

Ruthless and Defiled

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Legionnaire Security figured that Dante Wakefield was a nigger who would play ball. The company thought that a few house niggers around would improve their image with wealthy white liberals and get them more contacts. They were right.

As a junior officer, he rode shotgun through North Las Vegas. He was with Officer Harvey Klein. Harvey was forty plus, big shouldered, big gut, beer and steaks diet that would stop his heart before too much longer. He'd been with the company almost twenty years.

Harvey said, "This neighborhood is the worst. None of these ni . . . people have got company protection, but lots of them pack heat. You see a gun around here, just lay waste. Doesn't matter how many you put down. It's free, 'cept for the ammo and ammo is cheap. Because they *will* dust you, if they can."

Racism was institutionalized with the company. Which made it worse for Dante, but what was he going to do? He took the jobs he could get. The company didn't care that he didn't have a college education, the company didn't care about his credit history, the company cared about his psyche profile, the company cared that he would hurt people for money.

"What if you have to interrogate someone?" Dante said. "What if the contract needs them alive or whatever?"

"You grab a civilian sled with a four man snatch team. One guy hits the perp" – everyone they dealt with who wasn't a client was a perp – "with a taser when the van rolls up, and you basically just toss him in and go. A driver, one guy in the van, one guy with the taser, and one other guy on the street in case it goes south and you need the extra firepower. It takes ten, twenty seconds, the civilians are too stunned to do shit. And like I said, no one down here has contracts with anyone. I've never gotten any corporate heat in Northtown."

"Just like that."

"Just like that," Harvey confirmed. "But you're too green to be doing snatches. You'll just ride patrol and light weight rousts until you get your feet."

"Like we're doing now?"

"Yeah. We got a complaint about a . . . black youth who has been hanging out in front of Galt High School who accosted a client's daughter. The client has a class A contract, so he says jump and we say, 'How high!' Sigint caught the youth's face in a bank cam down the street we own, and we ran it through visual detection and came up with a hit. So, go on, punch it up. You know how."

Dante punched it up from the car's computer terminal. Legionnaire Security had good gear – all cars with computer uplinks to the base. It came up, like Harvey said.

The perp was Navidad Soleros, a dark skinned Guatemalan who worked bus at a casino, did odd jobs. No record with Legionnaire. Barely any contact with the system at all. He was a good looking kid, seventeen, and they had the address his work gave the Legionnaires for a small fee. No contract protection. He was wide open.

Harvey said, "He probably lives with a dozen people. You wouldn't believe the way people live down here."

Dante didn't say, *I am from Northtown, you cracker fuckwad*. But he thought it pretty loud. Harvey didn't catch it, he was into the Soleros job.

Harvey went on, "So this could get messy. But like I said, Who gives a shit?" Then Harvey looked portentously over to Dante. "You okay with this? I can do this solo."

Dante frowned and shook his head. "If this is my job, its my job and I'd best get used to it, huh?"

"Yeah." He looked back at the road and laughed. "Don't sweat it, though. You'll dig it. This job is the fucking best, Dante. Seriously. You've never had power before. You've never had respect. You'll dig it. You'll jazz on it. Trust me."

Dante kept his mouth shut. *Yes, massa, yous gots it, massa.* He swallowed his pride. He just gulped it down.

They rolled up Highland. They made a left at a street named after a tree that didn't even exist, anymore. Redwood Lane. Cheap houses with cracked stucco, no AC, desert lawns choked with weeds, husks of cars on the road, in yards, shingles off the rooftops, no one around. No streetlights, cracks and potholes in the semi-paved street. Half the homes probably didn't even have electricity or running water. Dante remembered. On his street, only one guy had running water and he sold it at a profit to everyone else. It was 2:46 am, real time. When you didn't have lights, or could only afford two hours power per day, people went to bed early, especially in winter. They pulled up to the curb.

Harvey said, "Check your body armor, get on your helmet, and go in heavy with your bullpump. Don't take any shit from anyone. You hear me, son?"

"My ears are good. I hear you," Dante said, putting on his helmet and strapping it on.

"You play cover. I'll arrest the perp. Anyone resists . . ."

"I got it, already. Shoot first."

"Right."

Harvey put on his helmet. He got his shotgun and so did Dante. They chambered rounds and clicked off their safeties.

Dante kicked the door in because he was the junior. Harvey went in, the flashlight on his shotgun sweeping the room. He'd been right – half a dozen people were sleeping in the living room. His flashlight was laser bright. He blinded them. Dante came in, his flashlight the same – he blinded them, too.

Harvey shouted, "Everyone down! All you fucking niggers eat carpet! Down!"

Dante shouted, "Get the fuck down!"

A teenage girl – fourteen, fifteen – didn't get down. Harvey made her eat the butt of his shotgun. She hit the ground, spitting teeth. Everyone else hit the ground. Sweep the living room, sweep the attached dining room, sweep the kitchen.

Harvey shouted, "Clear!"

Dante kicked in a door. Bathroom.

"Clear!"

Dante kicked a door. It was a bedroom, chaos, three married couples sleeping on mattresses that covered the floor. Flashlights blinded people. Someone was trying to get out a window.

Harvey said, "Down, you motherfuckers!"

Dante just shot. The shot blew out the glass. The perp was knocked out the window, hit the ground outside. Everyone got down.

Harvey shouted, "Clear." Dante barely heard him because his ears were ringing. Harvey shouted for Dante to check the perp.

Dante looked out the window. He saw the bloody mess. The shot had taken out Soleros at the legs. Blood was everywhere. Soleros was screaming in pain, but Dante barely heard that, either.

"We got him!" Dante shouted. He was sure Harvey couldn't hear too well, either.

Dante put one hand on the window sill and vaulted out. Harvey came around. Soleros was trying to crawl away from them. Dante's ears rang, digitally pure noise, digitally loud. Dante gripped his shotgun real hard so Harvey couldn't see how his hands were shaking in time with his hammering heart.

"Good shot," Harvey said. "Cuff him. Its your collar, Dante. Nice fucking work."

Dante cuffed Soleros. He couldn't stand, so Dante and Harvey picked him up – one arm each – and carried him back to the car. He screamed the whole way, he leaked blood on sand and concrete. They tossed Soleros in the back of the car. They took him to the station and handed him off before going up and writing the report.

Dante heard Harvey, a few cubes down, say down as he typed, "That nigger is one of the

whitest men I've ever met." He said it like it was a fucking *compliment*.

That night, Dante couldn't get to sleep. He tossed and turned for two hours. He got up and drank tequila until dawn. He tried to sleep, but had to puke and barely made it to the toilet. After that he sort of dozed until his alarm went off. But by then he was sober and aspirin made most of the headache go away.

The next day, Dante asked Sergeant David Winnow, "Sarge, what happened with Soleros? That perp I collared."

David said, "Good work on that. I read Officer Klein's report about it and he was quite impressed with you. Most fresh meat don't have the guts to take a shot first time out."

"And . . . ?"

"Oh, yeah, he was interrogated. We got our man. He won't be bothering the client anymore. He's cold."

He's cold.

Dante kept his cool but his balls crawled in his belly and his guts turned to ice. He nodded. "Thanks, Sarge."

Dante talked to the interrogator, Mark Sloane.

Mark said, "Yeah, he talked, alright. Said that Jenny Moore was his girlfriend, that they met at a football game. He was a janitor, she was in the audience. The affair was consensual, we verified that, but daddy didn't like it and he pays the bills."

Dante kept his cool. He nodded and thanked Mark. He made it to the bathroom where he popped vomit in a toilet. He made it down to the dry heaves. Tears squirted out of his eyes when he puked.

He went to see the body. Navidad Soleros. Seventeen. The body, despite his black skin made blacker by the hard Nevada sun, looked somehow wan in death. No one had bothered to treat his leg wounds. He had been terminated according to policy, a hollow point magnum slug to the back of the head. Navidad didn't have a nose, or front teeth, and his jaw was laid next to his head. Blood was all over the body, dark against the darkness of his skin.

Soleros – *Navidad* – didn't have a security contract. He was a nigger spic busboy who did odd jobs, like clean up private school shit during football games. So he was fair game. No trial, certainly no jury, taken care of with a minimum of fuss and muss – the cost of six man hours, a shotgun shell, and a hollow point bullet. Dante tried to imagine how Navidad hooked up with Jenny Moore. He tried to imagine why Jenny had a fling with a nigger spic janitor she met during a football game. Was it love? Was it a rich white girl slumming? He remembered the words of the interrogator, "*The affair was consensual, we verified that, but daddy didn't like it and he pays the bills.*"

She had a security contract. She had Legionnaire, class A contract, give all assistance. He could not roust Jenny Moore, he could not brace her. If he ever talked to her at all, he would be polite. He would say "ma'am" and "thank you" and "please" a lot, period. Right? It would be suicide to go up against Legionnaire.

His paycheck – no taxes, of course, they were a thing of the past – was for \$2,600 a month, give or take. Even after retirement, medical insurance and rent, he was doing pretty good for himself. Just looking at his pay stub made his eyes go red and half-blind, his hands tremble.

Time flew. Dante proved himself. He knew, because he was black, that he had to be harder than the rest. Otherwise, he knew, and he was right, that Legionnaire Security would find another black man who was willing to play to their tune.

He tried to play it straight, but he learned. There was no straight. His daddy had told him right from wrong, but the world contradicted that lesson. *Right* was power. *Right* was money. *Right* was success. Everything else was a lie.

He had dreams. He saw knuckle duster gloves and people spitting out teeth in his dreams. He saw scarlet slick bladed razors. He saw gunshot wounds. He saw Navidad Soleros with no jaw.

He drank, but didn't do anything else, because the company had policy. They could check his piss and blood. They could do black bag searches of his home – he signed waivers, he gave

them copies of his keys to help out with it. But they didn't care about liquor, so he drank. When he learned they never checked for X, he dropped X in large doses. To stop the dreams.

He wanted to play it straight, but thirty percent of Las Vegas had no security contracts. No one to protect them. A quarter of small businesses had no security contracts and no one to protect them. They might have guns, but – Dante worked with Legionnaire. He had combat training, a hard vest, he had ripper bullets that would shred armor, shred flesh; he had a partner. Legionnaires looked out for each other and if anyone hurt a Legionnaire, there was payback with usurious interest rates.

Security companies only respected other accredited security companies, their contracts and clients. They let the lawyers handle inter-company negotiations in case of violations. No one wanted a war between security companies; there was no profit in it. So he worked immediate response for clients, and muscle work against the uninsured.

He worked it hard and brutal. He learned that there is no straight. Six months in, he bought a new car. New to him, at any rate – two years old, a Mustang GT convertible, sleek and fast. It had a Legionnaire sticker on it, so it was protected.

It was a bad car for tail work. Still – he sat outside of Galt High School. A Legionnaire car drove by, slow, and Dante recognized the driver, the driver recognized him. The Legionnaire car drove on. School got out. When he had the free time, he liked to be around Galt when school got out.

Most of the students drove their own cars, of course. If their parents could afford an education, they could most certainly a car for their kids. It was easy to see the scholarship students – they didn't have cars, they didn't dress in the latest fashions. They rode bikes or walked. He remembered when he was a scholarship student – he only made it through sixth grade.

Not because he couldn't keep the grades up for more scholarships, but because the other kids hated his guts and he didn't apply himself. Because he was young, and a fool; when he was twelve he thought it would be cool to hang out on street corners and sell dope to rich kids whose contracts said "No drugs". But he was wrong, competition was fierce and profits low. He thought he should have stayed in school, endured the hate, gone to college . . . but he also thought that it was better not to endure the hate, not to endure the abuse and neglect and instead keep a part of his soul for himself. He didn't know which one working for Legionnaire was: had he sold his soul, or kept part of it?

Most of the students just walked by. Some looked at him – *Is he a thief?* That's what their eyes said to Dante.

Jenny Moore came out. She was eighteen, slender, leggy, tight sweater showing her curves. She was blond with blue eyes and tanned skin. Her lips were scarlet, the color of his car. She didn't see him. He was invisible to her. She got into a Mazda two-seater and peeled out with the rest of the kids.

Next day: the place was a mosque on Fridays, a synagogue on Saturdays and a church on Sundays. The rest of the week they did a lot of different things – they called it Westside Community Center. It was a lousy cinder block building on D Street, wedged in between Squatters Alley – a shanty town by the freeway, ten or twelve thousand strong – and a lot of abandoned storefronts, liquor stores, pawn shops and gun stores. There was a Texaco nearby, two armed guards, not Legionnaire but Clamp Security: cheap, ill-trained but legit, so Dante would respect them. Clamp had a reputation for being trigger-happy. High body counts created a reputation almost equivalent with good training and gear.

Dante had bought his own body armor, too. Synthetic silk and liquid kevlar – he didn't understand how it worked, but it could stop teflon bullets. He had his helmet, armored knuckle duster gloves, armored boots, knee and elbow pads. Over it he wore urban camo. He had a shotgun with flechette rounds – steel needles instead of lead pellets, popped through kevlar, ripped through flesh. He had a Desert Eagle with razor claws – huge, ugly wounds. He had a taser, lock picks, tear gas, earplugs, flashbangs, spare clips, hand grenades, night vision goggles, a tenth of a kilo of plastic explosive with a timer. He felt like fucking Batman.

Tuesdays: Community Security Meeting at 7pm. It was socialist agitation, poor people

unite, take back the streets. They forgot how these same people gave up the streets for tax cuts and smaller government. Dante didn't care. He wasn't political.

He wired the plastic to the power panel from the street. He went around to the back door. He picked the cheap lock. No other security, plus there were twenty people inside. November in Vegas – it was already dark at 7 pm. Not a lot of lights around. Shadows and the smell of piss in the alleyway, a bum wrapped in newspaper next to a dumpster.

Bang!

The community center went dark. Dante went in. He was in the back – small offices, then backstage. He heard people asking questions, but distant, far away because of the earplugs:

"What's going on?"

"Someone call the power company! We pay for this shit!"

"Was that a bomb?"

"Order, order!"

"Don't be paranoid."

He tossed a flash bang. He ducked behind the wings and put down his night vision. The battery pack whined as the goggles came on.

"What was that?"

Flash bang!

He stepped out from the wings. There were two people on stage. He fired his shotgun twice. They went down. He saw an arm come off, splatter on the ground. With the night vision on, he couldn't tell colors, everything was green, black and a little blurry – it didn't matter.

People were panicking. They couldn't see. They stumbled. One of them had a gun out. She waved it around, firing high, blind, stupid. Dante fired and she fell back, a hole right through her chest. Dante pumped and fired, again. A man fell, his guts like snakes on the ground, a woman fell, her leg missing from the knee down. He fired until his shotgun was empty.

They were finding the door. They were clustered at the door. He tossed a hand grenade. He stepped behind wings, again.

Boom!

He went out the back, the way he came in, reloading his shotgun as he walked. The bum in the alleyway was awake, scared, eyes wide and white as Dante flipped up his night vision goggles.

"Boo," Dante said, chambering a round in his shotgun.

The bum saw him. He got up and ran, stumbled, skinned his knee, got up again and kept on running. Dante walked around the front. There was one man walking in front of the community center. He was covered with blood, one arm limp, dazed, stunned.

One of the Clamp guys had run down, his gun out, as Dante came out.

Dante said, "I'm a Legionnaire."

The Clamp guy stopped and watched as Dante blew the head off the man who was stumbling around.

That was Tuesday evening.

Wednesday morning, Dante walked into the squad room. Standing ovation.

Harvey Klein said, "Un-fucking-believable. Shit. The news is calling it twelve dead, six wounded. Un-fucking-believable." Harvey shook Dante's hand, clapped Dante on the back.

He didn't tell them: *I was so scared I could barely see. I could barely breathe out there. Ohmygod, what did I do? I did it. I did it! I DID IT!*

Tuesday night he had walked all until dawn. He lived in a good neighborhood. A gated neighborhood. He walked until he got blisters, and then he walked until the blisters got bloody. He walked with JD. JD helped him forget, helped him come down off his high. Dante was sick. He was exhilarated. He was *both*. He was walking on Cloud 9. He was walking on hot coals. He was walking on *both*.

He smiled, sick. He was sick and happy. People patted his back and called him a stud, a badass, said that those fucking community security centers wouldn't be messing with Legionnaire.

Sergeant David Winnow came out of his office and said, "Hey, Dante, come over here for a second. Lieutenant Maxwell wants to have a confab, okay?"

"Yeah, sarge," he said, pulling himself away from the men. He went into the sergeant's office and David let him in.

Lieutenant Maxwell was aging, tall, silver haired, very white – pink, even, the way that old men who avoid the sun can get. Translucent. He had gotten stuck in middle management, and the rumors were he had debt to casinos. In Vegas, *no one* fucked with the casinos, not even international firms like Legionnaire. They ran as they pleased, and rarely bothered with contract negotiations. Which meant that some casino owned Maxwell. Lieutenant Maxwell was sitting on the edge of David Minnow's desk.

He said, "Take a load off, son."

"Son" grated. Dante swallowed it. The lieutenant was old. Dante sat down.

The sergeant folded his arms across his chest. He wasn't big and it didn't make him look any bigger, but Dante didn't say, *Hey, man, you look like a little guy trying to act big, which is ridiculous*. He let that lay, too. Dante said, "What is it, sir?"

"We just wanted to touch bases on what happened last night. So, tell us, what happened last night?"

"That so-called community security firm was giving me hassle over the Soleros bust. Like I set policy or something. They were picketing my apartment, I was getting hate mail, phone calls, so I decided to do something about it. None of them have any *real* contracts with anyone, and now there's no 'community security firm' to give any one any grief."

David said, "You do realize this is a public relations disaster."

"It was my time. I can do what I want with my time," Dante said, defiant.

Lieutenant Maxwell leaned in close. He smelled old, sick, wounded and dangerous. He said, showing teeth, "Bullshit, officer. I can fire you anytime I want and replace you with a hundred niggers who would know how to goddamn *obey*."

Dante grit his teeth. His stomach flip-flopped. His heart beat cold. He thought, *I killed a dozen people last night. I could kill you, too*. He felt sick. His head started to whirl. He couldn't do anything because the lieutenant was right.

"Yes, sir," he said.

"Better," Lieutenant Maxwell said, leaning back. "It is a public relations disaster. Not that you killed a bunch of human waste, that you offed a wannabe security firm – but you blew up a church, son. They're going to be taking collections to try to get a settlement from us, and that settlement will include your ass."

He smirked. "I have more ammo," he heard himself saying, aghast that he said it.

He expected to get dressed down, hard. Maybe told to pack his things. Maybe told that Legionnaire would, in fact, sell his ass out. His eyes went dizzy, his hearing went weird, like they were by the ocean. But the old man smiled. "That is one response. They are already scared of you and if you killed a few more of them, that fear would solidify, take root, and they'd back down. They don't have the money to hire a real professional to go after you.

"But I don't want you to do that. Not to kill. To be honest, son, I'm impressed with your drive and initiative. Not many people could have done that. Not many men have the balls to do what you did. But you've got to learn to let people live. So that's my words on this – clean up your mess, but no more bodies. You make more bodies outside of official business, I'll kick your ass back to the street."

It was like the tension went out of his bones. Dante sagged. His mind went *pop*. It cleared up. He was going to live. He had his job. Everything was cool. All he had to do was clean up his mess, no bodies. No problem, right?

Dante's time crept by. Cleaning up messes was a problem. Not that he couldn't do it. He could. He didn't want to, murder exhilaration giving way to soul sickness, so he boxed himself in and procrastinated. He found work he could be doing and did it. He avoided the mess he'd made, but it made time creep.

Now, he was a guard at Galt High School's prom. Legionnaire was playing the crowd, which was white and well-to-do and liked to think of themselves as open minded – so Legionnaire gave them black guards, him and Jeff Wilcox, and an Asian, David Liu. There were three other guards, white, but to the people at the party it looked like Legionnaire was the soul of integration, corporate integration, integration done *right*. Ignore the fact that nearly every non-white Legionnaire in Las Vegas was in the room.

It was civilian clothes work. Black suit, red tie – they all wore the same. Dante had kelvar under his shirt, a 10mm Glock in a shoulder rig. The Glock kicked like a motherfucker, but it got the job done. He also had a sap, mace, cuffs and taser on his belt. He had a throat mike and a wire to his ear.

He and the guards stood out, but not so much. Enough to make the parents comfortable about security but not intrusive enough that the kids couldn't have fun – that was the idea. Easy assignment, probably nothing, maybe break up a fistfight. Dante and the Legionnaires spent the time checking out teenage girls, but the policy was strict: *no fraternizing*.

Jenny Moore fronted Dante. He nodded and said, "Hello, ma'am."

She said, "You can't be more than twenty, right?"

"I'm twenty-one, ma'am, but fully field certified."

"You're that Legionnaire that blew up that church," she said. She was tipsy. She swayed on her feet. She had a push-up bra and a low cut dress; the dress was slit up the thigh. In heels, she was almost as tall as he was. "Killed all those people."

Dante said, "I don't know what you're talking about, ma'am." He could hear the other Legionnaires laughing through his earpiece; they heard him through his throat mike, they saw the girl confront him.

She said, "Oh, cut the bullshit, right?" He said nothing. She said, "What was it like?"

"What was what like?"

"The killing." Her lips were parted and very red, moist and her eyes were misty.

The others were getting up close, to eavesdrop.

He said, "Excuse me, ma'am, its time for me to take a break." He nodded to her and started to walk away.

She grabbed his arm and said, "You also killed Navidad Soleros."

He twitched. His stomach jumped. He turned to her and said, "I only collared him. I'm not in executions."

"They say you shot him up."

"Bird shot. Just to collar him."

"Funny, hearing a black man use the word collar like that."

She smiled and let him go. He got out of there. He went outside. His pulse was up, his stomach twisted around.

David Liu came out and whistled, "Piece of work, that one."

"Yeah, piece of work."

Fredrick Moore owned a multi-million dollar ranch outside of town. Nearby were other multi-million dollar mansions, separated from each other by walls and desert. The view of the valley, at night, was great: Las Vegas glistened like diamonds on velvet, the brightest city in the world. During the day, when Dante was summoned, Las Vegas was covered by a brown sheet of smog, the whole city looked sepia, filthy.

Fredrick Moore was a tall man, thin, maybe sixty, silver-blond, blue eyed. He looked the sort of fit his men age got with dietitians and professional trainers. He owned two low roller casinos outright, and had stock in many of the Strip joints. He was wearing a smoking jacket and had a silk cravat; his shoes cost more than Dante made in a year, the beast that gave up its life for Fredrick Moore's shoes having become extinct a decade ago. He was one of those men that it was hard to imagine could ever look frumpy, could ever look anything less than perfect, just so. Fredrick Moore was born a millionaire and became a billionaire. He considered himself a self-made man. Dante hated him on sight. Hated him bone deep, soul deep.

Dante was brought in by a Mexican serving girl – brown skinned and pretty, dark hair, dark eyes. Dante watched.

Fredrick said, "Pretty thing, isn't she?"

Dante shrugged. "Yeah, she's pretty."

Fredrick made it clear he was waiting for something.

Dante said, "Sir."

Fredrick smiled. He said, "I read about you in the papers. You're infamous, for a moment. Does it make your job harder or easier?"

"A little of both, sir."

"Isn't that the way of the world?"

"I guess so, sir."

"You'll learn it is so."

Dante tried not to grit his teeth as this rich white man gave him street advice. He itched to say what Freddy knew about the streets was about as much as Dante knew about corporate boardrooms. Dante saw Freddy had no scars on his knuckles, no callouses on his hands. It was hard to take him seriously.

"You're probably wondering why I called you here, today."

"Yes, sir, I am."

"You're the man who caught that mad dog that was sniffing after my little girl."

Dante knew that Freddy hadn't been told what the interrogators found: that Daddy's Little Girl sought out an affair with a black Latino man. Freddy thought that Navidad Soleros was a stalker, maybe a rapist, definitely dangerous to Daddy's Little Girl.

Dante said, "Well, it was Senior Officer Klein and myself, yes, sir."

"I read the report. You're the person who immobilized the man."

"I shot him, yes, sir."

"You did a good job with it. And I see that you're chafing at the bit here. You don't like me, do you?"

Dante hesitated. "No, sir."

"Because I'm white?"

"Because you're in charge and you don't deserve it, sir," he said. "It's got nothing to do with skin color."

"Oh-ho. Are you a socialist?"

"No, sir. I don't want to change the world."

"But you don't like it?"

"I don't like my place in it."

"Ah, yes. The truth of human nature, and why things are the way they are. Those community advocates ignore that. They ignore that all they're working to do is get where I am, now. That in the history of leftist movements, they all became, in the end, like us – with the rich and powerful doing what they want, and what they can, while the peons agitate not for change but merely to be on top. That's history, but you're probably not a big fan of history."

"Not really, sir."

"You have the air about you of a man of action, and a realist." Freddy laughed. "I understand your hatred of me, but I don't hate you. Just the opposite. I like you. You're forthright. I value that. I want you to do something for me. Off-policy."

"Sir?"

"I don't want you reporting this to your superiors."

"What is it, sir?"

"I want you to convince Lieutenant Paul Maxwell to give me his security codes, including his codes for his virtual private network, including his VPN card key which he will not report as missing."

"He owes you money, sir."

"Yes, money he has not repaid despite repeated attempts to collect. So I will collect something else."

Access to Legionnaire's Vegas records. Dante got it at once. Freddy knew that Legionnaire had security records that were strictly confidential, and Lieutenant Maxwell had access to the intelligence reports database. Dante also got it that after Freddy had plundered Legionnaire's database that it would get back to Legionnaire, back to Maxwell.

So, Dante said, "Will this job include removing Maxwell from his job after you're done? He'll have to be removed. If I can shake this info out of him, then the interrogator will be able to shake everything else out of him. Sir."

Freddy smiled. "As I said, a realist. Certainly. It shouldn't take more than ten hours on my end to get everything completed, then you clean up Maxwell."

"Okay. The bill will be a hundred large for me, and bump up Senior Officer Klein to

sergeant when Winnow takes Maxwell's job. You'd like Klein. He's a realist. He'll play ball. Sir."

Freddy laughed. He nodded. He hashed out the rest of the details with Dante.

Dante went to his car. It was parked under an awning, top down. He got in. Jenny Moore walked up and leaned on the driver's side door, a tennis outfit that showed lots of leg. She had the same air her father did: she was always dressed sharp, it was impossible to visualize her dressed frumpy.

She said, "Did you get the job? I overheard Daddy saying he needed someone for something delicate and I mentioned him to you. They're calling you the Visigoth, you know. None of the peons get it, but they don't read the papers, anyway, right?"

"If you want to know what you got, ask daddy."

"Ha!" she said. "You owe me"

"Bullshit. I never asked for anything from you. I can smell a shakedown. This is a shakedown."

"I've got no brothers. Someday, all of this will be mine."

"Whatever."

"Maybe you'll indulge me?" she asked, pouty and seductive, like a switch had been thrown.

He rolled his eyes. "What?"

"I want to watch."

Dante was shocked, controlled it. "If your dad catches wind of it, he'll burn me down."

"I can handle daddy."

"More bullshit. You can handle daddy so he doesn't do anything to you, but I bet you've never handled 'daddy' about a single business item a day in your life. He'll smile and pat your head while he sends some guys down to my joint with pliers, a five pound sledge and a butane torch."

She perked an eyebrow. "But you haven't said no."

He started his car. It was stupid. He was feeling reckless and he hated Freddy. His pulse was up, his thoughts clouded. *There was no playing it straight.* Not with the Westside Community Center, not with Legionnaire, not with his own morals or beliefs. Why not with Freddy Moore?

Dante said, "Grease the wheels. I want twenty large."

She was shocked. She said, "What? You want me to pay?"

"Capitalism in action."

She laughed. She thought about it. She smiled and nodded. "Twenty grand. I think I can get that. Daddy gives me all this jewelry that I never wear more than once because he's always giving me more jewelry. I can get it."

"Get it by tomorrow night. This is gonna happen pretty fast. And give me your phone number so I can tell you where its gonna go down."

It went down. Dante called Jenny over to the in-between place: a motel room, way off-Strip, way low class, down by Glitter Gulch. Dante counted his money: twenty large. He took her cell phone, PDA and purse and left it. They got into his car and drove over to where Paul Maxwell was at – it was a dive, a bar off of Valley View, cinder block and chipped paint, wedged between a hot dog joint and a consignment second-hand clothing store: there was a Miller High Life sign in neon by the door. None of the Legionnaires went there, they were more upscale, more corporate in their tastes.

Dante called Paul Maxwell's cell phone. Dante said, "Loeey, I'm outside. I've got a situation. You remember that Jenny Moore girl? Yeah. I just picked her up on Alta Drive trying to score some horse."

Jenny said, "What?"

Dante hushed her with a wave of his hand. He said, "Yeah, she's in my ride right now and I'm outside Marcello's Cocktail Lounge, and since I'm looking at your shitty sky blue Caddy I'm figuring you're inside. This is too much heat for me . . . okay, see you in a second."

He hung up.

Jenny said, "You told him I was looking for heroin?"

"It doesn't matter. But you look pissed. That's good. Here he comes."

Maxwell came out out. He listed. He looked pinker than he normally did. He came up to

the convertible, Dante's side. He leaned on the door.

"This ain't good for you, young lady," he said, trying to act fatherly.

Dante looked around: no eyewitnesses. Dante hit the lieutenant with his taser. Paul Maxwell started to do the electricity dance, but Dante grabbed the front of his jacket and jerked him in the back seat. Dante used duct tape to seal Paul Maxwell's mouth, cover his eyes, then cuffed him with plastic, disposable cuffs. He put up the roof on the 'Stang.

Jenny was breathing heavy, lips slack, eyes wide. She watched the whole thing until Dante pulled the car out of the the parking lot. Then she curled up her legs and gripped her hands into fists, eyes squeezed shut. She relaxed and said, "That was fucking great."

"You are one fucked up little girl."

"I'm not the guy who just tasered my own boss."

"He was a jerk. He owed bad people much money. This is just collection."

"Shit. I'm not breathing right. Do you get like this when shit goes down? So you can't breathe?"

He laughed, driving north on Valley View. Row on row of shitty buildings, strip malls, cinder block, chipped paint, light industrial damage. The buildings got residential after a while, but not the feel: desert urban blight, more people, really poor, mostly Hispanics and blacks. He read that it had been different, once, better, but he had trouble believing it. It was old people fairy tales.

He pulled into a garage. The house: roof shingles missing, chicken wire breaking through the cracked stucco, washed out pink color, all the wood dry rotted, paint chipped, weeds in the yard, windows all gone, door boarded over. But it had a garage. The garage door worked. It was enough.

People saw them, but it didn't matter – in this neighborhood, no one had security contracts, and even if they did no one in Dante's car was on their coverage. Dante got out and pulled the garage door closed; he put down his roof and kept on his headlights Dante opened his trunk and got out the things he needed: an electric drill, a big clamp, several sets of pliers, a sewing kit, latex gloves, a cheap plastic raincoat, a shower cap, goggles.

Right in front of the car was an old workbench. Dante clamped his clamp to it. He dragged Paul Maxwell out of the car. Maxwell was conscious, muffling something, struggling but not too hard. Dante got him over to the workbench and tasered the old man, again. The old man boogied, electric shuffle. When the looey was limp, Dante hoisted him up on the table. He put Paul Maxwell's head in the vice and spun it tight, he ratched it down some.

Behind him, Jenny said, "Jesus Christ."

"You wanted to see this," Dante said, turning around and leaning on the bench. She was between the headlights of the car. He could see her trembling, vibrating.

She repeated, "Jesus Christ. I . . . I want to go home. I don't want to see this."

He said, "Shit, I just got him viced up. No way. It'd take an hour to get you back your car and back here – I'm not going to leave him and I don't want to unvice him and put him back in the car. If you wanted to pussy out, you should have done it before I got him in the vice."

She bit her lip. She said, voice fear heavy, "Okay. You're right. This is what I'm here to see."

She sat in the car: bucket seat comfort.

She watched as Dante pulled the tape off of Paul Maxwell's mouth and performed amateur dentistry, no anesthesia. It didn't take long, two hours, before Dante was satisfied that he had all the right codes, everything that Freddy Moore wanted. Once he had to stop because the old man had managed to work his head out of the vice – tearing his face to hell to do it. But Dante re-tasered the geezer and reclamped harder, this time, right on the cheekbones. He got the lieutenant's electronic code key, on his key chain. After, Dante stuffed some rags in the old man's mouth and retaped it.

Jenny saw it all. The blood, lips torn back so Dante could get to the teeth, the gaping oh-so-red holes where teeth used to be. The whirl of the drill as it ground up enamel, down to the pulp, the jabbing of the needles into the pulp. Bloody pliers. Torn up cheeks. She heard the screams, an old man screaming until his throat was raw, and then screaming again.

It wasn't any picnic for Dante, either. He'd hurt people, but never like this, never so cold, never with a mind to inflict as much pain as possible. Never *torture*. But he did it. After the first

tooth was out – his hands were shaking on that one – it got easier. His mind got to this place, a haze, like there was gauze between him and the rest of the world. His stomach burned. But he did it.

He checked himself for honesty: he sickened himself for doing it, but was proud of it afterwards. He could do it. He could torture someone. He could murder, maim, do more, do worse. He felt real pride of accomplishment in the bloody screams of an old man. Dante recuffed Paul Maxwell, hands and feet, and used lots of tape.

He tossed the old man in the trunk, this time. He put the raincoat, goggles, latex gloves and shower cap in a trash bag and put it in with Paul Maxwell. Paul Maxwell looked shrunken, defeated, alone.

In the car, driving Jenny back:

She was quiet. She'd been crying, her eyes were red. She was curled up, just looking far ahead.

Then she said, "No one came or anything."

"Nope."

"Once there were street patrols, y'know, security just driving around."

"Ancient history."

"Yeah."

"Nowadays, its just too expensive for low rent motherfuckers to afford noise complaints. I mean, shit, those low-end contracts are whack. Forty dollar deductible. You call, you get billed forty bucks. For a noise complaint? On what they make in that neighborhood?"

"Yeah."

Back at the motel: Jenny was in the bathroom. The shower was going.

Dante said, "Fuck it."

He went into the bathroom. He pulled back the shower curtain. She stood there looking at him, slick wet, hair plastered to her face, trembling afraid. She didn't cover herself.

Dante said, "Get on your knees."

She did. She pulled down his pants. She took him in her hand, her mouth. She had done this before. After a while, he picked her up and carried her to the bed. He got inside of her. She grit her teeth. She hissed, "Yes!"

She said, "Fuck me, Big Daddy, fuck me!"

He did.

Later on: Freddy Moore paid up, too, one hundred large. No one found the body, but after three days of no calls, no shows, the corporation officially fired Paul Maxwell. David Winnow became lieutenant of the unit. Harvey Klein got the bump to sergeant. Harvey argued that Dante should become a senior officer – cited his record, talked about Dante's extracurricular activities.

David Winnow nixed it: too young and inexperienced. David talked college courses; anyone with guts could do strongarm, lots of those fish in the sea. Harvey told Dante: you want to move up, get your GED, go to UNLV, go to college.

Dante knew it was bullshit. Senior officer was nothing, most officers got senior office without breaking a sweat after two years in. But he had the wrong color skin. A nigger had to get a GED. A nigger had to go to college.

He kept meeting with Jenny, clandestine. She said she had nightmares about Paul Maxwell. He didn't want to hear it. He shut her up with sex.

He had nightmares, too. But he kept wanting more. It was like his mind warred with itself. Like he liked the pain, liked the hurt.

On the job: he was alone in the prowler, now. He had proved his mettle and wasn't the young booty, anymore. They trusted a nigger for that, anyway, but kept him outside the gated communities, mostly. They wanted a nigger on staff, not actually poking his nose in white people's business.

He got a call. It was a domestic disturbance. On the way over, he checked the policy holder via the computer. It was always the husband. Phillip Marigold and Alice Marigold. Apparently one of their children called in the complaint, John, aged 9.

The apartment complex the Marigolds lived in was in Green Valley, off of Eastern near

Sunset Park. He rolled through the gate, using the emergency code, and pulled up to building 18. Dante saw Clamp guys going to the building, two of them, their batons already out.

Dante jumped out of his car and cut them off right before 18-A.

"This is a Legionnaire matter."

"Nope. We cover policy for Alice Marigold and her motherfucking child abusing, wife beating husband ain't on that policy. Its Clamp," they said.

Inside, the fighting was going on. Screams, male and female, things being thrown around, crashes, smacks. Thumps against the walls. They were going at it.

"Then we have a problem," Dante said.

Policy: do not fight other security firms; negotiate, arbitrate. Legionnaire Security couldn't afford a war with Clamp Security.

Dante said, "How about we stop them from killing each other and figure this out."

The Clamps said, "Fair 'nuff, nigger boy."

Dante let it pass, shaking his head.

They went in and broke it up. Three heavily armed men put a damper on their tempers. Clamp *and* Legionnaire. Simmering violence three hundred and sixty degrees around. The Clamp boys took Alice to one side. Dante went to the other side of the living room with Phillip.

Dante said to Phillip, "Look, this isn't good."

Phil said, "My wife bought a contract with those goons?!"

"Yeah. She got sick and tired of you kicking the shit out of her. I'd bet you fifty thousand dollars your kid is on the contract, too."

"Fuck." He was angry. His brows were together, his eyes burning white hot.

"The Clamp guys will want to take you into custody. Put you in their prison for a while, or have you pay a fine you will not be able to afford."

"Stop them!" he said, anger turning towards Dante.

"Your policy doesn't cover me fronting licensed security organizations. But, I'm betting her policy doesn't let them front me. We've got to arbitrate, negotiate. How much money does your wife have?"

"What?"

"Its important."

"We have a joint banking account and she's got credit cards."

"She got a job?"

"No!" He was insulted at the question. He was a real white man. His wife didn't need to work.

"She got job skills?"

Phil didn't know where this was going. Cautiously, "No."

"Let me handle this, then."

He walked over to the Clamp guys, who shut up, Alice shutting up at the same time.

Dante said, "Let's negotiate, boys. Let's step outside."

They went outside. The sun was pounding down on them, glare everywhere, hot and bright. Typical Vegas springtime weather.

The lead Clamp said, "We want to take that dogshit in."

Dante said, "No."

The lead Clamp said, "We've got a confront policy. Alice really doesn't want her motherfucking, kiddie raping husband to be on the streets." The other Clamp said, "Yeah, divorce is in the air."

Dante thought, *Shit*. A confront policy! Dante took a breath and said, "She can't afford the confront policy. She can't afford *any* policy. She's got no job, she's not got a way to get a job. You take in the husband and within seconds Alice will be cut off – no banking, no credit cards, nothing. I'll do it, myself. Alice and the kid will be on the street in thirty days and Phil will be out of your jail the microsecond her policy goes cold. For Phil, it'll be nothing but a light bounce, and he'll go back to work and Alice will still be fucked, no policy. Arrest Phil, you screw Alice's policy."

They thought about it.

The lead Clamp said, "So we negotiate, anyway."

"Right. The dogshit husband knows, now, that she's got a policy. I'll tell him that it was

luck that I got here first. I'll tell him about the confront policy and what it means – that you *will* take him in if a Legionnaire isn't present and as good at this shit as I am.”

The Clamps laughed.

Dante went on, “I'll tell him that there's a good chance that even if he did get hauled in that it wouldn't be for long, but I'll tell him that you guys put a hurt on him that he will never forget.”

The lead Clamp said, “And hope he gets the drift. Like, mutually assured destruction. So long as he doesn't touch her, he doesn't get touched.”

“Yeah. I mean, this guy is a fucking junior tax lawyer,” Dante said, rolling his eyes. More laughs. “Look at his hands. No callous, no scars. His fat ass is two hundred and fifty pounds of chewed bubblegum. He's got no minerals for a hurting, for busted knees and elbows.”

The Clamps nodded to each other and said, “Okay, we'll do it. We'll put it in our report, too, that if we do pick this sonofabitch up that he gets worked over hard.”

They went back in. The truce had held while they were outside.

Dante explained the situation: *Hit her, again, touch the kid, and you'll carry the pain with you the rest of your life.* Phil went white. Then he went a little pale. He looked over at the Clamp guys, who were looking at him. One of them cracked his knuckles.

He asked Harvey, at the office, “We always side with the policy holder?”

“Yeah. That's what we're paid to do.”

“Even if the policy covers family members and the policy holder is, y'know, fucking them up?”

“Yeah. If we don't, they'll go to someone who does, y'know? The policy holder pays the bills, the policy we enforce is shaped around that fact.” He was thinking about the Marigolds. He was thinking about Jenny. He was thinking about her Big Daddy talk, how it put him on edge, and all her tells, all his tells about Daddy's Little Girl.

Harvey said, “Earth to Wakefield. The lieutenant still wants you to clear that business with the churches, got it?”

Dante nodded, “Yeah, sarge, I got it. I'm on it. Just waiting for the right time.”

“The right time is *now*.”

Dante went to college. His eyes got opened. He knew it all, but he started to guess what it meant.

Security corporations kept their databases secret. They routinely suppressed information for clients, they routinely doctored databases. A bad case was a PR problem; PR problems meant fewer clients. Solution: don't let anyone know you have a bad case. Doctor the databases, find a stooge, make it work.

It meant investigations – real investigations – were a pain. The security companies didn't talk, they didn't share information about many clients, and they sometimes lied. Investigations to intelligence: corporate espionage rife. Invade a competing firm, check their records, alter data, delete data. Methods: lean on compromised people in the corporation. Set them up, shake them down.

“We saw you with another man's dick in your mouth, we saw you with a twelve year old girl, we saw you with a spike in your arm, we saw you snorting dope, we saw you fucking your boss's daughter.” Close in a lot of directions, Dante sweating the classes, looking at his notes.

Another Legionnaire, same class, Jonah Cort, “Why is your skin leaking, Wakefield?”

“Think I got a flu.”

Investigation was a mess. No cooperation, lots of hiding, lots of lying. What about corp against corp? No profit in fighting – soldiers expensive, weapons expensive, bad for PR, bad for business. Plus, if a corporation gets a reputation for letting its clients go to jail, clients look for different corporations. Instant cooperation: find a stooge, again. Someone without security protection – set 'em up, knock 'em down; private security detention sometimes, but usually the poor saps get a bullet to the back of the head. That way no one talks.

All of this was different from the PR, which played up how crime was down since the corporations took over, how much safer everyone was. The classes were honest, they laid it bare:

no one really knew. No one even wanted to know, except some citizens groups.

Speaking of citizens groups

Dante did a house invasion. Reverend Damien Karksen, about fifty, thin, had a dive in Northtown, no security contracts, but a wife and three kids. But the wife was out of town, the kids were with her.

He popped the lock in back, slipped into the kitchen. Karksen in the living room, eating a sandwich and watching TV. It was a sitcom, he was laughing.

Dante was wearing gloves, a mask, gloves with knuckledusters, taser, disposable cuffs, tape, a magnum on his belt and a back-up on a leg rig.

Dante stopped the laughter. Karsten got tasered, tied up, hand and foot, tape over his mouth. Karksen's eyes were wide, not wild, he was cool, Dante figured him for hard. Karksen believed, had a higher purpose.

So Dante showed him the pictures: a little girl, aged 9. She could have been Dana Karksen – pale and brunette. She was naked, butchered, burned; precise ID hard to make. He showed the Reverend close ups – butane torch burns, stripped off flesh, orifices torn wide open. It was a horror show, and the Reverend responded: he vomited, the tape held, spew came out his nose. Choking, swallowing his own vomit, gagging; Dante let him strangle a bit before tearing off the tape. The Reverend vomited again, on the couch, on the floor. He was crying, a madman.

Dante said, "Not Dana, but I know where this animal lives. I have this animal's leash. You don't stop this fucking nonsense against Legionnaire and its officers, I feed this animal your little girl. I feed him the little girls of your brothers, your sisters, business partners, you name it. You got it?"

The Reverend cried, nodded his head.

Dante grabbed him by the back of the neck. He said, "I want to hear you say it. What will you do."

Through sobs: "I'm off the Legionnaire demos, I get everyone off."

"Fuckin' right. And if you don't, the last thing a lot of little girls are gonna see is some monster's cock gouging out their fucking eyes."

Even Dante didn't know if he was bluffing.

When Dante got home, he was the one tasered. His world went white and spun, he was on the ground, nothing made sense, his world was fragmented, black and white spots, nothing could join together. He was worked hard. Saps to his head, Dante spitting teeth, more tasers, brass knuckles to the ribs, kidneys, knees to his balls. He vomited, then vomited blood. The two goons who did it broke his arms, his legs, with a baseball bat.

When they left, they said, "Find a new fucking girlfriend, jigaboo."

Gone, Dante managed to crawl over to his phone and call his emergency medical service.

Dante was six weeks in the hospital. Upper and lower jaw broken, most of his ribs broken, femurs broken, arms broken, oral surgeons working to rebuild his teeth, plastic surgeons to fix his face. No knee hits, no elbow hits, nothing serious to his hips, arm and leg breaks clean. They wanted him in action.

Daddy was pissed, but still interested.

Dante thought, *Fuck Daddy*. Dante thought about revenge. Dante thought about Legionnaire.

Twelve weeks out of the hospital: outpatient stuff, therapy. He hit the therapy hard – he got steroids, he got vitamins, he drank protein shakes and smoked meth to give him energy. No permanent damage: after therapy he was hard as hickory.

The pain was good. He reveled in it. The pain kept his anger hot, his mind focused. One more rep, one more rep, get it back, get more of it back. Back to the job. No one said a thing. No one mentioned Jenny Moore, no one mentioned Fredrick Moore, no one asked about the thugs who thumped him. No one rushing to take revenge on the guys who did it – the code didn't apply to shit like this. Too serious, too *dangerous*. People avoided him: afraid. Not afraid of him, but afraid to be tainted by association with him. Dante would remember that, too, their *fear*. He got Senior Officer, though. Daddy threw him a bone.

Dante did his job, went back to school, cultivated patience, cultivated contacts.

Maurice Tercell, Freddy's cook, 40s, shortish, stout, black as India ink. Got to work at 5:30am to start to the bread for breakfast – Freddy liked his bread fresh daily – and didn't leave until past 9pm, usually, after dinner was done, but sometimes he worked later if there was a party or guests. He worked this six days a week, and the seventh he put in a half day. Maurice had a family, but his wife left him because he was never around, for a guy who owned his own five ton truck and did local shipping. He had a daughter, Eve, he never saw, too busy with work.

He had a thing with one of the maids, quickies between lunch and dinner about all of his social life. Saturday nights, though, he went out – bar crawl with friends, chasing skirts.

Maurice liked Dante just fine. Dante did the bar crawl with Maurice. Dante kept an eye out on Maurice's kid, made sure she stayed out of trouble with the "bad crowd". Dante was glad to deliver – he beat up Eve's boyfriend for setting her up with crystal meth, beat him so hard the kid lost an eye and couldn't talk straight. Eve was scared of Dante, tried to avoid him, but couldn't. She didn't go straight, but at least she kept out of the gutter.

For kicks, Dante braced the mom, too, told her to pay attention to her fucking daughter or he'd blow up her gravy train. It was funny – she said, "My man has a contract!"

So Dante kicked the shit out of him, too. Beat him down right in front of her, beat him down until he was begging like a little child. When the security guys came, two guys from Magnum Patrols, he just fronted them. He dared them to get into a gunfight with him over some two bit fucking punk ass bitch cocksucker with some shitty minimum service contract. Then he greased their palms and went back and kicked that sucker down, again.

Dante told the Magnum boys to call it frivolous, false alarm, to charge their clients for it – then momma begged, too, saying they couldn't afford it and Dante told her not to complain, then, and sent the Magnum guys off. They left stunned, not sure what was going on, but they didn't care – they'd log the call as no contact, no investigation and spend their five hundred each without comment.

Maurice loved it. He howled his ass off. Bought Dante drinks all night, strip joint lap dances.

Dante thought of Jenny, lean and long and everything he thought he could never have in a woman: white and rich. It fucked him up.

Dante asked about Freddy's muscle. Dante said it was a violation of Freddy's security contract. Freddy evoked no loyalty. Maurice gave it up without batting an eyebrow, helping a pal on the job, maybe giving the finger to Freddy for shitty pay and long hours and degradation.

"Yeah, Moore's got a couple of hard boys working for him. They used to be casino in-house security down at Roman's or whatever, but they got busted out for something and are working small time, now." Casino security was the security apex; they were badass, they answered to no one but the casino, and they were fearless about handling outside security – for them, getting into gunfights to keep their casinos untouched was worth it. Usually old hand mercs with good records.

"They're brothers, fucking twins. Norbert and Winslow Stirt. With names like that, you've got to be a badass."

"Word."

"They do all sorts of shit with his joints. Y'know, collect from stiffes who short him, muscle work – and I heard, because my woman used to have a thing on the side with Bert, they rig wires and get pictures of people in all sorts of compromising situations."

"They at the top of Freddy's private goon pile? He have other goons?"

"They're apex, yeah. They run Freddy's casino security, so they have the juice to order all those guys around, natch."

"Natch."

"And they're always around Freddy's place. They score women and drugs for him, shit like that. Its crazy over there some nights."

"Freddy uses?"

"Yeah. We're not talking weed, either. He sniffs heroin, cocaine, smoked hashish so strong that I can get a contact high in the kitchen, crystal meth smoker, crazy shit."

"I guess he needs to unwind, huh?"

Maurice laughed. "But I get piss tested every month! Can you believe that? He snorts heroin but would fire me for fucking smoking a fucking joint!"

"Crazy, yeah, same at my biz."

"Yeah, but you carry a gun. You've got some perks."

"Now and then, yeah, now and then."

"You haven't tried to see Jenny," Freddy Moore said. "For over a year. I heard you got your associate in law enforcement." He paused. "You look somewhat different."

"Fortunately for me I had good insurance through Legionnaire, and some money stashed away for a rainy day, sir," Dante said. He was in back of Freddy's house, on a private driving range. To one side was a tennis court, to the other a huge swimming pool. Aztec statuary – all the stuff outside was fake – and trimmed hedges. He could feel the evaporation against his skin as the sun dazzled.

"Ha-ha. Jenny told me about the twenty grand you extorted from her."

Dante didn't let anything show on his face. Hate resettled into his bones.

Freddy went on, "You did a good job with Maxwell, though. I checked in about you at Legionnaire – you cleared up that problem with the community center very sweetly. Don't let them fool you, you did them a great favor by getting rid of a thorn in their side."

"I should have charged for it. Next time I do something like that, I will, sir."

"No need to earn points with them, eh?"

"Not that, sir. I wouldn't mind earning points with Legionnaire, but that isn't the way to do it. That's just being a chump they can use up until there ain't nothing left of me and piss away when they're done."

Freddy laughed and whacked at a ball. Dante didn't give a shit about golf, so he didn't even bother to look where it went. Freddy looked after the ball, slightly disappointed.

Then he said, "That's smart. I find that one of the hardest things to do in this life is to be honest about people's motives, to understand how brutal humans want to be to each other."

"I presume you didn't call me down here to watch you hit golf balls, sir."

Freddy looked over to Dante, eyebrow raised. "Don't like golf, do you?"

It's for rich pussies. "Not particularly, no."

"What do you like?"

"Football, basketball, boxing," he said.

"Ah, very manly sports. Very . . ."

"Pedestrian. Yes, sir."

Freddy cut a smile at Dante. "Yes. But to business. I have watched your career with interest. You are smarter than you look. You work hard. You are ruthless. I need men like that, son."

Dante was sweating, but the sun was bright and the Legionnaire gear was hot in the sun. Freddy wouldn't notice it. Was Freddy having him tailed? He periodically ran spot routines but it was damned hard to catch a three car team, and Freddy Moore could afford that kind of tail.

Dante said, "What do you want done?"

"A little affair. It seems that my daughter has been accosted by another nigger."

Dante didn't give any tells, he didn't move or flinch. He found it odd that a guy who so much prided himself at being able to take hard truths couldn't take it that his little white girl liked black men.

Dante said, "If you have the man's name and address, he'll vanish. Else, give me a couple of days and the problem will still vanish."

"Excellent." He took out an envelope from his pocket and handed it to Dante. "That will be all."

Dante walked himself out. In the prowler, he started up the engine and cranked the air conditioning to full. Cold air frosted him. He opened the envelope. A name: Jefferson Cartier. Way out, not really a city address, an "alone in the middle of fucking nowhere" address.

Dante put the car in gear and looked up. He saw an open window. Jenny was stripping, looking out at his prowler. He sat and watched her, got fucked up again. When she was nude, she shut the drapes. He could hear her laugh in his head. He pulled out, fishtailing down the street.

He did a drive-by, daylight, in his prowler. Las Vegas Boulevard to Blue Diamond Road –

waaaaay out in the middle of nowhere. He found the mailbox. He was the only car around for miles – down a dirt track there was a trailer on cinder blocks. No one home.

Well, fuck it. No time like the present. He was alone out here.

He pulled up and stopped the car. He got out, put his club in its loop, got his shotgun. He scoped the area out. The trailer was off the power grid – a big propane tank out back. The tank not connected to anything. The line came out of the ground near a box that probably once held a generator. There was a water tank, too – Dante rapped the butt of his shotgun. Like a bell: hollow. Empty.

What it was was a trap. No one lived out here for a while. More gives – the roof was trashed, broken windows without even cardboard backing to keep out the dust and rain.

Yeah, he was smarter than he looked. But to Freddy, he just looked like a nigger who fucked his daughter. But why wait? His hard boys could have killed him, easy, when they busted him up. Something had changed.

Freddy said that he'd extorted twenty grand from Jenny – it was bullshit, but he was such a racist motherfucker that Dante told himself that Freddy was just putting spin on whatever Jenny told him. Did Jenny say that Dante extorted her? Did she say more, make it seem like Dante raped her? Did he rape her? He remembered their first time together, painful in his stomach and cock.

He went back to his car, left, trying to think.

What he came up with: he hired a wage slave from Shantytown, gave the guy a hundred bucks and the keys to Dante's Mustang. Dante told the guy to drive the car to the address, to go into the house and take the suitcase that would be there and drive back out to where Dante picked him up. Dante emphasized that his car was jacked to GPS, and cut off all questions. He made it a yes or no deal, and the answer was yes.

He watched his Mustang go. He walked to a better neighborhood and called a cab. He got out at the Rialto Motel, just this side of Shitsville. He'd checked in the previous day, false name and they didn't bother to check ID. Mostly hookers used this place, taking johns to get fucked or get rolled, people in and out at all hours.

He did not go and look to see what happened. He was figuring a bomb, figuring that when it detonated that someone would check out what happened. He did not think they'd check his DNA, or the DNA of the stiff who just got blown to a dirt nap over a couple of acres. But they'd find bits of pieces, they'd find the Mustang, his, they'd go, "He's done."

But he wasn't done.

He waited. Saturday night, he followed Maurice in a beater car he bought for a grand. Maurice went to the old haunts, and Dante made checks and found no tails.

Dante called the bar with a disposable cell phone registered to no one, asked for Maurice. Maurice was regular, the bartender knew him, so in seconds Dante was on the phone.

Dante waited out the shock – three days, Freddy bragging that Dante was dead to his hard boys. Dante didn't explain, but asked for a favor. Dante asked about Jenny. He'd never done that before. Maurice paused, a tell, and Dante pushed.

Maurice said, "You should talk to Emma."

Emma Millnier, one of Freddy's maids, Maurice's at work fling.

"Give me her address, tell me when she gets home. Don't tell her I'll be coming – I'm laying low. Don't mention this to anyone."

Dante cased her place until Emma got home. She was maybe midtwenties, a slender, chesty light skinned black woman who walked into her studio apartment carrying a bag of groceries. He gave her a couple of minutes to situate herself and knocked. The eyehole went bright to dark and he badged her. She opened up, her door on a chain.

He said, "I'm a friend of Maurice's."

"That security friend. He's mentioned you. Dante?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

She unhooked her door and let him in. She said, "He said not to be surprised if something funny happened tonight. I guess this is it."

"I wish he hadn't even said that, but I guess its fair because you're his woman."

"More like one of his women. I know what he does Saturdays, that old hound dog. But he's

convenient and funny and sometimes he can be sweet." Dante didn't care, but let her talk. He wasn't going to strong arm her if he didn't have to. He didn't think he would.

She said, "Sit down. Can I get you a beer?"

"That'd be great," he said, sitting down.

The apartment was tiny, clean but worn, everything old, mostly second-hand but in good shape despite the wear. She had lots of books on her shelves, which was odd given how few people could read those days – the books paperbacks and second hand, too, mostly. She got him a beer. It was cheap but cold. She had one, herself, and sat down in a chair across from him.

She said, "What do you want, Dante?"

He'd spent hours trying to figure out what to tell her. He took a leap, figured she hated Freddy as much as he did, maybe more.

"Your boss thinks I'm dead, thinks he killed me. He almost killed me a year plus ago, had some of his bulls kick the ever living shit out of me, but he let me live, didn't even maim me permanent. He was punishing me for bedding down Daddy's Little Girl"

"Ah."

"But since he didn't kill me, it reasons he didn't want to kill me then. Since then, I haven't done anything to merit being whacked."

"You're here about Jenny."

He sipped his beer. "Yeah. Rich people talk to servants like they don't exist, and servants got no reason to love their bosses."

She sipped her beer, long pause, another sip. "No, I've got no reason to love my boss."

He watched her body language. Good looking woman, her boss a pussy hound, it didn't take much to figure out what some of her duties were. If she put up a fuss, well, there were a dozen equally pretty women lining up to take her place.

"Do you have a reason to love Jenny?"

She laughed. "She treats me like a pet. So, no. You know how it is thataway."

"Yeah," he said, because he did know. "So, we talk. When Freddy was setting me up, he mentioned that he thought I'd extorted money out of Jenny."

She nodded. Soft: "Yeah. She mentioned it to me. Not that you extorted anything, but that she sold some of her jewelry to watch something that scared her, but excited her, too. I figured it was bad, real bad, but I knew that she was shacking up with the guy who took her money."

"So, you knew it wasn't extortion?"

She nodded. "She was real clear that she did it on her own. To see things that she couldn't see." She laughed. "Jenny's a thrillseeker, or she thinks she is. She does this shit that would get you or me killed, but its okay because her daddy's is always there to clean her shit up."

"I know. I was one of those cleaning men."

She smiled, "What'd a big buck like you clean?"

"A Guatemalan brother"

"You popped Navidad?" Almost angry, working up to angry.

"No. I collared him. At the time, I didn't know he'd be popped. It was my first week on the job. I did not know the score."

Cool: "Navidad was an okay kid." She didn't ask if he would have popped Navidad; he was glad she didn't. She went on, muted, half-scared of Dante, "He was okay and Jenny, yeah, she was in love with Navidad."

"Well, shit."

She nodded. "Yeah, Daddy's Little Girl got over you, stud. She dug on the fear you gave her, dug on your hunger. But she's got some pimp motherfucker who is trying to get her to turn high class tricks for shakedowns, and she's plenty scared of him, too, and digging it. But she loved Navidad, and I'm guessing you're the one she's taking it out on. She rolled you over to daddy."

"This pimp motherfucker: do you have a name?" Dante building up to angry, himself.

"Ashley Wiacek. He's white, so he can come around the house. I don't think Freddy has run a background check on him, and he's probably so ecstatic that his little girl is dating a white man he wouldn't give a damn if he skinned people alive, so long as they were niggers and spics."

"Do you know where he lives, works – any of his haunts."

She smiled. "He gave me one of his business cards." She got up, checked her purse, and handed it to Dante: Vegas De Luxe Escorts, South Valley View address, a strip mall. "I almost went. I mean, I do the work, anyway, along with cleaning everything in sight, and maybe this pays better and I'd get to work on my back."

He took it. "I wouldn't be calling this guy, soon, Emma." He got up. "Thanks. If you're not too proud, I'd be happy to float a couple of thou your way."

"Sugar, I'm definitely not too proud to take your money for a little conversation." He took out his roll and peeled off the money – fresh hundred dollar bills. She took it. She whistled. "You're not so straight, yourself. This screams bent."

"There ain't no such thing as straight. Ideas like that are dead. There's only the paid and the poor."

She half-shrugged, said while he was at the door, "Why'd you chase that white cooze?"

"She was all I could never have."

"Was she worth it?"

He turned the doorknob. He looked over at her, "Yeah. But I think its time I outgrew that shit."

She gave a funny smile. "You know my address. Don't be afraid to use it."

He smiled and left. Outside, he put on his killer's face. Time to put the fear on. Time to do everything left he had to do. He got this massive adrenalin jag: suicide time he figured it, too much stacked against him, but he figured he had a long shot that was real: the best way to win is to do the shit that no one figures anyone has the guts to do. The way to win was to redefine the impossible.

Dante drove up to where the mile long driveway to the Moore estate started; out there the streets didn't even have names. He blocked the entry, popped his shit car's hood and waited. No traffic. The houses were spaced about two miles apart out here, late night, real calm, real quiet.

12:40am – a Legionnaire car rolled up. Dante's back was to the prowler. The Legionnaire honked. Dante gave him the finger. Dante heard the Legionnaire get out of the car, footstep crunches on the dusty road. The man put a hand on Dante, spun Dante around and Dante shot him in the throat – a silenced .45. The Legionnaire went down, gurgling blood: Ian Kinsley. Good looking strawberry blond white guy, had a nice family, a pretty wife and two kids, and a couple of mistresses on the side. Dante finished him off, double tap to the head, through the eyes under his helmet. Dante changed into his Legionnaire uniform, wiped the car even though he was wearing gloves through everything, then dragged Ian into a wash, dumped the beater car into it, too.

There were no street lights out here, nothing for a couple of miles around, no one would see anything until way after it was too late. He stood overlooking the ditch. His heartbeat was all fucked up, head whirling, everything red and black, noises like through a long tunnel. He forced himself to move.

Dante got into the Legionnaire prowler – engine still running, even, air conditioner on high, the chill helping his head – and at 12:55 got to the Moore residence. He was buzzed in – shift change for on site security detail, one Legionnaire pulling a cozy duty watching monitors, doing a perimeter patrol twice an hour. Dante was buzzed into the security booth: he saw Jaime Ariaga.

Jaime saw him and started to say something but saw the silenced .45 in one hand, a taser in the other.

Jaime said, "Shit." He raised his hands.

"Good move. If this works, you'll be covered, brother," Dante said and hit Jaime with the taser. The only reason Dante didn't kill Jaime is because Jaime wasn't white – he was thinking, hardcore, to fuck the ofay motherfuckers. Then he cuffed and taped Jaime under the desk, blind and gagged.

Doing fine, emotionally. Jaime would live. Dante would try to make it good by him.

Dante reported in. The corporation loved saving money – Dante had to give an *email* all's well that no one would even look at until morning.

Dante watched the monitors. Everything was quiet. He checked addresses on the laptop on the desk – he found the Stirt brothers. He called them up, said that there was an emergency at

the house and Moore requested their presence. He made it urgent, he made them move. He reloaded his .45.

He saw a car coming up the way. He snagged Jaime's keys and radio and walked over to the gate. His vision was popping like crazy. Was there one or two people in the car? The car stopped, Dante went through the small gate, flashed the car with a Maglight – nuclear bright.

The Stirt brothers came together. The window rolled down and one of them said, "You stupid motherfucker, get that light out of our face!" They didn't say anything else because Dante opened fire. Eight shots, hollow points. Dante didn't really see much because he was overjuiced. His hand was steady, though. He just emptied the gun. When his vision came back, or his memory, he'd never be sure, he saw that the Stirt brothers were dead. One of them had managed to get his pistol out, but then he lost his face. Bone, brains, blood, hair was splattered everywhere. The stink was awful, viscera, cordite and burned silencer threads.

He killed the car's engine and lights. He went back in. He reloaded his pistol. He stopped by the security booth and grabbed a shotgun.

He went into the house.

He got a radio call. Freddy: "What's going on? What happened at that car?"

Dante walked upstairs. He said, "It's nothing, sir. Just a wrong address."

"Nonsense. That looked like gunfire and the car is still there. What's going on?"

Freddy's bedroom was open. Freddy had been watching TV – a big plasma screen, six foot screen, a recliner that must have cost him ten grand – and seen something. He was talking on his own handset, on his wraparound balcony that faced the front of the house.

Dante shot Freddy. Shot the radio out of Freddy's hand, Freddy lost fingers. Then he clubbed Freddy unconscious with a pistol whip before Freddy could scream up a storm. A quick bandage, cuffed and taped to the huge four post bed – blind, gagged.

Dante felt good. Breath fine, vision fine. Fuck that ofay motherfucker. Dante moved the Stirt brothers car inside, grabbed a prowler. He checked the card that Emma had given him: Vegas De Luxe Escort Service.

A South Valley View address – mixed neighborhood, gated communities combined with ungated, a nice neighborhood but not great. The time was 1:12am. Prime pimping time.

He drove down, fast, cars honking and maybe even a gunshot as he ran lights, took shortcuts. He pulled in the strip mall where Vegas De Luxe had its storefront. He got out and walked in. The girls weren't on site – strictly a call service, not a brothel.

A pretty receptionist said, "Vegas De Luxe Escort Services, can I help you, sir?" She was eyeballing his uniform. He saw the sticker coming in: Lionheart Security, an okay outfit, comparable to Legionnaire – estimated response time seven minutes, no sweat.

Dante said, "I would like to have a word with Ashley Wiacek."

She said, "Well, if this is a security issue, you should take it up with our security firm, Lionheart."

Conspiratorially, Dante said, "I don't think that Mr. Wiacek would like that. This involves a Lionheart security officer, and they like to protect their own."

The receptionist was confused. A call came in and she took it, routed it, came back. She sighed, "What does this concern?"

Dante flipped open his notebook. He pretended to read, "One Lionheart security agent, Roger Smith" – not his best fake name – "abused a prostitute in your employ" – this was straight off their website – "Gina Wohlert." He flipped it closed. "It's a classic shakedown. The Lionheart officer figured that he could stall any investigation, that the company would protect its own. So she contracted out to us." He leaned forward and loomed, he put on his mean badass face. He played the race fear card: a nigger with a badge and a gun. She was scared. "Call Mr. Wiacek down so we can get this sorted out."

She swallowed, all big eyes and trembling hands. She called up. She said, "Mr. Wiacek will be down in a minute."

Ashley was a well-heeled white man, tanned with blond hair, blue eyes, but it came off as fake to Dante. Dante didn't give a shit, anyway. When Ashley came down, Dante pulled his pistol and shot the receptionist – bad vibes, woman killing, her sternum blown out her spine, Dante's mouth dry as his heart kicks up about a million beats a minute – and then tasered Ashley, who

flinched with this stupid look on his face, unbelieving that anyone would do anything like this

Dante frisked Ashley, dumped a cell phone, pistol and sap, noticed he had a bulletproof vest on – pimping semi-risky – and dumped him in the trunk, cuffed at the wrists, gagged, tape across the eyes. He had minutes before Lionheart could even show up, could even know. He found the server room where all the security data from cameras was stored. He ripped open the case, stuffed it with hand grenades, tossed one in – he was out the door before it blew: glass and concrete rain in the parking lot.

He drove back to the Moore place, hell bent, cut off horns and curses. He arrived real fast back.

Dante grabbed Ashley out of the trunk, recuffed him next to Freddy. Next stop, Jenny's room. He kicked it in. She bolted up in bed, sleepy stupid, wondering what was going on. Dante grabbed her by the hair. She screamed, she clawed.

He said, "You stupid fucking bitch. Today is the luckiest day of your motherfucking life. I should kill you for fucking ratting me out."

"Holy shit! Dante?!"

He tossed her in daddy's room. She skidded on the floor, looked around, saw her father, Ashley, tied to the bed, twitching. Freddy was pale, shocky, twitching at every sound. She screamed. Dante grabbed Jenny by the hair and made her look at Ashley. She tried to turn her head aside, but couldn't, and Dante shot Ashley between the eyes. Ashley's skull crown popped off, brains almost flung on the hardwood floor.

She screamed. Dante held her. He ripped off Freddy Moore's gag tape, eye tape. His lips were bloody flecked.

Freddy said, "You'll pay"

But then Dante shot him in the stomach. Freddy screamed. Jenny screamed. Dante shot Freddy's knees out, shot Freddy's ears off, another gut shot. Freddy screamed, puked blood, coughed it, sagged, groaned.

Still holding Jenny, Dante ground his boot into Freddy's knees – more screams, more coughing blood. Jenny trying to escape as Dante sapped out Freddy's teeth. Sapped Freddy's face into fucking goop.

Dante pressed Jenny's face up to Freddy's. Blood and snot bubbles popped out his nose.

He said to her, "Listen tight, you stupid bitch, you've got one motherfucking chance to live, just one, and that means you do what I tell you of you'll *wish* that this had been you. I'll make this look like school motherfucking rally. I'll make this look like the motherfucking prom."

Jenny: "Whatever you want! Oh, Jesus, whatever you want!"

Dante finished some loose ends: Jaime would play ball, palms greased by fifty grand. They destroyed the servers that stored the camera information.

Jenny to Legionnaire: Dante took the statement, Jaime witnessed: Her lover, a pimp sack of shit Ashley Wiacek, freaked out. He'd been acting weird, lately.

Jaime played ball: he buzzed in a Legionnaire prowler, but when the guy came in to relieve him Jaime got tasered. He described Ashley Wiacek as the guy who tasered him. Ashley knew Legionnaire protocols. Ashley iced Old Man Moore. Torture death, his fingerprints on the gun, right there.

Dante saved the day, right when Ashley was going to kill Jenny.

Ashley used the same pistol to kill the Stirt brothers, Ian Kinsley, not to mention his receptionist, but no one there "knew" that; let forensics figure it out, or not. It didn't matter. Jenny was crazy scared of Dante. Praised Legionnaires, praised Dante. It was bullshit. The corporation knew, figure that Dante's execution had been cleared through corporate, but

Next day, big meeting: Dante, Sergeant Harvey Klein, Lieutenant Dave Winnow, Commander Boris Kaluvich.

"Sit down, officer," Harvey said.

"This is all fucked up, officer," Dave said.

Dante said, "I have given depositions to three lawyers that exposes that I murdered all those people – that a Legionnaire officer was sold out by his own company, too."

Boris said, "I see."

"PR disaster. Legionnaire is competing for at least three big contracts, right now, billion dollar ops, multi-year. Right now, you've got an eyewitness saying great things about Legionnaire, how the bravery and integrity of Legionnaire officers saved her life. I don't contact my lawyers soon, well, they release the information – I name names. Kiss those contracts goodbye."

Harvey said, "Moore is scared, now. It'll fade. She'll recant."

"After its a dead issue, and who'd believe her? My deal is this: cut me loose from Legionnaire. I know if I stay with this outfit I'm a dead man, sooner or later, let's be honest, right? I'll sit on the evidence forever and a day because if I let it go, you'll kill me. I know you'll kill me, anyway, or try, after a suitable time has passed, but I can take that risk. Better than the alternative."

Boris shook his head. "A shakedown. What's to stop me from torturing you until you spill the names of the lawyers and just cap them?"

"Because they have their own safety measures – I mean, c'mon. They know the score, Boris," Dante said. "Think smart. What does any of this mean to you so long as you get your money?"

Boris nodded. "Deal. Now get off my campus, you sonofabitch."

END