister shivered and hunched his shoulders against the frigid air. He could see his breath float up past his face as he waited for his night vision to kick in. When it did, he saw the contours of the room in hazy purple outlines. The first thing he noticed was the desk sitting in the middle of the room.

The desk was covered with grit, mouse droppings, and a thick layer of dust and grime. It looked as if it had been in a warehouse for years. He had seen a secretary sitting here, working, not two hours ago.

He turned away from the desk; looking at it made his head swim and ache. Something was wrong here, and while this was nothing new to him (he recalled thinking that very same thing the first time he ever visited this building), he only just now realized how very wrong this place was. He walked over to the stairwell and entered, stopping short. The lights were off here, too, and the flights of stairs stretched up into utter blackness. His breath shuddered out, but he shook his head and gritted his teeth. He wasn't some kid, and he certainly wasn't afraid of the dark anymore, but as he started climbing, he had to admit that his confidence was a lie.

He came out onto Kobal's floor, and the streetlight outside shone through the window behind him, dimly illuminating a hallway that was many times shabbier than it had been hours ago. The wallpaper was gone, and a door far down the hallway was off its hinges and leaning on the wall opposite the room it was supposed to guard. The bare walls bore stains of a color impossible to identify in the poor glare from the light outside, and some of them were still damp, glittering with wetness. The hall also stank of years of decay and misuse, and underneath it was a powerful reek that he could not place; he had smelled rotting flesh before, and this was worse.

Covering his mouth and nose with a gloved hand, he walked cautiously down the hall to Kobal's room. The door was gone here, and he looked in to see another desk filthy with years of

decay and neglect. On its warped and dusty surface lay a plain white envelope, a clean and somewhat shocking contrast to the grubby surroundings; its white surface seemed almost to glow against its dark surroundings. Minister stepped into the room, a metallic fear in the back of his throat, as if he were in some great danger.

He swept the letter off the desk, his fingers leaving grooves in the soft layer of dust. He tore open the envelope and took the letter to a window to utilize the light from outside. The note was written, as he expected, in Kobal's hand:

Mr. Minister:

Despite our, shall we say, less than amicable parting earlier this evening, I must express to you how pleased I am that you have completed your mission. I did, I confess, know that you would all along, but even I can have my doubts, and I thank you for dispelling them. You have proved yourself a fine worker, and my superiors, too, are pleased; in fact, we may find it necessary to call on you again for further work, though what you have achieved today was, as I said, what you were raised for. In any case, you have done well, and your payment is in the center drawer of this desk. I do hope you'll forgive the surroundings, but we no longer require the use of this site and have moved on. Enjoy your pay, and we will meet again soon

-Kobal

Shivering, Minister opened the desk drawer; it shrieked against its runners, and inside, he saw a neat stack of thousand dollar bills, crisp and new, lying on the warped and rotten wood.

He backed up suddenly, breathing fast. He had wanted this money, worked for it and risked his life for it, but now, on a fundamental and savage level, he was afraid to touch it. As he turned away, he heard something, a rough thump, come from behind the wall.

Something was moving in the next office over, moving in the dark.

Minister ran. Pride disappeared, and he literally fled, pounding down the hallway and slamming into the stairwell. He took the stairs two at a time, and as he came to the landing for the second floor, his foot slipped on the last stair. He hit the landing awkwardly, and though his ankle gave a sharp stab of pain, it was neither sprained nor broken. The thought of that, of being stranded with an unusable ankle here in the pitch blackness of the stairwell while whatever was upstairs maybe decided to come down, sped him more quickly down the remaining flights of stairs.

The lobby seemed positively well-lighted next to the dark of the stairwell and the murkiness upstairs, but shadows choked the large room, and anything could have been standing there, watching him, perhaps keeping back a choked and rotten giggle. He ran across the room and burst out onto the street, continuing a full two blocks before the burning stitch in his side forced him to stop. He collapsed on a bench inside a protected bus stop and pulled air raggedly into his lungs. His hair was standing up, and his eyes watered. He sat that way for nearly ten minutes.

When the bus came, he boarded it, tossing more than was necessary into the payment receptacle. He normally shunned buses inside the city; they were dirty and carried people he did not like being near, but the harsh fluorescent lighting gave him a small feeling of comfort, and, though the people on the bus at this hour fit his description of human scum, they, too, comforted him. The thought of walking back home unsettled him; the alleys along the way were too dark.

The woman screams, the sounds rebounding off of the walls around her. She lies in an expensive hotel, groaning and pushing with all her might as the pain increases. The man between her legs mumbles to her in Italian, and, despite her pain and weariness, she pushes harder, understanding that the only way this will be over is if she ejects the wretched thing from her body. Then the pain will stop.

She does not know the man between her legs, looking at her open body, guiding her unwanted child out into an anonymous Roman hotel room; she only knows that this man knows the man who got her pregnant. She was usually very careful with her clients, made them wear condoms, and she was on the pill, but her last customer was a high payer, surprising since she was, herself, not very high class. High-class ladies do not walk the streets and give oral pleasure for a mere fifteen Euros. However, this man had offered a staggering five hundred Euros for one night in his own apartment, and she was so eager to get the deed done and see the money that she did not worry about a condom or any other precaution. Never mind the fact that the man growled during the height of his climax like a wolf and that he bit her on the neck hard enough to leave a strange mark like a burn. She had the money, and she was happy. And when she became big with child, she sought out the man and found only his companion, this man, this strange, dark, bearded creature who told her there would be a lot more money when the child came. Now, the time has come; he mumbles and she screams. And the baby comes out.

She feels it leave her. She looks up at her assistant, who cradles the child in his arms, but his smile is terrible, wolfish, and she frowns, suddenly scared. The man lifts the child, a boy, so that the woman can look at it, grinning beneath his beard, and the woman screams.

Her child is white, as white as the bone moon, and his mouth is full of teeth like slivers of glass. His eyes are silver and glint. He whines, not a normal infant whine but an unspeakable shriek of joy . . . and hunger.

She has brought death to this world, and this death is about to make her, his own mother, its first casualty. As the man leans forward with the child in his hands and sets him upon her, she realizes that the real pain has just begun, and she screams and wakes up-
-screaming.

Minister's bed shook with the force of his cry, and he looked around frantically until he realized where he was. His own room, secure, the window blinded but letting in a small amount of dim glow from the moon, the heater filling the room with comfortable, warm air. He was safe.

He sat up and swung his feet to the floor, trying to slow his breathing, and he shocked himself by breaking into tears, weeping with such force that his entire body trembled. They were sobs of simple exhaustion; that dream had stolen sleep from him for the past five days, getting progressively more vivid and detailed each night. He stood now and walked to the window. Tonight would yield no more sleep, that much he had learned from previous nights.

Outside, the night was crystal clear and icy, a layer of frost covering every surface. The sky held few clouds and allowed the full moon to pour its brilliance down on the city, only slightly less bright than an overcast day. Its cold light calmed Minister, and soon the tears stopped, leaving him drained.

The sound of a plane grew, slowly grumbling as it climbed sharply, then banked and headed east. He suddenly wondered where it was headed, if it might be a transoceanic flight like one that left the city less than a week ago with a seat for him and a man who was now dead. The

idea plagued him, and a sense of urgency had weighed upon him the past few days. He did not know what to do with himself. He avoided going out; it felt too unsafe, and that foolish fear left him frustrated, for he did not fancy himself a man who was easily frightened.

He sat on the bed again and watched the sky outside the window. A stray cloud passed the moon, and in the brief darkness, Minister's heart sped up. He shut his eyes and clenched his teeth, waiting for the feeling to pass, and when he sensed the faint brightness on his eyelids again, he opened them and breathed a sigh of relief

Behind him, on a small bedside table, lay his gun. He leaned over and picked it up, gazing down at the polished steel shining in the cold moonlight. The gun had a single bullet in it, the same bullet he had loaded five nights ago after coming back from the abandoned building. That night, his actions had been very calm and methodical to a point. He had loaded the gun, cocked it, and placed the barrel in his mouth and his finger on the trigger. He had sat that way for five minutes, tasting the metal, then finally took the pistol from his lips and laid it on the table, falling into bed and letting sleep overtake him. He had slept for sixteen hours straight.

Each night, after the dream had awakened him, he took the gun and examined it, thought about what he had almost done and what he might still do. It felt natural to want to, and to his core, he felt as if he had been used up, as if he had no more purpose and could very easily slip out of this world with not a look back. After all, there was no changing what he had done.

Except . . .

Except he still had a name. The name of a female prostitute in Rome. A name that could lead him to someone (or something) else. Redemption was impossible, he was sure, but could he still be of some use? Maybe a slight chance still existed.

The idea had appeared over the past days, a simple and unspecified notion at first, growing to a definite possibility. It would be easy; he knew how to track people, even the dead, and he was still confident in his abilities. Could he find a child, newly born, who might be in seclusion by those who would raise him to do . . . something . . . in the future?

He thought he could.

Yet, a voice inside, a cold voice, like the light of the moon outside, told him that it was useless, that *he* was useless, that any chance that might have existed was long gone and impossible to recapture.

Minister laid the gun on the bedspread beside him and put his hands over his face. This internal grappling of possibilities had wearied his mind for about as long as he could stand, and he was still no closer to a resolution. The moment he decided on one course of action or another, the opposing side would sound off, and he would be stuck again.

He looked at the digital clock by the bed, and as he did, the minute ticked over. It was now 11:58 pm, and suddenly, an idea occurred to him. He looked out the window again at the full moon that floated along with the scattered clouds, sped along by the swift wind. If, during the next two minutes, a cloud passed the moon, he would pick the gun back up and finish what he started five days ago. If the moon remained clear for that two minutes, he would dress, go to the airport, and book the next flight to Rome. The two outcomes and the deciding factor seemed neat and tidy to him, perfectly logical. Either way, this awful indecision would end in two minutes.

Joseph Minister smiled, gun at hand, watching the moon and the racing clouds as the day died.