

MONKEYLAND

Another word for freedom!



Alton H. Case

Volume One in The Monkeyland Series

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Alton H. Case

The First Volume in the Monkeyland Series

ALTON H. CASE

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MONKEYLAND

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MONKEYLAND

How a race of man came into the world
so exalted above the rest,
and distinguished like some new species,
is worth inquiring into.

Thomas Paine

MONKEYLAND

PART ONE

WHITE LAW

CHAPTER ONE

“Do you mind?” She pushed the barrel of the M-16 away from her ribs.

“Sorry.” The man’s mutter was barely audible over the reverberation of the truck engine. He shifted the weapon away.

It might as well have been midnight for all the light in the back of the truck, and the motion of the truck was constantly throwing the members of the team against one another. Gun barrels and other sharp edges were constant annoyances, and the fact that they were enclosed with various explosive devices didn’t help the tense mood.

Outside, the sounds of the city passed: a car horn honking; somebody yelling something in a foreign language; and, at one point, a siren, which caused the members of the team to look—they didn’t need light to feel each other’s attention—at one another.

Inside the truck there was no sound except the bump and rustle of bodies.

“Time?” one of the men asked. His unimpassioned voice hid any sign of excitement.

A large shadow in the darkness lifted one wrist and pressed a button. The shine of a blue watch face revealed a ring of attentive, bearded faces.

“Five minutes.”

A few of the men nodded, short bobs of their heads, then they were all back in their own worlds, trying to keep their balance, waiting, trusting that a bump of the truck wouldn’t ignite a mine, or a grenade, or a canister of nerve gas.

Five minutes.

Jerome Johnson, seven years old, had a new lunch pail. It was a Mighty Morphin Power Rangers. Being seven years old, he was not yet possessed of the demon of possessiveness, so he didn’t want to be better than Mo Robinson, who sat across from him, or Kinten Washington, or even Mariah Sanchez, who’s big brother was in the sixth grade.

No, all Jerome Johnson wanted was to share the excitement of having a new lunch pail, even if the wrong Power Ranger was most prominent on it. (His mother had, after all, gotten it from Missus Waters, whose son was now in the sixth grade and didn’t want to be seen carrying a lunch pail with no ‘moto cycle rider in tights’ no more.)

So Jerome Johnson, possessed of the joy of a new (in his eyes) lunch pail with two (count 'em!) sandwiches inside, one a peanut butter and jelly and the other made with those little vinny sausage things that were like hot dogs but a lot better, sauntered proudly along Commerce Street towards Washington Avenue and Lincoln Elementary School.

"Hey, Kinten!" He spotted his friend at the back gate and his hand sprouted into the air.

Kinten Washington waved and began running towards Jerome. His mouthful of grin was so wide it reflected the morning sun.

"Hey! Jerome!"

The two did high fives and low fives and side fives and spun to do foot fives. It was what the older boys did, after all.

"I got a Power Rangers!" Jerome yelled as they went through the ritual.

"Man! That's cool!"

"I tell ya it's cool!"

"It's cooler than cool!"

"It's cooler than a cherry popsicle!"

"It's cooler than the inside of a ice cream truck!"

"It's cooler than—"

"Is it cooler than this?"

Both boys turned to find Mo Robinson watching them with lazy, slitted eyes. In Mo's hand, cupped so no one but his friends could see, was a shiny razor blade.

"Oh, man! What you got there?"

"All the brothers are carryin' this year," Mo responded proudly, effecting a worldliness far beyond his years.

"Man, you gonna git caught!"

"I ain't gonna git caught!" Mo was disdainful, aloof at the very idea.

"Yeah, but if you do..." Kinten warned.

"Wilson's older brother got caught with a blade," Jerome chimed in.

"Yeah, but it was part of a comb!"

"He a fool!"

Any further argument was truncated as the school buzzer sounded.

"Oh, man," Kinten said, suddenly noticing the gate. Normally, they would have entered the playground through the side gate, but the gate was closed and padlocked. So engrossed had they been in their conversation that they hadn't noticed the other kids passing by the gate to walk the long way around to the front entrance.

"Who done this shit?" Jerome kicked the gate viciously.

"Who care who done it, man. We goin' be late!"

The three boys looked at each other and realized that they better hustle their butts, or they would get those butts chewed by the mean, old Missus Watson. Missus Watson was the principal, and she definitely knew the meaning of the word mean.

“Man, come on!” Kinten shouted, and the three broke into a sprint alongside the fence. They could race down the street, hop the low, brick fence by the front office and sneak in through the front entrance, thus making roll call with time to spare.

None of the three noticed the big white truck cruising past them.

Two men sat in the cab of the white truck: one lounging like the passenger he was, and the other shifting gears and guiding the big vehicle. The uniform of the day was blue jumpsuits, false whiskers, sunglasses, brand new Dodger ballcaps and surgical gloves.

As the truck passed the racing boys the passenger glanced over at them. The look on his face, under the disguise, was one of studied arrogance and cynicism.

“Lookit those niggers run,” he commented dryly.

He had been a cop in Georgia at one time, and because of that, and because he was chubby, though not with fat, the others called him Porky.

Bugs, slowing the truck for a stoplight and gauged the upcoming intersection. “Betty says to call ‘em Monkeys,” he said offhandedly, deciding to cut in front of the Granny Goose truck approaching from the left.

The Goose truck looked like it was heading for the school, and Bugs certainly didn’t want to stand in line to begin the operation. Betty would be one pissed mother if he let that happen.

Porky glanced at Bugs and frowned. For a second he thought Bugs might lecture him. Betty says this. Betty says that. Betty says calling Monkeys niggers was incorrect. Calling niggers Monkeys was correct.

But Bugs wasn’t the preaching kind. He leaned the truck almost onto two wheels—which caused the Goose truck to swerve and almost hit a red, Chevy wagon—and moved in front of the Goose. Bugs grinned as the sound of pounding and yells came from the box behind him.

Porky laughed and said, “You tryin’ to turn this puppy over on the doorstep?”

Bugs leaned forward and looked across Porky’s bow as they approached the entrance to the school. Behind them, the Granny Goose truck was honking angrily.

“Looks quiet enough,” Bugs observed with a twist of lips. His eyes were invisible behind the sunglasses.

Porky turned his head and inspected the target.

The school had been built in the fifties. It was a pale green auditorium, an office, and two wings with several classrooms each. The

roof over the corridors had brownish louvers and the windows had been upgraded to metal frames with double thick panes. A last few children were scampering past the office towards the classrooms, and there wasn't anybody in the parking lot except a tall black man sporting a short, gray beard. The black man had a briefcase open on the trunk of his car and appeared to be searching the contents for something.

"For now," Porky agreed.

Bugs noted the satisfaction in Porky's voice. It was satisfaction bordering on glee. Well, they each had their own reasons for being here, and it was a little late to get psychological on one of the team. He began to grind the gears down, noted the Granny Goose truck appeared larger than it really was in his mirror, and turned into the parking lot. The Goose truck honked and surged forward as if it wanted to take a bite out of his rear bumper.

Porky leaned forward and glanced at the mirror on his side. "Got a real asshole back there," he said.

"When I stop, you can take personal charge of the asshole," Bugs grunted as he cranked the wheel and prepared to back up to the vendor's entrance.

"Gee, do I really have to?" Porky grinned.

Resigned to Porky's chaffing manner, Bugs shook his head dourly. He began backing the truck up.

From the far end of the parking lot, Relson Walker glanced at the trucks. He was irritated and didn't know why; it just felt like the day was getting off to a bad start. He turned his attention back to his briefcase and continued looking for a folder containing transfer forms.

Now who in their right mind would want to transfer out of this veritable paradise? And Relson Walker, like Bugs, shook his head in resignation.

Bugs, leaning out the window and ignoring the Granny Goose driver, gently backed the white truck into the space reserved for deliveries. Here was where the potato chips and carrot sticks and whatall that the district considered suitable fare for young bellies made their initial appearance.

In front of the white truck, the Goose truck jerked to a stop, and the driver, a skinny looking punk with a shaved head and a scraggly beard and mustache, sneered at Bugs. The driver's dark, slitted eyes revealed his belligerent and righteous anger.

Bugs, noting the other driver's attitude, had no expression on his face as he turned the ignition off. The stupid little shit had no idea what was about to happen to him. The passenger's door slammed on the other side of the cab.

Victor Sanchez, in addition to his shaved head and first growth facial hair, had a thin, little braid hanging off the back of his neck. He

also had an attitude. Being twenty-two years old had given him that attitude. Being a homeboy had given him that attitude. Being cut off by that motherfucking white truck had *really* given him that attitude. And, attitude scribbled all over his face, he watched the porky fucker in the blue jumpsuit saunter towards him. There was something cocksure about the way that Porky moved that, had Victor not been so full of attitude, and thus blind, would have warned him to be somewhat more circumspect.

Porky arrived next to the cab of the Goose truck and gazed up at Victor. A thin grin sliced through his fake whiskers as he inspected the younger man. Easily accessible through the pocket slit of his jumpsuit was a Smith & Wesson .38 revolver. In a holster on his right ankle was a .22. Up one sleeve was a knife.

“Hey, man! You cut me off!” Victor blurted.

Porky inspected the young man with the shaved head and the ridiculous braid. He wasn’t supposed to start the OK corral out here in front of God and a last few hurrying school kids, but that didn’t mean he didn’t have a few options. “School’s closed today.” His voice had a gravely quality; his tones were almost bored. Almost.

Victor looked around. A few kids still ran to beat the sound of the last bell. He could hear a few happy yells. “School ain’t closed. What the fuck are you—”

Porky cut Victor off by stepping up on the running board. He looked into the cab of the truck. He balanced himself by holding onto the mirror strut with one gloved hand.

“Hey, man! Get off the truck!”

Up close, Porky emanated nervous energy. He was like a small thundercloud looking for places to shoot lightning bolts. Moving quickly, he let go of the mirror strut and grabbed the door handle. He pulled the door open as he jumped to the ground.

“Hey! What the....” Victor was pissed, but he was also confused. There was something about this guy that he didn’t understand.

Porky stood, almost leaning against the door, his teeth still showing through the false beard. Under the casualness that was just a little too casual, he was considering what to do.

Heck, he would have to move the truck himself if he killed the punk where he sat.

And, following this reasoning, he understood that even a severe wound might throw a monkey wrench into the plans of the team. So he lifted one foot to the running board, extracted the .22 from the ankle holster and, while Victor gaped, shot him in the hip.

For Victor the world suddenly transformed into a rubbery, unreal thing. His head was like a ratchet wrench in slow motion as he swiveled it and aimed his eyes down at his hip. He stared at the blood welling

through the light blue material of his jeans. He looked up at the man who had shot him with newfound respect—the sudden respect of the young for mortality, and his eyes showed that he was now viewing survival through the blinders of helplessness.

Porky stood negligently, held the gun loosely, and was calm. The fact of having shot someone had launched him into a new state of mind. Now that the first shot had been fired, the war had been declared. It was started. After all the planning and anticipation...what a relief!

For a long moment the two looked at each other; shooter and shootee, alone in a new world order.

Victor cast frantic looks around the parking lot. The sound of the gun had been a pop, more like a backfire than a bang, and nobody had come out to see what had happened. The teachers were all counting heads in their classrooms. The kids were having their heads counted. Even the fellow closing his briefcase at the end of the parking lot had merely glanced in his direction.

From the rear of the white truck came the mumble of voices, and the truck shook slightly as bodies unloaded.

“Had to shoot a stupid delivery man,” Porky said.

Victor focused again on the man who had shot him. It looked like he was talking into his beard. Son of a bitch had to be deranged.

“Told you,” Porky said to Victor, his attitude almost friendly. “School’s closed.”

“Can I leave?” Victor asked, drained of all belligerence. He was now quite willing to accept the fact that he had been cut off at the intersection.

“Sure,” Porky said. He still had one foot on the running board, and he slid the .22 back into the ankle holster. He put his foot on the ground, closed the door and, hands on hips, jerked a nod towards the street.

Victor, his blood leaking down his jeans and onto the bench seat, shoved the shift lever into gear and pressed on the gas pedal. The tires gave a hard squeak, and the truck almost stalled before lurching forwards. It was hard pressing down on the clutch with a leg with a hole in it, and Victor didn’t even glance at the tall, black man with the brief case, the one who had just left his locked his car and who had to jump out of the path of the accelerating truck.

“Hey!” Relson Walker yelled, clutching his briefcase. This was his school, this was his district, and he didn’t like truck drivers who didn’t watch where they were going. This was a school, for Christ’s sake!

Porky grinned as he watched the truck take the end of the parking lot on two wheels, then almost overturn as it tilted out of the entrance. In a matter of seconds the Goose truck was gone, heading up Commerce in search of a hospital.

“Was that the regular driver?” Walker glared after the truck as he approached Porky.

Porky studied the man. Tall. Shiny, ebony skin. One of those stupid jackets with the patches on the elbows. Goatee type of beard and a funky line of hair on the upper lip.

He wasn’t a parent, that was for sure. Parents came to school with an attitude of nervousness, like perps returning to the scene of the crime. Teachers walked like people on their way to work. This guy didn’t walk like a parent or a teacher. Guy walked like a warden. Administrators always walked like wardens. Yeah, he was official.

“I asked you if that was the regular driver?” Relson frowned at the short delivery driver. He didn’t like it when people didn’t answer him right away.

Porky concealed his hard grin. Uppity. That was what this son of a bitch was. Well, he had ways of dealing with uppity...Monkeys. Ways that he had cultivated on the backroads of Georgia. He smiled, tightlipped. “Got a delivery for you.”

“What? What delivery? And what are you wearing those gloves for?”

“Because of the delivery. Come see.”

Porky turned and strode towards the back of the white truck.

Relson stared at the back of Porky’s head. He was angry about the display of reckless driving he had just witnessed, and now he had some idiot delivery man not making sense. Just wait until he got back to the office. He would have phone calls to make about reckless driving and delivery men and deliveries that weren’t expected. Thus immersed in the haughty anger of his mind, blind like Victor had been blind, he followed the chunky man in the jumpsuit.

As Walker walked alongside the box of the white truck, the sound of a motor working frantically reached him. Through a gap between the truck and the wall, he could see something moving back and forth.

Porky stopped at the gap between the truck and the building and looked up at Relson. He grinned insolently, aware that the uppity couldn’t resist reacting to that kind of attitude. He didn’t say anything, just waited.

Walker scowled. He didn’t like the way this delivery man was acting. He didn’t like people who came onto his turf and acted like it was theirs. “Are you delivering something?”

“Yeah, we’re delivering. Special shipment. Take a look.” Porky stepped back, the grin on his face daring Walker to step forward.

Walker, tight-lipped with irritation, stepped into the gap between truck and building. In the corridor a small forklift was buzzing like a wasp, moving much too fast for a place where children could be found. The smell of propane was strong—almost strong enough to make him

gag—and he watched as the forklift disappeared through the double doors that led into the kitchen. Walker, anger being replaced by confusion, turned his attention to the men working at the back of the truck.

There were several men, all in blue jumpsuits, all variable sized clones of the short, rude driver. Like the driver, they wore beards, sunglasses, and new Dodger baseball caps. The weirdest thing, however, was the white, surgical gloves on all of their hands. A couple of the men glanced at Walker, then ignored him, kept working, kept unloading and unpacking and placing items on pallets for the forklift to transport into the kitchen.

On the cement was a boxed computer system, large floodlights, a radar dish, several coils of cable, and many sealed boxes. Everything was numbered and color coded, and a man with a clipboard made sure that everything was handled in order.

Walker, seeing but not entirely comprehending, turned his head and looked into the back of the truck. It was still half filled with boxes and crates and, on the floor, right in front of him in two open crates, barely visible in the semi darkness, two small missiles. Alarm flooded through him, and he jerked his head back and started to turn.

“You—”

POP!

The gun was waiting for the turn of his head and the presentation of his ear, and Relson Walker suddenly felt an excruciating earache, then he didn't feel anything, and his body was pushed, even as it fell, into some bushes next to the building. Relson Walker, who had wondered who would ever want to transfer out of this veritable paradise, had, himself, been transferred.

Porky balanced on one foot as he put the .22 back in the ankle holster. He would have liked to have used the .38, but this close to the office there was a noise factor. All he needed was one of those bitches in the front office to get scared and start dialing 911. Besides, a .22 in the right place, and the ear was just the right place, was as good as a .38 anytime.

“Are you having fun?”

Porky turned quickly and was instantly sober. Gone was the insolence and the joy as he looked down—the figure confronting him was shorter than he was—into a pair of the coldest blue eyes he had ever seen.

“Necessary,” was all he said, and he kept his demeanor just so.

Betty looked up at him. Her sunglasses hung from her pocket and she let the glacial effect of her eyes wash over him. She was well aware of the effect of her eyes. She was also well aware that Porky had been enjoying himself just a little too much. On the other hand, just because

she viewed their mission at the school as a series of items to be accomplished as machinelike as possible didn't mean that everybody had the same attitude. She lifted her beard with one slender, rubberized hand and, without taking her eyes off Porky, spoke into it softly. "Magilla, see to the office." Then she spoke to Porky. "I believe you have a roof to attend to?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said, carefully sincere, and he brushed past her just as Magilla came around the corner of the truck.

Magilla, named aptly as Porky had been named, was large. He was six foot four, which put him eight inches taller than Porky, and more than a foot taller than Betty. Every inch of him, unable to be concealed by the jumpsuit, was hard muscle and large bone. And beyond the sheer size of him was his granite-faced, dominating presence. That presence was what made him the unofficial, yet not to be disputed, top sergeant of the mission.

Now, face hard behind beard, he walked along the side of the parking lot. In one hand was a paper bag.

Betty watched him for a moment, a thin smile on her lips. White Law had arrived.

CHAPTER TWO

They had killed the cooks and thrown the bodies in a corner. A runnel of blood began at the bodies and ran down the slope of the floor to a floor drain. The blood was the same color as the floor tiles, but shiny.

On a table on the left side of the kitchen, surrounded by sinks, counters and refrigerators, Foghorn was setting up a computer. Behind the table with the computer, a Honda generator had been shoved up against one of the stoves.

Betty walked through the door leading from the kitchen to the auditorium proper. The door hadn't been large enough for the forklift, and thus the forklift had battered a larger opening with fang and grill. Betty stepped over the splinters of wood and plaster and walked across the shiny floor of the auditorium.

Here was where children gathered for Christmas pageants and parades and whatever community efforts the school offered itself to.

Here was where the autumn basketball league held try outs and games. Here was where the PTA met and discussed young futures.

And Betty, immersed in her mission, didn't give a rat's ass about the PTA, basketball, or anything else. They only had a limited time before the LAPD figured out what was going on, and the success of their mission could easily hinge on the degree of their preparation.

At the far end of the auditorium, Huckleberry pounded nails into the base of the planks leading to the stage. He suddenly stood back and motioned to Bugs. Bugs drove the forklift straight at the planks and roared up to the stage.

Huckleberry jumped to the stage and took his place on a pallet next to Porky. Bugs swung the lift around and jammed the forks into the pallet. Porky, as the pallet lifted, trailed cord while Huckleberry hoisted the power saw over his head. The cord came trailing down like a falling ribbon, and within seconds the sound of the saw could be heard gnawing at the roof.

Betty turned away and, smiling tightly, walked back towards the kitchen. Everything was on schedule.

Jerome, Kinten and Mo jumped over the low wall, snuck through a line of bushes, and prepared to sneak past the windows of the front office. Suddenly, a huge man rounded the corner into the corridor. He wore a blue jumpsuit and was carrying a paper sack. Because of the beard and hat and glasses, the boys could hardly see his face. They could

tell he was white, though, and that was unusual at Lincoln Elementary. They stood still and stared up at him.

“Better get to class, fellows.” The man’s voice was a light bass, very confident and knowing, then he entered the front offices and closed the door. Through the wire and glass window he looked at them for a moment, then he turned away and all they could see was his billboard-sized back.

“What that honky want?” Kinten asked. He was awed by Magilla’s size.

“I don’t know. But we better get to class.”

Taking advantage of any distraction the enormous white man might cause in the office, the three boys raced up the corridor.

Magilla, like Porky, had been in Georgia, but he had not been a cop. He had been regular army, stationed at Fort Benning and looking forward to completing his twenty. Just a couple more years and he could go west. He could go be a cowboy and ride into the sunset, live out his years hunting and fishing and just having a good time. He had served his country, through war and peace, and he deserved.

The problem was—he didn’t like black people. And that problem seemed to exacerbate with time, not lessen.

And, if queried, he couldn’t say why he felt the way he did about black people. It was just that he had to live in the closed and integrated community of the army, and as he got older, he got crankier and less tolerant of blacks.

One day he entered into a drunken argument with another sergeant, a black sergeant, and when the smoke cleared he was behind a barbed wire fence. The only reason he wasn’t in front of a firing squad was because the army doctors, very good at patching up battlefield wounds, had managed to save the life of the black sergeant. After two years in the stockade, Magilla was released. Broke, no pension and no hope for the future, he had gone west anyway, and, out west, Betty had found him.

From a man who could look forward to a future as a short order cook, a gas station attendant, or something equally as dismal, he was suddenly given hope—and a mission where he could spend a little of that anger that two years in the stockade had not lessened.

In addition to that, Betty was the best officer he had ever served under. It was a sheer pleasure to work with an officer that, in this day of the corporate military, was smart and committed.

In short, Betty, and White Law, became a substitute for almost two decades of dedicated service. He was still in the army, just a different army, and this one was going to make him rich.

“May I help you, sir?”

Magilla stood with his back to the closed door and inspected the front office.

He stood on a miserable tile floor, the same type of floor found in a thousand barracks, except that it wasn't shined half as well. The right wall was lined with windows, and below the windows were a few chairs and a table with brochures. To the left was a long counter with scuffed and scarred wood. On the counter were schedules under glass, wire baskets, and a couple of piles of leaflets. One of the leaflets proclaimed in loud red that anyone could 'say no to drugs.'

Beyond the counter were several desks, tables, and the various paraphernalia associated with the daily running of a school. The left wall was plastered with plaques and pictures of graduating classes.

And sitting at three desks behind the counter were three gargantuan, fat ladies.

Magilla grinned.

Trixie, Bonnie and Lisha were cronies in the front office. They were large, black, and secure that they couldn't be fired. They were 'black, fat and bureaucrat,' to use their own words, and they cackled, filed things whenever filing couldn't be put off, answered the phones somewhat belligerently, and lived life in their kingdom as they saw fit.

Suddenly that kingdom had been invaded.

An enormous white man in a jumpsuit stood on the other side of the counter. He was carrying a paper bag and he was weird looking, his face and head somewhat hidden by cap and beard and sunglasses. And the gloves? Why would a man wear surgical gloves on a hot day like this?

They had been too long secure in their kingdom, and alarm was slow to penetrate.

Trixie got up, which was a job in itself, and waddled to the front counter. "May I help you?" she repeated, and suddenly she had the feeling that she didn't want to be there, that there was something wrong.

Magilla looked around curiously. "Is that the loudspeaker system over there?" His tones were mild, not military at all.

Trixie turned and stared over the desks at the finished wooden box with the mike in front. Clipboards hung on the wall around the PA. On the table next to it there were baskets filled with paper. Above it was a shelf full of volumes that detailed the running of a school, according to what's legal according to the state, of course.

Trixie turned back to the man. The man's question had been innocuous, but she was a trained bureaucrat—trained not to give information under any circumstances. Besides, there was something about this fellow that was making her nervous.

"What is it you want?" Trixie's eyes narrowed into a look designed to unnerve the unwary.

Her two friends watched, picked up on Bonnie's unsureness, felt vague alarm tickling at their psyches.

Magilla reached into the paper sack like he was reaching for a sandwich, and he pulled out an M-16. It looked like a toy in his monster hands.

"What...." Trixie blinked, synapses clicked and she began to understand.

He thumbed the selector to single shot.

"You can't...." Trixie began backing her immense bulk up. She was like a blind truck driver as she bumped her big backside against a desk. Behind her, Bonnie and Lisha were standing up much faster than they normally would have. Their eyes were white plates in the distorted sea of their black faces. Panic was almost a visible emotion as it filled the room.

BANG!

Magilla let a little anger out, his aim not distorted by that anger.

Trixie's head jerked back, a dime hole in the front, a softball size mess on the back. Brain and blood splattered over the desks and triplicates and two other black women as Trixie fell. One large arm bumped a table and knocked papers to the floor, then her bulk bounced on the vinyl tiles.

As the other women started to scream—the screams weren't loud, more of the 'just getting started' variety Magilla quickly aimed at one, then the other.

BANG!

BANG!

His anger felt good, satisfying, and his hands were steady as he punctured the women's faces. The screams ended abruptly and the women collapsed. Magilla stood for a moment and inspected his work. It was as easy as Desert Storm. Satisfied, he turned away from the dead and walked alongside the counter towards the back offices.

In the nurse's office, Ming Lee was working on the monthly request for medicine. She was a pleasant Chinese lady with concentration lines between her almond eyes and a wisp of hair dangling on her forehead. Hearing what sounded like firecrackers, she looked up. Now who could be setting off fireworks in the office? Brushing the wisp of hair back into place, she pushed her chair back and stood up. It was two steps to the short corridor, then three steps to the hallway. She stepped into the hallway to see what was happening.

A very large white man walked towards her. He looked like a worker in that jumpsuit, but he was holding a—

BANG!

Ming Lee grabbed her throat with one hand and fell back. Her other hand flailed out and found the window sill. Slumping downward,

she gurgled. Her eyes were focused, still not quite comprehending what was happening, and why it was happening to her, on Magilla.

Magilla paused over the Chinese woman in the blood spattered white dress. She gargled something up at him, but her throat was irreparably damaged. Hell, she could have been speaking Chinese for all Magilla knew.

Staring down at the dying woman, not feeling any anger—she was not black, after all—Magilla shot her again, this time square in the face. She flopped back on the floor, and her legs gave a last twitch. Magilla stepped over legs that would never dance again and headed down the short hall to the nurse's office. He had to be sure there was nobody else in the back offices before he went for the principal.

“What are you going to do about it?” Mrs. Watson glared at Tubby. She was the principal and he was the janitor—and he was in trouble. He hadn't waxed the floor in the auditorium, he had other things to do that evening, and the maintenance schedule was beginning to look a shambles.

“Well, I, uh....”

She stared at Tubby and his goofy expression. Overweight and not too smart, she thought. He probably couldn't even get a job outside the school district. She sighed.

“Tubby, Tubby, Tubby. What are—”

BANG!

And then: BANG! BANG!

As one, their heads pivoted towards the window. The sound of the gunshots—working in South Central they both knew the sound of gunshots—seemed to come from the window. The walls had muffled the sound and they didn't know that the gunshots were occurring right in the building.

Tubby raised himself from the chair and stepped to the window.

“Get away from there,” Mrs. Watson snapped. She put one hand on the phone, but didn't lift it.

Tubby couldn't see anything, anyway, so he stepped back.

BANG!

And: BANG!

The gunshots were getting louder, and suddenly it struck Mrs. Watson—she being the brighter she got it first—that the shots were being fired right inside the building. She couldn't stop herself from looking at the closed door.

Watching the direction of her gaze Tubby realized what she was thinking. He turned around and opened the door.

“Tubby...” she began as she lifted the phone, intending to tell him to close the door.

Looking down the hallway, Tubby, saw Ming Lee lying on the floor. She looked like she was sleeping, except that blood pooled on the floor around her head.

“Hey!” he squawked in surprise and turned his questioning face back towards Mrs. Watson.

Mrs. Watson grimly took note of the O of surprise on Tubby’s round features. The intuition that something bad was happening burst upon her, and she pressed a slender digit on the nine to get an outside line.

Tubby caught a shadow with his peripheral vision. He jerked his head back towards Ming Lee, his mouth still open, and saw Magilla—who had just stepped out of the hallway leading to the nurse’s office—advancing towards him.

BANG!

Tubby stepped back and looked down at his chest in confusion.

BANG! BANG!

Tubby found himself backpedaling faster as Magilla strode purposefully towards him. At the back wall of Mrs. Watson’s office Tubby found that his legs weren’t straight anymore; he was slumping and sitting and his chin was lowering. Just like Ming Lee, he was going to sleep, and he didn’t think he was going to be having any dreams.

Blood and bone and bits of organs decorated wall plaques and bookshelves. A thick chunk of gore was slipping off the leaf of a rubber tree next to Mrs. Watson’s desk.

Mrs. Watson, sitting upright as if doused with cold water, stared in shock at at her dress; she had worn a brown, shiny dress with small buttons, now it was decorated with specks of Tubby.

And Tubby was crumpled in the far corner, an unmoving bulk, his eyes wandering sightlessly as he searched, unsuccessfully, for just one more breath.

Magilla, exuding purpose, stepped into the office, and Mrs. Watson found herself staring up at him. He was an immense, square block, bulky and imposing. The face hair made him look mysterious. The gun made him look dangerous.

“Uh...hunh...hunh!” The sounds coming out of her were soft grunts, and the fingers of one hand hovered over the telephone like birds afraid to land.

Magilla pointed the M-16 at her and waved it in an unmistakable ‘put down’ sign.

She lowered the receiver as if afraid it would break, her eyes sliding over Magilla’s disguised face in vain attempts to see, to understand.

“Come.” Magilla began backing out of the office.

Mrs. Watson stood up, unaware of herself moving, her body moving apart from herself.

He backed into the hallway, pulling her with an invisible line attached to the barrel of his pistol, like she was a fish that was hooked and needed to be reeled gently.

Mrs. Watson, giving little gasps to start the breathing process again, advanced to the door and saw Mrs. Lee sprawled on the floor. Mrs. Lee's face was sadly slack, and there was a bullet hole in the forehead.

"Come."

Mrs. Watson, fascinated and repelled by the sight of Ming Lee, forced herself to keep walking.

They walked down the hall and entered the front office. As Mrs. Watson saw her three workers, she found the desire to breathe flirting with the desire to puke.

"Stand here." Magilla stopped her in front of the counter and walked around the counter. He grabbed the mike to the PA system and said, "How do I turn it on?"

"I won't tell you," she said. Her legs were trembling and she was like jelly on the inside.

Magilla frowned, and he was about to say something, then his attention just seemed to go away as he reached up and adjusted something behind his ear. It looked like a hearing aid, and Mrs. Watson realized that it was some sort of headphone set up.

"What are—"

He made a very slight chopping motion with the barrel of the M-16 and she stopped talking.

"All secure," he spoke into his beard mike. "I'll make the announcement now and see you in the auditorium with Watson after the halls clear."

He knew her name! And who was he talking to?

Magilla suddenly shifted his head and looked towards the PA system again. He ignored the principal, but she knew that if she took even one step he would shoot her.

After a moment of inspection he selected a switch. It was the right one. He flicked it 'on' and held the mike to his beard.

"Attention. Attention, please. There is a special meeting in the auditorium. All teachers and students please report to the auditorium."

He placed the mike gently on the table, turned the switch off, and looked at her. "Why don't you have a seat." He nodded towards the chairs behind her.

"I will not," she replied. Though she was still feeling queasy, she was determined to find some control in the situation.

Magilla felt his inner rage threatening to erupt. Growling, he stepped forward and raised the M-16 as if to buttstroke the principal.

Quickly, Mrs. Watson sat.

Daffy was of medium build with a sharp, hard face under his fake beard. He was one of those people that seemed lazy until he went into motion, then became whip snap and certain.

Daffy had been a guard in a prison in Oklahoma.

Whereas Porky was virtually bred for White Law, and Magilla was abused into it, Daffy had no such excuse. He was just mean.

Daffy had enjoyed prison. He liked having nothing to do but sit around and smoke cigarettes, and if anybody pissed him off, and it was usually but not always the niggers, he could just pull out a non-regulation sap and do a little sap dance on their thick skulls.

He could have grown old in the prison system. He was smart enough to never get caught abusing the inmates, and he enjoyed prison, but it wasn't for him.

Daffy quit the prison.

He bummed his way towards the Pacific Ocean and went broke in Nevada. He refilled his wallet by getting in card games long enough to know who the winner was, and waylaying that winner after the game was over.

California, when he reached that great state, was a pisser. People were laid back and full of that 'we all gotta get along' shit. And while they were laid back, the niggers were having a ball.

Daffy eventually U-ed at the Pacific and made his way back towards Nevada. He was sitting in a bus station in Vegas when Betty found him.

Her icy blue eyes found his, and the connection was instant. He sat on a bench, she stood in front of him, in the midst of a sea of brats and mommies,.

"Aren't you tired of fucking around?" she had asked. There was nothing sexual in her question. It was just the iron hard tones of one kindred soul for another kindred soul.

Aren't you tired of fucking around, having nothing to do, having no direction?

And, under the simple question, *Come with me and I'll give you purpose, I'll give you something to do, I'll make your life a goddamn party.*

In his mind a party was a leather sock filled with buckshot.

In her mind a party was a school. This school.

Now, the hard work of learning to be part of a team behind him, Daffy stood at the end of one wing in the school and leaned against the wall. Damn place reminded him of a prison. It was made of brick and

cement and had iron grates at the entrances. Well, at least it made good, little institutional citizens out of the Monkeys. That's all the fucks were good fo— He stopped thinking and listened to the sound of Magilla giving the announcement over the PA system. "...all teachers and students please report to the auditorium."

Daffy turned and hurried down the corridor. He glanced through the small wire window in the first door and saw that the children were standing and getting ready to walk to the auditorium.

In the next classroom the kid's heads could be seen bouncing up and down as they lined up in front of the door.

A stream of children came out of the third classroom before he reached it. He weathered the stares and continued to the fourth classroom.

In the last classroom of the wing the children were sitting as quiet as mice as the teacher read from a book. The teacher was small, maybe five feet, and thin, maybe ninety pounds, and that was in her dripping wet L'eggs. She was wearing a light colored dress and wore a shawl with bright colors in African patterns around her neck.

Daffy's mouth twisted in a light frown. He smoothed it out and opened the door.

"Meeting in the auditorium, ma'am." His face was a study in blandness.

Eliza Nelson looked at the white man sticking his head into her classroom. She didn't like the way his face was hidden. She didn't like the snide sound of his voice or how he had entered her classroom wearing sunglasses. She didn't know him, and she didn't recognize the other voice that had come over the PA.

She closed the book she was reading from and addressed the children. "Children, I will be outside for a moment. Janey, you are in charge."

Wide-eyed, black faces watched as Mrs. Nelson walked, back erect and demeanor proud, to the door.

Once outside she said, "I don't know you." Her voice was hard and direct.

"Sorry, ma'am, but we have a real emergency. I don't want to alarm the children, but you really do have to take them to the auditorium."

Eliza studied Daffy suspiciously. His sunglasses made him look like a wanna be gangsta, and his beard looked false. She didn't believe him one whit.

"I think I'd like to talk to Mrs. Watson personally before I—"

Daffy felt a speck of irritation. He tried once more. "Ma'am, this is an FBI matter, and—"

"You don't look like an FBI man!"

Daffy grew hotter. “Ma’am—” he began, trying to suppress his anger.

“Let me see some identification, and take off those sunglasses! Let me see your face.”

He couldn’t believe the bitch was talking to him this way! No inmate ever talked to him this way! He glanced at the next wing. Through the windows he could see that the classrooms were already empty, and the children were nearly out of his wing, except for this one class.

“You hear me?” Impatiently, she reached one hand up as if to grab his sunglasses.

He backed up, looking lazy for all his speed. When her hand retracted from him he had the sap out and was swinging it. The sap connected with the side of her face. The jawbone went shapeless and he could feel bones breaking.

Her head went sideways, then her whole body dropped. She hit the ground hard, the side of her head bouncing on the hard surface. She lay still for a moment, trying to understand what had happened. She could taste blood in her mouth, and she managed to spit a tooth out onto the cement.

Daffy kicked her in the head, just above the ear, and she lay still. He grinned a pleased grin.

“Hey!”

Daffy spun and reached for the gun that was still in his jumpsuit. He stopped when he saw that it was only a half dozen children standing on the stairs to the playground. What the hell were they doing on the playground? Were they late? Well, it didn’t matter. He didn’t have time to fuck with them.

“School’s closed for the day, kids. Go on home.”

The children didn’t budge.

“You hit Mrs. Nelson!” A little girl objected.

“If you don’t go home,” Daffy growled, “I’ll hit *you!*”

The girl stepped back in alarm, then turned and ran. She stopped halfway across the playground to stare again, then ran for the gate. The others were right behind her.

Daffy leaned down and grabbed one of Mrs. Nelson’s ankles. He would have grabbed her by the hair, but it was cut fashionably short. He pulled her towards the playground, and the blood leaking out of her mouth left thin red streaks on the pavement.

“You shoulda just followed directions,” Daffy grunted as he dragged her onto the steps and pushed her over the side. She lay disoriented and dazed, out of sight from the street, as he walked back up the steps.

“Everything okay?” came through his ear.

Daffy touched his beard closer to his lips and said, "Yeah. Some teach didn't want to play." He let go of his beard and looked across the playground to where the kids were climbing over the fence. Fuckers really did move like monkeys.

"Daffy!" came the persistent sound in his ear again. "Is your wing clear?"

Daffy turned away from the kids climbing the fence and touched his beard as he walked towards Mrs. Nelson's class. "One more class coming."

He opened the door to the classroom and poked his head in.

"Kids," he said to the rapt faces. "Mrs. Nelson went to the office. She said for you to go on to the auditorium."

For a second it looked like they wouldn't go, but he was an adult and they were kids, so they all stood up and began to file out of the classroom. Little Janey stared at him as she walked past, then the whole class was filing down the corridor towards the auditorium.

As the kids marched, Daffy turned back to the playground. The last of the Monkeys had climbed over the fence. They had all clustered on the other side and were talking excitedly. Mentally, he shrugged. So what if a few kids or teachers got away? Most of the school population was in the auditorium. What difference did it make if a few escaped?

CHAPTER THREE

“Billy Washington!” Patsy’s tone brought the entire line of children to a waffling halt. Hers was the last class, and a space opened up between her children and Mr. Peavy’s.

“Yes, ma’am?” Billy didn’t even look up. He had been, to the glee of his friends, goose stepping his Nike’s right into Mariah Sanchez’s booty—and he had been caught.

Patsy sighed wearily. If they were in the classroom, she would have had him empty the trash, clean the blackboard, or just do push ups.

But they weren’t in the classroom.

They were in the corridor, and some workmen were unloading a truck behind the cafeteria, and she had no idea why an assembly had been called.

“Do you,” inspiration taking hold of her, “think you can channel that energy of yours into leading us into the auditorium?”

Billy’s head jerked up. His eyes were wide with surprise and delight and his teeth gleamed in the beginning of a smile. One second he had been in trouble, and the next he was being told to be the leader! Everybody would follow him!

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Of course that’s a lot of responsibility. Do you think you can handle it without getting in trouble?”

Billy wasn’t sure whether he should nod or shake his head, so he opted for, “I can do a good job.”

Patsy put a serious frown on her face. “Well, if you think you can —”

Before she could finish her sentence, Billy was at the head of the line.

“Everybody follow me!” he yelled. “And don’t you give no trouble!”

Patsy managed not to grin. Responsibility as a cure for troublemakers—now *that* was a concept!

The line continued down the wing, then turned into the entrance to the auditorium.

Inside the auditorium all was chaos. There was a hole in the ceiling over the stage, and a forklift was raising pallets up to the roof. On the main floor chairs hadn’t been set up, and the children were roaming freely. They talked, played tag, pushed and shoved, and were a general

handful. The teachers were proving quite ineffective at bringing order out of the chaos, and Patsy stopped in dismay just inside the large room.

“Move on in, lady,” Daffy said, directly behind her. “We got to fix this door.”

Patsy turned her head and observed Daffy’s slight smile. Another man was holding a nail gun and there were some planks leaning against the side of the door. She moved forward, wondering at a meeting being called while workmen were working, but again her thoughts were distracted by the disorder of the children.

“Move over there, children,” she directed, trying to herd them to where they normally would have sat. Why weren’t the chairs set up? Why...?

When the double doors behind her closed, she looked up, and immediately frown lines appeared on her forehead. It was dim in the auditorium. Too dim. The hole in the roof over the stage was actually allowing more light than the few ceiling lights that were on, and Patsy turned towards the workmen.

Wiley held a plank up and Daffy put the nail gun to where the wood crossed the frame. Ka chunk! Ka chunk!

Patsy’s frown spread across her whole face. What kind of fixing was that?

“Where you want ‘em?” Billy Washington was suddenly in front of Patsy, still in the thrall of responsibility.

She barely glanced at him before returning her gaze to the workmen. “Have them sit in front of the stage where we normally sit.”

Exhilarated with his new found authority, Billy began ordering children towards the stage.

Patsy, momentarily freed from distraction, walked to where the two workmen were fixing the planks across the exit door.

“Pardon me?”

One of the workmen—he looked like one half of the Mario Brothers—turned to look at her. His beard looked funny. It looked like a badly matched fall. In the dim light Patsy’s eyes were still adjusting from the sunlight; she couldn’t tell that the beard was a fake.

“This door has to stay open in case of fire. And the forklift exhaust...” She waved a slim hand in front of her face to emphasize the toxicity of the fumes.

The man stared at her, the grin on his face looked cock-eyed and knowing. Though she couldn’t see through the opaque blackness of his sunglasses, there was something about his demeanor that bothered her.

“Get back to your kids, sis.”

He turned from her then, dismissing her completely, and went back to ka chunking nails through planks.

Patsy's mouth opened in surprise. What kind of rude workmen were these? For a moment she was too surprised to do anything, then she reached out and touched his shoulder. "You—"

Daffy went into that lazy speed mode of his; he grabbed the back of her head with one hand even as he pressed the nail gun against her forehead with the other. Patsy, suddenly terrified that his finger would twitch and she would end up with a spike of metal thrusting into her forehead, found she couldn't move.

"How would you like me to nail your brain to the back of your fucking skull?" His jaw was tight under the beard, and his words snapped out in hard, staccato fashion.

Patsy's hand was on his wrist, but that wouldn't stop him if he decided to bend one finger. Her mouth was open, but no sound came out.

"Now, you wanna take care of the fucking kids?" His face was inches from hers. She could smell bacon and eggs and the slight aroma of aftershave.

"Gah...uh..." she managed.

He shoved her head away and her whole body went backwards. The whole thing had taken less than five seconds, and only a handful of children had noticed. They stood still and stared up at Daffy with big, serious eyes.

"For a second there I thought you were going to nail her," Wiley said, holding the planks. Daffy laughed, then went back to shooting nails.

Patsy was having trouble standing. She staggered briefly, caught herself, and managed to look down at the children. She could feel the indentation of the nail gun on her forehead. She rubbed at it and tears exploded from her eyes.

"Come on, Mrs. Kenmore," Mariah Sanchez took her hand and led her towards the stage. At the stage Billy Washington had gotten the entire class, including the very unruly Mo Robinson, to sit quietly.

Patsy forced herself to breathe. Something was happening here, and she had to stay in charge. She had to make sure she did what she could to protect the children. Unfortunately, she really had no idea how she could protect the children if she couldn't protect herself.

The auditorium was packed, the order displayed by Patsy Kenmore's class the exception and not the rule, and teachers were slow in gaining control over their children. Children chattered at the tops of their voices, trying to be heard over other children chattering at the tops of their voices, and the decibel level was right up to the roof. Through this cacophony and confusion the terrorists moved, pushing people aside, ignoring both the children who stared up at them and the teachers who glared after them.

Daffy and Wiley finished nailing the side door. The other side door, the one that opened on the parking lot, had been nailed shut before the school had been commanded to assembly.

Daffy trotted up the short steps at the side of the stage and jumped on the forks. While Bugs lifted Daffy up to the roof, Wiley made his way to the kitchen.

Bugs, temporarily done with his work, relaxed in the seat of the forklift and reached into his jumpsuit for cigarettes and matches. Shortly, he was smoking calmly while he watched the slowly resolving chaos in the auditorium. He wondered whatever had happened to ‘spare the rod and spoil the child.’

On the roof Porky, Daffy and several other terrorists were sweating under the morning sun.

Lights went to the corners. Weapons and shields went to designated locations—locations with commanding fields of fire. Cables, yet to be attached, were unspooled back to the main cable hanging down to Bugs.

“How’s it going?” Wiley arrived in the kitchen and stood at Foghorn’s shoulder.

“Run the cable from the generator,” Foghorn said.

Wiley nodded as he bent to pick up a roll of cable.

In the auditorium Patsy Kenmore was still shaking and trying to control her tears. She was standing by her children in front of the stage when Mr. Peavy suddenly appeared by her side. “Are you all right?” He offered her a handkerchief and she grabbed it like a drowning sailor would grab a life preserver. Mr. Peavy had been on the far side of the auditorium when Daffy had threatened to spike her brain, and it had taken him a long minute to work his way over to her. He hadn’t actually seen anything happen; he was just responding to his children telling him that ‘somebody shoved Mrs. Kenmore.’

“Is everything going to be all right? Mr. Peavy?” It was Mariah Sanchez. Her voice was cracking, and she was holding her sweater in her arms like it was a doll.

“Of course it will, Mariah.” He looked around as he patted her head. All the doors were nailed shut now, except for the one to the kitchen. Through the kitchen door he could see the men in jumpsuits moving around. Standing guard at the door, shooing children away, was a shorter jumpsuited figure.

Mr. Peavy wasn’t sure which of the workmen had threatened Patsy because they all looked alike. And why did they look alike? Were they members of some religious union or something? Their very attitude was a disgrace! Mr. Peavy turned and stared at Bugs, who sat in the yellow forklift and smoked a cigarette.

“What do you think is happening?” Patsy finally managed to ask through her tears.

“I don’t know,” Mr. Peavy said, watching Bugs and shaking his head. “I really don’t know.” His lips became a grim line of anger.

On the roof Porky said, “Fuck and double fuck.”

Betty: “Whatsit?” They had worked together long enough that all voices were recognizable over the head radios.

Porky: “We’re short a damned extension cord.”

Bugs glanced over the floor of the stage: “It’s down here. Must have fallen out of the box. Coming up.”

Bugs snuffed the remains of his cigarette on the side of the forklift and pivoted out of the seat. He trotted across the stage, retrieved the errant extension cord, and looped it on one fork.

The elderly Miss Wilkins, who taught third grade, stood nervously at the edge of the stage and watched Bugs work the lever that took the forks, and the cord, to the ceiling. These men were so abrupt, and she was not a particularly brave person, but... Working her courage to a high point, she ascended the steps on the left side of the stage and approached Bugs.

Bugs noticed her approach, but he was busy making sure that the cord reached Porky. He ignored her and watched Porky reach down and unhook the cord.

Miss Wilkens, quite timid, cleared her throat.

Bugs swiveled his head and fixed her with a gaze. “Yeah?”

“I’m sorry.” His tones were intimidating, but she forced herself to go on. “Could you tell me what’s going on?”

“Special Education,” Bugs said, and he laughed. “Now get back to where you belong.”

“But...” she continued, “but I—”

Bugs, it would be assumed by his naming, was a speedy vehicle operator. His appellation, however, was not the result of his efficiency with tire and wheel. He was named Bugs because, of all the team, he was the most unstable.

Bugs was the youngest of seven in a poor, Appalachian family. As the youngest he had been the most set upon. His older brothers—there were no sisters—were all large, bullying brutes, and slapping Bugs was the family sport.

“Do the dishes.” Slap.

“Wash my car.” Slap.

“Where’s the fuckin’ dinner!” Slap.

When Bugs finally made it out of the snake pit he was raised in, he found his way into trucking. For five years he trucked across the country; a silent, brooding youngster who managed to find the worst in every situation.

One day Bugs picked up a hitch hiker by the name of McVeigh. McVeigh wasn't caught up by optimism for the world either, and through McVeigh Bugs met another man named Nichols.

To make a short story shorter: Bugs was the third man in the Oklahoma City bombing.

Amazingly, considering that the composite picture of him had been quite accurate, nobody recognized him.

But who would?

His drunken brothers wouldn't recognize a TV from a fart, and none of the people he worked for saw enough of him--he always had a baseball cap on and his head tilted down—to make a connection. And McVeigh and Nichols, even if they had been willing, couldn't have told the authorities anything substantial about the third man for the simple reason that they didn't know anything about him. Bugs was merely a truck driver who stopped in every few months, whenever he was trucking in their area, and talked with them about bombs and the general dissolute state of the country.

The truth was that Bugs had been the one who had driven the truck in Oklahoma—he was the truck driver, after all—and from the bomb site McVeigh had driven him back to his truck, where he had immediately gone on a cross country run delivering a load of ceiling fans.

So Bugs was famous, and not famous, and there was a core of him that was pissed off because he had never gotten any credit for what he had wrought in Oklahoma.

Now, staring at the idiot face of the idiot teacher responsible for destroying the minds and souls of children across America—one teacher was all teachers in his mind—he felt that pissed off core of him waking up.

“But I—” Miss Wilkins began.

Kids were becoming morons and the United States was becoming weak and stupid.

“But I—”

It was all her fault. She was the one who spread the communist propaganda that leeches the hearts and souls of the young.

“But I—”

She was the one who said there could be no prayer and *slapped him in the face* raised up the Liberal Democrats *slapped him in the face* who had passed NAFTA and selling the country to the United Nations *slapped him in the face* and the New World Order was buying politicians and....

This train of thought coalesced and raced through his mind in the time it took ‘but...’ to reach ‘but I—,’ and he slapped her in the face.

The world skewed for Miss Wilkins. Her face was suddenly sideways and hurt, and she reached upwards to touch her cheek.

The auditorium was suddenly filled with a growing silence.

Bugs, breathing like an asthmatic, unaware of anything except *The Enemy*, clamped one hand over Miss Wilkins' upper arm. He spun her and shoved, and she fell on the shiny wood floor. In shock, she rubbed her arm as she lay on her side and looked up at him. Deathly silence settled upon the children. This wasn't an argument over who got to serve in four square; this was adults fighting.

Bugs wanted to continue the fight, but, since she was lying down and not so much of a threat to him and God and country, he restrained himself.

Miss Wilkens, small sobs issuing from her fine-skinned throat, began crawling across the stage. At the lip of the stage she was enfolded by the arms of Mrs. Kenmore and Mr. Peavy.

The rage left Bugs as rapidly as it had come. Suddenly he was just a forklift driver with a spare moment to smoke a cigarette. He turned away from the teachers and children and climbed into the forklift. He extracted another cigarette and matches and, with unshaking hands, began to light up again. His hands stopped their action and his eyes narrowed when he noticed the teacher stomping across the stage towards him. *The enemy* had returned once again.

Mr. Peavy was a short, roundish man who taught sixth grade. He was so short that some of his six graders were nearly as tall as him. He wasn't considering the fact of his being 'vertically challenged,' however, as he strode righteously across the stage.

He didn't notice that Bugs was still—like a snake about to strike.

“What do you think you're doing! You can't come in here and ___”

Bugs, dropping cigarette and matches, came off the forklift. One quick hand grabbed Mr. Peavy by his red tie and pulled while, at the same time, his other hand extracted an automatic from the side slit in his jumpsuit. Teachers and children across the auditorium, watching the play on the stage, gasped in surprise. This was the first time they had seen any weapons displayed.

Mr. Peavy suddenly found himself in a world he didn't like. He tried to pull back, but couldn't. His neck hurt and his hands made clawing motions as he tried to release the pressure on his throat. He was completely outweighed and outmuscled, however, and Bugs smacked him in the face with the handle of the gun.

The auditorium was dotted with small cries and little yelpish shrieks.

Mr. Peavy fell to his knees and scabbled at the floor with his hands. It looked like he was trying to make sure it was there.

Bugs kicked him in the side and Mr. Peavy fell over, curled around his ribs in a fetal fashion and held his hands to his face. His cheek had

been broken and he could feel the grating of bones. Blood trickled out of his mouth in a string of thick mucus and he began to cough. Interestingly, he wasn't scared, he was just hurt.

"Get the fuck offa here!" Bugs pushed him with one foot. Somehow, Mr. Peavy found himself on all fours, crawling towards the lip of the stage.

"Mr. Peavy."

It was Patsy and Miss Wilkens' turn to help him, and they pulled him the last foot, actually lifted him down from the stage.

"Are you all right?"

Through a haze of hurt and pain, he thought about the inanity of the question.

He wasn't all right, he was hurt, and he had blood all over his jacket and on the floor. Still, he had to keep up appearances.

"I'll be all right," he mumbled. It felt like his cheeks were full of broken marbles. They were really full of broken bones.

BANG!

Children cried out and shrank away from the sudden noise, teachers tried to hold as many youngsters as they could, and all looked to where Betty stood next to Mrs. Watson. Behind Betty, like a thick pillar of stone, stood Magilla.

"Your attention, please!" Betty yelled, and the silence caused in the auditorium by the buttstroking of Mr. Peavy shifted to Betty.

Betty let her eyes wander in satisfaction. A little show of force and the cattle were quelled just fine. She lowered the barrel of the still smoking gun and pointed it at Mrs. Watson's ear.

"We have just taken this school hostage," Betty yelled. "You will all do exactly as we say. If you don't you will be dealt with."

Beaten, like Mr. Peavy—or worse!

"Move back against the walls and be quiet. Do not speak unless spoken to. We may be here for some time, so you'd better get used to doing what we say real quick. Tell them." This last was directed to Mrs. Watson.

Mrs. Watson, aware of the gun at her ear, looked out over the children and teachers and saw their fear. These were her people, her charges, and they were relying on her. "Please do as these people say." She managed to sound calm.

Betty: "Stand back against the wall. Sit down and shut up."

Nobody moved. Shock was starting to set in.

"Teachers!" Betty, smiling meanly, cocked the pistol. "If you don't move those brats back I'll kill her."

The teachers began moving the thoroughly terrified children back against the walls.

"Hush, children."

“Move, back.”

“Shush now.”

The voices of the teachers were low, but Betty raised the pistol slightly and shot over Mrs. Watson’s head at the wall.

BANG! Again the large caliber sound filled the confines of the sealed auditorium. Mrs. Watson jerked.

“I said shut the fuck up!” Betty screamed.

She repointed the pistol at the gray hairs on the side of Mrs. Watson’s head.

Not a voice. Not a stir. Not a whisper or murmur.

“Now move them back quietly!”

The children moved back without talking, without even thinking of talking. They moved slowly, stepping quietly on each other’s feet. They kept shifting their eyes towards the crazy person holding the gun to Mrs. Watson’s head.

Shelley Dixon sat amongst her children. Several of the girls huddled against her, and she spoke low and soothingly to them.

“Hush now, it’s going to be okay. Don’t cry, Samantha. There now. No tears. It’s okay.”

“You!”

The big terrorist looked over the heads of the children at Shelley. He had one of those army rifles in his gallon sized hands, and there was no mistaking the fact that his eyes were focused on hers. She pointed at her chest questioningly.

“Come.”

She kept pointing at herself.

Magilla raised up the M-16 and pointed it at the head of Geoffrey Simmons.

Geoffrey, age ten, closed his eyes and shrank against the girl next to him, who similarly shrank away.

“You want to play stupid?” Magilla growled at Shelley.

Shelley got to her feet. She stepped over the heads of the children and approached the giant man.

“Let’s go.”

He spun and walked towards the kitchen. Shelley stared at his stiff back. He had given her a command and then ignored her, but what could she do? Docile, she followed.

Shelley was twenty-seven years old, and she had been a teacher for two years. She was bright, hated substituting, and had rejoiced when she had, ahead of time, been assigned her own classroom.

So what if it was at Lincoln?

So what if it was a ghetto school in the heart of South Central?

She had a calling, and she was blind to race, religion, poverty, or any other factor of undue significance. This blindness resulted in her rapid acceptance by both teacher and student at Lincoln.

She wasn't the Great White Hope; she was just a teacher, and she worked hard.

Magilla stopped and turned to half face her at the entrance to the kitchen. He reached one hand to his beard and spoke gently.

"Bringing a white Betty."

Shelley stared at the man, then realized that he was speaking into a microphone in his beard. What he said made no sense. What was a 'white Betty?'

Magilla motioned her into the kitchen, and she walked past him. Her mouth was open as if to question, but no question was brave enough to come forth.

Shelley stopped inside the kitchen.

Across the kitchen, at a table, one man worked on a computer. Next to the table another man was working on a video camera. Behind them, the short terrorist that had threatened Mrs. Watson with the gun was putting a map on a wall. A terrible fascination suddenly bent Shelley's head and she looked down. Running like a small river across the worn, red tiles was a darker red, a shiny red, a slippery, slick red, and, as if her head was being turned for her, Shelley traced the path of the river to a far corner and saw the bodies of the cooks. She began to shake.

"Go on," Magilla nudged her in the back with his rifle and she lurched forward. "Over there."

Shelley walked, her legs feeling like pegs, her vision skewed so that the whole room slanted under her fear. She passed the man at the computer, and the one working on the video camera—they didn't even look at her—and arrived at the side of the short one.

Betty was mumbling to herself in irritation. She had the map half up, was holding one corner with one hand and an elbow, but she was having a hard time with the tape. The stuff was sticking to the tips of her surgically gloved fingers, and she couldn't hold the little strips in her teeth because of the beard.

Suddenly, she noticed the teacher Magilla had said was coming.

"Hey, put some tape on the corners." She jerked her head to indicate the roll of tape on the table behind her.

Shelley, hands shaking like they were palsied, managed to tear off little pieces of tape and stick them to the corners of the map.

Trying to control her shaking, she leaned past the short terrorist and caught the faint whiff of perfume. Shock of shocks, it was a woman! Shelley's head turned uncontrollably towards the terrorist.

There was a trace of eyeliner around the eyes, the skin was finer than a man's, and the hair, that which curled out from under the edge of

the ballcap, was smooth and silky. The lips were fuller, too, and there was that trace of eye make up around the eyes. And the eyes, in spite of being a blue that was hard and penetrating, were very feminine.

“Hurry up,” Betty snapped, not willing to put up with the sudden awareness of the other woman.

Quickly, Shelley, now not shaking so much, finished the taping and stood back.

The map was a large blueprint of that part of the city in which Lincoln Elementary was located. Shelley, at that moment, was given a moment to herself while Betty spoke into her beard. She looked around and saw more rolled up maps sticking out of a cardboard box. Behind the woman, on the computer table where a man played the keyboard like he was performing a Chopin Etude, there were several cell phones in a box. Next to the box was a television for the video equipment.

“No, don’t shoot,” Betty said, watching Shelley. “We’re all barricaded in. Just keep observing and reporting. Okay. Magilla, you on the truck? Right, one minute.”

Betty stopped talking, turned her full attention to Shelley.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m a teacher,” Shelley said.

Betty shook her head slowly. “You think you can teach Monkeys to read? Shut up Magilla.”

The fact that this woman was carrying on multiple conversations at the same time was disconcerting to Shelley. Magilla? What kind of a name was that?

“Is this a racist thing?”

Betty gave a short snort of a laugh. “Yeah, this is racist. Are you some bleeding heart, liberal kind of puke?” Her voice brooked no nonsense.

“I’m a teacher,” Shelley repeated, as if that explained everything.

“Well, Teach, you want out on this?”

“What do you mean?” Shelley was achingly aware of the open doors at the back of the kitchen.

“I mean do you want to leave, vamoose, scat, gone, that kind of thing?”

“You’d let me leave?”

Again, a laugh.

“We got nothing against white people.” There was a country twang in the voice. It wasn’t a big twang, like Texas, or a soft twang, like the deep south; it was just country. It could have been from almost any rural area across the United States.

“I’d like to stay here.”

“Chances are...everybody here is going to die. You want to be part of that?”

Shelley suddenly felt like the walls of the kitchen were coming towards her. She felt enclosed, disoriented, and her skin prickled, yet there was something in her that rose to the occasion. "I'd like to be with my students."

Betty studied her, the sharp eyes probing, searching for weakness, perhaps looking for a change of mind to creep out.

"So loyal you're stupid. Take my advice and leave."

Shelley wanted to leave, but she found herself saying, "I'll stay with my children."

"Stupid." Betty shook her head slightly, then, disconcertingly, went back to speaking into her beard. "Magilla?" She listened for a second, then said, "Okay." She spoke again to Betty. "Go to that corner and sit down. Don't leave it."

"But, I..."

It was too late. Betty had turned and was walking towards the auditorium.

In the parking lot Magilla drove the white truck, now empty, over the curb and wedged it securely across the entrance to the school parking lot. Quickly, he climbed out of the cab. Walking around the truck, he stuck a thin stiletto into the rubber walls of the tires and, within seconds, the truck was lower by several inches. It would take a major effort to clear the entrance.

Magilla chuckled as he walked back across the parking lot.

In the kitchen Shelley stared at Betty Boop's back. Shelley didn't want to sit in a corner; she wanted to be with her children. That was her place. She began to follow Betty.

Magilla picked that moment to enter the kitchen and slam the double doors closed.

Shelley stopped where she was and looked at Magilla. She was sealed in, and a sense of doom and foreboding overwhelmed her.

Suddenly, a hand grabbed her shoulder and spun her, and Shelley found herself backing up. A shadow of grim purpose obscured her vision, overwhelmed her and forced her backwards.

"I told you to sit down!" Betty screamed. "Being white won't save your ass if you don't do exactly as I say! Do you understand me?" She had a pistol out and was shoving it into Shelley's face.

Shelley felt herself sinking into numbness. She cringed as she backed away.

"Over there! Bitch!" With a short, hard, chopping motion Betty hit Shelley on the side of the head with her gun.

Shelley collapsed on the ground, held her head, and tried to crawl towards the corner. She felt blood trickling down over her ear, and she

began to pray. She had never been much of a church goer, but she was suddenly finding herself praying.

“Nothing, Daffy. White Bitch learning a lesson is all. Right. Keep at it.” Betty’s shadow stopped looming over the crawling Shelley.

Shelley, crying, whimpering, made it to the corner and huddled between the wall and the side of a steel table. She held her head and couldn’t stop the tears from sluicing down her cheeks. Even as she cried, however, her mind was turning.

Porky. Magilla. Bugs. Daffy.

For a second everything was unreal, like she was in a cartoon, then, in the short reprieve of being ignored, her mind made a small intuitive leap.

She wasn’t in a cartoon. These people were just calling themselves after cartoon characters.

And, a smaller leap.

She, Shelley, was white, not ‘white Betty.’ That was just a run on sentence. And Betty was—Betty Boop?

She had been pistol whipped by Betty Boop.

She cried.

CHAPTER FOUR

“What you doin’ home, child?” Rawanda Jenkins hung up the phone and came out of the kitchen. She had been talking with Amanda Johnson, but her child appearing home at this time of day was cause for concern. She was supposed to be in school and—

“Mama!” Veronica Jenkins, eight years old and pig tailed, was breathless. “A big white man hit Mrs. Nelson. He said school was closed, but all the kids went into the auditorium. I—”

“Slow down, girl.” Rawanda put her daughter on the couch and arranged a chair for herself. She sat down, leaned forward, and said, “Now start from the beginning.”

Within moments Rawanda Johnson was poking her trembling fingers at the face of the phone. Hers was the second call received by 911 that morning. The first had concerned a gunshot wound at a local hospital. A truck driver had driven up to the hospital with blood leaking out of a small hole in his hip.

After the phone call Rawanda went to her daughter and hugged her—said nothing, just hugged her—and her mind moved and moved and moved.

Tom Erickson wanted to be a cop.

Technically, he met all the qualifications necessary to be a cop. He was six feet tall, 180 pounds, and had an IQ over 130. He was handsome with curly brown hair and kind, brown eyes that women just loved. He also had a history in the military that was very suited to police work. His MOS had initially been Military Police, but that had been changed when he had displayed leadership and a high talent for training young men to be Rangers.

Unfortunately, there were people that demanded a certain number of minorities on the police force.

No matter that his tests were higher. No matter that he had better oral exams. No matter that he showed a rare aptitude for police work. He was just the wrong color.

He could have been bitter about this state of affairs. He could have grouched and railed about the fact that white men had to score ninety-seven and black men only had to score eighty-three on the tests, but he didn’t. He just decided that if the door was going to open for him he was going to have to push a little harder.

Tom took a job with the Los Angeles Unified School District. He took a job that would enhance his resume and further impress the people looking over applications for the police department. Also, he kept applications out at all the cities in the Southland, which were many, and he took extra college courses aimed at police sciences. Most important, he worked hard at his job, which was as the newest member of the district's school police.

Tom enjoyed being a school cop; he became familiar with the gangs around schools, he cruised the streets discouraging drug dealers, and he became familiar to the children of the district. He even earned the weird nickname 'Uncle White Tom.'

On this morning, as Rawanda Jenkins sat holding her daughter, and a truck driver named Victor experienced the less than pleasant sensations of forceps poking at his hip bone, and the 911 switch board began to experience a deluge of phone calls—phone calls made by frightened parents—Tom noted several young children standing on a street corner.

He was on his way to Lincoln because a teacher suspected that a child was being beaten by his parents. Tom hated that kind of thing; he hated taking the reports, he hated seeing the looks in the eyes of children, and that was the reason he allowed himself to slow the car and speak to the children on the corner. He just wasn't in a hurry to get to school.

The children weren't supposed to be hanging on the street corners at this time of day, anyway.

"It's Uncle White Tom!" a young boy yelled and took off running. The boy was grinning as he ran, however, and looking over his shoulder to see if he could sucker Uncle White Tom into chasing him.

Tom smiled on the inside. He had grown up in a white suburban neighborhood and hadn't known what to expect when he was assigned to South Central, but kids were kids, and he found that the younger they were the more open they were.

He angled the car across the street and up to the curb. "Hey, you kids out looking for trouble?" he growled playfully as they crowded around his window. His pleasure was short-lived, however, as they related their gruesome tale.

"Mrs. Nelson got hit by a white man!"

"She got hit bad!"

"Dragged her down the stairs into the playground!"

Tom regarded the sober faces intently. He knew when kids were putting him on, and this was no put on.

"At Lincoln?"

"Yeah! Then he said school was closed!"

All the children nodded their heads at that.

“Okay,” Tom said, trying to make sense of what he had heard. “You kids want to do me a favor?”

“What’s that Uncle White Tom?”

“I know you want to hang out, but could you go home? And stay home until your mothers have called the school?”

“Can I go with Sally to her house?” a thin girl in a blue dress asked him.

Tom had a momentary thought on that, he shouldn’t give that kind of permission, but this school thing sounded serious and he didn’t have time to explain to the little girl. “That would be fine, honey, but you have to call your mother when you get there and tell her where you are. Can you do that?”

The girl nodded her head solemnly.

“Okay, you kids scat and I’ll scoot and we’ll meet in the middle, right on?”

They laughed, and they scatted, and Tom, deep in thought, eased the gear shift lever forward and let the car crawl away from the curb.

A man beating up a teacher? What the heck was this?

He turned the car up Commerce and made a wary approach to the school.

For this early in the morning, the school appeared pretty darned lifeless. There were no kids horsing around in the halls. Nobody was playing jump rope or kick ball on the playground. Wait a minute! There was a big guy—looked like he had a big beard—standing back in the shadows of a corridor. It looked like the guy was wearing some kind of Mario Brothers outfit.

The big man stepped back out of sight, and Tom continued his visual inspection of the school. He came abreast of the office and noted no sign of teachers or activity.

Frowning, he turned right on Washington, and blinked. A truck was pulled across the entrance to the parking lot and the tires were flattened. What the heck was this?

He reached for the microphone on his dashboard and, as he passed the parking lot, kept his head turned and searched the parking lot. There were the usual number of cars—the Chevy’s and cheap foreign models that teachers could afford—but there was, again, no sign of life or activity. Not that the parking lot should be a beehive, but people come and go and—that big, white truck probably discouraged the normal business of the day.

“Dispatch?” Tom spoke into the microphone as he slowly circled the block and approached the gate on the far side of the playground.

“Dispatch,” a voice confirmed over the radio.

“This is Tom Erickson. I’m at Lincoln Elementary. Could you get me some back up?”

“Sure, Tom. What’s the situation?”

“I don’t know. There’s a strange man on the school grounds, and some kids said he hit a teacher. I’m going to walk in from the playground side and see what he’s doing. There’s also a truck blocking the parking lot.”

“Ten four.”

Tom hung up the mike as he nosed the car up to the curb. He got out of the car and walked over to the gate—and stopped.

What the...?

A big fat padlock—a padlock for which he had no key—secured the gate!

But the gate was supposed to be open during school hours!

So who had closed it?

What the heck was going on?

Tom stood for a moment, his fingers hooked into the links like little claws, his eyes searching the backside of the school. He squinted in the morning light, and his face looked almost predatory. There were no heads bobbing in the few windows he could see. No children at all on the playground. Nothing.

Wait a minute! What was that? By the side of the stairs—it looked like somebody was lying down!

Tom focused on the area next to the steps for a moment. Though there was somebody there, there was no motion. He let his eyes sweep across the grounds once again.

There was no sign of the strange man. He was probably still on the other side of the school, by the front office. So who was lying—hiding?—next to the steps leading up to the second wing?

Tom grabbed the fence with his fingers and began poking his shoes into the links. He went over easily and dropped into a crouch on the other side. He straightened up and began walking slowly across the dirt scabbed turf.

“Eight David ninety-seven. South Central.”

Tom stopped and looked back at his car. Damn. That was his call sign. The police wanted to talk to him. Well, he wasn’t going back over the fence. He turned back towards the school and continued his course across the remainder of the grass, then the cracked asphalt. He was unaware that he was being watched every step of the way.

“School cop coming across the playground.” Porky eyed Tom through the small, but powerful, hand periscope. Once the cop car had been sighted—in spite of the fact that it was only a school cop car it had the ‘Police’ legend imprinted in large, bold letters—Porky and the others had ducked below the line of the parapet.

In the kitchen Betty Boop frowned. This was a little fast. Oh, school cop, not a real cop. They still had plenty of time. Of course when you had 600 children under the gun, you had all the time in the world. Still, it was nice to work without even being watched. Well, they could shoot and let him drop in plain sight, or they could take him prisoner and find out what was happening on the outside.

“Magilla, you want to bring him in?” She spoke into her beard.

“On it.” Magilla had been making a sweep of the school when he had seen the cop car sharking around the block. He had suspected that the cop would try to come in from the playground, and he was already positioned behind the wall at the end of the corridor. “Porky?”

“Fifty feet,” Porky answered from the roof.

Porky raised his head slightly, tilted the periscope and watched Tom walk, head moving and eyes searching, past the green lunch tables. “He’s left my line of vision,” Porky said. “About forty feet from you.”

“Right.”

Silence on the radio.

Magilla, his back against the pale, green stucco wall, listened for the sound of footsteps on the playground.

Tom slowed his walk as he approached the steps, then he saw the feebly moving body. Damn!

He came around the steps and squatted next to Mrs. Nelson. Gently, he touched her, lifted one of her arms and started to turn her over.

She had been hit, all right. Her face looked like it had been painted with blood, and her breathing was ragged. Her eyes rolled up at him, and he could tell that she was in shock.

“Who did this?” Tom asked, realizing that he shouldn’t be moving her, that she might have other injuries that he—

“Don’t move.”

Tom froze, used his peripheral vision to study the bulky shape at the top of the steps.

It was the large man with the beard that he had seen earlier—and he had a gun!

Tom, in spite of the fact that the fellow had the drop on him, wished he had a gun.

But school cops weren’t supposed to carry guns. Mothers didn’t want guns on campus. Ergo, he had no gun—and he wanted one.

“Lift your hands so I can see them.” Magilla’s voice was calm and patient.

Gently, Tom let go of Mrs. Nelson—she gasped as he did so—and lifted his hands.

“Very slowly, stand up.”

Tom stood up, taking advantage of the action to turn very slightly and get a full view of the man issuing him commands.

Magilla was a beard, sunglasses, ball cap, jumpsuit, surgical gloves, and a very familiar M-16.

Tom knew a professional when he saw one. The guy smelled of military.

“Come up here.”

Tom did so, and, as he approached the giant man, he asked, “What about her?” It was a risk, he was taking the initiative, risking a confrontation, but if the man tried anything while he was close enough....

But Magilla kept an adequate distance, kept the gun trained on Tom, and didn’t say a word. Tom let himself be pulled into the corridor and out of view of anybody who happened to be driving by on the street.

“Stop there. Now, slowly, turn around.”

Tom turned carefully, aware that he was being checked for weapons, and let his eyes scan the school. Except for the man holding the gun on him, he might as well have been alone in a desert.

Magilla inspected the cut of Tom’s uniform. There was no sign of a gun. There was no chaffing against the pants, or bend in the belt, that would have told him if the cop had ever worn a gun. Good. School cops weren’t supposed to have guns.

“Who are you?”

“Shut up.”

Tom shut. The man’s voice—it was the typical bass of a big man—was absolute in it’s conviction, and Tom had no doubts that the man was capable of shooting him. He finished turning.

“You a cop for the district?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, Junior. Walk down the corridor, stay on the cement.”

Tom turned without question and began walking. He was acutely aware of passing doors behind which there were no children. Should he risk asking? No. He had been told not to talk. Better to wait. Better to observe. The time to assert himself would come.

“The fish is in the pan. Ten seconds.”

Tom recognized the different tone of voice that people use when they talk on the phone, or through some kind of electronics.

Who was the man talking to?

For a brief instant Tom thought about escape. They were approaching the corner of the corridor, and if the big man let down his guard then perhaps....

But, when they came to the corner, his hopes were dashed. For one thing, Magilla swung wide and kept him under the gun. For another thing, down the corridor, in front of the back doors to the kitchen, was another facially concealed terrorist. This one, too, was big, and he held a .38. A .38 wasn’t as bad as an M-16, but it was plenty bad enough to puncture Tom’s body if Tom did something stupid. Tom kept an even

expression on his face as he approached the kitchen entrance. The second man stepped back and motioned him into the kitchen with a jerk of his head.

“Come on, Junior. Through the doors,” the first terrorist said.

Tom turned to the right and entered the kitchen. He had been in the kitchen before—had chased a kid into it once—but it didn’t look the same now as it had then.

The stainless steel prep tables had been pushed against the walls. A generator had been placed on the floor to the left, near the stoves, probably to take advantage of the flues. On a table in front of the generator a computer was on, and next to it was a TV. In the center of the room were two more jumpsuits with guns. Through the doors he could see the children of the school, an ocean of huddled, frightened faces, staring at him.

Tom felt, rather than saw, the motion alongside his frame, and he forced himself to remain perfectly still. It was a hand moving around his body without touching him. A metal detector was being run over him.

Standing calmly, he didn’t try anything. He could take one of the terrorists, possibly two, if circumstances and positions were right, but he was in the middle of three.

“Can I speak?”

“No.”

Surprised, even shocked, Tom managed not to turn and look at the person running the metal detector over him.

It was a woman!

A woman?

“Turn around.”

Tom turned. His eyes took in the bodies of a cook and his helper lying in a corner, and he tilted his head downwards. He was standing in a thin stream of blood. He tilted his head back up and faced his captors.

From a distance of two feet Betty stared up at him, her sunglasses off and her hard, blue eyes challenging.

Tom’s brown eyes devoured her, searched over her, and his scrutiny was so intense that it was easily mistaken for that testosterone, check out thing that men did.

Betty, feeling the intensity and tenor of his gaze, *he looks like...like...* slapped him in the face. “Don’t.”

Tom nodded thoughtfully as he touched his jaw with one hand.

Betty watched him without saying a word. He might look like...somebody else, but that didn’t mean he *was* somebody else. He was just a lousy school cop, and he had to be put in place. She stared at him and waited for him to lower his gaze, stumble into a question, or otherwise try to break from her arctic blues.

After a moment Tom did look away, but it didn't happen like it was supposed to. He simply sized her up, then lifted his gaze and looked around the room.

Betty, under the beard, frowned, and didn't really understand what had happened.

She didn't realize that he hadn't even entered into the staring contest with her.

Simply, the contest had started with only one.

And, therefore, while she couldn't lose, she also couldn't win.

And she wasn't even provided with a reason to slap him or otherwise assert herself.

Tom, unaware of what was going on in her mind, used his ranger trained eyes to inspect the people who had taken him prisoner. The big guy who had captured him was behind the woman, watching him through aviator sunglasses. Yes, definitely military. Noncommissioned officer, by the look of him. Wore sunglasses like he liked to cow recruits. The army liked big guys for NCOs. The other big guy, who had walked back to the computer, was also probably military, but the shorter one, at the map, wasn't. That one's posture was just a little too slack.

So, how many? They had to have seen him coming in, probably had a few people on the roof. Had to have a couple of guys in the auditorium. Fifteen? Twenty?

Too few people and taking over the school would be too difficult; too many would increase the chances for a screw up.

It was an interesting problem in tactics, and whatever the solution it would reveal much concerning their training and purpose. He finished his preliminary reconnaissance and lowered his gaze to the woman with the interesting baby blues.

"Can I ask what's going on?"

Betty wasn't pissed, but she was irritated by this school cop. She couldn't figure out what had happened—but something had—and she didn't have the top hand over him.

"You can stand here and not move," she ordered, and she turned and walked towards Foghorn and Wiley. As she walked, she spoke into her beard.

Tom watched, listened, and realized how efficient this group's communications were. After a moment he wondered whether he should move.

No. He shouldn't.

The woman, she certainly seemed pissed off about something—well, she had to be pretty damned weird to take a whole school hostage—was seeing how well he could follow directions. He stood quietly, and was aware of the big man staring at him.

For a long minute Tom stood and met the gaze of the big man, saw his own reflection in the finish of the sunglasses.

The big man obviously thought he could do a number on him. Of course, the big man couldn't know what Tom knew, and that would give Tom an edge. The trick, however, would be finding the right time to apply what he knew.

Then he realized that, in spite of his ability to take the big man staring at him, he had a whole school full of children to think about. Yes, he might be able to escape, but getting away wouldn't enable him to help the children massed in the next room—and the children were of paramount importance. Maybe he better just stay captured.

At the computer Betty talked to Wiley and Foghorn in low tones. She was pissed off about the school cop, and she didn't know why, but she wasn't going to let it affect her.

She would have to go back and bend him to her will.

She glanced at him, between conversations with the men at the table and through her beard, and frown lines appeared at the corners of her eyes.

Yes, he does look like....

Finally, irritation eating at her, she turned away from Wiley and Foghorn and approached Tom again. She stopped in front of him, stared at him with blue eyes made opaque by inner walls, blue eyes that made the one being looked at wonder what the looker was thinking. "Okay, Mr. Junior G Man, what's your name?" She bit into him with her words and tone.

And Tom said the one thing that she never expected, desperately wanted in her life again, and would have killed him for—if she had only known he was going to say it.

"Tom."

That was the moment she lost it. Before that one word she could have backed off and reasoned everything away, but it was too late now. Her eyes became something less than opaque.

Tom had no idea what he had wrought; he didn't perceive what had happened in the nethermost regions of her soul.

But, behind Betty, sensitive to his commanding officer's moods, Magilla felt it. The problem was he didn't know what he felt. He didn't know that the hard edge of her presence had evaporated and left.

Betty stared at Tom, not understanding the mighty transmutation of her psyche. There was no confusion on her face because that which had happened was too deep for her to perceive.

Magilla, behind her, felt the first traces of a murderous rage within. He had been betrayed by one military, and now he was being betrayed by another, though he lacked the verbal skills to put such a concept into words.

But he knew what he felt.

And he trusted what he felt.

And he felt the edges of what was going on deep within her.

She was the leader; she was the one he looked up to; she was the one he kicked butt for, and he relied upon her to set forth the mission parameters.

She was in charge.

And now, in some obscure fashion that he didn't understand at all, she wasn't.

What had happened? What?

He listened carefully to his earphone, distilled background noises from the soft murmur of her voice and the matter of fact voice of the school cop, and eavesdropped on their conversation.

"You work for the district."

Tom nodded.

"Say yes or no plainly."

"Yes."

"You want to live?"

"Yes."

"Go clean up the teacher in the corner. You can be in the corner or at that sink over there. Don't be anywhere else. Got it?"

"Can I ask a question?"

"Later." She studied him for a minute, a very creepy minute, then she turned and walked towards the map. As she walked, Tom realized that he was watching the curves of her body under the jumpsuit. Irritated, he looked away from her, and back into the Magilla's sunglasses.

Magilla met the gaze and, very slowly, reached up and took off his sunglasses.

Eyeballs locked and they sized each other up. Tom, in spite of the circumstances he was in, was relaxed. Magilla, on the other hand, was fighting for the gone presence of his commanding officer.

Tom didn't understand what was going on in the mind of the big guy, but he felt the impact of gray eyes and lowered brows. He stared back—and now he did enter into the contest.

For a long moment they stared, then Magilla made up his mind to kill Tom. Making this decision, he broke gaze first and, unaware that he had lost the contest, stomped past Tom after Betty.

Tom frowned. Most of the sergeants that he had met in the military were hard working and honest, but there were occasionally fellows like the one he had just matched looks with. These types usually enmeshed themselves in the ranks of the non-coms—and used their position to bully those under them. They were brave enough to stand up and carry out commands, sly enough to tailor those commands to their own ends, and smart enough to hold their position against the scrutiny of those who

commanded. Mentally, he shrugged. There wasn't much he could do about it, so he cleared his mind and walked towards the corner.

Shelley shrank away from him as he approached. Her frightened eyes looked out from the cave of her blood matted hair.

"It's okay," Tom said, hunkering down. "I'm not one of them. Are you okay?" His hands gently turned her head and inspected the matted wound. It was ugly looking, but probably not that serious or she would have been unconscious.

Shelley looked up at him like a frightened child. Even the sound of his voice—he was the first one to talk to her since she had been beaten—frightened her, but she managed to bob her head up and down.

"Okay." He turned his head away from her and his eyes searched the kitchen. "I'm going to get something to clean up your head. Just relax, okay?"

She nodded again.

Tom rose and crossed to the sink, as he walked he let his ears absorb the sounds of the school.

Children were crying softly in the auditorium. Teachers were trying to reassure the children. The terrorists in the kitchen were clustered around the computer, muttering in low voices. Under all the sound was a feeling, as if the whole school had been overwhelmed by a wave of emotional molasses, and all capacity for thought had been swept away and replaced by fear.

Tom arrived at the sink and turned on the cold water, then turned it off and reached for the hot water handle. Cold might be better for the swelling, but warm wouldn't shock her. He looked for a towel and couldn't find one.

He turned and saw a towel on the table across the room. Did he dare to cross the room and retrieve the towel?

Nobody seemed to be watching him.

The woman might be testing him.

She might be waiting for an excuse to shoot him.

He didn't think so. Besides, he needed the towel.

He turned and walked across the room.

The woman standing at the computer watched him.

He pointed at the towel he was heading for. She didn't do anything, didn't offer body motion or have any change of expression under the beard. Weird, looking at a woman with a beard. Well, it was time for him to test her. He continued walking, watched her, reached the table and extended one hand and closed his fingers around the fabric. He held the towel up for the woman to see. He made a motion with his head to indicate the woman back in the corner.

The woman merely stared, it was impossible to tell what she was thinking.

Tom went back to the sink and began soaking the towel in water. He thought about what he had seen so far.

The men, and woman, were armed. Well armed. They moved precisely and seemed to know what each other was doing. That, alone, spoke of a high degree of training.

In addition to arms, they had cell phones and a computer and video equipment and who knew what else. Definitely a professional operation.

Did that mean that the children in the next room might have a chance of surviving?

Professionals wouldn't bother killing people. There was no money in it.

On the other hand, if there was something to be gained by killing, then death was inevitable.

Having spent enough time at the sink, he walked back to the teacher.

She didn't shrink away from him this time, but he could tell it was because she was mentally forcing herself not to. Well, that spoke of presence of mind.

Gently, he lifted her hair and blotted at the wound. Yep, it was uglier looking than it really was, which didn't mean that it wasn't serious. A head wound was always serious.

He brushed and blotted at the matted hair and uncovered the purple discoloration of the swelling and a small split in the skin.

She flinched at his touch.

"How you doing?" he asked conversationally.

"Crappy."

He smiled ruefully and dabbed gently at the blood in her roots.

"Yeah, sorry."

He had to engage her in conversation, get her to relax, and get information.

"Do you have any idea what is happening?"

She shook her head. "There was an announcement of a special meeting over the PA, we gathered in the auditorium and...and they closed the doors and..."

"How many do you think there are?" He spoke gently as he worked over her scalp.

"I...I don't know. Do the cops know?"

Tom thought about the radio call he had not answered. "I'm pretty sure they do."

"They named themselves after cartoon characters," she said, suddenly.

Tom stared at her, stopped dabbing for a moment. She took the wet towel and held it to her head, closed her eyes.

“The woman, she’s called Betty Boop, I think. And the big one is Magilla. And there’s Porky and Bugs and....” Tom listened, tried to remember the names she mentioned and who they referred to.

“Are they coming?” Shelley asked, and it took Tom a moment to realize who she was referring to.

“I honestly don’t know anything about what the police are doing,” he replied. “I’m sure we can plan on something happening pretty soon, though. Why’d they hit you?”

“The woman. I didn’t follow her directions.”

Tom frowned at Shelley’s words, and he thought about the terrorist called Betty Boop. He knew it wasn’t logical, but he had hoped that a woman with such pretty eyes would be...what? A little more pleasant?

Yes, he was being illogical. He wondered, obliquely, why. He turned off that thought and turned his attention to Shelley. He smiled and held out one hand.

“I’m Tom Erickson.”

She hesitated, as if figuring out whether to be unsure or not, then extended her own hand. “Shelley Dickson, glad to meet you.”

He grinned reassuringly as they shook hands.

CHAPTER FIVE

Roberta Higgins was about to take a bite out of a glazed donut when the radio in the cruiser erupted.

“Six David forty-nine. South Central. Priority detail.”

‘Priority detail’ meant something serious was going on. Roberta put her donut down and leaned forward to turn the ignition key. Her partner, a large black man named Ernie Boetiger, grabbed the mike. “South Central. This is six David forty-nine. Go ahead.”

“Shots fired at Lincoln Elementary. There is an officer on the scene. Unable to raise.”

Roberta tromped on the gas pedal, swerved around a bag lady—the height of fashion in her gown of baggies—and the cruiser accelerated into the light, Monday morning traffic.

Ernie, reaching over to hit the siren, said, “South Central, we are responding.” His voice was cold, matter of fact. His son went to Lincoln Elementary.

Roberta slid the cruiser, the siren warbling like an opera singer having a bad night, around a corner at fifty miles an hour and accelerated. Roberta knew where Ernie’s son was.

“A fucking school,” she murmured, angry at the thought that a kid could bring a gun to school and shoot another kid, which was what she assumed had happened.

“A school,” Ernie agreed, a tinge of worry in his voice.

As Tom had noted, Betty Boop and friends were state of the art professional. Each member of the group knew his job, the specific tasks of their jobs, and how those tasks related to the tasks of the other team members. Bearded conversations were few and conducted in a low key, matter of fact way, and there was no confusion over who was talking about what to whom or why. Inside the kitchen the generator was fired up, and the exhaust fumes were vented up the flue so efficiently there was almost no odor whatsoever. The TV next to the computer was turned on so the terrorists could stay abreast of any news concerning themselves. None of the team missed a beat, needed any guidance, or hesitated.

Bugs: “Betty, that teacher Porky had trouble with is running across the playground.”

Betty: “Let her go. We’re on schedule. Foghorn, you got the police band, yet?”

“Check.”

“Huck here. Two kids playing basketball on the playground.”

Laughter.

“Fourth light up. Running cable.” A minute later another cable was run into the kitchen and plugged into the generator. When the power was cut they wouldn’t even notice.

“You’re a cop?” Shelley asked, as they watched the hurried but efficient activity.

“School cop,” Tom answered. He had heard seven cartoon names so far, but what good were cartoon names?

“A school cop.” The disappointment was obvious in Shelley’s voice.

Tom looked at her and smiled understandingly. “Sorry.” It didn’t bother him if people tended to underestimate him.

“No,” Shelley apologized. “I just...” she trailed off.

Tom went back to listening to the terrorists and trying to memorize data. He wished he could take notes.

“What do you think they are planning to do?”

“Hostages mean money. I think LA is going to be held up for a large ransom.”

“But they’re white!”

Tom looked at her soberly. “They’re terrorists. Doesn’t matter if they’re white. They have demands, and those demands will probably be for money.”

“But....” Shelley had talked to Betty, and Betty had said something about racism, but Shelley, still suffering from the conk on the head, couldn’t quite figure it all out.

“I’m sorry. Let me listen to what’s going on?”

Shelley was silent. The damp cloth felt good on her head and she felt sleepy. She yawned.

“Don’t get sleepy.”

“What?”

“You received a blow on the head. That probably means a concussion. You’re not supposed to go to sleep when you get a concussion.”

Shelley yawned again, was aware of Tom watching her. “For how long.”

“Well, for a while. Make it a couple of hours. We can try to get some aspirin or something when things calm down. But even then you can’t sleep for long. We’ll have to wake you up every hour or so.”

Shelley suppressed a yawn and looked about the kitchen. She felt totally miserable.

In the auditorium Mrs. Watson moved slowly through the body of children. Interestingly, she wasn't scared. She had been scared when the big man had shot his way into the front office, and she had known she was going to die when the woman terrorist had pointed the pistol at her head, but she hadn't been killed, and had, instead, suffered the realization that everybody was depending upon her. The school was her responsibility, and she had to do what she could to save the children.

"Let me through, child."

A little girl looked up at her and saw the hope of a world restored. She moved so Mrs. Watson could ease over to where Mr. Day sat amongst his children. Mr. Day taught the sixth grade class next to poor Mr. Peavy's, and Mrs. Watson wanted a man's insights as to their situation.

She settled herself next to Mr. Day. "How is it going, Mr. Day?"

"Fine, Mrs. Watson. And you?"

"Fine." There was a moment of hesitation, then Mrs. Watson said, "Can you tell me what is happening?"

Harold met her eye and realized that she was searching for some way of dealing with their plight. "Sorry, I know as little as you."

"Can you come up with a plan? Some way to undo this terrible predicament?" Predicament. Mrs. Watson liked to use words with four syllables or more.

"I will certainly do my best." In the gloom his positive attitude was reassuring.

"Fine. Select a level headed boy for a runner if you need me, but make sure he moves slowly." She had a sudden thought. "Can you open the doors under the stage?" She was referring to the low doors behind which chairs were stored in long, rolling racks.

"I believe so."

"Fine. Please have somebody light of foot reconnoiter and do inform me concerning your findings." Polite. Precise.

"Yes, ma'am."

Mrs. Watson started moving away. Even as she moved she took time to caution children, to shush when needed, to encourage when necessary. She didn't know what was going to happen, but surely there had to be—

"You! Stand up!"

A cone of bright light shone on Mrs. Watson.

Mrs. Watson stood up. Her face was calm and proud. Around her the children moaned and shrunk away from the hard light.

"Come out here!"

Mrs. Watson carefully picked her way through the children. She managed to exude an attitude of decorum and propriety even as she moved out to the aisle.

“Principal moving around out here.” Magilla spoke into his beard in low tones. “Right.” Then he spoke louder, putting more authority into his voice as he addressed Mrs. Watson. “Go to the kitchen.”

Mrs. Watson didn’t nod, merely turned and walked, back erect, towards the kitchen.

“On her way,” came the gruff voice behind her.

Never had the auditorium felt so large to Mrs. Watson. Her footsteps echoed harshly on the wood floor, and she suddenly had an errant thought of Tubby. She had been quite hard on him, and now he was dead. Maybe they would all be dead soon. Well, maybe—but not if she could help it. These were her children. She was responsible, and she would do what she could.

She entered the kitchen.

Tom didn’t know Mrs. Watson was on the way, but he knew something was happening because Betty Boop suddenly left her map and walked to the door to the auditorium. She arrived at the door just as Mrs. Watson entered the kitchen.

Tom studied Mrs. Watson. She was one person that he thought was truly color blind when it came to people. White, brown, black or whatever, they were equal in her eyes. And, they were underlings. She spoke to all in studied, moderate tones and demanded only one thing—results.

Now she stood primly, her graying hair highlighted by the fluorescent lighting in the kitchen.

Shelley started to say something, but Tom held up his hand and she noticed what he was looking at. She became quiet as they tried to hear what Betty Boop was saying to the principal.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Whatever I can to protect my children.”

“Your children.” Betty Boop was silent for a moment, then she said, “We thought keeping you alive would help us control the children. Maybe we should have killed you.”

Mrs. Watson had nothing to say to that, and she stood and matched Betty’s stare. At last Betty seemed to make up her mind. She pointed to the corner where Tom and Shelley sat.

Mrs. Watson turned, as if she was dismissing Betty Boop and not the other way around, and marched towards the corner. Tom stood up to greet her, and to make space for her to sit.

Mrs. Watson sat heavily, yet tried to make it look light. She might be a prisoner of war, but she was going to make a good show of it.

Tom took the cloth from Shelley and went to the sink. Betty Boop glanced at him, then ignored him as he cleaned and soaked the cloth with

cold water. He returned to the corner where Shelley took the cloth and began pressing it against Mrs. Watson's lined face.

"My, my," Mrs. Watson said. She began to relax against the wall.

"What are they doing out there?" Tom asked, at length.

Mrs. Watson opened her eyes and sighed. "Apparently they are putting flood lights on the roof. They all carry weapons. They're all white."

Tom studied her. He was sure that she had not noted the color of a man's eyes in years—let alone skin. Yet the situation was whittling her down to slanted observations that she normally wouldn't have made. Tom wondered what his slanted observations would end up being.

"Are my children all right?"

"Yes, dear. Miss Weston is doing adequately." Adequately was a compliment in Mrs. Watson's lexicon.

Shelley nodded.

Mrs. Watson turned to Tom. "Can you tell me, Mr. Erickson, what you know of the police attitude outside?"

"Sorry, ma'am. I don't know anything."

Mrs. Watson sighed, "Then—"

She stopped talking. The terrorists had stopped their activity and were standing with undue concentration. Something had happened. Something was different. The air was electric with their attention.

"Hush, now." Mrs. Watson murmured.

The three captives were silent as they tried to hear what was being said through beard and earphone.

"Keystone One has arrived. Front entrance," Porky drawled from the roof.

Betty Boop stared at the map. "Done with the dish?" she asked.

"Almost. Only one car, moving East on Commerce, slowly."

Only one car—probably two cops. She sorted through what the men were doing and came to a decision. "Daffy, handle the cops."

"No problem," came the answer. On the roof Daffy moved to where weapons had been placed on a blanket. He picked up one of the Remingtons and trotted over to the edge of the roof.

Porky, working on the dish, kept Betty up to date concerning the police doings. "They've stopped at the entrance. They don't like our parking job. Uh oh, I think we're going to get a ticket. Big, black Monkey just got out of the car. He's walking around our doorstep."

Betty: "Maybe we better give him a ticket of our own."

"Sighting," Daffy said. He hunkered down, his profile a small hump against the line of the roof.

At the dish Porky stood up to watch.

Daffy put his cheek against the smooth wood of the stock and set the cross hairs on the big, black cop standing in front of the cop car. The rifle was loaded with armor piercing bullets, and Daffy stilled his breathing to stop all waver in the scope.

“A buck if you hit the badge,” Porky whispered gruffly.

Daffy didn’t even glance up. “Fuck...” his finger started to tighten on the trigger, “...you.”

In the street, frowning, Ernie looked around. The school looked empty. There were no kids, nobody in the windows in the front office, nothing. And the fact that nothing was happening on a school day was making little alarm bells go off.

Fifty yards away cars were passing back and forth on Commerce. Behind him, a car went around his cruiser. Two old people had stopped on the sidewalk and were watching.

So what was this damned truck doing in the entry? Somebody had flattened the tires on purpose, and—

The bullet, traveling at high speed, sliced through cloth, vest, skin, bone and assorted innard. It didn’t snowball or explode or do any of the things a particularly nasty bullet would do. A sniper bullet is designed for accuracy, teflon coated so absolutely nothing will stick to it or otherwise cause it to waver in it’s path. It is designed to leave a small but efficient hole—all the way through an elephant. Ernie, even with his kevlar body armor, was not as thick as an elephant. It was teflon against kevlar, and the teflon won.

In the car Roberta was speaking into the mike. “...tow truck. We have a truck parked sideways across—”

Ernie’s shape came back towards her and fell across the hood of the car. The car bounced under his weight and his head flopped against the windshield—that was what told Roberta that he had not fallen, but had been pushed—then the sound of the rifle reached her.

“Shots fired! Shots fired! Man down! Ernie’s down!” she screamed. She came out of the car like Jack coming out of the box and tried to pull Ernie off the hood, to protect him from whoever was shooting.

On the roof Daffy watched the woman tugging at her partner. He smiled. The angle of fire here was as good as from any watch tower in the pen. He spoke into his beard. “First cop dead.” Not down, no question as to his status, just assumed, and correctly, that he was dead, or going to be within moments. “Second cop is white, female. Checking on her partner. Want me to take her out?”

In the kitchen Betty Boop gave his question little thought. “Stay with the plan. Let’s make it hard for them.”

Daffy whistled soundlessly as he settled the cross hairs once again. He steadied himself, let his breath out, and squeezed the trigger gently.

Roberta tried to keep her profile low as she pulled her partner. “Ernie?”

Ernie didn’t say anything. There was a terrible, low rattling sound coming from his throat. It sounded like he was trying to gargle with an oyster in his throat. There was only a small hole in his badge, but there was blood all over the hood and—

Roberta felt herself grunt as the world suddenly twisted on her, then she was lying on her back.

I’ve been hit.

The sun was very bright. She tried to move her left arm and the bones grated in the shoulder. She didn’t feel any pain, but she knew that was a temporary thing. She reached up to her left shoulder with her right hand and felt where the bullet had entered. There was only a dime sized hole, but it felt like a buck and a quarter inside.

She raised her right hand higher and managed to turn her shoulder mike on.

“I’m down. I’m down. Oh God.”

Then, against all reason, against the protests of her damaged body, she stood up. She used her good, right arm to lever herself to where she could use her feet. Blood dripped down the left arm, soaked the sleeve, made her hand sticky. She had to help Ernie. She had to.

“Son of a bitch!” Daffy murmured. He had shot the bitch good, and here she was getting to her feet.

He shot her in the right shoulder.

“Daffy?” Betty Boop asked from the kitchen. She was standing next to Foghorn at the computer, watching the screen over his shoulder.

“Bitch is tough, took two.”

“Okay,” she acknowledged him. In a lower, non-radio voice she said, “Do it, Foggie.”

Foghorn worked his large fingers in a most nimble fashion and watched hieroglyphics dance across the screen. Wiley turned from the map and watched over Betty’s shoulder.

In the corner Mrs. Watson asked, “What are they doing?”

“I don’t know,” Tom said.

On the other side of the kitchen Betty Boop grinned.

“Secure the circuit and advise me.” She patted Foghorn’s back affectionately, punched Wiley lightly on the shoulder, and turned towards the corner.

“Right,” Foghorn said, concentrating on the screen.

Betty found herself staring at the three people in the corner. She scowled. She was doing her job, but she had a nagging feeling that all was not right. Instinctively, she knew that this feeling stemmed from the school cop.

Making up her mind, she crossed the kitchen.

“You’re Shelley Dixon and you’re Irma Watson. I know about you two. So who are you?” She spoke this last to Tom, careful to keep her voice level and uninvolved.

He studied her carefully. “Tom Erickson, School Police.”

“More than just your name,” she said. She was irritated and didn’t know why.

Tom frowned. Why was she concentrating her attention on him? What was with her?

“I work for the district, act as liaison for the police, sort of, try to keep kids off drugs—”

He stopped because she was getting more irritated.

“Look, I don’t know what you want.”

Betty stared with hard eyes, *the shape of his jaw, it’s just like...* Through her irritation she realized that he was right. So what did she want from him?

“Foghorn, check on Tom Erickson, try the LAUSD computer. No hurry.” She spoke into her beard, listened for moment, then made herself include the women in her gaze, “No doubt you folks would like to know what is going on?”

Tom nodded. Shelley didn’t move. Mrs. Watson cleared her throat and gave a nod.

“You’ve been taken hostage by a bunch of racist, Monkey hating, white supremacists.”

“I want to—” Mrs. Watson began.

“I’m not talking to you, Monkey.” Betty’s voice was a rasp. This felt better. Now she felt like she was in charge.

Mrs. Watson clamped her mouth shut. Her eyes showed her anger.

Betty Boop focused again on Tom. Her blue eyes were level and icy. The beard was incongruous, and abetted the insane ambiance of the moment.

“Want to make a break for it?”

Tom didn’t say anything.

Betty reached into the side slit of her jumpsuit and extracted her pistol. She held it out to him.

“Take it.”

Tom didn’t move.

She reached out and grabbed his hand, opened it, placed the gun in it. He could smell the musky scent of her hair while she leaned towards him.

Tom held the gun loosely. It was a 38. He was familiar with weapons, and his head felt like the insides of an inflated balloon.

“Well?”

Tom stared her.

“Shoot me, Junior. Grab the molls and make a break for it. Fight your way out. Fight for truth, justice, and the American way.”

Tom didn’t move.

“Go on, take me hostage. Turn about is fair play, right?”

Still, Tom didn’t move. No terrorists were watching him, nobody was even close, but he knew it was a set up.

“Don’t want to?”

Tom shook his head.

“Good.” She held out her hand and Tom handed the gun back to her. She put it back in her jumpsuit and looked back up at him. “Come with me.” She looked at Shelley and Mrs. Watson. “All of you—come with me.”

The group walked towards the door leading to the auditorium, stepped into the auditorium, and stopped. The sea of small, round, black faces with large whites showing in the eyes swiveled up at them.

“See that man sitting on the stage?”

Bugs sat in a folding chair next to the forklift. He was holding an M-16. Like Betty he had taken his sunglasses off, but it was impossible to see his eyes across the darkened auditorium. It was obvious, however, that he was aware of the group at the other end of the auditorium. He raised one fist in a thumbs up.

“Yes,” Tom said.

“If he hears so much as a single gunshot he is to assume we are under attack and start shooting Monkeys.”

Neither Tom nor Shelley nor Mrs. Watson said anything.

“A bullet from an M-16 travels approximately a mile a second. It tumbles on impact. How many bodies do you think such a bullet could go through, taking into account, of course, the fact that the bodies are young and thin?”

“You’re sick,” Shelley said.

“You’re evil,” Mrs. Watson said.

Their voices had erupted, twinned, in shock.

Tom didn’t say a thing.

“Now then, we are going to be dealing with the police, the media, and whatever problems arise. We will be too busy to deal with you. Stay in the kitchen, stay in the corner, stay out of our way. We’ll talk again, when we’re not so busy, but I don’t want any misunderstanding concerning your role here.”

They stared at her.

“Simply,” she focused on Tom and Shelley, “you are in the land of the Monkeys—Monkeyland—and though you are white, you are prone to the same rules as the Monkeys. Do anything to piss us off and you will be shot—just like a Monkey. Do you understand?”

Tom and Shelley nodded. Mrs. Watson heard the words and her mind railed.

“Go on, now.”

For a second they didn’t move, then they turned and trudged, defeated, back to the corner. Arriving at the corner they sank down and didn’t say anything. They didn’t even look at each other, though Mrs. Watson mumbled something unintelligible occasionally.

In the auditorium, on the stage, Bugs sat in his chair, held the M-16, and lit another cigarette. He blew a plume of smoke into the air and watched the smoke curl. Life was good.

CHAPTER SIX

There wasn't enough crime in the world.

There wasn't enough rape, murder or kidnapping. There wasn't even enough mugging and wife beating.

This lack of human tragedy gave Ron Larkin, head producer for ABC news, a major problem.

Not that he wanted people to suffer, but he had a show to run, and if there was nothing happening in the world then what was he going to put on that show?

Sitting in his office, swiveling his plush chair gently, he gnawed his pencil and considered his options.

He could make some crime. He could pick some small potato thing and jack it up. Maybe top it off with something scurrilous about the new police chief.

Yeah. That was it.

People loved it when the media spoke ill of the Top Cop. They hated the gangs, and they weren't too fond of the cops. Made his job easy sometimes.

He could get Trish out interviewing, use some stock footage of Rodney King, maybe of those illegals in the truck that the cops had beaten. There was that piece coming up on Mexican gangs he could pirate some footage from, and....

His problem solved, he began scratching a pencil over a legal pad, listing the sequences of footage he tentatively planned. Morning news was over, and it was time to focus on—

Ring.

Larkin grabbed for his phone. His secretary was not to disturb him before staff meeting unless it was real news. Ergo, this had to be real news, and that was a godsend on such a dull day as this.

“Yes?”

“Look at our web page.”

“Wha...?” Larkin's brows furrowed as he hung up the phone. He swiveled to the side desk and tapped keys. He always kept the computer on when he was at work, and it was a mere moment before he was on line.

Attention CBS:

We have taken 600 children and teachers hostage at Lincoln Elementary School. Press 'return' if you would like to download linking data.

Larkin goggled at the message. It blinked like an alarm. What the hell? He pressed 'return.'

The screen flickered, became a list of numbers, and began to scroll. At the bottom of the list was the further message.

If screen goes blank go to next setting.

In a nanosecond Larkin came to a decision. Whoever it was meant business. Broadcasting was high tech, took some kind of brainpower. Furthermore, to broadcast meant breaking federal law. So whoever was talking into their web...of course it wasn't any kind of proof, but...gut feeling....

Larkin hit the intercom. "Sally! Notify everybody that the staff meeting is now! Get a hard copy of this list of settings off the computer and tell the news room to go to the first setting."

Before Sally could signify assent, Larkin was charging out of his office. His eyes were flashing with determination and he didn't look to the sides. His jacket was unbuttoned and he looked like a fullback about to hit the line.

And all across Los Angeles, at every significant television studio, every other major news producer was swinging into high gear. The lead story for the noon news had been found.

"Betty, we have connections," Foghorn murmured into his beard. "Air time in ten minutes."

Betty Boop was on the roof. A good general, she wanted to see the front line for herself. She wanted to personally experience the eyes of her team. She wanted to know what they knew as best she could.

"Keep me updated," she said into her beard. She had been discussing the street situation with Daffy.

"I'm surprised they haven't tried to move the cops," Daffy said, when he had her attention again. He and Betty peered across the parking lot to where a crowd had gathered next to the downed cops.

"Probably scared to," Betty said.

"Probably."

Roberta lay on the pavement and shivered. Getting shot hadn't hurt, but now she was shivering, and she wasn't cold. She wondered when it was going to start hurting.

“Hello? Police department?” A voice came through the gathering citizens.

Roberta stared between legs and under hunkered buttocks. Somebody was in her car. Somebody was using her radio.

“Out of the car, sir.” She thought she was thundering, but she was really whispering.

“What’d she say,” somebody asked.

There were a full dozen people gathered around. Somebody had put something under her head, and somebody else had said something about not moving her. Heck, she could move herself. She leaped to her feet in her mind—and her legs trembled on the street.

“Easy, ma’am,” somebody said. Faces were a kaleidoscope around her. She was chilled, but sweat dripped off her face.

Where was Ernie? What was Ernie doing?

“Who shot her?” somebody asked.

But nobody in the crowd knew where the shots had come from.

Several cars were lined up behind the police cruiser, and Betty and Daffy watched with interest as yet another one decided to zip around the growing jam. There were a dozen people standing around the downed officers. In addition, people had come out of houses and were standing on lawns, looking around, trying to figure out what had happened. Often they looked, and even pointed, at Betty and Daffy. But Betty and Daffy stood and observed so openly that they weren’t suspected. On the street it looked like the female cop was trying to tell the people crowding around her something, but she was probably in shock and not very comprehensible.

Betty stared up into the distance. It was going to be a very LA day. Blue skies would reign, but the people would see only a smoggy haze. In the distance a helicopter looked to be inspecting the Santa Monica Freeway. Soon the helicopters would be overhead, which was all right with her.

“Wiley?” She spoke abruptly into her beard.

“Yo,” Wiley answered from the kitchen.

“Keep checking with Huey, Dewey and Louis.”

“Gotcha.”

Magilla came up behind Betty and she glanced at him as she spoke to Daffy, “When Keystone Two arrives clear out the rabble at Keystone One.”

“You got it.”

She turned to Magilla, and her smile was fierce in the beard. “Yeah?”

Magilla frowned. This was the old Betty, in charge, thinking ahead, leading the way.

Magilla cleared his throat and looked around, then pulled down his beard and jerked his head to the side.

Betty pulled her own beard down as she followed him to the side. "Yeah?"

"The school cop."

She waited.

"It's time to get rid of him."

"What's he done?"

Nothing. Everything. Undermined the whole operation, robbed him of his commanding officer. Yet his commanding officer stood before him in all her presence.

"He's...call it a gut feeling...it's just time."

Betty studied him carefully, scrutinized him until he was nervous, then: "Killing white people is now a priority?"

"No, but this wannabe cop..."

Lester Giggins drove and Bill Woodard sat in the passenger seat. They had been chatting to a couple of whores at MacArthur Park when the Lincoln Elementary call had come in. This early on a Monday morning the streets were still fairly clear, so Lester hit the siren and really squashed the pedal. Bill kept the radio tuned and they kept conversation to a minimum as they listened for any new developments.

Nothing else was coming over the airwaves concerning the situation at the school.

More units were being called, and it was starting to look like a major mobilization.

But, as there weren't a lot of units immediately available, and since they were the closest, Bill and Lester were going to be ahead of the pack. Still, they had a ways to go, thus it was a full ten minutes before they entered the intersection of Commerce and Washington.

"Keystone Two has arrived."

Betty turned away from Magilla and his arguments. She was perturbed that he wanted to kill the school cop. There just wasn't any reason to kill the school cop, and Magilla seemed to be hesitant in his arguments, like he wasn't telling her everything. Putting the problem of Magilla and Tom aside, unaware that she had successfully avoided repairing the chink in her own armor, she walked across the roof to where Daffy was kneeling behind the parapet and sighting.

"Color?"

"Both black."

"Do it."

Daffy opened up.

One moment Bill and Lester were slowing, approaching the cop car with the crowd of people around it, noting the truck with the flat tires in the entrance, the next moment the world came undone.

A hole popped into existence in the windshield.

To Lester it felt like a big claw had swiped at his neck, and his hands left the wheel and jerked upward. His head was strangely loose, and his vision skittered up the windshield and onto the visor. He was unaware of the car beginning to veer wildly.

“Wha—” Bill noted the hole in the windshield, then heard Lester gag. He turned and saw that Lester had grabbed his throat, and that blood was gushing from between Lester’s fingers.

The next bullet was aimed at Bill’s heart, but the way he was turned made the bullet angle into the vest. It slid across the side of his body, cutting an inch deep ditch in his torso. Pain scoured his side and he twisted, grabbed the wheel with one reflexive hand even as he fell to the floor over Lester’s legs. He wasn’t sure what was happening, but the car was out of control. He pushed on the brakes with his free hand.

The car skidded, bounced off a parked car with a loud bang, and came to a stop.

At the first cop car, by the entrance to the school parking lot, the crowd of people jerked as one and turned to stare at the second cop car. The sound of shots rolled across the street and several people in the crowd pivoted their heads towards the roof of the school.

“Somebody’s shooting!” an old, black man in a shabby suit yelled.

“They’re on the roof of the school!” another voice yelled.

Everybody looked at the school then, and everybody was suddenly conscious of what it was to be a target in the open. They began shifting weight nervously, taking foolish little steps, but since the shooting was directed at the second cop car, their attention was drawn back up the street.

Jimmy Elson and Tom Shoenburger were on the track team at USC. Running around a track being boring, they had decided to jaunt through the neighborhoods of LA, and had mistakenly jogged into South Central. At first they had been nervous, being in the minority, but after a while they had started laughing about their nervousness. They even joked about how difficult it was to hit a moving target, and how they had never heard of ‘jog by shootings’. Then they had turned up Washington and encountered dead and wounded police, blood all over the street—and the jokes suddenly weren’t so funny.

Seeing the second cop car come around the corner, they had been relieved, then the shooting had started and the second cop car had crashed into parked cars.

Jimmy, followed by Tom, broke into a run towards the second cop car. As he ran, he glanced up at the roof of the school and saw flashes

and heard the sound of rapid fire gunshots. The second cop car began to disintegrate in front of the two boys

On the roof Daffy had gone to an M-16. He was a good shot, and he began to pepper the second cop car like he was the man in charge of holes at a Swiss cheese factory. He knew he had missed the second cop, and he was intent on flushing the son of a bitch out.

The windows in the cruiser exploded. The tires popped. The radiator became a steaming, dripping mess. Shot after shot spanged into the body of the car, but the damned cop was sitting tight. Daffy finally shifted the attentions of his shooting. The two boys who had been running towards the destroyed cruiser were now standing and gaping at the destruction he had caused. He would have gone ahead and shot them, but the crowd around the first cop car hadn't yet scattered. There were blacks in that crowd, and Daffy smiled as he shifted his position.

The people at the other car knew where the sniper was now, but they weren't being shot at. They had stood and stared, fascinated, at the sight of the second cop car being riddled and torn apart.

Suddenly, a black teenager dropped to the ground. He was in the back of the crowd and nobody even noticed him slumping downward.

A woman in a print dress was next. She took one in the shoulder, spun to the ground, and gasped a drawn out yell of pain and startlement.

Everybody around the first cop car turned then, saw the dead boy and the hurt woman, and knew that their turn had come. They began to duck behind the cop car, or the truck, or to just run like flushed quail.

Jimmy and Tom looked at each other and realized that the sniper had finished shooting at the cop car. Quickly, they sprinted the last few yards and ducked behind the now destroyed cop car. For a second they squatted, heads down, out of sight, and turned to watch the massacre at the first cop car. Several people were crouching behind that cop car, and several more were huddled against the side of the white truck. Others were in full flight, hoping to outrun the incredibly accurate aim of the sniper.

After a moment, his breathing slowing, Jimmy rose up and peeked over the edge of the window.

Lester stared up at the roof of the car. He was dead, his eyes calm and glassy, his neck shattered.

"Aag!" Jimmy said. He would have puked, but the other cop, the one laying as if he had been trying to become one with the floorboards of the car, spotted him.

"Hey!"

Jimmy closed his mouth, swallowed the foul taste of bile, and focused on the other cop. He asked, "Are you all right?"

Tom's head appeared next to Jimmy's. He focused on the dead cop and his face immediately contorted in revulsion.

“Who’s shooting?” Bill asked. He couldn’t believe that he was still alive.

The gunfire coming from the roof was regularly spaced now, and people up the street could be heard yelling.

“I don’t know,” Jimmy said. “They’re shooting from the roof of the school. They’re shooting all the people at the other cop car. Are you all right?”

“Yeah. No. Yeah.” Why weren’t these two white boys being shot? “I want you to look around. Describe what’s happening. Talk to me.” He grabbed the car mike.

Jimmy looked back down the street. “Oh, man!”

“Talk!”

“Everybody’s running. Some old guy just got it in the back. Oh, Jesus!” Jimmy finally did puke.

From the roof Daffy shot an old black man in a cheesy Tee.

The old black man, skinny as a stick, was running across a lawn when his back hurt and something big and red shot out of his chest. Then he was laying face down, and his eyes were dimming even as he realized that he had been shot. He got up to his elbows, then gave up and laid peacefully down, turned his head, and went to sleep.

Daffy hit the black woman as she leaped over the curb. Her sudden leap caused the bullet to hit her in the buttocks instead of the back. She fell and gave a wounded cry. Her fingers grabbed blades of grass as she tried to pull herself away from whoever had shot her.

A black man in a suit took one across the shoulders.

A black teenager—he looked like some sort of gangbanger—spun and fell. It felt like somebody had punched him in the face. Half his cheek was strewn across the sidewalk.

Temporarily out of blacks, Bugs started going for the whites. Sticking to the plan, he only shot to wound them.

He shot a woman, she was trying to back up her station wagon, in the shoulder. Her car barely missed the second cop car before plowing into a battered Nissan pick up.

An old man running down the sidewalk took one in the leg. He cried out, fell, and crawled, leaving a streak of red on the sidewalk.

Daffy, eyes narrowed and a grim slant of smile on his face, reloaded.

Jimmy cowered next to the cop car while he described what was happening in the streets to Bill Woodard, who relayed the information through the radio.

Jimmy had thought he was dead and gone to heaven or hell or whatever when the station wagon crashed right next to them, but he immediately popped back up and kept talking. Suddenly, a hole appeared

in the roof of the cruiser, and Jimmy became aware that his head was up a little too much.

“Shit!” He ducked down, felt for the handle of the cop car. Tom, next to him, moved back so he could swing the door open.

Bill suddenly realized that it was time to see to the protection of the civilians. “Time for you to get out of here.” He eyeballed Jimmy.

“We’ve got to get you out of here!” Jimmy responded.

“I’m okay! You beat it!” Bill reached out with one hand and tried to shove Jimmy away, but couldn’t reach him. The effort hurt his ribs. He had never been shot before, and he didn’t like the experience.

Jimmy shook his head. “I’ll stay!”

“Go!”

“I’ll stay.”

Bill’s mind worked quickly. He had to persuade the kids to get to safety. “I need somebody to call in! Get to a phone! 911!”

Jimmy realized the cop was right. Tom ended the impasse by saying, “I’ll stay here.”

“No! Both of you!”

But the two boys ignored him and stared at each other in silent communication. Finally, Jimmy made up his mind. He nodded, took several deep breaths, thought about how big his back was going to be—he might just as well paint a bull’s-eye on it—and used his hands to push away from the side of the cop car.

Bullets dug at the pavement at his heels. He jumped left, then right, using quick motions designed to fool a tackler, and ran for the nearest house. On the porch of that house an old black lady in faded jeans and a purple shirt stood and held a ragged screen door open for him.

“In here!” she screamed in a shrill voice and windmilled one hand to urge him on.

Jimmy took the porch steps in a bound and dove through the doorway even as a bullet smacked into the doorframe and showered him with splinters. He tripped and fell to the floor, rolled onto his back, and gasped for breath.

The black lady slammed the heavy door and turned to him. “You all right?”

“Your phone! 911!” Jimmy got to his knees and stared out the window. The cop car sat in the middle of the street with the door open. Tom lay half in, the cop still trying to convince him to run. The cop’s partner still reclined peacefully in the driver’s seat, sitting as if peacefully meditating.

Between and around the two cop cars the street resembled a battle zone. It was littered with the dead and the dying, and people moaned and

cried for help in the dry, morning air. Several cars, having had tires and windshields shot out, had been abandoned.

Across the street the sniper was still shooting, but at a much slower pace.

On the roof men were still working. They ignored the sniper in their midst, and their shapes were bumps moving behind the parapet.

“Here!” The black lady handed a pink Princess phone to Jimmy. “But it’s busy!”

Jimmy took the phone, dialed 911, and listened to the busy signal. He looked at the phone morosely. “My name is Jimmy,” he said suddenly, half turning and looking at the woman who had braved the storm of bullets to open her door and give him refuge.

“Estelle Andrews.” She hesitated for a moment, then stuck one skinny hand out.

Jimmy shook hands, felt the scrawny bones within, detected her nervousness, tried to smile at her.

“They okay?” Estelle moved to the side of the large front window and peeked out.

“One is,” Jimmy muttered. He began a cycle of hanging up, waiting a second, then lifting the receiver and pressing redial. He didn’t say anything else. His body felt like it was going to start shaking on him. He had gone for a morning run and seen people killed, blown away, splattered across the street. He shut down that part of his mind and asked, “Do you have a pair of binoculars?” He was still hitting the redial button.

“Why, I do,” she exclaimed, pleased, and moved towards a back room.

On the roof Daffy hunkered over the M-16 and concentrated on hitting cars trying to turn onto Washington. He was largely successful, and a traffic jam was blocking traffic effectively on Commerce. As he fired shot after shot, people were leaping from blocked in cars and running for cover.

Staff consisted of three drivers, three reporters, the writers, the head writer, two producers, and various other people necessary to making the day’s news happen. Unaware that all hell had broken loose within the confines of their city, they sat around the long, wooden conference table and paid rapt attention to Ron Larkin’s clipped voice.

“Trish, you do the ‘on the scene.’ Bill, get over to Parker Center and rattle some cages. Tom, we’re going to need your connections in the mayor’s office, and....”

The door to the conference room opened and Ron’s secretary slipped in. She placed a sheet of paper on the table in front of Ron and would have taken her place next to him, but he was already giving her fresh orders.

“Get the chopper over Lincoln Elementary in South Central.” He let loose the fabric of her sleeve and she quickly exited the room.

She popped her head back in almost immediately.

“We’re receiving a broadcast, Mr. Larkin.”

She closed the door softly as Larkin grabbed the remote to the TV monitor. Everybody swiveled chairs to better face what was coming in.

On the screen of the monitor, on a blue background, were the red letters:

STAY TUNED

Under the letters seconds were ticking down. There were just over three minutes showing.

Betty Boop, squatting behind Daffy to better assess his effectiveness, was virtually invisible from the street.

“Three minutes, Betty,” Foghorn whispered into her ear from the kitchen.

“Be right there,” she said, and she patted Daffy on the back and walked across the roof towards the hole over the stage. Shortly, she was descending to the stage on the tips of the forks.

Magilla, sweating under the sun as he helped Porky fit large lamps to tripods, watched her leave. He wiped a large drop of moisture off the tip of his nose as he made sure light would go where it was aimed. He wasn’t happy with the results of his conversation with her. Well, he would just bide his time. The school cop was his, and that was that.

Suddenly, his hand slipped and blood poured from a fresh flap of skin on his knuckles. He kept the curse in and sucked on his knuckle, aware that loud curses would alarm the others.

Betty, walking down the center of the auditorium, unaware of Magilla’s intentions, smiled as she noted the quietness of the children. The room was starting to heat up and she would have to see about water before long. She didn’t care if the brats starved slowly, but if they got thirsty fast there could be trouble.

A teacher stood up, looked as if she was about to come over to her. Betty shook her head in the negative and kept walking. The teacher stopped herself from moving, looked after Betty with a helpless expression, and sat down.

Betty stopped at the entrance to the kitchen and motioned to a little girl sitting nearby. The girl was seven years old, wore a yellow dress, had a headful of snake braids.

“Come here, honey.”

A teacher was suddenly next to the girl and holding her. The teacher was a middle-aged woman with a chunky body and thick glasses. Behind the glasses her eyes were glaring.

Betty reached into her pocket and pulled out her gun. She aimed it at the teacher and waved the barrel in a sitting motion. The teacher shook her head in the negative.

Betty sighed. She was willing to shoot the teacher, but she didn't want the Monkeys unduly upset. Besides, in the extreme, she didn't want any kind of martyr. She pointed the gun at a cluster of children sitting to the side.

The children began whimpering and crying; they wiggled and squirmed and tried to crawl away from the bearded lady with the gun.

Betty kept her eyes on the chunky teacher and shrugged her shoulders in a questioning manner.

The teacher gave up. She bent to the little girl and whispered a word of encouragement in her ear, then patted her on the back.

The little girl walked slowly and fearfully towards Betty, her large eyes filled with big, wet tears.

"What's your name, honey?" Betty put away the gun.

"Meesha." She had trouble talking because she was trembling like a leaf in a big, mean wind. "Meesha Brown."

Betty smiled. "Well, Meesha Brown, you get to come with me." Betty, ignoring the chunky teacher, took little Meesha Brown by the hand and walked into the kitchen.

In the kitchen, on the other side of the computer table, Wiley had the camcorder set up and was sitting in a chair and munching on a Three Musketeers. Seeing Betty, he quickly rewrapped the remaining half of the candy bar. He stood up and moved behind the camcorder. Meesha Brown's eyes circled the kitchen in terrified wonder.

The conference room was electric. Everybody's eyes were glued to the monitor like it was God come to earth. The final few seconds counted down.

In Estelle Andrews' little, yellow house Jimmy Elson finally reached 911.

"911."

"I just saw a cop get shot!" he blurted, aware that he had to control himself.

The operator helped him control himself with her tones and words. "Speak calmly, sir, and tell me where you are."

"I'm on Washington. I'm across the street from a school. Some sniper just blasted hell out of a cop car. Killed one of the cops. The other is trapped inside. A whole bunch of—"

“Your name, sir?”

“I’m Jimmy. Jimmy Elson. Are you going to send somebody? There’s people all over the—”

“Help is on the way, sir.” Behind the dispatcher the supervisor was waiting for just such a call. He motioned to the dispatcher.

“Sir, please hold while I put my supervisor on.”

“Sure,” but before he had completed the word a new voice was on the line.

“Jimmy?”

“Yes, sir?”

“My name is George Hoskins. We do have people on the way, but we need somebody to describe the situation for us out there. Are you willing to do that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Fine. If we get cut off just hang up and I will call you as soon as I can. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, now, I want you to look across the street, you’re in the third or fourth house, if I recall my street numbers....”

“Second house.”

“Great! Look across the street and describe, slowly, in as much detail as possible, exactly what you see. Start with the police cars.”

“Well, there’s two cop cars, one right in front of this house, and....” Jimmy, glad to have found some source of stability on this mad day, described the hellish scene he had, somehow, lived through.

Standing behind Jimmy, Estelle stared out the window. This neighborhood had always had trouble. What with drug dealers and gangbangers and...and...and now trouble had come again.

She looked down at the young man talking so earnestly into the phone. She could tell that he was a good boy, just like her own two boys. But what chance did a good boy have in this neighborhood?

Betty stood, resolute, in the kitchen. She had a gun in one hand and the neck of Meesha Brown in the other. She stood in front of the video camera and waited. She had put her dark glasses back on and looked the part of the cold, hardened terrorist.

Next to her, wide eyes darting back and forth in terror, Meesha Brown trembled. Her cheeks were wet with little streams of tears. The lady had spoken so softly, but she had a gun—and Meesha wanted to go home to her mommy and daddy.

Would the lady let her go? Should she ask? She was afraid to ask.

Foghorn sat at the computer and waited. Betty’s image was on the monitor and there was a count down in the bottom right hand corner. Next to the computer the TV was engaged in selling toilet bowl cleaner.

“Five, four, three, two, one, you’re on.” Foghorn tapped return on the keyboard and Betty’s image went from the camera to the computer through the cable to the radar dish on the roof. It was received at all major television studios in Los Angeles.

The monitor in the conference room flickered and over a dozen sets of eyes focused instantly. Ron Larkin leaned forward. He had a notebook in front of him and a badly gnawed pencil in one fist.

Betty appeared. The close up revealed nothing but disguise, and that disguise was not reassuring. The camera panned back to show the little girl standing next to her. The little girl looked to the side, and it was obvious to the professionals in the conference room that she was watching herself on TV. It was also obvious that she was frightened, terrified even, and her lips trembled and her eyes shed unashamed tears.

“Oh my God,” one of the reporters said.

His reaction was not alone.

In the kitchen Betty took a breath and began to speak from a rehearsed script. Her voice was cold and proud, haughty with righteousness. “This is a live telecast from Lincoln Elementary School. We have invaded Monkeyland and taken 600 children and teachers hostage. We will be putting forth our list of demands as soon as we are carried by all stations.”

Betty stopped talking and stared into the camera like a cold wind while Foghorn checked channels on the TV set next to the computer.

Foghorn looked at her and shook his head in the negative.

“If we do not appear on all screens within one minute—I will shoot this little girl.”

Betty raised her revolver and pointed it at the head of the little girl.

Meesha Brown wanted to struggle, but the hand that gripped her was clamped tight. She closed her eyes and tried to shrink, but the hand stopped her from even doing that. She heard herself making a small whining sound. She sounded like a hurt kitten.

“Oh my God!” was repeated in the conference room.

“Put her on, Ron!”

Hardened news people, people who thought they were in control, were suddenly helpless victims, pleading for the life of a little girl.

Ron Larkin closed his eyes and ignored all sounds. His face was screwed tight in frantic thought, his mind was whirling like a tornado.

Put them on...or don’t put them on. If he put them on he might not be able to get them off.

Let madmen dictate?

Every other channel would be carrying this.

Should he allow the station to be held hostage?
But a young girl was being held hostage.
Could he take responsibility for the death of a young girl?
He couldn't. Besides, this was real news.

He opened his eyes, looked around at the desperate people, and succumbed. "Run it." His voice was soft and strangled.

In almost every TV station in Los Angeles other news producers came to the exact, same conclusion.

In the kitchen Betty stared at the camera. Her face was so well disguised that there was no telling what she was thinking. Her voice had revealed that she was a woman.

Foghorn clicked from channel to channel. At the end of a minute he said, "Everybody but CBS." His voice, soft and electronically altered, came over the monitor.

Betty stared into the camera and brought the gun to within one inch of Meesha's head. "I'm going to shoot one," she said. It sounded like she was talking to the camera, but she was really talking into her beard.

Bugs, on the stage, unheard by anybody not on the terrorist's net, confirmed Betty's order through his beard. "Betty's going to shoot one."

On the roof Magilla said, "Fire in the hole."

BANG!

The sound echoed off the kitchen tiles with a flat twang and the side of Meesha's head exploded outward. Blood and bone and brain spewed across the floor. There were other noises, including small yelps and little screams from the auditorium, then there was silence.

Meesha Brown had walked to school with her friends. She had her homework prepared and was planning to play kickball during lunch. She had laughed and giggled and always raised her hand the highest during class.

Meesha Brown was dead.

Betty let the lifeless body drop from her hand. She stared at the TV, and the hardness of her blues could be felt even behind the sunglasses.

"Bring me another one."

All across Los Angeles programs had been interrupted. Dick Van Dyke had been cut off before he could trip over the stool. Regis had been cut off mid laugh. A paid commercial for the 'Exer-bouncer,' the latest in exercise gimmicks, had been suspended. And every major channel, except one, had cut to a terrorist holding a gun to the head of a little girl.

And, when the face of Betty Boop had appeared, the commentary had been concise. Terrorists were broadcasting to the studios—their

demands would be forthcoming. Then, over the soft voices of the commentators, Betty Boop had blown the brains out of an innocent child's head.

People everywhere, pulled out of soap and commercial and the whathaveyou that constitutes daytime TV, drawn into the drama against their will, screamed.

Some people fainted.

Some people vomited.

But everywhere people reached for their remotes and turned the sound up.

That is, after all, one of the sad facets of human nature.

Then the face of another child, a young, black boy, this one even more terrified, appeared on the screen. Hysteria was replaced by shock and fascination.

"CBS, we are waiting." Betty's voice was blocked on most stations, but that was only a temporary matter. Channel Thirteen cut the picture, but put it back on at Betty's next words.

"If any of you TV people are thinking about pulling the plug on us, we will just shoot Monkeys until you put us on. If you carry us then this child will not be harmed."

Ron Larkin put his face in his hands. Something worse than his worst dreams had come to pass. Not ten minutes ago he had felt like a hard charging, successful mover and shaker. Now the world had come undone, gone amuck, and he was powerless to effect it.

What could he do?

If he took the terrorists off more children would die!

And, in the far recesses of his quite intelligent mind, Ron Larkin murmured that which his staff had been murmuring for the last few minutes.

Oh my God!

Betty, waiting calmly, watched herself on TV. It was quite bizarre to see oneself in such fashion. The little black boy she was holding—he was staring at the body of Meesha Brown—began to cry. Incongruously, Betty leaned towards him and said, "Quiet down now, honey. Everything will be all right."

The boy didn't believe her.

"Five is on," Foghorn said.

Betty smiled and let the little boy go. He promptly fell on the floor and began crawling to a scramble to a run for the auditorium.

Betty spoke: "I am Betty Boop. I represent the group known as White Law. We have taken the children and teachers of Lincoln Elementary hostage.

“Our demands are simple. One billion dollars from the government. These funds are to be taken from Welfare accounts, food stamp accounts, or other similar program, and transferred to accounts we have specially set up. The numbers of our accounts are being printed on the screen.” Names of banks and account numbers flashed across the bottom of the screen

“To put it simply, we have decided that we will not support the Monkeys anymore.”

Betty reached behind herself, found a stool previously placed there, and sat down. Wiley angled the lens to keep her face framed.

“We will not support free lunch, food stamps, welfare, AIDS research, or anything else.”

Betty breathed. There was a glass of water next to her, but she ignored it. This whole thing was electric to her. She had never imagined how she would feel when millions of people were staring at her, but the sensation was exhilarating, to say the least.

“For years we have listened to the Monkeys. The running dog media has afforded them what is nothing more than free advertising. They want free food and housing. They want to be paid for their father’s work picking cotton in the fields. They want a portion of these United States to be set aside for them. White Law has decided not to comply with their demands any longer.

“No Monkey has ever contributed anything of real value to this country, and so it is time to put them in their place.”

Now she did take the glass of water and, smoothing her beard back with one hand, drank a small gulp. She was careful not to get any liquid on the microphone in her beard.

“We would prefer that they went back to Africa, but considering the lack of backbone on the part of our elected leaders this doesn’t seem likely. Thus, we, the people, are making ourselves heard.”

“One billion dollars, or we will start shooting little Monkeys one at a time.

“If the police, or any other armed force, attempt to discourage us we will release nerve gas and destroy all of them. That is all for now, but we will make another broadcast in an hour. Until then...White Law!” Betty held a clenched fist up.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In the auditorium children and teachers cringed as the terrorists whooped in victory.

On the roof Porky and Magilla yee hawed.

In the kitchen Betty Boop high fived with Wiley, then slapped the widely grinning Foghorn on the back.

In the corner, Tom and Shelley and Mrs. Watson were in shock. The demands which they had heard all too clearly, preceded by the brutal murder of an innocent little girl, were too much for them. They had gone into a phase of dull stupidity which can only be described by one word—brainlock.

“Half way home, boys!” Betty yelled, her soft voice lifted to the ceiling in triumph. “Pack your bags and count your money!”

“Yee haw!” came a rebel yell from the hole in the ceiling above the stage.

“That’s cappin’, Bets!”

“Give ‘em hell, boss lady!”

Not a real southern accent amongst the voices, but definitely a country twang in their manner.

After the brief moment of celebration, the terrorists who called themselves White Law returned to business. Foghorn trickled his fingers across the keyboard. Wiley, keeping his eyes on the map, answered a cell phone. Betty found herself looking at the group huddling in the corner. She walked across the kitchen with slight swagger. She didn’t even glance at the body of Meesha Brown.

“Well, Tom, what do you think?” She hunkered in front of him, ignoring Mrs. Watson and barely glancing at Shelley.

Tom had seen death before. Ranger training was tough, after all, and troopers had died in the swamps of Georgia. The death of Meesha Brown, however, was not something he was prepared for.

Meesha Brown had come to school to play with her friends. She probably loved kittens, maybe even had a big teddy bear on her pillow at home. And the woman smiling at him had ended that sweet existence without a second thought.

Interestingly, in spite of the shock to his calm, he didn’t hate Betty, or feel some sort of revulsion for her. He just felt a deep, inner sadness.

“I don’t know what to think,” he finally answered. “I think I’m in shock.”

“Safe answer, but you don’t have to play safe with me. As long as you do what you’re told you can say anything you want to me.” She was enjoying the moment. It felt like she was actually in control of this handsome school cop.

“What about Shelley and Mrs. Watson?”

“The girl can say anything she wants. As for the Monkey—Monkeys should be seen and not heard.”

There was a guffaw from Foghorn at the computer table, and Tom realized that the computer operator was listening in, as had every person on this team right from the start. He thought about being given the gun and what a set up it had been.

“How do you justify killing a little girl?” What the hell, take a chance, talk to the woman.

There was a slight grin in Betty’s beard. “I don’t need to justify killing a Monkey. It’s the same as putting dogs in the pound and gassing them, just a little quicker, a little more mess.”

Tom could feel revulsion welling from Shelley.

“I—” he stopped. What was there to say?

“Go on,” Betty prompted. She was getting off on this.

“Why?” Mrs. Watson asked.

Betty turned her bombsight blues on the principal. “Did I hear a Monkey speak?”

Mrs. Watson didn’t move. Her eyes were filled with the emotionless emotion of a thousand yard stare.

Betty turned back to Tom and challenged, mockingly, “Maybe you want to ask me why?”

Tom nodded. He didn’t know what else to do.

“Do you wonder why I am bothering to talk to you?” Her emotions shifted, became lighter as she chose to answer him with a question. Tom didn’t like it. Minds that skittered always made him nervous.

“Yes.”

“Do you know what is going to happen once we leave?”

“No.”

“Big manhunt, the whole works, FBI, CIA, ATF, every agency in the alphabet, Interpol, even countries that are quite hostile to the United States are going to be looking for us. They won’t find us. And they will begin to dig into you for everything you know about us.” She began to mock Tom talking to the police. “Sure, officer I can identify them. Foghorn worked the computers. He was a big guy in a jumpsuit. He wore sunglasses so I don’t know what color his eyes were. Wore a cap so I don’t really know the shape of his head or if his hair color is natural. Wore a fake beard so I don’t know what his face looks like. But I can identify him.”

Betty grinned, went on with her mockery of a police statement. "And Daffy, he was on the roof, I think, at least some of the time. He wore a jumpsuit, dark glasses, beard and hat. Oh, and Porky, he wore—"

"I get the idea," Tom interrupted.

"But me," Betty continued, "you can identify me. Blue eyes, dark hair," she took off her ball cap and revealed dark hair cut short, "a face not unpleasant to look at." She pulled down her beard, careful not to disconnect the wire that led to the microphone in it, and revealed her face.

Her face was oval, slightly weather toughened, but showing the potential for softer lines. Her nose was small and straight, and her lips, though firm, were full. The only thing disturbing her beauty, really, was her hard expression. But, hard expression or not, she was more than pretty.

The three prisoners were absolutely fascinated as they inspected every pore, every lash, every curve and angle of her face.

And the three prisoners saw the toughness under the even features, and that under the toughness was a meanness.

But Tom, of the three, saw deeper; he saw the hurt.

Deep hurt, bad hurt—something had schismed right into the depths of her soul.

But that was no excuse for killing a child.

But at least there was some sort of reason, some way to understand how the woman had done what she had done. Suddenly he had a bad thought.

Betty tossed her head to shake out her short hair. "I'd take off my jumpsuit and show you my man killing body, pardon the pun, but it keeps the blood from touching my lily white skin."

Guffaw from Foghorn.

"Shut up, Foggie." There was affection in her voice.

Foghorn said something from his table and it sounded like, 'yes ma'am,' though none in the corner could be sure.

"You see, the authorities won't know anything about the others, and they'll have too much of me." She grinned a pleasant grin.

"You said I could say anything," Tom asked.

"Shoot. No, not you guys."

Laughter from the auditorium. Betty was knocking 'em dead.

"We've seen your face, are you going to kill us?" Tom put words to the bad thought eating at him.

"You haven't been listening, have you, Junior." Her mouth closed and twisted slightly in amusement, then her expression sobered. "I'm coming. I want to see this."

Tom realized that she was talking to somebody else. "What do you want to see?"

“Helicopters.” She stood up. “And don’t worry about being killed. We’ll finish this later.” She turned and strode away, adjusting the beard and mike and setting the cap in place. Tom stared at her straight back.

“Are we going to die?”

Tom realized that Shelley was talking to him. “No,” he said. He tried to sound firm, like he knew what he was talking about. The problem was that the woman who had just told him not to worry had been just as reassuring to Meesha Brown—and Meesha Brown was dead.

Suddenly, Tom’s thoughts were interrupted by the low murmur of the camera man. Tom glanced across the kitchen and saw that the man was speaking into a cell phone. The man saw that Tom was watching him and turned away. Now why would one of the terrorists be speaking on the cell phone when he had a mike in his beard?

Betty rode the forks to the roof and strode towards Magilla, who was standing by himself in the middle of the roof.

The day was calm, just occasional puffs of breeze that did nothing to dissipate the heat building in the LA basin. Not too far to the south planes soared into LAX, and the sound of traffic—routed around the traffic jam that Washington and Commerce had become—was honkingly distinct in the distance.

“Where?” Betty asked as she came up behind the big man.

“Coming in from the West.” Magilla squinted and trained a large finger into the sky

Betty peered along the line of his arm.

“Ten o’clock. Comin’ from Santa Monica. Looks like the police.”

Betty saw it then. It was just a speck, but it was growing larger.

“Zingo bingo. You ready to party?”

“Rock and roll.” Magilla affirmed. “Daffy? Porky?”

Daffy left his position and came to them, as did Porky. Both were carrying Remingtons with large scopes.

Across the street, in the yellow house, Jimmy Elson placed a half-eaten bologna sandwich on the white plate resting on the couch and stared hard through the binoculars. While eating, he had held the phone in the crotch of his neck so as to be able to keep talking, and now he had switched it to his free hand. “Something is happening. The sniper has left the edge of the roof and...it looks like some sort of conference. I count four people. Two of them have rifles. Big scopes on the rifles.”

George Hoskins frowned on the other end of the phone, his mind trying to envision what was happening.

A conference? Sniper rifles? But the police were still arriving and staging. They hadn’t started any major deployment. Wha...?

“A helicopter’s coming in! They’re aiming at the helicopter!” Jimmy’s voice, suddenly frantic, hit Hoskins, and everything fell together.

“Get the chopper back!” George snapped tersely at the dispatcher sitting in front of him.

The dispatcher stabbed at the switch in front of her and called the police chopper.

“Get back! They’re waiting for you! Get back!”

Daffy and Porky had taken positions on each side of a vent housing. They propped their bodies against the housing for added stability and sighted on the helicopter.

“Fire,” Betty said calmly, watching the helicopter grow larger. It was as big as a basketball to her unaided vision, and that meant it was as big as a house to the men peering through the scopes.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

Daffy and Porky poured shot after shot into the approaching chopper. Daffy aimed for the windshield and Porky peppered the engine cowling.

In the chopper holes began appearing in the windshield. The pilot ducked as high velocity slugs smacked into the metal behind him. He winced as a slug came out of the instrument panel, and he noted, with much alarm, the way certain needles were beginning to gyrate.

“I’m hit,” he said, trying to stay calm, ignoring the voice in his headphones that was yelling at him to get out of there.

He slewed the chopper around, saved himself from being killed by the constant puncturing, but presented the broad side of the chopper to the snipers.

Daffy and Porky concentrated their fire on the cowling, and smoke began to leak from the edges of the access panel.

“Die,” Porky murmured, sounding like a college professor arguing a point at a faculty coffee klatch.

“Hummm,” Daffy agreed.

BANG! BANG!

In the chopper the pilot felt the controls stiffen. He threw his weight against the stick and managed to keep the helicopter level.

“Come on.” Daffy sensed the kill.

BANG! BANG!

It happened. A bullet hit one of the landing lights. The red plastic shattered and a piece flew upwards. It was just a small piece, but when it flew into the path of the blades the result was devastating.

The piece of plastic hit one of the blades, and a hairline crack occurred. The crack grew into a split, and the split resulted in a small section of blade flying away.

The chopper pilot saw the piece of blade fly away only because it was directly on his line of sight—it was like seeing a weird shaped golf ball on a long fairway—then the shuddering began.

A helicopter is an immense work of delicacy. The blades are exquisitely balanced, and if one of the blades breaks it unbalances the whole thing. The shaft leading to the blades began shaking back and forth, and imperceptible stress fractures became cracks within microseconds.

The shuddering grew worse.

Daffy and Porky kept firing, then the whole blade assembly was tilting and cutting into the side of the chopper. The machine began to tear itself apart.

“Yee haw!” Daffy yelled.

“Fuck! Look at that!” Magilla whispered.

Betty shaded her eyes and watched.

Daffy and Porky stopped firing and watched as one blade disconnected and flew away like a broken boomerang. The chopper tilted sideways and began to drop like a lopsided rock, picking up speed as gravity pushed it’s mighty hand on it.

Dennis Ellison had stayed home that day. He was a janitor at the Interstate building downtown, and he had an extra day of sick leave stored up. He planned to go to the beach that evening and party hearty.

Then the program had come on TV. Terrorists taking over a school. A kid being shot in the head! What a kick!

He broke out some weed and started partying early.

Now, though nothing was really happening on the tube since the bearded lady had said her piece, the grass was righteous, and he was feeling about as golden as a guy could get without being rich and— He heard something.

He walked to the window and peered out. He couldn’t see much, he was on the second floor of an apartment on Rosewood, right behind the CHP station, but he angled his vision up and searched for whatever it was that—

The chopper struck the side of Dennis Ellison’s building with a mighty Whoomp!

Dennis Ellison saw the bulky shadow descending, then the whole world went bright red. The gas tank in the chopper blew and Dennis was lifted up and flung—the front half of his body burnt into toasted mush—through the wall of his apartment. The apartment house exploded into flame, and the sound of impact and explosion broke windows for a block

in all directions. Four apartment houses would burn to the ground before the fire department could get the conflagration under control.

Watching the dark cloud of smoke rise up, Magilla and Porky high fived. Betty smiled. Daffy curled his upper lip and touched teeth to his lower lip.

“Good shooting, fellows,” Betty said.

“Keep ‘em coming,” Porky yelled at the city.

“All right, back to your posts.”

Daffy, ambulating nonchalantly across the roof, suddenly stopped and yelled, “Fuck!”

Magilla and Porky turned, as did Betty near the hole in the roof.

“The sons of bitches are escaping!” Daffy put the sniper rifle down and snatched the M-16 standing against the edge of the roof. He began firing, single shot, as quickly as he could pull the trigger.

Magilla and Porky laughed, and Betty shook her head in amusement.

Washington, and that section of Commerce directly in front of Lincoln Elementary School, was a no man’s land. Bodies were sprawled, and a few crawled, and moans and cries were rampant. Cars were scattered the length of the street, and a feeling of desolation was upon the scene.

When Daffy had left his position on the edge of the roof to take out the helicopter, the people cowering in the streets and houses hadn’t understood what was going on; they just knew that they had been given a chance for survival. One at a time they left the cover of car and bush, crawled across lawns and behind fences, and made their getaways. The people in the surrounding houses, seeing that the firing had stopped, began coming out of their houses and helping the wounded to their feet, or just dragging them, if need be, to safety. A white woman, who’s car had flat tires due to Daffy’s accurate fire, ran to where an old black man held a door open. Two teenagers carried a large black woman into an alley. An old man helped a lady and a baby. Slowly, except for the dead, the street began to empty.

Tom Shoenburger, seeing the people leaving the battlefield, stood up and stared at Lincoln. There was nobody on the roof from his viewpoint, but when the sound of the sniper rifles started up again he, along with everybody else on the block, instinctively ducked. The deadly fire didn’t scythe through the people on the street, however.

“Can you get me out?” Bill grunted from inside the car.

Tom turned and began pulling Bill’s arm. If he had had presence of mind he would have run around the cop car and taken the injured cop out through the passenger door, but minds don’t always work nice and sharp

in the middle of a war. He tried to pull Bill over the legs of the dead Lester.

“Ah, God!” Bill groaned. His ribs were on fire, and the kid pulling on him wasn’t helping.

“Sorry,” Tom muttered, finally realizing that he was doing it all wrong. He let go of Bill and grabbed Lester’s dangling arm. He pulled and Lester fell out onto the street. With a quick jerk, he had Lester completely out of the car, and the way was clear to extricate Bill.

“You’d better hurry.” A heavy sheen of sweat covered Bill’s face.

Tom made up his mind. Time was more important than pain. He reached in and, with a burst of unusual strength, pulled. Bill would have screamed, but the way Tom was pulling he couldn’t get a breath.

“Aggh,” Bill finally managed, sprawling on the street.

“Come on!” Tom helped the cop to his feet.

At that moment the drama in the sky reached its peak, and Bill and Tom found their attention drawn upwards.

Fascinated, they watched the helicopter angle across the horizon for a moment, then drop like a bird suddenly shorn of wings.

“Ah, damn!” Bill breathed.

The sound of the far away explosion made them aware of the danger of their position.

“Better get out of here!” Bill tried to take a step and Tom helped him, tried to support as much of the cop’s weight as he could.

The firing on the roof stopped and the terrorists could be heard yelling jubilantly.

Tom and Bill hobbled across the sidewalk, then the lawn was soft and spongy underfoot. Ahead of them the door in the yellow house popped open and Jimmy charged out. Estelle held the door open for them.

“Come on!” Jimmy exclaimed, then he and Tom were both under the cop’s arms, speeding him across the lawn faster than his shuffling feet could carry him.

Bill Woodard’s senses were skewed. His body was on fire where he had been hit. Dimly, feeling the blades of grass rubbing at the hard toes of his shoes, he wondered how much blood he had lost, then his feet were being dragged over wooden steps.

“In here!” Estelle yelled, eyes wide with fright, her bony hands holding the screen door open.

The street was almost empty. Two houses over somebody disappeared through a gate in a fence, and somebody, somewhere, was yelling something incoherent in nature.

Somebody yelled a ‘fuck’ from the direction of the school, and the sniping began again.

A bullet smacked into the porch just as the two boys and the cop crashed through the front door and collapsed on the thin rug in the center of the Estelle's living room. Bill lay still for a long moment, gasping for breath, then turned over to face the ceiling. He thanked God that he was still alive.

At the site of the crashed helicopter, as the fire began to engulf adjacent apartment buildings, a massive pall of smoke rose to cast a shadow all the way from the Hollywood Freeway to Griffith Park.

Firemen around the city pulled themselves away from TV sets—where a most bizarre act of terrorism had captured their attention—and found themselves driving through strangely empty streets to the scene of the crash.

Firetrucks filled the streets around the helicopter wreckage and the apartment buildings and began pumping tons of water over the blaze. Odd to the firemen, not many citizens came out to watch. The terrorists on the tube were providing an alternative draw that was much more entertaining than a mere fire. At any rate, while the firemen worked frantically to put out the fire, the towering pillar of smoke that was twisting the light of day became, for those citizens of Los Angeles who observed it, the first physical sign that White Law was hard at work.

And the police began to arrive.

Cop car after cop car screamed up Commerce, and a trickle became a flood. Car after car roared along side streets, and cop after cop, armored and armed, or sometimes just trying to finish dressing after being woken up and called in, gathered in the parking lot at the corner mall two streets up from Washington and Commerce. In that parking lot things began to happen.

Lt. Randolph Huggs was the first ranking officer on the scene. He nosed his car to the curb, parked next to a yellow hydrant, and was out and striding across the small parking lot in a determined fashion.

“Who's in charge?”

The half dozen cops talking over the hood of a car turned as one. Huggs' question had not been an inquiry so much as a statement that *he* was in charge.

Huggs frowned. These were good men and women, but they were nervous. Well, a few orders would take care of that. Put them to work and all fidgeting would disappear. “Okay,” he said. “You three, shut down the shops on these four corners. You two, get cars across Commerce at the next intersection and let's start routing traffic elsewhere. You, go shut that service station down across the street.”

The officers snapped to their tasks even as more officers arrived, parked their cruisers, and intuitively gravitated towards the source of authority.

“Victor, good to see you, get a map on this hood here,” Huggs said. The man named Victor nodded even as he turned to find a map.

“Ma’am, you’ll have to step back to the curb. George, get somebody to sweep the civilians back. I want a perimeter established.”

Huggs didn’t know that the woman merely wanted to find out about her daughter, who was being held hostage at the school.

“What you mean I got to close!” An old black man in a tomato paste smeared apron came out the front door of ‘Red’s Pizza Parlor.’ His arms were waving wildly and his agitated voice carried across the parking lot.

“I got bills! There ain’t no trouble on this block, and....”

The cop talking to him tried to calm him but was unsuccessful.

Workers poured out of Tuck’s laundry next to the pizza parlor, and next to the laundry a Subway manager was locking his glass doors. Behind the manager two young workers stared at the cops with large eyes.

“I got my rights and I got to stay open and....” The Pizza Man was not cooperating.

Across the street the manager of the gas station was also upset, though what he was saying wasn’t quite as loud as the Pizza Man.

“Let’s park incoming cars along that street. SWAT can stage in the gas station parking lot, and....” Huggs, giving orders like they were party favors, was bent over the map on the hood of the car.

“My goddamn produce is going to go bad, and I can’t pay for the new ovens I got ordered if....”

Huggs straightened up and raised his voice, “Tell that man to quit the area or he’ll be arrested!”

The officer talking to the pizza man nodded with a nervous jerk.

“You ain’t goin’ to arrest me! I got a business....”

Within seconds the pizza man’s arms were being forcefully cuffed. He kicked and screamed at the cops as they lifted him by the arms and carried him away.

“Damn,” Huggs muttered, leaning over the hood. “Don’t these folks understand?” He peered closely at the map and pulled out a pen. “Now, the perimeter is going to be along these streets.” He began drawing a square surrounding and one street over from the school. “We’re going to have to evacuate all houses inside the perimeter, and....”

At the entrance to the corner mall the Pizza Man, still yelling and shouting about his rights, had a hand placed on his head as he was helped, forcefully, into a cruiser.

From the corner chosen for field operations the police fanned out, batons swinging from belts and rifles held in hands. Moving in small formations, they looked like soldiers come to take over a small country,

and, because of the severity of the situation, they weren't always as polite as could be.

"Out...out!"

"A shelter will be set up on the next street!"

"No choice ma'am, you'll have to leave!"

One man was arrested for trying to stay in his home and watch TV.

And the people began to come out of their houses and gather on the sidewalks and lawns of the area. They didn't understand that the police were just following procedure; they just knew that white people (though there were black cops moving through the neighborhood they were generally considered to be following white men's orders) had taken over the school—and now white people were moving them out of their homes! The citizens began to gather in surly groups and trade complaints concerning what was taking place in their neighborhood.

"Shoo us out of our own homes," one retired black man muttered.

"Can't get ready for work," a black nurse complained.

"How'm I gonna get my car!" a young legal aide objected.

"Son of a bitch told me to move or he'd arrest me!" a city worker protested.

The police continued to move through the neighborhood. Though they encountered hard glances and muttered imprecations, they were unaware of the total effect they were creating.

"Move on, sir."

"You can't stay here."

"Please move down the street."

And the people, responded with:

"Who you shovin'?"

"Why ain't you over at the school gettin' our children back?"

"Get your hands off me!"

The situation, instigated by but apart from the terrorists in the school, was beginning to boil.

On a corner one street over from the school, freshly removed from his home, Elwin Jones stood on a street corner and studied the growing numbers of people in the street.

Elwin was normally the most placid of men, but now dissatisfaction was working in his gut. Being highly intelligent, he understood what was happening better than most, but that didn't stop the feeling that wormed and crawled in his belly and threatened to actually become something angry.

Heck! He never got angry.

But he had seen the little girl killed on TV. Heck, he *knew* the little girl! He saw Mrs. Brown at the grocery store on occasional, and he had even patted little Meesha on the head. Now Meesha was dead—dead and

gone—and people were being moved around like so much cattle, and the cops were treating everybody like they were the criminals. No, that wasn't right, they weren't, not really—but it felt like it! The line in his gut tightened and a crease of a frown moved across his face.

“Sir, you'll have to move on!”

Elwin turned his blocky body to the approaching cop, his demeanor a solid wall.

What if I don't move on! What if I hold my ground?

But Elwin understood that that thought, if allowed to manifest, wasn't the solution for what was going on.

But what was the solution?

The cop saw the look on Elwin Jones' face and slowed. Though Elwin wasn't entirely convinced he was right, he was almost ready to enter into that Battle of the Solid Citizens—then he felt a hand on his upper arm.

“Come on, Elwin.” Gus Peebles pulled at him. Elwin managed to let himself be turned and led away.

“What you tryin' to do, man?” Gus hissed as they crossed the lawn to Gus' porch.

Elwin didn't say anything. Things weren't right and the feeling in his gut kept moving and moving.

“Come on, sit down there and I'll get us somethin' to drink.”

“Nothing alcoholic,” Elwin managed to mumble, not looking at Gus.

Gus stared at his friend for a brief moment, then turned into the shadows of his house. He had known Elwin for years, and he had never seen such an expression on his friend's face. Well, Elwin could stay with him for a while, at least until this mess was settled.

When he returned to the porch with a couple of tall glasses of iced tea, he found two more friends sitting with Elwin. The two men greeted Gus with the news.

“They arrested Red.”

“The pizza guy?”

“Yeah, and old Billy Foxx, he wanted to stay in his house and watch TV, but they run him out and arrested him.”

And the second man reached the conclusion that others in the 'hood were also reaching. “Damned police act just like that White Law bunch!”

Gus noted that Elwin didn't join in the conversation, or even react to what the others had been saying. He just kept sitting in that comfy old yellow chair tucked into the corner of the porch and looking like worms were holding a wrestling match in his gut.

Gus raised his gaze and saw armed police running into houses, and he saw people coming out, holding babies (no small children, those were

at Lincoln, where the police should be!)—and each other—and he noted the terrible upset, the shrillness, the rising frenzied mood taking over everybody. He frowned.

He looked up the street and saw more cops coming.

He heard sirens and knew, by how they were moving, that they were heading for the big fire where the gunship went down. Funny, even after all these years he still thought of helicopters as gunships.

He looked back down at Elwin.

And, looking at Elwin's face, he thought of the thousand yard stare men came out of the bush with back in Nam.

But Elwin didn't have that look, exactly. It was more like he was just thinking about having it.

Ah, hell, thought Gus, dismissively. When a guy as calm as Elwin Jones gets upset things are pretty damned bad. And Gus returned to the kitchen to ask his wife to fix some more iced tea. A lot more. A whole damned tub of the stuff. He had seen two more friends coming up the street towards his porch. Looked like his place was going to be the meeting hall for the neighborhood.

Above the neighborhood, causing a gloominess reminiscent of an eclipse, smoke hung and contributed to a general hothouse effect. It was only ten in the morning, and Los Angeles was heating up. White Law had been in business for one hour.

White Law had settled down to routine. Tom, in the kitchen, studied the terrorists, and memorized who was who, who did what, or anything else that might be of value.

The one called Foghorn worked the computer. He seemed to have some kind of military training, but it didn't look like army. Probably Air Force. The Air Force was heavily into computer training.

Wiley worked at the map, talking on the cell phone and making marks. He had a more civilian manner of motion.

Magilla had to be the top sergeant, and that meant—

Suddenly, Betty entered the kitchen and looked at Tom. For a long moment she stared, then she turned away and began speaking to Foghorn. For a long minute the two conversed, then Betty pivoted to Wiley. Wiley alternated talking into the phone and talking to Betty, then Betty, impatient, took the phone and began speaking. Tom realized what it was that was nagging at his awareness.

“Son of a gun!” he whispered.

“What?” Mrs. Watson asked.

“They have people on the outside,” Tom said. “That's why they're talking on the cell phones. Look—they talk on the phones, then make marks on the map. Somebody—somebody who is not on that beard net

they have—must be telling them what’s going on outside, providing reconnaissance, maybe telling them where the cops are.”

Mrs. Watson thought about what Tom had said for a moment, then nodded her head in agreement.

“I’ve counted eight of them in the school.”

Tom stared at Mrs. Watson. He hadn’t expected hard information from her, but he should have. After all, what is a principal but the general of a school? He nodded.

“And they have more than one outside, probably two or three.”

“Yes,” she agreed.

“Probably three. That makes eleven, almost an even dozen.” Tom considered how that number of people effected the terrorist’s ability to work together. Not too many to confuse things, but enough so that all stations could be double manned. Smart. Tom wasn’t encouraged.

“So,” Mrs. Watson interrupted his cogitations, “has anybody come up with a plan?” The way she tilted her head and looked down her nose made it seem like she was glaring at Tom and Shelley.

Life was looking good to Betty. She had a crackerjack team trained to perfection, the hard part of the operation was completed, and she was even a media star.

So why was she so aware of that school cop in the corner?

Underneath her beard she pursed her lips and scowled even as she talked on the cell phone. One thing she had learned, in putting this operation together, was that you had to confront what was bothering you. Those things which you procrastinated over became ten times larger, and always came looking for you with an extra set of industrial strength teeth.

Aware of this, Betty checked on the reports coming in from Huey, Dewey and Louis, made sure Wiley was keeping up with the flow of information—he was—then put down the cell phone and headed for the far corner of the kitchen. Halfway across the kitchen she plucked a bag out of a box.

“Want a sandwich?” Betty ignored the women as she looked down at Tom.

She was smiling slightly as she held out a wrapped sandwich.

Tom started to shake his head, then thought better of it.

“Yeah.” Keep fed. Don’t be stupid proud.

“One for you and one for you,” Betty handed another sandwich to Shelley, who glanced at Tom before she took it, “and...oops, no more. Sorry.” Her eyes glinted with mean humor as she focused her gaze on Mrs. Watson.

For a second Tom was frozen, then he ripped his sandwich in two and handed half to Mrs. Watson. Tuna fish.

Betty laughed. "Taking care of your pet, eh?"

Tom ignored her degraded humor and chewed on the sandwich. Shelley followed his example and began eating, also. It took Mrs. Watson a moment to swallow her pride, then she, too, began to eat. She was smart enough to see why Tom was so agreeable about accepting food, and strong enough to force herself to follow his example.

For a long moment Betty watched, then she looked around for a chair, elected to sit on a small two step ladder she retrieved from a corner, and began to eat her sandwich. It was just like a little picnic.

"Okay, Junior. Time to clue you in."

Tom swallowed, wished he had some water, and gave her his attention.

"What I was starting to tell you, before we were so rudely interrupted, was that I am not leaving. My partners are. I'm not. So you have no need to fear for your life just because you know what I look like."

"Oh?"

Betty chewed, stared, then segued into a seemingly different channel.

"A couple of years ago my husband came to LA. We lived on a ranch in Arizona. He came to LA to do some banking.

"In Arizona people aren't so particular about gun control. We have rifles in our trucks. We carry guns in the glove box. We even, on occasion, carry weapons on our person."

"Tom, he had the same first name as you, arrived in LA and went to the bank. He was carrying a gun because he was carrying a sizable amount of cash. At the bank somebody saw the gun on his hip, under his jacket, and jumped to a conclusion—and they called the cops. They didn't call from inside the bank. Nobody in the bank had any idea that anything was happening. Some customer had seen the gun and gone out to a pay phone.

"So Tom goes on with his banking. One of the tellers notices that there aren't any customers coming into the bank. Tom looks out the window and notices there isn't anybody on the street. A teller goes out to see what is happening, Tom goes with her. Sniper shoots him in the side of the head. Zingo bing, my man is dead."

Betty's offhand, yet intent, manner of speaking had them frozen. Time was nothing but an ice cube, and they were nothing but specks within that cube.

"You know who shot Tom?" Betty asked.

"A black?" Tom found himself injecting.

"Yup. And a black police chief hung a medal on the black sniper's chest. Called him a hero. My husband, you see, went to gun shows, knew people who were in the KKK, had joined the militia.

“The sniper claimed Tom was reaching for his gun. Video tapes—they made a video of the damned thing—showed he was just putting his hand on his hip. I’ve seen him put his hand on his hip and look out over the ranch hundreds of times.

“The sniper said he was going to hurt the teller, that he was reaching for her neck. Doesn’t matter that the video showed Tom smiling. Sniper never explained how Tom could go for his gun and break a lady’s neck, all with a big smile, all at the same time.”

Though Betty’s voice droned she was wound up. The three in the corner watched her, fascinated, like they were watching a missile traveling in slow motion.

“Doesn’t matter that everybody in Arizona knows somebody who’s in a white supremacist organization, owns a few rifles, drives a truck with an American flag on the bumper.

“And Tom never joined any militia. He joined the National Guard. He was in the fucking National Guard, and he was shot through the head for that. And the Monkey fuck that did it gets a damned medal from the Monkey that’s in charge of the Monkey fucking law in this town.” Her voice was lower, if anything, as she injected invective, “And you know the absolutely terrible, terrible, incredibly unbelievable thing about the whole business?”

Tom, unable to speak under the hard presence of her narrative, shook his head.

“The customer who reported that he had a gun,” Betty was whispering now, her eyes glinting, her awareness focused totally on the fact of the crime, “was a drug addict. She came in to the bank to borrow money for a fix. She didn’t have a home, or collateral, or anything. She was just so messed up with drugs that she thought she could walk into a bank and borrow money for a fix.”

Betty stopped talking, wasn’t breathing hard. Her eyes had become pin points.

Tom had the feeling that he was in a tunnel with her, the kitchen and the people in the kitchen somehow excluded from the tight line between them. She was at one end, staring out of her insanity at him, and he was at the other end, understanding, probably more than he liked, exactly why she was the way she was. And he knew that, in some fashion, life had dealt her a blow that was insurmountable, and the only way she had of coping with this blow was going absolutely, stark raving, nuts. And she liked him because he had the same name as her dead husband. Maybe there were other similarities, but...but that was it.

And he was suddenly struck by the fact that he might know what was going on in her mind now, but what good was that going to do for him? Could he use it to sway her? Could he somehow undo this terrible

mental imbroglio of hers? Could he somehow unbalance the White Law manifestation of her insanity?

Well, he had no answers, but a piece of the puzzle was better than nothing.

“So you organized this,” Tom said.

“I did,” Betty said, nostrils flaring, proud. The change of subject seemed to make her happy. Of course it would. Dwelling on the death of her husband certainly couldn’t make her happy.

“I knew virtually nothing about military operations before this, but I read books, purchased training manuals, got on the Internet—that’s where I met Wiley—watched training videos, and went about recruiting and planning for this mission.

“I recruited from all over the country, went to gun shows, met leaders of militia movements, and found the right kind of men for this mission.”

Of course, thought Tom, people of a feather flock together.

“Our group is composed of ex-policemen, truck drivers, even a dog catcher.” She gave a laugh of fondness and appreciation for this unnamed individual in her troops. “Most of them have military training of some kind. You would be shocked at how many Green Berets and SEALs we have.”

Actually, Tom wasn’t surprised by this revelation. Having been in the rangers, he understood the potential for abuse in the military mindset.

“We gathered at your ranch and we set up a training facility. We built small scale mock ups, duplicated the true dimensions of the school in the pasture, began running exercises to help us understand what we faced physically. We studied the school, the city, all records, everything. We wanted to be prepared, to anticipate accurately to the point of prediction what the city and the police would do. And, so far, we have been exactly, 100 per cent, right!” She smacked a fist into her hand in glee.

“Want to know what was at the heart of our training?” She leaned forward.

Tom nodded. He was picturing the members of White Law sweating under the sun, practicing crowd control techniques, handling assault tactics, and he was prepared for more of the same. What she told him, however, was terribly different.

“Once we had a likely recruit for our program we would send him into a city somewhere. He would be under orders to kidnap a Monkey. A young Monkey. He would then have to kill that Monkey in such a fashion that it would make the headlines. We picked different cities and, because each kill was done differently, by a different person, the MOs never the same, law enforcement agencies never tumbled to what was happening.

“If the recruit came back happy we would accept him into the inner circle. If he showed remorse, or felt badly in any way, we thanked him—and killed him.”

Tom’s mind had been shocked several times over the morning, but this was the worst.

“Hitler’s SS is supposed to have trained in that same fashion, but with puppy dogs.”

“Puppy dogs or Monkeys, what’s the difference?”

Tom couldn’t say any more. He just shook his head, unable to cope with her insanity.

“So, you don’t have to worry about being killed. We don’t like to kill white people, though we obviously will if we have to, and when this is over the fellows will go their merry way. They have several routes of escape planned, they have plastic surgery scheduled, and they will live lives of luxury.

“I, on the other hand, will not be leaving. I will be captured, alive, and I will tell the world what happened to my husband. As the greatest criminal in the history of the United States, I will be afforded the largest pulpit imaginable. It will be ten times better than the OJ trial. And, who knows,” she smiled, “it’s California. I might even get off!”

Magilla sat on the roof, his large bulk leaning against the housing Daffy and Porky had used to settle their sights earlier. He masticated slowly on a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, his jaws moving up and down in slow, measured movements. Deep in thought, he was unaware of any sensation of taste whatsoever.

He knew about Betty’s husband. She had told him the same story—even using the same words—and it didn’t bother him. After all, there was something about the death of her husband that cemented her to the cause. Knowing her reason for starting White Law had only reassured him as far as his own purposes and motivations.

And her telling the school cop about the workings of White Law didn’t bother him. After all, the school cop was going to die. He, Magilla, was going to make sure of that.

And Betty was still sharp as a laser in her leadership. Her conversations with the outside observers backed that up to the hilt, and her pride in White Law carried through the faint whisperings of his headset to let Magilla know that she was still motivated.

Suddenly, sitting as still as a rock in a field, Magilla realized what was bothering him.

She had spoken of Tom’s ranch as ‘your ranch.’

Was she confusing her late husband with that school cop in the kitchen?

She was.

But would that confusion effect her decision making abilities?

Magilla didn't think so, but he should still keep an eye on her, and he should still have a talk with her. But when they talked he should be very careful not to cross the line with her as far as her husbandly confusions went. No, he shouldn't even mention that particular item.

After all, Betty was under the gun, the pressure on her had to be immense, more than Magilla had ever experienced, and she didn't need to be confused further. She needed to keep making the same hard decisions and leading in the manner which he and the others had become accustomed to.

Then he had one, last, very disturbing thought.

Yes, the members of White Law had gone out and killed Monkeys—not all of them, but any who didn't have combat experience, or similar experiences in killing people—and the ones who displayed emotional turmoil had been dispatched.

But Betty had never killed a Monkey. As the leader she had picked cities and worked with Magilla on logistics and planning and a thousand other details—but she had never killed a Monkey. Somehow, in making sure that everybody else was a killer, her own status had been overlooked; because she was the leader everybody had overlooked that fact.

Magilla realized that he had stopped eating. The sandwich was motionless in his hand, a collector of flies even as he sat, and he tossed it away in disgust. His mind returned to the problem he had just realized.

If Betty wasn't a killer, if Meesha Brown was the first Monkey that Betty had killed, then he had to watch and make sure that she was able to deal with it, or she would have to be killed herself.

"Fuck," he said, and he slammed his fist against the cowling.

"Magilla?" Betty queried over the headset, always alert to the needs of her troops.

"Everything's okey doke. Sorry."

But it wasn't okey doke. Not by a long fucking shot.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Ruby Ridge, Waco, Oklahoma City, the Unabomber, Little Rock, Monkeyland. Where will the terror end?” Accompanying the announcer’s voice were pictures of Waco and Oklahoma City.

Betty hit the remote.

“These people are of the same mind set as Ted Kazinski, Randy Weaver, and the Madman in Little Rock.” A cherubic-faced spin doctor offered psychoanalytic commentary. Stupid, he had lumped Randy Weaver in with terrorists.

Betty hit the remote.

“Four apartment houses are gutted, ruined, and the people responsible have taken—” The ditzzy blonde reporter stood in the way of hurrying firemen and spouted her burble.

Betty, tired of the mindless box, hit the mute and bit her lip.

So far so good.

So what was bothering her?

She turned to Wiley and checked on the status of the three nephews. Yes. So far so good.

So?

She took a last oblique glance at Tom, then exited the kitchen.

Tom sat in the corner and nibbled on his lip. Betty was nervous about something, and he had the strange feeling that he was part of that nervousness.

Was that revelation about him having the same name as her husband behind it?

Shelley, next to him, chewed on her sandwich; it seemed like she wasn’t swallowing, just chewing.

“She likes you,” Mrs. Watson said.

Tom looked at the principal.

“Did you hear what she said about her husband’s ranch?”

Tom shook his head in the negative.

“She called it ‘your’ ranch.”

“What good does that do me?” Tom was blank to the significance of her observation.

“Whatever good you can make it do you,” she shot back at him.

“I want to go back to my children,” Shelley said, suddenly. Her sandwich was only half eaten, and the look in her eyes indicated that she

was not quite there. She yawned, and Tom and Mrs. Watson exchanged glances.

“Tom will ask Betty if you can go back to them.”

Tom stared at Mrs. Watson. The look in the Principal’s eyes was solid steel. She was coping. She could offer solace to Betty even while she marshaled whatever forces she could. The problem was that the only forces she could muster were one district cop.

Hundreds of police were organizing on the streets encircling Lincoln Elementary, and more were coming. Roadblocks had been set in place and all traffic was being rerouted, and the entire area began to look like a budding military encampment. After the debacle of the Gates handling of the Rodney King riot some years previous, the police had undergone intensive training for just such a situation as this. That training was proving it’s worth now, and if a few citizens sat on the sidelines and grumbled about the high-handed tactics of the police, that was just the price of securing peace in a city that suddenly found itself enduring the problem of a massive hostage situation.

Lt. Huggs stood and watched as the communications van was hooked up. His potential for effective communications had just been upped tenfold. The citizens were pretty surly, and his men might be a bit nervous, but very few incidents had been reported. The perimeter had been secured.

“SWAT’s here, sir,” a voice said at his elbow, and Huggs turned to see a black van with the SWAT logo on the side pull up to the curb. Fully armed and armored men began pouring out the back of the van, and several of them carried sniper rifles. Excellent, maybe they could put a little dent in White Law’s ways now.

“Lt. Huggs?” A tall SWAT officer came towards him and offered a firm hand. “Lt. Byrd. Have there been any communications with the terrorists?”

“No,” Huggs shook hands. “We’ve got a citizen watching the school through binoculars, and he says that the terrorists aren’t even around the front office. That’s where the phones would be.”

“Hmmm,” Byrd frowned. His face was an amalgamation of hard angles, and those angles had never been harder as he considered what the other officer had said. Successful hostage negotiating depended upon good communications.

“What about their link to the media? Any chance of cutting in on that?”

“They’re linking with a computer. Parker Center is working on that, but....” He shrugged and his meaning was clear. A phone line they could tap, break into, whatever...but a computer network?

“Excuse me?”

Both officers both turned as one.

“Special Agent Sanders.” The newcomer had a shiny smile, shiny shoes, and slicked back, shiny hair. He was willowy in build, but not weak. All in all, he exuded a slickness that did not reassure the two officers.

“FBI?” Huggs queried.

“Yes,” Sanders smiled a little wider, trying to effect concern but not quite succeeding. “This situation has the attention of the nation, and I’ve been ordered to observe until a Hostage Rescue Team arrives.”

Huggs and Byrd glanced at each other, the glance was meant to be surreptitious, but Sanders picked up on it.

“Look, guys, I’m just here to observe. Let me know if there is anything I can do, and just fill me in occasionally so I don’t look like a schmuck when the HRT gets here. Fair?”

Then, simple as that, he wandered off.

Huggs stared for a moment, then turned back to Byrd. “Fair? Not hardly.”

“I don’t mind the FBI,” Huggs said. “I just mind some of the oily, gladhand fucks they have working for them.”

“Yeah, well,” and Byrd turned back to business. “Do you have a map that we could...”

Behind Byrd members of the SWAT team checked their weaponry. They had sniper rifles, assault rifles, and full body armor. They were clad in dark material that made them perfect modern day ninjas. The look in their eyes proclaimed that they were ready.

The cruiser crawling up the street endured the eyes of the citizenry.

“Get off the streets!” The loudspeaker was obnoxious in tone and the message certainly didn’t help. “Go to your homes and stay inside!”

“First they kicks us out of our homes and then they tells us to go to our homes.”

Gus listened as one of the six men on his porch grumbled in response to the passing police cruiser.

“How ‘bout they go to their own homes,” another man said. “Fuckers don’t even live here.”

In the kitchen the women could be heard talking. In the backyard Gus’ mother-in-law was watching over several children too young to go to school.

“What bothers me,” Gus said, “is that I don’t think they have a clue as to how they gonna take that school back and rescue the children.”

All of the men grumbled at that. That was one question that kept, in some form or other, coming back again and again.

What about the children?

The TV had no answers, the cops were playing their games, and six hundred children, the children of the neighborhood, were just a block away.

“Those cops even care about us?” A thick, bald fellow who worked at a service station held one gnarly fist up to emphasize his point. “They don’t live in this neighborhood, they get fat city paychecks and come into the hood and push people around and think that—”

“They think we’re niggers.”

“Or monkeys!”

“Or some other low life they can just....” and the conversation continued.

In the corner, in Gus’ comfy chair, Elwin sat and listened. He wasn’t angry, He would swear that he wasn’t angry. But his gut was rumbling like it needed a truckload of Pepto.

His head swiveled slowly to watch the tail end of the cop car as it delivered it’s message up the street. Suddenly his eyes stopped, backtracked, and focused on a kid standing on the curb across the street. The kid should have been in school, but had dropped out to sell drugs. He sold them right out in the open.

That was the moment that Gus knew, in spite of his talking himself to the contrary, that he might, just might, be feeling the wee edge of a touch of anger. Just might.

The cruiser, having navigated the streets around the school several times, pulled up to the barricade on Commerce. The barricade was halfway between the school and the corner mall, and neither the school nor the mall could be seen from it’s location. The two cops unfolded themselves from the car and stretched.

“How’s it going, Sarg?” the driver asked.

Sergeant Ernst Polski came from behind the cop car that had been nosed across the intersection and approached the two cops. He was a thick barrel of a veteran with gray hair and wise eyes that would have much preferred humor and donuts to the current situation. Polski had worked through the King riots, and there was a feeling to this one that he didn’t like. Not that he liked any riot, but this one—this one was different.

“Fine here. How about you guys?”

“I don’t like it,” the cop who had been working the PA said bluntly.

Polski raised his bushy eyebrows.

“People here don’t always like us, but now it’s about a hundred times worse.”

“They doing anything?”

The cop shook his head, brushed a piece of lint off his shirt front. “No,” he looked up, “and that’s the worst part. They don’t do anything. They just look at us.” He shrugged helplessly.

Polski nodded. “I understand.” And he did. Maybe if somebody threw a rock at them, or screamed at them, but nobody was doing anything, and the longer the calm, the worse the eventual storm.

“I wish I did,” the driver murmured.

“Look,” Polski said, seeing the strain on the faces of the two officers, “it’s okay to stop and talk with them. They’ve had their children kidnapped and they’ve been kicked out of their homes. How would you feel?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

But the look on the cop’s face didn’t signify complete understanding. It showed nervousness and foreboding, and those were not good attributes to be cruising the mean streets with.

Twenty yards behind Polski and the two cops, standing on a fire hydrant, was a white man with a camera and a hearing aid. The man didn’t stare at the cops, or otherwise act in a suspicious manner, but he was listening to what they said through his ‘hearing aid,’ which was actually a device to amplify sound. And while the man didn’t wear a beard or ballcap or sunglasses, he did wear a wig, a mustache, and a pair of glasses with flat lenses. He had a badge and an ID card which labeled him as a police photographer.

After a short while the man tired of eavesdropping. After all, he had heard this same type of conversation at every barricade. Hopping off the hydrant, he walked through a patch of knee high weeds and jumped up on the thick bumper of a battered pick up truck. He aimed his camera up and down the street, and let the zoom feature aid his vision. For a long moment he scanned the street, looked for cops to listen in on, and watched for people to do something that might be of interest to him. Two SWAT cops suddenly came trotting around the corner from the direction of the staging area. They ran towards him and he lowered the camera as the officers got closer. They were carrying sniper rifles, and they barely glanced at him as they passed. He watched as they turned down the street behind the school. One of them turned into the second yard, the other continued on down the street for four more houses before turning in. Quickly, but surreptitiously, the man on the truck pulled a cell phone out of his pocket and hit the speed dial. He had something to report.

He was unaware that if he had been listening to the citizens he would have had a lot more to report.

Wiley put down one phone and picked up the one that had just started ringing. He pressed the 'talk' button on the cell phone and said, "Yeah?"

"Two Long Johns on Commerce. Two and six."

"Betty," Wiley spoke into his beard without hanging up the phone.

"Yes?" She was on the roof checking the installation of the floodlights.

"Two Long Johns on Commerce. Two and six."

"Everybody," Betty's voice was terse, "shields up. Foghorn, time to turn on your ears. I'll be right down."

"Right," Wiley turned his attention back to the cell phone and listened to the member of the team known as Huey. As Huey continued his report Wiley made marks on the map on the wall, pinpointing the movement and location of cops and snipers.

Suddenly, the second cell phone rang, and Wiley answered that one. He held it with one hand, had the first phone lodged into the other side of his neck, and studied the map as he conducted conversations.

Foghorn, at the computer, glissaded the keyboard, and the voices of the cops erupted from two small speakers next to the computer.

In the corner Tom nodded as his suspicions were confirmed. "They're hooked into the police band," he said, trying to make sure none of the sudden admiration he felt for their competence entered into his voice.

Mrs. Watson stared at Tom with arched eyes, but didn't say anything.

As Betty was lowered from the roof, she stared back at 600 dismal, discouraged faces. The children were starting to get hungry, and there had already been several 'accidents.' She hopped off the stage and trotted towards the kitchen.

"Long Johns?" Betty asked Foghorn as she burst into the kitchen.

Wiley turned and held up two fingers at Betty, then one more. He mouthed the word 'Washington.' Betty nodded and Foghorn, intent at the computer, said, "Checking the other bands right now. Ah...there we go."

He hit a key and the sound of heavy breathing came over the speakers.

"Eagle, this is Hawk Three. I'm in the alley north of the furniture store."

"Check," the command voice responded. "Hawk Two?"

"Hawk Two, south side yellow house."

"Check."

"Advise Dewey," Betty said to Wiley.

Wiley nodded as he made marks and put pins into the map. There were black pins for cop locations and red pins for the Long Johns. To a casual onlooker it would have looked like he was doing nothing more

than planning a little football strategy. He picked up a third cell phone and began dialing.

Betty continued: "Daffy, yellow house. Porky, watch house six. Magilla?"

"Huck and I are watching Washington and the furniture store."

"Good. Fire at will."

"Roger."

Over the computer speaker: "Eagle, this is Hawk One. I'm crawling through the fence on the south side of the house."

Foghorn relayed the information and Bugs knew exactly where to look.

"Check," came the command voice over the speaker. "Number two?"

"Behind a fence on the south side."

"Eye in the sky, Betty. Check the TV," Foghorn said, cutting over the sound of the command voice issuing from the computer.

Betty spun and focused on the television screen. Channel Seven had a far picture of the school on the screen. Channel Seven apparently didn't want their chopper shot out of the sky, but did want a picture of Lincoln.

"Huckleberry, you ready to do a little long work?"

"You got it, Betty."

"Good. Magilla, Bugs is available for back up."

"Thanks, Betty."

Betty stood where she was, surfing channels, listening to the Long Johns on the speakers, was aware of the growing number of black pins on the map. It was plain that the police, spearheaded by the SWAT snipers, were looking to make their presence felt.

Along the sides of the roof the members of White Law hunkered down. Quickly, they erected small, metal shields on sturdy tripods. The shields were thick, able to deflect even armor piercing rounds, and slightly curved, so as to provide a full range of protection. Now that the police snipers had shown up there would be no more strutting across the roof or standing in plain sight. The shields became bumps along the roofline, and the terrorists pushed their rifles through thin, vertical slits, accepting the limitations of vision for the added protection.

"George?" Jimmy Elson's face was twisted in consternation as he peered through the binoculars.

"What's happening?" George's calm voice came back immediately.

Jimmy stared through the binoculars. His eyes were tired and he could feel the beginnings of a massive headache. "Something is happening on the roof."

“What?”

“They’re putting up little shields in front of themselves.”

George Hoskins frowned. Being at the center of communications, he was hooked into everything, and he knew that the SWAT team was placing snipers. They do something, and the terrorists do something. It had to be connected. He nudged the dispatcher right in front of him. “Get the SWAT commander on the horn. Tell him that the terrorists are ready for them. Advise him to pull back.”

Daffy looked through his scope. He could see the paint peeling on the side of the house. He could see the leaves on the bushes next to the house. He could see the leaves rustle, and he knew a sniper was crawling under the bushes. He focused the crosshairs at the bottom of the bush and waited. Sure enough, a rifle barrel poked out.

It was a perverse sense of self that moved Daffy to wait.

In the kitchen: “This is Eagle. All Hawks pull back. Repeat, all Hawks pull—”

“Shoot!” Betty, hearing the command voice, blurted impulsively.

The rifle barrel under the bushes was lifting, then it stopped, started to pull back.

Daffy had focused his cross hairs on the scope looking for him. He could almost see the eye behind the scope.

Daffy pulled the trigger.

The bullet hit the scope on the side. One screw gave way and the scope twisted. The bullet continued on to graze the face of the Long John; it cut a shallow groove in the side of the officer’s face. The scope swung to clip him on the temple, and he laid back and twisted against the side of the house and began to crawl backwards frantically.

Daffy knew that he had only wounded the man. He never should have waited for the fancy shot. At other places on the roof other rifles were shooting.

“Fuck!” Daffy muttered.

“Daffy?” Betty asked.

“I only grazed him.”

“Okay. How about the rest of you?”

The results were bad. Nobody could be sure they had hit any of the Long Johns.

Betty bit her lip. She turned and stared at the map, then turned and looked at the computer. “Okay. They have an eye somewhere. It’s not a cop because it’s not on their band. Maybe you guys should break a few windows.”

Several voices affirmed her order, and the snipers on the roof began banging away.

“Huckleberry?”

“Sighting.”

“Fire when ready.”

“Ten four.”

On the roof, Huckleberry focused the sighting mechanism of the Stinger on the far away chopper. A buzz went off in his ear, indicating a target lock, and he pulled the trigger. From the tube on his shoulder the rocket erupted. There was no kickback, and he watched the jet trail stretch away from him.

Betty watched the missile launch on Channel Seven.

The view from Sky Seven was long, but effective. The individual dots that were the members of White Law could be seen moving on the roof, and the commentator had even noted when the sniper battle had commenced and ended. Now the commentator, and all of LA that was tuned to ABC, and, most importantly, the pilot of the chopper, could see a little puff of smoke on the shoulder of one of the figures standing in the center of the roof.

“Incoming! Incoming!” The pilot had flown for the army in Desert Storm, and his military training kicked in as he pushed the stick hard.

On the TV the missile became a dot with a slight puff of flame haloing it.

Sky Seven veered and dropped. The pilot knew he couldn't outrun the missile; he had to try to drop down under the possible vector, but he didn't have a chance. He didn't have the power or the maneuverability of a military chopper. He also didn't have the extra plating, and he didn't have any chaff or other countermeasures.

Sky Seven dropped. The Stinger curved over and descended, the barrel of it's body briefly visible to the TV viewers.

Sky Seven veered right. The Stinger, now extremely close, curved with it.

Sky Seven was fifty feet off the ground, still visible from the school, when the missile impacted. The missile struck the fuselage right over the engine compartment, and there was a massive blast as the chopper turned into a gigantic fireball. Channel Seven went blank on a million TV sets.

WHOOMP!

Windows broke for hundreds of yards around.

The chopper fell between two apartment houses, catching the rotor tail on one and bouncing into the other, setting both ablaze as it caromed into the alleyway between them. Flames shot up the sides of the apartment houses and, within seconds, the alley was a gorge of fire. Walls inside twenty different apartments erupted into sheets of flame.

“Yee haw!” a terrorist screamed on the roof. Though nobody stood up behind the small shields, the accompanying cheers were wildly enthusiastic. In the kitchen, Betty smiled grimly at the static that had

been a picture. The snipers may have been forewarned, but Channel Seven's Eye in the Sky had died.

Betty turned away from the computer, and found herself facing the school cop. Their eyes met, locked, and suddenly the beard felt itchy. She pulled it down to scratch her chin. She wasn't thinking; she was just watching the man, and a warm sensation began to creep delicately through her frame.

The police barricades were working and the streets were deserted. Abandoned cars squatted like dead beetles, and bodies lay where they had fallen, prone to the whims of flies. The hot sun was getting hotter, bearing down, boiling the cops inside their armor. It was almost lunch time, but lunch, for the unwary, could be a hot lead sandwich. Thus, as the terrorists began potting windows in the houses along the street, the cops kept their heads down and waited in frustration. It was never fun to be shot at, and it was doubly frustrating if you couldn't shoot back. Daffy began shooting windows at the Washington end of Commerce, while Porky started at the other end. They planned to meet in the middle.

Daffy, taking his time, shot out every window in the first house, which was a flat topped, two story apartment house with four units. He even took out the frosted bathroom windows.

Porky, on the other hand, hadn't had an apartment house, and he was already to the third house. Daffy, finally finished with the apartment house, focused on the windows of the second house, a small, yellow affair where two white kids had taken the cop from Keystone Two. The windows in the yellow house were set back on the porch and hard to see through, but he thought he could see a shadow, as of somebody watching. He squeezed the trigger.

Estelle was irritated and didn't know why.

She looked around the living room of her pretty, yellow house. There were bullet holes in the door and a cop had bled all over the sofa, but that wasn't what vexed her.

She looked at the TV and listened to the low voices of people talking about terrorists and hostages and demands. Fat lot they knew, they weren't anywhere around South Central, or Monkeyland, as some of those snotty, young people on TV actually referred to it (no matter that they apologized even as they used the term).

Maybe that was what was bothering her; Lord knew the news never made her happy, and here she was getting a good dose of it and.... No, that wasn't the source of her botheration.

Estelle looked across the room to where Tom was taking a turn staring at the school through the binoculars. Jimmy, next to him, rubbed

his eyes and forehead and held the phone to one ear. Tom chose that moment to hand the binoculars back to Jimmy.

Maybe there was just something she didn't like about the idea of two boys conducting surveillance of the very school her boys had gone to. She knew they were just trying to help, and the children in the school were what was important, but...no, that wasn't what bothered her.

And suddenly she knew.

When the boys, then the cop, had sought refuge, she was helping people in trouble. But, as the TV droned on and she came to realize that the children across the street had been kidnapped, by white people who hated black people, her irritation had started. And, unreasonably, it had included the two white boys in her living room.

Now it was lunch time, and the school buzzer had gone off like nothing was amiss, but the children were still captive and the TV blabbed on and the police didn't do anything, and it wasn't these two boys fault, but—

“Thanks, ma'am,” Bill Woodard said, looking at the bandage Estelle had just finished putting on him.

She looked away from the two white boys and focused on the cop. “I bandaged up my own boy ten years ago on this very spot.”

Bill looked askance at her.

“A boy at the school—the school right across the street—cut him with a razor when he tried to take his basketball back.”

Bill shook his head.

“Where is he now?”

“Two of them. They're both in the army. They both went to college, and now they're in the army.”

That was another thing. Her boys went to college—she had sweated two jobs, and they had done their fair share of work—and the army was the best job they could get. Not that being a soldier was bad, but...

Bill, watching her, didn't say anything. He could feel the dull resentment within the thin, middle-aged woman.

“Well, the army isn't bad work. I guess you could—”

The look in her eyes stopped him. There was something tired in those eyes, not old age tired, but age old tired—tired of the same old song and dance that black people had been hearing for hundreds of years.

While Estelle and Bill faced the unfair components of life in the ghetto, Jimmy, looking out the window, was talking to George Hoskins. “They're shooting, but I don't know why. It's regular shooting. They're aiming at the house next to us, it looks like, and somebody is shooting down the street. Wait minute. They're shooting at somebody on Commerce, too. I'm going to open the front door so I can see without glass or screen in front of me.”

It was this decision to open the front door that saved Jimmy Elson's life. He moved, and the bullet shattered the front glass and went through his side. It didn't hit any internal organs, but it spun him for a loop and a half.

"Oh!" he shouted, then realized he was on the floor.

The others in the room dodged behind furniture or just huddled against the wall as windows continued to break.

"Jimmy?" Hoskins beseeched from the dispatch center.

"Oh, shit." Jimmy struggled to a sitting position on the thin throw rug by the front door and looked at the blood leaking out of his side. There was a biting pain under his ribs and he looked at the phone, which was somehow still in his hand. "I've been shot."

Tom and Bill were looking around now, and Tom was first to see the wound in Jimmy's side. Jimmy's tee began to blotch with red.

"Are you okay?" Hoskins' hand was white on the telephone. He was well aware that this boy was a civilian. He would have cared about anybody, but he could hear the youthfulness of the voice, and youth should not have to be on a battlefield.

"Yeah. Oh man, I think this is what an ulcer must feel like."

Hoskins, on the other end of the line, kept his voice calm to downplay any panic Jimmy might be feeling. "I got the ulcers, Jimmy. Tell me where you're hit."

"Through the side. I'm bleeding, but not too badly. Can I stay here?" Jimmy, from his seated position, looked out the door towards the school.

Hoskins shook his head as if Jimmy could see him. "We'll have a medic to you in a jiffy. Just stay put."

Estelle crossed the room and knelt by Jimmy, lifted his shirt. There were two small holes, one just under the ribs and one over the kidneys, and red, glistening blood welled slowly out of them. With no facial expression, Estelle took a fancy edged pillow from the couch and pressed it so that it covered both wounds. "Hold this while I get some alcohol," she said, then she was striding across the room towards the bathroom for more medical supplies.

Jimmy pressed the pillow against his side, his teeth gritted as he tried to suppress the pain.

"Jimmy?" came over the phone.

"I'm okay. The lady here is patching me up. Tom? Could you open the door?"

"Jimmy! Don't open the door!" Hoskins protested.

Tom, not hearing Hoskins' protest, opened the front door a crack. Jimmy moved forward gingerly.

"But you got to know what's going on. Thanks, Tom."

"Stay out of sight of the men at the school."

“You don’t have to tell me, I...oh!”

“What?”

“They’re shooting out all the windows! Why are they doing that?”

“Because they know somebody is looking at them. They’re looking for you, Jimmy.”

“They found me.”

“Yes, they did.”

Estelle returned and lifted the pillow, began dabbing at the wounds with a cotton ball. Jimmy could see that the flow of blood was already slowing. “The bleeding is stopping. Can I stay here?”

Hoskins could only shake his head. He was sure that people had already displayed bravery, even heroics, thus far on this terrible day, but this was his first brush with such noble behavior.

Betty looked at Tom as she listened to the almost rhythmic firing of the rifles on the roof. Coming to a decision, she traversed the kitchen to squat in front of him. Her face was only a couple of feet in front of him as she turned her enigmatic blues on him. Her expression inscrutable, she lowered her beard and scratched her chin, licked her lips to moisten them. It was a curiously sexual deed.

Tom began to feel creepy. The way Betty was staring at him, Shelley and Mrs. Watson might not have even existed.

“Well, Junior, what do you think?”

“About what?” He felt very, very far away. He felt like he wasn’t in charge of his own speech.

“About this. About life. About the man in the moon.”

Tom knew, at that moment, what was happening. She was coming on to him. She was actually flirting with him. He felt like running and screaming at the thought, but it was true.

What do you do when a madman, or madwoman, flirts with you? How do you make love with a person holding a gun on you?

A million thoughts beehived in Tom’s mind, but the overriding concept was motivated by the words of Mrs. Watson: *She likes you.*

“I’m sorry we have to meet like this,” he said, being sincere, trying to quell his agitation.

“Yeah. Other times, other places.” She shrugged.

Tom didn’t know what to say. He had started the play, but didn’t know how to keep it going, so he just blurted, “Why can’t Shelley go back to her children?”

Betty smiled slightly, her eyes never wavering from his face. “Let somebody of intelligence in amongst the Monkeys? Next thing you know they’ll start organizing, think they’re intelligent, maybe even start a union, then we’d have a fine ball of wax on our hands. That’s the kind of stuff that got us into this mess in the first place.”

Desperately, Tom tried to come up with something to say. He could feel Shelley staring at him. He could feel Mrs. Watson mentally urging him on. What could he say?

“You always live in the big city?” Betty broke the awkward moment.

“No,” Tom said. “I was in the South for a few years.”

“South! The South is full of Monkeys! What were you doing there?”

“I was—”

Suddenly, Betty tilted her head slightly. Tom could tell that she was listening to somebody on the terrorist’s circuit, and he stopped talking.

She looked back at him.

“I’ve got to go, Junior. I’ll be busy for a while, but we’ll talk again.”

“I’d like that,” Tom managed to utter.

She eyed him hard for a moment, and he thought maybe he had gone one step too far, then she gave a nod and stood up, adjusted her beard, and walked back to where Wiley was sitting behind the video camera.

“Just a sec, Bets,” Foghorn said. He rhumba-ed his fingers across the keyboard. “I’m getting a little feedback.”

Betty sat down in chair and sprawled like a lazy despot. She draped one arm over the edge of a stove and scratched at her face through the beard. All the while, her eyes were fixed on Tom.

“Good, good,” Mrs. Watson muttered.

“What’s good?” Shelley asked.

“He’s getting her to like him.”

Shelley didn’t say anything, but there was an expression of revulsion on her face as she looked at Tom.

Tom ignored Shelley, focused on Betty across the room and tried to come to grips with his actions, and, maybe it was his imagination—he hoped it was his imagination—it looked like Betty had blown him a kiss through the beard.

Tom had the sudden urge to shiver.

In the ABC studios Ron Larkin stared at the screen of the monitor in the broadcast booth. For the first time in his life he felt a grand distaste for his position. He had always loved TV, had gotten a job because his father knew somebody, and one thing led to another...and now he didn’t want to be anywhere near a TV set, let alone in charge of programming.

He wanted, truth to tell, to pull the plug on the bastard.

Unfortunately, the powers that were thought it was great.

So he was under orders to keep the show going, and it was business as usual.

But wasn't this blackmail?

Wasn't he being held hostage to acts of terrorism?

Had the concept of televised news gone to far?

In his heart of hearts he knew it had, and he felt a brown smog in his soul as he watched the timer on the screen alerting him to another message from the people calling themselves White Law.

"Okay, people," the Director next to Larkin said. "Five, four, three, two...go!"

On the screens in the broadcast booth, on screens all across the country, the bearded visage of Betty Boop materialized.

In the kitchen Foghorn finished the countdown, and Betty straightened up and stared straight into the camera.

"Good day, fellow citizens. I am Betty Boop speaking for White Law. You will be happy to know that our invasion of Monkeyland is thus far highly successful. We have established a perimeter around Lincoln Elementary School, and we are shooting anything that moves within that perimeter. We have killed many Monkeys, and we have wounded many of the Monkey tenders. Please watch and you will see what we see."

She nodded to Wiley and the screen cut to an outside camera. The camera was at the rear corner of the roof, and the whole country was moved slowly across the playground behind the school.

The playground was deserted, the gate was locked, and the desolate feel of the place was unmistakable.

The camera swept across the parking lot. The truck blocking the entrance was shown, along with a close up of the flattened tires. The first keystone was examined, then the second, with close ups detailing bullet holes and shattered glass. The camera started going from body to body, not lingering, but delaying just long enough to reveal that each body was dead.

Finally, the scene cut back to Betty.

"I am happy to note that we have not suffered one injury. And this is fortunate, because for every member of White Law that is injured, we will throw ten Monkeys off the roof."

She didn't say anything for a moment, just waited for her words to be absorbed by all of America.

"Now then, we have established ourselves, we have secured our position, we have made our demands, and we know that our fellow citizens are quite curious about us. Let me take a few minutes to outline our beliefs. Afterwards, we will throw open our phone lines for questions."

She smiled.

“White Law is dedicated to the proposition that certain continents are reserved for certain races. North America is reserved for white people. Africa is reserved for Monkeys. The Orient is reserved for the Oriental races. The Middle East is reserved for those of Mid East descent, South America is reserved for those of Hispanic origin, and so on.

“White Law is dedicated to securing the North American Continent for white people. We are suggesting, quite strongly, that the Monkeys return to their own continent. If they don’t, they will be dealt with harshly.

“White Law believes that the white race is far superior to lesser species such as the Monkeys. If you follow certain scholarly works, you will understand that in the far past aliens did visit planet earth and did create slave races to do their work. The first slave race was the blacks. They were created by mixing the DNA of apes with the DNA of the aliens. However, this first slave race proved incapable of higher mental functions such as counting, addition, subtraction, that sort of thing. Thus the aliens used more alien DNA and less monkey DNA. The result, after many failed experiments, was the white race. We, the white race, have proved capable of intelligent thought. We, the white race, have proved capable of running the planet. We, the white race, are the inheritors of this planet.

“The aliens are no longer here, or, at least, are no longer obvious. Perhaps they are just sitting back, waiting, watching while the white race proves itself, or fails.

“White Law is that arm of the white race that will ensure that the white race succeeds. We will send the Monkeys back where they came from, and we will provide, in the Northern Continent of the Americas, a safe place for white children to grow. We will establish a country where there are no ghettos, drugs, welfare, and where higher DNA is allowed to rise to the surface.

“These are the basic aims of White Law. I will now answer any questions.”

A phone number appeared on the bottom of the screen.

CHAPTER NINE

“I don’t fucking believe it!” Tom was incredulous.

“Mind your language,” Mrs. Watson warned.

Tom nodded. They had a very good view of the TV screen from their corner, and they could see Betty first hand if they chose to turn their heads. She was half obscured by the camera, however, so they concentrated on the TV screen.

“I don’t understand,” Shelley yawned. She seemed to be getting sleepier and sleepier.

“It’s a call in show,” Tom explained.

“You mean like Rush Limbaugh?”

“Well, I don’t think Rush Limbaugh would like to be considered on a par with these people, but yes.”

“But...what are we going to do?”

“Wait,” Mrs. Watson said, the iron still in her voice.

“Oh, no!” Ron Larkin stared at the wall of TV screens. On the screens Betty Boop was holding a cell phone up for the cameras and explaining that if the phone lines were cut they would simply throw a Monkey off the roof and move to another line.

“You want we should cut it?” the director asked, without turning his head towards Larkin.

For a moment Ron almost said yes. For a long moment he wrestled with the desire to pull the plug. But children would be shot, or thrown off the roof, or some other terrible thing would happen. Giving up, he sat heavily in his swivel chair.

“No.”

The cell phone in Betty’s hand rang. Betty pressed the ‘talk’ button and put it to her ear.

“White Law. Go ahead.”

“Man, you guys have got to be crazy! What the hell are you doing killing innocent children! Why do you think—”

Betty hung up the phone and narrowed her gaze on the camera. The phone had already begun to ring again.

“Please don’t waste our time. Give your name, or at least a name to represent yourself, and ask your question. We will hang up on idiots.”

She pressed ‘talk’ again.

“White Law. Who’s this?”

“This is Tom. I live here in South Central.”

“Are you a Monkey?”

“I am an Afro-American, if that is what you mean.” There was anger in the caller’s voice, but it was held in tight control.

“Okay, hold for a moment, Tom.” She pressed a button on the base of the phone, which put Tom on hold, and spoke into the camera.

“Normally I don’t talk to Monkeys. However, because I am actively trying to sell them on the idea of going back to Africa, before they have to be forced back,” she said this last forcefully, “I will talk to Monkeys on this phone line. I will talk to anybody who has an intelligent question or comment. Before I continue my conversation with Tom, however, I would like to say that this ‘Afro-American’ thing is exactly the sort of crap that White Law objects to.

“Whites are accused of racism, yet the people accusing us are calling themselves ‘Afro Americans.’ Isn’t that a form of racism?”

“As far as I’m concerned, a member of the slave race is a Monkey—and that’s that.”

She hit the button on the base of the phone and said, “What is your question, Tom?”

“I been living in this country all my life. I belong here! My fathers were kidnapped and brought to this country, and because the black man is superior we are now taking over this country and you—” His tones were rising as he lost control, and Betty hung up.

“I don’t normally deal with such idiotic statements. I want intelligent questions, and Tom is just proving the inferiority of his race by not following my instructions. “Before I take the next call,” the phone started ringing and she hit another button at the base of the phone to mute the ringing, “let me address a couple of Tom’s statements.

“First off, the black man was brought to this continent, given meaningful work, and cared for. He lived a lifestyle not able to be had on his own continent. Because he has not conducted himself with honor, however, because he is not fit to receive the blessings of White America, he is being asked—told—to leave. Simply, he should get on a boat and sail away. The fact that Monkeys have been allowed to live in a high tech country should be considered a blessing, and not a right. You know,” Betty appeared thoughtful, “if the Monkeys actually had any intelligence, they would dedicate themselves to stamping out African corruption and elevating their own continent, not sucking welfare dollars out of a white continent.”

She answered the phone.

“White Law.”

“How can you justify killing a child?” the caller blurted, obviously upset.

Betty gave a carefully orchestrated sigh. “Who is this?”

“You can call me Matty. I’m a black woman living in South Central.”

“Well, Matty, if you had a dog with rabies would you shoot it?”

“I don’t think you—” Matty began to bluster.

“You would call the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, right?” Betty was the essence of calm, understanding reason.

“But black people don’t have—”

“And the pound would put it to sleep. The point here, Matty, is that Monkeys are ungrateful for being allowed on a high tech, white continent. Thus, they ruin the white society through such artifices as welfare. They abuse the medical system by having more and more babies, obviously a plot to take over the country through sheer numbers alone, though how on God’s good earth they can hope to support themselves, should they become a majority, God forbid, is beyond me. The point that I’m making here is that whether the blacks have a sickness or not is not the point...the point is that they act like they do. They behave irrationally, like a dog with distemper, or rabies, and they must be put to sleep.”

“But you are talking about a child!”

“Nits become lice.” Betty said, politely. “Thank you for calling, Matty.”

Betty tapped her finger on the hang up button and the phone began ringing. Betty tapped her finger again.

“White Law.” She smiled into the face of America.

While Betty conducted her talk show, while people bled on the streets around the school, while the police department tried desperately to make arrangements to cut in on the Betty Boop Show, while children cowered and cried softly in the darkness of an overheated auditorium, something that Betty, in her wildest imaginings, had not planned on was about to occur. The first sign of that coming occurrence happened in the offices of the city government.

“Mayor Fresling? There is a group of people to see you.”

The Honorable John Fresling, mayor of Los Angeles, looked to where his secretary was framed in the doorway. Fresling was a small man with a reassuring air about him and a head that seemed larger than it was because of his receding hairline. He considered his secretary carefully.

At that precise moment he was on the phone with Chief Teskins, discussing the effectiveness of various back up plans for the hostage crises. He put one hand over the receiver and spoke softly.

“Do you realize that I am trying to sort this hostage situation out right now?” he offered blandly, realizing that she had not buzzed him, thus she must not want anybody listening in, thus somebody was in the

front office, thus somebody, whoever the hell that somebody was, must require delicate handling.

“Yes, sir. These people are from South Central.”

Warning lights went on in the back of Fresling’s mind. South Central. Had to be the Monkeyland thing. Probably activists, and activists had good TV coverage. They could be idiots, but God and the TV folks loved idiots, and that meant that he had to be careful in what he said.

“Can you ask them to wait for me in the conference room? I’ll be along in a few minutes.”

His secretary having departed, Fresling talked to Teskins for another minute before hanging up, then, assuming that his secretary had gotten the ‘group of people’ out of his waiting room, he hit the intercom. “Linda?”

“Sorry, sir. It was Reverend Thomason.”

“Thanks. See to coffee for them. Tell them five minutes.”

“Yes, sir.”

Fresling swiveled to the TV where Betty Boop was talking and closed his eyes in thought. All he needed was the Most Reverend Luthor Thomason yapping at him. For a long minute he mentally composed himself for the meeting about to ensue, considered what Thomason might say, what he might say in response, and then, because he wasn’t ready for Thomason and his people, he turned the volume up on the TV.

Deep in the heart of a police station in Hollywood, Detective Randall Davis and his partner, a huge, black man, sat in a commandeered office and worked the phones.

Davis, was a strong-jawed, craggy sort. Beamis was just big.

“You sure this is going to work?” Beamis pressed buttons and listened to one phone, then the other, waiting for something other than a busy signal or a dial tone.

“Hey!” Davis grinned equably. “You’re the one that likes to gamble.”

“Huh!” Beamis grunted, pushing buttons with his mammoth fingers. “That’s for money, this is just for some no account, bullshit terrorist who picks on kids.”

Davis kept pressing buttons. It was silent in the station because most of the officers had been dispatched to South Central.

“Whyn’t you just get the Chief to put you in charge?” Beamis grumbled. “Then you could have a dozen guys pushing buttons for you.”

Davis grinned. “Chief might be the man here, but he’s just one of a half dozen downtown.”

“You don’t think he could swing it for you?”

“Probably, if I pushed it, but...” Davis shrugged and kept hitting buttons.

“So if it’s not important enough to bother the Chief then why are we—”

“Hey!” Davis exclaimed, cutting his partner off. He pointed at the phone in his ear and winked even as it rang.

Beamis returned the grin and moved across the room to watch the door.

Detective Randall Davis, top interrogator for the Hollywood Station, fair-haired boy of Chief Teskins, a cop’s cop, heard the distant click of the phone being answered.

“White Law, who’s there?” Betty was getting more and more relaxed.

“Hi, Betty, this is Randall Davis. Will you accept a question from a cop?” Davis’ tones were completely and utterly disarming.

“Before I answer that...did you cut into the phone lines to get through to me?”

“No. They have somebody else trying to do that. I got tired of waiting, so I just decided to hit the redial a few hundred times.”

Betty responded to Davis’ candor and the humor in his voice and smiled at the camera as if she was smiling back at him.

“Then I can tell you that cops are some of my favorite people. What did you think of the Rodney King situation?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. Mr. Randall Davis, obviously a clever cop, hadn’t expected to have to handle a question himself. “Well. I was sorry to see him beaten. I was sorry for the media circus. The whole thing should have been dealt with by the department. I was sorry to see Koontz and Powell, who were no danger to society, shipped off to prison.”

“Sounds like the party line, Randall.”

“The party might be right in this instance.”

The sounds of knocking, then a clatter, as of something being thrown into a wall, sounded over the phone. A deep, bass voice in the background said, in a most threatening manner, “Get the fuck out!”

Betty blinked.

“Sorry, Betty, some other officers just realized who was talking to you and tried to break in on us.”

“Oh...aren’t you saying what they want?”

“Probably not. Can I ask you that question?”

“Sure.”

“What are you doing about feeding the children at the school?”

“We have certain arrangements that...” Betty hadn’t expected a question like that, and she spoke carefully, unsure where Davis was going.

“I don’t think so,” Davis was masterful, being pleasant even as he disagreed.

Betty was silent for a moment. A thoughtful look grew on her face and she spoke in no nonsense tones.

“They will be given some food, but we aren’t a catering service. Monkeys dependent upon us will be more compliant.”

Now it was Davis who was quiet.

“So let me ask you, Randall, what do you care about a bunch of Monkeys?”

“Well, I don’t agree with your thesis of alien DNA. To be honest, it sounds a little over the top.”

“So how do you explain that the Monkeys have never done anything with their continent?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Outside interference creating wars. Something like that makes more sense. It’s what you’re doing, after all.”

Betty suddenly found herself on the wrong end of the conversation and with no way to terminate. This guy—whoever he was—was one hell of a confabulator.

“Interesting observation, but except for the Bohr Wars—”

“Over the diamonds in South Africa,” Davis cut in.

“There haven’t been a lot of wars.”

“What’s a lot?” Davis asked. “In a country where there is so much drought, where it is very difficult to live, the slightest interference by agents of other countries can be quite detrimental. Can I make a point?”

“Go ahead.”

“The people you call Monkeys have human spirit. Regardless of the how and why of their suppression, they are possessed of souls. Quite honestly, your DNA theory sounds like a rehash of the old ‘Aryan blood’ argument, which hasn’t been proved and is Hitlerian.”

“Do you have a car?” Betty found her opening and charged.

“Sure.”

“What kind?”

“Mustang.”

“New?”

“Yes, I think I know where you’re—”

“Is it worth more than a twenty year old Beetle?”

“Monetarily, yes.”

“And the white race is worth quite a lot more than the outmoded ‘first slaves.’ Doesn’t matter who drives the car, we are talking about worth and value to society.”

“Yes, but—”

“Sorry, Randall. Got other callers.” Betty hung up, and it looked like there was an expression of relief on her face. Most of her face being under the beard, however, it was hard to tell.

“Good morning, Reverend.” Fresling entered the conference room and extended his right hand.

Thomason, a man of good suits and little patience, except for his own flock, of course, kept his own hand to himself. He stared at the white mayor. “It is a bad morning. And what do you plan to do about this White Law group? What do you plan to do about the children?”

From behind Thomason a half a dozen citizens stared at the mayor with fixed and unforgiving faces. It was Thomason’s hand picked flock.

“Sit down, please. Everybody sit down.” Fresling, not perturbed at the refusal of his hand, walked through the citizens, opting for the friendly but businesslike approach, and sat down on one side of the long table occupying the center of the room.

For a moment it looked like the half dozen blacks weren’t going to sit. Finally, with Fresling just looking up at them disarmingly, they looked at the Reverend Thomason. Thomason nodded and they all sat.

“Now, let me assure you, Reverend, that the police department is doing absolutely everything in it’s power to—”

“Mayor Fresling,” Thomason cut him off rudely. “My community is fed up with the short shrift we have been getting in this city. Now terrorists move in and take hundreds of black children hostage, and *you* talk about the police doing everything they can.”

“It’s true,” Fresling said.

“Then why is this situation being played on all TV stations?”

Fresling sighed. If no station carried the Betty Boop Show then Thomason would no doubt want to know why.

“While you do nothing this Racist is spewing her venom uncontrolled.”

“Reverend,” Fresling broke in. “I have absolutely no control over what the networks show. Besides, what would you do if you were in charge of a network and black people started throwing white children off of some roof?”

It was the wrong thing to say. Aside from just being a loose logic popping out, it was too close to the bone. It left no room for rhetoric; thus, Thomason was prompted to stand and spout all the rhetoric he could muster.

“Is that all you can say!” Thomason roared. “You just want me to be understanding while you hypothesize a different situation?! The truth of the matter, sir, is that black children are being killed wantonly, and the perpetrators of these murders are being given full airtime in which to

convince the populace of the purity of their motives! You can't twist the situation to your advantage this time!"

Fresling tried to calm things down. He remained in a seated position and raised his palms gently. "Sit, please. Only by calm discussion will we be able to deal with this situation. We must—"

"We? The white man's 'we'? My children are being savagely murdered and you want me to sit down and talk about it?"

"No, that's not—" Fresling was sweating. It was obvious that Thomason had not come here for any dialogue. He didn't want to be helpful; he just wanted to rant and rave. Was there any real difference between the maniacs in the school and this man in the conference room?

"The time for talk has gone!"

Several people around the table stood up to offer encouragement to Thomason.

"Yes!"

"He's right!"

"Praise the Lord!"

Thomason, full of himself, shouted, "It is time to take control of the situation ourselves! No more white cops coming into our community and forcing their own brand of 'White Law' upon us!"

"Praise God Almighty!" one of Thomason's people said.

"But you—" Fresling tried to insert a little sanity into the situation, but it was hopeless in the face of the man's political rage.

"The Lord God has entrusted the saving of the black race to the black man! No more will we listen to the white man and..."

Fresling, seeing there was nothing more to be said, stood up and walked out. There was nothing else he could do. Behind him, he could hear Thomason rattle the rafters with that thundering preacher's voice of his. Fresling walked down the hall, oblivious to the looks of people, and entered his offices.

For a long time Fresling stared out the window in his office. He looked out over the city and contemplated his administration. There was a bitter tinge to his contemplations.

He had entered office with the highest of aspirations, and all during his time in office he had been subjected to attacks. People were homeless and homes weren't being built and it was his fault. People were sick and couldn't get into hospitals and it was his fault. Crime was up and the police needed more money and...and everything was his fault.

Yet how could one person be the source of all of society's problems?

And even if one person wasn't the source of all problems...how could one person solve them all?

And, in that moment of introspection, of self judgment, Fresling realized the true value of politics. And the truth was—there was no value in politics.

He was nothing more than a figurehead. His ability to actually sway the affairs of man was negligible, built up by those people who sought only to hide their own inability from themselves, who wanted to elect someone so they had somebody to blame when they screwed up their lives.

Well, maybe that wasn't the whole truth, but it was part of it, and, standing in front of the window, having this thought, Fresling realized what was responsible for his dourness.

He had heard the death knell for his career.

His time as a politician was over.

Because of this situation people like Reverend Thomason would see to his demise at the next election.

And who would be the next public whipping boy?

Would it be that Hispanic fellow? Gomez? The guy screaming about law and order and ending the coddling of criminals?

Heck, for all he knew, it might end up being the Reverend Thomason. Wouldn't that be the cat's meow? Serve up that idiot a little of his own dish.

Fresling, made happy by his last thought, turned from the window and went to his chair. He lowered himself into the leather plushness and turned on the TV. Betty Boop was still talking.

“...brought up the idea of being paid for their father's labors in the cotton fields. When you were a child did your father come home and turn his paycheck over to you? The whole thing is idiotic!” Betty was talking calmly, putting forth her points so succinctly that they were hard to defend against. Yet all that this showed was that a maniac could hold a train of logic and appear sane.

“Next caller. This is White Law.”

“Hi, Betty. Say, what do you plan to do with a billion dollars?”

Betty smiled. “I'm glad you asked. As you know, we are demanding that these funds be drawn from welfare accounts. When this happens the citizenry will have to be very careful. When California proposed a lottery the government officials said the funds wouldn't be used to build schools. The funds would be used to pay teachers. So they paid the teachers out of the lottery and used the funds normally used to pay teachers to build schools, do you follow me?”

“Yes....” The voice was tentative.

“So when the welfare money is gone the government will just try to keep paying welfare, and rob some other fund. Maybe they'll let old people starve, rob Medi-Cal...who knows.”

“But what about—”

“I know. I’m getting to that. The billion dollars will enter certain accounts which we have set up. We will then reroute those funds through a variety of means so that the government can’t trace where they go. Then we will return the funds to society.”

“Give the billion dollars back?”

“Sure. We’ll invest that billion dollars, and in this way the money goes right back into society. Some of the fellows want to build nice houses. Some of them want to buy planes. Some of them want to invest in various ways, build businesses, that sort of thing. Don’t consider this billion dollars as something that disappears, just consider it as an investment in America. The fact that the government will no longer be in the loop will make the investment that much more effective.”

“Wow! I never thought of—”

“Next caller. White Law.”

“Hi, White Law—”

“Call me Betty.”

“Sure, Betty. Say, I got a question.

“Tell me your name and ask your question.”

“Gene.”

“Go, Gene.”

“Well, I was listening to your last caller, and I wondered...”

“Yes?”

“If I wanted to make a contribution to your group, where would I send the money?”

“That’s an interesting question. We’ll have to consider establishing an account for public contributions. If we decide to do so we will put the number on the screen for you. Next caller. White Law.”

“You are just a racist!”

“You’re right.”

“You are hate filled!”

“You’re wrong.”

“Somebody should throw *you* off a building!”

“Thank you. Next caller. White Law.”

“Hi. I’m—”

Suddenly, across the bottom of the screen, a strip message ran left to right.

‘Attention, White Law, this is ABC. A press conference is being held on the steps of city hall. We would like to cover this event.’

As the message repeated itself Betty frowned slightly, considered, then said, “If the caller will hold the line we will allow ABC—and ABC alone—to cover the conference. When we go back onto the phone lines we expect ABC to halt what they are doing and continue with their coverage of us.”

Ron Larkin let his breath out as he gave the sign to go to city hall.

Reverend Thomason stood like an avenging angel on the steps of city hall. One fist was pounding relentlessly into a palm and his face was twisted in righteous anger as he exhorted his flock of outraged citizens and whatever passersby he could net.

“The mayor has tried to confuse the issue! He will not listen to any of our demands...and he is relying on the racist, black hating, Ku Klux Kops to enforce the demands of this White Law terrorist group upon our community! I ask you...what white mayor...what white cop...is willing to give up his life for a black child! No! It is time for us to take back our freedom! It is time to establish a secure zone for black people to live in peace and harmony! Free from the evil white man! Free from the imprecations of the hate mongering white politicians and the vicious murdering tactics of racist supremacists such as White Law! We must—”

The scene on channel seven shifted back to Betty.

“I for one, am not going to listen to such tripe. These people come to our country, are responsible for most of the crime, suck welfare dollars, have babies out of wedlock, and offer nothing substantive to society. Caller, are you still there?”

“Yes, Betty. Listen, I’m not a racist—”

“That’s too bad.”

“But isn’t there a more peaceful way of handling this situation?”

“Peaceful ways have been tried. We give the Monkeys priority in education and jobs—and the crime rate still goes up and the welfare sucking still goes on. The media says we should go on giving. Our politicians say they want more of our money to spend. What do you want us to do?”

“Well, but killing them....” Dismay was evident in the caller’s voice.

“Look, we don’t want to kill them. Blood is messy. But they aren’t going to get on a boat peacefully as long as we offer them any alternative. And they must get on boats and leave this country. That’s is all there is to it!”

“Yes, but....”

The calls went on.

In the kitchen of the school Tom and Shelley and Mrs. Watson watched. It was almost hypnotic the way Betty Boop handled callers, fielded questions, and kept the flow of the show moving along. It was obvious that she was a woman of many talents.

It was almost one o’clock when the printer next to the computer began to rattle. Tom turned his head towards the computer and found that Foghorn was staring at him. For a long moment their eyes locked over

the length of the kitchen, then Foghorn lowered his head and whispered into his beard, "Betty."

On the TV Betty gave no sign that she had been summoned, merely segued into, "I'm sorry, folks, but I have business to attend to. I will get back to you. I do thank you for your support. I'm Betty Boop and this has been," she raised a fist, "White Law!"

On the television Betty's image disappeared, and images of spin doctors launching into full voice replaced her. Betty stood up and stretched, then walked over to Foghorn.

"What ya got, Foggie?"

Foghorn handed her the paper that had been spewed out by the computer and turned to look at Tom. Foghorn was relaxed, his arms folded, but his gaze was very intent.

Betty read the paper for a moment, then looked up at Tom. There was absolutely no expression on her face. She soughed under her beard to Foghorn, then sauntered towards Tom.

"What do they want now?" Mrs. Watson muttered.

"I hope it's good news," Tom said. An innate feeling told him that it wasn't.

Shelley just watched.

ALTON H. CASE

PART TWO

MONKEYLAND

CHAPTER TEN

“I went to that school.” Gus remarked from his corner of the porch. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees and an empty glass on the porch next to him. “We had white cops then, same as now, and they said they was goin’ to stop the drugs and the violence. Now the damned school is filled full up to the top with them damned drugs and violence.”

“You said it.”

“Yeah.”

The men on the porch agreed with Gus, and their inner rage grew a little more, weltering like a boil about to bust.

“What the hell those honkies goin’ to do for us? You think white men are goin’ to kill white men just to get our babies back?” That was Maury Wilson. He ran the Kentucky Fried over on Pico.

“They control everything we hear and see. You see the way they cut off the Reverend on the television?” Gus observed.

“Yeah.”

“You bet.”

There were mutters of agreement from all the men on the porch as their psyches moved like sparks towards tinder.

“If black children are goin’ to be brought home safe, then it’s up to people like us—not some whitey mutherfucks.”

Elwin listened but didn’t hear. His features were creased and his lips were tight, and, for the twentieth time, he let his head turn to watch a cruiser prowl down the street. The sound of gunshots from the school—somebody had said the terrorists were shooting out windows—had almost ceased, and the air was heavy with smog and smoke.

Elwin could see cops behind a barricade up the street. People were being arrested, and barricades were everywhere, and all of South Central was turning into an armed camp.

His eyes, turning back from dogging the cop car to the barricade at the end of the street, suddenly stopped. Across the street, in front of a ramshackle, weed covered house with boarded up windows, a ten year old child, gangly in overlarge jeans, wearing no shirt, was talking to the homey he had noticed earlier.

The homey had expensive shoes, and expensive shoes meant dope dealer or basketball star. Elwin knew, for a fact, that the homey wasn’t a basketball star.

“Why ain’t the police bustin’ Mr. Big Shoes there?” Elwin said to no one—and everyone heard him. There was an indefinable element in

his not overly loud voice that had departed the realm of reasonable conversation.

But nobody responded and, after a moment, the conversation continued with only a few nervous sidelong glances at him.

Only Gus, sitting near his friend saw what was happening, and he didn't really understand it.

After all, Elwin Jones never, ever, EVER got mad.

"Mayor Fresling!"

Fresling sighed as he stepped up to the urinal.

The reporter, having effectively tracked the mayor, stepped up to the next urinal.

"What are you doing about the Lincoln situation, sir?"

Fresling shook his head. He had been immersed in the situation all morning, and he was dizzy with fatigue and fact overload and no solution. "We're working with the police on that. You'll have to—"

"What about the Reverend Thomason? Is he helping?"

"I haven't had much dialogue with Reverend Thomason. We would like to include him in any conversations that—"

"What about the people evacuated from the Lincoln area?"

Everybody knew about the evacuees. Pictures of people evacuated from the Lincoln school area, many of them parents of kidnapped children, had started appearing in little squares on the TV. The squares had been carefully placed so as not to obscure Betty Boop's image.

"We are planning a camp for those unfortunate enough to be...."

And the interview went on in the confines of that most sacred of all places, the common urinal.

"An instructor for the rangers?" Tom was on his feet and Betty was close to him, her face inches away and uncomfortably intimate. It was obvious that the papers in her hand were, courtesy of computer and various agencies, Tom's personal history.

"Yes." Not defiance, exactly, but certitude, definitely.

She pulled her sunglasses down and eyeballed him. For a long minute she stared, her blues trying to cannibalize their way right into his brain.

And, he couldn't stop it, he started to respond. She was a woman—he had been slapped for noticing that earlier—and he was aware of her eyes, her lips, her breasts...and there was a growing warmth in his gut.

Christ, he thought, if this keeps up I'll be in Hard On City.

Betty slapped the sheaf of papers the computer had spewed out against her thigh. She was aware of what was happening in him. She could feel the core of him starting up, glowing at her like a little sun, but she didn't care. She was trying to understand him, and if physicality

revealed what was swimming behind those dark, brown eyes and under that curly hair, then so be it.

And she didn't understand that he was the only man, since her husband, that she couldn't control, and that she was opting for the only way she had to control him.

"What do you want?" Tom asked lamely, trying to stop the heat in his center from spreading all the way up to and through his shoulders.

Betty boiled him with her blues, and was shocked to discover that some teeny weeny, little piece of her—a piece that she had thought dead—was starting up in her, too. Her core heat was responding to his core heat. She stood up, took his hand, was excruciatingly aware of the hard/soft, electric touch of his skin. "Come."

She led him across the kitchen. Tom was aware of Mrs. Watson and Shelley staring at his back. Likewise, he was aware of Foghorn and Wiley watching him, and was aware that they had been listening to Betty speak to him through her beard mike.

But—and this thought was bizarre—could they hear the heat of them igniting?

They stopped on the other side of the kitchen, next to the sinks, and Betty turned and hopped her bottom up on a stainless steel counter. She held his hands then, felt herself giving in more and more to him, allowing what he was doing to her. She fixed him totally and absolutely with those opaque, blue eyes.

"Have you ever killed anybody?" She spoke very softly, increasing the intimacy between them, relishing him.

"No," he said.

"Too bad," she smiled at him like a lover. "If you had you could join us. Of course it would be a limited partnership, but at least you wouldn't be sitting on your duff in a corner. I mean—you trained rangers. You know tactics. You know how men will react. There are several rangers among us and every one of them is a cut above."

Were any of them first named Tom? Tom thought, trying to stay focused, trying to stay abreast of the madwoman, finally realizing that he was losing something, but not sure what it was.

"But you saw people die?"

"Yes."

"Of course. Ranger training is tough. It's impossible not to train them for a few years without seeing a chute that fails to open, a man taking a nose dive off a cliff, that sort of thing." She shook her hair as she talked, emulating a school girl in the mating ritual. She would have been more effective if it wasn't for the fact that Meesha Brown was laying with her brains blown out not twenty feet away.

"I'm...I'm sorry I had to meet you in these circumstances," Tom managed. It was weak, but she accepted it; she was blinded by her own complex needs.

"Yes. We could have been a pair. Gone to the movies. Danced." Her eyes, far away, revealed that she believed the fantasy complete.

"I'm sorry...I...I understand what you're doing. I think some of it is worthwhile." He tried not to rush his words, not sure what track she was on, trying to stay committed to his course of action. "It's just that...I don't know if I could...kill the blacks, the...the Monkeys."

"Oh, you get used to it. Say, come here." She hopped off the table, actually managing to brush her body against him suggestively. He could feel breasts under her jumpsuit. He was horribly aware of her legs moving against his.

She pulled him over to Foghorn. "This is Foghorn Leghorn. He's in charge of communications...and lots more. If you've been watching him then you know how good he is."

The terrorist known as Foghorn swiveled slightly and smiled a smile that didn't reach Tom. "Glad to meet you, Tom. Rangers, eh?"

"Yeah." Aware of Foghorn's reserve under the seeming openness, Tom shook hands.

"I was at Benning for a while. Then I went up to Bragg. I wanted to go Green Beret but I couldn't meet the requirements," Foghorn said.

"I thought about it, but..." Tom shrugged.

"Should have tried, man." Foghorn turned back to the computer and played with the keyboard, dismissing Betty Boop and Tom from his awareness.

Betty pulled him towards the map and Wiley. She was like a school girl towing a steady. "Of course we've all been trained in everything. If Foggie gets taken out then any of us could fill in. Of course, he's the specialist, but...this is Wiley Coyote."

"Hi, Tom," Wiley mumbled over a mouth with a pencil between the lips. He lowered the sunglasses he wore and inspected Tom momentarily, then he went back to the map.

"Wiley is in charge of correlating recon reports."

Wiley Coyote, watching the roads, of course, Tom thought, and then, afraid that any question might be considered prying: "The fellows you've got outside?"

"That's right. Huey, Dewey and Louie."

Tom nodded.

She pulled him away, acting the coquette. "So, what do you think?"

"Of...?"

"Of our tactics. Of how we have set up our operations. What could we do better? We have outside surveillance. We have lights and cameras

on the roof covering all angles. We have night scopes. We have long range and short range weapons. We have intelligence up the yin yang. What could we do better?"

Tom tried to sound intelligent, but he had the compromised feeling of a man giving aid to the enemy. "What about the alleyway the kids use behind the school?"

"We nailed mesh across it last night. We wanted to control how the school was approached this morning."

"And you knew about deliveries...." He tried to sound as if he was mulling it all over. "What about heavy ordnance? Tanks? That sort of thing?"

"We have mines under the manhole covers on the street surrounding the school."

Tom blinked.

"And we have fitted charges on the sides of telephone poles, should we wish to put obstructions in the streets. We even have a supply of nerve gas, I wasn't kidding about that, should we need it."

Tom forced himself to talk. "Well, I think that about does it...except...."

"What?"

"Well, I hesitate to ask. I don't want...."

"Hey, you're white, we'll try our best not to kill you. So what is it?"

"Well, it seems like you've left no way out."

"An escape route?"

"Yeah."

She smiled, swaying back and forth, holding his hand. "We've got one."

"Oh. Well."

"It's not that I don't want to tell you, it's just that I want to see the look on your face when you see what we've got planned."

Elwin Jones sat on the porch, his face unmoving, the anger in his gut having grown until it was a maw that threatening to swallow him whole and pass him right down into the bowels of some hellish emotion he had never known. He had listened to the men behind him for hours now. He had listened to their bitching and their half baked plans and known that it was all bullshit. He worked for the city as a shift boss in the motor pool. He busted tires and yanked engines and supervised work done by men who couldn't get a job anywhere else and were hired for minimum wage. He knew the difference between men sitting around bullshitting, and men who got the job done.

He was a man who got the job done.

In spite of this dedication to accomplishment, he considered himself an average man. Unlike most 'average men,' however, he had never taken a day of sick time in his life. He was almost fifty years old, built like a barrel, in excellent health, had been possessed of this work ethic all of his life, and if asked why he was the way he was he would have responded with one word.

Duty.

He considered life and living a solemn duty, and he did his best, which was considerable, to measure up to that sense of duty. His viewpoint of life was that everybody had their own obligation to duty. He was of sufficient magnitude, however, that he understood that if others didn't understand their duty then he should be patient and grant them the space to live their lives as they saw fit.

But, for the first time in his life, he had lost that patience. Patience had been replaced by a roaring in his ears and a blackness in his gut and the sure knowledge that he was about to explode, to do something very unpleasant and...necessary.

Necessary like duty was necessary.

He fought that inner explosion, and, by resisting his own sense of duty, he edged ever closer towards a state of 'spontaneous' combustion.

Mr. Big Shoes, across the street, was talking to another customer. He was jiving and slapping hands and grinning like a slick suited politician.

Down the street, cops were swarming at the barricade, but here, at a crack house in a neighborhood that could be nice if it wasn't for dealers like Mr. Big Shoes, in a neighborhood run by terrorists (what was a drug dealer but another kind of terrorist?) Mr. Big Shoes conducted business as usual, selling drugs to children and not caring about the ineffectual cops, talking and selling, directing the buyer, invariably a youth, towards the hovel of a house behind him. Elwin watched the various customers walk towards the hovel and stop at the front door where, when money was pushed into the mail slot, a small baggie or vial or some other small container of illegal substances would be pushed out.

Drugs.

Drugs that didn't stop for white man or terror or anything.

And, while the black men on the porch talked their talk, school kids died of drugs and terrorism

Drugs and terrorism.

Terrorism and drugs.

Elwin Jones, without quite knowing what had happened, found himself on his feet.

"Elwin?"

The black mass that had been threatening to eat Elwin Jones from the inside out was gone. His mind was void of distractions and he was

totally focused on what he was going to do. Interestingly, if he had been asked, he couldn't have told you what that thing he was going to do was, but he sure as damn hell was going to do it.

The other men on the porch gaped. Elwin hadn't spoken a word or uttered a sound, yet he had sprung to his feet like a bomb that had gone off, and there was this sense of him permeating the porch that made them feel like leaves in the path of a very large wind. And, in a sense, he *was* a bomb that had gone off. Elwin Jones, a black man with a deeply ingrained sense of duty, had finally had enough.

Elwin, without being aware that he was walking, crossed the porch and descending the stairs. In his ears a roaring sound was running roughshod over surprised voices, and the men behind him found themselves coming to their feet.

Elwin walked across the lawn, striding over the bare spots, and approached a knot of angry citizens. The small group of citizens felt the presence of the grim-faced Elwin Jones. They stepped to the sides hurriedly and stared with open mouths as he passed through their midst.

"He's headin' fer that damned crack house," Gus Peeples' voice crackled with growing excitement.

The men on the porch crowded down the steps, talked in excited voices as they were joined by other men, and all draggled behind the brawny back of Elwin Jones.

"Hey, what it be!" Mr. Big Shoes jived, slapping hands with a thirteen year old boy. Suddenly, the boy, who was a regular customer, stepped back, turned pale, and his eyes opened up as wide as hubcaps.

"What...?" Mr. Big Shoes began.

The boy turned and began hurrying, then running, down the street.

Mr. Big Shoes turned to see what had frightened the boy, and was bemused to see a bunch of dumb ass citizens led by that funky dude who changed tires for the city.

Mr. Big Shoes struck a defiant, sneering attitude as he watched Elwin mount the curb and cross the cracked sidewalk.

"What you want, old man?"

Elwin didn't say anything, just kept advancing like a big truck that had slipped its parking brake, and Mr. Big Shoes finally comprehended the look on Elwin's face.

Mr. Big Shoes was a scrawny drop out with lots of acne and a runny nose. By himself, he demanded no respect, but he had people behind him—people with guns and the willingness to use those guns—and thus the people of the neighborhood treated him like somebody. Sure, they didn't like him, but they left him alone, even walked around him, and when they did talk about him it was from a distance, and it was usually small remarks made with the hope that he wouldn't hear them.

'You got no right being in this neighborhood.'

‘Stop poisoning the children.’

And, occasionally, a simple, ‘get out of here.’

But the man walking towards him now wasn’t one of those skinny, housewifey types. He was a hard working man with a clean tee shirt that showed he had a fair amount of muscle. He wasn’t cut like a weight lifter, but he was thick, looked strong, and he wasn’t slowing down or flapping his lips or doing any of the things that the workin’ niggers usually did.

“Hey, man!” Mr. Big Shoes blustered, but the man, and the crowd behind the man, didn’t listen.

Mr. Big Shoes could feel his courage fading, and not even the knowledge that there was a man with a gun watching him from the crack house reassured him. Mr. Big Shoes began to backpedal towards the crackhouse and cover, but he was too slow and too late.

Elwin Jones hit Mr. Big Shoes with one gnarly, work toughened hand, a hand that popped tires off rims like they were the pop tops on soft drink cans, and the boy went down. He went down and his teeth went out and his blood went flying...and Elwin Jones wasn’t done. He wasn’t done by a long sight.

“Hey!”

“Look at that!”

“Look what Elwin done!”

Elwin, using just one hand, grabbed the scrawny Mr. Big Shoes by the neck and lifted him into the air. He began to slap the drug dealer with the other hand. He slapped Mr. Big Shoes’ face right, he slapped left, he slapped and he slapped and he slapped—and the slaps hurt!

Mr. Big Shoes, the tough drug dealer, holding onto Elwin’s thick wrist so he wouldn’t choke, began to cry.

“Shoot ‘im! Shoot ‘im! Please!” Mr. Big Shoes blubbered, but nobody was shooting Elwin Jones. The man behind the front door of the ugly, gray crack house had nodded off.

“Lee me ‘lone!” Mr. Big Shoes’ voice was weak. His mouth was filled with blood and his normally large lips were suddenly about three times their usual size. “Lee me ‘lone, nigger!”

“I ain’t no nigger,” Elwin Jones said, punctuating each word with a muscle driven slap.

“I am Mr. Black Man to the likes of you!” Elwin didn’t sound angry; he sounded like a salesman patiently explaining a contract to a very stupid buyer.

“Helf! Helf!” Mr. Big Shoes yelped, his mouth smacked into something not quite capable of coherent speech.

The man behind the door of the crack house finally woke up and thrust a rifle barrel through the mail slot of the door. The rifle waved

back and forth, but had trouble settling on a target. There were just too many people crowding up the walk.

Mr. Big Shoes, meanwhile, had begun to flail his arms in an attempt to loosen the hand clutching his neck. Elwin became unbalanced, and he staggered even as the rifle, finally making up its mind, fired.

The bullet hit Elwin in the thigh, a glancing but painful wound, but the pain was, to Elwin in his present state of mind, no worse than a skinned set of knuckles.

Elwin lifted the blubbering drug dealer by neck and crotch. He hoisted the boy overhead and, with a gravel-throated yell, using every ounce of his work hardened muscles, smashed the boy down upon the front door.

The door was solid; it was new and bought by the drug dealers for the express purpose of slowing down cops with a battering ram, which would enable the dealers to run out the back door or flush the drugs down the john or set up some other line of defense. But it wasn't a mere battering ram that came into contact with the door--it was one of their own dealers, powered by the full and unrestricted intention of nothing more than the common working man. The door flew inward like a playing card popped out of thumb and forefinger. Elwin Jones, accompanied by a dozen enraged citizens, charged into the gloom of the crackhouse. More citizens gathered on the street outside. They pushed against each other as they tried to enter the house.

Under the thick front door, which had been backplated with a thick sheet of metal, the homey who had discharged the rifle grunted. The door was heavy, but if he could get some help getting it off then...but he was getting no help. People kept walking across the door and his body got thinner and he was having trouble breathing, and it felt like his ribs were going to break. The first rush of people stopped and he gathered in some air, then more people—not a dozen now, but twenty, thirty, and more—began to charge into the house. The whole damned neighborhood was walking on him! Hundreds of pounds became thousands of pounds, driving him down until, again, he had no breath. Blood began to seep from his nose and ears and his ribs began to break with popping sounds. Inexorably, the door lowered like it was powered by a hydraulic jack, then the backplate of the door was against his skull and his bowels cut loose and he gave up on breathing and everything became dim and, at an imprecise moment, he simply expired.

Elwin, pushed by a mass of people, moved down a short hallway into a living room. On a series of tables in the living room were rubber tubes, spoons, syringes, burners, and large boxes of baggies filled with marijuana. From the back of the house came the sounds of two dealers running out the back door. The dealers would cross the backyard and jump a fence, cross a street and run through another yard, and run past a

startled cop with a bloody face who was trying to reset a sniper scope on a rifle. Once past the cop they would find themselves on a street with abandoned cars, and they would be shot—one, two, dead center—from the roof of the elementary school.

More and more people packed into the house, filling the front room and knocking over the tables. The floor became thick with broken baggies, and brown bits of leaf began to caked the bottoms of people's shoes. Elwin led the way down the back hall towards the kitchen and the bedrooms.

Four boys, sleeping the late sleep of the night time drug dealer, were pulled, screaming, off filthy mattresses and tossed back through the crowd. Fists flew and the four boys, pummeled into unconsciousness, fell to the floor and were trampled to death.

Three girls, dazed from drugs, who were actually being held hostage for the pleasure of the drug dealers, had their clothes torn off them and were chased, screaming, through the neighborhood.

A man who had been cooking speed in the kitchen tried to crawl out a small kitchen window. He was pulled back into the house kicking and yelling. He was beaten senseless, but wasn't killed.

Elwin tore open the last door at the end of the hall—and stopped. The room contained money and guns and several cardboard boxes. The boxes, large enough to contain computers, were filled with bags of white powder.

Elwin braced his thick arms against the frame of the door and the massed people ran into his back. For a moment it looked like the frame was going to give way, or perhaps even his arms, then the pressure let up and he pushed back. Finally, there was enough room for him to turn around.

People looked at him. People he had known for years. Gus, Sam, Thelma, Kayla...and others. These were black faces that had been ignored by white clerks, old faces that had seen fields for a buck a day, faces that had seen daughters swayed into the fast lifestyle that replaced sweetness and innocence with pain and depravity—and all these faces had followed him into this house of death.

“What's goin' on?”

“Why he stop?”

“Shut up!”

“Make room!”

Elwin stood, his tee shirt not so white now, framed in the doorway. His very dark and even face, crowned by wiry gray hair, stared at the faces, and the crowd became silent.

There was some kind of epiphany going on here, but none knew what it was—just that it was.

Suddenly, a voice cried out, “There's police here!”

Behind that voice the indistinguishable but unmistakable voice of command filtered through the house, telling the people of the neighborhood to clear out of the house and go on home.

But the black people of South Central were not going home. They were home. This was their home. They were taking it back.

“In this room is the guns and the drugs and the money,” Elwin said, his voice low but carrying.

“Yeah!” Murmurs.

“You tell ‘em!” Swelling anger.

“Make way!” an authoritative voice commanded. The owner of that voice was trying to gain access, but the people were scrunching their backs up and moving against one another to make a solid wall that ran the length of the house.

“We’re goin’ to take the guns,” Elwin said, his mouth a tight line, “and we’re goin’ to take the money, and we’re goin’ to burn this damned house right to the ground.”

Murmurs. Happy voices. Somebody yelled, ‘Hosanna!’

“What we goin’ to do about the police, Elwin?”

Elwin looked at the man who had spoken. “You tell the police to go home. You tell him to get out of here. We don’t have any need of him.”

Suddenly, the crowd was silent. On later introspection many of the crowd would realize that this was the moment; up until this moment it was an angry neighborhood, but at that point it became a determined neighborhood. At that moment the blacks of South Central, as represented in the filthy confines of an overwhelmed crack house, made a decision.

Elwin Jones, an ordinary man, calm and cool, intelligent and well spoken, had articulated that decision.

Elwin stepped back into the room and began handing out weapons.

“Gus, you take the machine gun. You been in the army. Terry, you ain’t no good with guns without no two hands, take this machete. Thelma, get some womenfolk and collect up this money, hold it across the street till we decide what we goin’ to do with it. Billy, only one gun you crazy nigger.” Everybody laughed, and in the laughing took the time to look at each other’s faces. Eyes were bright. Smiles were beginning to show and grow. And there was intelligence in the looks. There was purpose and...and dedication. A decision had been made and these people, tired of being the scapegoat, tired of hearing the white man’s rhetoric, tired of having their young ending up uneducated and dead, were happy to have made the decision, and were surprised to find themselves suddenly willing to back it up.

“Clear out! Get out of—” The white cop had managed to make it into the back room—and he stopped. He suddenly realized he was alone,

surrounded by a throng of blacks holding some pretty mean looking weapons. The faces of that agglomeration stared at him remorselessly, no smiles on their faces.

“Put the weapons down and clear out of the house.” He had a revolver in his hand, but he had no intention of using it. It wasn’t cowardice, and it wasn’t indecision; it was the fact of being overwhelmed by purpose and decision.

That white cop had been through the LA riots some years previous. He had stood shield to shield with LA’s finest and protected city property. When the riot had finally broken (because of armed Koreans being shown parading along the rooftops, not because of any concerted effort of the police, he was ashamed to admit) he had roamed the streets arresting rioters. He had not been scared then, and he had champed at the bit to go get the rioters, to be allowed to do his duty.

But this was different.

This was not a mob of people; these were citizens with a purpose, and that purpose overwhelmed him and robbed him of any ability to stand against them.

“Take that gun!”

“Grab that man!”

Hands slapped at him and his gun was stripped from him, and he found himself pushed against a wall.

“Tom, Fred! You boys take this man—and any other police man who happens to be right outside—across to Gus’ garage.”

“Right!”

“Got it!”

The cop was hustled out of the room and through the now parting crowd.

“Now then,” Elwin said, “we need to—”

“Elwin!” Kayla Taylor, who lived right next to Gus and who had known Elwin for years, exclaimed. “Look at your leg!”

Elwin looked down. The bullet that had struck him had torn flesh and fiber, and his pant leg was saturated with blood.

“What the heck?” Elwin didn’t remember being shot.

Kayla moved forward and squatted next to his leg. She grabbed the material of his pants with two strong hands and ripped it apart.

“You been shot!”

“What do you mean I’ve been shot?”

“I mean you been shot! Didn’t you know you been shot?”

“Well, I...” He stuttered for a moment, then made one of those ridiculous statements that would be repeated by everybody until it was near legend. “I thought it was a mosquito.”

Nobody said anything for a moment, then Kayla, looking up from his thigh, began to chuckle. Everybody began to chuckle, and Kayla

responded with, "You got bit by a mosquito, all right. You got bit by one of them Monkeyland mosquitos." Everybody was laughing outright and slapping each other on the back.

"You hear what Elwin said?"

"You hear what she said?"

"What'd he say?"

"He said...."

"Elwin," Kayla said, shaking her head, her voice barely heard over the laughing people. "You a damned fool!"

"Why am I a damn fool?" Elwin protested, distracted by the laughter of the people and the realization that he was leaking blood.

"Cause we need you." It was a solemn statement, and it made Elwin blink. There was something positively enormous in Kayla's simple remark. "Theodore, get me some water." And, to Elwin, she said, "Don't you realize how important you are?"

Elwin stood, felt Kayla's finger prodding at the bullet hole in his leg, and was confused. He studied the people. The people studied him right back, nodding their heads solemnly. It was a rare moment, a special moment, and one which he was fighting with all of his soul.

He wasn't special; he was just a guy who busted tires for a living, and he had gotten a little pissed off but he was all right now and....

The people looked at him. They were a wall of faces waiting...waiting...for what?

"But I...." He stopped.

It was election time and he couldn't say that he wouldn't serve. He had already, in some fashion he didn't understand, taken office.

"Thanks, Theodore," Kayla acknowledged the pan of hot water placed next to her. "Now get me some scissors and thread. No, make it dental floss. I can sew this up right now."

Elwin's mind was moving like a comet through the sky of his soul. *I just work for the city. But I started this. How can I stop this? I don't want to stop this. But I don't want to be in charge of this. But who's going to be in charge? I got to. I don't want to. There's got to be somebody else who....*

But there was nobody else.

Sure, there were people who could lead, there were a dozen competent men and women he knew of who could do what he had done and...but he had done it. He had provided the spark, and if he had spooked the horses then he had to grab the reins.

But he didn't want to.

Duty.

And the comet of his mind finally stopped, sputtered out, and was replaced by a calm not unlike the calm he had experienced when he had crossed the street on the way to this damned house.

Duty.

Elwin Jones, against his will, nothing more than a common man, rose to the occasion and the dictates of his soul.

He looked down to where Kayla was blotting blood away from the tear in his leg.

He looked up to the crowd.

“I guess we got to take the barricades.”

“Yeah!” came the response.

“Damned straight!”

And, the first step being taken, matters picked up speed.

“And we got to move fast!”

“Tell us what you want, Elwin.”

“We’ll do what it takes.”

“You just say the word.”

Elwin looked down at Kayla. “Woman, stop that sewin’. I got things to do.”

Kayla didn’t even look up. “You a damned fool, Elwin Jones,” she muttered. “You can do what you need to do with your blood on the inside as easily as on the outside.”

So Elwin Jones, a wise leader in spite of any nagging self doubts, let her sew his skin together while he gave the necessary orders.

Sergeant Polski was bent over the map spread out over the hood of his car and discussing the situation with three other cops.

“Soon as it’s dark we could approach the school from the wing side.”

“Yeah, but you think they won’t have somebody waiting for—”

“Sarg!”

Polski looked up, and his eyes grew large.

A crowd was coming down the street towards the barricade. It was a big crowd, a whole damned neighborhood crowd, and it wasn’t a bunch of angry looters or school kids throwing rocks at windows.

It was citizens.

Mothers, fathers, oldsters, children, teens.

And they weren’t angry, they were determined, moving down the street like a wall, being joined by more citizens, and many of the citizens had clubs and knives and guns. And there were so many of them!

“Get behind the cars!” Polski yelled.

The cops, there were almost twenty of them, scrambled behind the squad cars. Hair standing on end, they felt like interlopers. They were at the wrong end of the growing mob, and they crouched down and pulled out weapons.

Elwin walked slowly down the center of the street, feeling the comfort and power of his neighbors next to him.

The crowd approached to within ten feet of the barricade before Elwin raised a hand.

“Who’s in charge back there?” Elwin called.

Polski stared at the middle aged man with the bloody rag tied around one thick thigh. He stood up slowly and faced the man.

Elwin lifted both hands and made chopping motions to the side. Immediately, the people behind him spread out and encircled the barricade. The cops behind the cars found themselves in the center of a thickening ring of black faces and weapons held at the ready. Surprisingly, there was no talk, just the sound of feet moving over pavement like a long, protracted wave.

“You people put your weapons down and disperse!”

Nobody said a word or paid the slightest heed to Polski’s demand, and the sergeant felt like he was sinking into quicksand.

“I said—”

“We heard what you said,” Elwin interrupted Polski easily, his determination cutting right across the bow of the cop’s voice.

Polski focused on the black man in the tee shirt who led the crowd. Funny. He, Polski, had a gun, and the other man had no weapon at all, yet Polski felt like he was the one about to be shot.

“I don’t know who you are, but—”

“I know who you are, though,” Elwin cut Polski off. “I know you don’t have any business being in my neighborhood. You don’t have any business holding a gun on me or my people. You don’t have any business here at all.”

“Yeah!”

“Tell ‘im, Elwin!”

“Honkey fucker!”

Yet the voices weren’t mad, not even the one that had called Polski a honky fucker. They were simply insistent.

“You people must step back and—”

Elwin’s voice was lower when he interrupted Polski, but somehow even more cutting. “No. I think you people, you, Mr. Police Man with the ‘big gun,’ better put your pistol down and your hands up. And if you don’t, then we’re going to trample you dead.”

Polski had never been in a situation like this. As a policeman he had always been on the side of law and order. Now, however, he was the minority, stripped of rightness and surrounded by a superior and compelling force.

Polski didn’t understand that a decision had been made, that the watch had been changed and, in this neighborhood, the white race was on the wane and the black race was on the rise. All he knew was that he had a decision to make: give up his weapons and save his and his officers

lives, or shoot and be killed easily and quickly and, truth, for no good reason that he could see.

Elwin didn't wait for Polski, he just kept boring in. "In five seconds we're going to move forward. You know what that means?"

Polski stood, his backbone going, his confidence in himself as duly constituted authority evaporating.

"Five, four, three, two—"

"Hold it," Polski said.

"Put your guns down," Elwin commanded.

"No harm will come to my men."

"That's right," Elwin agreed, showing no elation at the fact that he had won, merely carrying out the dictates of the decision that had swept him along.

Polski hesitated, looked at his men in a sidelong glance, then, wearily, bent at the knees and placed his gun on the ground. "Put your weapons down," he said. It took a moment, but his men, with some hesitation and startled looks, followed his lead.

In truth, the police had possessed sufficient firepower to blast their way out of the situation, but they lacked the will. The people confronting them weren't robbers. They weren't rapists and murderers. They were citizens, and they had been possessed, and motivated, by a singular, concerted idea.

"Hey! What about me?" One of four black police officers protested.

Elwin looked at the man. "What about you?"

"I ain't no whitey!"

Elwin stepped up to the man. Three other black officers had put their weapons down and stood nervously. They were still part of the police force, but something had happened, and they were trying to understand what that something was. The one police officer who had spoken glared at Elwin angrily.

"You quitting the police department?" Elwin asked.

"I..." Indecision became decision. "Yeah."

"Then keep your gun and take off that uniform."

"You'll be up on charges for this!" Polski suddenly shouted.

Elwin spun on Polski. He was shorter than the white sergeant, but he leaned his face into the grizzled veteran's. "Don't you be talkin' about charges and things like that."

Polski controlled himself, though his jaw clenched mightily. He had been caught, but, now that he had no weapons, he felt the threat to himself lessen, and he found the courage to be heard.

"I don't know what you people think you're doing, but—"

“We are makin’ a statement, Mr. Police Man. We have decided to take back our streets, and that means there is no room for you and yours hereabouts unless we give you the say so. Do you understand?”

Polski didn’t speak or nod or make any kind of move. He just stared at Elwin, who leaned into his face with granite and unforgiving eyes.

“Do you understand!” Very insistent.

Finally, Polski, through a face growing red, said, “I understand what you are saying.” Not agreement, just understanding, but it was enough.

“Good,” Elwin turned back to the crowd. “Pass these guns out. Get any extra ammunition. Vickie, run tell Mrs. Peeples that she’s going to be having more visitors. Charlie, I want you to select twenty men and man this barricade. Keep doing what these men were doing and we’ll—”

“What are you going to do with us?” Polski asked.

Elwin turned back to the sergeant. “You are a prisoner of war. You will be dealt with in a prisoner exchange program.”

“You can’t—”

“Tom, Zulu, Reddy, escort these officers down the street and into Gus’ garage. Don’t you be mean to them, they gave up like men and they have got to be treated right.”

“I’ll make sure they have TV and snacks, Elwin.”

The crowd chuckled at Reddy’s response.

“Hey! Wait a minute! I got rights! I demand—”

“Mr. White Man!” Elwin said, turning and putting his face into Polski’s, once again his voice holding sway over the crowd and the captured police officers. “You don’t have any rights here. You are a prisoner. You are in Monkeyland now!”

The crowd cheered. A white terrorist had called it thus, and the nation had heard it called thus, and now it was fact. The curse of a terrorist had been turned into a proud fact. In the cheer and jubilation of decision and confrontation, Monkeyland had been born.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“White Law! Who’s this?”

“My name is Barbara Fullerson, and I don’t see how you can justify holding children hostage. If you have a disagreement with the black people then you should use the established agencies, go through legal channels, use the courts and—”

“Barbara, you sound like a housewife, and you really ought to get out into the real world.”

“Well, I nev—”

“The fact of the matter is that the Monkeys have flooded our streets with drugs, stolen our dollars through welfare, and filled our prisons with their bizarre ideas of right and wrong. An animal, Barbara, has no concept of right and wrong. An animal will not make moral choice. These Monkeys don’t make moral choice, therefore they prove that they are animals.”

“But to go into their neighborhood and take them hostage! Why don’t you just leave them in their so called ‘hoods!’”

“Because it is not working. In these protected enclaves called ghettos they bleed the white community and do their tribal dances and mate irresponsibly, and we are stuck with the bill. We are paying the way to our own demise! Look, Barbara, we are not just taking hostages...we are invading Monkeyland! We are going to the heart of the beast and hitting it where it hurts! When they realize that it isn’t even safe to have children then they will pack up and leave!”

Suddenly, Betty, on the screen, reached out and took a sheet of paper from a latex gloved hand. She read briefly, then: “Even as we talk the Monkeys are burning their own neighborhood. While we talk and try to make sense and establish a little order in our country, they burn their own houses. Just a block over the Monkeys are fighting with the police and....”

“Huggs?”

“Yes, sir,” Lt. Huggs answered Chief Teskins, holding the phone to his ear. A runner from Parker Center had brought the cell phone to him, along with the Chief’s number. Huggs was standing next to a table that had been set up for the maps. In the parking lot cops were arriving, being briefed, and being assigned tasks.

“They’ve got somebody on the outside!” Teskins barked into the other end of the phone.

“Sir?” Lieutenant Huggs put a hand over his other ear and turned away from the activity of the parking lot.

“That’s right. They just made an announcement that police were fighting with blacks near you. Have you checked your barricades and perimeter recently?”

“Uh....”

“Do it.” Teskins, not done, segued back to the subject of outside observers. “Look, they might have known that a house was burning. Hell! They can see it from the roof! But how would White Law know that blacks are fighting cops? Dammit! They can’t see through houses! Can they?”

“Uh...no, sir.”

“That’s how they knew when we put out snipers. And that’s how they know whenever we’re going to do something!”

Huggs found himself turning and looking around the area, searching for spies, a surprised look on his face. He was having a hard time absorbing what the Chief was saying. “You mean somebody doing reconnaissance? Surveillance? That sort of thing?”

“Dammit, man! All it takes is a cell phone!”

Son of a bitch!

“He’d be white...could be a she, for that matter,” Teskins continued, “and they’d be talking on the phone, probably right out in the open, looking like a damned reporter or something!”

“Maybe they wear jumpsuits and climb telephone poles like a telephone repairman!” Huggs was finally starting to understand.

“Right. Check those perimeters, arrest anybody talking on a cell phone.

“Yes, sir,” Huggs said.

“And be careful of armed resistance!”

“Right!” Huggs said.

“And don’t put this on the radio!”

Huggs blinked and finally realized the full import of the cell phone in his hand.

Dewey ran. Finally, out of breath, drenched with sweat from running under the hot sun, he stopped and leaned his back against the side of a brick building. Bending over, he put his hands on his knees and took deep breaths.

The scene at the barricade had nearly caught him, and, if he hadn’t been quick, he would have been taken prisoner with the cops. He had been standing at the mouth of an alley, watching the Monkeys swarming around a gray house a few houses down the street, then they had filled the street and marched towards the barricade. Dewey had hidden behind

a dumpster and the Monkeys had walked right past him without seeing him, and he had been close enough to hear everything they had said.

Monkeyland.

Their own fucking country.

When Betty found out she'd kiss the money good by, kill all the little Monkeys, and do the vamoose.

And that left him sitting all by his lonesome out in the middle of...of...Monkeyland!

Fuck!

Having regained his breath, he straightened up and walked down the alley. He came out of the alley near a home grown church with a hand painted sign, and he mentally assessed his position. He was several streets over from the school and a couple of miles from Manchester, which was the bottom of the South Central area. Damn! Whichever way he went, he was going to have to get through large numbers of the Monkeys.

Better get near a barricade, assuming he could reach a barricade before the monkeys did. The intersection of Washington and Nelson was probably the best bet. He could call in from there, and Wiley could relay information to Huey and Louis.

He stepped onto the sidewalk and walked across the front of the church. It used to be a mini-market and was now 'The Home of the Nazarene.' Several blacks were standing in the entrance to the church, and they stared at him as he passed.

Christ in a fucking wheel chair! Who would ever expect the Monkeys to actually organize?

The Monkeys, as Dewey called them, weren't organized. Not yet. But word was going out, faster then he was running, actually, and the people of South Central were stirring.

They burned a crack house behind the school!

Took over a barricade!

Guy named Elwin Jones is in charge!

The effects rippled. People talked, conversed on the phone, ran over to neighbor's houses. Rumors abounded, and, on a deeper level, people *knew* what was happening.

On the perimeter around Lincoln School, in spite of the cruising cop cars, people began to gather again. Many of them, kicked out of their homes by the police, had no place to go. Many of them were frantic parents, wanting to hear something concerning their kidnapped children. Many of them were nothing more than street scum, looking for a little gangbanging.

All of them were angry, and growing angrier.

And the anger could explode. A riot of far more magnitude than Watts, or the one some three decades later in this very neighborhood, could have ignited and swept Los Angeles into darker times.

But Elwin Jones, now decided and committed, was moving fast, and the anger was being absorbed and channeled almost as fast as it was growing.

From the first barricade Elwin moved to the second barricade, all the while gathering people and guns and determination.

“Spread the word,” Elwin spoke to those nearest him. “Nobody is to shoot anybody. Live cops are hostages that we can use, dead cops are martyrs.”

“What’re martyrs?” a fifteen year old boy asked. He had managed to sneak up between all the men and women vying to walk next to Elwin.

“Haw!” a large man with a red bandanna tied around his head laughed. “Whyn’t you get back wif the wimmin and chilrun.”

Several people laughed, and Elwin looked up at the man who had spoken, then he looked at the stricken boy.

“No,” Elwin said, quickly. “The boy has got a good question.”

Elwin spoke so that the boy smiled and the bandanaed man didn’t take offense.

“If we kill a cop then the other cops will be pissed off, and they’ll think of that cop every time they shoot one of us. You got that?”

“Yes, sir,” the boy said.

They were crossing 119th now, and the next barricade was just around the corner. Elwin stopped.

“What’s your name?” he asked the big man with the bandanna.

“They calls me Pokey.” The man grinned.

“And what’s your name?” Elwin turned his attention to the fifteen year old.

“Tommy.”

“Well, Tommy and Pokey, you two are now partners.”

“Say what?”

“I don’t want to be with this old—”

Elwin held up a hand to stop the youth. “You gonna take over this country with nobody at your backside? Watchin’ out for you?”

“Well, I...” the two being singled out eyed each other. Not thirty seconds before one had been making fun of the other, and that other had felt resentment.

“Listen! All of you!” Elwin raised his voice and tried to be heard by everybody in the crowd. There were nearly two hundred people around him now.

“We are going to use the buddy system!” People looked at each other in surprise. “Nobody is to turn that next corner unless they have a friend at their side!”

With surprising speed people began pairing up and even making threesomes. Friends and strangers came together.

“Okay! Somebody give me a gun!”

A large, military style .45 was thrust into Elwin’s hands. He turned and handed it to Tommy.

Tommy’s eyes went big and round at the weight and significance of the thing.

Elwin looked up at Pokey. In large words he said, “Your job is to make sure he doesn’t go shootin’ somebody.”

“But I can’t stop him from shootin’ somebody!” Pokey protested.

“Then you’ll have failed.”

It was a simple statement and, because Elwin chose the exact right tone, the onus was directly upon the large Pokey. For the first time in his life, Pokey was face to face with success, failure, and...responsibility.

“But I...but I...” he stuttered.

Elwin turned to Tommy. “I’m trustin’ you to do the right thing, boy.”

And Tommy, similarly under just the right words and tone, suddenly became a man.

“Okay! Everybody! All you friends of Monkeyland...let’s go!”

The crowd, stronger by a factor of two, surged forward.

Elwin Jones was proving to be a better leader than anybody could have imagined.

They came around the corner, filled the street like a flood, and descended upon the second barricade.

Behind the second barricade the cops immediately got down behind their cruisers and leveled shotguns. They had received word that the citizens were fighting with the police at another barricade, and they had received orders to hold their positions, but they had no idea what that entailed.

“Hold up!” Elwin called as they reached the edge of the intersection, and the mass of people slowed to a stop.

“Who’s in charge up there?”

Terry Sutton stood up. He was, like Polski, a sergeant. Unlike Polski, he was black and had grown up on these very streets. “You people are hereby ordered to lay down your weapons and disperse.”

“Stay back,” Elwin called over his shoulder in a strong voice, and he began walking slowly forward, his eyes fixed on the muscular, young buck that was a sergeant.

Sutton glanced around at his men. All of them were focused on the single, unarmed man. Sutton licked his lips nervously and stepped out from behind the car.

Elwin and Sutton came together in the middle of the intersection.

“Sir, this is an illegal assembly and—”

“You’re young Sutton,” Elwin spoke softly, but the familiarity of the words made Sutton blink.

“I know your father, worked with him layin’ bricks before I took the job with the city.”

“I don’t know you,” Sutton managed to say. There was a presence to the older man that was pushing down on him.

“No, but I remember slicin’ a big piece of watermelon for you on a Fourth of July. You were skinny as a stick, and your pop wacked you and two others for spittin’ seeds at the smaller children.”

“You’ll have to disperse,” but it was weak, and Terry Sutton knew it was weak.

“How is your father?”

“Sir, if you—”

“Look around you.”

Sutton stopped. He didn’t look around, but he was suddenly aware that the whole neighborhood, maybe all of South Central, was behind this man. And more were coming. Even as he faced Elwin, more people were massing on the far side of the intersection, lining up to face the police. It was amazing how many of them had weapons.

“Sir—”

“Listen to me now,” Elwin said, conversationally, as if he was trying to tell the younger man how to pull weeds. “I am going to tell these fine people to surround you, and then we are going to start shooting. Do you want to be part of that?”

Sutton was caught. Under the blue uniform he was black, and he had never felt that fact so acutely as he did right at that moment.

“What I suggest,” Elwin continued, “is that you go back and tell your officers to lay down their weapons. The white officers will be held prisoner, they will not be harmed, and the others can do what they want.”

“This is entirely against the law and—” Sutton tried to bluster, but it was a failed effort.

“There is a new law here, and you can be part of it, or you can be against it,” Elwin’s eyes burrowed into the younger man’s. “We are taking back our neighborhood, and that means removing the white man from it. Now, do you wish to stand by your people, or shoot them with those fine weapons that the white man has bought for you?”

Sutton’s mouth was open and he could hear himself breathing.

Such a fine day, and if he hadn’t been called in he would have gone to the gym and worked out, maybe played a little cards later on, had a few brewskis, and....

Instead, he was sitting in the middle of a rundown suburbia with a madman threatening to start a war like they had in Palestine.

But was this man a madman?

Elwin, his eyes kind, watched Sutton. He knew exactly what was going through the young sergeant's head.

Sutton croaked something meaningless and took an involuntary step backward. He felt like he was strangling.

Elwin watched him and didn't move.

Sutton raised his eyes and glanced across the face of the crowd. Though nobody spoke, he could hear a crowd yelling in his mind.

Was he black?

Or was he blue?

Twenty years and a pension, if he stood his ground and ordered the massacre of people that he had grown up with.

He turned and staggered towards the barricade, excoriating his heart and soul as he returned to the uniforms and the city cars and the....

Elwin watched, knew what was going to happen.

Sutton reached the barricade and turned around. From thirty feet away the older man's eyes scoured into him, and increased distance was no barrier to the infliction of knowledge.

Black or blue.

Black or....

The confusion left Sutton's mind. Imperceptibly, he straightened up and spoke to his own men in a loud, calm voice. "Put your weapons on the ground.

"But Sarg—"

Sutton wheeled viciously. "I said to put your weapons down!"

Of the twenty two men and women at the barricade, eight were black, four were Mexican, one was Filipino, one was Chinese, and eight were white. All wore blue, and all hesitated.

Sutton was a good leader, and he wasn't about to let these men disobey him. "I said!" his voice thundered across the street as he moved through the men, slapping barrels downward, "put your weapons down!"

Slowly, the men behind the barricade disarmed themselves.

"The whole problem, Reverend, is that it is a white man's education. Our children learn nothing about being torn from their families, packed into the black hold of a slaver, and taken to a strange land. They learn nothing about the back breaking labor of picking cotton. They learn nothing about their true roots."

The very large and rotund Marsta Janson stopped talking and sat down. Pulling a large hanky out of her oversize purse, she commenced to wiping the moisture from her face. It was cool in the church, but talking always seemed to heat her up.

Todd Sweeney stood up and was preparing to speak when the Reverend's secretary walked up the side aisle and leaned towards the Reverend's ear. Thomason tilted his head slightly to take her message.

“Reverend, there’s fighting going on in the streets. The police at the barricade on Commerce and Franklin have been taken hostage, and there’s talk of more people marching on another barricade!”

She was late in her information and didn’t know it. The second barricade had already fallen, and the people were already marching on the third.

Thomason looked up at her. The whites of his eyes were large, and he stared very briefly, then got to his feet.

“I’m sorry to interrupt you, Todd, but there has apparently been a confrontation with the police.”

“What’s it about? What’s going on? Do you think....” the instant hub bub lasted a second, then Thomason’s outstretched palms quieted the small meeting.

“I really don’t have any facts, but I think it would behoove us to go into the community and make sure that our people are guided in their actions. We don’t want a riot occurring.” What he meant was that he wanted to be the one guiding the riot, or at least taking advantage of it.

“He’s right. What do you think....”

“Let us meet here this evening, if at all possible, and....”

Within moments the Reverend Luther Thomason was striding down the center aisle of his church. Several of his people, those who had gone with him to the meeting with the mayor, were right behind him.

“Lieutenant Burrows,” Huggs spoke into the cell phone and prayed that his next words wouldn’t be misconstrued. “Would you mind telling me if you are white or black?”

Burrows was white, and, therefore, there was no upset. If he had been black, there would have been charges and possibly even trials after all this was over.

There still might be. In fact, would be.

But what was he going to do?

Of the eight barricades surrounding the school, two were already out of communications. At the second barricade Sergeant Sutton, who was black, had said that a large crowd of blacks were approaching the barricade. The sergeant had promised to get back to him, but hadn’t, and that could only mean that the barricade had fallen.

If this crowd was moving in a logical fashion, then he was talking to the next barricade in line.

“Okay, Burrows, here is what I want you to do.”

“Johnson, I’ll take your weapon.”

Johnson looked at Burrows in disbelief. Johnson was the third black man the white Lieutenant had approached, and it was obvious what he was doing.

“You son of a bitch!” Johnson said, his eyes daggering into the Lieutenant.

Burrows didn't say anything.

“I will sue your ass. I will end your career. You cannot do this.”

Burrows was sided by two large white men. Their purpose was obvious, but neither of them looked comfortable.

“Hand it over,” Burrows said.

Johnson unholstered his sidearm and handed it to Burrows. “You fucking piece of shit....” he wanted to say ‘white man,’ but he didn't.

Burrows handed the gun to the man on his right. “I want you to know that I protested these orders, and I deeply regret them.”

“Fuck you.” Johnson stared with eyes suddenly made ghetto.

Dewey approached the barricade at Washington and Nelson at a quick walk. Several cops stared at him. A white man with a quick walk and a sweaty face warned of a situation.

“Hi,” Dewey said. “My car ran out of gas, can you believe it? I was afraid.” He had discarded his camera and hidden his ‘hearing aid.’ He looked like a businessman in the wrong place.

The cops nodded. No wonder the man was quick and sweaty. One of the cops said, “You want me to call a tow for you?”

“That's all right, I have a cell phone,” and Dewey pulled the cell phone out of his pocket. He looked at the dial and began pushing buttons.

“Don't move!”

He looked up. Two of the cops had their guns trained on him.

What had happened? They hadn't suspected him and then...they must have realized that somebody was calling in to White Law. Who had betrayed him? Who had caused him to....

Dewey didn't realize, as he reached for the gun in the holster in the small of his back, that it was his very own Betty Boop that had caused him to be found out.

“Sorry, Chief.” Huggs spoke into the phone to Teskins. “They had one. Guy with a cell phone. He was killed in a shoot out.”

“Damn!” Teskins, staring morosely at the large Thomas on the wall of the room in was in at Parker Center, thought quickly. “Any identification?”

“No.”

“Okay. Put a priority on identifying the bastard. And keep looking! There's got to be more of them.”

“We have another problem.”

“Yeah?”

“Blacks are attacking the barricades.”

Teskins didn't say a word. Suddenly, he wished he was not just talking on a phone, but actually on the scene.

"I have notified the officers in charge and we are disarming black officers."

"What?"

Huggs took a deep breath. "I didn't know what else to do. I'm ordering black officers back, but that means I need more white officers, and..." he continued explaining his dilemma at length, and finished with, "I'm not letting any reporters in. I think it would be bad if the news media found out. If they find out and talk about it, and White Law finds out..." Huggs shrugged on the other end of the line.

"Of course," Teskins considered the ramifications of what was going on. From a hostage situation this was escalating into a damned civil war.

"I have given orders on my own responsibility, Chief, and if you want to remove me..." It hurt him to say these words, but it was necessary.

Teskins was silent. He was a good man, a top cop, and had a lifetime of honorable service. Now everything was going to go into the proverbial shitter.

Maybe he should replace Huggs.

Maybe it was time to watch his own behind.

Then the steel of the man took over. "No. You do what you have to, and I'll do what I can to back you up."

"Yes, sir. If you'll excuse me...I want to check in on the third barricade."

"Huggs?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Make plans for getting your people out."

Huggs didn't say anything.

"Huggs?"

"Sir."

"I'll get some people working on plans for a second perimeter, one all the way around South Central" *Where was he going to get the manpower for that?* "In the meantime, use discretion, but if things go bad it is your duty to get as many of your people as possible to safety."

"Yes, sir." Teskins did make sense, but it galled. Oh, how it galled.

"Keep me informed."

They each hung up.

Reddy, and half a dozen Monkeyland Volunteers, as they were calling themselves, walked through one yard into the back yard of the second house on Washington, which happened to be yellow.

“Bill, Sam, Shaba. Check on the sniper over there.” Reddy pointed to the left, and the three men split off towards the corner of the house. They held their weapons at the ready. Reddy and the others mounted the back steps to Estelle’s house.

“What?” Estelle’s eyes went wide. She moved back against the kitchen cupboards as the large, armed men—men with hard and decisive eyes—entered her home.

“Monkeyland Volunteers, ma’am. No need to be alarmed.”

The four men brushed through the kitchen and into the living room. Estelle found herself following in their wake.

In the living room one of the men was taking Bill Woodard’s revolver from the surprised officer. Two white paramedics, who had arrived just moments before the armed black men, were against the wall, as were Jimmy Elson and Tom Shoenburger. The binoculars and the phone had been taken from Jimmy and Tom and placed on the end table next to the couch. For all that was happening, the invader’s attitude was calm and businesslike.

“What are you men—” Bill tried to protest.

“Please be quiet,” Reddy’s voice cut the police officer off. He turned to the paramedics. “How bad are his wounds?”

“He’s got to go to a hospital.”

Reddy nodded, said, “Take him.” He spoke over his shoulder to one of his men. “Archie, go with them. Get them past the barricades.” He spoke to the paramedics again. “You will be allowed to help the injured in Monkeyland as long as one of us escorts you. Is that clear?”

The two paramedics gulped even as they nodded.

“You mind telling me what is going on?” Bill managed to insert.

“What about this boy?” Estelle came forward and stood next to Jimmy.

Reddy took in the old lady and the two white boys.

“He has been shot!” Estelle explained.

Reddy nodded. “These fellows,” he indicated the two paramedics, “will take anybody who’s injured. What about the other one?”

Tom blinked, was surprised to find himself being the center of concern. “I’m okay.”

“You can go out with your friend in the ambulance, or you can be held prisoner. Which will it be?”

“I’ll go...I’ll...” Tom stared around and moved closer to Jimmy.

“Prisoner?” Estelle blinked. She was a welter of confusions. Jimmy was a fine boy, but she was feeling sorely about whites in general.

“Do you mind telling me what is going on?” And there was that within Bill’s voice which turned Reddy towards him.

“We’ve decided to take matters into our own hands,” Reddy explained, then he spoke to the two paramedics. “Get going.”

Estelle, wanting more of an explanation, said, "But who are you?"

And, for the second time since he had entered the house, Reddy said, "Monkeyland Volunteers." He turned to Bill Woodard and spoke two words in a most enigmatic manner, "New country."

While the number of captured police and whites grew, so did the numbers of Elwin Jones' impromptu army, and the people of South Central Los Angeles began to come awake. Small mobs began to form, and the number of violent incidents was a sharply rising line. Officers at Southwest Station, which was one of the main staging areas, found that their problems were escalating at a frenetic pace. Officers just walking to their cars were likely to be targets for thrown objects.

A crowd gathered in front of the Newton station on Central, and the front of the building was pelted with bottles and rocks. Police inside could do nothing but wait for the storm to subside.

A cruiser coming into the city with a contingent of officers from San Bernardino was ambushed by a gang armed with slingshots. Though they managed to make it to Southwest Station with nothing but cuts and bruises, they were badly shaken.

The worst thing, however, was that officers around Lincoln School were going off the air, and it appeared that they were being taken prisoner by citizens.

Elwin Jones and the Monkeyland Volunteers swooped around the corner and marched like a wall towards the third barricade, but this time the police were prepared.

Black officers had been disarmed and taken off the line, and the remaining officers were ready and waiting.

Elwin stopped the crowd even as a voice on a PA called for them to lay down their arms. Elwin turned and spoke over the blare of the speaker.

"Women and children out of sight. I want all armed men to circle the barricade and find cover. Do not fire until I give the word!"

The import of the moment came home. Thus far it had been talk the talk and easy pickings. Now it was time to walk the walk, and the chances of being shot—of dying—were very real.

Moving quickly, the Monkeyland Volunteers broke ranks, ran around the barricade, ducked behind cars and fences. Weapons were aimed and cocked.

From behind the barricade Burrows watched with narrowed eyes.

"Lieutenant! They're surrounding us!" A man called out from the other side of the barricade.

The barricade was only four cars nosed into a box. There just hadn't been time to do more.

“Hold your fire!” Burrows called.

“Burrows?” Huggs voice came over the cell phone. At the corner mall Huggs had a phone at each ear. Burrows was giving him information on one phone, and he was relaying that information to Teskins on the other.

“You men behind the barricade! Come out with your hands up!” Elwin called. Elwin knew the barricade wasn’t going to be surrendered. He knew that it was going to come down to violence and bloodshed. He felt a sinking sensation within his gut.

“Give me that.” Burrows held out his hand to the man with the loudspeaker. In a moment he was calling, “Who are you?”

Elwin, praying against the inevitable, answered, “I am Elwin Jones, and these are the Monkeyland Volunteers. Give up your weapons and you won’t be harmed!”

Burrows didn’t hesitate. “You will step forward with your hands raised. You are under arrest and—”

Elwin dove for the back end of a brown Mercury.

As to who shot the first round there was no way of telling, but suddenly the street was a cloud of gunfire and a din of screaming men and women.

Inside the box of cars, Burrows was hit, and he found himself huddled in a fetal position. Bullets smacked into metal, went through doors, exploded window glass, and hit flesh. The cops, being decimated savagely, began throwing themselves to the ground. They were not even twenty, and the Monkeylanders were hundreds.

“AIIIIIII!” Burrows began screaming, unaware that he was even screaming, the terror gripping his soul complete and utter. He wasn’t aware of other cops screaming—but they were.

Next to Burrows a man’s head snapped back, and the man laid down and died.

And another one died, and another one. The air was alive with bullets, screams, and the spray of blood as the Monkeylanders let their rage out.

From behind the Mercury, Elwin watched, and he felt the horror assail his soul. Within a minute it was all over, but the Monkeyland Volunteers kept shooting.

Elwin stood up and began yelling, “Cease fire! Hold your fire!” But the shooting didn’t stop until he was running towards the barricade, and then it only stopped because the Monkeylanders thought he was charging and began to charge with him.

“Stop!” Elwin cried. He jumped on the back of a bullet riddled cruiser and raised his hands. Confused, the crowd began to slow their rush. They gathered outside the barricade, stared into the barricade, and began to realize the horror of what they had wrought.

Elwin, stricken, turned and looked into the charnel pit.

Within the four walls of the cop cars, men were bleeding and dead. Bodies were torn apart, and those that were still alive lay half under the cars, or were huddled against each other and the dead. Hands clawed the unforgiving pavement and feet twitched a last, feeble dance. Dazed eyes stared at the suddenly gaping Monkeylanders—or at nothing.

“Everybody back,” Elwin said. He didn’t have to yell, the Monkeylanders saw what they had done.

“Holy sweet Jesus,” Pokey muttered.

“Oh my God,” Tommy said, turning to vomit on the shoes of the man behind him.

Elwin hopped into the confines of the four cars. He nearly slipped on the thick blood. “Anybody with medical knowledge get in here! Every one else stay out!”

Two men in the crowd, one a dental helper and the other a vet, climbed over fenders and began helping Elwin tenderly turn bodies over.

Four men were still alive, though two of the four were not going to be alive for long. One of the remaining two was Burrows, who had been shot in the ankle, the shoulder, along the line of the jaw, through the ribs, and across the back. The other man, by an absolute miracle, was untouched.

“Don’t! Don’t!” Burrows whimpered, trying to crawl in spite of his wounds.

For a moment Elwin held the man and tried to comfort him, then the vet took over and Elwin climbed to the top of a cruiser. He stood with feet on each side of the roof lights and spoke over the suddenly humbled crowd.

“Please, dear God!” Elwin intoned desperately. “Don’t let this happen again!” Then he turned his voice onto the crowd. “And if any one of you feels good about what happened...please pull the trigger on your ownself.”

Nobody said anything. Many looked at the ground. The Monkeylanders had won the first engagement, but though not a single one of them had been injured...it had hurt...it had really hurt.

Thomason and his followers stopped in the middle of the street. They had been following a most circuitous and winding route around Lincoln School because of barricades and the police ordering them this way and that.

“That’s gunfire!” a man exclaimed next to the Reverend.

Gunfire, in this neighborhood, was not uncommon, but given the current situation, it was cause for thought. Deep and serious thought. Thomason listened to the storm of shooting and bit his lip.

“You think there’s more fighting?” Marsta asked at Thomason’s elbow. In spite of her bulk she kept up, even contributed to the pace. She waddled, but she made time.

“I pray not,” Thomason responded.

The contingent turned up the next street and approached a barricade. There were no police at the barricade; it was manned completely by brothers—and the brothers were armed. Two of the brothers walked forward as soon as they spotted the Reverend.

“Good afternoon, Reverend.”

“Hello, Thomas. Can you apprise me of the situation?”

Thomas blinked. Sometimes Reverend Thomason used words that were hard to understand.

“We took over the barricade. Burnt a crack house, too,” the other man said. The Reverend didn’t know the other man, but he could hear pride of accomplishment in the man’s voice.

“I see,” the Reverend said, his mind engaged in quick thought. Try to take over? No. Find out who had guided the flock in this fashion, then make sure things went the way they were supposed to. “And who is responsible for this insurrection?”

“Insur...”

“Elwin Jones,” the second man answered, looking a little unsure. “He been givin’ the orders.”

Elwin Jones. The Reverend knew Elwin Jones. He had a reputation for being a hard working man, though he didn’t show up in church too often.

“And where is Mr. Elwin Jones.”

“Well, uh,” the Reverend’s important manner of speech was cowing the two men. They were no less determined, they were soldiers in a new and righteous cause, but when a ranking officer comes along....

“Speak up, man.”

“He headed for the next barricade.”

Thomason looked around. Cop cars were gathering down the street. It looked like the cops were staring at them through binoculars. What, in the Good Lord’s Name, had Elwin Jones done?

“We’re goin’ have our own country,” the second man said, staring directly at Thomason. “Gonna call it Monkeyland.”

“That’ll give those damned whiteys something to think about,” the first man chimed in.

“Watch your language,” Thomason said. He watched to make sure his admonishment had the proper effect, then, “Which way is the next barricade.

The second man man pointed down the street. “Down there, second street look left. You’ll see it.”

Thomason looked around imperiously, then set off. His flock followed dutifully along.

For a moment the men at the barricade watched Thomason stride down the street, then one said, "He sure is full of himself, ain't he?"

Nobody disagreed.

"Shooting to the North, Betty." Porky spoke from the roof.

Betty, unaware of how little strands unraveling were becoming big strands unraveling, cocked her head and listened. "I hear it," she answered from the kitchen.

"Sounds like a war!"

"Keep me informed," she said, then she turned to Wiley. She had just finished talking for three hours, and she wasn't envious of Rush Limbaugh. Talking was hard work. Guy had to be a damn liberal to be able to talk so much.

"What about Huey and Louis?"

"Louis is fine, but I can't reach Huey and Dewey." Wiley shrugged. He was worried.

"Well, keep at it." Betty touched his shoulder, and he nodded and went back to studying his map even as he hit the speed dial on one of the cell phones.

Betty had a quick word with Foghorn, drank some water, and looked across the kitchen at Tom.

"Tell her how good lookin' she is."

Tom, aware of Betty Boop's stare, turned his head to Mrs. Watson.

"You got to make her like you. You got to get an edge. You tell her how good lookin' she is and she'll melt."

"How do you know?"

"Boy, she already like you. She *want* to love. I seen that type of girl a thousand times over in my years of schoolin'.

"There's a big difference between a black fifteen year old girl and a white maniac holding hostages."

"There is no difference under the skin. Both is highly excitable, both is highly charged with juices."

Tom noticed that the principal's usually impeccable manner of speaking was slipping, and she was effecting a more streetish manner. But no matter what her state of mind—how could she expect him to make passes at a terrorist holding a gun on him?

"Hi, Tom." Betty loomed over him. Immediately, Tom tried to focus only on her. He ignored, as she was doing, Shelley and Mrs. Watson.

"Hi, Betty." Use her first name. Get familiar. Speak low. Be charming.

“What do you think?”

“I’m really impressed. You guys are really...professional.” Good word.

“Yeah, we are,” she took off her cap and shook her hair, rubbed her fingers through it.

“I’m amazed that you could do this.”

“Oh?” She put her cap back on. “Why’s that?”

“Well, uh...” Do it! Make yourself do it!

“Go on.”

“Well, usually people don’t associate beauty with brains.”

For a second, Betty didn’t do anything. For a second, she just stared, and Tom just knew that he had said the wrong thing, spoken too heavily...then she smiled. She not only smiled, she lit up the room with her white, even teeth.

“Why, Tom, what a nice thing to say. Why don’t any of you guys say such nice things?” This last to her beard.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be forward.” Christ! All the terrorists heard him say that! How could he make time with a girl with twenty guys listening in?

“Why, Tom. I like forward. Come give me a hand...then we can talk.”

Tom got up, felt the blood rush through his legs and buttocks, and followed Betty across the kitchen.

As they crossed the room, Wiley was down on his knees in the center of the kitchen. He was measuring distances from the walls with a tape measure. He found the spot he was looking for, and he smashed a tile with a hammer to mark it.

“Right about here.” He stood up and went back to his map and the cell phones.

“Okay,” Betty looked at the spot, then glanced at Tom. “Let’s move that prep table.”

The table was only a couple of feet square and had been built only to fill up a corner of the room. They had to lift it over the corner of a larger table, then slide it across the tiles.

“There,” Betty said.

“What’s this for?”

Betty smiled mysteriously and sat on the table, pulled him to her, held his hands in hers. “Tell me again about this brains and beauty thing.”

Against all logic, Tom found his heart beating harder. It was bizarre. It was insane. Yet he was physically responding to the smile and directness of this woman.

“Well...”

“Now he starts to stutter. Come on. You can do better than that.”

Hesitantly, Tom pointed at the mike in her beard.

For a long moment Betty stared at him, she considered, then she gave in to her own desperate needs. She lowered her beard.

“I could tell you’re a woman right away,” Tom said.

A dreamy smile crossed her face.

“I could see through the jumpsuit. I mean, the way you walk. The curves the jumpsuit tries to hide.”

“Curves? I always thought my breasts were too small.”

“Well, I can’t tell for sure, but it looks like they’re just right for the size of your body. Too big is ridiculous. Too small and....” he managed to shrug his shoulders.

“Too small and they don’t hold up to the babies’ demands.”

Babies! Tom’s mind was shrieking. It was about to shriek even more, however.

“Tom,” she looked at him and batted her blue eyes, the blueness soft with concern, and asked, “do you think the horse is going to foal soon?”

Horse? What fucking horse? What the fuck is going on?

“Mr. Jones?”

Elwin turned, mildly surprised to be called anything besides Elwin.

The crowd had proceeded one block since the bloody battle, and their numbers had swelled even more. There had to be over five hundred people now, and more were coming.

“Phone for you.” The teenager held out a cell phone.

Elwin studied the teenager.

“I...uh...picked it up at the last barricade. Then it rung and some guy wants to speak to you.”

Elwin frowned, then nodded as he held out his hand. As the teenager handed it to him Elwin said to the crowd, “Make sure you turn stuff like this in. We’re going to need phones.” Then, to Gus, “Gus, have some people collect phones, or whatever else we need, and send them over to your house.” Elwin put the telephone to his ear. “Yes?”

“Elwin Jones?”

“Who’s talkin’?”

“This is Lieutenant Mathew Huggs of the LAPD. You are engaging in criminal activities, and I am ordering you to cease those activities and turn yourself in.”

Elwin considered the cell phone for a long moment, his eyes hooded and thoughtful, then: “I suggest you remove all your people from Monkeyland.”

Next to Elwin somebody said, “You tell him, Elwin!”

“Mr. Jones, if you come in you will be dealt with fairly. If you don’t then—”

“Sir!” Elwin said. “If you don’t remove your people from our land then I cannot guarantee their safety. We have already had one battle, there has been blood shed, and we don’t want anymore!”

For a moment the officer on the other end of the line said nothing, then: “Do you understand what the word ‘sedition’ means?”

Elwin snapped back, “Do you understand what the word ‘justice’ means?”

Huggs hesitated, trying to figure out what Elwin was referring to, then, “If you back off then we can handle this hostage situation at the school and—”

“No,” Elwin suddenly shot into the phone. “Furthermore, my final word is this!” He smacked the cell phone on his knee, exploding it into little chips and pieces.

The people around him began to cheer.

While everybody backslapped everybody else, Reddy suddenly appeared in the crowd. He caught Elwin’s eye, and Elwin motioned to Gus and Zulu. The four men moved to the side for a quick conference.

“We cleared out the police,” Reddy said. “We’re putting them in that clothes warehouse over on Raymond St. Billy Jones, Sam Lucas and Shyla Jones have taken over, they each got a couple of people helping them.”

“Excellent work,” Elwin said, then he stared at the remains of the cell phone in his hand. He had wasted a good phone, but sometimes one needed to make a statement. “Make sure you get cell phones so we can stay in touch.”

“Got it.”

“Listen,” Elwin said, becoming just a touch more forceful. “Does anybody doubt that the police are going to be coming after us?” His meaning was clear: they were fugitives.

The others looked at him and he could see realization dawning.

“What you sayin’, Elwin?”

“I’m sayin’ it’s one thing to take over and kick the cops out, it’s another thing to hold on to what we’ve got.” He eyed each of them carefully, assessing the impact of his words.

“What you want us to do?” Reddy asked. There wasn’t an ounce of back off in his voice.

Elwin took a breath. “Gus, I am putting you in charge of taking the remaining barricades.”

“Got it.”

“Reddy and Zulu, I want you to organize more roving patrols. I want you to get things calmed down, arrest troublemakers if you have to, make sure this thing doesn’t explode into a riot.”

“Where are you going to be?” Zulu asked.

“I’m going back to Gus’ house. Now listen. I want you to look for volunteers. I want smart people, people who can get other people to do things. Send ‘em to Gus’ house, along with any weapons you can find.”

“First Monkeyland Volunteers, at your service,” Reddy said.

Smiles flashed across the other’s faces.

“Elwin?” Gus sounded troubled and Elwin looked at him.

“What if people don’t want to go along with us?”

“Like who?”

“I’ve come across some gangbangers that don’t want to pay us much attention.

Elwin frowned, then, “Look, the secret of leading is to give people work, give them responsibility. If you come across some banger that wants to cause trouble, you just tell him he’s in charge of making sure the ‘hood doesn’t burn. Make him important, give him something important to do. Most of these people ain’t never had nothing like that—so they’ll be willing if you do it right. Make them somebody and they’ll be somebody. Got it?”

Each of the men, having experienced this philosophy firsthand from the man who was explaining it, nodded their heads in pleased understanding.

“I got a question.”

Elwin looked at Reddy.

“What you want us to do about the white people?”

Gus knew what Reddy was referring to. He wasn’t talking about the cops, or a few white tourists caught in the crossfire, he was talking about white people who lived in South Central, who had jobs and owned businesses.

For a long moment Elwin stared at nothing. He considered every angle he could, then he said, “I want no harm to come to any unarmed white man. Tell them to take their belongings and leave, tell them they will be arrested if they don’t.”

“And if they don’t?” Reddy asked.

“Then arrest them,” Elwin said, and he stared at Reddy.

Reddy returned the stare. “Got it,” he said.

Elwin looked at each of the three men in turn, then spoke with conviction and determination. “Remember, the important stuff starts now. Anybody can shoot, anybody can start a riot, not anybody can make sure that we stay civilized and in control of ourselves—and we have to if we’re going to get our children back.”

Elwin’s sober words penetrated through to them.

Huey, walking the streets, was in a state of alarm. He had seen Dewey shot. He had been approaching a barricade, had been about to call

to Dewey when he had seen his friend reach for his cell phone, then the cops had shouted at Dewey and guns had been drawn and Dewey had been killed.

But why would the cops draw on Dewey? They must have known he was part of White Law, and that meant the police knew that White Law had people on the outside. The question was--how had they found out?

He, as had been Dewey, was ignorant of Betty Boop's small mistake.

Huey, upon seeing the death of Dewey, had immediately walked away. The cops, their attention on Dewey, had not noticed him.

And he had entered chaos.

It was his worst nightmare come true.

He was not just a stranger in a strange land...he was a stranger in a monkey land! And the people were no longer acting docile or otherwise ignoring him. Now they were openly hostile, and he had never experienced such a thing in his life!

He was different, and the people sat on porches and watched him.

He was the sole white man, and small children followed him, swinging sticks viciously at his back.

Several times he had been forced to run from the larger kids.

Several times groups had stared at him from distant street corners.

He had gone through yards, over fences, been cut off, chased by dogs.

He hadn't even been able to use his cell phone.

This was not the way it was supposed to be! The Monkeys were supposed to hide in their houses while White Law trotted off with a billion dollars!

But they weren't hiding. They were coming after him. A White Man!

For the first time in his life Huey suddenly realized what it was to be in the minority.

Really realized!

"Honky!" somebody screamed, and Huey looked over his shoulder.

Four large, black gangbangers, who had been standing in the shadows of an apartment entryway, were running towards him. They threw rocks and screamed insults, and if it wasn't for the iron fence around the apartment they would have had him. The bangers couldn't climb over the sharp points and had to run back to the gate before coming after him.

Huey broke into a trot. He was in excellent condition, had spent months honing himself to a physical peak for this mission, but now, no matter how good his condition was, he was close to running on empty.

Running here, running there, never being able to get all the way free from his pursuers, never finding his way out of the maze of Monkeyland, was exhausting him.

“Get him!”

“Get whitey!”

“Kill the fucker!”

Huey turned left at the corner and broke into a sprint.

He ran past store fronts where merchants stood and guarded their wares. The merchants had clubs and home made weapons, but, while they didn't threaten him, they didn't offer to help him, either.

He cut across the street, bounced off a car that skidded to miss him, and charged onto a sidewalk.

“Get whitey!”

More blacks were in front of him. They carried bats and tire irons as they closed on him.

“Kill ‘im!”

There was no way out!

Sobbing, he kicked at a door and ran up some stairs. The thunder of footsteps chased him.

He was in a hallway. He ran, his feet pounding on the thin rug.

A doorway opened and a black woman looked out. She was holding a pot of food in one hand. Anger on her face, she threw the pan at him.

“Aiiee!” he screamed. He rubbed at the pea soup burning his eyes, and he banged back and forth against the walls.

Footsteps behind him.

He tried to draw his gun.

He had it! He pulled the trigger once, then the gun was forced from his hand. Fists pummeled him and feet kicked him. Bats and tire irons broke his bones. He crumpled to the floor and tried to protect himself.

When the beating was done Huey was not conscious—and never would be again.

Wiley Coyote walked to the small prep table in the center of the kitchen. He pulled a mousetrap out of his pocket and set it. Carefully, he put a ping pong ball on the bar. He then placed the trap on the table, looked at Tom and the ladies in the corner, smiled, and went back to his maps.

Rod Pearson watched the streets and chewed on his lip. Darkness was less than an hour away, and he was troubled over the orders and information that had come down to him. First, there had been the admonishments over the radio to beware of armed citizens, along with a

caution to be ready to abandon the barricade at a moment's notice. Then, he had been told to send all his black officers back to the corner mall. White officers had replaced those men, and he had found out that the black policemen were being reassigned throughout the city. Apparently barricades had fallen, or had been given away by black officers. But to who? What the hell was going on? And, if that confusion wasn't enough, there was the attitude of the citizens. The citizens weren't armed, but the dull resentment of the afternoon had given way to looks of deep anger and even rage. How the hell was he supposed to protect and serve people who hated him?

As he had this last thought, he noticed several hard looking black men walk past the barricade. These citizens, concealing their anger, seemed to be about something, and Rod watched them for a moment. The citizens continued on to houses and through yards, and Rod pushed them out of his mind. He inspected the barricade, spoke to his score of men, and listened to the occasional flurries of gunshots happening elsewhere in the city.

The smell of smoke was in the air, which meant fires had been set. If there was hell to pay—somebody was making a down payment.

“Joe, pull your car a little tighter.”

They could have a four sided box to hide in. Now why was he thinking of hiding?

“Officer?”

He turned. A thin, black man stood on the other side of the barricade.

“Yes, sir?”

“My name is Gus Peeples, and I suggest that you put your hands up.”

Rod stared at the man. Thin. Not dirty. Not well dressed, but clean. A look in his eyes that said he was talking serious business.

“And why would we do that?” Careful.

“Because I've got men on all sides. You are surrounded. You are prisoners of Monkeyland.”

Rod turned. Surrounded. Yes. He was. People who had walked meanly by were suddenly standing with guns in hands, guns that were aimed at him and his fellow officers. He looked up the street and saw cops being herded out of yards. Armed blacks were everywhere, and they were definitely in control.

His men started to reach for their weapons. They were close to panic.

“Hold it!” Rod yelled.

He turned back to Gus Peeples. He had been surrounded, hadn't had a chance, hadn't really known what to expect, and now he had no choices.

“Put your hands up,” Rod said to his men.

Monkeylanders moved through the barricade. They confiscated weapons and collected ammunition quickly and efficiently. They told the cops to sit down, and when the confused cops were slow they didn't buttstroke them with rifles or kick their legs. They might have mean eyes, but they were moving with organized purpose.

“Elwin? Barricade four is down. Moving to five.” Gus spoke into a cell phone. “No. No injuries. Everything is cool.”

Somebody—with Rod's gun in his hand—told Rod to sit down against the side of the cop car. Rod sat. He looked up at the man who had told him to sit. “Who are you guys?”

“We the Monkeyland Volunteers.” There was unmistakable pride in the voice.

Just the day before this man would have fought, screamed at and sued anybody who called him a Monkey, now it was becoming a source of pride. Dimly, in the back of his mind, Rod made the association that such changes of attitudes were possible only in the chaos of war.

Not Riot.

Not rebellion.

War.

Sally Yelkins, seventy-two years old, had been born and raised in Texas. Thirty-eight years previous, she had moved to California, and she had lived in a house on Olympia ever since. She was healthy—coming from good stock as she had—and had outlived two husbands. She lived in a small community of white people stuck into the side of South Central, and for years she had practiced a policy of ‘you treat me right and I'll treat you right.’ She had, as a result, never had a problem with blacks. Now, standing on her front porch, she watched her neighborhood disintegrate.

It had started an hour ago when a horde, that was the only word for it, of large, black men had started going door to door, demanding that white people leave the neighborhood. Shortly after that, people, carrying what belongings they could, had started packing their belongings on their cars and driving away.

Now the blacks had reached her house, were coming up her drive—were coming for her.

She stepped back inside her polite house and closed the door.

Knock. Knock.

No help from the police. She had been watching TV and knew that the police were busy with that terrible school business.

She looked through the peephole.

“Yes?”

“We’re evacuating the neighborhood, ma’am. You have five minutes to get what belongings you can carry and leave.”

Sally’s thin lips closed in irritation.

“You can get the hell off my porch or I’ll call the police!”

“Ma’am,” the man’s tones did not sound friendly, “if you don’t leave then we will break the door down and take you prisoner.”

“One moment,” Sally said. She moved to the little coat closet at the side of the foyer. She opened the door to the closet and pulled a chair into the doorway so she could reach the top shelf.

“Ma’am?” The man pounded on her door. “I’m warning you!”

Sally lifted down the shoebox—it sure was terribly heavy after all these years—and opened it to reveal the big six gun she had brought with her from Texas thirty-eight years previous. One of her husbands, the second one, had wanted her to get rid of it, but there was no way a Yelkins would be caught without a firearm.

“Ma’am?”

Sally checked the wheel to make sure that the gun was fully loaded. She grabbed the box of shells and placed them in the large pocket of her housecoat, then climbed off the chair.

“Okay, kick it in!” The voice on the porch commanded.

The door was thick, good oak with two dead bolts, and it took a minute for the men on the porch to kick it in. When it finally swung back Sally could be seen standing under the arch of a doorway, her feet spread and the gun pointed.

“Hey!” one of the kickers exclaimed.

Sally began pulling the trigger of her very large gun.

BOOM! One man flew backwards with streamers of blood flying from his back.

BOOM! Another man flew back.

Sally, having grown up on the plains of Texas, where a family ate well in accordance with their ability to shoot, was a hell of a shot.

The men who had been moving the white people out of the neighborhood went flying over the handrails of the porch.

Sally, moving as if she had not a care in the world, stepped forward and took a position on the porch. She sighted.

BOOM! A man running across the lawn flew into a bush and flipped. His hands stretched out and he tried to crawl.

BOOM! A man at the curb did a header.

BOOM! A woman with a shotgun, she had been too surprised to use the weapon, went flying backwards.

BOOM! A man hiding behind a car had the unpleasant sensation of a slug traveling through two doors and then across his wide shoulders.

Sally flipped the wheel and shook the empties out. They scattered across the well swept porch like beads freed from a string.

BANG! Somebody shot a gun at Sally, it sounded like one of those little lady's guns. The slug smacked into the wall right above Sally, and Sally stepped calmly to the right and finished reloading.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! She aimed at people who were aiming at her, her jaw very pugnacious as she squinted over the sights.

BANG! BANG! BANG! Slugs whistled past her and lodged in the wood of her house.

Then: BOOM! BOOM! And, from an M-16 confiscated from the cops: POPOPOPOPOPOPOP! The Monkeylanders, realizing that they had a real live gun battle on their hands, were starting to return fire.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

From the streets a volley of lesser bangs interspersed with the deeper crack of rifles as the Monkeylanders upped their fire.

And, as Sally flipped the wheel out once again, the slugs buzzing like bees all around her, bullets finally began to find her skinny frame.

Whap! She was twisted, her skinny frame hitting an elbow on a porch pillar.

Whap! It felt like her shoulder had exploded—and it had.

Shells skittered across the porch and she found herself lying face down. She reached for the rolling shells and continued reloading.

The Monkeylanders charged, unloaded their weapons in a furious barrage, and Sally Yelkins, thirty-eight years out of Texas, died.

The Monkeylanders finally ran out of ammunition. The rush stopped at the foot of the porch as they realized that they had shot the enemy, and the enemy was dead.

“Sweet Mother of Jesus!” a hulking youth exclaimed. “I always thought these whiteys were a bunch of soft chickenshits!”

When the tally was taken the score would end up being Sally Yelkins eight, Monkeyland one.

It was dusk, the sun was a fat, faded pumpkin in the sky, and Reverend Thomason was a tired and frustrated man. He had spent the afternoon going from barricade to barricade, always a step behind, and when he had finally caught up to the Monkeyland Volunteers Elwin Jones hadn't even been in charge!

The idiot that had been in charge, Gus Peeples, had looked at him with no respect whatsoever, and merely said that Elwin might be at his house—or might not.

Lord! What an idiot!

And when Thomason had gone to Gus Peeples' house, he had been directed to a warehouse filled with subdued and discouraged white police officers. Then he had been sent to yet another warehouse—this one filled with weapons—where he had been told that he had just missed Elwin Jones, and that Elwin Jones had gone to Gus' house. Now, standing

outside Gus' house, he was actually being patted down like some common criminal.

"I am a man of the cloth!" he said, indignantly.

Finally, he was shown into the house. His attitude, at that precise moment, was a little put out, to say the least.

"I am looking for Elwin Jones," Thomason announced haughtily to the half dozen men and women working at card tables set up in the living room.

They looked up at him, then ignored him and returned to working on lists of people and weapons. One man said, "In the kitchen."

Thomason wanted to shake some sense into these people, but they had obviously been misled. He stomped towards the kitchen.

The kitchen was an older kitchen, with a dripping faucet and tiles that leaked grout. The linoleum was old and cracked and the cabinets had once been painted a bright yellow. To one side Elwin Jones and several men were bent over a map which hung over the sides of a kitchen table. There was a circle of x's on the map, signifying conquered barricades, and a double red line, which outlined the South Central area. On the wall was a picture of fruits and vegetables.

"Elwin Jones! What is going on!" Thomason demanded, determined to assert himself. Whatever the hierarchy, Thomason had no doubt that he was needed.

People had to be led, after all, and what would a tire buster know about leading people?

Elwin looked up at the stocky Reverend. All day long, ever since he had thrown that scrawny Mr. Big Shoes through the crackhouse door, he had been moving. He had been wounded, and he had been in battle, and he was tired. He was also different. People had always trusted him, friends always asked him to help move the refrigerator or pull the block in their old car, but now they were asking him other things, important things, and they seemed to think that he would know the answers. Somehow, he had to keep an even keel. Somehow, in spite of all changes, he had to remain the same person as he had always been. And he had to do this in spite of being bone-weary tired.

"Welcome to Monkeyland, Reverend." He smiled tiredly and a bit ruefully.

Several of the people in the room smiled also, but there was a determined grimness to their smiles.

That 'Monkeyland' thing again!

"What do you mean Monkeyland?"

"We were so named by that White Law group, and we'll keep that name until we come up with a better one. Of course, there will always be those who will stay fixed on the name Monkeyland."

"Kingland," said a woman peeling potatoes at a sink.

“Yes, definitely a possibility. But there were two Kings.”

Thomason’s mind moved quickly as he tried to come up to speed. Martin Luther King, a religious figure of magnitude, like himself. And Rodney King, a crook. In spite of what anybody anywhere else might think, even the black community realized that Rodney King was just a petty criminal. But the point was that Kingland would be considered a name with two potential inspirations, and to confuse the religious with the criminal was not good.

“Lutherland,” a guard at the back door said, not letting up on the scanning of the backyard.

“Reverend would like that, wouldn’t you?” A woman at the sink grinned.

Thomason knew better than to rise to the bait. He also knew that these people weren’t exactly partial to him, and that he had best proceed with care, and that meant working with Elwin Jones. “If you folks have finished flapping your lips, then maybe you could tell me what you are planning to do here.” Lower tones, more bass. Bass was always impressive.

Elwin sat back and stretched. “Simple, Reverend. We have taken over the barricades, and the police have set up another perimeter. The second perimeter is around the whole of South Central, and inside this perimeter we have set up roving patrols, and we are now discussing the termination of all crack houses—and that’s what we’re planning.”

Elwin didn’t feel entirely comfortable with the Reverend, but the Reverend did have many followers, and it would be best not to follow the practice of divisiveness in these times.

Thomason’s mind was moving at light speed. Yes, he had ideas, and he should be allowed a forum with which to present these ideas to the people of Monkeyland. Right now, however, these people weren’t interested in the glory of fine speech; they were interested in immediate results, and he better offer something substantive.

“Have you planned for food?”

The men exchanged glances over the small table.

“I thought so. You think of guns and fighting, and ignore the fact that there are women and children to be thought of. You can’t just go off shooting people, you have to find and store food. You have to make plans for gardens. You have to make plans for getting more food, and this means opening lines of communication, ensuring that you can transport goods to and from our new country. Tell me, have you considered who is going to be in charge of ambassadors to other countries?”

And, with this one sentence, Thomason created, ran for, and was elected to official position.

“I can’t reach Huey or Dewey.”

Betty, in the silence of the kitchen, understood the importance of what Wiley was saying.

“Nothing on the TV?”

“No.”

“Then the Monkeys must have gotten them.”

“Both Huey and Dewey?”

Betty continued, “Or they were caught by the police, and the media is out of the loop.”

Wiley nodded.

Betty asked, “How about Louis?”

“He’s still sittin’ pretty.”

“Tell him to keep low. He can try to get to us tonight, or he can make his own way out. It’s up to him.”

“We’re leaving?”

Betty looked through the door of the kitchen into the auditorium. In the darkness all that could be seen of the Monkeys were patches of bright clothing and scared eyes.

“Maybe,” she said.

Wiley turned back to the map, punched the speed dial for Louis, and shortly was talking.

Betty Boop was worried. When she talked to Tom she wasn’t worried. Things were fine, then, but there was this feeling, whenever she wasn’t talking to him, that things were coming unraveled. The city had the numbers of the bank accounts, but thus far Foghorn had reported no activity in those accounts.

But it wasn’t the city that worried her. They might not get the money. Hell. She wouldn’t pay for a bunch of Monkeys, though she expected the city to pay, but she certainly didn’t expect anybody to organize any resistance.

The Monkeys had burned a crack house. They had fought the cops. Not in wide spread riot, which she had expected, but in short—almost too short to be noted—military actions.

Could the Monkeys be organizing? Was such a thing possible? Was there too much alien DNA in the Monkeys?

No.

She wouldn’t buy that.

She turned towards the corner.

Tom stared at her.

She smiled.

He smiled.

She felt better, then she had a thought.

If they left tonight then she would have to kill the black bitch principal—which she wouldn’t mind too much—but what about that

quivering white bitch? The teacher didn't talk much, but, when the cops asked, she would certainly offer a complete description.

Maybe she shouldn't have shown them her face.

But it was sound strategy at the time, kept them calm and reassured concerning their status.

But then she had been going to stay and seek her forum. Now it looked like she wasn't. Now it looked like her forum was disappearing, and that meant that she would be leaving.

She would have to kill the white teacher.

This point, so difficult for her gently fraying mind to broach, led to the next, inescapable point.

Tom.

She hadn't known Tom would come back into her life.

She would be leaving...Tom.

Tom had seen her face, too.

Would Tom go with her when they left? Could he? Would the others let him?

The thought of him staying behind, of her having to kill him, segued into *God, if she could only be done with this...done and back at the ranch, the cold wind warning of winter better chop the wood and fix the roof and Tom is there feed for the horses would the foal come tonight she hoped it would.*

She turned back to Foghorn. Flighty thoughts of home, thoughts absent of horses and foals and such (thoughts that she had not had before she had killed little Meesha Brown) evaporated in the face of the necessities of command. She was unaware of how she was vacillating in her mind.

"Torch it!" the crowd screamed.

Lenny Hinson swung the torch and prepared to throw it through the window of the white owned business not three blocks South of Lincoln Elementary.

"Burn the fuckers out!"

"Burn Whitey!"

BOOM!

The crowd hit the dirt, shocked by the discharge of the shotgun. Lenny dropped the torch and tried to crawl under a car.

Slowly, when no more shots were fired, the people in the crowd looked up to see who had fired the shotgun in their ears.

Reddy, looking solid in a billowing black leather coat, stood with a smoking shotgun in his arms. There were ten similarly armed men behind him.

"On your feet," Reddy said in a loud, no nonsense voice.

The crowd began to get up and dust themselves off.

“What the fuck, Reddy! What you doin’?” Lenny knew the man with the shotgun.

Reddy raised his voice and spoke to Lenny. He was like thunder over the crowd.

“What the fuck are *you* doin’?”

Lenny stared at Reddy.

“You gonna burn your own homes again?” His words sunk in as he looked across the ring of faces.

“Just Whitey!” somebody said.

Reddy ignored the voice. “Lenny, how long did it take you to get a job after the last riot?”

Lenny looked down in dull anger.

“And all that time you was takin’ the White Man’s welfare dollars and reportin’ to him like he was your goddamn probation officer or somethin’!”

Lenny nodded. He was still angry, but it was a different kind of anger now, a dull, smoldering anger.

“Jimmy!”

A man in the back of the crowd stared at Reddy.

“You had that rib joint over on 123rd. You ever get it built back up?”

“They said they was goin’ to lend us the money,” a woman said, resentment obvious in her voice.

“Yeah, they was goin’ to lend you the money! They was goin’ to lend you white dollars, but we seem to have a lot of those big white businesses in the ‘hood these days. Sally, who you workin’ for now?”

Sally, a large woman with a bouffant of hair, said, “MacDonalds.”

“You all want to work for the big MacD? What about it?”

“What you tellin’ us, Reddy. You talkin’ the talk, but what’s the walk?”

Reddy lowered his shotgun, “Come here, folks. Gather in.”

The crowd moved closer.

“We’re takin’ the ‘hood back.”

“Whatchou mean?” a skinny fellow with yellow eyes and no teeth asked. There was a considerable glint in those yellow eyes.

“You all heard about the crack house that got burnt?”

Head nods.

“And we took the barricades, took the cops prisoner and—”

“Who’s we?” a suspicious woman blurted.

“Elwin Jones.”

Nobody said anything. Several of them knew of Elwin, and rumors had been flying that afternoon. They began to think about what Reddy was saying.

Reddy continued. "Elwin took it, but we got to hold it. And that don't mean burnin' the whole damned 'hood to hell 'n back! We got the guns, we can do it, but we need you people to organize."

That was a curve ball. Suddenly everybody was looking at each other in surprise.

"We're goin' to organize and start our own country," Reddy said.

"Our own country?" somebody muttered in disbelief.

"Yeah?" The suspicious woman again. "And what you gonna call this country.

"We're gonna call it what they call it." Gus looked at the people defiantly.

"What's that?" several people asked.

"Monkeyland."

Silence. Surprised silence.

"We're gonna push it in their faces. We're gonna take what they call us and show them the truth! You want to be part of that?" And, from the dawning look upon their faces, they did.

"Good evening, Mr. Mayor." Chief Teskins shook hands and took the seat Fresling indicated.

They were in the mayor's office because Teskins had asked to brief Fresling personally. Fresling knew that this was not good. It meant something was happening for which Teskins had no solution. And if Teskins had no solution then why would he, Fresling, have a solution?

"What can I do for you, Chief?" Fresling gave a slight groan as he sat. What a day! Everything had started out peachy, then White Law had torn the day apart. Then, if that wasn't bad enough, that idiot Thomason had shown up and held an impromptu rabble rousing session on the front steps of his place of business. What was going to be next?

"Well, sir, there is...uh...apparently a rebellion going on."

Fresling stopped in the act of reaching for a cigar. He was frozen for a moment, then he sat back to consider the chief.

"This afternoon a group of black citizens calling themselves 'The Monkeyland Volunteers' took over the barricades. They took our officers hostage and are holding them somewhere. We have set up a new perimeter—one around the whole of South Central—and the blacks are setting up a matching perimeter just inside our perimeter. Our perimeter is facing in, theirs is facing out. People are being taken hostage and—"

It felt like somebody had just set off an airhorn in the mayor's mind. "Are these people Black Panthers or something?" he managed.

"No, sir. They seem to be your average citizen. They are arming themselves and keeping all white people out."

"And making hostages of all white people inside their so called perimeter?"

“We’re not sure. There have been reports of violence. There have been reports of hostage taking, but it seems to be mainly the police they’re holding. Some white people have simply been turned out. Apparently, the Monkeylanders are letting some people leave. They even let them take their belongings. They—”

“Chief, let me get this straight. Are you saying that there is a revolution occurring within the borders of Los Angeles?”

“Yes, sir.”

Stunned silence. Never, in his wildest nightmares, had Fresling imagined such a thing. What the hell could he do?

“Sir?”

“Yes?”

“I suggest calling out the National Guard.”

“The National Guard?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve been on the scene. I’ve even talked to some of the people leaving Monkeyland. This is turning into a real problem. These so called ‘Monkeyland Volunteers’ are getting more and more organized as they go along. Word is that they are confiscating food supplies, making plans for massive resistance, storing weapons, the whole bit. Even with the police reserve I can only raise ten thousand men. And these men won’t be trained for full out and out combat. Not only that, it takes a heavy support group to establish any kind of military action, and—”

“Wait a minute!” Fresling rubbed his head while Chief Teskins waited. Call out the National Guard? He wasn’t going to call out the National Guard!

“Sir?”

“Wait...wait...”

He stood up, went to the sink and splashed water on his face—the hell with his expensive shirt—he needed to get fresh on this. He turned, leaned against the edge of the wet bar, and inspected Chief Teskins.

Solid man. No bullshit. If the situation was as bad as the Chief had described it then there was cause for alarm.

“Chief.” He went back to his desk, sat down. “I don’t think I can call out the National Guard at this point.”

Teskins was going to say something, but Fresling raised his hand to forestall him.

“Look, aside from the constitutional question of taking military action against US citizens, think about all the precedents: Kent State; Waco; Ruby Ridge; that goddamn maniac in Little Rock. If we call in tanks and machine guns, we are opening ourselves to the worst kind of publicity.

Teskins sat, stunned. Publicity? Was this what it was all about? Fucking publicity?

“No, the solution is honest communication with these people. They have demands, we can work something out...” In this fashion Fresling, being, really, a politician, with all that that entailed, fashioned a fantasy scenario that had nothing to do with reality. Perhaps Teskins could have chipped away at Fresling. After all, talk long enough and the politician, lacking any real integrity, would sway, but at that moment Fresling’s secretary entered the room.

“Sir? There is somebody on the phone.”

Normally Fresling would have chewed his secretary out for interrupting with such a nebulous statement. After all, he didn’t take phone calls from just anybody, but he was at wit’s end and his secretary offered a possibility to, if not end, at least forestall the meeting with Teskins.

“Who is it?”

“He says he’s the First Ambassador of Monkeyland.” The secretary continued, looking a bit confused.

Fresling looked at Teskins in surprise. Teskins tilted his head at this absurdity. Fresling picked up the phone. “Hello? Oh, Reverend Thomason! Just one moment...” He stopped talking, put his hand over the receiver and looked at Teskins significantly. “There! You see? There are intelligent people still willing to talk.” Fresling uncovered the phone. “Reverend? What can I do for you?” As Fresling began talking to Reverend Thomason, who was now calling himself the First Ambassador of Monkeyland, he waved his hand at Teskins to indicate that the meeting was over.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Ahhh!” Louis woke with a lurch, grabbed his head, and waited for his heart to stop pounding.

The dream. He had only dozed for five minutes, and he had had the dream again: Viet Nam. Slithering through a Viet Cong barracks and slicing the throat of every other man. It had seemed like a good idea at the time—a fun idea.

Now, decades later, afraid to go to sleep lest he dream the dream again, he wasn't sure.

He wasn't sure because the dream was different than the real thing. In the real thing his victims hadn't woken up after dying, chased him from the barracks, caught him and shredded him with their fingernails, all the while screaming *Why! Why!*

In the dream, if he didn't wake up soon enough, his victims frequently did.

He sat up and pivoted to a sitting position and stared at the school across the street. Noting the lack of activity at the school, he rubbed his face...and wondered what had happened to Huey and Dewey.

It was quiet in the attic. All that could be heard was the occasional sound of far away gunshots. He glanced at the little TV he had brought with him. There had been nothing on the TV about Dewey and Huey. 'Course the press being so damned incompetent, he didn't really expect them to tell him anything that was current and happening.

So what had happened to them? He couldn't raise them on the cell phone, and he hadn't seen them with his binoculars, and he had this little voice, in the backyard of his cranium, telling him that something had gone wrong.

From where he was, he could see parts of backyards on both sides of the school. He could see the barricade on Commerce from one end of the attic, and he could see another one, on 122nd, from the other end of the attic. Fucking Monkeys had taken over the barricades, could you believe that? Maybe Dewey and Huey had been gathered up with the police? That would account for the lack of news on the TV.

He leaned over and grabbed a bottle of water—he had several bottles of water because he had known it would be hot in the attic—and took a sip. The water was cold because he had frozen it the night before. He rattled the chunk of ice still in the bottle and put the bottle down.

So, should he make for the school tonight? Or should he make his getaway through Monkeyland?

Louis had been a member of Third Force Recon in Nam. His orders, loosely, when being dropped into enemy territory, were to gather data while creating as much havoc as he could while making his way back to the front lines.

Havoc. He liked that. He remembered the thrill of being allowed to destroy whatever he wanted to. He had blown up cars, refineries, factories. He liked to sit at a distance and listen to the ‘whump!’ of exploding society. He liked the thrill of ghosting through enemy encampments, hooking grenades to doors to be opened, putting charges under toilet seats, cutting sentry’s throats. It was all good fun, at least until the dreams had started.

Thank God he had found Betty.

Working for Betty, planning this mission, training for this mission, the dreams had lessened. Sometimes he even slept a whole night through.

But he had just had the dream again and, coupled with the fact that Huey and Dewey had disappeared, and the fact that the Monkeys were taking over the barricades, that meant the mission was about over.

Yeah. He could feel it. Things were going strange, and maybe he better stop worrying about Huey and Dewey and start thinking about getting out of Monkeyland.

He smiled. He could make his escape right through the heart of Monkeyland: blowing up buildings; cutting a swatch of destruction; wreaking havoc wherever he could.

If he couldn’t have a billion dollars then maybe he could have, at the very least, a little havoc.

Havoc.

Such a nice word.

“I always deal fairly! I never raise pricee! What you do! What you do!” Though Sing Lee’s voice was shrill it had no effect on the men in his store.

“Quiet down, Sing.” The large, black man spoke calmly, a shotgun cradled in his arms. “You’ll be paid for all your groceries. Heck, if we didn’t confiscate them then looters would just steal them anyway. At least this way you’ll get paid.

“How I get paid! You say pay! I say how!”

Citizens of Monkeyland, armed with hand trucks and shopping carts, carted boxes of peaches and tea and ham and other assorted groceries around the two men and out of the corner store.

Sing had come from Korea, worked hard, and made it through the riots. And now this! This wasn’t looting! This was out and out theft!

“Look, I’ve come into your store for years. You know me. When I say you’ll get paid, you can believe me.”

“How I get paid!? How!? How!?”

The black man, a full sergeant in the Second Company of Monkeyland Volunteers, sighed. "Look, Sing. We got lots of money."

"Where you get money?"

"We got it from the crack house we burned up."

Sing was suddenly quiet. These were the hooligans who had burned the house? What was going to stop them from burning his business?

"Don't worry. We ain't going to burn you. Look, how much you think all this stuff is worth?"

"How much?" Sing's eyes went wide.

"That's right. "You put a price on this stuff. Make it a fair price."

"You want me to put price on this stuff?" Not food. Not goods. Stuff, called stuff because Sing was surprised.

"How much is it worth?"

Sing began to do calculations in his head. To tell the truth, he knew exactly how much everything was worth to the penny. However, because these men were taking it all at once, and because he was scared he would never see a penny, and because he deserved a slight profit... "75,000 dollah!"

"You shittin' me." The black man grinned.

"Okay, 72,000 dollah, no less. Hard bargain! You drive hard bargain! 72,000 dollah!" He glared at the larger man.

"That's quite a mark up. Chuck!"

"Yo." A black man sporting dreadlocks and a colorful African robe appeared.

"I want you to go to headquarters and tell Mr. Peeples that Mr. Sing Lee, an honorable man, would like 72,000 'dollah' for his merchandise. Bring back the cash as quick as you can."

"Yo." Chuck disappeared into the coming night.

Sing Lee stood silent. He didn't believe. He folded his arms. Would they really give him \$72,000?

"Okay, Sing, the cash will be coming, and before it gets here I want to give you a little advice."

"What 'vice?"

"Things are going to be getting a little strange in the 'hood, and it would be better if you had some relatives, maybe in Beverly Hills or something."

"Me no got relatives in Beverly Hills. You think me big movie star! Ha!"

"Well, anywhere. No offense, you been a right guy, a little pricey maybe, but you ain't the right color, if you get my drift."

"Coloh? What coloh? Me US Citizen."

"Yeah, but you ain't in the US. You in Monkeyland now."

"Monkeyland?"

“Yeah. The brothers got together and decided to have their own country.”

“How be membeh of new country? How be membeh of Monkeyland?”

Several of the brothers in the store chuckled.

“I can’t tell you right off, but I’m sure there will be ways to get citizenship in Monkeyland. Course we’re going to have standards. We’re not like Honkyland. We want to stand for something.”

“Me got standards. Me run store for years. You know me got standards.”

“I know, but—”

“Me not leaving. Me got family heah. Me got home. Me got business. Me stay heah!” He folded his arms. He had forgotten money. His home was worth more than money.

The black man sighed. “Okay, I guess we could set up some sort of guard around you. If Gus wants you gone, though, then you’re going to have to leave. You got that?”

“Me got! Me got! Me be membeh of Monkeyland.”

“That’s citizen.”

“Yeah. Me be citizen, too!”

“Okay,” the black man turned to his workers. The store was near empty. The stacks of ‘two for one’ specials were in trucks outside, ready to be transported to places around the ‘hood which the white man wouldn’t know about, and which could be used for distribution when times got tough.

Suddenly Chuck ran into the store. “Here go, bro.” He held out a package wrapped in tinfoil.

The black man pulled a corner back to reveal that it really was money, then handed it to Sing, who’s eyes bulged so far out they threatened to fall out of his skull and roll on the floor.

“Okay, guys, let’s wrap this up and—”

Sing tugged at the black man’s sleeve. “Hey! You want buy truck?”

Elwin Jones stood with his back to the sink and frowned. The room had divided into two camps. Reverend Thomason and his people sat at the table or stood against the wall. Elwin’s people stood against the drain board.

The Reverend’s people wore expensive suits.

Elwin’s people wore tee shirts and pants (which pants and tees were mostly black, which was starting to look like the uniform of the day).

Between the two camps was tension.

The good Reverend, though he had a couple of good ideas, seemed to take a curious delight in opposing Elwin, or anything Elwin's side might say.

"I have talked to the mayor. He has guaranteed that the National Guard will not be called. He is offering that we incorporate as a city and —"

"So we should stop being a country and start being a city. Go back to being a city. A black city in a white country." One of Elwin's people interrupted the preacher.

Thomason countered with, "This man has made major concessions. There will be no reprisals and—"

"You a fuckin' politician," somebody muttered.

"Don't blaspheme in my presence," Thomason said, righteously.

Elwin waited, listened to the argument rise again. He wasn't talking much, just listening, trying to understand all the ramifications of the issue.

"I ain't goin' to front for no white man."

"We been fightin' and now you askin' to give it back."

"No, I am saying we can co-exist...and—"

"Elwin?" Gus Peeples whispered from the back door. Elwin stared at his lieutenant. If the Most Reverend Thomason knew a little more about hard work and organizing, and less about talking and preaching, then things would go a little smoother. Still, everybody had a place. Thomason had contributed some valuable insights, and the fact that Thomason had asked, almost demanded, to be named president hadn't helped the man at all.

"Scuse me," Elwin said.

Thomason stared as Elwin walked past.

For a second Elwin had the thought that Thomason was going to follow him. The man seemed to want to be in on everything.

"Yeah?"

Gus and Elwin stood under a half grown peach tree. A mother stood on the far side of the yard with a young girl at her side. Somebody had a boom box on somewhere, and the raucous sound didn't sound quite so harsh in the softness of the lowering night.

"We're goin' to try gettin' to the school," Gus said.

Elwin stared up at the stars, or where the stars would be if there wasn't so much smoke in the air. In spite of their efforts, there were still people who had managed to torch a building or car, and there had been deaths, but wholesale rioting had been avoided.

And now that they had taken back their neighborhood they had to see about 600 children. That was the crux of the matter, after all. That was what had started everything, and...so why did he feel so tired and run down?

“Elwin.”

Elwin, even as he protested in his own mind, knew that Gus Peeples was asking for a blessing.

“Yes,” he said, simply, signifying that it was time.

Gus nodded in the darkness, then: “You buyin’ any of that shit the Reverend is passin’?”

Elwin shook his head, then explained: “The man does have insights.” But how valuable were those insights? Seemed like the Reverend’s insights were getting smaller, and his mouth was getting bigger.

“Well, you let me know if you need him taken care.”

Taken care of? What was Gus thinking of? And the potential for disaster, if he didn’t keep a level head, was impinging on Elwin. “I don’t think it’ll come to that,” he said softly, tiredly.

“Okay, but you remember.”

Elwin said that he would and the two men bumped fists in the darkness, then Gus turned away and was swallowed up by the night.

Elwin walked back into the kitchen. In the short interim of his absence, the discussion had changed from the serious to the not so serious, though, to look at the faces of those arguing, it was more serious.

“I say a black flag, and the cross should be silver.”

“And I want our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, on the cross.”

“We ain’t victims,” somebody shot at Thomason.

Thomason, undaunted, shot back, “You speak that way about our Lord and Savior?”

“I can get the black, but the silver is probably going to be a little white,” a woman said.

“Long as there ain’t no honky hangin’ on it,” one of Elwin’s people said.

Thomason jumped to his feet, his voice left the bass and screamed, “Don’t you dare talk about Christ that—”

Another voice, equally strident, equally pissed, clamored at Thomason, “He looks white to me!”

Thomason moved towards the man who had made the last statement and several people jumped between the two. The kitchen resolved into men wrestling each other to the ground.

Elwin looked over to the sink and saw that somebody had laid a pistol on the green tile. He would have to talk with everybody about making sure that weapons stayed out of the reach of children. So thinking, he took the pistol and fired one round into the ceiling.

Everybody froze in mid wrestle.

“Have a seat, folks. We can do this without the fighting.” Elwin was the absolute picture of calm.

Slowly, in moods ranging from sheepish to irritated, the combatants broke apart. Thomason made a show of brushing himself off.

After a moment, Elwin spoke again: "Now, Reverend, your side has one minute to make it's case, and the other side won't talk. Then the other side will take it's turn—and there will be no interruptin' or I will punctuate somethin' else other than this leaky roof. Is that clear?"

Both sides nodded, and Thomason cleared his throat.

"Before you start to talking, however, I would like to make one observation."

They all looked at Elwin.

"Has anybody considered a black flag with a silver monkey on it?"

One could almost hear the click of concerted thought. Another decision had been reached, this one spontaneous and fitting. There would be more argument, people would raise their voices and perhaps scream of unfairness and stupidity before other people gave in, but Elwin Jones, the father of his country, had once again risen to the occasion. The flag of Monkeyland had been chosen.

On Manchester, a Mercury Marquis rolled to a stop in front of a police barricade. A hundred yards further on was another barricade, that one manned by blacks. The second barricade established the basic perimeter Monkeyland was claiming as it's border.

There were only four cops at the first barricade. This was because there were no black officers being allowed at the perimeter, and because Monkeyland had taken so many prisoners, and because the area of South Central was quite a bit larger than a simple little school.

Two of the cops walked up to the Marquis. The other two stood back and watched.

"Sorry, sir, you'll have to turn back."

"I ain't turnin' back. That's my country up ahead." The speaker was young, had kinky, black hair slicked back with pomade and wore shiny pants. Next to him was a scared young girl with a baby in her arms. The baby cried softly and the girl, wide eyed and missing one tooth, tried to soothe it.

"Sorry, sir. Nobody is being allowed into South Central. Where are you from?"

"I am going to Monkeyland! That is my home—and I am going home!" The young black was becoming more agitated.

"Sorry, sir." Both cops had their hands on their weapons. The two cops behind them held their weapons at the ready. "You can report to an Aid Center if you live in South Central, otherwise you'll have to leave."

For a long moment the young black behind the wheel looked at the cops, then, grumbling, he put his car into reverse and backed away.

The cops sighed as they looked at one another in relief. This was the sixth car in forty minutes, and they were getting a little flustered. Why not let the damned people go where they wanted to?

Suddenly, the engine of the Marquis roared. Tires squealed and smoked, and the Marquis accelerated right at the cops!

If the Marquis had gone around the roadblock, if the car hadn't aimed directly at the two cops, then they probably wouldn't have responded as they did. The car was aimed at the cops, however, and became more of a guided missile than a vehicle for transportation. The cops drew their revolvers and began peppering the car.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The windshield shattered and the driver jerked his head to the side, half his cheek blown away. The girl next to him huddled over her baby in the corner and screamed.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The cops dove to the sides and the car went between them. They spun and fired after it, and were joined by the concerted fire of the other two cops. Bullets missed the car as much as hit it, and at the far barricade the Monkeylanders thought the white cops were firing at them. They immediately returned fire.

POPOPOPOPOPOPOP! M-16's rattled through clips.

The Marquis seemed to lose some of its steam as it rolled down the street. It wasn't accelerating now, but rather slowing, and veering to the right as bullets struck it from both ends of the street. The sound of the girl screaming still came from the car. The driver's head, seen through the now glassless rear window, was limp.

POPOPOPOPOPOPOP! One of the white cops fell, then another, then the last two. Cheers came from the far barricade.

The Marquis hit a garbage can, swerved even more to the right, and lurched half through a fence before stopping. The girl continued to scream, and two of the Monkeyland Volunteers ran down the street to get what weapons and ammunition they could from the fallen officers before reinforcements arrived.

It was a some minutes before anybody checked on the girl, and then only because she wouldn't stop screaming.

"No National Guard yet?" Huggs asked his boss.

Teskins threw his hat on the table in disgust. The two men were in the communications trailer in the corner mall. Teskins had come to the command center so he could brief Huggs personally. Besides, he wanted to get out in the field and get the feel of the situation. "Is the perimeter holding steady?"

"Yeah, but—"

"But what?" Teskins sat heavily and looked at Huggs.

“But people are being allowed out.”

“Yeah. I knew that.”

“And people are wanting to get in.”

Teskins stared.

“Blacks from outlying areas are demanding that they be allowed entrance to ‘their’ country. We’ve had instances of people running the barricade. A couple of shootings. A couple of fights. Do you know how many blacks there are outside of South Central?”

“A million?”

“Probably more. There’s black people—whole communities of them—in Santa Monica, Pacoima, everywhere.”

“Shit,” Teskins said. “It won’t be long before they try to expand their borders.” Then, desultorily: “What about desertions?”

“The longer this goes on the more desertions there are. Hell, the black officers know what’s cooking. They get orders to pull back, are assigned administrative work or are ordered to help in some other support capacity, and they figure they’re being held prisoner. There’s even a rumor goin’ out that the whites are planning a big death camp for the blacks!”

“Who the fuck would start such a rumor?”

Huggs shook his head.

For a long moment the two cops sat silently. In the length of the trailer next to the office, through a glass window, they could see white officers putting pins on maps, speaking through lip mikes and cell phones.

“We’ve been training them.”

“Pardon?” Huggs stared at Teskins.

“The blacks that are all deserting. They can’t get work so they get jobs in the military and learn how to fight, and they can’t get jobs when they get out of the military so affirmative action policies makes us lower standards and take them—and we train them even more. Hell, we’ve been training them all along to do this, to fight us, to make their own country.”

“You could look at it like that,” Huggs agreed.

“And you know what?”

Huggs waited.

“I don’t blame them. Sure, there’s a lot of rotten blacks, but there’s a lot of rotten whites. You’ve been on patrol here, out in Watts, over in some of the other areas. These people have a hard time renting out of their neighborhood. And if they do, they’re treated to side looks and stares that you or I would go punch somebody out for. Now these damned White Law idiots come right into their home and threaten 600 of their children. Wouldn’t you get pissed?”

“Yeah.” Huggs wasn’t begrudging. He understood the streets.

“It isn’t dope and crime...it’s attitude, human attitude, and everybody’s got it.”

At this dour observation, the two men could only sit and chew on their teeth.

The sun had descended, the sky was dark, and the inside of the Lincoln School auditorium was hot.

Teachers were allowed to carry buckets of water to the children, and several cartons of crackers had made their appearance. Mrs. Watson had managed to be detailed to passing out the crackers.

“These are children. They need sustenance,” Mrs. Watson had complained to Betty at one point.

Betty Boop had stared at the principal. She was getting a little irritated. Communications to Dewey and Huey were out. Nothing of importance was coming over the TV or the police band. Perhaps they could have found out more about what was happening in the outside world if they had had a radio, but of all things, they had forgotten a simple radio. And now this bitch Monkey was making demands.

“You ate bread and water on the way over here, maybe you better think about bread and water on the way back.

There was nothing Mrs. Watson could say. She continued passing out crackers, listened to the crying and whimpering of innocents, and made her way back into the kitchen in a blue funk. She sat down heavily next to Tom.

“How are the children?” Shelley asked.

“Fine!” she snapped, then, softer: “I’m sorry. It’s not your fault.”

“It’s okay,” Shelley said. “Who’s taking care of my children?”

Mrs. Watson had the irrational urge to yell at Shelley, to tell her that they weren’t ‘her’ children. They belonged to their parents, and their parents lived in this neighborhood, and.... She stifled the urge as irrational and said, “Mr. Peavy. He’s telling them stories. Everything’s fine.”

For a moment none of the three said anything. The terrorists were taking turns eating in the kitchen. They were cooking TV dinners, and the smell had to be torture for the starving children in the auditorium.

“How you makin’ with Betty Boop?”

Tom sighed. “I don’t know. She’s...she’s not all there. She’s—”

“Don’t you say that!”

Tom looked at Mrs. Watson.

“You think she’s crazy you goin’ to blow it. You think she’s fine then you won’t make no mistakes. She believe you, and maybe...just maybe you get a chance!”

Tom snorted. "What kind of a chance? They have the guns. She says they have nerve gas. I think we better plan on the city paying money."

Now it was Mrs. Watson that snorted. She was tired. She was dirty. And this bone brain white boy was coming up short on guts. Well, at least brains. She knew that no white city was going to fork over a billion dollars for black children. "You talk sweet to that girl." She finally said. "You convince her that you care. Convince her that you aren't fond of blacks, for that matter. Hell, if you need to, call me a bitch, spit on me if you have to, but convince her that you are coming over to her side. Do what you need to, but get on her good side!"

"Be part of the enemy?" Tom asked. "I don't think I was ever cut out to be a spy."

Shelley, appropriate of nothing, said, "They shoot spies, don't they?"

"Sweet Lord Jesus!" Mrs. Watson said, putting her face in her hands.

"What do you say, Buggy?"

Bugs glanced at Betty Boop, then rubbed his eyes. The flood lights, being saved for battle, hadn't been turned on, and Bugs was scanning the area through a night scope.

"Things are quiet. Feels...sort of...itchy out there."

"I know what you mean." She glanced over the parapet. Dark, in LA, was not really dark. There were millions of street lights and headlights and store lights and other types of lights, and there were a few burning buildings, besides, all bouncing their rays off clouds, giving a glow to the city that suspended any true darkness.

Not that it was light as day, but it was dark gray around the school, with a plethora of absolutely black nooks and crannies where Monkeys could spy from and begin assaults. Damned Monkeys blended right into the goddamn night.

"Betty?" Magilla's deep tones were heard by all as he entered the conversation over the radio. "What about the school cop?"

Betty didn't say anything for a long time. Everybody was on the same circuit. Everybody had heard her talking to him. They couldn't always pick up his voice, but it sometimes came through. And there was a part of her, in spite of the giddiness of flirting, that understood exactly what Magilla was referring to.

"I don't know."

"He's not one of us," Magilla said. "And it's too late to recruit anybody else." All afternoon he had wanted to talk to Betty privately, but the opportunity had never come. Well, so be it. Things had to be said.

“Never killed a Monkey,” somebody, it sounded like Porky, chimed in.

“I know.”

And Betty did know, but there was a chasm in her thinking. One side of her was the icy general plotting the complete situation, making cold decisions, doing what needed to be done. And the other side of her talked to Tom softly, thought about nights when they had walked across the Montana turf, talking about grass conditions and water conditions and whether the government subsidy would come in time and whether the mare would foal.

She shook her head. There was something confusing about that side of her. Tom wasn’t Tom, and the mares were thousands of miles and—wait a minute, what was she thinking? She had sold the stock after Tom died, needed money to support the ranch while she organized White Law. So why did she behave like a school girl and think of foals?

“You going to kill him?” Magilla thought again about the fact that Betty probably hadn’t killed a Monkey before this morning. She wasn’t acting sorry or anything, and she was sharp in her commands, but there was a soft feel to her, like her combative edge wasn’t all it should be.

Betty didn’t say anything.

“You going to kill the principal?”

“Yeah,” she agreed.

“Then you better plan on killing the school cop, and the white girl, too.”

They were going to kill white people—and the two sides of her were pushed against each other even harder. Two sides coming together, confusing...confusing...if only the foal would come then—

“Betty?” Bugs voice was so close that she jerked.

“What?”

“Monkeys across the street.”

Betty peered over the roof edge and Bugs pulled her back, handed her his rifle. “Try this.”

She looked down the barrel and through the scope.

Across the street figures scurried around the terrorist’s truck. The figures were outlined in green, stark in contrast to the shades of gray that the scope offered.

“Zingo bingo,” Betty murmured, then, through her beard: “Foghorn, blow the truck.”

A moment while Foghorn, in the kitchen, reached for a black box he kept next to the computer. In the parking lot the night was lit orange with flames.

Betty and Bugs and the other terrorists ducked below the parapet and the roar of the explosion rushed over them.

The whole auditorium, including the kitchen, shook. Children screamed. Shelley huddled against Tom. Mrs. Watson stared at Foghorn and wondered what was happening. On the small table the mousetrap clacked and the ping pong ball sailed through the air.

“What happened?” Shelley asked, staring as the ping pong ball bounced on the tiles.

“Whatever it was it was outside.”

“Are they bombing us?” She didn’t try to define who ‘they’ were.

“Didn’t sound like ordnance. Sounded...I don’t know...maybe like a gas tank popping.”

Mrs. Watson looked at Tom. Ordnance? A gas tank ‘popping?’ If he was noticing that she was slipping at the edges, then she was noticing a little of him coming out.

At the entrance to the parking lot those Monkeylanders that hadn’t been killed by the exploding truck picked themselves up gingerly. In the sudden light it could be seen that they were wearing black pants and shirts.

Terrorists opened their eyes and leaned into their shields and took aim.

BANG! BANG!

Monkeylanders scattered for cover, and within seconds there were only a half dozen crawling injured—and a half a dozen dead—left in the street. The snipers focused on the injured, and, shortly, all attempts at crawling were halted. The truck, what was left of it, burned brightly, and illuminated the parking lot clearly.

“Yee haw!” somebody yelled from the school roof.

Across the street, from the attic of the furniture store, Louis stared through binoculars. Fortunately, he hadn’t been looking through his night scope at the moment the truck went up, and he watched the Monkeys being put out of their misery. He smiled, then, when the fun was over, he went back to watching TV. In a moment he wasn’t smiling.

Behind the fence, at the exact place where Bugs had knocked the scope off the Long John’s rifle, Gus Peeples stood. His face was grim and he kept as far back as he could as he watched the deaths of his comrades. The fuckers would pay for this! The fuckers would...and then he saw it. He saw how he could get close to the school, and, a very grim and scary smile on his face, he backed away from the fence and headed towards his house and Elwin Jones.

In the kitchen Foghorn reset the mousetrap and replaced the ping pong ball.

Betty was just entering the kitchen when one of the cell phones rang. Wiley answered it, listened, and then handed it to Betty with a look.

“Louis.”

“How’s it going?” Betty asked, aware that whatever Louis was going to say was important, or Wiley wouldn’t have given her the phone.

“Been watching the news?”

“No.”

“The Monkeys are creating their own land, calling it Monkeyland.”

“What?”

Louis talked for a moment, explaining the facts behind the blacks fighting the police and manning the barricades, and Betty’s mind whirled. When Louis was finished she hung up and turned to the TV and tuned in the first of many stations that were reporting the latest changes in the hostage situation.

Monkeyland.

White Law wasn’t going to get any money. Well, they had known they might not, and this meant they could get out of South Central that much sooner. Within the hour.

And that meant that she definitely couldn’t stay. The Monkeys wouldn’t give her a forum--so why bother?

And Tom would have to be killed.

No more thinking about it, no more equivocating in her own mind about the future of the man.

He was as good as dead.

As dead as a foal.

“I want our own language!” Reverend Thomason screamed.

“Do you know how many African tongues there are? Let alone dialects?”

“We can choose one! We are African in our heart of hearts and—”

“We may be African, but we are a strange country in a strange land. I think we better make sure we can speak the language. This is a very parasitical situation and....” The speaker was a school teacher who had somehow found his way to the group making decisions regarding the establishment of Monkeyland. To Elwin’s relief, though he spoke the expensive talk of Reverend Thomason, the teacher used the sound logic of a working man, and he was giving Elwin a much needed respite from the Reverend’s constant badgering and yowling.

“Elwin?”

Elwin walked to the back door, stepped into the backyard. The woman and the young girl were gone. It was getting late.

“I heard the explosion,” Elwin said to Gus.

“They blew the truck in the parking lot entrance. I think they can see us in the dark.”

“Probably have night scopes,” Elwin agreed. “What you goin’ to do?” Not for a moment did he consider calling Gus off.

“I have a plan. I’m goin’ to need some very skinny volunteers. We’re going to....”

Elwin listened. Gus was a man who knew how to get things done. He could trust Gus to do what had to be done while he went in and watched the shark-suited Reverend. When Gus was finished outlining his plan, Elwin just nodded. “Do what you have to do.”

“Right on.” Gus disappeared into the night once again. He would round up volunteers, get weapons, make plans, and make plans work.

Elwin, on the other hand, had Thomason to fight. Standing there, alone in the dark, listening to the night sounds, he had a strange thought. All the white folks that started up the United States...had they had the same trouble? Had they been at each other’s throats when they started up their country? Did they threaten each other with violence and shout at each other in place of calm reason? Maybe. Probably. Suddenly he had respect for what those guys like Washington and Franklin and Jefferson had done. Now if he could borrow a little of their magic. He took a deep breath and stepped back into the kitchen.

Betty Boop walked back into the kitchen and looked around. Wiley worked the map and kept an open line to Louis. Foghorn played the keyboard and watched the monitor and the TV. The principal and the two whites sat in the corner looking at her.

The two whites.

When had she taken to killing white people?

Tom, across the kitchen, felt her. He saw her eyes and knew, without knowing how he knew, that she was going to kill him. A decision had been reached. Maybe she had been pushed into it, but there it was. See her face and die. But he wasn’t sorry he had seen her face. In fact, against all reason, he was sorry he couldn’t see more of her face. Across the kitchen, looking at him, Betty felt his thought. Suddenly they were in a tunnel made by their knowing eyes, knowing what each other knew.

I’m sorry you’re going to die.

I’m sorry I won’t get to know you.

Betty blinked.

In the tunnel it was a slow shuttering of blue that said, ‘*sorry.*’

Yeah. Sorry. They both were.

Betty walked across the kitchen, the tunnel becoming shorter, more intimate, shutting more and more of the outside world out. She stopped in front of him.

“Get up,” she said, throatily.

Mrs. Watson stared. Shelley dropped her jaw. There had been open lust in that voice. Something was shaking the tiles under their bottoms.

Tom stood up.

“Come with me.”

They walked across the kitchen and Betty Boop hopped up on the prep table against the wall. Tom moved until his thighs surrounded one of her legs, and their faces were only inches apart. Betty pulled down her beard.

“You know.”

Tom nodded.

Betty stared at him with no expression.

Tom was intensely aware of her as a woman. He felt his manhood surging against her leg.

She felt it. She didn't smile, but they both felt the moment, knew it was as close as they dare ever come to each other, and accepted it for what it was.

“I wish....” Betty began.

Tom stared at her face. Two Betty's. One under the beard: hard; icy; capable of murder. One without the beard: talking of children and...foaling. And Tom was aware that he suddenly didn't care that this was nuts. Let her be insane. Let her talk of things that made sense only to her. This tunnel that they were in was more important than life.

“Does every man have this darkness in him?” he asked.

Betty breathed on him. He could feel her breath, her hair, her skin. It was so gloriously intimate. It was even more intimate than sex.

“Does every man get hard when he's about to die? Is it just the desire to mate and procreate and keep the race going even though...are you my black widow? Is this moment part of my last meal?”

“You're smart,” she said. “Like Tom.”

Which Betty was she?

“I'm dumb. I should wring your neck and grab your gun and take my chances.” Random conversations unraveled in their psyches.

“Yeah, you should.”

They sat and stood, entwined deeper than human beings had a right to be, love and death all in one hugless hug, and the trap clapped and the ping pong ball flew through air.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Under the aged blacktop they crawled, pushing cellophane wrapped weapons in front of them. They were like worms in the earth, unable to see where they were going, and each man cursed in his heart and forced himself onward.

Gus Peeples, at the head of the feebly advancing troop, took the small maglight out of his mouth and turned it on. He hated to do this because his hands reeked of sewer, and the smell would get on the small light and thus into his mouth, but he had to every once in a while because the utter and complete blackness terrified him so.

Ahead of him the thin beam of light reflected off the sides of a sewer that was encrusted with decades of slimy waste and rot, barely large enough for him to wiggle his way forward, and showed the sewer opening just a few yards ahead. Quickly, he turned the light off so as not to alert any of the terrorists who might be staring in the direction of the grate.

The grate was part of the curb next to the parking lot. Laying just feet from the grate, Gus listened to the grunt of voice, the slither of cloth and flesh through muck, as his men drew up behind him.

Gus rapped his knuckles on the ceiling of the pipe and all crawling stopped. Into the attentive silence he whispered, "Coming to the grate."

Nobody said anything. The men all knew that they were nearly across the street and well into no man's land, and they knew that the concussion caused by a simple grenade dropped into the sewer at the school end would kill them all. All knew the value of silence.

Gus lay still for a moment. He had crawled over fifty yards through the sewer, and he was caked with filth. The bilious odor permeating his clothes and person made him want to vomit, and he had every right to considering where he was. Instead of vomiting, however, he placed his hands against the slime coating the sides of the small passageway he was in, kicked his feet, and somehow gained another couple of inches.

Earlier, when the truck had exploded, he had looked across the fire lit street and studied the parking lot. He had seen the way the ground indented right next to the auditorium, and he had remembered that next to the kitchen was a huge trap. The drain from the trap had to be fairly large, at least large enough for a skinny man to crawl through—maybe many skinny men—and once to the trap they could somehow get to the

hallways. They would be in the school, and that much closer to the children. They could do it. They could. They had to.

Now, an hour after that initial observation, his men inched past the grate and the ruins of the truck overhead, and every man was treated to a whiff of fresh air and a moment of barely adequate traction. Nobody said anything as, one by one, they wriggled past the last breath of freedom, under the old parking lot, and came to within just yards of the school...and the children.

Betty shoved aside the small table and stomped hard on the floor.

Tom, abandoned at the prep table stared, and suddenly became aware of a dull motor sound. No...not a motor...a roar, but....

Betty stomped again.

The sound stopped.

Suddenly, Tom knew what was happening. Somebody was digging up from the sewer! A school this size had to have large drainage ways! And those drains would connect to the main sewers, sewers large enough to stand in! This was how White Law was going to escape!

“Oh, no!” Tom said.

Betty looked at Tom. They were no longer in the tunnel of their own, separate universe, but they were still close. “Yes. We’re going to tunnel right out of this trap. The western access is so large you can walk all the way to Santa Monica.” She suddenly realized she was out of communication and tugged her beard into place. “Okay, people! Marvin the Martian has arrived.”

Tom returned to the corner where Shelley and Mrs. Watson sat without being told.

“What’s going on?” Shelley asked.

Tom explained, then: “They’re going to get away with it. They’re going to walk away scot free.”

Mrs. Watson said something that sounded like ‘my ass,’ then: “You’ve got to stop them.”

Tom looked at her. “There’s nothing I can do.” He didn’t tell Mrs. Watson that he knew they were all going to die.

More members of White Law congregated in the kitchen. A jackhammer appeared, and, shortly, the kitchen reverberated with a monstrous roar as the bit dug first into floor tiles, then into cement. Men could be heard yelling in the auditorium, telling the children to shut up.

Betty smiled and covered her ears, spoke into her beard and laughed. She turned to Tom and, touched by the part of her that hadn’t admitted that she was going to have to kill him, gave him a quick thumbs up.

Thumbs up for the terrorists. Thumbs down for him.

Tom watched the activity and considered the situation glumly. He might have to sit quietly, but he had no intention of being snuffed out like some helpless animal. The problem was—he had no idea of what, exactly, he was going to do.

“Hello, Mr. Ambassador.” Fresling spoke into the telephone with warmth. After they had gotten over the foolishness of him having to address Thomason in such a manner, the talks had gone well. Except for a few isolated incidents, like that man and child killed at one of the barricades, things were going well.

“Have you thought about opening our borders?”

“I’m afraid that we’re a little nervous about the violent potential you have to offer.”

“There is more potential for violence if we are not guaranteed our rights as individuals.”

“But those rights are as American citizens. I have to be blunt, Mr. Ambassador. The United States takes a dim view of insurrection and rebellion.”

“We are not rebelling, we are stating our desire to rule ourselves. It is you, the white government, who does not want us to do so.”

“I think you’re mistaken, Mr. Ambassador, there have been many blacks who have....”

The discussion went on. Both ends were being tape recorded. Fresling wanted proof of criminality. Thomason wanted proof of duplicity. As a result, progress was quite slow as they each searched for traps, tried to fool one another while not being fooled themselves.

“Mr. Mayor, are you aware that we control a major power plant? Are you aware that many power lines go through Monkeyland? We could cut off power, telephones, all sorts of things. I think it would be best if you decided to grant us recognition and stopped standing in our way.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have the authority to grant any kind of status to a nation.”

“But you, personally, will admit that we have a right to self-government?”

“Again, I don’t think I—”

“You do, but we don’t?”

“Forgive me for pointing this out, Mr. Ambassador, but you haven’t been granted power through any electoral means.”

“If we held an election in Monkeyland today, what do you think the results would be?”

“But an election hasn’t been held, therefore—”

“So we hold an election, and you will grant us our right to self rule?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Mr. Mayor, you can’t...”

Elwin Jones sat in the living room, eating a turkey sandwich and talking with Zulu. He wasn’t interested in political bullshit. He was more concerned with educating Zulu as to how to organize and manage the First Monkeyland Mosquitoes, which was what Zulu’s men, in response to Reddy naming his company the First Monkeyland Volunteers, had named themselves. Seemed like everybody wanted to be the first of something.

“The first thing is to find responsible sergeants. You have to be an officer, and that makes you a gentleman, and that means you have to have somebody to do the down and dirty of running a large group of men for you.”

“But I don’t understand,” Zulu said, for probably the tenth time. “Why can’t I run it?”

“You do run it, but you got to take the larger view. You have to make sure of supplies, weapons, training, and all that sort of thing. Most important, you got to make sure that you work with the other companies in the army.”

“But there’s only Reddy and Gus and you!”

“For now, but we need more, and they all have to work together. They all have to—”

“Mr. Jones?” A Monkeyland soldier, wearing a black tee and dark slacks, stood framed in the front doorway.

“Come in. You went to see the drug dealer at the crack house on 122nd. Right?”

“Yes, sir.” The soldier preened, proud to be recognized and remembered by Elwin Jones.

“How’d it go?”

“We’ve brought him to talk to you. I brought him here under a flag of truce. Is that all right?” Nervous at making a big decision.

“That’s exactly what I had in mind,” Elwin said, though he hadn’t.

“Come on in.” The soldier at the door opened the door, and a shadow moved across the porch towards the door.

“Scuse me,” Elwin said to Zulu, brushing his hands and putting the plate aside. A lady took it quickly, and this surprised him. Why would anybody want to wait on him?

Razor Rentles swaggered into the room. He was wearing a long, black leather coat, a few pounds of gold chain, and his hair was woven into neat cornrows. He was aware of the old biddies staring disapprovingly at him. He was aware of how the men around the room upped their chests a bit to compete with his wide shoulders and scowling visage. He stopped in the center of the room and looked around.

“Who’s in charge here?” His eyes circled the room like hawks ready to pounce.

“I guess I could do some speakin’, if you’re willing.” Elwin spoke softly.

Razor looked at the man sitting in the chair next to the couch. There was a big guy next to him, a very mean, possessive looking soldier, but the man doing the talking didn’t look that tough. He was well built, you could see the muscles under the tee shirt, but there was a softness to his expression that wasn’t right.

“And who you be?”

“My name is Elwin Jones. Come have a seat.”

Razor stared at the man. This was the one who had destroyed a crack house single handed? This was the man who started the whole mess? This was the man everybody was kow towing to and making such a big fuss over? He didn’t look so tough!

“Come. There’s no danger.”

Razor wanted to make a remark then; he wanted to dis the man, because Elwin’s statement made the inference that he was scared.

Razor looked at the other people in the room. They watched him, and they were respectful of Elwin. They respected Elwin, and they made everybody else respect him—but there was more. This old man had a feeling about him, and it was that feeling that was at the bottom of all the respect.

Razor crossed the room and sat on the couch.

“Can we get you a drink of water? A soft drink, or something?”

“Don’t want no cola.”

“I see,” then: “shall we get to the point?”

Razor just gave Mr. Elwin Jones a defiant stare.

Elwin Jones leaned forward slightly. “Mr. Rentles, what if you had the chance to do everything over again. What if you had a chance to make things right?”

“What things you be talkin’ about?”

“I’m talking about honesty. I’m talking about not dealing in drugs.”

“What if I like dealin’ in drugs?”

Elwin Jones didn’t raise to the challenge. “Mr. Rentles, things are changing here in Monkeyland. We are making a new nation. This is going to bring out the best in people, and it is going to bring out the worst.”

“What you talkin’ about?”

“Mr. Rentles, I’ll be plain, we need weapons, we don’t need drugs. You will not be suffered to continue in selling drugs, not to white or black, not for any reason. Is that clear?”

“I’m not sayin’ I agree, but I hear what you be sayin’.” Razor tried to summon up some defiance, but there was iron under the soft, matter of fact man confronting him.

“About the guns, when we were part of the United States we were guaranteed the right to bear arms. That right was badly abridged. We are going to make sure that we have that right in Monkeyland. We will make sure that we never fall into the trap that the United States has fallen into.”

Even though Razor didn’t completely understand the reference to the United States he liked the way the man was talking about it. It felt like there really was a difference between the white man and this Monkeyland thing.

“However,” Elwin continued, “there is a difference between the right to bear arms, and having the arms to bear. We would like your help on that.”

“My help.” A flat statement. Not a challenge or defiance or anything else of that sort. Simply a statement—and the need for more information.

“Yes, word has it that you are very efficient in the procurement of weapons. Word has it that you have...resources.”

Elwin Jones stopped talking.

Razor stared at him.

The city provided the sound of gunfire and far away yells for their background.

Finally, Razor had to say something. Elwin Jones certainly wasn’t going to say anything. He had made his case.

“And what you do if I refuse?”

Elwin sat back and put his elbows on the arms of the chair, steeped his hands in front of his chest.

“Then you refuse.” Acceptance. Acquiescence.

“And what happens then?”

“You can leave. You can go back to your house, or you can go anywhere you want. Tomorrow, I should tell you, we are going to level, completely, every crack house in Monkeyland.”

For a long moment Razor Rentles sat and stared at the man. Elwin had made a statement of fact, not a threat, and Razor knew that, sure as shit, tomorrow would bring the burning of all crack houses. That was a done deal.

“And what if I don’t go to the house? What if I just go off somewhere in Monkeyland and live my life?”

“Then you live your life.”

Razor cocked his head suspiciously.

“Look, Mr. Rentles, this is a new country. We’re not carrying any of the old, bad ways into it. Crime will not be suffered. But you won’t be harried for any crimes you committed while under the white government.

Maybe what you did under the white government was wrong; maybe it was right, considering the way we were treated, but, regardless, those days are over. Everybody starts fresh. You do what you want.”

Silence. End of talk. Time for decisions.

Razor Rentles stood up, faced Elwin Jones. “I think about it.”

Elwin Jones didn’t sigh or make any sign. He simply nodded and said, “God be with you, Mr. Rentles.”

Razor again wanted to make some sort of remark. Not to dis now, but...just because...he wanted to say something. But the wind had gone out of the situation. The moment, whether he liked it or not, was past. Razor nodded and walked to the door.

Nobody stopped him. The soldier, not glowering now, simply stepped aside and held the door for him. In some indisputable way the conversation with Elwin Jones had reduced Razor Rentles to the level of a common man.

Razor stood on the porch and listened to the night. Out there was gunfire—and men killing men. He had killed men.

Back in the house was warmth, and a chance, and...a decision, if he could make it.

“Was that a drug dealer you were just talking to?” A rude voice suddenly interrupted on Razor’s thoughts.

The voice came from inside the house.

“It was a man, Reverend.”

“We will not condone drug dealers in Monkeyland!” Razor could hear the man he hadn’t seen trying to steal some of Elwin’s thunder, but in the same way that Elwin had reduced Razor, he reduced the other, pompous voice.

“We certainly won’t. Have you finished your communications with Mayor Fresling?”

It wasn’t what he said so much as how he said it. This Elwin Jones was definitely in charge. He...he had something about him that...something that touched people.

Razor stood, aware of the soldier behind him, aware that the soldier was staring at his wide back. He looked out into the flame lit night. Out there was death, and behind him, through that screen door that kept out the flies, was...life? A chance?

Had he ever had a chance before in his life?

Sure, and he had blown them all.

But maybe that Elwin Jones in there could give him his chance again.

He turned and walked towards the screen door. The soldier, still saying nothing, merely opened the door for Razor.

Conversation stopped. Old ladies looked at Razor. Soldiers looked at him. Some clown in an undertaker's suit, the pompous fool that had tried to downplay Mr. Elwin Jones, looked at him.

Elwin Jones, with eyes that were polite and interested, looked at him. "Yes, Mr. Rentles?"

It was tough, for a second he thought he wasn't going to make it, then he said: "I don't keep many weapons in the 'hood 'cause the cops'd find out. But if you give me six men I can go to where they are and get back here by dawn. If that's okay?"

"I think that would be just fine. Reddy, find Mr. Rentles six good men and assist him in whatever other way he might need. Will that be suitable, sir?"

For a moment Razor said nothing, then: "Yes."

Reddy motioned for Razor to follow him into the kitchen, and Razor walked across the room. His chest was filled with a welter of emotions that he had never expected to have. Pride? Was that pride? And honesty? Could he possibly be experiencing a bit of honesty?

"Mr. Rentles?"

Razor turned back to Elwin Jones.

"Do you have a first name?"

"Bashanhavothjair Leviticus Rentles."

Elwin blinked.

"My mother was very religious."

"Well, perhaps we could continue calling you 'Razor?'"

"That would be fine," hesitation, "sir," and Razor left the room.

Elwin sat for a long moment and stared at the door Razor Rentles had walked through. Yesterday he never would have been able to convince the man to give up dealing in drugs. Yesterday there was no Monkeyland. Yesterday there were no problems and no need to solve them, and there had been no feeling of tiredness from solving so many of those problems—and failing to solve others. Was he different?

No. The people thought he was, but he was just put upon. That's all he was...put upon.

"Better get back," Magilla said, handing up the jackhammer. "It's starting to go."

He stood in a hole four feet deep in the center of the kitchen. There was a mound of shattered tiles, earth and broken cement next to the hole. Through the shattered cement and hard packed earth, Magilla was starting to sink. Magilla grabbed helping hands and climbed out of the hole, and, as the earth gave way, the sound of another jackhammer could be heard. Suddenly the earth dropped completely away, and the hole became quite a bit deeper. In the depths a man with a miner's hat could be seen lowering his own jackhammer.

“Yee haw!” one of the terrorists yelled.

“Zingo bingo!” Betty yelled.

Terrorists clapped each other on the back.

Quickly, Marvin was hauled up and given fresh water and congratulated. Other men began enlarging the hole.

Betty was standing not six feet from Mrs. Watson and the others when one of the terrorists said, “We going now? Or are we going to wait a little longer?”

Betty considered the factors in the final decision. No money. Communications down. News on the TV about a bunch of Monkeys starting their own country, calling it, of all things, ‘Monkeyland.’

Having to kill Tom.

But which Tom? Tom was dead at the bank. Tom was sitting in the corner, waiting to go home and the mare was foaling. No. Tom was dead and she had sold the horses. But Tom looked at her, lived inside her.

She looked at Tom.

She looked at the terrorists she had recruited and trained.

Everything was dead and foaling.

“We go,” she said.

Instantly the room took on a different mood as the men made the idea of escape their singular goal.

“Porky, Bugs, everybody off the roof. Masks at the ready. We leave in one minute.”

Two terrorists ripped open a large box and started handing out gas masks. Then a smaller box was opened, and canisters were gently lifted out of it.

Tom stared at the canisters and felt perspiration break out anew all over his body.

Nerve gas!

“Magilla, set the charges. Foggie, crash the computer. Wiley, burn the maps.” Betty was efficiency personified.

As the terrorists hustled about the kitchen and carried out their assigned tasks, Tom watched in dismay.

Charges? Nerve gas? They not only intended to take out the children, but to spread the gas over the whole of South Central! How many people would be killed? Hundreds of thousands? A million? For what? Not for money. It was a statement. A statement of hate.

“Okay! Daffy, Bugs, into the hole. Porky and Huck get ready.”

Foghorn hit some keys on the computer, got up and walked over to Betty.

To the side of the computer, out of the way of traffic, Magilla placed charges around the gas canisters. Within moments he was done, and he stood up and came towards Betty. In his hands was a little black

box with a switches and a small red light. The red light was on, which meant that the charges were armed.

“Here you go, Betty.” Magilla handed her the detonator.

Betty took the detonator, and in her mind was...dead...foaling...dead...foaling....

Gus stopped. He heard a dull, roaring sound, but it sounded far away. The sound stopped. Gus waited a moment, then began crawling again. Suddenly, his hands poked into space. Feeling relief and exultation, and covered with immense amounts of slime, he crawled out of the pipe and stood up. Above him, he could see a dim slit of light where the trap doors joined. If they could open those doors they could climb out and try to get into the hallways and into the school and the auditorium. Once into the hallways they would save as many children as they could—and take out as many terrorists as possible.

“Gus?”

“Yeah?”

“You hear that?”

Gus listened, and heard the sound of voices. They were very faint. “It’s comin’ from here!”

Gus bent down next to the other man. On the far side of the trap was another drain. It was larger than the one they had crawled through, and it came from the kitchen. Out of the drain came the dull murmur of voices. Gus reached into the hole and his hand encountered a blockage. The blockage felt dry and rough. It hadn’t been steeped in slime.

What the fuck?

Gus put his head right to the opening and risked shining his light into the drain.

It was a wall. It was a round cut of plywood, fresh built, fitted precisely into the hole, and it had cardboard egg containers stapled to it.

“Shhh!” Gus said, and he leaned into the hole and pried at the wall. It was loose. There was nothing to nail it to—it was just like a plug in a bottle--and it could be pulled out if he could get a grip. He tried to insert his fingers around the edges, but all he could do was grab the bulges of the egg cartons. He sank his fingers in and pulled, and a few staples popped out. He pulled more gently, and the wall started moving.

“Here we go,” Gus murmured under his breath, and, working gently, he began to extract the false wall.

“Porky and Huck, go.”

Two more terrorists leaped into the hole in the kitchen, and that left only five terrorists in the school. Nobody was left on the roof, and Foghorn watched the auditorium from the kitchen door. No one in the

auditorium had any idea that nerve gas was about to be released, and Betty held the detonator in one slender, rubber gloved hand.

Magilla stood next to Betty. "Look, Betty, I don't care how sealed these suits are...make sure you are in the hole and covered before you hit the switch."

"Got it," Betty said. They'd only gone over it a hundred times in practice. She was calm and cool, as calm and cool as a person could be with images of dead...foal...dead...flipping through her mind like a rolodex on high speed. In an attempt to stop the images in her mind, she concentrated on putting her gas mask into place.

"And get those people in the corner into the auditorium. You don't want them anywhere near you when you leave."

"You bet." Betty looked at Magilla, who was looking at her, and then felt her gaze drawn inexorably towards the corner where Tom and the two women were standing.

Louis trotted down the steps from the attic. The store was deserted. There had been white cops there earlier, but the blacks had—could you believe it—arrested them!

Louis jumped the last few steps to the ground floor. He was mindful of the grenades swinging against his body, the M-16 slung on his shoulder, the extra clips stuck in his belt, the 45 in his holster, and the spare Berretta in his ankle holster.

He walked down the center aisle of the store towards the large doors which led to the dock. At the back of the store, to the side of the doors, was a long counter, and above the counter were a series of cupboards. Louis stopped and considered the cupboards and, rubbing his face in delight, smiled. He walked to the cupboards and began opening them, pulling the doors hard enough to pop the little padlocks right off.

The furniture store owner kept his supply of thinners and varnishes and paints in the cupboards, and next to the counter, in a small room, Louis found the real treasure. Stacked to the ceiling were dozens of full gasoline containers. This must have been the store owner's hedge against gas shortages, and Louis chuckled as he inspected the hundreds and hundreds of gallons of flammable liquid. This was, truly, a treasure beyond his wildest dreams.

Working quickly, he loaded a flat push truck with gallon cans and pushed it up the aisle. Within a short time he had a mountain of cans stacked against the wood staircase that led to the second floor. The second floor was the workroom, and the sawdust on the stairs and the upper floor would provide great ignition for the conflagration he planned. Finally, a mountain of gas and varnish and thinner next to the steps, Louis opened a couple of cans and began sloshing the contents over couches and chairs and beds. Soon the whole room smelled not just

of fresh wood, but of the more pungent odor of oil based liquids. Lastly, he punched holes in the bottom of several cans with a screw driver and placed them carefully on the mountain of cans he had built. The liquid flowed over the other cans, dripped on the floor and made a small rivulet towards the rear door. Louis was almost ecstatic as he contemplated what he was about to initiate. This thing was going to burn hot and fast, probably take out everything on the whole damned block!

He stood back and, for just a pleased moment, watched the small river flowing through the sawdust towards the back door. Perfect. He walked to the back door and lit a cigarette complacently. He took a long, satisfied drag, then put the cigarette on its butt on the floor, blew on the tip gently to check the glow, and walked out.

The liquid would reach the cigarette, pool around it, and the vapor would rise up, and the whole thing would eventually go...bang!

Hee hee! Such a nice thought! Louis didn't notice that some of the liquid, on the other side of the mountain of cans, was running into a small round grate. Furthermore, he had no idea that the grate led to a pipe that ran across the street towards the school.

Louis opened the door to the dock, slipped out, and closed it gently. Best to hurry now, and he hopped off the dock and ran across the back yard of the furniture store. He ran past the rows of couches under tin overhangs, past—

“Hold it!”

Louis dove forward in a shoulder roll as a large flashlight illuminated him.

“Gun!” somebody yelled as Louis came to one knee and fumbled with his M-16.

BANG! BANG! A bullet grazed his thigh and Louis suddenly realized that Nam was thirty years past—and so were his reflexes and agility.

BANG! BANG! He pulled the trigger and fired randomly around the yard.

But there was nothing for him to shoot at. He had been blinded by the flash, and the people who had ambushed him hadn't been, and now that he had showed his bad intentions they really unloaded into him. A cascade of bullets poured into him, and in seconds he was nothing more than a rag doll dancing as his life was torn away.

“That all?” a voice asked when all firing and motion had stopped.

“I don't know,” another voice answered.

Figures moved out to check who they had shot. One of the figures kicked Louis, turned him onto his back.

“Fuck! It's a honk! He's wearin' army clothes and black shit on his face!”

“What the fuck was he doin' in the furniture store?”

“I’ll go see.”

One figure turned and trotted towards the back of the furniture store.

Gus stopped working the plug in the drain and listened to the faraway sound of gunfire. The shooting ended quickly, and Gus continued working his hands inside the drain. Suddenly, the plug popped free and he pulled it out, lowered it gently to the muck in the trap. He turned his head, put his ear right into the drain, and listened carefully. The voices were still indistinguishable, but they were louder; the plug had been quite effective in hiding their existence. Gus turned his head and squinted into the darkness. Twenty feet up the pipe, at a junction, he could see a reflection of light.

There was another way to get into the school!

“First three after me,” Gus whispered over his shoulder. “You others wait until I say, then climb out the trap and try to break into the school.”

Men nodded in the darkness, and Gus ducked down and crawled into the pipe.

This pipe was larger than the sewer pipe he had been in, but it was still tight. He reached for hand hold and foothold and slithered forward. Behind him, more men slithered, snakes, searching for white mice in a maze. Gus had the uncomfortable realization that if he was discovered there would be no way for him to back up.

Behind Gus, the trap was packed with men. They stood and waited silently, looking at each other, ghosts of muck and filth, knowing that they were going to have to do the impossible very shortly, which was to bust out of the trap and find their way into the school.

“Hey,” one of the men whispered to the one next to him. “You smell something funny?” It was said so intently that the men, under more pressure than they could bear, clamped their filthy hands across their mouths and held themselves from laughing. It had to be a joke, right?

None of them thought to check that there really might be a smell—a smell that wasn’t sewage—entering the trap.

Wiley and Marvin hopped into the hole. That left Magilla, Foghorn and Betty.

“I’ll move Junior into the auditorium,” Magilla said.

Betty *dead...foal...dead...foal...* nodded.

Magilla approached the three in the corner, his pistol out and ready for business. “Okay, people,” he said, motioning with the gun. “Make for the auditorium.”

Tom stood up, tried to get some extra motion into his legs, to shake them into readiness. He was out of time now, and he knew that he was going to have to do something. But what?

He helped the ladies up. Mrs. Watson, proud, head erect, led the way towards the auditorium. Shelley straggled along, looking confused and frightened. She had dozed a little during the evening, but her head still hurt, and she just wanted to go back to sleep.

Tom walked slowly behind the women. He glanced at Betty, but she was rooted in spot and staring into space.

Tom didn't know that Betty was incapable of motion, and that the only thing going through her mind was *dead...foal...dead...foal...*

Tom stopped right before the door and turned. Magilla stopped and faced him, smiled nastily. He was going to enjoy this.

"You think I didn't know what you were trying to pull with Betty?" He spoke low so that Betty couldn't hear him. "You think you were going to sweet talk your way out of this?" He laughed silently, the mean in his eyes leaking out.

Tom didn't respond. Truth, he hadn't had much faith in his ability to sweet talk a terrorist, and the only thing on his mind was that he wasn't going to go into the auditorium. He wasn't going to suck gas and wonder what hell had happened to life. He wasn't going to lay down and die.

"You fucking asshole," Magilla sneered in low tones.

Behind Magilla, Foghorn squatted and jumped into the hole.

Magilla raised his gun and pointed it at the center of Tom's chest.

Tom knew that he was going to die, that he had never had a real chance to escape or fight the terrorists.

Magilla saw the realization and nodded. He was pleased, and he began to squeeze the trigger.

Gus rounded the curve in the drain pipe and found himself in a tunnel about three feet high. He moved forward in a silent scamper, careful not to slip in the slime. The light was only a half dozen feet ahead, bright light, and then it blotted out for a bare instant and a blue suited figure landed not five feet in front of him. Gus froze. He hadn't taken the cellophane off his weapon, had merely stuck his finger through the cellophane into the trigger guard. The surprise of seeing a terrorist right in front of him almost caused him to pull the trigger, but he stopped himself. The man in the blue jumpsuit moved away from him.

Son of a bitch! They were in the sewers! White Law was using the sewers! This was how they planned to make their escape!

Another terrorist jumped down and began moving away.

Gus waited. Nobody else jumped down, and he moved cautiously forward. He moved his head slowly into the shaft of light and looked

upwards. He was under the kitchen! He heard voices, but nobody was looking down into the hole. He turned and motioned for his men to come forward. If he could get two of his men to thrust him upward, he could be up and shooting before the terrorists knew what was happening. He could do a lot of damage in a few seconds.

He didn't notice that there was a blue film covering the water around his feet. He was too preoccupied to notice the smell of paint and thinner and gasoline.

The man behind the furniture store put his hand on the door handle. Funny, he could smell gasoline. Well, this *was* a loading dock. He pulled the rear door of the furniture store open.

Flammable liquid had pooled around the cigarette butt. Vapors drifted up and, as the back door opened, the air rushed slightly towards the butt. The vapors ignited. Along the center aisle of the store flame backtracked, getting hotter and hotter, turning from burn into—it reached the stack of cans—explosion.

The furniture store, being old and somewhat rickety, literally came apart at the seams. The roof lifted up in one piece, the walls popped out, and a massive whump displaced the air of the entire neighborhood. Windows shattered. Cars were tossed into the air. Houses facing the store were pushed off their foundations and collapsed. And, as gas lines were severed, secondary fires began to erupt.

The wave of the explosion crossed the street and struck the walls of the school.

Magilla's finger on the trigger stopped tightening when the world outside the kitchen went white.

Magilla raised his head slightly and his mouth o-ed in surprise, then the line of windows at the top of the kitchen burst inwards.

Instinctively, Magilla and Betty closed their eyes. Magilla pulled the trigger, but he was a microsecond too late.

Tom, eyes also closed, had stepped to the left and closed the distance. He felt the bullet whistle through the cloth of his sleeve, then he had one hand on Magilla's gun hand.

Magilla backed up. He was larger, stronger, and he was just waiting for the shower of glass to stop.

Tom went with Magilla, adjusting himself and waiting for Magilla to stop backing up and begin attacking. Truth, he didn't even need eyes for what he was going to do to the bigger man.

The glass stopped falling and Magilla opened his eyes.

Tom opened his eyes.

Magilla grinned, and he began a punch with his left hand.

Tom, one of the few people in the world to have studied the art of Monkey Boxing, used his left hand to slap Magilla's punch inward, thus crossing Magilla's arms. At that point he could have twined the arms, and the result would have been Magilla flipping through the air with a broken elbow, and a broken shoulder when he landed.

But Tom wasn't feeling gentle.

He turned his hips in, stuck his arm across the neck to effect a 'splitting' technique, but when Magilla tried to turn out of it, as he had to, Tom held on, they spun, and the split became a guillotine, and Magilla's neck broke clean and quick. The amount of time between the initial punch and the breaking of Magilla's neck was under a half second.

Betty shook glass off herself as she straightened up. The first thing she saw was Tom dropping Magilla, and it was obvious that Magilla was dead

"Stop!" Betty yelled, rendered ineffective, pointing her gun anyway.

DEAD FOAL DEAD FOAL DEAD FOAL

Tom watched from across the room, frozen in a crouch, waiting for something to happen behind those blue eyes looking through the windows of a gas mask.

The men in the trap saw the world turn white through the door seams above them, and for a brief moment they could actually see each other, standing with wide, scared eyes, in the filth of the pit. The sound of the exploding furniture store reached them less than a second later, and the ground shook so severely that the men flailed their arms and reached for each other as they fell. Laying in the filth of the trap one of the men suddenly yelled. A flame, apparently following a trickle of some kind of liquid in the muck, ran across the face of the muck.

In the kitchen, knowing she had to shoot Tom, trying to force herself to shoot Tom, not understanding why she couldn't shoot Tom, Betty heard voices in the sewer, and her eyes, without conscious command, looked down into the hole. A Monkey that looked like he had been dipped in excrement looked up at her. Two other Monkeys were starting to lift him upwards.

The flame crawled through the pipe and reached the area directly under the kitchen. Explosive liquid had been pooling there, caught because muck had been kicked into little dams by Marvin the Martian when he had jackhammered into the kitchen. The pool of liquid ignited.

The sewer systems of Los Angeles are not the most efficient in the world, and waste material pools and rots and creates methane gas.

Normally, the amount of methane is very slight and not a danger. One could light a match in the sewer and nothing would happen, but this was not a match being lit, this was a massive collection of finished petroleum products igniting, and the methane couldn't refuse a fuse of such magnitude. The methane in the sewers exploded.

Instantly, the sewer pipes became hotter than the insides of a gun barrel, and the resultant force rushed through the underground, igniting other concentrations of methane, and the effect was as if the barrels of multiple rifles were pressed together and the triggers pulled simultaneously. All along the tunnel leading west, towards the Pacific Ocean, members of White Law were compacted, burned, crushed under the mighty wave of explosions. Hair, cloth, flesh, muscle and organs turned, within seconds, into charred bones.

And east, into the trap and through the sewer system, the explosion likewise killed members of the Monkeyland Volunteers. Bodies were crushed, forced backwards along the pipes, exploded out of the trap.

Charges under manhole covers all around the school went off, and the heavy metal plates sailed through the city.

This was enough to set off charges on power poles, and the poles fell into houses. More and more fire swept through the neighborhood, and Louis' wildest dreams, even though he was dead, were realized.

Gus, midway through being tossed out of the hole, suddenly found himself going ten times faster than he had planned. He hit the ceiling so hard he went right through it.

Betty, already staggered by the explosion of the furniture store, was thrown back by the geyser of flame shooting out of the hole in the floor. Flung against a refrigerator, she dropped the gun and the detonator and slid downwards.

Tom was pushed back by the pressure and the heat coming out of the hole. He fell, then scrambled to his feet. He ran around the flames, still erupting from the hole in the floor, and reached Betty just as she was came to her senses and stood up.

"Wha...." She was aware that a shape was coming at her, and she bent over and reached for the detonator.

Tom kicked the detonator out from under her grasping fingers. It slid under the massive refrigerator.

Betty, like Magilla, was practiced in hand to hand combatives. She kicked and punched and tried to stick her fingers into Tom's eyes. But, like Magilla before her, she was up against a Monkey Boxer, and she wasn't even as good as Magilla had been. Tom punched her foot, slipped her punch and twined her arms, then he moved in. He pulled on one arm to bring her head into his elbow and felt the reassuring smack of elbow against cheek. Her mask dissipated the force somewhat, and that was all that stopped her from going out right then. Dazed, she continued to

struggle, so Tom slipped a foot behind her and trapped her in the splitting position, then he simply hammered a fist into her plexus. That stopped her—but good! Now she was unable to fight, or even to hold herself up, and he let her slip through his hold. She curled on the ground and held her mid section.

Tom bent and picked up her revolver.

The sound of the explosions diminished, but the glow of fire in the ‘hood could be seen through the shattered windows lining the top of the walls. The flame in the hole in the floor died down to nothing but heat and a slight glow. There was a hole in the roof and Tom had no idea how that had happened.

Tom suddenly realized that the school hadn’t been blown up, that the children were safe, and he was alive! He was—

“Get away!”

Mrs. Watson stood in the door of the kitchen. She had found Magilla’s gun and was trying to get a shot at Betty.

“No!” Tom yelled. “She’s done!”

“Get away, white boy!”

White boy?

“I’m going to kill that bitch!”

Tom knelt in front of Betty so Mrs. Watson couldn’t get a clear shot.

BANG! Mrs. Watson fired. The round was high, and the bullet made a spanging sound as it struck the metal door of the refrigerator.

“No!” Tom yelled.

Betty made a sound of fright. She was helpless. She touched Tom’s ankle. He was her only protection.

“Get away from her, or I’ll kill you, too, white boy!”

Tom focused on her. Sounds died away. In the dim recesses of his mind, he realized that this was a moment of truth. This was the ‘now’ that would guide the rest of his life.

Let her shoot Betty?

Or, don’t let her shoot Betty.

On one hand was the terrorist who had held 600 children hostage, who threatened to gas a whole city.

On the other hand was a black principal who treated him like hired help and talked down to him.

Betty, for all her evilness, was sick.

But wasn’t Mrs. Watson sick, too?

Wasn’t everybody who called anybody a monkey or a honky or any other name of disrespect sick? And could he say that he wasn’t when he lived in the middle of it?

So he made his choice. He lifted the gun, his calm, cool training taking hold in the significance of the moment, and he pulled the trigger.

BANG! The bullet punched Mrs. Watson in the sternum. It tilted her, and she backpedaled a little, then fell backwards.

“You!” a voice yelled.

Tom looked through the door, over Mrs. Watson’s body, to where Shelley Dickson pointed at him.

“You’re one of them! You were one of them all the time!”

Tom pulled the trigger again, hitting the wall above the door. Shelley jumped away, back into the auditorium, and Tom could hear the sounds of 600 people trying to hide—from him!

He had shot Mrs. Watson, and Shelley would go to her grave claiming that he was one of White Law. There was only one thing to do.

Tom turned and scooped Betty up in his arms. He jumped—and it was only a short fall to hell.

They hit the burning muck, and flaming liquid splashed. He was under water—or whatever liquid it was. The explosion had created a deeper pit, and the pit was foul smelling and filled with glowing excrement. Tom choked and struggled to his knees. His head broke the surface, and he realized the muck was only waist high. He reached for Betty and pulled her to her knees also. His face, burning with the clinging muck, hurt.

“What?” Betty was dazed. She still had her gas mask on, her face was protected.

The temperature in the sewer was unbearably high—his face burned with the heat—but the only way out was through. Tom pulled Betty into the pipes where fires still burned and dead bodies floated.

“Where...where?”

“I don’t know,” Tom shouted back, then he realized he didn’t have to shout. His face was burning and yet curiously cold. He rubbed his face and a thin coating of muck came off, he didn’t realize the muck was really skin.

“You saved my life!”

Tom walked half hunkered, pulled her along, and rubbed at his face. He pulled off his shirt and plastered it against his skin.

He pulled her onward, and the light of the fires still burning in the sewers—and burning throughout Monkeyland above—gave them enough light to navigate by.

They came to the first of the jumpsuited bodies and Tom stepped over it, pulled Betty along. She stared at the charred remains of that which had been a man, and it was at that moment that she began to realize what had happened.

They walked for miles, and somewhere along the way Tom found that he was crying. He didn’t know why.

Betty came to him then, uncovered his head and took a close look at him. She knew why he was crying, and it was her turn to lead him, to pull him along, to save him.

They walked for a long time, an indeterminate time. The light of flames faded as they left Monkeyland, and they entered darker sections of the city. They found a grate and crawled out. Once out, Betty pulled off her jumpsuit, discarded beard and hat and mask and whatever else might identify her, and led Tom down the street.

“Where...where....” he managed.

“Hospital,” she responded tersely.

“But they’ll catch you!”

“No, they won’t.”

And it was true. She was no longer in disguise, she was in brown slacks and a thin cotton shirt. Her shoes didn’t look so hot, but it would be doubtful whether anybody would notice her shoes, especially with half of South Central burning and the hospitals filled with the dead and the dying. They were almost in downtown Santa Monica before a cop picked them up and took them to a hospital.

EPILOGUE

Tom sat in the easy chair and watched TV. The chair was old with cracked, leather arms, and the TV was small.

Through the windows he could see the wind tearing the last of the leaves away from the stark tree branches. The first driftings of snow were beginning to scurry across the ground. He was warm in the ranch house; Betty always kept the pot belly stove cherry red.

The door slammed.

“Hi, honey!”

Tom mumbled hello and Joanie leaned over him, kissed him lightly on the lips.

That was her real name. Joanie. Joanie Day.

She had told it to him while he was in the hospital. She had complete documentation to prove herself, and somehow came up with false documents for him. In a land where people didn't know to what country they belonged, it was easy enough to do, he supposed.

He had spent a month in the hospital, the doctors giving him all sorts of bad news about his face. It was months before the bandages came off, and then his face had been twisted and gnarled, a cruel joke of the handsome man he had once been.

Well, that was okay. Nobody would recognize him as the terrorist who had been the inside man when White Law took 600 children hostage.

Sometimes he didn't think he recognized himself.

“What's on the news?”

“Same old, same old,” he replied, and though Joanie didn't question him any further, he thought about what he witnessed on the tube daily.

The mayor of Los Angeles, Fresling, lost his office to a guy named Gomez. National Guard had finally been called in, but all they did was sit around the perimeter of Monkeyland. Seemed like nobody wanted to go into Monkeyland and risk a real race war.

And a race war would have resulted if the National Guard had moved in. The Monkeylanders had weapons, were growing their own food, were rebuilding—and were proving pretty darned self sufficient.

And nobody—nobody with a warrant or a gun—could find the illusive Elwin Jones. He was the invisible president of a country that wasn't recognized.

But recognized or not, Monkeyland was having an effect on the rest of the country. Blacks insisted on living there, were migrating from all over the country. And other parts of the country, and the blacks that weren't migrating, were saying they wanted to be part of Monkeyland. Riots were occurring everywhere, and they were of such magnitude, and inserted right in the heart of the white communities, that even should the government have the guts to stomp them out, there was no way to draw a battle line.

"Texas was on the news," said Tom. "Some guy named Harding..." he trailed off.

"Yes, Texas," Joanie agreed, simply.

She was bent over the sink, washing vegetables from their garden. They didn't have much meat these days. Neither of them had any money. People from town came by every once in a while, brought them some canned goods—but not much meat.

"Yeah," he said, his mind drifting as he looked out the window.

Montana. Montana was cold. Her ranch wasn't in Arizona, but in Montana. Just one more in the layer of lies she had built to mislead the authorities. And there weren't any horses here. Could be, but Betty...Joanie...said she had sold them before she went to LA.

"What's the President saying about Monkeyland?"

"Same old, same old," he replied. Joanie liked to talk sometimes. Sometimes she didn't. Tom didn't care. He just thought about things. A lot of the time he thought about flying out of LA, lying sick in a small ranch house in Montana, being tended by Joanie.

He had saved her, and she had saved him, and they were like two old people fending off encroaching old age.

Joanie.

She was fine most days. But on some days she would stare at him like she didn't know who he was. On those days he would have to tell her that the mare was foaling and she better get out to the barn. She would leave, come back in a half hour, be fine.

They would make love.

Him, with the ugly face that no woman could love.

Her, who he never knew which one he was making love to.

But what else was there?

When neighbors decide not to be friends, when blacks and whites pretend their skin color matters, when the beast rolls over, crushing right thinking people with its ponderous belly...then such places as Monkeyland come into existence—and then there is hell on Earth.

Tom looked out the window, saw the cold and isolation, ignored the babble that was the false preaching of TV.

He was safe. Whatever that was.

"Tom? Honey?"

“Yes?”

She came to him, dried her hands on her apron. Her face was smooth, like a model's, but slightly weathered, and those blue eyes seemed to reach right into him and twist his innards. When he was with her it was like he was always in a tunnel, but sometimes it was like a tunnel with only one opening.

She slipped her legs over his and sat on his lap. Her face was inches from his scarred visage, her lips were close to his ear, and she whispered, “I think I need a little loving tonight.”

He held her. A little loving.

“How about you?” she asked.

He needed a lot of loving.

“Do you want a little loving?” she murmured.

He held her and looked out the window at the leaf stripped trees and the beginning of winter. He pushed the blaring of the intrusive TV out of his mind, was frightened by his decisions, and said, “Yes.”

He began to cry.

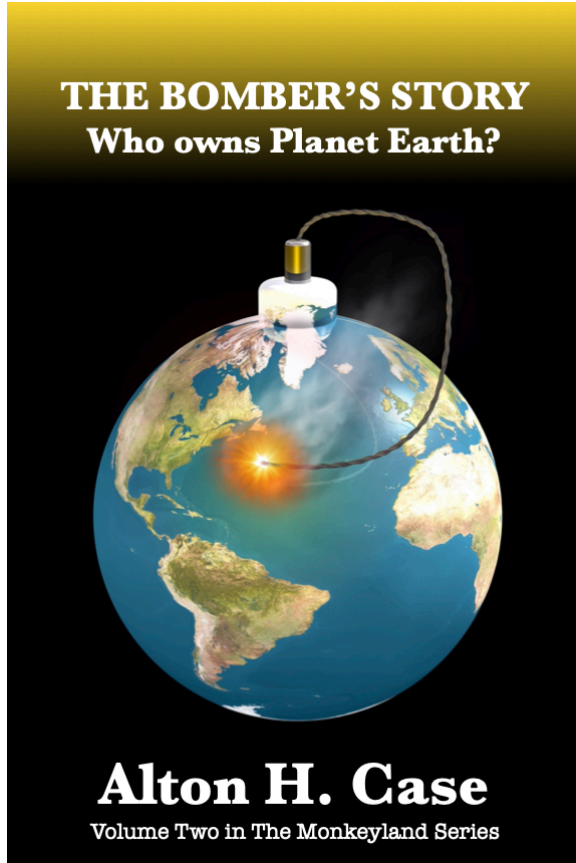
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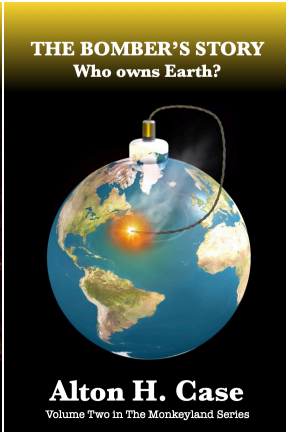
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