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Out of the Mouth of the Dragon
1st draft

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The first earthquake recorder was invented in 132AD by Chang Heng. It consisted of eight bronze dragons in a ring, with eight frogs below. Each dragon held a ball loosely in its mouth. When the earth shook, one ball would fall into the mouth of the frog beneath. The direction of the earthquake's epicentre was given by a line drawn from the centre of the ring through the ball that fell out of the mouth of the dragon.
Part 1: Four Weeks

Part 2: Seven Days

Part 3: Forty-eight Hours
Part 1: Four Weeks
When he lies down to sleep, this landscape is always in his mind:

A dense pine forest covers the hills like fur. Miles from the road, there is a secret valley with steep sides and a cold river in its cleft. Here, hidden from strangers' eyes, a sunny south-facing slope has been cleared and terraced, and on the steps of the terrace grapevines are cultivated. The soil is stony, but this is good for grapes, he knows, because the stones retain the heat of the sun and warm the roots of the vines, protecting them from the deadly frost.

Men, women and two or three children move slowly along the rows, tending the vines. One of the women laughs, her clear high voice floating across the valley like birdsong. Some of the men quietly speak a mantra as they work, praying to the gods of the valley and of the grapevines for a good crop. At their feet a few massive tree stumps remain, to remind them of the back-breaking work that created this place twenty-five years ago.

Beyond the vineyard is a cluster of wooden buildings, rustic in appearance but well-built and weatherproof. Smoke rises from a cookhouse. In a clearing, a woman is teaching a teenage boy how to make barrels.

Lately, though, the vision has begun to change.

Something has happened to the quick cold stream that used to zig-zag through the valley. Its chatter has been silenced, its hurry abruptly halted. Instead of a rush of white water there is a dark pool, silent and still. The edges of the pool seem motionless, but if he looks away for a few moments they widen. Soon he is forced to retreat up the slope.

The others do not notice the rising waters. As the black pool laps at the first row of vines, they carry on working with their feet in the water. The buildings are surrounded then flooded. The cookhouse fire goes out, and the empty new barrels float away across the growing lake.
He realises he must pick up one or two or even three of the children, and save them from drowning; so he tries to run toward his daughter, but now he discovers that his feet are stuck in the mud and he cannot move; and he is filled with dread.

The others continue to tend the vines, as if they have not noticed what is happening. The water comes up to their knees, then their waists, then their necks. He tries to yell at his friends and family, telling them they must do something before it is too late, but though he opens his mouth and strains his throat, no sounds will come out. Sheer terror possesses him utterly.

The water laps into his open mouth, and begins to choke him.

This is when he always wakes up.
As he watched, the powerful machinery behind the driver's cabin slowly lowered a massive steel plate to the earth. There was a pause, then he heard a low-pitched rumble and felt the ground shake beneath his feet. A cloud of dust rose around the truck as it began to pound the earth rhythmically.

This was a seismic vibrator, a machine for sending shock waves through the earth's crust. Priest had never had much education, except in stealing cars, but he was the smartest person he had ever met, and he understood how the vibrator worked. It was similar to radar and sonar. The shock waves were reflected off features in the earth—such as rock or liquid—and bounced back to the surface, where they were picked up by listening devices called geophones, or jugs.

Priest worked on the jug team. They had planted more than a thousand geophones at precisely measured intervals in a grid a mile square. Every time the vibrator shook, the reflections were picked up by the jugs. All this data was fed into a supercomputer to produce a three-dimensional map of what was under the earth's surface. And the map would be sold to an oil company.

The vibration rose in pitch then stopped abruptly. Priest ran along the sendero to the truck, screwing up his eyes against the dust. He opened the door and clambered up into the cabin. A stocky black-haired man of about twenty-five or thirty was at the wheel. "Hey, Mario," Priest said as he slid into the seat alongside the driver.

"Hey, Ricky."

Priest was using his real name, Richard Granger, the name on his Commercial Driving Licence (Class B).

He was carrying a carton of Marlboro cigarettes, the brand Mario smoked. He tossed the
carton on to the dash. “Here, I brought you something.”

“Hey, man, you don’t need to buy me no cigarettes.”

“I’m always bummin’ your smokes.” He picked up the open pack on the dash, shook one out, and put it in his mouth.

Mario smiled. “Why don’t you just buy your own cigarettes?”

“Hell, no, I can’t afford to smoke,” Priest said.

“You’re crazy, man,” Mario laughed.

Priest lit his cigarette. He had always had an easy ability to get on with people, make them like him. On the streets where he grew up, people beat you up if they didn’t like you, and he had been a runty kid. So he had developed an intuitive feel for what people wanted from him—deference, affection, humour, whatever—and the habit of giving it to them quickly. In the oilfield, what held the men together was humour: usually mocking, sometimes clever, often obscene.

Although he had been here only two weeks, Priest had won the trust of his co-workers. But that was not enough. No matter how much they liked him, they would not give him the seismic vibrator. He would have to steal it. He had not yet worked out exactly how. But he knew when. He had to do it in the next few hours, for tomorrow the truck was scheduled to be driven to a new site, seven hundred miles away, near Clovis, New Mexico.

His vague plan was to hitch a ride with Mario. The journey would take two or three days—the truck had a highway speed of around forty miles per hour. At some point he would get Mario drunk, or beat him over the head with a wrench, or something, then make off with the truck. He had been hoping a better plan would come to him, but inspiration had failed him so far.
“You want to give me a ride to San Antonio tomorrow morning?” he asked.

Mario was surprised. “You ain’t coming all the way to Clovis?”

“Nope.” He waved a hand at the bleak desert landscape. “Just look around,” he said.

“Texas is so beautiful, man, I never want to leave.”

Mario shrugged. There was nothing unusual about a restless transient in this line of work.

“Sure, I’ll give you a ride.” It was against company rules to take passengers, but the drivers did it all the time. “Meet me at the dump.”

Priest nodded. The garbage dump was a desolate hollow on the outskirts of town, full of rusting pickups and smashed TV sets and verminous mattresses. No one would be there to see Mario pick him up, unless it was a couple of kids shooting snakes with a .22 rifle. “What time?”

“Let’s say six.”

“I’ll bring coffee.”

Priest needed this truck. In a way his life depended on it. His palms itched to grab Mario right now and throw him out and just drive away. But that was no good. For one thing, Mario was twenty years younger than Priest, and might not let himself be thrown out so easily. For another, Priest wanted the theft to remain undiscovered for a few days. He needed time to drive the truck to California and hide it before the nation’s highway patrolmen were alerted to watch out for a stolen seismic vibrator.

There was a beep from the radio, indicating that the supervisor in the doghouse—the recording truck—had checked the data from the last vibration and found no problems. Mario raised the plate, put the truck in gear and moved forward fifty yards, pulling up exactly alongside the next pink marker flag. Then he lowered the plate again and sent a ready signal. Priest watched
closely, as he had done several times before, making sure he correctly remembered the order in which Mario moved the levers and threw the switches. If he forgot something later, there would be no one he could call and ask.

They waited for the radio signal from the doghouse that would start the next vibration. This could be done by the driver in the truck, but generally supervisors preferred to retain command themselves and start the process by remote control. Priest finished his cigarette and threw the butt out of the window. Mario nodded towards Priest’s car, parked a quarter of a mile away on the two-lane blacktop. “That your woman?”

Priest looked. Star had got out of the dirty light-blue Honda Civic and was leaning on the hood, fanning her face with her straw hat. “Yeah,” Priest said. “Lemme show you a picture.” Mario pulled an old leather billfold out of the hip pocket of his jeans. He extracted a photograph and handed it to Priest. “This is Isabella,” he said proudly.

Priest saw a pretty Mexican girl in her twenties wearing a yellow dress and a yellow Alice band in her hair. She held a baby on her hip and there was a dark-haired boy standing shyly by her side. “Your children?”

He nodded. “Ross and Betty.”

Priest resisted the impulse to smile at the Anglo names. “Good-looking kids.” He thought of his thirteen-year-old daughter, Flower, and almost told Mario about her; but he stopped himself just in time. “Where do they live?”

“El Paso.”

The germ of an idea sprouted in Priest’s mind. “You get to see them much?”

Mario shook his head. “I’m workin’ and workin’, man. Savin’ my money to buy them a
place. A nice house, with a big kitchen and a pool in the yard. They deserve that.”

The idea blossomed. Priest suppressed his excitement and kept his voice casual, just making idle conversation. “Yeah, a beautiful house for a beautiful family, right?”

“That’s what I’m thinking.”

The radio beeped again, and the truck began to shake. The noise was like thunder, but more regular. It began on a profound bass note and slowly rose in pitch. After exactly fourteen seconds it stopped.

In the quiet that followed, Priest snapped his fingers. “Say, I got an idea....No, maybe not.”

“What?”

“I don’t know if it would work.”

“What, man, what?”

“I just thought, you know, your wife is so pretty and your kids are so cute, it’s wrong that you don’t see them more often.”

“That’s your idea?”

“No. My idea is, I could drive the truck to New Mexico while you go visit them, that’s all.” It was important not to seem too keen, Priest told himself. “But I guess it wouldn’t work out,” he added in a who-gives-a-damn voice.

“No, man, it ain’t possible.”

“Probably not. Let’s see, if we set out early tomorrow and drove to San Antonio together, I could drop you at the airport there, you could be in El Paso by noon, probably. You’d play with the kids, have dinner with your wife, spend the night, get a plane the next day, I could pick you
up at Lubbock airport, we could be in Clovis that night or Monday morning...I guess it is possible.”

“But you want to go to San Antonio.”

“Hey, I’ve never been to Lubbock. That’s where Buddy Holly was born.”

“Who the hell is Buddy Holly?”

“A pop singer. He died before you were born. I liked him better than Elvis. And don’t ask me who Elvis was.”

“You’d drive all that way just for me?”

“Sure, long as you let me smoke your Marlboros.”

Mario shook his head, miming amazement. “You’re a hell of a guy, Ricky. But I don’t know.”

“Well, think about it.”

“If something goes wrong, I don’t want to lose my job.”

“You’re right.” Priest fought down a scream of frustration. “I tell you what, let’s talk later. You going to the bar tonight?”

“Sure.”

“Why don’t you give me your decision then?”

“Okay, that’s a deal.”

The radio beeped the all-clear signal and Mario threw the lever that raised the plate off the ground.

Priest gave him back the photo and opened the door. “I’m telling you, man, if I had a girl that pretty I wouldn’t leave the goddamn house.” He grinned, then jumped to the ground and
slammed the door.

The truck moved off toward the next marker flag as Priest walked away, his cowboy boots kicking up dust.

As he followed the sendero to where his car was parked, he saw Star begin to pace up and down, impatient and anxious.

She had been famous, once, briefly. At the peak of the hippie era she lived in the Haight-Ashbury neighbourhood of San Francisco. Priest had not known her then—he had spent the late sixties making his first million dollars—but he had heard the stories. She had been a striking beauty, six feet tall and black-haired with a generous hourglass figure. She had even had a brief recording career, speaking poetry against a background of psychedelic music on an album called Raining Fresh Daisies. However, it was not her record that made her famous, but her insatiable sexual promiscuity. According to legend, she had had sex with anyone who briefly took her fancy: eager twelve-year-olds and surprised men in their sixties, boys who thought they were gay and girls who did not think they were lesbians, friends she had known for years and strangers off the street.

That was a long time ago. Now she was a few weeks from her fiftieth birthday, and there were streaks of gray in her hair. Her figure was still generous, though no longer like an hourglass: she weighed a hundred and eighty pounds. But she still exercised an extraordinary sexual magnetism. When she walked into a bar, all the men stared.

Even now, when she was worried and hot, there was a sexy flounce to the way she paced and turned beside the cheap old car, an invitation in the movement of her flesh beneath the thin cotton dress; and he felt the urge to grab her right there.
“What happened?” she said as soon as Priest was within earshot.

He was always upbeat. “Looking good,” he replied.

“That sounds bad,” she said sceptically. She knew better than to take what he said at face value.

He told her the offer he had made to Mario. “The beauty of it is, Mario will be blamed,” he said.

“How so?”

“Think about it. He gets to Lubbock, he looks for me, I ain’t there, nor is the truck. He figures he’s been suckered. What does he do next? Is he going to make his way to Clovis and come clean with the company? I don’t think so. At best, he’d be fired for letting someone else take the truck. At worst, he could be accused of stealing it and thrown in jail. So what’ll he do? I’m betting he’ll get right back on the plane, fly to El Paso, put his wife and kids in the car and disappear. Then the police will be sure he stole the truck. Ricky Granger won’t even be a suspect.”

She frowned. “It’s a great plan, but will he take the bait?”

“I think he will.”

Her anxiety deepened. She slapped the dusty roof of the car with the flat of her hand.

“Shit, we have to have that goddamn truck!”

“We will,” he said. “If not this way, another way.”

She put the straw hat on her head and leaned back against the car, closing her eyes. “I wish I felt so sure.”

He stroked her cheek. “You need a ride, lady?”
“Yes, please. Take me to my air-conditioned motel room.”

“There’ll be a price to pay.”

She opened her eyes wide in pretended innocence. “Will I have to do something nasty, mister?”

He slid his hand down into her cleavage. “Yeah.”

“Oh, darn,” she said, and she lifted the skirt of her dress up around her waist.

She had no underwear on.

Priest grinned and unbuttoned his Levi’s.

She said: “What will Mario think if he sees us?”

“He’ll be jealous,” Priest said as he entered her. They were the same height, and they fit together with the ease of long practice.

She kissed his mouth.

A few moments later he heard a vehicle approaching on the road. They both looked up without stopping what they were doing. It was a pickup truck with three roustabouts in the front seat. The men could see what was going on, and they whooped and hollered through the open windows as they went by.

Star waved at them, calling: “Hi, guys!”

Priest laughed so hard he came.

* * *

“No one can cause an earthquake,” Priest had said. “The forces required are too great.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” said Melanie.

He gave her a hard look. The idea sounded far-fetched, but he had his back to the wall,
and he would consider anything. Was she serious?

They had been sitting around the stove in the cookhouse, fourteen desperate people, drinking wine and smoking marijuana in a disconsolate mood. It was late. The children were asleep in the bunkhouse, all except the alert nine-month-old baby boy sitting on Aneth’s knee. A blonde girl called Song was picking out a blues riff on an acoustic guitar. Star was singing along, making up words, *Ain’t gonna ride that no-good train.*

There was an air of quiet recklessness. Priest had just explained to Melanie, who was new to the group, that their home was to be destroyed. Within a year there would be nothing here. They had done all they could to save it, but they had lost the battle. They had no money to start again elsewhere. Anyway, none of them believed that the spirit of their community could be transplanted to a different location.

Melanie was weeping quietly, big tears streaming down her face. “I only just found you,” she said. “I only just found you.”

“I’m not ready to give up,” Priest said. “I’m still looking for a way to make the state of California change its mind.”

Oaktree, the carpenter, a muscular black man in his forties, said in a musing tone: “You know, it ain’t that hard to make a nuclear bomb.” He had been a colonel in the Marines until he was discharged after killing another officer during a training exercise. “I could do it in a day, if I had some plutonium. We could blackmail the governor—if they don’t do what we want, we threaten to blow Sacramento all to hell.”

Aneth said: “You can’t save the world with bombs.”

Star stopped singing. “Why not?” she said fiercely. “Why should we let them destroy us?
We told them, thirty years ago. All you need is love! But they wouldn’t listen. And look what has become of their society: violence and ugliness and pollution, presidents who tell lies and break the law, riots and crime and poverty. Meanwhile, we’ve lived here all these years in peace and harmony, with no money, no sexual jealousy, no conformist rules.” She stood up, inspired by her own passion. “We were right and they were wrong. We know we’ve found the way to live—we proved it. We can’t let them wipe us out. If this group disappears, there will be no one left to show the way. We have to survive, for the sake of the whole world.” She sat down again. “I’d make a bomb,” she finished.

Priest, who had already considered and rejected the idea of making a nuclear bomb, said:

“It’s getting the plutonium that’s the hard part.”

Aneth said: “Forget it! I won’t have anything to do with that stuff. It’s deadly!”

Star started singing again. *Train, train, no-good train.*

Oaktree persisted: “I could get a job in a nuclear power station, figure out a way to beat their security system.”

Priest said: “They would ask you for your résumé. And what would you say you had been doing for the last five years? Nuclear research at Berkeley?”

“I’d say, I been living with a bunch of freaks and now they need to blow up Sacramento, so I came here to get me some radio friggin’ activity, man.”

The others laughed. Oaktree sat back in his chair and began to harmonise with Song: *No, no, ain’t gonna ride that no-good train.*

Priest frowned at the flippant air. He could not smile. His heart was full of rage. But he knew that inspired ideas sometimes came out of light-hearted discussions, so he let it run.
Aneth kissed the top of her baby’s head and said: “We could kidnap someone.”

Priest said: “Who? The governor probably has six bodyguards.”

“What about his right-hand-man, that guy Albert Honeymoon?” There was a murmur of support. They all hated Honeymoon. “Or the president of Coastal Electric?”

Priest nodded. This was a much more practical approach.

He knew how to do stuff like that. It was a long time since he had been a street hoodlum, but he remembered the principles of a successful rumble: plan carefully, look cool, shock the victim so bad he can hardly think, act fast, and get the hell out. However, there was something unsatisfactory about the idea of a kidnapping. “It’s too...like, low-profile,” he said. “Say some lawyer or some businessman gets kidnapped. So what? If you’re going to scare people, you can’t pussyfoot around, you have to scare them shitless.”

He restrained himself from saying more. When you’ve got a guy on his knees, crying and pissing his pants and pleading with you, begging you not to hurt him any more, that’s when you say what you want; and he’s so grateful that he loves you for telling him what he has to do to make the pain stop. That was not the kind of talk to give people such as Aneth.

At this point, Melanie spoke again.

She was sitting on the floor with her back up against Priest’s chair. Aneth offered her the big spliff that was going around. Melanie wiped her tears, took a long pull on the joint, and passed it up to Priest, then blew out a cloud of smoke and said in a slow, stoned voice: “You know, there are ten or fifteen places in California where the faults in the earth’s crust are under such tremendous, like, tension that it would only take a teeny little nudge, or something, to make the tectonic plates slip, and then, BOOM. It’s like a giant slipping on a pebble. It’s only a little
pebble, but the giant is so big that his fall shakes the earth."

Oaktree stopped singing long enough to say: "Melanie, baby, what the fuck are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about an earthquake," she said.

Oaktree laughed. *Ride, ride that no-good train.*

Priest spoke with quiet intensity. "What are you saying, Melanie?"

"Forget kidnapping, forget nuclear bombs," she said. ""Why don't we threaten the governor with an earthquake?"

That was when Priest said it couldn't be done, and Melanie told him he was wrong.

"How do you know? he asked her.

"I studied it. I have a master's in seismology. I started a doctorate, but then I got pregnant with Dusty, and I never picked it up again afterwards. But my husband—soon to be my ex-husband, I hope—is one of the leading seismologists in America. He developed the low-stress theory of earthquakes."

It captured Priest's imagination immediately, though to most of the others it was just another stoned late-night conversation. *No-good train ain't going nowhere.*

He caught Star's eye. She nodded sombrely. She believed in the unorthodox. It was an article of faith with her that the bizarre theory would turn out to be the truth, the unconventional way of life would be the happiest, and the madcap plan would succeed where sensible proposals foundered.

Priest studied Melanie's face. She was beautiful in an otherworldly way, pale and slender, with startling green eyes and long, straight hair the colour of paprika. The first words he had
spoken to her, when he met her a few days ago, had been: “Are you from Mars?”

Did she know what she was talking about? She was stoned, but sometimes people had their most creative ideas while doping. He said: “What’s the low-stress theory?”

She frowned, concentrating. “At certain points along the fault line, pressure builds up, over the decades, to a very high level. Then, it only takes a relatively weak vibration in the earth’s crust to tip it over the edge and cause an earthquake.”

“If it’s so easy, how come it hasn’t been done already?”

“Oh, I didn’t say it would be easy,” she said. “You’d have to be a seismologist to know exactly where the fault was under critical tension.”

Priest’s mind was racing. When you were in real trouble, sometimes the best way out was to do something so weird, so totally unexpected, that your enemy was paralysed by surprise.

He said to Melanie: “How would you create a vibration in the earth’s crust?”

“That would be the hard part,” she said.

Priest sat back, pretending to lose interest.

Ride, ride, ride

I’m gonna ride that no-good train

A local ordinance prohibited the sale of alcoholic beverages in the town of Liberty, but just the other side of the town line there was a bar called The Doodlebug, with cheap draft beer and a country-western band and waitresses in tight bluejeans and cowboy boots.

Priest went on his own. He did not want Star to show her face. He wished he had not had to ask her to come here from California. But he needed someone to help him take the truck home.
They would drive day and night, taking turns at the wheel, using amphetamines to stay awake, in the hope of getting there before the truck was missed.

Priest had changed his appearance before arriving in Liberty. He had grown a bushy beard and moustache, and tied his long hair in a tight plait which he kept tucked up inside his cowboy hat. But Star had taken no such precautions.

He was already regretting the afternoon’s indiscretion. Mario had seen her from a quarter of a mile away, and the three roustabouts in the pickup had only glimpsed her in passing, but all of them could probably give a rough description of her: a tall white woman, neither old nor young, heavy set, with long dark hair....

But no one would be asking for descriptions of them, if all went according to plan.

When Priest arrived at the Doodlebug, Mario was already there, sitting at a table with some of the jug team and the party boss, Lenny Peterson, who controlled the entire seismic exploration crew.

Not to seem too eager, Priest got a beer and talked to the barmaid for a while before joining Mario’s table.

Lenny was a balding man with a red nose. It was Friday night and he was getting loaded. When Priest sat down, Lenny said in his slow Texas accent: “So, Ricky, you’re leaving us tomorrow. I’d just like to say very sincerely that it’s been a real privilege and pleasure knowing you, even for such a short time.”

The others grinned. This kind of joshing was commonplace. They looked to Priest for a riposte.

He put on a solemn face and said: “Lenny, you’re so sweet and kind to me that I’m going
to ask you one more time: Will you marry me?”

They all laughed. Mario clapped Priest on the back.

Lenny looked troubled and said: “You know I can’t marry you, Ricky. I already told you the reason why.” He paused for dramatic effect, and they all leaned forward to catch the punch line. “I’m a lesbian.”

They roared with laughter. Priest gave a rueful smile, acknowledging defeat, and ordered a pitcher of beer for the table.

The conversation turned to baseball. Most of them liked the Houston Astros, but Lenny was from Arlington and he followed the Texas Rangers. Priest had no interest in sports, so he waited impatiently, joining in now and again with a neutral comment. They were in expansive mood. The job had been finished on time, they had all been well paid, and it was the weekend. Priest sipped his beer slowly. He never drank much: he hated to lose control. He watched Mario sinking the suds. When Tammy, their waitress, brought another pitcher, Mario stared longingly at her breasts beneath the checkered shirt. Priest thought: Keep wishing, Mario—you could be in bed with your wife tomorrow night.

After an hour, Mario got up to go to the men’s room.

Priest followed him. The hell with this waiting, he thought: it’s decision time.

“I believe Tammy’s wearing black underwear tonight,” he said as he stood beside Mario.

“How do you know?”

“I got a little peek when she leaned over the table. I love to see a lacy brassiere.”

Mario sighed.

“You like a woman in black underwear?” Priest went on.
“Red,” said Mario decisively.

“Yeah, red’s beautiful, too. They say that’s a sign a woman really wants you, when she puts on red underwear.”

“Is that a fact?” Mario said. His beery breath came a little faster.

“Yeah, I heard it somewhere.” Priest buttoned up. “Listen, I got to go. My woman’s waiting back at the motel.”

Mario grinned and wiped sweat from his brow. “I saw you and her this afternoon, man.”

Priest shook his head in mock regret. “It’s my weakness, I just can’t say no to a pretty face.”

“You were doing it, right there in the goddamn road!”

“Yeah. Well, when you haven’t seen your woman for a while, she gets kind of frantic for it, know what I mean?” *Come on, Mario, take the friggin’ hint!*

“Yeah, I know. Listen, about tomorrow.”

Priest held his breath.

“Uh, if you’re still willing to do like you said....”

*Yes! Yes!*

“Let’s go for it.”

Priest resisted the temptation to hug him.

Mario said anxiously: “You still want to, right?”

“Sure I do,” Priest said. He put an arm around Mario’s shoulders as they left the men’s room. “Hey, what are buddies for, know what I mean?”

“Thanks, man,” Mario said, and there were tears in his eyes. “You’re some guy, Ricky.”
It was still dark when they got up on Saturday morning. Priest got coffee from the diner next door to their motel. When he came back Star was poring over the *North American Road Atlas and Vacation Guide* by the light of the reading lamp. “You ought to be dropping Mario off at San Antonio international airport around nine-thirty, ten o’clock this morning,” she said. “Then you’ll want to leave town on Interstate 10.”

Priest did not look at the atlas. Maps confused him. He could follow signs for 1-10.

“Where shall we meet?”

Star calculated. “I should be an hour ahead of you.” She put her finger on a point on the page. “There’s a place called Leon Springs on I-10 about fifteen miles from the airport. I’ll park where you’re sure to see me.”

“Sounds good.”

They were tense and excited. Three weeks ago they had conceived a wild, off-the-wall plan to save their way of life. Today that crazy plan would turn into reality. Stealing Mario’s truck was the first, crucial step. If things went wrong, their dreams would be dashed. But if all went well, by midday they would be in possession of the machine that would make everything else possible.

Star was worrying about practicalities. “Where are we going to sell the Honda?”

Priest had bought the car two weeks ago for a thousand dollars cash. “It’s going to be hard to sell. If we see a cheap used car lot we may get five hundred bucks for it. Otherwise we’ll find a lonely spot on the interstate and dump it.”

“Can we afford to?”
Star did not know how much money they had, and he wanted to keep her ignorant. “Money makes you poor,” he said. He was quoting one of the Five Paradoxes of Baghram, the guru they lived by.

Star shrugged. “I haven’t worried about it for twenty-five years, so I guess I won’t start now.” She took off her reading glasses.

Priest smiled at her. “You’re cute in your glasses.”

She gave him a sideways look and asked him a surprise question. “Are you looking forward to seeing Melanie?”

He took her hand and stroked it. Melanie was his new lover. He had met her four weeks ago. She was twenty-nine. “Sure,” he said.

“I like to see you with her. She makes you happy.”

A sudden memory of Melanie flashed into Priest’s brain. She was lying face-down across his bed, asleep on rumpled sheets, with the morning sun slanting into the cabin. He sat watching her, sipping coffee, enjoying the texture of her white skin, the curve of her perfect derriere, the way her red hair spread over the pillows. In a moment she would smell the coffee, and roll over, and open her eyes, and then he would get back into bed and make love to her; but for now he was luxuriating in anticipation, planning how he would touch her and turn her, savouring this exquisite moment like a glass of fine wine.

The vision faded and he saw Star’s fifty-year-old face in a cheap Texas motel. “You’re not unhappy about Melanie, are you?” he said.

“Marriage is the greatest infidelity,” she said, quoting another of the paradoxes.

He nodded. They had never asked one another to be faithful. In the early days it was Star
who scorned the idea of committing herself to one person. Then, after she hit thirty and started
to calm down, Priest had tested her permissiveness by flaunting a string of girls in front of her.
But for the last few years, though they still believed in the principle of free love, neither of them
had actually taken advantage of the privilege.

So Melanie had come as kind of a shock to Star. But that was okay. Their relationship
was too settled anyway. He did not like anyone to feel they could predict what he was going to
do. He was fond of Star, but the ill-concealed anxiety in her eyes gave him a pleasant feeling of
control.

She toyed with her styrofoam coffee container. “I just wonder how Flower feels about it
all.”

“She hasn’t grown up in a nuclear family,” he said. “She lives in a commune. We haven’t
made her a slave to bourgeois conventions.”

“Yeah.” Star agreed, but it wasn’t enough. “I just don’t want her to lose you, that’s all.”

He took her hand. “It won’t happen,” he said.

She squeezed his fingers. “Thanks.”

He stood up. “We got to go.”

“Yeah.”

Their few possessions were packed into three plastic grocery bags. Priest picked up the
bags and took them outside to the Honda. Star followed him.

They had paid their bill the previous night. The office was closed and no one watched
them as Star took the wheel and they drove away from the motel in the gray early light.

There were not many vehicles on the streets this early on a Saturday morning. Star ran
both the town’s stop lights and headed north. They reached the dump a few minutes before six a.m.

There was no sign beside the road, no fence or gate, just a track beaten through the sagebrush. Star followed it over a slight rise. The dump was in a dip, hidden from the road. She pulled up beside a smouldering pile of charred garbage. There was no sign of Mario or the seismic vibrator.

Priest could tell that Star was still troubled. He had to reassure her. He did not want her distracted today of all days. If something should go wrong, she would need to be alert, focussed.

"Flower isn’t going to lose me,” he said.

“That’s good,” she said cautiously.

“We’re going to stay together, the three of us. You know why?”

“Tell me.”

“Because we love each other.”

He saw relief drain the tension out of her face. She fought back tears. “Thank you,” she said.

He kissed her. “Mario will be here any second. You get movin’, now. Put some miles behind you.”

She swallowed. “Yeah.”

He got out of the car.

“Hey,” she said. “Don’t forget Mario’s coffee.” She handed him a paper sack.

“Thanks.” He took the bag and slammed the car door.

Star turned around in a wide circle and drove away fast, her tires throwing up a cloud of
Texas desert dust.

Priest looked around. He found it amazing that such a small town could generate so much trash. He saw twisted bicycles and new-looking baby carriages, stained couches and old-fashioned refrigerators, and dozens of supermarket carts. The place was a wasteland of packaging: cardboard boxes for stereo systems, pieces of lightweight polystyrene packing like abstract sculptures, paper sacks and polythene bags and tinfoil wrappers, and a host of plastic containers that had contained substances Priest had never heard of: rinse aid, conditioner, moisturiser, fabric softener, toner. He saw a miniature fairy castle made of grey plastic that he presumed was a children’s toy, and he marvelled at the wasteful extravagance of such an elaborate construction.

In his commune there was never much garbage. They just did not use baby carriages or refrigerators, and they rarely bought anything that came in a package. The children would use imagination to make a fairy castle from a tree or a barrel or a stack of timber.

A dusty red sun edged up over the ridge, casting a long shadow of Priest across a rusting bedstead. It made him think of sunrise over the snow peaks of the Sierra Nevada, and he suffered a sudden sharp pang of longing for the cool pure air of the mountains.

Soon, soon.

Something glinted at his feet. A shiny metal object was half-buried in the earth. Idly, he scraped away the dusty soil with the toe of his boot, then bent down and picked up the object. It was a heavy Stillson wrench. It seemed new. Mario might find it useful, Priest thought: it was about the right size for the large-scale machinery of the seismic vibrator. But, of course, the truck would contain a full tool kit with wrenches to fit every nut used in its construction. Mario had
no need of a discarded wrench. This was the throwaway society.

Priest dropped the wrench in the dust.

He heard a vehicle, but it did not sound like a big truck. A moment later, a tan pickup came over the ridge. It was a Dodge Ram with a cracked windshield: Mario’s car. Priest frowned. What did this mean? Mario was supposed to show up in the seismic vibrator. His own car would be driven north by one of his buddies, unless he had decided to sell it here and buy another car in Clovis. Something had gone wrong, and Priest’s instinct told him it was bad. “Shit,” he said. “Shit.”

Mario pulled up and got out.

Priest handed him the paper sack. “I brought you coffee,” he said. “What’s up?”

Mario shook his head sadly. “I can’t do it, man.”

Shit.

Mario went on: “I really appreciate what you offered to do for me, but I gotta say no.”

What the hell is going on?

Priest gritted his teeth and made his voice sound casual. “What happened to change your mind, buddy?”

“After you left the bar last night, Lenny gave me this long speech, man, all about how much the truck cost, and how I don’t gotta give no rides, or pick up no hitchhikers, and how he’s trustin’ me, and stuff.”

I can just imagine Lenny, shitfaced drunk and maudlin—he probably had you nearly in tears, Mario, you dumb son of a bitch.

“You know how it is, Ricky, this is an okay job—hard work and long hours, but the pay
is pretty good. I don’t want to lose this job.”

“Okay, no problem,” Priest said with forced lightness. “So long as you can still take me to San Antonio.” I’ll think of something between here and there.

Mario shook his head. “I better don’t, not after what Lenny said. I ain’t taking nobody nowhere in that truck. That’s why I brought my own car here, so I can give you a ride back into town.”

And what am I supposed to do now, for Christ’s sake?

“So, uh, what do you say, you wanna get going?”

And then what?

Priest had built a castle of smoke, and now he saw it shimmer and dissipate in the light breeze of Mario’s guilty conscience. He had spent two weeks in this hot, dusty desert, working at a stupid worthless job, and had wasted hundreds of dollars on air fares and motel bills and disgusting fast food.

And he did not have time to do it all over again. He had issued a threat, delivered an ultimatum to the Governor of California. He had to prove he meant business. There would be no second chance.

He recalled Star saying: “Maybe we should do everything we need to do first, get all our ducks lined up in a row, and then issue the ultimatum.”

“Hell, no!” Priest had said. He had been angry with her for making the suggestion. He knew that a group such as theirs had to be led. They would not do the right thing just because it was rational. They had to get committed, go out on a limb, take a risk, and feel there was no turning back; otherwise tomorrow they would think of reasons to get scared and back out. An
invading armada should always burn its boats, according to Priest’s philosophy of leadership.

Mario frowned. “So, you want a ride, or not?”


Mario turned around.

Priest’s eye fell on the Stillson wrench he had dropped just a few minutes earlier.

A new plan unfolded, fully-formed, in his brain.

As Mario walked the three paces to his car, Priest stooped and picked up the wrench.

It was about eighteen inches long and weighed four or five pounds. Most of the weight was at the business end, with its adjustable jaws for gripping massive hexagonal nuts and the heads of bolts. It was made of steel, he guessed.

He glanced past Mario, along the track that led to the road. There was no one in sight.

No witnesses.

Priest took a step forward just as Mario reached to open the door of his pickup.

He had a sudden disconcerting flash: a photograph of a pretty young Mexican girl in a yellow dress, with a child in her arms and another by her side, and for a split-second he felt the crushing weight of the grief he was about to bring into their lives.

Then he saw a vision of a greater tragedy: a black pool of water slowly rising to engulf a vineyard and drown the men, women and children who were tending the vines.

He ran at Mario, raising the wrench high over his head.

Mario was opening the car door. He must have seen something out of the corner of his eye, for when Priest was almost on him he suddenly let out a roar of fear and flung the door wide,
partly shielding himself.

Priest crashed into the door, which flew back at Mario. It was a wide, heavy door and, with Priest’s weight behind it, it knocked Mario sideways. Both men stumbled. Mario lost his footing and went down on his knees, facing the side of the pickup. His Houston Astros baseball cap landed on the dusty earth. Priest fell backwards and sat heavily on the stony ground, dropping the wrench. It landed on a plastic half-gallon Coke bottle and bounced a yard away.

Mario got to one knee and reached for a handhold to pull his heavy frame upright. His left hand closed around the door frame. As he heaved, Priest—still on his butt—drew back his leg and kicked the door as hard as he could with his heel. It slammed on Mario’s fingers and bounced open. Mario cried out with pain and fell to one knee, slumping against the side of the pickup.

Priest leaped to his feet.

The wrench gleamed silvery in the morning sun. He snatched it up. He looked at Mario, and his heart filled with rage and hate toward the man who had wrecked his careful plan and put his way of life in jeopardy. He stepped close to Mario and raised the weapon.

Mario half-turned towards him. The expression on his young face showed infinite puzzlement, as if he had no understanding of what was happening; all his most profound expectations had been confounded, and the world had turned upside down. He opened his mouth and, as Priest brought the wrench down, he said in a questioning voice: “Ricky...?”

The heavy end of the wrench made a thud like a car crash as it smashed into Mario’s head. His dark hair was thick and glossy, but it made no perceptible difference. His scalp tore, his skull cracked, and the wrench sunk into the soft brain underneath.

But he did not die.
Priest began to be afraid.

Mario’s eyes stayed open and focussed on Priest. The mystified, betrayed expression barely altered. He seemed to be trying to finish what he had started to say. He lifted one hand, as if to catch someone’s attention.

Priest took a frightened step back. “No!” he said.

Mario said: “Man...”

Priest felt possessed by panic. He lifted the wrench again. “Die, you motherfucker!” he screamed, and he hit Mario again.

This time the wrench sunk in farther. Withdrawing it was like pulling something out of soft mud. Priest felt a surge of nausea when he saw the living grey matter smeared on the adjustable jaws of the tool. His stomach churned and he swallowed hard, feeling dizzy.

Mario fell slowly backwards and lay slumped against the rear tire of his pickup, motionless. His arms became limp and his jaw slack, but he stayed alive. His eyes locked with Priest’s. Blood gushed from his head, ran down his face and into the open neck of his checked shirt. His stare terrified Priest. “Die,” Priest pleaded. “For the love of God, Mario, please die.”

Nothing happened.

Priest backed off. Mario’s eyes seemed to be begging him to finish the job, but he could not hit him again. There was no logic to it, he just could not lift the wrench.

Then Mario moved. His mouth opened, his body became rigid, and a strangled scream of agony burst from his throat.

It pushed Priest over the edge. He, too, screamed; then he ran at Mario and hit him again and again, in the same place, hardly seeing his victim through the haze of terror that blurred his
The screaming stopped and the fit passed.

Priest stepped back, dropping the wrench on the ground.

The corpse of Mario fell slowly sideways until the mess that had been his head hit the ground. His grey brains seeped into the dusty earth.

Priest fell to his knees and closed his eyes. “Dear God Almighty, forgive me,” he said.

He knelt there, shaking. He was afraid that if he opened his eyes he might see Mario’s soul going up. He could not stand that stare.

To quiet his brain he recited his mantra: *Ley, tor, pur-doy-kor*. It had the rhythm of a nursery rhyme he recalled from his short childhood:

*One, two, three-four-five*

*Once I caught a fish alive*

*Six, seven, eight-nine-ten*

*Then I let him go again*

When he was chanting to himself, he often slipped from the mantra into the rhyme. It worked just as well.

As the familiar syllables soothed him, he thought about the way his breath entered his nostrils, went through his nasal passages into the back of his mouth, passed along his throat, and descended into his chest, finally penetrating the farthest branches of his lungs, before retracing the entire journey in reverse: lungs, throat, mouth, nose, nostrils, and back out into the open air. When he concentrated fully on the journey of the breath, nothing else came into his head—no visions, no nightmares, no memories.
A few minutes later he stood up, his heart cold, his face set in a determined expression. He had purged himself of emotion: he felt no regret or pity. The murder was in the past, and Mario was just a piece of garbage that he had to dispose of.

He picked up his cowboy hat, brushed off the dust, and put it on his head.

He found the pickup’s toolkit behind the driving seat. He took a screwdriver and used it to detach the licence plates, front and rear. He walked across the dump and buried them in a smouldering mass of burned garbage. Then he put the screwdriver back in the toolkit.

He bent over the body. With his right hand he grasped the belt of Mario’s jeans. With his left he took a fistful of the check shirt. He lifted the body off the ground. It was heavy.

The door of the pickup stood open. Priest swung Mario back and forward a couple of times, building up a rhythm, then with one big heave he threw the body into the cabin. It lay over the bench seat, with the heels of the boots sticking out of the open door and the head hanging into the footwell on the passenger side. Blood dripped slowly from the head.

He threw the wrench in after the body.

He wanted to siphon gas out of the pickup’s tank. For that he needed a long piece of narrow tubing.

He opened the hood, located the windshield washer fluid, and ripped out the flexible plastic pipe that led from the reservoir to the windshield nozzle. He picked up the half-gallon Coke bottle he had noticed earlier, then walked around to the side of the pickup and unscrewed the gas cap. He fed the tube into the gas tank, sucked on it until he tasted gasoline, then inserted the end into the Coke bottle. Slowly, it filled with gas.

Gas continued to spill on the ground while he walked to the door of the pickup and
emptied the Coke bottle over the corpse of Mario.

He heard the sound of a car.

His rigid calm left him. He started to shake, the plastic bottle slipped from his fingers, and he crouched down on the ground like a scared child. Trembling, he stared at the track that led to the road. Had an early riser come to get rid of an obsolete dishwasher, or the plastic playhouse the kids had grown out of, or the old-fashioned suits of a dead grandfather? The noise of the engine swelled as it came nearer, and Priest closed his eyes.

_Ley, tor, pur-doy-kor._

The noise began to fade. The vehicle had passed the entrance and gone on. It was just traffic.

He felt stupid. He stood up, regaining control. _Ley, tor, pur-doy-kor._

He filled the Coke bottle again and doused the plastic bench seat and the entire interior of the cabin with gasoline. He used the last of the gas to lay a trail across the ground to the tank, then he threw the bottle into the cabin and stepped back.

He took a book of matches from his jeans, struck one, and used it to light all the others; then he threw the blazing matchbook into the cabin of the pickup and swiftly backed away.

There was a whoosh of flame and a cloud of black smoke, and in a second the inside of the cabin was an inferno. A moment later the flames snaked across the ground to where the tube was still spilling gas from the tank. There was another explosion as the gas tank blew up, rocking the pickup on its wheels. The rear tires caught light and flames flickered around the oily chassis.

A disgusting smell filled the air, almost like roasting meat. Priest swallowed hard and stood farther back.
After a few seconds the blaze became less intense. The tyres, the seats, and the body of Mario continued to burn slowly.

Priest waited a couple of minutes, watching the flames; then he ventured closer, trying to breathe shallowly to keep the stench out of his nose. He looked inside the cabin of the pickup. The corpse and the seating had congealed together into one vile black mass of ash and melted plastic. When it cooled down, the pickup would become just another piece of junk that some kids had set fire to.

He knew he had not got rid of all traces of Mario. If the cops ever examined the pickup they would probably find Mario’s belt buckle, the fillings from his teeth, maybe his charred bones. But Priest would make sure they did not come looking, not for a long time anyway.

He nodded to himself, satisfied. He had successfully completed the first part of the emergency plan that had come into his head when Mario let him down.

He turned away from the burning body and started walking.

He followed the track that led to the road, then headed for the town.

With nothing to do but walk, he started to think. He remembered the killing: the way the wrench had sunk into Mario’s soft brains, the look on the man’s face, the blood dripping into the footwell.

This was no good. He had to stay calm and alert. He still did not have the seismic vibrator that he needed so badly. Killing Mario had been the easy part, he told himself. Next he had to pull the wool over Lenny’s eyes. He began to mull over the second part of his plan.

He was jerked back to the immediate present by the sound of a car.

It was coming from behind him, heading into town.
In this part of the world, it was unusual to see anyone walking. Most people would assume his car must have broken down. Some drivers would stop and offer a ride.

Priest tried to think of an explanation why he was walking into town at six-thirty on Saturday morning.

Nothing came.

He tried to call on the muse who had inspired him with the idea of murdering Mario, but she was silent.

There was nowhere he could be coming from with fifty miles—except for the dump, the one excuse he could not use.

The car slowed as it came nearer.

He resisted the temptation to pull his hat down over his eyes.

*What have I been doing?*

—I went out into the desert to observe nature.

*Yeah, right, sagebrush and rattlesnakes.*

—I went to take a leak.

*This far?*

Although the morning air was cool, he began to perspire.

The car passed him slowly. It was a late-model Chrysler Neon with a metallic-green paint job. Texas plates. One person inside, a man. He could see the driver examining him in the mirror, checking him out. Could be an off-duty cop—

Panic filled him, and he had to resist the impulse to turn and run.

The car stopped and reversed. The driver lowered the nearside window. He was a young
Asian man in a business suit. He said: “Hey, buddy, want a ride?”

*What am I going to say? “No, thanks, I just love to walk.”*

Priest got in the car. His hands were shaking. He fastened his seat belt, just to have something to do to disguise his anxiety.

As the car pulled away, the driver said: “What the heck you doing walking out here?”

*I just murdered by friend Mario with a Stillson wrench, then I burned his body in the front seat of his own pickup.*

At the last second, Priest thought of a story. “I had a fight with my wife,” he said. “Stopped the car and got out and walked away. I didn’t expect her to just drive on.” He thanked whatever gods had given him inspiration again. His hands stopped shaking.

“Would that be the good-looking dark-haired woman in a blue Honda that I passed fifteen or twenty miles back?”

*Jesus Christ, who are you, the Memory Man?*

The guy smiled and added: “When you’re crossing this desert, every car is interesting.”

“No, that ain’t her,” Priest said. “My wife’s driving my goddamn pickup truck.”

“I didn’t see a pickup.”

“Good. Maybe she didn’t go too far.”

“She’s probably parked down a farm track crying her eyes out, wishing she had you back.”

Priest grinned with relief. The guy had bought his story.

The car reached the edge of town. “What about you?” Priest said. “How come you’re up early on Saturday morning?”
"I didn’t fight with my wife, I’m going home to her. I live in Laredo. I travel in novelty ceramics—decorative plates, figurines, signs saying ‘Baby’s Room’, very attractive stuff."

"Is that a fact?" What a way to waste your life.

"We sell them in drugstores mostly."

"The drugstore in Liberty won’t be open yet."

"I’m not working today, anyway. But I might stop for breakfast here. Got a recommendation?"

Priest would have preferred the salesman to drive on through town without stopping, so that he would not have a chance to casually mention the bearded guy he had picked up near the dump. But he was going to see Lazy Susan’s as he drove through town, so there was no point in lying. "There’s a diner."

"How’s the food?"

"Grits are good. It’s right after the stop light. You can let me out there."

A moment later the young novelty salesman pulled into a slantwise slot outside Susan’s and killed the engine. Priest thanked him for the ride and got out. "Enjoy your breakfast," he called pleasantly as he walked away.

He was beginning to feel better.

His employer’s office was a large trailer in a vacant lot a block from the diner. Mario’s seismic vibrator was parked in the yard alongside Lenny’s cranberry-red Pontiac Grand Am.

Priest stopped and stared at the truck for a moment. His hands itched to grab that wheel and drive it away. He looked at the mighty machinery on the back, the powerful engine and the massive steel plate, the tanks and hoses and valves and gauges. I could have the thing started in
a minute, no keys necessary, he thought. But if he stole it now, every Highway Patrolman in
Texas would be looking for him within twenty minutes. He had to be patient. I'm going to make
the earth shake, he said to himself, and no one is going to stop me.

Inside, the main office was busy. Two jug team supervisors stood over a computer as a
colour map of the area slowly emerged from the printer. Today they would collect their
equipment from the field and begin to move it to Clovis. A surveyor was arguing on the phone
in Spanish, and Lenny's secretary, Diana, was checking a list.

Priest stepped through an open door into the inner office. Lenny was drinking coffee with
a phone to his ear. His eyes were bloodshot and his face blotchy after last night's drinking. He
acknowledged Priest with a barely perceptible nod.

Priest stood by the door, waiting for Lenny to finish. His heart was in his mouth. He knew
roughly what he was going to say. But would Lenny take the bait? Everything depended on it.

After a minute Lenny hung up the phone and said: "Mornin', Ricky. You seen Mario this
mornin'?" His tone was annoyed. "He should of left here a half hour past."

"Yeah, I seen him," Priest said. "I hate to bring you bad news this friggin' early, but he's
let you down."

"What are you talking about?"

Priest told the story that had come into his mind, in a flash of inspiration, at the dump,
just before he picked up the Stillson wrench and went after Mario. "He was missing his wife and
kids so bad, he got into his old pickup and left town."

"Oh, Jesus, that's great. How did you find out?"

"He passed me on the street, early this morning. He was heading for El Paso."
“I hope he keeps going across the border and doesn’t stop till he drives into the goddamn ocean.” Lenny rubbed his eyes with his knuckles.

Priest began to improvise. “Listen, Lenny, he’s got a young family, don’t be too hard on him.”

“Hard? Are you serious? He’s history.”

“He really needs this job.”

“And I need someone to drive the seismic vibrator all the damn way to New Mexico.”

“He’s saving up to buy a house with a pool.”

Lenny became sarcastic. “Knock it off, Ricky, you’re making me cry.

“Try this.” Priest swallowed and tried to sound casual. “I’ll drive the damn truck to Clovis if you promise to give Mario his job back.” He held his breath.

Lenny stared at Priest without saying anything.

“Mario ain’t a bad guy, he’s normally reliable, you know that,” Priest went on. *Don’t gabble, you sound nervous, try to seem relaxed!*

Lenny said: “Do you have a Commercial Driver’s Licence, Class B?”

“Since I was twenty-one years old.” Priest took out his billfold, extracted the licence, and tossed it on the desk. He had been driving trucks on a forged licence at the age of seventeen, but he did not tell Lenny that.

Lenny checked it, then looked up and said suspiciously: “So, what are you after? I thought you didn’t want to go to New Mexico.”

*Don’t screw around, Lenny, tell me yes or no!* “Suddenly I could use another five hundred bucks.”
“I don’t know....”

*You son of a bitch, I killed a man for this, come on!*  

“Would you do it for two hundred?”  

*Yes! Thank you! Thank you!* He pretended to hesitate. “Two hundred is low for three days’ work.”  

“Two fifty.”  

*Anything! Just give me the keys!* “Listen. I’m going to do it anyway, whatever you pay me, cause I think Mario’s a nice kid and I want to help him. So, just pay me whatever you genuinely think the job’s worth.”  

“All right, you sly mother, three hundred.”  

“You got a deal.” *And I’ve got a seismic vibrator.*  

“Hey, thanks for helping me out, you hear?”  

Priest tried not to beam with triumphant elation. “Sure.”  

Lenny opened a drawer, took out a sheet of paper, and tossed it over the desk. “Just fill out this form for our insurance company.”  

Priest froze.  

He could not read or write.  

He stared at the form in fear.  

Lenny said impatiently: “Come on, take it, for Christ’s sake, it ain’t a rattlesnake.”  

*I can’t understand it, I’m sorry, those squiggles and lines on the paper just jump and dance and I can’t make them keep still!*  

Lenny looked at the wall and spoke as if to an invisible audience. “A minute ago I would
of swore the man was wide awake.”

*Ley, tor, pur-day-cor.*

Priest reached out slowly and took the form.

Lenny said: “Now what was so hard about that?”

Priest said: “Uh, I was just thinking about Mario. Do you suppose he’s okay?”

“Forget him. Fill out the form and get going. I want to see that truck in Clovis.”

“Yeah.” Priest stood up. “I’ll do it outside.”

“Right, let me get to my other fifty-seven friggin’ problems.”

Priest walked out.

*You’ve had this scene a hundred times before, just calm down, you know how to deal with it.*

He stopped outside Lenny’s door and looked at the form.

*The big letters stick up, like trees among the bushes. If they’re sticking down, you got the form upside-down.*

He had the form upside-down. He turned it around.

Sometimes there was a big X, printed very heavy, or written on in pencil or red ink, to show you where to put your name; but this form did not have that easy-to-spot feature. Priest could write his name, sort of. It took him a while, and he knew it was kind of a scrawl, but he could do it.

However, he could not write anything else.

As a kid he was so smart he did not need to read and write. He could add up figures in his head faster than anyone, his memory was infallible, and he could always get people to do
what he wanted without writing anything down. In school he easily found ways to avoid reading aloud. When there was a writing assignment he might get another pupil to do it for him, but if that failed he had a thousand excuses, and the teachers eventually shrugged their shoulders and admitted that if a kid really did not want to work they could not force him. He got a reputation for laziness in everything but math, and when he saw a crisis approaching he would play hooky.

When he was in business, he never wrote a letter. He did all his work on the phone and in person. He kept dozens of phone numbers in his head until he could afford a secretary to place calls for him.

Getting a form filled in was easy.

He sat down in front of Lenny’s secretary’s desk and smiled at Diana. “You look tired this morning, honey,” he said.

She sighed. She was a plump blonde in her thirties, married to a roustabout, with three teenage kids. She was quick to rebuff crude advances from the men who came into the trailer, but Priest knew she was susceptible to polite charm. “Ricky, I got so much to do this morning I wish I had two brains.”

He looked crestfallen. “That’s bad news—I was going to ask you to help me with something.”

She hesitated, then smiled ruefully. “What is it?”

“My handwriting’s so poor, I wanted you to fill out this form for me. I sure hate to trouble you when you’re so busy.”

“Well, I’ll make a deal with you.” She pointed to a neat stack of carefully labelled cardboard boxes up against the wall. “I’ll help you with the form, if you’ll put all those files in
the gray Chevy Astrovan outside."

"You got it," Priest said. He gave her the form.

She looked at it. "You going to drive the seismic vibrator?" she asked.

"Yeah, Mario got homesick and went to El Paso."

She frowned. "That's not like him."

"It sure ain't. I hope he's okay."

She shrugged and picked up her pen. "Now, first we need your full name, date and place of birth."

Priest gave her the information and she filled out the blanks on the insurance form. It was easy. He did not know why he had panicked. It was just that he had not expected the form. Lenny had surprised him, and for a moment he had given way to the old fear.

He was experienced at concealing his disability. He was a great user of libraries. That was how he had checked out the seismic vibrator. He had gone into the central library in Sacramento—a big, busy place where his inquiry would probably not be remembered—and walked up to a librarian with a friendly face. "I'm looking for information on seismic exploration," he had said with a smile. "Could you help me?"

She had taken him to the right shelf, picked out a book, and with a little encouragement found the relevant chapter. "I'm interested in how they generate the shock waves," he had explained. "I wonder if this book has that information."

The librarian had leafed through the pages with him. "There seem to be three ways," she had said. "An underground explosion, a weight drop, or a seismic vibrator."

"Seismic vibrator?" he had said, with just the hint of a twinkle in his eye. "What's that?"
She had pointed to a photograph. Priest stared, fascinated. The librarian had said: “It looks pretty much like a truck.”

To Priest it had looked like a miracle.

“Can I photocopy some of these pages?” he had said.

“Sure.”

There was always a way to get someone else to do the reading and writing for you.

Diana finished the form, drew a big X in a box, handed the paper to him and said: “You sign here.”

He picked up a pen and wrote laboriously. The “R” for Richard was like a showgirl with a big bust kicking out one leg. He did not have to write the whole of Richard: just the first letter was enough. Then the “G” for Granger was like a billhook with a big round blade and a short handle. After that he did a wavy line like a snake. It probably wasn’t very pretty but people accepted it. A lot of people signed their names with a scrawl, he had learned: signatures did not have to be clearly written, thank God.

He looked up. Diana was watching him curiously, surprised at how slowly he wrote. When she caught his eye she reddened and looked away.

He gave her back the form. “Thanks for your help, Diana. I sure appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll get you the keys to the truck as soon as Lenny gets off the phone.”

The keys were kept in the boss’s office.

He remembered that he had promised to move the file boxes for her. He picked one up and took it outside. The gray van stood in the yard with its rear door open. He loaded the box and went back for another.
Each time he came back in, he checked her desk. His insurance form was still there, and no keys were visible.

When he had loaded all the boxes he sat down in front of her again. She was on the phone, talking to someone about motel reservations in Clovis.

Priest ground his teeth. He was almost there, he nearly had the keys in his hand, and he was listening to crap about motel rooms! He forced himself to sit still.

At last she hung up. “I’ll ask Lenny for those keys,” she said. She took the form into the inner office.

A fat bulldozer driver called Chew came in. The trailer shook with the impact of his work boots on the floor. “Hey, Ricky,” he said. “I didn’t know you were married.” He laughed. The other men in the office looked up, interested.

Shit, what’s this? Priest said: “Now where did you hear a thing like that?”

“Saw you get out of a car outside Susan’s a while back. Then I had breakfast with the salesman that gave you a ride.”

Damn it, what did he tell you?

Diana emerged from Lenny’s office with a key ring in her hand. Priest wanted to snatch it from her, but he pretended to be more interested in talking to Chew.

Chew went on: “You know, Susan’s Western omelette is really something.” He lifted his leg and farted, then looked up and saw the secretary standing in the doorway, listening. “Scuse me, Diana. Anyhow, this youngster was saying how he picked you up out near the dump.”

Hell!

“You were walking in the desert alone at six-thirty, on account of how you quarrelled
with your wife and got out of the car and she up and drove off!” He grinned broadly and the other men laughed.

Priest stood up. He needed to kill this conversation dead. “Well, Chew, I’m going to tell you something. If I ever happen to learn anything about your private affairs, specially something a little embarrassing, I promise I won’t shout about it all over the goddamn office. Now what do you think of that?”

Chew said: “Ain’t no call to get sensitive.”

The other men looked shamefaced. No one would question him further.

There was an awkward silence. Priest did not want to exit in a bad atmosphere, so he said:

“Hell, Chew, no hard feelings.”

Chew shrugged. “No offence intended, Ricky.”

The tension eased.

Diana handed Priest the key to the seismic vibrator.

He closed his fist over it. “Thank you,” he said, trying to keep the triumph out of his voice. He could hardly wait to get out of there and sit behind the wheel. “Bye, everyone. See you in New Mexico.”

“You drive safely now, you hear?” Diana said as he reached the door.

“Oh, I’ll do that,” Priest replied. “You can count on it.”

He stepped outside. The sun was up and the day was getting warmer. He resisted the temptation to do a victory dance around the truck. He climbed in and turned over the engine. It came to life instantly. He checked the gauges. Mario must have filled the tank last night. The truck was ready for the road.
He could not keep the grin off his face as he pulled out of the yard.

He drove out of town, moving up through the gears, and headed north, following the route Star had taken in the Honda.

As he approached the turn-off for the dump, he began to feel strange. He was afraid he would see Mario hitch-hiking at the side of the road, with grey brains seeping out of the hole in his head. It was a stupid, superstitious thought, but he could not get it out of his mind. His stomach churned. For a moment he felt weak, too weak to drive. Then he pulled himself together.

Mario was not the first man he had killed.

Jack Kassner had been a cop, and he had robbed Priest’s mother.

Priest’s mother had been a whore. He found out, after she died and he looked through her papers, that she had been thirteen years old when she gave birth to him. By the time he was fifteen she was working with three other women out of an apartment over a dirty bookstore on Seventh Street. Jack Kassner was a vice squad detective who came once a month for his shakedown money. He usually took a free blow job at the same time. One day he saw Priest’s mother getting the bribe money out of the box in the back room. That night the vice squad raided the apartment, and Kassner stole fifteen hundred dollars, which was a lot of money in the sixties. Priest’s mother did not mind doing a few days in stir for prostitution but she was heartbroken to lose all the money she had saved. Kassner told the women that if they complained he would slap them with drug trafficking charges and they would all go down for a couple of years.

Kassner thought he was in no danger from three girls and a kid. But the next evening as he stood in the men’s room of the Blue Light bar on Broadway, pissing away a few beers, little Ricky Granger stuck a razor-sharp six-inch knife in his back, easily slicing through the gray
mohair suit jacket and the white nylon shirt and penetrating the kidney. Kassner was in so much pain he never got his hand on his gun. Ricky stabbed him several more times as he lay on the wet concrete floor of the men's room vomiting blood. When he was sure Kassner was dead, Ricky cut off his fingers, as a punishment for stealing; then he remembered the free blow jobs and cut off his penis as well.

Looking back, Priest marvelled at the cool assurance of his fifteen-year-old self. Anyone might have stepped into the room while he was mutilating the corpse. But he had felt no fear, no shame, no guilt. He had even rinsed his blade under the tap before walking out.

But after that he had been afraid of the dark.

He was not in the dark very much. The lights were usually on all night in his mother's apartment. But sometimes he would wake up a little before dawn on a quiet night, like a Monday, and find that everyone was asleep and he was in the dark; and then he would be possessed by blind irrational terror, and would blunder around the room, bumping into furry creatures and touching strange clammy surfaces, until he found the light switch, and sat down on the edge of the bed, panting and perspiring, slowly recovering as he realised that the clammy surface was his mirror and the furry creature his fleece-lined jacket.

He had been afraid of the dark until he found Star.

He recalled a song that had been a hit the year he met her, and he began to sing:

Smoke on the water....

What was the name of the band? Deep Purple, right. Everyone was playing their album that summer.

It was a good apocalyptic song to sing at the wheel of a seismic vibrator.
Smoke on the water

And fire in the sky

He passed the entrance to the dump and drove on, heading north.

Priest had a hard time finding his way through San Antonio. In his original plan, Mario would have driven the truck as far as the airport. But now Priest was alone as he threaded through the maze of freeways that encircled the city.

There was no way he could read a map.

Even road signs were difficult for him. He could read numbers and, if he stopped and concentrated for a while, he could tell the difference between “East” and “West” or “North” and “South”. But there was a lot of other stuff on road signs that meant nothing to him. Gas station attendants would say things like: “Follow Corpus Christi Highway until you see a sign for Brooks Air Force Base.”

He knew by the sun which way was north, and he could recognise signs for route 10: a stick with a circle, easy. He stopped to ask directions every time he felt he might be going wrong. With patience and persistence, at last he got out of San Antonio on the I-10, and a few minutes later, passing through a small town, he saw the blue Honda parked at a McDonald’s restaurant.

He hugged Star gratefully, then took a break and drank a cup of coffee.

They left the Honda in the car park of McDonald’s and drove on together in the truck.

Star took the wheel. She did not have a truck-driver’s licence, but they had to risk it: Priest could not drive for three days and nights without a break, no matter what kind of dope he might take.
As they pulled away, she handed him a paper bag from a drugstore, saying: “I got you a present.”

Inside was a pair of scissors and a battery-operated electric shaver.

“Now you can get rid of that damn beard,” she said.

He grinned. He turned the rear-view mirror towards himself and started to cut. His hair grew fast and thick, and the bushy beard and moustache had made him round-faced. Now his own face gradually re-emerged from the foliage. He trimmed the hair down to a stubble with the scissors, then used the shaver to finish the job. Finally he took off his cowboy hat and undid his plait.

He threw the cowboy hat out the window and examined himself in the mirror. His hair was pushed back from a high forehead and fell in waves around a gaunt face. He had a nose like a blade and hollow cheeks, but he had a sensual mouth—many women had told him that. However, it was his eyes they usually talked about. They were very dark brown, almost black, and people said they had an forceful, staring quality that could be mesmerising. Priest knew it was not the eyes themselves, but the intensity of the look that captivated them: it was the feeling he gave a woman that he was concentrating powerfully on her and nothing else. He could do it to men, too. He practised the look now, in the mirror.

“Handsome devil,” Star said—laughing at him, but in a nice way, affectionate.

“Smart, too,” Priest said.

“I guess you are. You got us this machine, anyway.”

Priest nodded. “And you ain’t seen nothing yet.”
In the Federal Building at 450 Golden Gate Avenue in San Francisco, FBI agent Judy Maddox sat in a courtroom on the fifteenth floor, waiting.

The court was furnished in blond wood. New courtrooms always were. They generally had no windows, so the architects tried to make them brighter by using light colours. That was her theory. She spent a lot of time in courtrooms, waiting. Most law enforcement personnel did.

She was worried. In court she was always worried. Months of work, sometimes years, went into preparing a case, but there was no telling how it would go once it got to court. The defence might be inspired or incompetent, the judge a sharp-eyed sage or a senile old fool, the jury a group of intelligent, responsible citizens or a bunch of lowlife jerks who ought to be behind bars themselves.

Four men were on trial today: John Parton, Ernest "Taxman" Dias, Foong Lee and Foong Ho. The Foong brothers were the big-time crooks, the other two their executives. In cooperation with a Hong Kong triad, they had set up a network for laundering money from the Northern California dope industry. It had taken Judy a year to figure out how they were doing it and another year to find proof.

She was working with an assistant District Attorney whom she knew very well indeed.
His name was Don Riley, and until a year ago they had been living together. He was her age, 36, and he was experienced, energetic, and as smart as a whip.

She had thought she had a watertight case. But the accused men had hired the top criminal law firm in the city, Brooks Fielding, who had done a hell of a job. They had undermined the credibility of witnesses who were, inevitably, from the criminal milieu themselves; and they had exploited the documentary evidence amassed by Judy to confuse and bewilder the jury.

Now neither Judy nor Don could guess which way it would go.

Judy had a special reason to be worried about this case. Her immediate boss, Brian Kincaid, had not wanted her to have the assignment. She was unquestionably the most able Supervisor in counter-terrorism, but Kincaid, whose rank was Assistant Special Agent in Charge—ASAC—had said she did not know enough about organised crime. He wanted to give the case to his protegé, Marvin Hayes, another high-flying Supervisor the same age as Judy. It was true that she had spent most of her FBI career in counter-terrorism. But she had developed this lead herself, she wanted to broaden her experience, and she had pushed for the assignment.

She had one big advantage over Hayes: she looked Oriental, kind of. Her father was a green-eyed Irishman, but she took more after her mother, who had been Vietnamese. Judy was small and dark-haired, with an upward slant to her eyes. The middle-aged Chinese gangsters she was investigating would never suspect a pretty little half-Oriental girl of being a hotshot FBI agent.

She went over Kincaid’s head to SAC Milton Lestrange, boss of the San Francisco field office. He had always liked Judy and believed in her potential, and he gave her the case. She got what she wanted, but she made two enemies, Kincaid and Hayes.
As the investigation dragged out into a year and then two years, the stakes got higher. Kincaid tried to undermine her, telling Lestrange that she could not close the case and he should turn it over to the experts in Kincaid’s squad. Lestrange stubbornly refused. At the same time, the case became bigger, as the amounts of money thought to be involved grew from thousands to millions.

If Judy lost today, Kincaid would be vindicated and Lestrange would lose face. But if she won, she would be promoted. The SAC normally had four ASACs under him, but one post was currently vacant, and Lestrange had promised it to Judy if she won her case.

She was surprised that neither Kincaid nor Lestrange was in court today to hear the verdict. It made her uneasy. She wondered if something was going on at headquarters that she did not know about. Her antennae were twitching. She decided to step outside and call the office. Her secretary would know if something was going on. But before she got to the door, the clerk of the court entered and announced that the jury was about to return. She forgot about the office and sat down again.

A moment later Don came back in, smelling of cigarettes: he had started smoking again since they split. He gave her shoulder an encouraging squeeze. She smiled at him. He looked nice, with his neat short haircut, dark blue suit, white button-down shirt and dark-red Armani tie. She still liked him. But there was no chemistry, no zing: she no longer wanted to muss his hair and undo his tie and slide her hand inside the white shirt. Judy’s love was an eggshell that could only be broken once.

The defence lawyers returned, the accused men were walked into the dock, the jury entered, and at last the judge emerged from his chambers and took his seat.
Judy crossed her fingers under the table.

The clerk stood up. “Members of the jury, have you reached a verdict?”

Absolute silence descended on the room. Judy realised she was tapping her foot. She stopped.

The foreman, a Chinese shopkeeper, stood up. Judy had spent many hours wondering whether he would sympathise with the accused, because two of them were Chinese, or hate them for dishonouring the race. In a quiet voice he now said: “We have.”

“And how do you find the accused—guilty or not guilty?”

“Guilty as charged.”

There was a second of silence as the news sank in. Behind her, Judy heard a groan from the dock. She resisted the impulse to whoop with joy. She looked at Don, who was smiling broadly at her. The defence lawyers shuffled papers and avoided each others’ eyes. Two reporters got up and hastily left the room, heading for the phones.

The judge thanked the jury and adjourned the case for sentencing in a week’s time.

I did it, Judy thought. I won the case, I put them in jail, I justified my boss’s faith in me, and I won my promotion. Assistant Special Agent in Charge Judy Maddox, only thirty-six, a rising star in the FBI.

“All stand,” the clerk said.

The judge went out.

Don hugged Judy.

“You did a great job of prosecuting,” she said. “Thanks.”

“You gave me a great case,” he said.
She could tell he wanted to kiss her, so she stepped back a few inches. “Well, we both did good,” she said.

The defense lawyers came over to shake hands. The senior of the two was David Fielding, a distinguished-looking man of about sixty. “Congratulations, Ms Maddox, on a well-deserved win,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said. “It was closer than I expected. I thought I had it buttoned up until you got started.”

He acknowledged the compliment with a tilt of the head. “Your preparation was immaculate. Do you have a legal qualification?”

“I went to Stanford Law School.”

“I thought you must have a law degree. Well, if you ever get tired of the FBI, please come and see me. With my firm you could be earning three times your present salary in less than a year.”

She was flattered, but she also felt condescended to, so her reply was quite sharp. “That’s a nice offer, but I want to put gangsters in jail, not keep them out.”

“I admire your idealism,” he said smoothly, and turned to speak to Don.

Judy picked up her briefcase. She was eager to share the news with SAC Lestrange. FBI headquarters was in the same building, occupying two lower floors. As she turned to leave, Don grabbed her arm. “Have dinner with me?” he said. “We ought to celebrate.”

She did not have a date. “Sure,” she said.

“I’ll make a reservation and call you.”

As she left the courtroom she remembered the feeling she had got earlier, that he wanted
to kiss her; and she wished she had turned him down.

As she entered the foyer of FBI headquarters she recalled the worry she had felt when neither Kincaid nor Lestrange showed up in court. But there was no sign of unusual activity here. The carpeted corridors were quiet. The robot mailman, a motorised cart, hummed from door to door on its predetermined route. For a law enforcement agency, they had very swanky premises. The difference between the FBI and a police precinct house was like the difference between corporate headquarters and the factory floor.

She headed for the SAC’s office. She should celebrate with Milton Lestrange, not with Don: it was Lestrange who had gone out on a limb for her and backed her when the going got rough. And it was Lestrange who was about to give her the promotion she wanted.

As soon as she entered the outer office she knew something was wrong. Lestrange’s secretary had obviously been crying. Judy said: “Linda, are you okay?” The secretary burst into tears. Judy went to comfort her, but Linda waved her away and pointed to the door of the inner office.

Judy went in.

It was a large room, expensively furnished, with a big desk and a conference table, like the office of a CEO. Sitting behind Lestrange’s desk, with his jacket off and his tie loosened, was Brian Kincaid, a big, barrel-chested man with thick white hair. He looked up and said: “Come in, Judy.”

“What the hell is going on?” she said. “Where’s Milt?”

“I have bad news,” he said, though he did not look very sad. “Milt is in the hospital. He’s been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.”
“Oh, my God.” Judy sat down. She recalled that Lestrange had gone into hospital yesterday—he said for a routine checkup, but he must have known there was something wrong.

“He’s having chemotherapy, and the doctors are optimistic, but he won’t be back in the office for several months, at a minimum.”

“Poor Milt! I guess Jessica’s with him.” Jessica was his second wife.

“Yes, and his brother is flying up from Los Angeles right now. Here in the office—”

“What about his first wife?”

Kincaid looked irritated. “I don’t know about her. I talked to Jessica.”

“Someone should tell her. I’ll see if I can get a number for her.”

“Whatever.” Kincaid was impatient to get off the personal stuff and talk about work.

“Here in the office, there are some changes, inevitably. I’ve been made acting SAC in Milt’s absence.”

Judy’s heart sank. This was bad news for her. “Congratulations,” she said, trying for a neutral tone of voice.

“I’m recommending Marvin Hayes for the vacant ASAC post.”

Judy stared at him open-mouthed. “Milt promised that job to me! And I won my case today—I put the Foong brothers in jail!”

Kincaid looked smug. “Milt’s not here now, I am. And I don’t feel you have the maturity yet for the ASAC role.”

“I’m the same age as Marvin!”

“It’s not just a question of age. And it’s not a topic for discussion here and now. ASACs are appointed by Washington. I’ve made my recommendation. The decision is up to them.”
Judy knew that Washington nearly always followed the recommendation of the SAC in the field. She fought back tears of frustration. She had done everything that was asked of her, and now her reward was being denied to her by this creep.

“Marvin will take charge of organised crime,” Kincaid went on. “You’ll return to counter-terrorism, reporting directly to me. Here’s your new assignment.” He handed her a file. “The state governor has received a terrorist threat from a group calling itself Stop Now.”

Judy opened the file but she could hardly read the words on the papers. She was shaking with rage and futility. To cover her emotions she tried to talk about the case. “What are they asking for?”

“A freeze on the building of new power plants in California.”

“Nuclear plants?”

“Any kind. They say they’re the radical offshoot of the Green California Campaign.”

Judy tried to concentrate. Green California was a legitimate environmental pressure group based in San Francisco. It was hard to believe they would do something like this. But all such organisations were capable of attracting nutcases. “And what’s the threat?”

“An earthquake.”

She looked up from the file. “You’re putting me on.”

He shook his head.

Because she was angry and upset, she did not bother to sweeten her words. “This is stupid. No one can cause an earthquake. They might as well threaten us with twelve inches of snow.”

He shrugged. “Check it out.”
Judy knew that high-profile politicians received threats every day. Messages from crazies were not investigated by the FBI unless there was something special about them. "How was this threat communicated?"

"It appeared on an Internet bulletin board two or three weeks ago." He checked his wristwatch, anxious now to get rid of her. "It's all in the file."

She looked him in the eye. She was in no mood to take any crap. "There's something you're not telling me. The threat has no credibility whatsoever and for seventeen days we ignored it. Now, suddenly, we're investigating."

"A couple of days ago John Truth saw the bulletin board—surfing the net, I guess. Maybe he was desperate for an exciting new topic. Anyway, he started talking about the threat on his show."

"I get it." John Truth was a controversial talk radio host. His show came out of Sacramento, the state capital, but it was syndicated live on stations all over California. Judy became even angrier. "John Truth put pressure on the governor to respond to the threat. The governor responded by calling in the FBI to investigate. So we have to go through the motions."

"That's about it."

Judy took a deep breath. "This office has been trying to nail the Foong brothers for twenty years. Today I put them in jail." She raised her voice. "And now you give me a bullshit case like this?"

He looked pleased with himself. "If you want to be in the Bureau, you'll have to learn to take the rough with the smooth."

"I learned, Brian!"
“Don’t yell.”

“I learned,” she repeated in a lower voice. “Ten years ago, when I was young and inexperienced and my supervisor didn’t know how far he could rely on me, I was given assignments like this—and I took them cheerfully, and did them conscientiously, and proved that I goddamn well deserve to be trusted with real work!”

“Ten years is nothing. I’ve been here twenty-five.”

She tried reasoning with him. “Look, you’ve just been put in charge of this office. Your first act is going to be to give one of your top supervisors a job that should have gone to a rookie agent. Everyone will know what you’ve done. People will think you’ve got some kind of grudge.”

“You’re right. I just got this job. And you’re already telling me how to do it. Get back to work, Maddox.”

She stared at him. Surely he would not just dismiss her.

He said: “This meeting is over.”

Judy could not take it.

“It’s not just this meeting that’s over,” she said. She stood up. “Fuck you, Kincaid.”

A look of astonishment came over his face.

Judy said: “I quit.”

And then she walked out.

“You said that?” Judy’s father said.

“Yeah. I knew you’d disapprove.”
“You were right about that, anyway.”

They were sitting in the kitchen, waiting for coffee to perk. Judy’s father was a detective with the San Francisco police. He was a short, powerfully built man, very fit for his age, with bright green eyes and gray hair in a pony tail—he did a lot of undercover work.

He was close to retirement, and dreading it. Law enforcement was his life. He wished he could remain a cop until he was seventy. He was horrified by the idea of his daughter quitting when she didn’t have to.

Judy’s parents had met in Saigon. Her father was with the army in the days when American troops there were still called “advisors”. Her mother came from a middle-class Vietnamese family: Judy’s Vietnamese grandfather had been an accountant who worked in the Finance Ministry. Judy’s father brought his bride home and Judy was born in San Francisco. She called her father Bo, the Vietnamese equivalent of Daddy; and the name caught on so that he was known as Bo Maddox.

Judy adored him. Her mother had died in a car wreck when Judy was thirteen, and since then they had been close. After she broke up with Don Riley, a year ago, Judy moved back into her father’s house, and since then she had had no reason to move out.

She sighed. “I don’t often lose it, you have to admit.”

“Only when it’s really important.”

“But now that I’ve told Kincaid I’m quitting, I guess I will.”

“Now that you’ve cursed him like that, I guess you’ll have to.”

Judy got up from the kitchen table and poured coffee for both of them. She was still boiling with fury inside. She put cream and sugar in her father’s cup. She took hers black. “He’s
such an damn fool.”

“He must be, because he just lost a good agent.” Bo sipped his coffee. “But you’re
dumber—you lost a great job.”

“I was offered a better one today.”

“Where?”

“Brooks Fielding, the law firm. David Fielding told me I could be earning three times my
FBI salary within a year of joining.”

“Keeping mobsters out of jail!” Bo said indignantly.

“Everyone’s entitled to a vigorous defense. It’s the American way.”

“Why don’t you marry Don Riley and have babies? Grandchildren would give me
something to do in retirement.”

Judy winced. She had never told Bo the full story of her separation from Don.

The truth was, she had got pregnant. Don had been adamant that he was not ready to be
a father. Judy had told herself that she, too, wanted to progress her career farther before starting
a family. So she had an abortion. It was an easy decision and a quick operation—but it changed
everything. She could not feel the same about Don afterwards. She had no rational complaint
against him. But she never again wanted to make love to him. And she had not felt drawn to
anyone else, either. A switch had been thrown somewhere inside her, and her sex drive had
closed down.

Bo did not know any of this. He saw Don Riley as the perfect husband: handsome, smart,
successful, and working in law enforcement too.

Judy said: “Don asked me to have a celebration dinner, but I think I’ll cancel him.”
“I guess I ought to know better than to tell you who to marry,” Bo said with a rueful grin. He stood up. “I better go to work. We have a raid going down tonight.”

She did not like it when he worked at night. “Have you eaten?” she said anxiously. “Shall I make you some eggs before you go?”

“No, thanks, honey. I’ll get a sandwich later.” He pulled on a leather jacket and kissed her cheek. “I love you.”

“Bye.”

As the door slammed, the phone rang. It was Don. “I got us a table at Masa’s,” he said. Judy sighed. Masa’s was very swanky. “Don, I hate to let you down, but I don’t want to go.”

“Are you serious? I practically had to offer my sister’s body to the maitre d’ to get a table at this short notice.”

“I don’t feel like celebrating. Bad things happened at the office today.” She told him about Lestrange getting cancer and Kincaid giving her a dumbass assignment. “So I’m quitting the Bureau.”

“That’s terrible!”

“It’s time for me to make some money, anyway. I was a superstar at law school, you know. I got better grades than a couple of people who are earning a fortune now.”

“Sure, help a murderer escape punishment, write a book about it, make a million dollars. It just doesn’t seem like you.”

“Maybe not. But with all this on my mind, I’m not in the mood for a celebratory dinner.”

There was a pause. Judy knew that Don was resigning himself to the inevitable. After a
moment he said: “Okay, but you have to make it up to me. Tomorrow?”

Judy did not have the energy to fence with him any more. “Sure,” she said.

“Thanks.”

She hung up.

She turned on the TV and looked in the fridge, thinking about dinner. But she didn’t feel hungry. She took out a can of beer and opened it. She watched TV for three or four minutes before realising that the show was in Spanish. She decided she did not want the beer. She turned off the TV and poured the beer down the sink.

She thought about going to Everton’s. It was a bar used by a lot of the agents. She liked to hang out there, drinking beer and eating hamburgers and swapping shootout stories. But she was not sure she would be welcome now, especially if Kincaid was there. She was already beginning to feel like an outsider.

She decided to write her résumé. She would go into the office and do it on her computer. Better to be out doing something than sitting at home getting cabin fever.

She picked up her gun belt, then hesitated. Agents were on duty twenty-four hours a day, and were obliged to be armed except in court, inside a jail, or at the office. But if I’m no longer an agent, I don’t have to go armed, she thought. Then she changed her mind. Hell, if I see a robbery in progress and I have to drive right on by because I left my weapon at home, I’m going to feel pretty stupid.

She strapped on the gun.

It was a standard-issue FBI weapon, a Smith & Wesson 9mm semi-automatic pistol. She wore a shoulder rig. A woman with a neat flat ass could carry a gun on her hip, and wear a long
jacket to hide it, but Judy was too rounded, and the gun would make a conspicuous bulge no matter what she wore. So she tucked it under her arm.

She also had a model 860 five-chamber shotgun. Like all agents, she did firearms training once a month, usually at the sheriff’s range in Santa Rita. Her marksmanship was tested four times a year. The examination never gave her any trouble: she had a good eye and a steady hand, and her reflexes were quick. But she had never yet shot at a real person.

She pulled on a short Levi jacket and went outside. Her Chevrolet Monte Carlo was parked at the kerb. It was an FBI car: she would not be sorry to lose it. If she became a hotshot defense lawyer she could get something more exciting: a little European sports car, maybe, a Porsche or an MG.

Her father’s house was in the Richmond neighbourhood. She took the Geary Expressway downtown. Rush hour was over and traffic was light, and she did not see any armed robberies in progress, so she was at the Federal Building in a few minutes. She parked in the underground garage and took the dedicated FBI elevator to the twelfth floor.

Now that she was leaving the Bureau, the office took on a cosy familiarity that made her feel nostalgic. The grey carpet, the neatly numbered rooms, the desks and files and computers all spoke of a powerful, well-resourced organisation, confident and dedicated. There were a few people working late. She entered her own office, sat at her desk and switched on her computer.

When she thought about writing her résumé her mind went blank. She could hardly give the details of the cases she had cracked, the busts she had been on, the standoffs and the shootouts and the car chases: they wanted to hire a lawyer, not a gunslinger. But before the FBI there was only school and two dull years in the legal department of Mutual American Insurance.
She decided to begin by writing her formal letter of resignation.

She put the date, then typed: “To the Acting Special Agent in Charge.”

She wrote: “Dear Brian: This is to confirm my resignation.”

It hurt.

She had given a lot to the Bureau. She was smart and conscientious and methodical. She had done good work and risen fast: she had been a supervisor at thirty-two.

But it was worse than that. Her mind returned, as it often did, to the baby she might have had. Sometimes she felt she had given up her child for the sake of her career. It was a foolish, irrational thought, but it came back to her powerfully now that she was quitting. It brought tears to her eyes. What kind of a fool are you, she said to herself, sitting alone in your office crying to your damn computer.

Then Simon Sparrow came in.

He was a heavily muscled man with neat short hair and a moustache, wearing khaki chinos and a short-sleeved sports shirt. A year or two younger than Judy, he had a master’s degree in psychology. In the Bureau he specialised in psycholinguistics.

He liked Judy, and she liked him. With the men in the office he talked men’s talk, baseball and firearms and cars, but when he was alone with Judy he noticed and commented on her make-up and jewelry the way a girlfriend would.

He had a file in his hand. “Your earthquake threat is fascinating,” he said, his eyes glowing with enthusiasm.

She blew her nose. He had surely seen that she was upset, but he was tactfully pretending not to notice.
He went on: "I was going to leave this on your desk, but I'm glad I've caught you."

He had obviously been working late to finish his report, and Judy did not want to deflate his enthusiasm by telling him she was quitting. "Take a seat," she said, composing herself.

"Congratulations on winning your case today!"

"Thanks."

"You must be so pleased."

"I should be. But I had a fight with Brian Kincaid right afterwards."

"Oh, him." Simon dismissed their boss with a flap of his hand. "If you apologise nicely, he'll have to forgive you. He can't afford to lose you, you're too good."

She didn't want to argue with him. "Tell me about your analysis of the threat."

"It had me puzzled for a while." He handed her a printout of the threat message as it had originally appeared on the Internet bulletin board. She studied it again.

I" May

To the state governor:

Hi!

You say you care about pollution and the environment, but you never do nothing about it; so we're going to make you.

The consumer society is poisoning the planet because you are too greedy,

and you got to stop now!

We are Stop Now, the radical offshoot of the Green California campaign.

We are telling you to announce an immediate freeze on building power
plant. No new plant. Period. Or else!

Or else what, you say?

Or else we will cause an earthquake exactly four weeks from today.

Be warned! We really mean it!

Stop Now.

It did not tell her much, but she knew that Simon would mine every word and comma for meaning.

“What do you make of it?” he asked.

She thought for a minute. “I see a nerdy young student with greasy hair, wearing a washed-out Guns n Roses T-shirt, sitting at his computer fantasising about making the world obey him, instead of ignoring him the way it always has.”

“Well, that’s about as wrong as could be,” Simon said with a smile. “The vocabulary and sentence structure suggest an uneducated lower-class man in his forties. Look at the salutation. Middle-class people don’t start a letter with ‘Hi’, they put ‘Dear Sir’. And educated people avoid double negatives, such as ‘you never do nothing’.”

Judy nodded. “That sounds pretty straightforward. What puzzled you?”

“Other elements suggest a young middle-class woman. The spelling is perfect. And look at the punctuation. There’s even a semicolon in the first sentence. That indicates someone educated. The number of exclamation points indicates a female—sorry, Judy, but it’s the truth.”

“How do you know she’s young?”

“Older writers are more likely to use initial capital letters for a phrase such as ‘State
Governor', and hyphenate words such as ‘off-shoot’ that young writers run together to make one word. Also, the use of a computer and the Internet suggests someone both young and educated."

"Contradictory evidence. Are you going to tell me this message was written by a schizophrenic?"

"Nope. Much simpler than that. It was written by two people: the man dictating, the woman typing. His sentences, her punctuation."

It was amazing how much data he could glean from a few words. "So much for my lonely nerd theory," she said ruefully. She was captivated, despite the resignation letter on her screen.

"I ask myself why he dictates," Simon said. "It might come naturally to a corporate executive who was used to having a secretary; but this guy is more of a regular joe."

"Any theories?"

"I wonder if he's illiterate?"

"He could just be lazy."

"True." Simon shrugged.

"All right," Judy said. "We've got a nice college girl who is somehow in the thrall of a street guy. Little Red Riding Hood and the big bad wolf. She's probably in danger, but is anyone else?"

"As you know, we classify terrorist threats and attacks according to three parameters: motivation, intent, and target selection."

Judy nodded. This was basic stuff.

"Motivation is either emotional or practical," Simon went on. "Is the perpetrator doing it to make himself feel better, or because he wants something?"
Judy thought the answer was pretty obvious. “On the face of it, these people have a specific goal. They want us to stop building power plant.”

“Right. And that’s good news.”

“How so?”

“It means they don’t really want to hurt anyone. They may achieve their aims just by making a threat.

“Whereas the emotional types would rather kill people.”

“Exactly. Now, intent classifies the act as political, criminal or mentally disturbed.”

“Political, in this case, at least on the surface.”

“Right. Political ideas are sometimes used as a pretext for an act that is basically insane, but I don’t get that feeling here.”

“Except for the earthquake threat. That’s insane.”

“I’ll come back to that, okay? Finally, target selection is either specific or random. Trying to kill the president is specific target selection; going berserk with a machine-gun in McDonald’s is random. Taking the earthquake threat seriously, just for the sake of argument, it would obviously kill a whole lot of people indiscriminately, so we have to categorize this one as random.”

Judy leaned forward, fascinated. “Now you’ve got it classified, how does that help?”

“This combination of practical intent, political motivation, and random targeting has one of two purposes: either publicity or bargaining.”

“These people seem to be bargaining. They’ve asked for what they want right out.”

“Yes, and I think that is their genuine aim.”
"What makes you so sure?"

"Their choice of medium for transmission of the message. They put it on an obscure bulletin board on the Internet. That suggests they’re not after publicity. They didn’t go for media exposure. They simply wanted to communicate with the state governor."

"It also suggests naivety. They think the governor reads his messages."

"I agree. These people are an odd combination of sophistication and ignorance."

"So you think we should take what they say at face value?"

"Yeah, and I’ve got another reason for that. Their demand, for a freeze on the building of new power plant, isn’t the kind of thing you would choose as a pretext. It’s too down-to-earth, it has no symbolic resonance. If you were making something up, you’d go for a splashy demand: no cars on the freeways on Mondays, for example, or a ban on air-conditioning in Beverley Hills."

"So who the hell are these people?"

"I don’t know. The typical terrorist shows an escalating pattern of behaviour. He begins with nuisance phone calls and anonymous letters; then he writes to the newspapers and TV stations; then he starts hanging around government buildings, fantasising. By the time he shows up for the White House tour with a Saturday Night Special in a plastic shopping bag, we’ve got quite a lot of his work on the FBI computer. But not this one. I’ve checked the linguistic fingerprint against all past terrorist threats on record, but there’s no match. These people are new to us. They haven’t done this kind of thing before."

"Anything else you can tell me about them?"

"They’re Americans, and there is no indication of any particular ethnic group: their
language shows no characteristically black, Asian or Hispanic features. And they’re in California.”

“How do you know that?”

“Common sense. Their message is addressed to ‘the state governor’. If they were in another state, they would address it to ‘the governor of California’.

Judy grinned. “I guess I should have figured that out for myself.”

Simon shrugged.

“Okay.” Judy took a deep breath. “Everything you say suggests that these people are sane, serious and focussed. And that means dangerous.”

“Right.”

She shook her head. “But there’s one big hole in that theory.”

“The threat, right.”

“Simon, they have to be crazy. They think they can cause an earthquake!”

“Maybe you’re right,” he said. “I don’t know anything about seismology. But I know psychology, and I’m not comfortable with the theory that these people are out of their minds.”

“You think they can cause an earthquake?”

“If I were you, I’d check it out.”

She nodded slowly. “I guess you’re right.”

He stood up. “I’m beat. Want to go for a beer?”

“Not tonight, Simon—but thanks. And thanks for the report. You’re the best.”

“You bet. So long.”

When he had gone, Judy looked at her screen. Because she had not touched the keys for
a while, her screen saver had come on. It was a photograph of her at the age of seven, with gaps in her teeth and a plastic clip holding her hair back off her forehead. Judy was sitting on her father’s knee. He was still a patrolman then, and he was wearing the uniform of a San Francisco cop. She had taken his cap and was trying to put it on her own head. The picture had been taken by her mother.

She touched the space bar and the screen saver disappeared. In its place she saw the words she had written: “Dear Brian: This is to confirm my resignation.” Her hands hovered over the keyboard. After a long pause, she spoke aloud. “Aw, hell,” she said. Then she erased the sentence and wrote: “I would like to apologise for my rudeness yesterday....”
The sun was coming up over I-80. Priest’s ancient Ford Mustang was heading towards San Francisco, its built-in roar making fifty-five miles per hour sound like ninety.

He had bought the car at the height of his business career. Then, when his little empire collapsed and the IRS was about to arrest him, he had fled with nothing but the clothes he stood up in—a navy business suit, as it happened, with broad lapels and flared pants—and his car. He still had both.

During the hippie era, the only car it was cool to own was a Volkswagen Beetle. Driving his Mustang, Priest looked like a gangster, Star told him. So they gave it a trippy paint job: planets on the roof, flowers on the trunk lid and an Indian goddess on the hood with eight arms trailing over the fenders, all in purple and yellow and turquoise. In twenty-five years, the colours had faded to a mottled brown, but you could still make out the design, if you looked closely. And now the car was an antique.

He had set out at three a.m. Melanie had slept all the way. She lay with her head in his lap, her fabulously long legs folded along the worn black plastic seat. As he drove he toyed with her hair. She had sixties hair, long and straight with a part in the middle, although she had been born around the time the Beatles split up.
The kid was asleep, too, lying beside the dog in the back seat. The dog was quiet, but every time Priest looked at him he had one eye open.

Priest felt good.

Better than good, he felt great. This was like the old days. In his youth he always had something going, some scam, a project, a plan to make money or steal money or have a party or start a riot. Then he discovered peace. But perhaps life had become too peaceful. Stealing the seismic vibrator had revived his old self. He certainly felt more alive now, with a tense encounter ahead of him and a pretty girl by his side, than he had for years.

He should have been worried.

He had stuck his neck all the way out. He had claimed he could bend the governor of California to his will, and he had promised an earthquake to force the issue if necessary. If he failed, he would be finished. He would lose his home and his position and he would probably not get out of jail until he was in his seventies.

But he was the smartest person he had ever met. And he was already half way there. He had stolen a seismic vibrator, which was hidden in a lonely valley in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. Now he needed to know exactly where to place it.

He planned to find out from Melanie’s husband.

At 35 years of age, Michael Quercus was one of the leading seismologists in America. He knew more than anyone else in the world about the San Andreas fault. His accumulated knowledge was stored on his computer.

And Priest was planning to steal his backup disk.

In the rear seat, Michael’s five-year-old son Dustin woke up.
Priest’s German shepherd dog, Spirit, moved first, and Priest heard the click of his claws on the plastic upholstery. Then there was a childish yawn.

Dustin, known as Dusty, was an unlucky boy. He suffered from multiple allergies. Priest had not yet seen one of his attacks, but Melanie had described them: Dusty sneezed uncontrollably, his eyes bulged, and he broke out in itchy skin rashes. She carried powerful suppressing drugs, but she said they mitigated the symptoms only partially.

Allergy sufferers often had a reaction to pets, Priest knew, but Dusty had no problem with Spirit; perhaps because he was an outdoor animal who lived in the open air and slept in a doghouse.

Now Dusty started to grizzle.

“Mommy, I’m thirsty,” he said.

Melanie came awake. She sat upright, stretching, and Priest glanced at the outline of her breasts in the skimpy T-shirt she wore. She turned around and said: “Drink some water, Dusty, you have a bottle right there.”

“I don’t want water,” he whined. “I want Coke.”

“We don’t have any goddamn Coke,” she snapped.

Dustin started to cry.

Priest said: “Hey, whoa, what the hell is that coming up behind us?” He made himself sound really scared.

Melanie looked around. “It’s just a truck.”

“That’s what you think. It’s disguised as a truck, but really it’s a Centaurian fighter spacecraft with photon torpedoes. Dusty, I need you to tap three times on the rear window to raise
our magnetic space shields. Quick, now!”

Dusty tapped on the window.

“Now, we’ll know he’s firing his torpedoes if we see an orange light flashing on his starboard fender. You better watch for that, Dusty.”

The truck was closing on them fast, and a minute later its left side indicator flashed and it pulled out to pass them.

Dusty said: “It’s firing, it’s firing!”

“Okay, I’ll try to hold the shields while you fire back! That water bottle is actually a laser gun!”

Dusty pointed the bottle, and Spirit joined in, barking at the truck as it passed. Melanie started to laugh.

When the truck pulled back into the slow lane ahead of them, Priest said: “Whew. We were lucky to come out of that in one piece. I think they’ve given up for now.”

“Will there be any more Centaurians?” Dusty said eagerly.

“You and Spirit keep a watch out the back and let me know what you see, okay?”

“Okay.”

Melanie said quietly: “Thanks. You’re so good with him.”

I’m good with everybody: men, women, children and pets. I got charisma. I wasn’t born with it—I learned. It’s a way of making people do what you want. Anything from persuading a faithful wife to betray her husband, all the way down to getting a scratchy kid to shut up. All you need is charm.

“Let me know what exit to take,” Priest said.
“Just watch for signs to Berkeley.”

She did not know he could not read. “There’s probably more than one. Just tell me where to turn.”

“Okay.”

A few minutes later they left the freeway and entered the quiet university town of Berkeley. Priest felt Melanie’s tension rise. She directed him through the leafy intersections to Euclid Avenue, a street of modest houses and small apartment buildings probably rented by graduate students and younger faculty.

“I still think maybe I should go in alone,” she said.

Priest allowed himself to show a flash of anger. “No!”

“Okay, okay,” she said hastily. She bit her lip.

Dusty said excitedly: “This is where Daddy lives!”

“That’s right, honey,” Melanie said. She pointed to a small apartment building, and Priest pulled over.

Melanie turned to Dusty, but Priest forestalled her. “He stays in the car.”

“I’m not sure how safe—”

“He’s got the dog.”

“He might get scared.”

Priest twisted around to speak to Dusty. “Hey, Lieutenant, I need you and Ensign Spirit to stand guard over our spacecraft while First Officer Mom and I go inside the spaceport.”

“Am I going to see Daddy?”

“Of course. But I’d like a few minutes with him first. Think you can handle the guard
duty assignment?"

"Yes."

"In the space navy, you have to say 'Aye, sir!' instead of 'Yes'."

"Aye, sir!"

"Very good. Carry on."

Priest got out of the car.

Melanie got out, but she still looked troubled. "For Christ's sake don't let Michael know we left his kid in the car," she said.

Priest did not reply.

Melanie took her purse off the seat and slung it over her shoulder. They walked up the path to the building door. Melanie pressed the entry phone buzzer and held it down.

Her husband was a night owl, she had told Priest. He liked to work in the evening and sleep late. That was why they had chosen to call on him at seven o'clock in the morning. Priest hoped he would be too bleary-eyed to suspect that their visit had a hidden purpose.

Melanie had left her husband six months ago—driven away, she said, by Michael's workaholic habits. He spent the days driving all over California checking the instruments that measured small geological movements in the San Andreas fault, and the nights putting the date into his computer; and he never paid enough attention to her. At the time she had moved in with a musician, the bass player in a hot young band, but that had not worked out: the musician was too selfish, she reported. She had left him shortly before she met Priest.

Eventually a grouchy voice came through the intercom. "Who is it?"

"It's Melanie."

There was a buzz, and the building door opened. Priest followed Melanie inside and up
a staircase. An apartment door was open on the second floor. Michael Quercus stood in the door.

Priest was surprised by his appearance. He had been expecting a weedy professorial type with glasses. Quercus was tall and athletic, with a head of short black curls and the shadow of a heavy beard on his cheeks. He was stark naked, so Priest could see that he had broad, well-muscled shoulders, a flat belly, narrow hips with a lot of dark pubic hair, and long legs. *They must have made a handsome couple.*

As Melanie reached the top of the stairs, Michael said: “I’ve been very worried—where the hell have you been?”

Melanie said: “Michael! Put on some clothes!”

“You didn’t say you had company,” he replied coolly. He stayed in the doorway. “Are you going to answer my question?”

“I’m here to explain,” she said. “This is my friend Priest. May we come in?”

He shrugged, turned his back, and walked inside.

*He looks like a friggin’ movie star, except you don’t often see a movie star’s bare ass.*

Melanie and Priest followed Michael into a small lobby. He opened the bathroom door, took a dark blue cotton robe off a hook and unhurriedly slipped into it before leading them into the living room.

This was clearly his office. As well as a couch and a TV set, there was a computer screen and keyboard on the table, and a row of electronic machines with blinking lights on a deep shelf. Somewhere in those bland pale-gray boxes was stored the information Priest needed. It was so tantalising: there was no way he could get at it. He needed Melanie to act for him.

One wall was entirely taken up with a huge map. “What the hell is that?” Priest said.
Michael just gave him a who-the-fuck-are-you look and said nothing, but Melanie answered the question. “It’s the San Andreas fault.” She pointed at the map. “Beginning at Point Arena lighthouse a hundred miles north of here in Mendocino County, all the way south and west, past Los Angeles and inland to San Bernadino. A crack in the earth’s crust, five hundred miles long.”

Melanie had explained Michael’s work to Priest. His specialty was the measurement of tension at different places along seismic faults. Earthquakes were most likely to happen at points where the tension was high. His work had won him professional eminence and academic prizes. But a year ago he had quit the university to start his own business, a consultancy giving advice on earthquake hazards to construction firms and insurance companies.

At first Melanie had been keen on the idea, hoping it would make them rich. She too was a seismologist—or she had been: she had quit work on her doctorate when she got pregnant with Dusty and had never gone back to it. She was also a computer wizard, and she had devised the set-up Michael used.

She had programmed his computer to back up every day between four a.m. and six a.m., when he was always asleep. Everything on his computer, she explained to Priest, was copied on to an optical disk. When he switched on his screen in the morning, he would take the disk out of the disk drive and put it in a fireproof box. Then, if his computer crashed or his house burned down, his precious data would not be lost. He could copy it from the disk to another computer.

It was a mystery to Priest how knowledge about the San Andreas fault could be kept on a little disk, but then books were just as much of a mystery as disks to him. He accepted the fact and used it. The important thing was that with Michael’s disk Melanie would be able to tell Priest
where to place the seismic vibrator.

Now they just had to get Michael out of the room long enough for Melanie to snatch the disk from the optical drive.

“Tell me, Michael,” Priest said. “All this stuff.” He indicated the map and the computers with a wave of his hand, then fixed Michael with The Look. “How does it make you feel?”

Most people got flustered when Priest gave them The Look and asked them a personal question. They often gave a revealing answer because they were so disconcerted. But Michael seemed immune. He just looked blankly back at Priest and said: “It doesn’t make me feel anything, I use it.” Then he turned to Melanie and said: “Now, are you going to tell me why you disappeared?”

*Arrogant prick*

“It’s very simple,” she said. “A friend offered me and Dusty the use of her cabin in the mountains. It was a late cancellation of a rental.” Her tone of voice said she did not see why she had to explain something so simple. “We can’t afford vacations, so I grabbed at the chance of a free one.”

That was when Priest had met her. She and Dusty had been wandering in the forest and got completely lost. Melanie was a city girl and could not even navigate by the sun. Priest was out on his own that day, fishing for sockeye salmon. It was a perfect early-summer afternoon, sunny and mild. He had been sitting on the bank of a stream, smoking a joint, when he heard a child crying.

Following the sound, he found Dusty and Melanie. She was close to tears. “Thank God, I thought we were going to die out here!” she said when she saw Priest.
He had stared at her for a long moment. She had been wearing cutoff jeans and a halter top, and he thought she looked like an angel with tits. It was magical, coming across a damsel in distress like that when he was alone in the mountains. If it had not been for the kid, Priest would have liked to lay her right then and there, on the springy mattress of fallen pine needles beside the splashing stream.

He knew where the vacation cabins were. He picked up his fishing rod and led her through the forest, following the valleys and ridges that were so familiar to him. It was a long walk, and on the way he found out all about her. She had been a fool to leave her husband for an unreliable musician, and now she was in trouble: no home, no job and no money.

Priest liked people in trouble. All you had to do was offer them what they needed, and they became your slaves.

By the time they reached the cabin it was suppertime. Melanie made pasta and salad, then put Dusty to bed; and then Priest seduced her on the rug. Her body was a dream of perfection. Priest had not felt so good for twenty years. He wanted more of her, lots more.

He still felt the same way.

Now her supercilious handsome-professor husband was complaining. “That was four weeks ago. You can’t just take my son and disappear for four weeks without even a phone call!”

“You could have called me.”

“I didn’t know where you were!”

“I have a mobile.”

“I tried. It wasn’t working.”

“The service was cut off because you didn’t pay the bill! You promised you’d pay it.”
"I paid it. I was a couple of days late, that’s all."

"Well, that’s why you couldn’t reach me."

This was not getting Priest any closer to that optical disk. He had to get Michael out of the room. He interrupted the row. "Why don’t we all have some coffee?" he suggested, hoping Michael would go to the kitchen to make it.

Michael jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Help yourself," he said. He turned back to Melanie. "It doesn’t matter why I couldn’t reach you. I couldn’t. That’s why you have to call me before taking Dusty away on vacation."

Melanie said: "Listen, Michael, there’s something I haven’t told you yet."

Michael looked exasperated, then sighed and said: "Sit down, why don’t you."

Michael sat behind his desk. Melanie sank into the couch in a way that showed it was familiar to her. Priest sat on the arm of the couch, not wanting to find himself at a lower level than Michael.

Michael’s tone of voice suggested that he had been through scenes like this with Melanie before. "All right, make your pitch," he said wearily. "What is it this time?"

"I’m going to move to the mountains, permanently. I’m living with Priest and a bunch of people."

"Where?"

Priest interrupted. He did not want Michael to know where he lived. "It’s in Del Norte county." That was in the redwood country at the northern end of California. In fact the commune was in Sierra county, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada on the eastern border of the state.

Melanie shot him a questioning look, puzzled by Priest’s lie, but she did not say anything.
Michael was outraged. “You can’t take Dusty to live hundreds of miles away from his father!”

“There’s a reason. In the last four weeks, Dusty hasn’t had a single allergy attack. He’s healthy in the mountains, Michael.”

Priest added: “It’s probably the pure air and water. No pollution.”

Michael was sceptical. “It’s the desert, not the mountains, that normally suits people with allergies.”

“Don’t talk to me about normally!” Melanie flared. “I can’t go to the desert—I don’t have any money! This is the only place where Dusty can be healthy—and I can afford to live!”

“Is Priest paying your rent?”

“It’s a commune.”

“Jesus, Melanie, what kind of people have you fallen in with now? First a junkie guitar player—”

“Wait a minute, Blade was not a junkie—”

“Now a godforsaken hippie commune!”

Melanie was so emotionally involved in this quarrel that she had obviously forgotten the real purpose of their visit. Priest interrupted again. “Why don’t you ask Dusty how he feels about this, Michael?”

“I will.”

Melanie shot Priest a despairing look.

He ignored her. “Dusty’s right outside, in my car.”

Michael flushed with anger. “You left my son outside in the car?”
“He’s okay, my dog’s with him.”

Michael looked accusingly at Melanie. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Priest said: “Why don’t you just go and get him?”

“I don’t need your fucking permission to get my own son. Give me the car keys.”

“It’s not locked,” Priest said mildly.

Michael went out.

“I told you not to say that!” Melanie wailed. “Why did you do it?”

“To get him out of the goddamn room! Now grab that disk!”

“But you made him so mad!”

Priest stood up. He took Melanie’s hands, pulled her upright, and gave her The Look.

“You don’t have to be afraid of him. You’re with me now. I take care of you. Be cool. Say your mantra.”

“But—”

“Say it.”

“Lat hoo, dat soo.”

“Keep saying it.”

“Lat hoo, dat soo, lat hoo, dat soo.” Melanie became calmer.

“Now get the disk.”

Melanie nodded. Still saying her mantra under her breath, she bent over the row of machines on the shelf. She pressed a button and a flat plastic square popped out of a slot.

Priest had noticed before that “disks” were always square in the world of computers.

She opened her purse and took out another disk that looked similar. “Shit!” she said.
"He’s changed his brand!"

Priest looked at the two disks. They seemed the same to him. "What’s the difference?"

"Look, mine is a Sony but Michael’s is a Phillips."

"Will he notice?"

"He might."

"Damn." It was important that Michael did not know his data had been stolen.

"He’ll probably start work as soon as we’ve gone. He’ll eject the disk and swap it with the one in the fireproof box, and if he looks at them he’ll see they’re different."

"And he’s sure to connect that with us." That was even worse.

Melanie said: "I could buy a Phillips disk and come back another day."

Priest shook his head. "I don’t want to do this again. Does he keep spare disks?"

"He should. Sometimes a disk gets corrupted." She looked around. "I wonder where they are." She stood in the middle of the floor, looking around helplessly.

Priest said: "Melanie. You have two disks in your hand. Put both of them in your purse."

She did so.

"Now close your purse."

She did that.

Priest heard the building door slam. Michael had come back in.

"Now. When you were living here, did Michael have a stationery cupboard?"

"Yes. Well, a drawer." She pointed to a cheap white chest against the wall.

Priest pulled open the top drawer. There was a package of yellow pads, a box of cheap ballpoints, a couple of reams of white paper, some envelopes—and an open box of disks.
He heard Dusty’s voice. It seemed to come from the small lobby at the entrance to the apartment.

He took out a disk and handed it to Melanie. “Will this do?”

“Yes! It’s a Phillips!”

Priest closed the stationery drawer.

Michael walked in with Dusty in his arms.

The child was saying: “And you know what, Daddy? I didn’t sneeze in the mountains!”

Michael was looking at Dusty.

Melanie put her disk in the slot, and the machine whirred softly and drew it in, like a snake eating a rat.

“You didn’t sneeze?” Michael said to Dusty. “Not once?”

“Uh-uh.”

Priest relaxed. They had got away with it.

Michael said: “That dog doesn’t make you sneeze?”

“No, Spirit is a clean dog. Priest makes him wash in the stream, and then he comes out and shakes himself and it’s like a rainstorm!”

“Is that right?”

Melanie said: “I told you, Michael.”

Her voice sounded shaky, but Michael did not seem to notice. “All right, all right,” he said in a conciliatory tone. “If it makes such a difference to Dusty’s health, we’ll just have to work something out.”

She looked relieved. “Thanks.”
Priest allowed himself the ghost of a smile. It was all over. The data was safe in Melanie's purse. His plan was working.

Now they just had to hope that Michael's computer did not crash today. If that happened, and he tried to retrieve his precious data from the optical disk, he would discover that it was blank. But Melanie said that crashes were rare. The backup system was like an insurance policy. The odds were there would be no crash today. And tonight the computer would back up again, storing Michael's date on the disk. By this time tomorrow it would be impossible to tell that a switch had been made.

Michael said: "Well, at least you came here to talk about it. I appreciate that."

Melanie would much rather have dealt with her husband on the phone, Priest knew. But Priest had seen this as a perfect cover for visiting Michael. He and Melanie could not have paid a casual social call on her husband without making him suspicious. But this way it would not occur to Michael that their visit might have had some other purpose.

In fact Michael was not the suspicious type, Priest felt sure. He was brainy but guileless. He had no ability to look beneath the surface and see what was really going on in the heart of another human being.

Priest himself had that ability in spades.

Melanie was saying: "I'll bring him to see you as often as you like, I'll drive down."

Priest could see into her heart. She was being nice to Michael, now that he had given her what she wanted. She had her head on one side and she was smiling prettily at him. But she did not love him.

Michael was different. He was angry with her for leaving him, that was clear. But he still
loved her, Priest thought. And he would ask her to come back to him, except that he was too proud.

Priest felt irrationally jealous.

_I hate you, Michael._
Judy had been in an earthquake once.

Known as the Santa Rosa earthquake, it caused damage worth six million dollars, not much for an earthquake, and it was felt over the relatively small area of thirty thousand square kilometres. The Maddox family was living in Marin county and Judy was in first grade. It was a minor tremor, she knew now. But at the time she had been six years old, and it had seemed like the end of the world.

First there was a noise like a train, but real close, and she came awake fast and looked around her bedroom in the clear light of dawn, scared to death, searching for the source of the sound.

Then the house began to shake. Her ceiling light with its pink fringed shade whipped backward and forward. On her bedside table, Best Fairy Tales leaped up in the air like a magic book and came down open at Tom Thumb, the story Bo had read to her last night. Her hairbrush and her toy make-up set danced on the Formica top of the dresser. Her wooden horse rocked furiously of its own volition. A row of dolls fell off their shelf, as if diving into the rug, and Judy thought they had come alive, like toys in a fable. She found her voice at last and screamed once: "Daddy!"

From the next room, she heard her father curse, then there was a thud as his feet hit the
floor. The noise and the shaking grew worse, and she heard her mother cry out. Bo came to Judy’s door and turned the handle, but it would not open. She heard another thud as he shouldered it, but it was stuck.

Her window smashed and the shards of glass fell inwards, landing on the chair where her school clothes were neatly folded ready for the morning: gray skirt, white blouse, green V-neck sweater, navy-blue underwear and white socks. The wooden horse rocked so hard it fell over on top of her dolls’ house, smashing the miniature roof; and Judy knew that the real roof of her real house might be smashed just as easily. A framed picture of a rosy-cheeked Mexican boy came off its hook on the wall, flew through the air, and hit her head. She cried out in pain.

Then her chest of drawers began to walk.

It was an old bow-fronted pine chest her mother had bought in a junk shop and painted white. It had three drawers, and it stood on short legs that ended in feet like lions’ paws. At first it seemed to dance in place, restlessly, on its four feet. Then it shuffled from side to side, like someone hesitating nervously in a doorway. Finally it started to move toward her.

She screamed again.

Her bedroom door shook as Bo tried to break it down.

The chest inched across the floor towards her. She hoped maybe the rug would halt its progress, but instead it just rucked up then moved in front, pushed by the relentless lions’ paws.

Her bed shook so violently that she fell out.

The chest came within a few inches of her and stopped. The middle drawer came open, looking like a big wide mouth ready to swallow her. She screamed at the top of her voice.

The bedroom door shattered and Bo burst in.
Then the shaking stopped.

The memory of her childhood fear stayed with Judy all day, making her tense. Thirty years later she could still feel the overwhelming terror that had possessed her like an epileptic fit as the whole world fell apart around her. She had been frightened of closing the bedroom door for years afterwards; and she was still frightened of earthquakes.

She was on edge that evening as she drove to Masa’s, wearing a black silk dress and the row of pearls Don Riley had given her the Christmas they were living together.

Don ordered a white burgundy called Corton Charlemagne. He drank most of it: Judy loved the nutty taste, but she was not comfortable drinking alcohol when she had a semi-automatic pistol loaded with 9mm ammunition in her black patent evening purse.

She told Don that her boss, Brian Kincaid, had accepted her apology.

“He had to,” Don said. “Refusing it would be tantamount to firing you. And it would look so bad for him if he lost one of his best people on his first day as acting SAC.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Judy said, but she was thinking that it was easy for Don to be wise after the event.

“Sure I’m right. Imagine the scene where he explains to Washington why he had to let you go. ‘She said fuck to me!’ he says. Washington goes: ‘So what are you, a vicar? You never heard an agent say fuck before?’ Uh-uh.” Don shook his head. “Kincaid would seem like a wimp if he refused your apology.”

“I guess so.”

“Anyway, I’m real glad we may be working together again soon.” He raised his glass.
“Here’s to many more brilliant prosecutions by the great team of Riley and Maddox.”

She clinked glasses and took a sip of wine.

They talked over the case as they ate, recalling the mistakes they had made, the surprises they had sprung on the defence, the moments of tension and of triumph.

When they were drinking coffee Don said: “I miss you. Do you miss me?”

Judy frowned. It would be cruel to say No, and anyway it was not true. But she did not want to give him false encouragement by saying Yes. “I miss some things,” she said. “I like you when you’re funny and smart.” She also missed having a warm body beside her at night, but she was not going to tell him that.

He said: “I miss talking about my work, and hearing about yours.”

“I guess I talk to Bo now.”

“I miss him, too.”

“He likes you. He thinks you’re the ideal husband—”

“I am, I am!”

“—for someone in law enforcement.”

He shrugged. “I’ll accept that.”

Judy grinned. “Maybe you and Bo should get married.”

“Ho, ho.” He paid the bill. “Judy, there’s something I want to say.”

“I’m listening.”

“I don’t know how you feel about it now, but I think I’m ready to be a father.”

For some reason that shocked her. “So what am I supposed to do about it?” she said angrily. “Shout hooray and open my legs?”
He was taken aback by her reaction. "I just...well, it was an issue."

"An issue? You call it an issue? I had an abortion!"

He looked mortified. "Okay, I must have misread the whole situation, but I thought maybe you left me because I didn’t want children."

"And now that you do, I’m supposed to come running back to you, as if nothing had happened?"

"I wish I knew what did happen."

"I guess you’ll never understand." His evident distress softened her. "Come on, I’ll drive you home." When they were living together she had always been chauffeuse.

They left the restaurant in an awkward silence. In the car, he said: "What I was trying to say was, I’m ready to try again."

"I don’t think so."

"I miss everything about you."

She believed him. He was not drunk, just mellow enough to say what he felt without embarrassment. She sighed. She did miss him. She missed sex. Don was not the world’s greatest lover—his lovemaking was unimaginative, though enthusiastic—but he was better than nothing, and nothing was what she had had ever since she left him.

He said: "Don’t you miss me just a little bit?" He stroked her thigh through the silk dress.

She said: "If you feel me up while I’m driving, I’ll throw you out of the car."

He knew she could do it. "Whatever you say." He took his hand away.

Then she wished she had let him continue.

A minute later she pulled up outside his building. "Thanks, Don," she said. "For a great
prosecution and a great dinner.”

He leaned over to kiss her. She offered her cheek, but he kissed her lips, and she did not want to make a big thing of it, so she let him. His kiss lingered until she broke away. Then he said: “Come in for a while. I’ll make you a cappuccino.”

She was tempted. She could put her gun in his safe, drink a large heartwarming brandy, and spent the night in the arms of a man who loved her. “No,” she said firmly. “Good night.”

He stared at her for a long moment, misery in his eyes. She looked back, embarrassed and sorry, but resolute.

“Good night,” he said at last. He got out of the car.

Judy pulled away. When she glanced in the rear-view mirror she saw him standing on the sidewalk, watching her, his hand half-raised in a kind of wave. She ran a red light and turned a corner, then at last she felt alone again.

When she got home, Bo was watching Conan O’Brien and chuckling. “This guy breaks me up,” he said. They watched his monologue until the commercial break, then Bo turned the TV off. “I solved a murder today,” he said. “How about that?”

Judy knew he had several unsolved cases on his desk. “Which one?”

“The Telegraph Hill rapist. A guy was picked up for harassing young girls in the park. I had a hunch about him and searched his apartment. He had a pair of police handcuffs like the ones found on the body. I ran a DNA test on his blood and it matched the semen from the victim’s body. Then he confessed. Three in a row, jackpot.”

“Well done!” She kissed the top of his head.