

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF DEPRIVERS

THE KILLSWITCH REVIEW



STEVEN-ELLIOT ALTMAN AND DIANE DeKELB-RITTENHOUSE

The *Killswitch* Review

from Bestseller

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and

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Dedicated to the late, great Philip K. Dick.

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In the year 2156, stem cell therapy has triumphed over all forms of disease, extending the human lifespan indefinitely. Americans who have been granted Conscientious Citizen status now live healthy, youthful lives well beyond the century mark.

To combat overpopulation and depletion of resources, America has sealed her borders and instituted strict measures of birth and death control. Families are now restricted to one child per couple, and the leading cause of death in the U.S. has become technology-assisted suicide.

BLACK BUTTONS, INC. is the government authority responsible for dispensing Kevorkian units — handheld devices which afford the only legal form of suicide.

An armed “Killswitch” monitors and records a citizen’s final moments — up to the point where they press a button and peacefully die.

Post-press review agents — “button collectors” — are dispatched to review and judge these final recordings to rule out foul play.

Chapter One

BLACK BUTTONS, INC.

Haggerty had his finger on the button. The black onyx set in the gunmetal casing felt cool beneath his touch. There were millions of registered buttons just like it, hundreds of millions, in fact. No one knew that better than he did, but this one was his, tailor-made. His name glowed across its base: JASON P. HAGGERTY.

He looked around the living room of his spacious compartment, remembering the pride and excitement with which he had made every acquisition it held. His plasma dome viewscreen cost more than most people made in a decade. The glass-topped bar was stocked with premium liquors, not cheap bar brands. A replitext that could become any book he'd ever read or ever wanted to read rested on an elegant simumarble pedestal. Those were just the most obvious of the niceties of life he had been afforded. He called the outer wall into full transparency mode. It cleared instantly, revealing the cityscape outside: close-packed stalk-like buildings stretching to the blazing blue sky dappled with wisps of clouds above distant snow-capped mountains. That view had been the main reason he chose to live here. All these luxuries, so casually on display, never failed to impress the few friends he kept or the even fewer women he'd brought here since Lorraine had left him. The pain that came with his job had once seemed a small price to pay for such wealth. No longer. The compartment and everything it held was too big, too luxurious. Too empty.

All week long he'd contemplated the act. He planned on pressing around midnight. There was a certain poetry to a midnight press on a Saturday night, a certain feeling of closure, pressing as the week ended, before a new one could start. He'd always been a man who saw things through to the end, no matter how difficult the task. He'd worked to be a true Conscientious Citizen, someone who made a positive contribution to society, who unfailingly honored his commitments, who promptly and thoroughly discharged his obligations, and who brought all his skill and ability to his chosen profession. If he were still that man, he'd be getting into his uniform and preparing for his final shift, making sure that when he pressed, he left no loose ends for someone else to clean up. Instead, his finger was on the button, fifteen hours early.

It would take so little, just a light push, to gain release. Why wait? It was unlikely anything earth-shattering would require his presence at work today. Black Buttons, Inc. could manage without him. Haggerty could barely recall the last time a Kevorkian unit had been tampered with, or a press coerced. These days there were no surprises in the reviews he conducted, rendering them largely a formality. Let his successor deal with the unclosed files in his office. No fortunes would be reversed, no futures altered. The outcome of no case would be affected by his passing.

Nor would any thing outside of work. Or anyone. He had no family left, and most of his friends had drifted away long ago. Only two remained who might regret his passing. Doug, the company doctor, who'd likely be pissed as hell, and Elsa, Haggerty's personal assistant. He didn't know how she would react. He wasn't sure she was capable of comprehending the depth of the loss he'd suffered, or to feel loss herself. Any regrets she had would likely center around not having noticed what he was about to do and not acting

to stop him. But Elsa would not wallow in self-recrimination or prolonged grief. Most likely she would pragmatically accept that there was nothing she could do to change things and move on to serve whichever reviewer was next in line for a new assistant. Haggerty had no final words for her or for Doug, nothing that mattered enough to say. All his affairs were in order, and if the only duty left to him was to rubberstamp some paperwork, well, that was one obligation his successor at BBI could discharge.

So easy, he thought. The cool metal drew heat from his finger—that exchange seemed reasonable. He could trade the inertia of routine for the act of pressing, trade the anesthetizing drug of work, duty, and obligation for the anesthetic spray on his thumb, the unfelt injection of tailored toxin that would deaden his pain centers as life drained from his body.

A fine tremor ran through his hands. He sat back, letting go of the unit. He felt old, tired, done.

He reached for his button once more. *Just one push*, he thought, one tiny exertion of pressure and it would be over—much as his father must have thought a year earlier, Haggerty suspected, as his thumb tensed on the trigger of the registered antique, double-barrel shotgun illegally restored to working order. Haggerty drew a deep breath and flipped the ARM switch.

“Recording,” announced the soft feminine electronic voice he’d selected years ago from a dozen options. “Eighth March, Twenty-one-fifty-six, oh-nine twenty-four.” The pale amber light he’d chosen came on beneath the button.

It was customary to say something. But nothing came to mind—no *Forgive me* or *Not without you* or *Since I am ruined* or *Just done it all* like he’d seen in so many

reviews. So he merely said, “Enough . . . it’s been enough,” wondering who the agency would send to do the post-press, hoping it wasn’t Corbin. The Dragon owed him that much, at least.

A bead of sweat made its way through his hairline and down, stinging, into one eye. The climate control system silently switched on, no doubt registering his rise in body temperature, pumping cool air. His compartment was more alive than he was. Haggerty circled the button with the tip of his middle finger with hesitant tenderness, like a man exploring the nipple of a new lover, certain now. He couldn’t stand to face another day. He stared at his unit, ready to press.

The phone chimed an incoming call.

“Damn it!” he grunted, laughing mirthlessly. “Answer, visual off!” he barked, and disarmed his KV unit.

A small, clear light appeared in the air a few feet in front of him, began spinning fast, acquiring color, depth, texture, expanding outward until a life-size holographic representation of Elsa floated in the center of his living room.

“I’m downstairs, Jason,” she said. “Why is your visual off?”

“I’m naked,” Haggerty lied, stowing his KV unit in the drawer of an end table. “Still interested in seeing me?”

“Do you want me to see you?” she asked with polite disinterest.

Elsa was dressed in regulation BBI grays. The jumpsuit, though neither fashionable nor flattering, did little to hide her physical perfection. When she’d first been assigned to him, Haggerty had been married only fifteen years, and Lorraine had teased him, claiming to be jealous of his beautiful, supportive, fiercely loyal assistant. After all, flesh was flesh,

and most reviewers did end up taking their assistants to bed, Haggerty included. But that was before Lorraine, and no matter how adult Elsa looked, she reminded him of a child.

“I thought you might like to ride to work together,” she said. Meaning she had concluded that his behavior over the last few days was worrisome, and she wanted to keep an eye on him.

“Go in without me,” Haggerty said. “I’m debating calling in sick.”

“Are you seriously ill, Jason?” Elsa asked. “What sort of symptoms are you—You’d better let me come up immediately.”

“Wait there, I’ll be down in five,” Haggerty said. He snapped off the connection, glanced at the end table drawer and headed for the master bathroom just off his bedroom. The lights flared awake as he entered. “Cold,” he said, and the basin tap came on.

Haggerty popped open his pillcase and extracted a celtrex. The translucent, faint green gelcap sat in the palm of his hand like a drop of seawater. Sometimes he wished it were more than a drop, wished it were enough to drown his sorrows. He reached into a cabinet for a disposable cup. His hand came into contact with something soft. He frowned, pulled out the unexpected object, then froze, staring down at one of the bejeweled fabric ribbons Lorraine had used to tie back her long black hair. How had this one escaped his notice? He’d thought he got rid of them all. Haggerty lifted the ribbon slowly to his face. It was still there, ever so faint, the scent of jasmine and Lorraine.

He gripped the sink, closed his eyes, got himself enough under control to put the scrap of cloth back into the cabinet and grab for a cup. He filled it with water and swallowed the pill, calming instantly—a psychological reaction; it would be three or four minutes before the drug could do the job it was intended for, if not the job he needed

done. He bent over the sink, splashed his face, then stared into the mirror and waited for the celtrex to take effect.

The mirror continued to lie, proclaiming him to be exactly as he had appeared on his thirtieth birthday, sixty years ago. His hair was still dark, his chin still cleft, still the most notable feature in what might be called a boyishly attractive face. Only his gray eyes revealed the truth: Haggerty had seen too damned much, too damned often. His eyes would always be haunted.

It appeared that he would be discharging his final obligations, after all. Maybe he should request that as his epitaph: *A Conscientious Citizen to the End*. With another mirthless laugh, Haggerty left the bathroom, pulled on his uniform, slid his pillcase into a pocket, grabbed his com from where he'd left it on the nightstand, and headed out for what he decided would be his last day of work.

* * *

Elsa waited patiently in the lobby. She was exquisitely beautiful, in a way that had gone out of fashion at least fifty years before. Petite and curvaceous blue-eyed blondes with what had once been called "classic" features were the goddesses of a bygone day. Now the rage was for cream-skinned brunettes standing a minimum of five-feet-ten, with the lean lines of well-bred greyhounds. Still, of the dozen people passing through the lobby, not one failed to look at Elsa just a bit longer than was polite.

Haggerty suggested they use the Ojai beltway. It took a little longer than the superbelts but was more scenic and a lot less jammed at this hour (which, at this time of

day in a city the size of NewVada, simply meant that it wasn't standing-room-only with people packed six deep).

Elsa cocked her head. "Are you sure you wouldn't be more comfortable driving?" she said. "Air quality and visibility are both very good this morning, but the heat index is above normal for this time of year."

"I'm not getting behind the wheel of a car," Haggerty said. "Not today."

"I suppose I can understand that," she conceded. "I am aware of the date, Jason. You shouldn't . . ."

"Let it go, Elsa," Haggerty said firmly, knowing she had no choice. Nodding acquiescence, she followed him outside.

Despite the cooling fabric of his regulation grays—a nonthreatening, neutral color meant to reassure adjusters and surviving next of kin present at press sites—the heat of the city slammed into him as soon as the door opened, before he'd crossed the threshold. Used to its impact, Haggerty kept moving. Elsa was enviably unaffected, her smooth skin unmarred by perspiration, her long blonde hair untouched by anything so vulgar as sweat.

The street outside Haggerty's complex was packed with thousands of lower-status citizens on their daily commute, who had to use public transport. Haggerty and Elsa fell in step among them and were jostled along by the slowly moving crowd. In less than ten minutes they reached the silvery column of hypersteel that would transport them to the beltplatform. They tubed up and quickly made their way to the on-loops, moving forward with the crowd to the entrance turnstiles. Most people used their thumbprints for access, though a few individuals scanned voucher strips or identiplates to charge the cost of transportation to a corporation or government agency, rather than to their individual

private accounts as happened with thumbprints. Someone had been pulled aside by security, drawing the attention of passers-by; the lines to the turnstiles nearest the altercation slowed as people turned to gawk. A guard frowned intently at the strip of plasticine that a slightly paunchy, gray-haired man had tried to feed into the system. Outside the immigrant enclaves or the Vegas Black Light district, it was rare to see an adult whose true age was so painfully obvious. The man, clearly not a Conscientious Citizen, spoke slowly, his English awkward and not easily intelligible as he tried to convince the guard that his employer had given him the voucher to run an errand. The guard wasn't buying his story.

The line at Turnstile Number Three is moving quickly. Elsa's words projected into Haggerty's mind via a neural transmitter link implanted at the base of his skull. The link, allowing review agents and their assistants to communicate silently within a hundred yards of each other, to hold private conversations in public situations, had once been a closely guarded industry secret, a crucial factor in BBI's, and Haggerty's, success. Now, it mainly helped him avoid traffic jams and social *faux pas*. Elsa sent another message: *There's a pylon obscuring the view of what's going on here, so there's no rubbernecking beyond it.*

Let's go, then, he linked back, moving toward the line Elsa had indicated. He flashed his BBI identiplat at the reader and stepped through the turnstile to the on-loop, Elsa following behind.

The loop fed them quickly onto the Ojai, thousands of feet above ground level, and they were soon being conveyed through the city. The belt was pretty full, but there were a few marginally comfortable bench seats available for those who wanted them. The trip

was short enough for Haggerty to prefer standing. Elsa stood quietly beside him as the moving path ushered them along, correctly reading his mood to be that he preferred silence.

Looking over the rail, Haggerty thought he could make out the terminus of the Crutzfield-Jacob Building, but it was too far down to see without lenses. He considered what falling from such a great height might feel like, the rough, hot wind on his face. But a last thrill before termination was not for him, even if he could overcome the programmed safeguards and throw himself over the edge. He was simply admiring the view. Tired as he was of his life, he could still be awed by the cityscape of towers rising from the floor of barren desert to challenge the distant mountains for supremacy.

Until the end of the last century, most of NewVada had been part of California. Politics, and the need to build a city that straddled the old state lines, had redrawn the map. Though Haggerty had a distant memory of when this part of the Nevada/California border had been nothing but miles of scrub, sage, and sand, that memory was hard to reconcile with the current reality. Because that memory was the world of his childhood, when the human body was subject to incurable diseases and the encroaching debilitation of old age. Aggressive funding had fueled stem-cell research, and death from age or illness was relegated to the past, until overpopulation became the most pressing concern facing America and every other industrialized country in the world. The increased demand for living space, coupled with the need to conserve land that could be productively farmed, forced governments to carve cities out of terrain previously deemed uninhabitable.

Now, buildings packed tightly together covered the desert, rising into the clouds,

interwoven with massive twelve-lane elevated beltways for those rich enough to afford cars, and, a few stories beneath them, pay-as-you-go pedestrian belts for the masses. The higher up you lived and traveled, the higher your status. All belts circled and offered multiple offramps to Downtown, the heart of the city, which housed most of the city's government infrastructure: City Hall, Police Headquarters, Central Morgue, and Haggerty's own agency, BBI. Transfer between belts was possible at any number of junctions, and all of the city's belts converged at four different locations, North, South, East and West, the belt wheels acting as transfer points so that riders could get anywhere in the city, no matter from which belt they started.

NewVada had been one of the first megapolitan cities built, its twenty-three-million population crammed into a hundred square miles of the hottest land on earth. Temperatures in excess of 130 degrees Fahrenheit were common, at least at ground level. But only those with no other option lived and traveled at ground level: immigrants awaiting Provisional Citizen Status; denizens of the Vegas Black Light District; those on the fringes of society. Most NewVadans rarely had to deal with such extremes, and in theory could go from one climate-controlled environment to another—compartments to transportation to offices, hotels, public buildings or private residences and back again—their entire lives spent without ever experiencing the raw power of the untempered heat suffusing the city around them. Even so, some vital system always broke down or wore out, causing people to swelter uncomfortably for an hour or a day or a month until climate control was restored. Like anything else, if you lived in NewVada long enough, you got used to the heat, or at least enough used to it to take the occasional shortcut out of doors. And after tonight, Haggerty thought as they approached their transfer point off the Ojai,

there would be one less person putting out heat.

Haggerty and Elsa merged onto the Northside beltwheel, where practically the entire cityscape came into view: the Northside heavenscrapers, home to the uber-rich, where Haggerty lived; the Westside slums, refuge of the ultra-poor; the Southside, an uneasy blend of those who struggled in between. And the Eastside, dominated by Vegas, the world-renowned Black Light District, the place where one's monetary status could change for better or worse with a single roll of dice.

A group of teens sporting garish skinpaint and stickjewel artwork on the visible portions of their bodies sped up on airboards to Haggerty and Elsa, surfing several feet above belt level, the hovering boards the latest end-run by Junior Citizens around the law prohibiting those without full CC status from setting foot on privileged belts during rush hour. Legally, the kids couldn't even apply to be CCs until they were of employment age. Haggerty wasn't sure how they got past the entrance turnstiles, unless they airboarded from the floor of the terminal to the maintenance catwalks, along those to the overpasses, then dropped a hundred feet to belt level. Just the kind of dangerous, brain-dead stunt typical of JCs. They thought they could come away unscathed from any outrageous stunt. He couldn't deny that they *were* skilled as they maneuvered their boards deftly between annoyed CCs without causing accidents. Still, the belt wasn't wide enough to leave much margin for error; Elsa had to step aside quickly to avoid being hit.

"Sorry," one of the teens called back in a voice of indeterminate gender.

"Reckless," Haggerty said as he watched them weave in and around ducking pedestrians, the stickjeweled words CLONE JESUS! flashing on one JC's bare back.

"What's Clone Jesus?" he asked Elsa, not bothering to link. "A new religious

movement?”

After a moment, she answered, “It’s a band of musicians. They have the number-one song on the current Indranet download charts. Would you like to hear it?”

“No, thanks,” Haggerty said. He didn’t like the music popular with JCs these days. He was happy to let Elsa keep track of such cultural trends, along with all the other bits of trivia she tracked as part of her assigned duties.

A buildingboard-sized cityscreen flashed the morning news as they belted along, repeating a story Haggerty had seen last night depicting dozens of illegal ships off the California coast, filled with hopeful immigrants, fired upon relentlessly by the American Coast Guard. Their tiny boats were no match for the gargantuan U.S. gunships. Those that did not capsize fled back toward the free zone, their dreams of the Promised Land never to become reality. There was simply no room for them here.

“Poor bastards,” Haggerty said to Elsa. “Do they have enough rations for a return trip, or even homes to go back to?”

Elsa considered his question, then shook her head. “Unlikely,” she said softly. “Space is at a premium on the pirate ships smuggling illegals into the country. More cargo means fewer passengers and less profit. When a ship fails to make landfall here, mortality rates increase rapidly after the first few days of the return journey. For those who do make it back to their homelands, there is a very high probability that any property they left behind has already been confiscated.”

Haggerty nodded, not really surprised. He knew that for most illegals, the journey was all or nothing. He could only imagine the sufferings they’d face upon return.

“Keeping America’s borders safe for Americans,” the board stated, and then

displayed a five-second advertisement from BBI of a smiling man reclining in a hammock with the latest unit model by his side. “*KV. The choice is yours,*” the advertisement droned.

Haggerty and Elsa stepped onto the exit belt that would take them to BBI’s platform. Haggerty scanned his identiplat at the gate, which obligingly rose out of their way, and they headed toward the building’s main entrance.

They heard shouting. Haggerty grimaced. Another protest must be underway. The Religious Right had more or less set up a permanent camp on the BBI quad. Maybe a hundred people hoisted flashbanners demanding NATURE FIRST and DISARM YOUR SWITCH! And, inevitably, HEAVEN WON’T TAKE THOSE WHO PRESS!

“Do you want to go around back to avoid them?” Elsa asked.

“Tempting,” Haggerty admitted. “But I’m already running late. Not like we haven’t run the gauntlet before.”

It was, in fact, almost a daily occurrence. They pushed past the protesters with practiced ease, but as they reached the marble archway flanked by six bull-faced guards wearing crash gear and holding multi-burst autostuns, a girl with long, sandy-brown hair rushed to block their path.

“Don’t go in there and fit for a button,” she pleaded. “You don’t need a Killswitch. Life and death are decisions meant for God, not for you!”

Her eyes caught Haggerty, their green depths so earnest he couldn’t simply walk past, as he had walked past a thousand protesters before her. He allowed himself to be stopped, and returned her intense gaze. Judging anyone’s age by physical appearance alone was always dicey. She was wearing the kind of clothing popular among Junior Citizens—

loose-fitting pants that started at the hip and ended just below the knee, a half-tee that truncated right beneath her breasts, both in a mossy green that matched her eyes, and the backpack no one but students ever seemed to carry. Skinpainting of a purple iris bloomed on her torso. But Haggerty had long ago trained himself to read more subtle, almost subliminal, signs to figure out how old someone really was. Usually, there were clues—the way people spoke or dressed, the specific films or music or books they enjoyed, the sports playoffs they talked about, the politicians they admired—something that revealed when they'd grown up. No clues were needed now. The girl's unlined face had a rawness that plastiche would have smoothed away, all the more attractive for its lack of perfection. Haggerty was sure that she wasn't much older than the twenty or so she appeared.

"I'll make my own choices, thank you," he said, not unkindly, and tried to move past her. She mirrored his action, continuing to block the path. He sensed Elsa tensing for action, and hastily sent reassurance across their link.

"Pressing is a mistake," the girl said vehemently. "And it's one you can't fix. There are no second thoughts with a Killswitch." She all but spat out the derogatory slang for the Kevorkian unit.

She was so young, Haggerty thought. Too young for this much intensity. Then again, maybe only the young *could* feel so intensely about life anymore. He guessed she had lost someone recently, maybe a parent, someone she wasn't ready to let go. He might feel pity or compassion, even empathy, for her, but he still had to do his job.

"That's a risk I'm willing to take," he said truthfully. "Now, if you'll excuse us."

She remained in their path. Haggerty tried to force his way past her.

The girl grasped his arm. “Don’t do this,” she pleaded.

There was nothing particularly aggressive about the way she’d reached for him. If anything, her hold was tentative, a gesture to get his attention, nothing that could really have prevented him from moving. But her effort did not go down well with security. Elsa grabbed the girl by the wrists as the nearby guards swooped in. Exasperated by everyone’s overreaction, Haggerty raised a hand.

“It’s okay,” he said.

The guards lowered their weapons and at Haggerty’s linked command, Elsa let the girl go.

Haggerty stared her in the eye. The girl returned his gaze with defiance, even pride. But he had the edge on her, the weight of age and grief and the sheer length of time he’d gone on living enabling him to face her down as long as it might take. After a moment, her gaze faltered. Haggerty gave the girl a grim smile and continued walking. Elsa threw her a disapproving look before falling into step behind him.

As they entered the BBI building, the girl came forward once more. “Go ahead, then,” she cried out angrily. “Cough and die if it suits you! Press your Killswitch!”

There was no point in telling her he planned to.

* * *

“Haggerty, where ya’ been?” Tanner grumbled as they entered the viewing room, looking up from his breakfast. “Diddling your assistant? We had a double press over an hour ago.”

Elsa took a seat at the main switchboard and began downloading data, ignoring Tanner's comment. Haggerty envied her ability to remain unmoved. After decades of ignoring it himself, he'd lately found Tanner's habitual, juvenile crudeness unbearably irritating.

If Jason Haggerty tried to live up to the ideal of what a Conscientious Citizen should be, Mitch Tanner seemed intent on living down to the worst excesses associated with the status. Haggerty didn't like Tanner, finding in him the extreme example of everything that was wrong with the majority of people who'd been CCs for more than two decades. He dosed too much in his off time, bitched too much when he was on, and had been campaigning to get Elsa into bed almost from the moment she'd become Haggerty's assistant. He also went in for plastiche to the point of absurdity. Nobody went much past thirty without at least one visit to the best plastiche parlor he or she could afford, but Tanner chose to look like a JC rather than an adult, and acted like he was no older than he looked. He was ninety-two playing at twenty-two, and not very convincingly. But whatever Haggerty thought of Tanner's perpetual adolescence, he had to work with the man, if only for the rest of the day.

A quick look at what Tanner was eating, greasy cubes of cloniform beef from the cafeteria dispensary, was enough to turn Haggerty's stomach. Some of the grease had made a bid for freedom on its way to Tanner's mouth, and got as far as his chest; two small dark spots marked his regulation grays, which the self-cleaning fabric would eliminate within half an hour. At the moment, though, they remained revoltingly visible.

"Do you have a clue how they prepare that stuff?" Haggerty asked, indicating the plate of food.

“Nope,” Tanner said. “As long as they’re doing the preparing and not me, I don’t really care.”

“There hasn’t been a live cow on the planet for half a century,” Haggerty pointed out. “What they call meat in that swill was culled from a one-hundredth generation clone, grown in a nutrient tank, packed in fake gelatin, flavored with synthetics, and then saniwaved”—which was the reason Haggerty, despite his love of rare steaks and thick burgers, reluctantly followed a vegetarian diet.

“Jeez, Haggerty,” Tanner said, forking up another mouthful of cloniform beef, “you sound like that Code Six guy who’s supposed to be holed up in the desert someplace. What’s his name? Cody?” Tanner scrunched up his face in concentration. “Bodey? Brody?”

“Tomas Yosif Svoboda,” Elsa supplied.

“Yeah, him,” Tanner said. “The back-to-nature nut.”

Code Six was one of the “blue codes,” police designations for threats to public health and safety that required the intervention of law enforcement officers, in this case designating that the person causing the disturbance appeared to be mentally defective and should be approached with caution. Haggerty dimly remembered headlines from decades ago regarding this man, Svoboda—a physicist who supposedly found God, denounced society and founded a cult of subversives called—what was it—the “Indivisibles?”

Tanner lifted his fork to his mouth and another scrap of breakfast hit his grays, making a third spot bloom on the cloth. Haggerty’s mouth tightened. Like so many others, Tanner didn’t look deeply into the nature of things, or care about anything unless the telemonitor warned him to. Perhaps Tanner’s failure to see below the surface was the

reason he was merely a trace and dispatch operator, while Haggerty was a reviewer.

“Who and what?” Haggerty asked now, giving up speculation and turning to the job at hand.

He stepped into the pulpit and powered it on. Elsa’s fingers blurred in motion on the transparent board. Data streamed before Haggerty: holo-reps of both pushers, one male, one female, their lives in coded bytes listing below them.

“The dearly departed,” Tanner quipped. “His name was Gustavo Nyuga, one hundred and four, and she was Maria-Christina Rosenberg, one hundred and thirty.” Tanner smiled nastily. “Guess he liked older women.”

To the eye, they both seemed nubile, ageless. The remark was another of Tanner’s crudities: with people living well into their second century and no one looking much over thirty, age gaps between couples were commonplace. What did a few decades matter when everyone had so many of them to look forward to?

“He was a retired investment banker; she was his client, then boss, and then lover,” Tanner continued.

“When and where?” Haggerty asked, moving into the scaled continuous-update holo-rep of the cityscape.

“Oh-eight forty-two,” Tanner read aloud. “The Hodkins Building.” An amber pinlight fixed on a Southside compartment. Haggerty knew the building; he’d been assigned there on a number of occasions. “Looks like they pressed together. Very sweet,” Tanner said.

Who, what, when, and where duly answered, it was Haggerty’s job to find out the *why* and make sure it was clean. The *how* he knew all too well.

“Elsa, code us last rites and warrants and get me a thermos of coffee, won’t you?” he requested as he returned to the pulpit.

* * *

The Southside was thick with buildings, stalk after stalk of hypersteel, plasticine, and permaglass rising in square columns of sandy beige and yellow and tan, as if the desert had merely redistributed itself vertically rather than been swallowed whole by Man. In this desiccated garden, the Hodkins Building was the one notable bloom, an exclusive residence, a superior example of the Karin Li school of architecture that had flourished in the second half of the previous century. The building curved around itself, spiraling upward in a graceful sweep, its permaglass surface gradations of blue, from deepest navy at the base to light aqua that seemed to fade into the sky at the upper reaches. The inside was as elegant as the outside. They entered the tube and Elsa typed the pass code to allow them entry to the floor they needed. As they approached the compartment, Haggerty raised the flashing yellow police tape and they passed beneath. A uniformed officer halted them.

“Sorry folks, this is a press scene.”

The man had to be new on the job, not to distinguish between the gray suits of ordinary citizens and their regulation grays. Haggerty flashed his BBI identiplat and the officer, with an embarrassed apology, waved them on.

The door was ajar. Inside they found a well-dressed man seated calmly on an esplanade couch drinking a glass of blue liquid, maybe KeepAwake. Dark-haired, tanned,

handsome in that bourgeois way that plastiche seemed to have made everyone's birthright, he placed his drink on a coaster on a delicate antique end table and rose to greet them.

"The name's Primrose," he said. "Haggerty, right?"

Haggerty reached to shake hands. "You're the adjuster? Never seen you before." He'd also never seen anyone who'd chosen to keep his physical appearance at early middle age, though he knew the trend was gaining popularity with some businessmen. Primrose sported a frost of silver at each temple, stark and handsome against his dark hair, and the barest suggestion of lines around his eyes. His athletic build had a hint more solidity than the usual thirty-year-old look. Primrose's look was distinguished, striking, sophisticated, intended to convey authority and experience—invaluable in an adjuster's work, Haggerty thought.

"Just got assigned to NewVada," Primrose said. "Transferred from New York."

"You must be excited," Haggerty said.

Primrose appeared confused.

"The game?" Haggerty added.

"Oh, the Superbowl. I won't be there. I'm not much of a football fan," Primrose said with a self-deprecating smile. "Don't appreciate violent sports."

Haggerty nodded. He had his own reason for not being there, beside the fact that tickets cost a small fortune and were near impossible to come by. He'd shared a love of football with his father, and had painfully let it go in his absence. Pressing the night before the big game would itself be an act of defiance for Haggerty. The fact that NewVada was finally a contender made it all the more ironic.

“Mind showing us the press site?” he asked Primrose.

“This way.”

Primrose’s swaggering walk suggested confidence, another asset in an adjuster. Who wanted to leave their final affairs in the hands of someone who didn’t have absolute faith in what he was doing? But, Haggerty thought, Primrose overdid it a bit. Like Tanner’s love affair with puberty, Primrose’s idealized middle-aged man rang false. From the clothes he wore and the jewelry he affected, Haggerty read Primrose to be not much older than the appearance he maintained, a youngster of fifty or so. Most likely he was an up-and-comer with great prospects but a minimal track record in his field, for which his appearance was calculated to compensate. He couldn’t blame Primrose for trying to gain advantage. Everyone started someplace.

He really is young, Elsa told Haggerty through their link. I can tell.

So can I, Haggerty sent back.

Primrose led them into the bedroom, a healthy-sized chamber nearly eight-by-eight, half the size of Haggerty’s but still indicative of wealth, as were the room’s furnishings. Before he’d pressed, Nyuga had indulged a taste—his or his lover’s—for antiques. Real wool carpets covered the floor; bureaus, end tables, and armoires of genuine wood stood against the walls. There were lighting fixtures on tall, elegant poles with fluted crystal glass bowls to deflect the illumination—torch lamps, Haggerty vaguely recalled, his mother had owned one, inherited from a great-aunt. The bed was not the standard platform but a carved fantasy designed to look like a Russian sleigh from at least three centuries back. The wood was natural, though Haggerty couldn’t say from what kind of tree, and against the dark frame a set of mauve silk bedclothes had been twisted by

passion, not slumber, and heaped together like discarded flower petals. Drool-tinged blood was evident on one pillow, urine and fecal stains on the sheets—typical evidence of a press. One KV unit lay half hidden beneath a coverlet; Primrose pointed out the other one on the floor, under the bed.

Haggerty cleared his throat. “Do you have the DCs?”

“Right here,” Primrose said, holding up his com and hitting the recall codes. He withdrew the two strips of plasticine the com disgorged. “Do you have the warrants for the boxes?”

Haggerty nodded, following suit with his own com. The two men exchanged documents that were neatly encoded on plasticine cards. Haggerty scanned the death certificates, observing that they were affixed with the proper coroner’s seals, then asked, “How long since the bodies were removed?”

“Half an hour,” Primrose said. “They took all the necessary samples. The detective, I believe his name was—”

“Woyzeck, I know him,” Haggerty interrupted. “He called it a love-spawned clean double, pending our review.”

“His exact words,” Primrose said.

“Okay, let’s do it,” Haggerty said. “Record on.”

Elsa leaned against the bedroom door, casually smoothing blonde hair from her face and folding her arms. “Recording,” she said.

“Eulogic proceedings for Gustavo Nyuga and Maria-Christina Rosenberg. Jason P. Haggerty, representative for BBI, presiding.”

“Oliver Wendell Primrose, adjusting agent for the insurance firm of Cromwell and

Sons, prepared to review,” Primrose added in a more officious tone.

Haggerty went to the bed, pulling on black duratex gloves. “Elsa,” he said, “please note: By the authority vested in me by legal warrant of the State of Nevada, I am taking possession of, and responsibility for, two KV black button units that are, to the best of my judgment, the property of BBI and assumed to be the devices of record assigned to the deceased.”

“So noted,” Elsa responded.

Haggerty picked the first unit off the bed and read out the serial number engraved on the casing, then got down on his knees, retrieved the second unit, and repeated the process.

“Serial numbers confirmed as those registered to the deceased,” Elsa said a few seconds later.

“Units appear fully intact and previously armed,” Haggerty continued. “Tabs popped clearly indicate that both buttons have been pressed.” He tipped the boxes up for Primrose to inspect.

Keeping a safe distance, Primrose eyed the tabs and called, “In my best judgment, I confirm that both buttons appear to have been pressed.”

Post-press, the units were, at least in theory, toxin-free, but Haggerty was careful as he handled them, anyway. BBI protocol required that he not put the theory to the test. He brought them over to Elsa. “Mind closing the curtains?” he said to Primrose, who located the console and dialed them shut.

Elsa stood motionless against the door, waiting for Haggerty to reach her. She gave him a look; he supposed she’d smelled the celtrex lacing the coffee on his breath. As he

handed her the first unit, she unfastened the tab at the collar of her jumpsuit and pulled the zipper down to her waist in one smooth motion. Primrose watched with an avidity bordering on the salacious as she pressed her thumb hard against her sternum, snapping open her breastplate and exposing her ported upload center, then deftly inserted the unit.

“Analysis?” he asked.

Elsa was silent a full minute, then, “Serial numbers as previously confirmed. Residue on unit confirmed as a BBI toxin. Prints on unit confirmed as belonging to the registered owner. It is established that this is the device of record for Maria-Christina Rosenberg.”

“Play recording with full room projection,” Haggerty said. “Adjust for the light.”

Behind Elsa’s irises, twin beacons whirled into motion, projecting onto Haggerty’s face. He stepped aside. A duplicate holo-image overlaid the room, with the notable inclusion of Gustavo Nyuga and Maria-Christina Rosenberg nude in bed, KV units in hand. Hers was armed; tears wet her cheeks as the soft male electronic voice announced, “Recording,” and went on to give the date and time. The unit cast a violet light across the couple’s bare skins.

Primrose stood mesmerized, as if this were his first post-press viewing. Haggerty had encountered that sort of prurience before. Some adjusters never got tired of the show; it was almost indecent. It seemed to Haggerty that the final moments of the deceased should be observed solemnly, with respect. He turned his attention back to the review.

Gustavo Nyuga took Maria-Christina in his arms, peering over her shoulder as he armed his unit. “Recording,” it droned, bathing the curve of her back in pale green light.

“Quickly, Gustavo, before I change my mind,” she wept. “I love you forever.”

“God, I love you too,” he said, and pressed. She moaned when she heard his unit

pop. Then hers popped as well.

Her unit continued to record as they crumpled against each other onto the pillows, euphoria in their eyes. Their bodies trembled and gave a final spasm as their hearts seized simultaneously. Looking at them, Haggerty wondered if having someone to press with made it better. Was there comfort in being so close to someone that the decision could be made, and acted upon, jointly?

Primrose stood by the bed, so near he looked comically like a participant in the scene, his hand to his mouth as though holding something back. Nausea? Excitement?

Haggerty didn't want to know. "Judgment," he called.

Primrose took a breath. "Cromwell and Sons declares the cases of Gustavo Nyuga and Maria-Christina Rosenberg to be legitimate presses, their actions apparently the result of joint bankruptcy and inability to secure future income. As neither Mr. Nyuga nor Ms. Rosenberg has any living relatives or heirs, the settlement of their affairs will be posted to the State." After, of course, Cromwell and Sons took their cut, Haggerty thought. Certainly there were enough antiques in the bedroom alone to cover the normal fees, dues, and charges such firms exacted for their services, before the client's creditors and heirs—in this case, the State—got to wrangle over what was left.

Haggerty had listened to Primrose stoically. Properly speaking, they ought to have waited for the second review before signing off on both cases. "In the case of Maria-Christina Rosenberg, death by press judged clean," Haggerty pronounced. "Stop projection."

The couple vanished. Elsa removed the unit, and Haggerty took it from her, handing her Nyuga's, sliding Rosenberg's into a minthizine case for transport back to

headquarters. Elsa had already run the analysis, confirming the second unit as Nyuga's device of record, and begun uploading his final recording, when Primrose spoke.

"Don't see any need to play the other recording," he said, fetching his drink from the end table.

Elsa looked at Haggerty. *I don't understand why adjusters are always so impatient, Jason*, she sent across their link. *Shall I proceed?*

Elsa was right: adjusters never wanted to hang around a press scene once the unit was reviewed. They preferred to have the formalities handled as expeditiously as possible so they could go about the business of securing assets, finalizing arrangements, and determining their percentages. A year ago, Haggerty would have ignored Primrose's comment and told Elsa to proceed with the projection. Adjusters might not like the additional delays and attrition of assets that accompanied the exceedingly rare finding of a criminally manipulated press, but Haggerty had always been scrupulous in carrying out his duties. As a result, he found those exceedingly rare criminal manipulations a less conscientious reviewer would have missed.

But he was a different man today than he had been a year—a lifetime—before. Fewer and fewer manips had been found over the past few decades. These two clients certainly had reason to press and—unless Governor Benfield had suddenly acquired a passion for torch lamps—no heirs to benefit from hurrying them along their way. What was the point of looking further?

It's all right, Elsa, Haggerty sent across their link. *I think the first projection told us everything we need to know.* Aloud, he said, "It's clear what happened. Record epitaph: Regarding the case of Mr. Gustavo Nyuga, one-hundred-four, and Ms. Maria-Christina

Rosenberg, one-hundred-thirty, consecutive presses observed and both judged clean. Eulogic proceedings convened on March eighth, Twenty-one-fifty-six, by BBI senior agent Jason P. Haggerty. Life insurance settlement to be placed in trust to the State.” Formalities taken care of, he gestured for Elsa to return the second unit. “Go ahead and open the curtains,” he told Primrose, and secured the second discharged unit in another minthizine case.

The other man dialed the curtains back open, rubbing his eyes as sunlight flooded the compartment. “Is that all?” he asked Haggerty, pulling out his com and flipping it open to record the BBI agent’s verdict in the appropriate files.

“Yes,” Haggerty said, concealing his distaste for Primrose’s cavalier attitude. “That will be all as far as BBI is concerned.”

Primrose closed the com again and put it away. “Nice working with you, Mr. Haggerty.” He extended his hand, realized Haggerty was still wearing the duratex gloves, and settled for a nod. “Have a good day.”

Primrose left the room.

Haggerty went into the bathroom and ordered the sink, “On, hot.” Elsa helped him out of the gloves, which she put in a minthizine biohazard bag, before they began sterilizing their hands as BBI protocol required once discharged units had been contained.

“Jason, I have a question,” she said, looking up from her cleaning.

He saw that she was addressing his reflection in the mirror, and found it odd. “What’s on your mind?” he said.

“The decision those two people made to press together. It was premeditated, wouldn’t you agree?”

Haggerty nodded.

“Please explain to me why two healthy people, in no apparent jeopardy, would decide that they have had enough of life at precisely the same time.”

Haggerty stopped scrubbing and looked at her reflection, perplexed. They’d worked together a long time, reviewed hundreds of double presses together. Why this question now? He thought about how to summarize, knowing that inevitably his answer would fall short of acceptable to her logic board. He knew Elsa was perpetually reprogramming herself, to better understand the nature of those she served, but this was a difficult query, perhaps important to her development. He selected his words carefully.

“Two people can grow together, share so much together, have such a commonality, that they begin to make decisions as one,” he explained, or hoped he did.

Elsa gazed into the mirror, unblinking. “So if the drive to press is based primarily in despair, I should assume they shared the exact same level of despair?”

Haggerty towed his hands, aware he was not doing a very good job of explaining. “Sort of,” he said. “Let’s say they were committed to each other and circumstances led one of them to decide that pressing was the right choice. Even though the other may not have been suffering the same level of despair at that moment, the strength of their commitment, coupled with the fear of being separated from each other, the person who is the main reason and purpose for living, compounds the despair.” Haggerty scratched the back of his neck. “That could bring them to a decision to press together.”

“Despair by osmosis,” Elsa stated flatly.

“Something like that. Does this shed any light on the human condition for you?”

“I’m going to *digest* it,” she said, using one of the phrases Haggerty employed in rare

moments of uncertainty—or, more usually, to mask defiance toward his superiors. “I’ll run it parallel against previous input and observe the variable shift.”

Haggerty smiled, ever astonished at her desire to learn, to understand. The bulk of androids produced these days were suited only for the most menial or dangerous work no human wanted to do. Intelligent, intuitive androids like Elsa were few and far between, too expensive to produce in quantity, the jobs they were suited for too badly needed by the burgeoning human population. Haggerty took the extra time and effort with her because she had, in many ways, been raised by him, a standard perk in his department long before the impact of androids in the workforce had become an issue with the unions. Her personality, distinctly machinelike and artificial when she’d arrived to replace the earlier model he’d been assigned, had evolved over time, largely in response to his influence. While she was, perhaps understandably, a little too protective of him and inclined to nag, he was happy to have had a hand in her development.

“You do that,” he said.

* * *

Tanner gave them the high sign when they got back to BBI, and reminded Haggerty that a staff report was due upstairs. Haggerty looked at the clock and nodded, keying in his pass code to the mausoleum. The meeting was due to start momentarily. He didn’t really have time for his planned detour to the men’s room to dose a celtrex; lateness was something that was sure to have the Dragon breathing fire at him. Then again, a man about to press didn’t have much to fear from those flames. The meeting could start

without him. Haggerty stepped forward, allowing the scanner to pan his retinas, and waited as four sets of interlocking gates disengaged and slid back into the floor and ceiling, revealing a permaglass wall with one narrow concave section forming an access port. Once the hypersteel gates had disappeared, Haggerty glanced back at the control panel, stamping his thumbprint against the flatscreen to turn off the remaining electronic wards, before pulling on the pair of black duratex gloves Elsa handed him. When the system sent the green light clearing him for access, Haggerty took the minthizine cases and biohazard bag from her and stood on the pressure plate in front of the access port. There was just enough room for one person to stand within its circumference. Once in place, the concavity slid open around the access port, effectively bringing Haggerty inside the room while ensuring no one else entered with him. The shield's permaglass construction ensured that his actions would be observable by any duly assigned witnesses. Originally, two were mandated, usually the on-duty dispatcher, the reviewer's assistant, or another reviewer. These days, little actual observation was ever done. Tanner didn't even bother to turn his attention from his own console, though Elsa managed to keep Haggerty in her line of sight even as she headed over to a nearby decontamination sink to wash her hands and run the requisite sterilization protocols on her internal systems.

The discharged KV unit storage room was the highest security area in the building; only state-registered review agents could enter. Somewhere in this same facility a similar room held thousands of brand-new, uncalibrated units—Haggerty had been there once, his first day on the job, when he'd signed for his own—boxes without namescreens housing buttons without printscans. But the mausoleum, with its stone floor and vaulted ceilings, held only discharged black boxes: row after row and shelf after shelf of dead

units. T. J. Sovereign, the man who'd designed the first box, had suggested they be recycled. This was quickly vetoed on the grounds that no one wanted a device that had been discharged. In order for it to be safe and unthreatening, it had to be clean, untarnished, sterile—and unique.

Haggerty stepped to the console, uttered the command, and waited for the program to identify his vocal pattern. A few seconds later, a pair of narrow panels slid aside, revealing freshly sterilized containment slots. He deposited the units within—evidence in the unlikely event of future challenge—and watched as the panels automatically sealed shut. Most likely, those seals would never be broken, the units' evidence never required.

Haggerty headed for the exit sink and coded open the appropriate secure waste container beside it. He dropped the biohazard bag inside, stripped off his gloves and sent them after, then coded the container closed. Though the minthizine cases and duratex gloves made it virtually impossible for him to have picked up a single spore of contamination, he followed protocol, washing his hands once more, then returned to the access port to leave the mausoleum. He stepped from the pressure plate and the mausoleum's four pairs of gates closed behind him for the last time.

Elsa sat at a console, sorting through data streams. She smiled at him as he made his way out of the storage room.

"I have a staff meeting," he said.

"I'll keep myself busy," she replied.

* * *

“Welcome, Mr. Haggerty,” said Consuela Pitcairn, the division director, referred to in whispers as the Dragon. The sole person at the table not wearing grays, she was dressed in a stylish business suit of pale gold that featured an elegant straight skirt ending demurely at the knee, over a cream-colored synthesilk blouse. She had been with BBI since before Haggerty, and had to be nearing the century mark, but like almost every one else looked no older than thirty. Right now, she also looked annoyed.

Haggerty didn’t bother trying to excuse his lateness. He headed for the only seat available at the large round black onyx table, between Tanner and O’Connell, directly across from the new kid, Corbin, who was chewing one of her irritating cubes of gum. She had been recruited two months ago, after the union complained that three retired agents’ positions had gone unfilled far beyond contractual time limits. Management had successfully argued that there wasn’t enough work for three new agents, but the arbitrator upheld the union’s position that the contract required that at least one job be filled. Thus BBI acquired Corbin to take up the nonexistent slack and Consuela acquired a devoutly loyal agent. Because Corbin was the minimum legal employable age, thirty. This made her two decades younger than the national average for initial employment in any job, let alone this highly sought-after field. No doubt Corbin’s loyalty was also due to the fact that the field still skewed heavily toward the male demographic.

Corbin had smooth, clear skin, short dark hair, and piercing blue eyes Haggerty figured were natural. Like every other Conscientious Citizen, she was good-looking—most would probably say beautiful. But something about her left Haggerty slightly repulsed. She was smart-mouthed, certain she knew more than the experienced agents, much like Haggerty when he first joined BBI. But Corbin was hard, smug, unlikable. Her

not so subtle hints that BBI would be better off if she were to take over Haggerty's position didn't help to foster a good working relationship, either. Haggerty's biggest gripe was that Corbin acted as if she were doing everyone a favor by being there, that she was just killing time until something more worthy of her talents came along. Even at his most callow, Haggerty had never done that. Corbin was clearly unhappy about having to attend this meeting, her eyes darting from one object to the next; she was barely able to sit still.

"Clean presses, I assume?" Consuela said as Haggerty took his seat.

He nodded.

"Good," she said. "Let's get started then. Most of you know that pressage is markedly down these past few months, following a pattern that's been growing for several years." She smiled provocatively. "Which means some of you may be advantageously positioned for early retirement."

Haggerty could feel Corbin's too-blue eyes burn into his flesh. That meant Haggerty's name was probably on the list. In most industries, the youngest employees were the first to be cut during lean times, but like the police, BBI agents suffered high burnout rates, which worked in favor of younger colleagues. No matter. She could have his job tomorrow.

"With full pension and continued benefits, of course," Consuela went on. "BBI doesn't forget its own."

Tanner leaned in to whisper, "We'd benefit more from *her* early retirement."

"Fat chance," O'Connell whispered back, past Haggerty.

"I realize you're all in perfect physical condition," Consuela said calmly, attributing the murmuring to a mix of excitement and apprehension about her news, "but I'm calling

for psychevals on each of you later this afternoon. You'll go down alphabetically."

"So sayeth the Dragon," Tanner echoed, loud enough for Haggerty to overhear. Corbin's eyes continued to target him. Haggerty gave her a thin smile. *Relax, kid, you won't have to wait much longer for my post.*

"Are there any questions? Gupta?" Raj Gupta, the only person with more seniority than Haggerty, shook his head no. "O'Connell?" Another head shake. "What about you, Haggerty?"

"Nothing immediate comes to mind," he said, leaning back in his chair and scratching his neck. "I'll digest what you've told us. Maybe later I'll have questions."

Corbin's eyes narrowed slightly. Was Haggerty willing to fade away quietly, without a fuss? He smiled at her, amused when she scowled back. He was tempted to make up something, just to yank Corbin's chain, but decided it wasn't worth the effort.

No one else had questions. The rest of the meeting was routine reporting of clean presses by mature clients—*mature* being defined as having reached the century mark.

An hour later, Haggerty found himself in a chair under psycheval by someone who probably knew more about him than any test could ever reveal. But conducting the evaluation was part of his job, and Haggerty knew that Doug Zabrowski never slacked off. Though that didn't mean he liked running evaluations on his friends. His incessantly puffing on a cigalite was a clear sign he was distressed. Doug only smoked when something was bothering him.

"In my day, those things would have done serious damage to your lungs, Doug," Haggerty said.

"In your day, anyone taking the equivalent of what you take in celtrex would be on

suspension until he'd completed a detox program," Doug retorted.

Doug Zabrowski was living proof that there was only so much plastiche could achieve. He was as good-looking as everyone else, and every bit as youthful, but there was something worn about him, something tired and solemn that caused him to close in on himself, pinching his attractive features and making them ever so slightly less so. The smoking, at least in Haggerty's opinion, didn't help, a fact of which he'd tried to warn his friend, off and on for the past fifty years.

Doug saw it differently. "Cigalites are safe enough for a baby, Jason, and you know it," he said, fiddling with his setup programs.

He was right, of course. Tobacco had been detoxified decades ago, its natural poisons genetically engineered out of existence. And even had they not been, Haggerty understood that the lungs of a fully geno-immunized body could easily tolerate the abuse, and the annual stem-cell therapy all Conscientious Citizens underwent would repair any tissue damage. In the rare instance where deterioration occurred, there was always the option of having an afflicted organ regrown. No one found smoking offensive these days, whereas Haggerty's prescription for celtrex had raised the eyebrow of his pharmacist on more than one occasion—which struck Haggerty as exceedingly unfair.

"It's not as if I'm dosing on something recreational," he said, unpleasant images of Tanner at his worst coming to mind. "Everyone who's had stem therapy takes celtrex."

"Not in the doses you use," Doug said. "It's meant as a telemor maintenance drug, not a sedative."

"I don't use it as a sedative," Haggerty protested. "If anything, just the opposite. It clears my mind, helps me focus, stay keen. It takes the edge off."

“Listen to yourself,” Doug said as he adjusted dials with perhaps a shade more vigor than required. “If something is taking the edge off, by definition it’s making you *less* keen, not more so. You think you’re focusing and clearing your mind, but what you’re really doing is pacifying yourself. Your mind doesn’t clear, it becomes dull, latching on to the first solution that presents itself and clinging to it, whether it’s the best solution or not.”

“It helps me get the job done,” Haggerty persisted.

“Really? Look, Jason, the fact is we’re not designed to live forever. The things we do to ourselves, to extend our lives beyond what our healthiest ancestors could ever have dreamed of, aren’t natural. Our bodies know that, try as we might to fool them.”

“You’ve lost me,” Haggerty said.

“I may have lost myself,” Doug said ruefully. “What I’m getting at is, your reaction to celtrex, the way you’re abusing it—” He held up a hand to stop Haggerty’s protest. “I think your body may be resisting the artificial attempt to make it live longer. Your need for celtrex may be tied to an instinct to die, to make room for the next generation, continue the life of the species rather than the life of the individual.”

Haggerty had never heard this particular theory before.

“You think celtrex is making me suicidal?”

“I think maybe it’s exacerbating something in the telemor treatments that your body is rebelling against.”

“Is that possible?” Haggerty asked.

“Oh, Jason, my friend,” Doug smirked. “The more science learns about the body and the brain, the more we realize we don’t know.”

Doug grunted satisfaction as the last setup program flashed ready. He threw a switch. An inkblot engulfed the room.

“Tell me what you see in this image.”

Haggerty got up and walked around the black, flowing globules.

“This part looks like an old steamship,” he observed. “Those globs look like buoys. The centerpiece seems like a giant spider, spinning . . .”

Haggerty knew each word was being recorded, analyzed by patterns of semantics and symbol, each syllable and pause and inflection compared to the dozen other times he’d taken this test. There was no way to cheat. The machine would detect that he was stressed. It might even factor in the significance this date held for him. The results would get sent upstairs; he’d never see them.

Apparently, some results didn’t take long to analyze. Haggerty watched with interest as Doug consulted his screen and sat back.

“Anything interesting?”

“Nothing I hadn’t already figured out,” Doug said. “But I had hoped . . .”

“What’s the bad news, Doc?” Not that it mattered. Haggerty wondered if Doug knew. Maybe that was why he’d invited Haggerty to dinner this evening with himself and Mandy, remembering the anniversary, figuring he’d help Haggerty get through the day. But Haggerty had declined the invitation, and Doug was enough of a friend to understand that some things couldn’t be helped—and enough of a friend to dislike his own helplessness.

“You know what the bad news is,” Doug said quietly. “I could see it in your eyes when you turned me down for dinner. You used to beg me to invite you over for Mandy’s

famous cream cheese cakes.”

“Doug. . . .”

“That isn’t all,” he went on brusquely. “The other bit of bad news the analysis has come up with . . .” He looked at the reading again, and Haggerty was surprised to see a smile break out on his face. “Well, maybe it isn’t bad news, although I’m sure you’ll consider it a disaster.”

“What is it?” Haggerty said sourly.

“Your response arc to the celtrex is baseline lethargic.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means that your body is no longer responding to the higher dosage. You’d get the same therapeutic effect, as far as telemor maintenance properties go, from a smaller dose.”

Haggerty frowned. It didn’t matter a damn. But the surest way to rouse Doug’s suspicions and subject himself to a well-meaning, futile attempt at intervention was to let this go without protest.

“That can’t be right, Doug,” he said, making the argument he would have made had he not intended to press. “I feel the difference with the higher dose. I don’t know why the analysis says it isn’t working. I guarantee that it is.”

“Jason, old boy, you are in no condition to guarantee a damned thing. Not according to these readings. Trust me on this.” Doug was clearly enjoying himself. “The higher dose isn’t helping. It might even be making things worse. I’m decreasing your dosage of celtrex.”

Haggerty shook his head. When he recorded his press tonight, he’d have to

remember to include an apology to Doug. “Trying to counter my instinct to die?” he said, knowing that in his case, the instinct was too deeply ingrained to be negated.

Doug didn’t know that, though. He flashed Haggerty a wicked grin.

“God, I hope so.”

Chapter Two

GENERATION ZERO

Haggerty spent the rest of the day behind his desk checking paperwork from cases reviewed by other agents and officially closing the files, grateful that the boards were clear—he couldn't have handled another review. Maria-Christina Rosenberg's soft sobs, the bleak despair in Gustavo Nyuga's voice were still with him. His limit for handling emotional pain—his own and others'—was well and truly exceeded. He could no longer deal with Tanner's obscene glee while recounting the stats of someone who'd pressed. He would hand off any other cases that came in that day, even if it were Corbin who took them.

He reflected on the system and the part he played within it. Did presses really need to be inspected, anymore? When KV units were first introduced, attempts had been made to use them for illegal purposes—fraud, even murder—and review agents were necessary. Haggerty knew this from experience. From the start of his career, he had detected manipulations, including some missed by the initial reviewer, and was proud of his reputation as one of the best in the business. But there had been nothing of importance to detect in a very long time. Second reviews, standard in the initial decades, had been reduced to random samples, then done away with altogether. The kind of paperwork check in which Haggerty was currently engaged involved catching clerical errors or mistakes in protocol. Haggerty had begun to think that meticulously reviewing the

recording of every press to uncover criminal intent was a waste of time and resources. Surely a random review system provided whatever safeguards were needed to deter wrongdoers from interfering in a press.

But no one with the power to change the system was in any hurry to do so. The scrupulous reviews, the follow-up reports and analyses, were all expensive components of a lucrative process that benefited a number of parties. As long as there were insurance agencies trying to avoid paying more than they had to for as long as possible, and heirs trying to inherit more than their due, Haggerty's and his colleagues' skills would be required. Death by press might be government-sanctioned and BBI a subsidiary of the state's Department of Public Health, but it was also a business.

Haggerty felt drained when his shift finally ended. He glanced around the room, satisfied that it was ready for whomever the Dragon assigned to take his place. Walking down the familiar corridor a final time, he passed the portrait of T. J. Sovereign, a young man with pale skin, dark eyes, reddish-brown hair, and a look of perpetual sobriety—the inventor of the KV unit. Haggerty had always been curious about him, but found little in the official records beyond statistics—birth date, degrees, marriage, children, employment, and when he'd invented the black box. There was nothing about the man himself, why he'd invented it, how he'd felt about the way it was used. Haggerty knew Sovereign had been one of the original directors of BBI, but he'd resigned after a mere five years, and there was nothing about what happened to him after that. He might have retired and moved to Florida, or died peacefully in his sleep; he might even have used his own invention. It wasn't the most important mystery Haggerty had ever faced, and he was reconciled to leaving it unsolved. He nodded good-bye to old T. J. and made his way

toward the exit.

“Good night, Elsa,” he called.

She was still sorting data. “Good night, Jason,” she said, looking up briefly from her viewscreen and smiling. Haggerty took a last look as she turned back to the data streams. He was going home to a compartment that could easily house two families, while Elsa would tube up to the eightieth floor and a recharging cell which—because it was the size of a coffin, possessed no interior illumination yet provided Elsa with the electrical “sustenance” she needed—the reviewers jokingly referred to as a “womb-box.” Haggerty understood that—being a machine—Elsa didn’t find such restriction objectionable. But his gut insisted she ought to object to being so confined. As far as he was concerned, Elsa had more humanity in her circuit boards than many of his flesh-and-blood coworkers, clients, and neighbors.

He stood lingering too long. Elsa noticed.

“Is something wrong, Jason?” she asked.

He scratched the back of his neck. “Not really,” he said. “Everything checking out with the decedents’ records?”

“The Nyuga and Rosenberg remains have been turned over to the mortuary designated in their wills. Their affairs are properly concluded.”

“Good work,” Haggerty said. “Good night again, Elsa.”

“Good night, Jason. See you in the morning.”

She might at that, he reflected, if she were sent with the agent conducting his post-press. He wondered if he ought to leave instructions for the Dragon about his assistant’s Personal Loyalty Chip, supposedly removed long ago. It occurred to him that, if Elsa

were reassigned to Corbin, it would do the brat good to find out the hard way about the chip. Haggerty was mentally going through the short list of reviewers without android assistants, trying to figure the odds on Corbin upgrading to Elsa, when the green-eyed girl who had accosted him earlier once again blocked his path on the quad. Haggerty braced himself for a confrontation, expecting her to rail at him.

Instead, she merely said, “Why didn’t you have me arrested this morning?”

“If that’s what you want, I still can,” Haggerty said, grinning mildly, supposing that she was hoping for media coverage to help spread her message to the uninformed masses. *Splintered* masses would be closer to the mark. Though BBI had been incorporated nearly three quarters of a century before, many citizens, even those with CC status, were on the fence regarding the morality of the right to die. But the girl surprised him again.

“No,” she said, almost contritely. “I’m sorry I told you to cough and die.”

“It’s okay,” Haggerty said. “But what exactly does ‘cough and die’ mean?”

“It’s an old-style cracker term for when a computer program unexpectedly crashes,” she explained. “When there’s no apparent cause, like a virus or a fatal error. If a cracker *makes* a system crash, he’ll leave a message saying SCREAM AND DIE.”

“Is that the new lingo, ‘old-style cracker’?”

She smiled. “It’s mine, anyway.”

“Well, your apology’s accepted,” he said. “But you’ll have to find someone else to arrest you.”

“I saw you go in there twice today. You’re a button collector, aren’t you?”

The slang term always stuck, Haggerty thought ruefully. In the end he was always a button collector.

“I am,” he said. “The polite term is ‘post-press review agent’ or just ‘reviewer.’ ”

“I didn’t realize. I didn’t mean to insult you.”

“I don’t think many people remember our real title anymore,” Haggerty reassured her.

The girl wasn’t willing to let herself off the hook that easily. “I should have known. I’ve been researching the issue. I wouldn’t fight against something I hadn’t tried to understand first.”

She stopped. Haggerty studied her as she worried her lower lip, struggling with whatever it was she wanted to tell him. Her hair was sandy brown, her expressive green eyes set above high cheekbones in a classic oval face. Her light golden complexion and pleasantly rounded figure were striking changes from what was now fashionable. Even her height wasn’t quite up to par. But Haggerty found her more appealing than any of the women whose images flashed across viewscreens and e-covers everywhere. The thought startled him.

The girl finally began speaking again. “I know this is nervy of me, after what I did today, but would you be willing to talk to me for a few minutes?” she asked, anxiously tugging the straps of the backpack slung over her shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sort of in a hurry.”

“Please,” she whispered softly. “I have questions only someone like you can answer.”

Maybe it was the sincerity with which she asked, or that she was truly as young as she appeared. Or maybe it was that she looked as tired as Haggerty felt. Whatever the reason, he hesitated. BBI had strict rules. Confrontations with protesters were to be

avoided, and a private conversation with one was guaranteed to lead to confrontation. But the girl seemed harmless, and anyway he wouldn't be around long enough for disciplinary charges to be filed against him. He wasn't sure he knew anymore why people pressed, or why someone would make a career of reviewing those presses. Maybe *she* had answers for *him*.

"Sure," he said. "What's your name?"

"Regina," she said, visibly relieved.

* * *

He took her to the Java Joint, one of his favorite haunts, an unimposing little cafe not far from BBI headquarters to which he usually came alone. All white plasticine furniture, white tiled floors, and white painted walls, the Java Joint served the best coffee in NewVada—real coffee, made from real coffee beans. Haggerty often wondered where they got the beans from, but had never asked. During his parents' day, beans were imported from places like Costa Rica, Peru, or as far away as Indonesia, but that was before the sanctions had been put in place.

He lifted his cup, savoring the dark, bitter brew. "Tell me why you're protesting against BBI, Regina," he said. "Why do you think we're doing something wrong?"

Her green eyes narrowed. Now that she had him alone, she didn't seem to know what to do with him.

"Tell me honestly," he coaxed her. "I mean, besides the pro-life bit."

"You mean the Sixth Commandment," she said with a grin, taking the sting out of

the words. “ ‘Thou shalt not kill?’ ” She sipped her coffee, leaving a purple lipstick smudge on the rim of her cup, either not noticing or unimpressed by its quality. “I know that you wouldn’t do what you do if you didn’t believe it was right. But I believe that suicide is self-murder. It used to be a crime.”

“It still is, if you use any method other than the Kevorkian unit.” The image of his father’s body flashed painfully across Haggerty’s mind.

“I know that you’re not fitted for a button unless you’ve already passed a psysheval that proves you can make a rational decision about ending your own life,” she said. “But that just gives you a free pass to do away with yourself at any time, without really thinking it through. When they first made suicide legal, you had to give notice of intent and wait a few days, giving you a chance to reconsider. It’s not like that anymore.”

“That was a very different time. There were so many other ways you could die, and it was certain that you *would* die decades, maybe even a century or two, before natural causes will kill you today. Our lives are so long now, it’s inevitable that sometimes people have had enough of living. But you’re young; I can understand that it’s hard for you to accept that.”

She shook her head. “I’m always being told that I’m too young to understand things, too young to make an informed choice, too young to think for myself,” she said quietly.

“I don’t believe you’re too young to think for yourself, just too young to have the experience to see all the aspects of a given situation.”

“There are other sources of wisdom, other ways to learn than experience,” she said. She leaned forward, her eyes passionate. “Ever read the Bible?”

“Decades ago,” Haggerty said. “I prefer the Buddhist approach. Suicide is viewed as a negative act, because it ends life, but in extreme situations it’s acceptable, if it ends one’s suffering or the suffering of others, which only you can judge.”

“I’m not talking about judgment or religious philosophy, I’m talking about overlooked science.”

Haggerty arched a brow.

“Got a pen?” Regina asked.

Haggerty pulled one from a pocket and handed it to her. She undid her napkin and sketched a graph, on which she drew a line.

“This is Adam, Old Testament times. Genesis 5:5. The Bible says he lived to be nine-hundred-thirty years old.”

She drew another line.

“Over a thousand years later, Lamech lived to be seven-hundred-seventy-seven.”

“He would’ve wanted a button, I’m sure,” Haggerty joked.

Regina smiled. “Maybe I can shake up that certainty.”

He smiled back. “You’re welcome to try.”

“Methuselah lived to be nine-hundred-sixty-nine. The Bible doesn’t present these numbers as miraculous or extraordinary. They’re just stated. It was commonplace to live that long.”

“I don’t think those numbers are meant to be taken literally,” Haggerty said.

Regina nodded emphatically. “As many intellectuals and bagbiters have argued. They suggest that back then each month may have been misinterpreted as a year. Divide by twelve, that’d make Methuselah about eighty-one. That fits nicely, right?”

“Yes,” Haggerty said.

“Except that they also recorded that Cainan was seventy when his first son was born. Divide that by twelve and Cainan was about five years old when he became a father. Think that’s probable?”

“The Bible was compiled by different writers,” Haggerty countered. “Obviously, some used the twelve-month rule and some didn’t.”

“Convenient theory,” Regina said airily. “But wrong.” She drew a new line. “Noah lived to be nine-hundred-fifty. Then came the Flood. Noah built the Ark and God did some global sterilization. And before you say the Flood’s not accepted fact, ask an archeologist about the layers of clay deposits in what used to be Mesopotamia, or the universality of contemporaneous flood layers around the world.”

Haggerty raised his hands in playful acquiescence.

“This is where things drop off considerably,” she continued. “By two-thousand B.C., Abraham only lived to be one-hundred-seventy-five, Joseph one-ten.”

Haggerty finally caught her meaning. “You’re saying the Flood changed something major in our ecosystem.”

“It introduced things that were harmful to us by design,” Regina said. “Radiation. Bacteria. Viruses. Things that decreased what was once our natural lifespan. David only made it to seventy-one, Solomon to fifty-eight.”

Haggerty hadn’t heard this analysis before, and doubted Regina had come up with it on her own. She seemed like an enthusiastic student reciting her latest lessons. He’d bet she was regurgitating some more complex oration, but couldn’t imagine whose.

“Solomon’s lifespan was pretty near the mark for most of recorded history,” he

pointed out. “It wasn’t until the medical advances of the twentieth century that people began to live longer lives, and of course stem cell and telomere research resulted in our current longevity. How does the Biblical trend toward diminished lifespans fit in now?”

“Don’t you see,” Regina said earnestly, “all medical science has done is give us back what we had before. We’re *supposed* to live hundreds of years. Black buttons are just a quick cure for sadness or loneliness, cures that wouldn’t be needed if people gave themselves time to work through issues.”

Haggerty sipped his coffee, recalling post-press reviews on pushers who’d changed their minds. Abandoned attempts rarely exceeded fifteen minutes of tape, those mysterious “dark zones” where they’d planned to press and succumbed to survival instinct—or maybe an incoming call.

“Before black buttons, suicide wasn’t only illegal, it was tough to do, right?” Regina continued. “You had to plan it, find a weapon, pick a building to jump off. It was going to be painful and even messy. BBI took all that away. Someone having a bad day or just a bad moment can make a bad decision and—” She snapped her fingers like a challenge. “By making death so accessible and painless, your company’s hijacked the natural barriers most people need to really consider the choice to die. It gives them an instant, selfish escape from responsibility.”

“Responsibility to whom?” he asked.

“To God,” she said. “Would He have allowed us to find a way to lengthen our lives again if He didn’t want us to live those lives fully? And each other. Do people who press stop to think how their friends and families will feel about their deaths? Their children, their partners, their parents? Maybe you don’t believe you owe God or your family a

thing. But if you're really a Buddhist, don't you have a responsibility to *yourself* to learn as many lessons as you can in this lifetime?

"I say, live and love as long as you can. Make the best of whatever life hands you. Tired of your body? Save to get it retrofit. Bored with your job? Change careers or go back to school and learn something new. Get a hobby. Take a trip. Make new friends. Visit old friends. Whatever. Pressing's not the answer."

"Then what is?" Haggerty said flatly. He was damned sure that the pain that had driven him to decide to press couldn't be assuaged by a world cruise, a year's worth of tango lessons, or all the plastic money could buy. People who pressed had done what Regina said they should do. They'd lived as long as possible and when they couldn't continue, they had taken the legal, responsible, government-approved way to end their lives. Things seemed so clear to the young; the world was black and white. Haggerty knew that age brought a myriad of gray complexity, of living life and dying from it.

"There's another way to look at this," he said, thinking back to his conversation with Doug. "If God sent the Flood, then He intended the lifespan He initially gave us to be reduced. Maybe it's the way we've gone about lengthening our lives that's the problem, and the Kevorkian unit is really an instrument of Divine Will."

"That's close to blasphemy," Regina said dryly. "The Catholic Church still holds that suicide brings eternal damnation."

"You don't truly believe that if you press you'll end up in hell, do you?" Haggerty asked, unable to keep from smiling.

Regina looked away. Sensing he'd somehow touched a sore spot, Haggerty changed topics.

“Are you still in school, Regina?”

“I was,” she said, absentmindedly. “But I dropped out when my mom . . .”

There it was, the person she’d lost before she was prepared to let her go, the reason she was so opposed to KV units. Her mother must have pressed recently, and he’d just belittled her memory, smiled at what might be a tremendous, unresolved fear for her daughter.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “This must be a difficult time for you. But I can’t believe that, if there is a God, He’d sentence us to eternal hellfire for ending our own suffering. Is your father still around?”

“Never was,” she said. “I was an accident. Quality byproduct of a one-night-stand.”

Haggerty was surprised. Compulsory contraception at puberty insured that there were no accidents, no unplanned pregnancies. Unless . . .

“It didn’t happen here in the States,” she said, answering the unspoken question. “We emigrated when I was a kid.” Regina stared at the floor.

What was logic in the face of grief? Haggerty mused. Abandonment must have driven her to seek solace in religious doctrine.

“Why did you quit school, Regina?”

“I saw how useless it was,” she said. “You can’t be hired full-time before you’re thirty, and most people don’t get a real job until they’re fifty or older. Then, if you’re lucky, you get a job that you hate. Any post worth having is already filled by some oldster who’s been holding on to it for at least half a century.”

Haggerty inwardly winced, although she did not seem to be accusing him. Had his body reflected his true age, she probably would not be with him now.

“Unfortunately, the way your system works, only when someone presses does someone else get a good job.”

“Fair enough,” Haggerty admitted. “I can understand why a college degree seems like a waste of time, right now. But didn’t you just suggest we have a responsibility to ourselves to learn as many lessons as we can in this lifetime? To keep us from giving up and pressing? Trust me, you’re going to eventually realize that you need the competitive edge a degree gets you. My advice is to go back to school, when you’re ready of course. What were you studying by the way?”

“Programming, like all the other drones. My entire generation is gonna be nothing more than code monkeys and data farmers for yours. Unless you’re an athlete, or some trillionaire’s brat, ya know? I’m neither, so I’m learning all right. I’m learning to crack.” She grinned at him. “You’d arrest me if you saw some of the things I’ve already done.”

“I’m not a police officer,” he said mildly. “I’m just the button collector, remember?”

“You don’t see the people who use the buttons you collect, do you?”

Haggerty was confused by her question. “You mean, after they’re . . . ?”

She shook her head no. “I mean, you don’t meet them when they sign up?”

“I’m not a sales rep or a fitter,” he said. “I guess you might say I sort of meet them after they press.”

“You see their final moments, on recordings. How long are they?”

“Sometimes a few seconds, sometimes they go on for hours. The units have several shivabytes of memory. They warn you if you exceed capacity, then disarm.”

“Do you save them forever? Are they uploaded? Could I . . .”

“Crack into our system and retrieve one?”

Haggerty supposed she thought seeing a recording might help her understand why people pressed. But most likely she would see someone at the last reaches of despair, and he wasn't sure she'd see why the press seemed to be the best answer. It didn't matter. However good a cracker she was, the BBI safeguards were better.

“I doubt you'd be able to pull it off,” he told her. “And you'd be guilty of a felony for trying.”

“I'm not saying I would.”

“I'm not saying you did.”

Her lips curved upward. “I bet I could,” she said mischievously.

Haggerty laughed.

Suddenly Regina was on her knees on her chair, peering over Haggerty's shoulder. “Oh wow, an Indran,” she whispered.

He followed her gaze to the lithe individual making her way into the café. The woman's skin was the color of burnt sienna. Dark hair coiled down her back in long, wild ringlets. A simple shroud of white synthesilk neither hid nor revealed her sex. Pure East Indian descent—rare to see and unenhanced by plastiche—was obvious in half the woman's face. Above the eye on the other side, sloping up her forehead and over her ear, a clear prosthetic window revealed a circuit mesh of blinking lights and fiber-optic neural implants inside the woman's skull. Her presence visibly unsettled Haggerty.

“Do you know her?” Regina asked him.

“I've seen her here several times,” he said.

“You don't seem too happy about that.”

“I’m not,” Haggerty said bluntly.

In fact, the woman repulsed him. The Indranet was perhaps the only product, if such a vast information and communication infrastructure could be called a product, for which the US relied on a foreign provider. Indrans were the latest advance of the Net, and nearly two-thirds of India’s population was indentured to the United States in this manner. Though the sheer number of Indrans made them a common sight elsewhere in the world, the immigration freeze made their presence within the States uncommon. Many Americans resented them; the popular consensus was that finding an alternate resource might very well determine the future of the current executive branch of the government. Haggerty agreed that having to outsource the Net was detrimental to American interests, but he knew that few citizens would be willing to offer up portions of their own brainspace and endure the surgical procedures this Indian woman had undergone in order to underbid India and source the Net themselves.

The idea that Regina was at odds with KV technology but fascinated by this woman’s proudly displayed self-mutilation saddened him. It seemed contradictory. Perhaps Regina was too young to understand the root of the cultural divide on the subject. Though he’d been a teenager himself at the time, Haggerty remembered the riots that ensued when the American Net had been judged so corrupt it was condemned by the United Nations. Even looking back at those days from an adult perspective in his current profession, he still couldn’t quite understand why Net system-separation anxiety had fueled such an epidemic of depression and caused so many violent suicides. Personally, he’d never had use for the Net.

“She’s a bit on the abrasive side,” Haggerty finally told Regina, attempting to

downplay his disgust. “She thinks that being part of the Indranet has somehow exalted her. To hear her tell it—and I’ve heard her tell it more than once—she’s over a hundred but has never needed stem or telemor treatments because her elevated neural system is enough to sustain her.”

Regina eyed the woman thoughtfully. “And that’s abrasive because . . . ?”

“It’s not,” Haggerty admitted, sipping his coffee. “The abrasive part is that she believes that what she proudly calls her ‘enhancements’ gives her the ability to predict the future, and that this entitles her to let the other patrons know what they’re in for, whether or not they want to hear it. Only after she’s done haranguing them will she settle at a table and order herself a cup of coffee. But by then the damage has been done.”

“I want to hear my future!” Regina exclaimed, and waved the Indran over before Haggerty could interject. Having sternly admonished the woman on multiple occasions, he braced himself for unpleasantness.

But the Indran merely stepped to their booth and smiled. “What a beautiful couple,” she said in a soft, tektronically enhanced Indian voice.

As guilty as he felt about what had been done to her and millions of her countrymen in the name of his own countrymen’s convenience, Haggerty could not mask his revulsion. “We were just leaving,” he told her, hoping she’d move on to other game.

“So brash,” she said with a *tsk*, and turned to Regina. “He’s going to be very aggressive in bed, little one.”

Regina blushed, but seemed delighted by the Indran.

“She’s not going to have an opportunity to discover whether you’re right about that,” Haggerty said.

The Indran continued to stare intently at Regina. “You’ve got mothering all around you, little one,” she said gently. “Not too far off.”

“Really?” Regina beamed.

The Indran nodded, then turned to Haggerty, splaying her empty hands out, palms up.

Haggerty reached into his pocket and pulled out five credits. “This is to leave us alone,” he said.

She placed her palms together, refusing the offering, and stared into his eyes. He realized how dark hers were. Everything was the same shade of inky black; he couldn’t tell where the iris began and the pupil ended. She looked at him, unblinking, her brow furrowed in concentration, the organic and tektronic portions of her brain engaged in a chaotic dance he could not fathom.

“Misfortune coming toward you,” she said, saddening.

“Yeah?” he said.

She ignored his sarcastic tone, taking his hand and closing her eyes. Haggerty pulled his hand back. She regarded him gravely, her dark eyes boring into his, her tektronic array alive with flashing diodes. Haggerty felt uneasy.

“You have a difficult night coming,” she said. “Difficult, and more important than you realize, with more things ending than you plan, and more things beginning than you dare to dream. I see you inside a morgue, inside a hearse, and coming to rest inside of your family’s mausoleum,” she said.

Regina tensed. Haggerty attempted to wave the Indran away. But she wasn’t finished. She bent low to whisper in his ear.

“I see you pressing a button tonight and harming yourself, and I beg you to refrain.”

That caught Haggerty’s attention. Could the Indranet actually harbor some sort of intuitive supernatural transcendence after all?

He chastised himself. The Indran’s generalizations were tricks only the gullible would fall for. Given the prevalence of pressing, it was more than likely that she would be right at least some of the time. Though he had to admire her daring “tonight.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Haggerty said dismissively.

The Indran smiled. “Thanks and blessings on both of you,” she said, once more the colorful local eccentric, and moved on to the next booth.

Regina seemed upset.

“Come on,” Haggerty said. “You don’t believe in fortune-telling, do you?”

“No, but the Indranet’s gone quantum now and utilizes collective intuition. It can predict with an accuracy that tweaks me. And she’s a part of it.”

Haggerty had to admit that she’d tweaked him too. While he wasn’t an Indranet user like Regina, he knew enough about the evolution of technology to understand how rapidly it advanced. The neural transmitter that allowed him to link with Elsa was one of the most amazing pieces of technology he’d ever encountered, never mind that the science behind it had been evolving since the first thought-wave response computers were developed for paraplegics at the close of the twentieth century. But prophecy? Actually foretelling the future? That was tantamount to saying that God lived on the Indranet.

“I’ve spent a lot of time jacked in,” Regina continued. “I’ve watched the Net calibrate. It’s beautiful. But for her to tell you such awful things . . . It’s not right. What if it made you nervous and you did something crazy, and then something bad *did* happen to

you?”

“I’m not nervous,” he said. “And the histrionic ramblings of an Indranet server aren’t about to make me so. Forget her. Now tell me, where do you live?”

“As if you’d come to the Westside slums to visit,” she said lightly. “I live with four other girls in a pairplex. We share bunk beds. Last one in gets the flowmat on the floor and a pushpillow. It’s paradise.”

Haggerty grinned at her candor.

“I bet you have a nice place,” she teased. “With a tremendous view of the city and a god-awful big viewscreen.”

“Guilty as charged,” he said affably. He glanced at the faux antique clock on the wall a few feet away. They’d been at the Java Joint a bit longer than he’d realized. “Perhaps it’s time I got back to it. I don’t think I have any more answers for you, Regina, but it’s been a pleasure.”

“The pleasure doesn’t have to be over now, does it?” she protested, managing to look adorable and wounded at the same time.

Haggerty scratched the back of his neck. “It’s not that I don’t enjoy talking to you. And you’ve given me some things to think about,” he said.

“It’s still early,” she coaxed, “and our conversation was just getting interesting. Can’t we move on, maybe go have some fun someplace?”

Haggerty glanced at the clock again, considering the pros and cons. He could spare Regina a bit more time and still carry out his plan at midnight. He wondered why she was so determined to keep him with her. She wasn’t sending out signals that she was interested in pairing. Or was she working up the nerve? No need to worry about that.

Perhaps she hadn't yet got the answers she was looking for. He doubted she would, even if he thought he had them to give her, which he didn't. But there was no harm in indulging her a while longer.

"What do you have in mind?" he asked.

She brightened. "How about this. You've shown me one of your places, let me show you one of mine. There's this new club I heard about, but I didn't wanna crash it without a date."

"Date?"

"I didn't mean . . . ," She was clearly embarrassed. "I just wanna scope out this place my girlfriends rave about. And it'll give you a glimpse of my world."

Haggerty hesitated. Then: "Why not?" he said, as much to himself as to Regina. "What have I got to lose?"

* * *

Night was no cooler in NewVada than the day had been, and the climate control on the crowded beltway wasn't working. It was well past rush hour. While a number of Conscientious Citizens still went about their business, younger, somewhat rowdy JCs were in the majority, taking advantage of the time to legally belt around the city. Too many conversations were going on around them for Haggerty to continue his discussion with Regina, so he sweltered along until she tugged him toward the exit loop that ramped them off at Fremont Boulevard, on the edge of the Vegas Black Light District. When Haggerty queried Regina as to how far they were going, she grinned.

“It’s actually pretty far inside,” she said as they were deposited onto street level. “Not scared, are you? I promise I’ll protect you.”

Haggerty shook his head. BBI frowned upon agents openly visiting the area of the city with most of the unlicensed vice dealerships and the least surveillance. What happened in the Black Light typically stayed in the Black Light. The Triads, NewVada’s last organized crime leagues, had seen to that with regular police payoffs. Haggerty knew that the platform surveillance scanners prevalent throughout most of NewVada would record his arrival, but given his plans he was not worried about being called in for questioning simply for entering the area.

“Actually, I’m surprised you’d come to Vegas,” he told Regina.

“Because they used to call it Sin City?” she said. “I’m not planning to do anything particularly sinful.”

“Most folks on the Religious Right feel that even supporting the legitimate businesses in Vegas somehow furthers an immoral agenda.”

She surprised him again. “But I’m not on the Religious Right. The two words don’t automatically go together.”

“That wasn’t you at the Ban the Box rally today?”

“That’s the only issue I agree with them on. Doesn’t mean there are others. For instance, as far as I’m concerned, Conscientious Citizens can do whatever they like in their own bedrooms. Saint Paul said that love is of God, so how can human lawmakers dictate the way people express their God-given love for one another? And when it comes to teaching intelligent design and sex ed, I’m about as far left as you can get. Yes, I believe in God and have strong ideas about His will—for my life and for humankind. And

while I may not approve of everything that goes on in Vegas, I understand why people come here. As long as laws aren't being broken, if people need a place where they can party hard to find relief, where's the harm?"

Haggerty drew her attention to a huge pyramid fronted by a replica of the Sphinx. "That place used to be one of the most famous casinos in Vegas, back in the days when the worst you could lose here was your shirt and there were plenty of counselors from Gamblers Anonymous and the like to help minimize the damage. Now it's mainly a residence for people who never got off the strip. This place isn't as harmless as you seem to think. In the new casinos, damage seems to be the whole point.

"Things are difficult for a lot of NewVadans," Haggerty continued. "And the dicier casinos prey on that. People are lured with the promise of dramatically improving their lives by chance, but more often than not, they wind up being driven deeper into poverty. And poverty all too often equals death.

"I had a case here a few years back, involving an unlicensed casino where people could bet their lives for a mere one thousand credits. It's completely illegal, but that didn't stop it from happening. The man involved had been driven to take those odds, and he lost. The establishment called in his debt, and he was *encouraged* to press in front of a paying audience of so-called CCs, who enthusiastically cheered him on. My review led to some arrests—observers whose images were captured on the recording as well as the management of the casino—all of whom got off on a technicality. The man had made his bet of his own free will, and then pressed of his own free will. Aside from a fine for running an unlicensed gambling parlor—the cost of which could be made up in an hour or two of play—no one but the man who pressed and the family he left behind suffered

any losses.”

“So they got away with it,” Regina said glumly.

“I suppose so,” Haggerty admitted. “But that case and a few uncovered by other reviewers inspired a number of legislative actions statewide, and got our wonderful City Council off its collective butt long enough to pass an ordinance prohibiting organizing or profiting from a press done as public entertainment.”

“That’s something, at least.”

Gambling was not the only thing for which Vegas was known. Garish signs and glitzy holograph projections boasted an array of services in lurid, multicolored lights as they made their way down the old strip—CHANGE YOUR FACE WITH YOUR MOOD! 30 MINUTE MAKEOVERS! (a plastiche parlor); HIDDEN SEXCAMS INSIDE THE HOMES OF YOUR FAVORITE CELEBS! FREE PRIVATE INTERFACE! (a cybercafe)—outrageous promises of quicker and cheaper diversions than those offered by their legitimate counterparts outside the Black Light, and less picky about legalities. Shooting galleries guaranteed their drugs rivaled the quality of anything offered in Amsterdam, OR YOUR CREDITS BACK! As if their patrons were in any position to go to Holland and compare, then file a complaint at home that they’d been victims of false advertising.

Regina turned off the boulevard, into a dark alley.

Haggerty stopped in his tracks. “Where exactly are you taking me?” he called after her.

She trotted back. “It’s just a few doors down,” she said, playfully taking his hand. “I promise it’s safe.”

Haggerty considered tapping his com and putting a pulse out to Elsa, just in case, then decided not to. If Regina meant to kill and rob him, well death was what he wanted so why did it how matter? Haggerty relaxed.

Not far into the alley they came to a large hypersteel door set into a faux concrete wall, the only marking a sprawl of glowfitti above it that read ORPHANAGE. Barely audible retro-trance music blasted into a din as Regina pulled open the door. The sheer volume was enough to make Haggerty wish he'd declined her invitation. She tugged him down a poorly lit, crusty staircase lined with faux velvet.

The place was actually an oversized boiler room, packed with underage Junior Citizens—all beautiful and half-naked, their flesh and hair stained and stickjeweled in fantastic colors and patterns, their fists hammering up and down to the backbeat.

“Don’t worry,” Regina said into his ear, her small hand still cupped around his. “There’s nothing illegal here, no alcohol or drugs. Even if there were, no one could afford them. Don’t sweat your CC status.”

“That’s not what makes me sweat,” he said. If possible, the room was hotter than the night outside, where it had to be over a hundred degrees.

Regina led him across what felt like hard, coarse pavement—it was too dark and crowded to see the floor beneath them. Haggerty glimpsed something odd, set up beside the boilers. He craned his neck to get a better look as Regina pulled him along. There in an overcrowded basement in the middle of the desert, a young boy, his golden-orange hair streaked with red and spiked to resemble a bloody, exploding sun, stoked glowing embers with a hand trough in a makeshift forge, the kind ironworkers used when there was still iron to be worked!

Regina released him as they reached the dance floor, raising her arms and swaying to the music as she led him through the throng of JCs to the bar, such as it was. Looking at the crowd around them, Haggerty realized that a lot of the skinpainted designs weren't at all garish or bright. Many were black, white, or gray deathheads and gargoyles, worms and ravens, rather than Regina's fanciful iris. She leaned across the rough planks that served as the counter and spoke to a shirtless boy with sweat dripping down the spider painted in the center of the web inked across his chest. He reached below and extracted two plastic bottles from a cooler.

Regina turned to Haggerty and called, "Six creds."

Haggerty handed her the credits and accepted one of the bottles. The label read Cafblast, but the liquid inside was clear.

"It's just water," she told him. "They recycle the bottles themselves."

"Tap water?" he asked apprehensively.

"Yeah, don't be such a snob," she teased. "You're fully geno-immunized, I'm sure." Regina unsealed her bottle and took a long pull, then recapped it and licked stray drops of moisture from her lips. "None of us are, and we're drinking it."

Haggerty took a swig. Why should he care about pollutants? The taste was unpleasant, but it soothed the stifling heat, however momentarily.

"Whattaya think about this place?" Regina asked him.

"It's a dump," he said.

"Exactly," she said. "A dump in the worst part of town. And it's the only type of place Gen-Ohs can afford."

"Gen-Ohs?"

“Short for Generation Zero,” she said bitterly. “If you do the math on CC status achievement rates and factor population control curbs, it’s clear we’re gonna be the first American generation that has basically no chance of reproducing ourselves one-for-one.”

“And less than one is zero,” Haggerty said.

Regina saluted him with her water bottle and took another deep drink. “Add to that the fact that data farmers and code monkeys don’t earn a helluva lot, and you wind up with this.”

Haggerty recalled a recent viewcast about the aftermath of birth restrictions in China during the previous century. The circumstances, the narrator reported dispassionately, were of course vastly different in China from anything facing Junior Citizens in present-day America, and such horrors were unlikely to be repeated. Looking at the JCs around him, Haggerty wondered.

“Do you have kids?” Regina asked him. “Frightened they’re hanging out in places like this?”

“No,” Haggerty answered, scratching the back of his neck before finishing his water.

She gave him a speculative look, and he braced himself for another brazen interrogation. He was about to change the subject when a shrill cry of pain pierced through the roar of the music. His training as an official triggered; he cut a swath through the crowd to investigate, pushing kids out of his way until he arrived at the source of the scream, then stood still, shocked.

A girl several years Regina’s junior stood leaning next to the forge, hands splayed against the wall as the orange-haired boy pulled a smoldering branding iron away from

the bare flesh of her back, leaving her skin blackened. The acrid stink assaulted Haggerty. The girl moaned, looking behind her with glazed eyes at the boy with the brand, her face dripping sweat. There was no blood loss along the weltmarks left by the iron, the brand having at once caused and cauterized the wound.

Haggerty was about to step forward when Regina caught his arm, moving close and saying, “That’s blisterbranding. It’s legal. Didn’t you know how it was done?”

“Who’s next?” the boy said, pointing the brand at Haggerty. “How ’bout you, oldster?”

Kids queued up by the forge. Haggerty suddenly understood why none of the JCs had seemed distressed or tried to intercede. They regarded this spectacle as normal, unremarkable. That some legislative body had actually condoned such a practice appalled Haggerty. He took one more look at the girl’s burns, then pushed past Regina and headed for the bathroom he’d noted earlier.

He stood trembling at the sink, grasping the edges, his eyes swimming with silverfish, then twisted the ancient manual faucet marked COLD. A thin stream of lukewarm water trickled into the basin. He splashed water against his face, pale in the pockmarked mirror.

“You okay there?” a voice beside him said. It belonged to a well-dressed young man with ash-colored hair slicked back off his forehead, who held out a handkerchief to Haggerty.

Haggerty’s fingers brushed the edge. The handkerchief didn’t have the usual slick synthetic feel. It was soft, with a subtle sheen to the fabric. He took a closer look. It was silk, probably as costly as his viewscreen. He pulled his hand back.

“Go on, take it,” the young man urged. “There’s no paper in here and the jetdrier’s broken. Just trash it when you’re through. I’ve got a drawerful of ’em at home.”

The kid appeared whipped on Sky or some similar drug. Haggerty accepted the handkerchief. If the kid’s parents could afford to supply him with a drawer full of them, they weren’t apt to harangue him if he misplaced one. The silk felt cool and soothing against his face. “Thanks,” he said, clearing his mouth with tap water then wiping his face again.

In the mirror he saw the young man relieving himself at the urinal. His clothing set him apart from the other Orphanage patrons half-naked and sweating on the dance floor. He seemed cool, despite the heat of the place and the contemptuous opulence of a jacket made of real leather that ought to have been intolerably warm. If he was in any way uncomfortable, nothing in his manner betrayed it. Perhaps this could be attributed to the Sky, or some similar drug, that Haggerty detected in his eyes. Whatever the reason, he looked almost as out of place here as Haggerty felt.

“Wanna hear a funny story?” the kid asked when he’d finished his business.

“Sure,” Haggerty said.

“Once upon a time we were warned that Four Horsemen would deliver the Apocalypse.” He counted them on his fingers. “War, Famine, Pestilence, Death. We insulated ourselves from War, then did away with Famine and Pestilence, and that let us get the better of Death—we kicked his ass and made him our bitch. But you know what?”

“What?” Haggerty asked, throwing the ruined piece of silk into the bin.

“I think Death’s a sore loser, and he’s red as hell, and he’s about to get back on that horse—and make everyone *his* bitch,” the kid said as he washed his hands in the sink and

pulled another bit of silk from his back pocket to dry them with. “And you’ll be surprised at how happy we are to have him back.”

He smiled a wasted smile and waved as Haggerty pushed open the door and left the restroom. Haggerty considered the kid’s Sky-whipped fantasies as morbid as the death-themed skinpaintings sported by the other JCs and their horrific self-mutilations. He’d had enough of the Orphanage.

Fortunately, Regina was where he’d left her in the dimly lit room. She was talking to a too-thin girl around her own age, who was trying to hand her something. Regina shook her head no, refusing the offering. The other girl shrugged and headed toward a table a few yards away, where someone large and obviously male waited for her, but that was all Haggerty could discern. Regina turned and, seeing Haggerty, smiled, then frowned as she got a closer look at him.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“I’m leaving, you do as you wish,” he said, waving the question aside. “What was that all about?” he asked as she gripped his arm and ushered him back toward the stairs.

“Traci? She’s one of my roommates,” Regina explained. “Someone’s giving away tickets to the game tomorrow, and she thought I should have some plasticine strips.

“Free tickets to the most anticipated Superbowl in years?” Haggerty said skeptically. “They gotta be counterfeit.”

“Probably,” Regina agreed. “Since Gen-Ohs can’t afford the real thing, someone’s always producing counterfeits to one event or another. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don’t.”

They were passing the forge now, where a boy screamed to the kiss of burning

metal. Haggerty clenched his teeth and moved away quickly. Up the strip and onto the beltway, he said nothing. He breathed deeply, trying to get the stench of burned meat out of his lungs, to purge it from his mind. Regina respected his silence.

“Why would they brand themselves?” he finally asked.

Regina was thoughtful. “They’re fucked, and they know they’re fucked,” she began. “The odds are against them, for jobs, children, even happiness. That has a sort of numbing effect, ya know?”

Haggerty did know.

“And when you’re numb to the world, to yourself, and you’re not feeling anything—feeling nothing at all—you go to extremes. You hurt yourself until the pain rushes in and tells you you’re alive.” Her tone turned flippant. “Besides, it’s the latest in celebrity fashion. No more dangerous than getting pierced or tattooed.”

He looked at this pretty young stranger beside him who was part of a generation he clearly did not understand. He considered telling her that even oldsters with jobs they’d held for decades, not making way for younger folks, didn’t always have it easy. That not everyone gets a break making it possible to afford a huge compartment with a god-awful big viewscreen. That he had only been so rewarded after a long, difficult apprenticeship. But what was the point? She’d find out for herself.

“You haven’t—”

“No way,” she said. “Skinpainting like this”—she indicated her iris, stickjewels meant to represent dewdrops twinkling in the light—“can be removed with plastiche in less than an hour. But burns that require surgical procedures to repair? No, thanks. My body’s a temple.”

“Good,” he said, unaccountably relieved.

“But I have to say,” she went on wistfully, “when done right it looks really cool.”

They approached the intersection dividing West. “You’ll be safe here,” Haggerty said. “It was a pleasure—”

“Can I see your place?” she asked.

“Regina—”

He was wavering, and they both knew it.

“This is the only chance I’ll ever get to see how your half lives,” she cajoled. “I’ll stay five minutes and then you can send me home in a taxi. I promise.”

If you enjoyed reading the first two chapters of *The Killswitch Review*, and would like to follow Elsa and Review Agent Haggerty's story, please consider purchasing a copy from your local bookstore, amazon.com, Yard Dog Press, or click this link to buy it directly from our secure website.

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