

THE NEW REFUGE

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## ABSTRACT

*The Last Refuge* explores the life of a refugee, Cooper Garcia, left adrift after the death of his father amid the breakup of the United States. Forced to flee the newly-formed Republic of Texas, he makes his way to the Commonwealth of California in search of safety, finding the family he never knew. This novella examines modern American society, culture, and technology through a near-future lens by extrapolating current trends to consider their implications. Cooper wrestles with each of these forces as an outsider in a society he once belonged to in an attempt to gain some measure of control over his life.

## INTRODUCTION

Thinking back over the past two years of study in the Master's program, perhaps the single most significant change in my development as a creative writer has been a shift in my interest from writing short stories to creating longer works. To a certain extent, this shift has simply come about through practice and confidence in my own abilities as a writer. Prior to entering graduate school, the longest piece of writing I'd completed was fewer than twenty pages. Any project even approaching that length seemed like a daunting task. What seemed to be a focus on page count in undergraduate classes left me with a preference for creating works of a shorter length, ones that told a complete story in only a few pages, with a focus on quality over quantity.

Graduate school presented me with the opportunity to produce many projects of once-daunting length. However, the emphasis had now shifted to producing quality work that happened to be longer. As I wrote new stories in these classes, I felt better able to concentrate on letting a story play out through its natural arc to a conclusion which might require additional pages above the requested length. I began to worry less about an assignment's length and more about telling more complex stories, which generally translated to telling longer stories. Additionally, the simple fact of writing more often gave me practice that increased my confidence in my own abilities.

Despite some of those pieces being a bit longer than usual for me, they were all still short stories, even though I had the confidence to write something longer. However, the story I had in mind for my thesis was much longer and more involved. My original plan was for a novel-length re-telling of *The Odyssey* set in the same balkanized post-U.S. America as *The New Refuge*.

However, in consultation with my advisor, I decided to change that idea and play to my strengths by doing a series of short stories in the same setting that would explore different aspects of life in that world. Then, I quickly realized that the first story idea I developed would take up most of the projected collection, so rather than shorten that story to fit, I elected to expand it to novella length.

Initially I felt that with so much more room to tell the story I had far more freedom to explore multiple techniques. But I quickly discovered that was not the case. My original plan was to alternate chapters first showing the main character, Cooper Garcia, struggling to cope with an unfamiliar situation in his newly-adopted country, and the next chapter following a minor character through the same day. My thought was to use the minor character's actions to explain to the reader the situations Cooper didn't understand. I still like this idea, but I quickly realized that in using parallel chapters, I was essentially cutting the length of the story in half while raising the profile of minor characters whose actions were not central to the story, solely to explain certain aspects of the world. So I killed that darling and continued with a more straightforward story.

Even with that more traditional version, I discovered that I still had to pare the story down to bring it in at a manageable length. I originally envisioned a section of the story in which Cooper moved to California's Central Valley to work for DosSantos. Part of that plot would have showcased other ways technology can be used exploitatively in a more rural setting with a corporate agriculture backdrop. But I realized that this section would have required almost as much space to set up as the rest of the story already had, so I decided to focus more on Cooper's relationship with his family, and less on the implications of other technologies.

Because this story takes place in the near future, certain aspects of society have changed. One of the changes shattered a nation, while others slid into place with little fanfare. But to the characters in the story all of these changes are simple facts of life which they have already lived through, dealt with, and accepted already by the time the story occurs. Because of that, many of the changes are not things that come up in normal conversation. While the breakup of the United States could be an exception to that rule, due to its wide-ranging effects, most people, especially in California which was doing relatively well post-breakup, would prefer not to think about it and just move on with their lives. It would be unrealistic for any of these characters to randomly bring up that time when everyone ceded their last vestige of privacy to a literal all-seeing corporation.

So my challenge was how to tell the reader about these huge societal changes when most of the characters simply take them for granted, and to do it in a way that feels natural. The breakup of the United States was a large enough event that I felt that I could reasonably call it the proximate cause of the radical changes in Cooper's life. Because of that, it could be part of his internal monologue, an issue that he thinks about when making his decision to leave Texas, despite being ignorant of the reasons for the breakup. In fact, the reasons themselves are irrelevant to the story, and providing them would have been needless exposition, because the people in this post-breakup society are no longer dealing with the causes, they are merely dealing with the aftermath.

To introduce the smaller societal changes to the reader, I needed an excuse to introduce them to Cooper. If he is unaware of the changes, that implies that he is an outsider. And in this world, outsiders are foreigners, so Cooper became an immigrant, then a refugee. However, I was

still left with the problem of relating a good deal of exposition without boring the reader. I elected to spell many of these changes out through dialogue as Cooper encounters these changes, mostly in the form of technology, for the first time. Dialogue allowed me to show the matter-of-fact way that these technologies had been adopted and embraced in a short period of time, but also allowed for omissions because of that same attitude. As an example, a character who had begun wearing augmented reality glasses when they were new would be aware that the glasses were changing what was shown. Knowing this from the start, they would not consider that someone else might not have the same understanding. Because these characters already understand their world, outsiders, both Cooper and the reader, have to piece it together from what they are given.

With Cooper's character, I wanted to explore the idea of regaining control over his life after loss. To this end, Cooper's loss of his family, his rediscovery of one that seems perfect, and his subsequent rejection of them upon discovering they were too good to be true paralleled a similar arc that followed the loss of his country. Unfortunately, his method of gaining that control is based on what he learned from his mother who left, and not his father who stayed, so he perpetuates the cycle by running away even though the possibility exists that he could have done a lot of good by staying.

I also wanted to examine certain aspects of modern American society, culture, and technology by considering how they might exist in a world in which certain safeguards we rely on had been removed. American immigration policies over the past three years informed Chapter One. I extrapolated some of those policies along with stories of desperate people trying to do whatever they had to in order to get to the U.S. I made that chapter extremely dehumanizing to

echo some of the dehumanization that's increased with recent U.S. immigration policy, but it's not, I suspect, worse than the struggles some refugees have had to endure.

I also wanted to explore some of the implications of the Citizens United ruling in a society in which corporations have been granted even more power as legal people with the ability to use their overwhelming capital as free speech. I combined this idea with the explosion of always-connected personal devices controlled by those same corporations to show a state where government surveillance is unnecessary once we've volunteered to conduct our own surveillance on ourselves and others. This tech turned some people into commodities while completely devaluing others.

I have long been fascinated with speculative fiction. Examining the implications of real-world societal issues by thinking about how they will play out in the future lends itself well to shedding light on those issues, and can provoke consideration of new ways to think about them. The law of unintended consequences is right at home in the genre of speculative fiction. Most definitions of speculative fiction envision it as a catchall term that encompasses many subgenres across the science fiction/fantasy spectrum. However, I've always preferred a more narrow version that combines realism with science fiction and requires a link to the now, however tenuous that link might be, and does not break any of the known laws of science. In this version, the extrapolation of ideas to a conclusion based on realistic human behavior is key. This definition embraces stories set in the near future, like George Orwell's *1984*, but also some that may be set in the far future. Most of Isaac Asimov's science fiction stories would fall under this definition because he explicitly linked them together in the same future history. Most alternate history stories would meet this definition also, because the link to the now is actual history; only

the point of departure from the timeline is different. This is not to say that other genres cannot do similar work; Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series tackled many modern issues with fantasy satire. I simply prefer to extrapolate from reality.

With regard to this idea of extrapolating from the real world to tell a story, Robert A. Heinlein's *If This Goes On*— is the first book that I read which made me understand that he was warning against a real possibility. In the story, Heinlein posits a future United States which is taken over by a theocracy. At the time I first read it, likely some time in the late 1980s, I wasn't aware of any concerns of such a thing either at the time or in the past. But as I read more texts, by Heinlein and others, I understood that many authors had used their books as platforms to warn against oppression that they believed would happen. For me, however, *If This Goes On*— was my introduction to the concept, and the title phrase has stuck with me ever since as a way to begin extrapolating an idea to a conclusion as a warning.

Harry Turtledove has written a number of alternate history series that take a turning point in history and examine what might have happened if things had gone another way. George Washington and George III find a peaceful resolution to the Revolutionary War, or a message gets through instead of being lost, allowing the South to win the Civil War. But beyond the basic ideas that he proposes, what impresses me most about his books is the realistic characters he writes. The famous people of history are rarely his main characters. Instead, he focuses most often on people who have small jobs to do, people who are just trying to live their lives but who have a part to play in his story. Their reactions are human; they are usually not heroic. They would usually be happy if the current moment had passed them by. They don't have a sense that they will play a part in history because they are relative nobodies.

Isaac Asimov's future history has influenced my understanding of world building. Other authors have created similar projects, but I've always remembered Asimov's not only because it encompassed almost all of his stories, from his robot short stories about the Three Laws of Robotics, set mostly on Earth and in the Solar System, to his galaxy-spanning Foundation books that take place thousands of years in the future, but also because of the consistency that they showed. In dozens of texts set in this future history, I cannot recall any contradictions, although he did occasionally have to come up with a plausible explanation for a plot point when our understanding of science changed.

Isaac Asimov also influenced me with how he revealed and concealed information. These techniques were by no means his own, but Asimov was the one I learned them from. As part of his future history, due to the long stretches of time involved, he was aware that sometimes information could be unreliable, changed, or simply forgotten. Depending on how Asimov elected to handle it, this might be common information that the reader would know, but not the character, or the character might uncover it while keeping it concealed from the reader. Asimov might also plant a red herring that both the reader and character would fall for. But my favorite technique, one that I am perhaps overly fond of, is having the climax at the very end of the story, perhaps even in the last sentence. This requires the author to set up certain conditions earlier in the story to prepare the reader, but done correctly, the implications are left up to the reader to extrapolate and understand what happens after the words end.

Because *The New Refuge* is set in the near future, and because I wanted to examine how technology affects society, or at least how it can be used in nefarious ways, I thought about how current technologies are used and attempted to extrapolate from them. However, the only piece

of completely new technology that I came up with was the spiral escalator, at least in the way I envisioned it. Every other piece of technology in the story is merely an extrapolation of current technology that has been either refined or used in a different way than its intent. Smart contacts are in development, though they do not look the way I described them in the story. And augmented reality that lays pictures over a screen in real time also exists. I just envisioned a world in which it had been perfected, and tried to envision possible uses. The reason I am wary of introducing completely new technology into a story is because of another Isaac Asimov book, *The Currents of Space*. The “currents” of the title were essentially rivers of gases that flowed through space and formed the backbone of the major plot point. At the time of publication, these currents were an acceptable astronomical theory. However, it was later proven that they could not exist—space is hard vacuum. Later editions of the book include a disclaimer that notes his error without correcting it because it is integral to the plot.

I prefer to use dialogue where I can to advance the plot. I discover much more about who a character is once I begin writing dialogue for them. Their patterns of speech tend to flow from the traits I’ve envisioned them having, but often the voice that shows up on the page can surprise me. In keeping with the realism that I usually choose to employ in my stories, I like to use dialogue to show state of mind where I can. Sudden, single word answers from a previously-verbose character, or a paragraph-long run-on sentence seemingly from nowhere can show emotion better than a description can. I often avoid conventions of grammar in dialogue, and I often say the lines aloud to see if they sound stilted. A character whose dialogue flows well is more effective and gives the reader more information than a paragraph full of exposition in my eyes. My main characters often have a tendency to use profanity, possibly because I place them

in awkward or harrowing positions. I am continually surprised by this because both I and my secondary characters rarely use profanity.

One reason that I prefer to write speculative fiction is that parts of the story will often be unfamiliar to the reader, or at least the characters will be placed in peculiar situations. Because certain aspects will be strange, I do my best to write the characters' actions and motivations as realistically as possible to ensure a suspension of disbelief. A character acting realistically in a strange situation can allow the reader to consider the character's motivations and question the ways this situation might apply in real life. The unfamiliarity can allow both the author and the reader to focus on the characters and the very human situations they find themselves in. When an awful thing happens to a character in modern-day New York City, it's the type of thing the reader has seen before, and so they already have possible reasons for the event in their minds, simply from having seen similar stories. Perhaps the character was somewhere they shouldn't have been, maybe it was just a mugging, maybe this or that. But if the familiarity of place or setting is removed, then so are the easy answers, and the reader has to look deeper into the story to find understanding. Or so I like to think.

*The New Refuge* is the longest piece of fiction I have written yet, and what I have learned in writing it is that I have not completed this on my own. No one writes in a vacuum, and this thesis has been directly or indirectly influenced not only by the authors I referenced above, but by teachers and other students. Other genres of literature that I've read in my classes have given me different perspectives to consider, and new ways to think about how I write. I have learned writing techniques in workshops not only by having my own successes and failures examined by

other students, but also by being able to see how they succeeded or failed. In short, my writing, like myself, has been and continues to be influenced by other writers.

## PROLOGUE

The harbor was full of jellyfish. They spread out below him, under the seawall, moving in time with the low waves that managed to make it this far into the harbor. Hundreds of full moons, all looking up at him and the real full moon. It seemed like an omen, but then, so did everything else these days. Why were there so many omens now, but none before the downfall of civilization? Why wasn't there more warning? He could tell he was starting to spiral back into depression, so he tried to head it off like his dad had taught him. Positive thoughts. Come up with something. OK, civilization didn't actually fall; it just felt like it most of the time with so many new countries who wouldn't talk to each other. That was positive, right? What else? The Republic of Texas was more stable than many of its neighbors, so he was safe . . . No, don't go down that road.

The jellyfish seemed to be weathering the non-apocalypse well. He wasn't sure if their appearance was a good or bad thing, or if the fall of civilization was responsible. Pollution had gotten worse, with so many places starting up their old coal plants again. "Just a stop-gap measure," the government said, or "just until normalcy returns," or "just until we get these new treaties worked out." They loved the word "just." And everything they said was a lie. How were they going to get treaties worked out when they were at war with most of their neighbors? Dad died on the front line of the Arkansan Action and still nothing changed. And that was another lie: they weren't "wars"; they were "skirmishes," "actions against terrorism," or "Freedom-Loving Texans Protecting Our Borders." Never were they "wars".

He noticed another lie coming around the corner a couple of blocks away. One of the press gangs the government said didn't exist, because press gangs weren't necessary, because the

Republic wasn't fighting any wars. But here came an armored car with a crowd of thugs looking for anyone who couldn't prove they shouldn't be drafted. He didn't think they'd spotted him yet, but there was no good place he could hide. Except maybe in a crowd of jellyfish. He eased himself down the slippery old stone steps, but hesitated when he got to the water. There were so many. He poked his head above the level of the steps. Yeah, they were still coming this way, and the stairs themselves offered no cover.

He had no family left, no friends, and now he was hiding in the water and risking getting stung to death so Texas didn't shanghai him. Not the worst day of his life, though. That honor still went to the day two months ago when his mom swallowed a pile of sleeping pills right after they buried his dad in a closed casket. Still, there only seemed to be bad days recently.

It was time to get out of Texas.

## ONE

“I gotta get outta here. We’re not supposed to be trapped like this. We’re all gonna end up in that box.”

I didn’t even know his name. He was clutching his knees and rocking back and forth in his seat next to me. He looked like he was in his mid-to-late teens, so a little younger than me, but not by much. It crossed my mind that his whole reaction was stereotypical and theatrical, much like how I remember myself overreacting, but that didn’t matter because he was about to get all of us killed.

“Would you calm the fuck down?” I realized how perfectly unhelpful that was while the words were leaving my mouth. I tried again. “Look, you’re safe. The body is in a cooler in the back of the bus. It’s sealed. Nothing’s going to happen to us as long as we stay calm until the bus gets to California.”

We were on a bus from El Paso to the California border. That used to mean maybe ten hours on a Greyhound with a stop for a meal somewhere in the middle of the trip, and even if the bus wasn’t great, everyone had a cushioned seat to themselves, even if you might have had to deal with a smelly neighbor. And it probably would have cost you a couple of hundred dollars.

No longer.

Instead, I had paid five thousand Texan Reals to get on a shitty old commuter bus, one of the long ones with the bend in the middle. And we were packed in there. I’m still not sure how many seats the bus had, but there were probably three or four people on the bus for each seat. “Standing room only” didn’t begin to describe it. Everyone was constantly moving, not from any particular altruism in offering their seat to someone else, although that did exist, but mainly

because those hard plastic seats played hell on your ass. Shifting from standing to sitting to leaning to any other possibility that would change your position was the only way to avoid the pain. The only difference between this bus and a cattle car was the huge windows that let us see the armed patrols that occasionally passed by.

The coyote, the head people smuggler, had explained it to us very bluntly. “The people of New Arizona are graciously allowing you to pass through their beautiful nation, but they don’t want any of you to pollute their portion of paradise. So none of you will leave the bus until we get to California, where there are people who will accept worthless pieces of humanity such as yourselves. If you attempt to get off the bus in New Arizona, you will be shot. By me. I don’t need the Zonans thinking we’re not obeying their laws as we transit their fine country, so if you jump off this bus, you’ll be dead before a patrol arrives.”

Oh, yeah. The body. The smugglers weren’t kidding when they said no one gets off. Someone had died about halfway through the trip, a few feet behind me. The smugglers pulled the bus over to the side of the road and waited. Maybe they called the Arizonans; I don’t know. But a patrol truck with a machine gun mounted on top pulled alongside about ten minutes later. I thought they were there to take the corpse, but no, they just kept the gun trained on the bus while the smuggler moved to the back to get the cooler ready. There wasn’t enough room, so the people behind me had to pass the body along through the bus. It took about an hour.

I’m glad I wasn’t back there, but at the same time, I wish I was. I feel guilty that I didn’t help, even though I know I couldn’t. The dead guy was older, and probably shouldn’t have made the trip, but I don’t know why he did. I don’t even know if he was traveling with anyone. A guy died ten feet away from me and it was so crowded that I couldn’t even tell if anyone in particular

was mourning him. Fuck, I should probably be more respectful of the dead than saying “dead guy.”

And what the hell does it say that there’s a cooler big enough for multiple bodies taking up space under the back bench seat? That’s an after-market addition; ain’t no bus manufacturer that sells a commuter bus with a corpse container as standard equipment. These assholes do this so often that they learned they have to have a body box, that it’s common for people to die during this trip, yet they still keep doing it.

I don’t even know which assholes I’m talking about, the smugglers or the fucking Zonans.

So, even as we were getting pretty close to California, after almost thirty hours on the bus, over roads full of unavoidable potholes that this new country had no interest in fixing, people were starting to crack. My new friend sitting next to me was freaking out about being in the same space as a dead body, but really, that was just his reaction to the bullshit we were all dealing with. I could see people getting visibly angry, but trying to hold themselves together, and some others openly crying, weeping even. That wasn’t a word I ever truly understood before I saw them heedlessly shedding tears, so lost in their own misery that they had no awareness of their tears. Am I broken that I’ve never cried like that? Not for my father, nor for my mother.

“We’re all gonna end up in that box.” My seatmate’s voice repeating that sentence brought me out of my trance. I think the only reason he hadn’t jumped off the bus yet was because there were too many people between him and the doors. But his shaking and muttering were creating a space around him that wasn’t there previously. People didn’t want to be near him when he broke.

We were in aisle-facing seats, and I wish I could have gotten him into a forward-facing window seat where he had no room to move, one where I could have been pressing him against the window and keeping him there. “No, look, everything’s gonna be cool. Hey, what’s your name? I’m Cooper.” I held out my hand in front of his face, hoping he’d take it.

It took him a moment to focus on my hand, and another before he understood why it was there. “Rafi,” he said as he grabbed my hand.

“Okay, Rafi, good to meet you.” I wanted to hold on to his hand, to give him some kind of connection, but the press of people made it too difficult. “So, why are you going to California?” I asked, as if this was just a normal trip that people would take, on a normal day, in a bus that they could leave whenever they wanted without the threat of being shot down for the crime of existing in a place others claimed.

“Uh . . .” Rafi seemed to be too locked into his own mental processes to switch gears that quickly, so I moved on.

“Well, me, I’m going because I used to live there when I was a kid. Yeah, I always wanted to go back sometime, and when I got this chance I just grabbed it.” That was technically true; my dad was stationed in California when I was a baby, but as far as I was concerned, the only thing I needed to know about it was that it wasn’t Texas. I just wanted to get Rafi out of his own head. “So why’d you say you were going there, Rafi?”

He actually looked at me this time! “My . . . I got a . . .” He didn’t seem to want to reveal anything, then he spit out, “I got family there.” He seemed to shrink a little when he said that for some reason, but I didn’t want his brain to start worrying about something that was just differently depressing, so I started babbling.

“Yeah, me too. I got an aunt up near San Fran, I think she’s some bigwig with Cornucopia. I’m going to see if she can get me a job with them. I want to work with computers, maybe VR design.” This was all completely untrue, and it looked like I was losing him with these lies, so I tried new ones. “But my grandma lives in L.A., and I’ll probably live with her for a while until I figure things out. She’s getting old, so I . . .

He wasn’t listening at all, so I tried using his name again. “Hey, Rafi. We’re getting really close to Cali now. Let’s check the signs to see how far it is. There’s gotta be one coming up soon.” I turned around to look out the window.

“The signs are all gone.” This was from a woman standing in the aisle.

“What?” I turned back.

“Yeah, I’ve been looking for a while now. There’ve been some signs that show how far some places are, but they never show California. I think some of them have had the bottom line cut off, like they don’t want anyone to know where the border is.”

I can’t blame her, even now. She was just giving out information. But I needed that hope to keep Rafi focused on something else. And he started getting really antsy when he heard her, rocking more, muttering under his breath, “keeping us here,” “going in circles,” and plenty of other things I couldn’t quite catch. I could tell he was looking for the door. I was desperately trying to come up with some way to bring his attention back to me.

“Oh, wait, I recognize this area.” There wasn’t a goddamn thing out there to recognize, even if I could have seen anything more than the tiny bit outside the window behind us. It was just flat, dry scrub with a straight line of pitted asphalt going through it. “Yeah, we used to come

through this way when I was a kid. We should be coming into California just after that next rise.” It looked to be maybe ten to twenty miles away, and I just hoped my lie was true.

Rafi perked up when I said that, and I feel like I held my breath the entire time it took to approach the rise. When we got there, “rise” was too strong a word, but we could catch glimpses ahead of yet another long stretch of road leading to yet another little rise. But someone who was standing closer to the front said, “Oh, I think that’s a town up there.”

“See, Rafi, there it is. We’re coming up to California. Almost there now. Just a little bit longer.” I ran through every stupid little statement like that I could think of, because I needed that town to be California for Rafi.

But it was just a crappy little Zona town that didn’t care about me or Rafi.

And we hit a massive pothole as we passed it.

Those who were standing were thrown to our side of the bus, and almost no one was left standing. Everyone who was sitting on the left side had at least one person on top of them. Everyone but Rafi, because they had all been trying to get away from him.

He saw a clear space and leapt, climbing and clawing his way over people on his way to forcing open the door.

I wasn’t even able to scream before I heard the shot.

We were again stopped for about an hour, and this time I forced myself to the back of the bus to help with his body.

When the bus started again, I was standing. I couldn’t see much from where I was in the back, but as we topped the next rise, we all felt the sigh of relief that moved down the aisle as the sign was revealed.

President Lexicon Welcomes You to the California Commonwealth.

I wept.

## TWO

The air was different in California; I'd swear to it. Maybe it was just the fact that I wasn't in Texas anymore, or that I wasn't breathing the nasty stench of New Arizona filtered through the lungs and digestive systems of hundreds of frightened people in a cramped bus, but stepping off that bus onto Californian soil, I felt that I was able to breathe for the first time since . . . I don't know; maybe since before my dad died? I felt like I was entering Paradise.

Realistically, this section of California looked just like the spot where the coyote killed Rafi—flat, dusty, scrub desert. But there were a few major differences that made it glorious. The Californians were welcoming us into their country. That immediately set them apart from the people in the last two countries I'd been in. And we were a raggedy-looking bunch, not least because we'd just spent days crammed into something only slightly better than a cattle car. I'd gotten out of Texas as my first choice; I was young, healthy, and just running away from being conscripted, but after that trip I wasn't fit for social interaction. And there were many on that bus who were far worse off than me, people who I'm pretty sure had done everything they could to stay in Texas until long after all of their resources had run out, people for whom this trip was their last hope. We were a group that in an earlier life I'd go out of my way to avoid, and I felt a bit ashamed at that. But now there were people coming out of the Refugee Resettlement Center to welcome us.

And that Refugee Resettlement Center was gorgeous. It looked entirely out of place as a desert outpost of civilization. Every movie I'd ever seen told me that a building in this location should not look how this one did. A building here should be described with words like "squat," "flimsy," "dirty." "Ramshackle" might make an appearance, or "forgotten." But this, this was

architecture. The morning sun reflecting on the vast amounts of glass that made up the Center made it difficult to look at. These soaring walls of glass seemed to break laws of physics because they seemed to be the only construction material, and looked to have been swirled into creation by a master glassblower. They formed a bubble that kept the forces of nature at bay to protect the oasis contained inside.

Someone had decided that we refugees were important enough to create this magnificent structure in the middle of a desert. This was California telling us that we mattered, that they accepted us. This was “Give us your poor, huddled masses,” or whatever that quote was. This was home.

It was also vaguely unsettling.

But the most important difference was simply that I was allowed to freely walk on this particular section of flat, dusty, scrub desert with very little chance of getting shot just for having done so. Texas had stopped pretending to guarantee that right a few months ago, and I don't think New Arizona ever had it. I looked back at the bus, now almost empty, the stragglers mostly those who were already sick or frail before the trip, now worse because of it. Still, they had survived, and it looked to me that even the woman who was probably the worst off, who was being loaded onto a stretcher as she was carried off the bus, looked happy to have made the trip.

My eyes moved up of their own accord, to study the coyote in his perch on the roof of the bus. The roof was clear except for his cupola; letting us refugees store baggage up there might spoil his field of fire. He looked arrogant, constantly surveying the crowd that had just gotten off of his bus, though this was no longer his country. The brim of his hat was pulled low against the early-morning sun. His rifle lay across his lap, the click of the safety as he flicked it off and on

loud in my ears, though that may have been my imagination. A drone hovered above him, keeping station in case it was needed. Was it armed also? Probably. But we were safely in California now, and he had no power here. I opened my mouth to shout at him, for his inhumanity, to dress him down for murdering someone who never got the chance to be my friend.

“You—”

And stopped. Did the coyote really have no power here? He had the power of the gun sitting on his lap, and if he decided he would shoot me, would anyone stop him? He seemed secure in his fortress on the bus’s roof. Has he shot others here, just before they gained their freedom? He might even have diplomatic immunity, but if not, he could just escape over the border. It was only a few yards away. My freedom to exist might not have been as secure as I thought. I pulled my gaze from the bus, and moved toward the rest of the crowd going toward the refugee center.

A voice began to make itself heard over the murmur of the crowd as I got closer to the entrance. It reminded me of ones I used to hear in commercials, all bright and peppy and welcoming. I hadn’t heard or seen anything bright or peppy for a few years. Not since . . . The voice was coming from a young woman at the entrance of the center. Whatever the technology was that they were using to project her voice, it was pretty seamless. From about fifty yards away, the voice sounded like it was coming directly from her, not from a hidden speaker, but even as I got closer, it didn’t get louder. It was as if she was speaking only to me.

“Welcome to the California Commonwealth! We’re all so happy you decided to make California your new home! Please come inside the Center so we can assist you with this transition.”

She sounded sincere, even though she must give the same speech every day. She was dressed in some kind of white jumpsuit that looked to be the uniform of the center, judging by the few other people I could see inside as I got closer. She was probably a few years older than me, and she obviously had her life together. I mean, look at her and look at me. She was clean and pretty and she belonged here and someone like her would never be interested in someone like me, not that I thought she should be, I mean that went without saying because I was standing here a dirty, ragged, homeless guy while she was practically running this place and she was probably going to take one look at me and decide to send me right back to Texas or maybe just over the border into New Zona and let them play target practice with me before they finally killed me because who could want anyone like me who had no skills and no family and nothing that made me worthwhile.

My panic attacks sometimes came out of nowhere. That’s not entirely true. They were the direct result of stress, but I was usually strangely calm in moments of high stress. Last night on the bus, in a completely awful situation that had people dying around us and Rafi losing his battle with a panic attack, I was fine. My attacks, when they happened, generally came once the pressure was easing, when I had a little bit of time to think, when the worst was over but my mind could give itself over to worry about all the things that could have happened. In those times, usually the best I could do was just force myself to stay still and wait it out. But I really didn’t have that luxury while waiting outside a refugee center. I did not want the California

Commonwealth's first impression of me to be that of someone who was mentally ill, because I had no idea what would happen then. The problem was that this was something I could only think about obliquely, lest the panicked part of my mind hear it.

Yes, I am aware that this sounds like a different version of sanity than some people are used to. It's how my mind works.

I needed to have other parts of my mind try to get a word in edgewise around the panicked part. I tried:

Asshole: "Would you just calm the fuck down and get in there with all the other dirty, raggedy refugees?" This approach worked on my panic just as well as it did on Rafi.

Calm: "Hey, everything is going to be fine. We've come this far and California is going to be great." No. My panic doesn't respond to calm.

Logic: "Look at all these other people from the bus. Most of them are in worse shape than we are but California is still welcoming us." Nope. My panic didn't want to hear it.

Spite: "You want to get back on the bus with the coyote that killed Rafi? You want him to drive us all the way back to Texas, laughing at us the whole way, just itching for a chance to shoot us? Do you want him to win?"

Ah, spite. I can deal with spite. It warmed the cockles of my anger and broke me out of my panic attack. Just in time, too.

I still had my eyes closed, shaking off the attack, when I felt a touch on my shoulder. "Sir? Are you feeling all right?"

Brown eyes. I couldn't tell the color before because she was too far away, but now there were a pair of stunning brown eyes that were suddenly my entire world view. I'd never

understood the term “tunnel vision” until that moment. Her kind brown eyes almost made me forget my panic attack, except that I still needed to explain to her why I’d been standing still with my eyes closed in the middle of a parking lot. But one nice thing about Texas, it taught me how to lie.

“I’m sorry. I was just taking a moment to say a prayer of thanks for the welcome that California has given us.”

This is the kind of lie that, in Texas, has gotten me free food in the past. I guess there’s just something about a prayerful kid that puts Texans into a generous mood. I wasn’t sure how it would play in California.

“Oh, that’s so sweet,” her voice said. “Oh, that’s so sweet,” her hand on my shoulder said. “Oh,” her eyes said, failing to finish the sentence because of the tiniest bit of condescension that had tainted the chocolate. The reaction of her eyes wouldn’t have been as bad if I had been sincerely praying, because then we would just have been two people with different religious convictions. But somehow, the fact that she had believed my lie, but didn’t care for it, made it even worse. I understood then that I had sabotaged a beautiful imaginary relationship with my own falsehood.

My mood was swinging from panic through lust and despair in seconds to mirth as my mind tried to settle down and cope with my new reality of being a refugee. The mirth was because I could suddenly see how I had built her up solely on the basis of her eyes while she was just being professional to someone who needed help. I had become a stereotype, and that realization made me absurdly happy. The stereotype meant that many other guys had done the same thing before, that I had fucked up in a way that made me similar to other people. And

despite being a shitty way to look at someone who was only doing her job, it meant that I was normal. All of which led to that absurd happiness, because I hadn't felt normal for years.

She kept her hand on my shoulder, this time using it to steer me toward the Center. "Your name's Cooper, right? I'm Vanessa, and we're glad you've decided that California's the place for you. We Californians decided that we would help out any who were affected by the Schism, even long after . . ."

My mind wandered as Vanessa started droning on about politics and how great Californians were for their stance on refugees. I started wondering when exactly the last time I'd felt normal was, because I was suddenly feeling very connected with my fellow human beings, all of whom probably had issues just like me. It would have been long before Texas got my dad killed because they thought Arkansas would be easy pickings, leaving me alone in a country that wasn't mine. It was definitely before we moved to Texas because of my dad's PCS orders. That's Permanent Change of Station for those who don't remember how the old U.S. Army used to work; military orders that sent us from Maryland to Texas. Back when the U.S. still existed. We got to Texas just before the United States went their separate ways, and I still wish we had gone almost anywhere else. "One place is as good as another," my dad used to say. He might have said "One place is as fucked up as another," and it would have meant the same thing, and been more accurate. I think I might have felt normal in Louisiana—that was before Maryland—but only before Mom walked out. So I didn't feel normal when Mom walked out, or through the whole time Dad was trying to divorce her, which was a bitch since he couldn't even find her, and we had to move to Maryland during that whole process, which meant he needed to restart it there, and once the divorce was finally settled I still didn't feel normal, and the move to

Texas was just awful and I didn't want to be there and Texas killed my dad and left me alone with no one.

So, yeah, it's been about ten years since I've felt normal. And with how fucked the world is now, I never expected to feel that way again.

Vanessa called it the Schism. Probably official California government terminology. I've heard other terms, some better, some worse, to describe how a nation imploded in a matter of weeks without a shot being fired. My favorite is the Great Untying, because it links to the idea of calling the ruins of what once was the Untied States, which many people hate. But the people who hate it are usually those who were adults at the time of the Great Untying and could have done something to prevent it. I was a kid, and didn't know what the hell was going on. So now, my petty little revenge on those who failed us was referring to the Great Untying and the Untied States whenever someone used a pretentious term for it. A term like Schism.

I didn't really want to mess with Vanessa, with whom I'd shared such an intense one-sided love affair, but there was the petty principle of the thing to consider, so I interrupted her while she was saying something about how great the current president was for California. "Hey, Vanessa, the Great Untying looks like it's worked out pretty well for Cali. How'd you guys pull that off?"

"I'm sorry, the great what?"

"The Great Untying. You know, when the U.S. became the Untied States. When all the states decided to tell their neighbors to fuck off. When Congress decided yet again that they didn't need to worry about the constitution after the president—" I realized I was becoming a little too invested in a question that was just supposed to be a petty snipe at pretension, and

getting worked up like that would blow my awesome feeling of normalcy, so I cleverly summed up, “The, uh, that whole time frame.”

More of that condescension showed up in the set of Vanessa’s eyes, though the rest of her expression didn’t change. She must have worked in customer service for a long time, so she didn’t bother to acknowledge that she knew I was trolling her. Or trying to, at any rate. She just pulled out the party line. “Yes, Californians stuck together during ‘that whole time frame,’” giving me a sharply pointed look here, “and that has helped us weather the crisis better than many other places have. We’ve also welcomed many of our neighbors, like you, who haven’t been as fortunate.” Maybe I was wrong about the whole customer service thing—those jabs weren’t entirely customer friendly.

Still, her tone made me take a mental step back and think about my situation. One, I was a refugee, literally a beggar whose entire worldly possessions were in my backpack or on my body, and I had been acting like I was just coming here on vacation. I had had an unconscious mindset that somehow, everything would go back to how it was, that Haha, just kidding, let’s open these borders back up and tie the states together again and end the wars and Mom and Dad would get back together. So it was finally starting to sink in that none of that was going to happen. And two, I had been actively pissing off the person who was paid to be nice to me and who held my future in her hands. Shit. Time to make nice.

“Hey, Vanessa, I just wanted to say how much I appreciate what you’re doing here. I mean, not just you. All of California.” Fuck, I was not good at this. Deep breath. “Look, my life has been pretty crappy since the—” Swallow your pride, shithead. “Since the Schism. Texas is actively drafting anyone who can move, The New Zonans don’t want me, and I have nowhere

else to go. So California being so welcoming really means a lot. And I'm sorry I was acting like a little shit."

Vanessa eyed me for a moment as if deciding whether to believe me, then shrugged. "Eh, we get all kinds coming through here. You're not the worst by a long shot. When President Lexicon decided we were going to let almost anyone in, I didn't think it was a great decision, but I did my job. And it's worked out pretty well. We're more prosperous than ever."

"That's an unusual name. Why'd he decide to do that?"

She looked confused. "Why did who decide what?"

"Sorry, is President Lexicon a woman? My bad, I just assumed. Why did she decide to let everyone in?"

"Oh, no, no. Look, I forget that you guys aren't used to California's government. I don't usually go to your orientation sessions. No, President Lexicon is the corporation. Lexicon, Incorporated."

"Okay, so, what, the CEO of Lexicon is also the President of California? Isn't that a conflict of interest?"

"Look, I'm not explaining this well. Where to begin?" She closed her eyes, and took a breath. "All right, a while ago, before your whole Untying deal, the courts decided that corporations were people. Or at least had all the same rights. And when California was looking to set up its own government, some companies sued for the right to run for office, saying they were being denied their rights as persons. The arguments went back and forth, but basically, the corporations had a lot of money, so they won the case."

I was having difficulty processing that idea. “So, how does that work? I mean, why would anyone vote to have a corporation be the president?”

“Well, because they get paid. Look, right after the Schism, Cornucopia got elected, because they were able to bounce back quicker. They had a good bit of cash available, so they were able to give their employees a bonus for their votes, and a lot of other people jumped on their bandwagon. But Lexicon was more diversified, so, even though it took us longer to get back up to speed, by the next election, we won.”

“They pay people for their votes? You can’t do that!” They weren’t supposed to do that, right? That was corruption, or something. I was sure I remembered something from school about that. My last couple of years of high school were pretty hit or miss right after things went bad, and the couple of college classes I’d been able to take weren’t the best, but I’d liked history. I paid attention. There was no way that was legal. And one other thing. “What do you mean ‘we won?’ Who’s ‘we?’”

“‘We’ is Lexicon. I work for them. Them and the government. And, yeah, you get paid for voting. Money is free speech. It was part of the same court ruling.” She looked up as someone from inside the center called for her. “Look, I really need to get you inside. Don’t worry about the government. It’s just different than what you’re used to, but it works, and you’re safe here. That’s all you really need to know for now. Go have a seat, and someone will come interview you.”

I realized that we were standing outside the entrance to the center, and had been for a few minutes. I took a breath. I’d been letting myself get agitated again, and I wanted to get that mirth

back. I liked that feeling. “Okay, Vanessa. I’ll give it a shot. I’ll try to keep an open mind. Thanks for talking to me.”

There was no door, only a circular opening. Or at least I couldn’t tell how they would close the entrance. However they did it, the temperature was more comfortable inside as soon as I crossed the threshold. I could see some of the refugees who needed medical help being taken to a screened-off area of the Center, but the rest of them, or us, I guess, were sitting in an open waiting area, many of them eating sandwiches from a table in the middle. As crowded as the bus had been, plenty of chairs were available. Some of the refugees were already being interviewed at desks scattered throughout the center.

I laid my backpack on the floor by a chair, realizing that I hadn’t let it go in over two days. Even on the bus, when it was too awkward to have on my back, I’d been clutching it like a security blanket. Everything I owned was in there, and if I was being honest, it was mostly worthless. The clothes I had were cheap and worn, and even the couple of thousand Texan Reals cleverly hidden in a sock wouldn’t be worth anything here. Still, I had found mirth, and that wasn’t bad.

The chair was amazing. Gravity did not exist while I sat there. It felt as if California was trying to relieve me of all of my burdens, and I was just fine with that. I was suddenly aware that I was bone tired from the past two days, and I noticed more than a few other people sleeping in the chairs. Even though California had a fucked up system of government, the interaction with Vanessa had put me in a great mood. I may have been reading too much into those eyes of hers, but as I drifted off to sleep in that chair, I knew that California would be great for me.

I did not wonder until much later how exactly she knew my name.

## THREE

“Sir? Sir?”

Someone was tapping on my shoulder. I woke with a start, almost falling out of the chair, confused at being comfortable for the first time in a while. “Wha—” I was still incoherent from sleeping, and my mind was slow to process. I got my eyes to work, and there was a guy a few years older than me standing there, wearing a jumpsuit like Vanessa had.

He spoke when he saw my eyes focus. “Hi there, sir. I’m sorry to wake you. I’m Shawn. I know you’ve been through a lot just to get here, but it’s time for your interview.”

“Okay, sure, yeah. Gimme a sec.” I stood up and stretched. There were still plenty of us refugees sprawled in chairs sleeping or just waiting, but not as many as I expected. Looking around at the number of desks where they seemed to be conducting interviews, it still didn’t add up to the number of us that were on the bus. “Hey, where is everybody?”

“The people who have completed their interviews have moved on to other areas of the Center. They’re likely getting new clothing, or doing some aptitude testing, or perhaps just taking a nap in one of our guest apartments.”

“Okay, you’ve lost me. This place is made of glass, and I can see pretty much all of it. There ain’t no apartments.”

He laughed, then covered his mouth and looked around as if checking to see if his boss had heard. “I’m sorry for laughing, sir. I often forget that our first-time visitors aren’t aware of the rest of the Center. No, we actually have extensive areas of the Center that are underground, mostly to protect against the heat, but also because this kind of glass is really expensive. Or at least, that’s what they tell me. I’m no architect.” He pointed over where I’d seen them taking the

sick people earlier. “If you look over toward our triage area, that low railing is actually the top of an escalator. Right next to it is a lift, but most people who are able prefer to take the escalator. You’ll see when we’re done with your interview. Come on over, and don’t forget your bag.” He walked over to the office area.

I grabbed my bag off the floor where it had fallen when I jerked awake, and looked around to see if I’d left anything else. That was wishful thinking, a holdover from better times when I’d had other things. I followed Shawn through the desks, and sat down opposite him when he got to his.

“Okay, it’s Cooper, right?” I nodded. “All right, Cooper, the point of this interview is for us, that is, California as a whole, the Center, and me, to get an idea about how we can best help you. We’ll talk about you, your background, why you decided to come to California, what kinds of skills you have, all sorts of things that will help us integrate you into California. It can be a long process, not just the interview, but the testing and other things, so if you need a break, just let us know.”

“Sure thing, Shawn. Fire away.”

“All right, Cooper. What’s your full name?”

“Cooper Garcia.”

“Are you kidding me? Hey maybe we’re related, somewhere along the way. Shawn Garcia, at your service.” He stretched out his hand for me to shake. As I did, he commented, “I don’t think anybody would guess either one of us were Garcias, though.”

I knew exactly what he was getting at. Neither of us looked Mexican, and neither of us looked like the other. I was white, and Shawn was black. I laughed. “Yeah, my dad was born in

Mexico, but apparently I look a lot more like my mom. You've probably gotten the same questions I have over the years."

"Yeah, I bet I have. My favorite is, 'Oh, you don't look like . . . ,' and then they just trail off."

I chuckled. "Or then there's the, 'Are you sure' ones. It's like, 'Yeah, lady, I'm sure of my actual name.'"

"And those are just the polite ones."

"Yeah." We both went silent as the conversation was starting to get a little too serious. "Hey, why don't we move away from the topic of casual racism and talk about something happier, like how I'm a homeless refugee hoping to find a place to live?"

"Good idea. Let's move on." Shawn looked at the notes on his desk's screen. "How old are you? When's your birthday?"

"Twenty. And February 13th."

"Where were you born?"

"California, actually. Oceanside."

"Oceanside, that's over near San Diego, right? Oh, Marines?"

I chuckled. "That's kind of a yes and no answer. I was born in the Camp Pendleton hospital, but my dad was actually an Army recruiter stationed in Oceanside."

"Ah, all right. So is that why you decided to come to California?"

Damn. I knew I was going to have to talk about this, but now that it was on top of me, I wasn't quite ready. I decided to go with only the truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.

"My dad told me that California might take me in because I was born here, yeah. I mean, I don't

have any other ties here, but then I don't have any ties anywhere. Hey, Shawn, not to change the subject," although I was trying to change the subject, "do you just have a really good memory or something? Because you're not writing any of this down."

"I don't have to, Cooper. I'm accessing the interview app now, so my AI knows to place your answers into their proper locations. Have a look." He swirled his hand on the top of the wooden-looking desk, which first lit up as the computer screen I didn't realize it was, then rotated to let me see the form with my information already partly filled in. It must have already accessed the hospital's records because right before I tore my eyes away from it, I noticed it had my mother's information. "Once you're settled, you'll get an offer from one of the companies based on your skills, and they'll provide you with an AI."

"Cooper, I suspect this next question is going to bring up some issues for you, but I have to ask. Tell me about your parents. Where are they now?"

I let out an involuntary sigh as I sat back in my chair. That change of subject hadn't helped like I'd hoped. "You're not wrong, Shawn, but it's okay. I just haven't had to talk about this in . . . well, I guess I haven't ever had to talk about it. My dad's dead. He was killed when Texas decided they needed to invade Arkansas for some trumped-up reason. They called it the Arkansas Action up until my dad died."

"Oh, Cooper, I'm sorry. Are you saying he was in the unit that—"

I cut him off. I didn't need to make him struggle to find the right words to describe the indescribable. "Yeah, my dad was part of the massacre that Texas decided to call the Arkansas Atrocity afterwards. As if Texas hadn't been grabbing land from all of its neighbors. Don't get me wrong; I'm not happy with Arkansas either. You'll notice I'm not seeking asylum there. But

Arkansas didn't send my dad into a situation with no support and no—" I took a deep breath. "My dad is dead, and he didn't want me to get drafted into a war that isn't mine. Texas was never my home. The United States was, but with that gone, California is maybe the closest thing I've got."

"And what about your mother?"

"As far as I'm concerned, my mother is dead too. She abandoned us when I was a baby and went back to her family. I've seen pictures, but she left before I even had a memory of her. He never talked about her much, but one of the few times he got drunk he told me that her parents didn't want their darling little daughter marrying a w—" No. I wouldn't even think the word.

"That must have been hard for him to raise you, being in the Army."

"Yeah, that's why he stayed as a recruiter. He sometimes had crazy long hours, but he wasn't going off to fight some war. He was able to keep me with him. Until Texas decided they just needed bodies to fight."

"Cooper, I'm sorry about having to bring up so many bad memories. There aren't many questions left, but how about we move you to the next phase, maybe get you something to eat? If I need anything else answered, I can find you. Come on, I'll show you around downstairs." He stood up and waited for me, then led me over to the escalator that he'd mentioned before.

But it was not what I was expecting. It was a spiral escalator, as if someone had taken an old spiral staircase, replaced the steps with translucent glass, and made it move. Each step was about eight feet wide, but the inside half was blocked by a glass barrier, leaving enough room for

two people. The up escalator exited right next to the down, so seen from the colonnade below, they made twin 40- or 50-foot-tall glass spirals extending into the ceiling.

Three floors had walkways that extended out to the escalators to allow entrance and exit from the side. These floors looked like some hotels I'd stayed at with my dad as a kid, with long balconies that overlooked a large interior space, and doors to the rooms off of the balconies. I assume the escalators came down in the middle of the colonnade, because I couldn't even tell how far it extended in both directions.

The ground floor looked like a shopping district in a quaint little town. There were restaurants with seating in the colonnade, clothing stores, theaters, groceries. I never did see all of them. But the most amazing thing to me was that the walls and ceiling all showed an outdoor scene that made me think of Italy in the spring, though I'd never been there. Spaces between stores looked like alleys that led to farmland. Trees in orchards rustled in the distance and people on ladders picked fruit off of them. Clouds moved across the sky, birds chirped, and a warm breeze kept the air moving. I'd learn later that the sun tracked across the sky, and at night the stars came out.

The entire Refugee Resettlement Center was an engineering marvel, and they had built it underground in the middle of a desert.

As we rode down, I could tell Shawn was amused at the look of amazement on my face. "What would you like for breakfast, Cooper? Or, if you'd like, it's late enough that you could get lunch if you wanted."

“Um.” I was having trouble finding words while I watched the scenery spiral by. “I think you’ll have to ask me again when we’re at the bottom. Shawn, this place is crazy. Why would they build all this just for refugees?”

“Well, there’s a bunch of reasons, but it’s not all because of you guys. As I understand it, the first building here was because some engineers wanted an out-of-the-way place to try out some new materials, like the glass that the top building is made of, and some other things that helped them build this whole underground part. This is before the Schism. Then after, when they were looking around for a place for the Center, this was available.”

We stepped off at the bottom, and wandered towards some restaurants. “But we get a lot more refugees than you’d expect. This location doesn’t just deal with ones like you guys that came across the border right here. We process them from all over SoCal. Most other places, after they cross the border, they get transported to us first. There’s a Loop station down the end there, or they come in by bus, depending. Pretty much, if you come across the border from Mexico, New Zona, or Southern Nevada, you end up here. And you’ll all be here for a few days, so there’s usually a couple of thousand people here.”

“What’s a Loop station?”

“Hyperloop, like a superfast subway. We’ve got a line that goes to LAX; anyone that comes into LA or San Diego comes to us by the Hyperloop. Everyone else gets bussed.”

The aromas from the restaurants here—part of me wanted to think of the ground floor as “down here,” but the total immersion wouldn’t let me—made my stomach growl, and I realized I had far more of a desire for food than answers. “Okay, Shawn, I think I want breakfast. Maybe an omelette?”

“Sure, there’s a good place down here. Gabriella’s. I have to get back to work, but while you’re here, you can order what you need, and it’ll be covered. Within reason. We almost never have problems with people abusing the system. Just don’t go overboard. Three meals, the occasional snack, some new clothes, toiletries, stuff like that. You’re in the system now, so people’s AIs will recognize you, and they’ll know that you’re covered for it.”

“Okay, Shawn. Thanks.”

“Not a problem Cooper. We Garcias have to stick together. Oh, when you’re done with your breakfast, go down to the hotel over there and get a room. They’ll let you know when and where to go for your aptitude testing. I’ll see you around, cousin.” He headed back to the escalator.

That word, “cousin,” hit me hard. I had no family anymore. There might be people who were related to my mother; probably were, in fact. But they were not family. My dad had been an only child, rare for a Catholic family from Mexico, but my dad thought that his mother had had some complications when he was born. He wasn’t sure, though; no one ever talked about it. That side of my family was a closed book. So hearing someone call me “cousin,” even as a joke, felt wrong, but I wanted it to feel right.

I wanted to just curl up somewhere, and with the way I was feeling, I really considered just going to the hotel without eating, but I wasn’t sure when I’d have to do those tests, so I went in and got an omelette. It was good. I think it was, anyway. I don’t really remember it. I was thinking about family, and Shawn not being my cousin, and how I wouldn’t want any of the people who might call me family anyway, because the only person who was ever family was my dad but he was deal like Rafi who had family here but I hadn’t even asked what his last name

was and I couldn't even find his family to say how sorry I was that he got shot just for wanting out like I just wanted out of Texas and I felt so goddamned guilty.

This wasn't a panic attack like the other one was. This was just all kinds of feelings that I didn't entirely understand washing over me while I watched like a bystander to my own life. That part of me that was watching kept the rest of me just sitting there, looking at my plate with the omelette on it.

Omelettes were never my breakfast of choice. Or at least they didn't used to be. Dad liked omelettes. Waffles, now they were my favorite. Still frozen right out of the box that dad hated but still bought because he knew I loved them. Or popped out of the toaster so hot that I had to hot potato them onto the plate while dad yelled at me to be careful I didn't burn myself, but they were cool by the time I cut them and poured syrup on them. Or fresh-made with a 3-minute timer in one of those hotels we stayed in when we moved because dad changed duty stations.

I haven't had a waffle in a while. Omelettes were my favorite.

I looked up after thinking about waffles and realized I was feeling normal again. Or at least normalish. I finished the omelette and looked for a clothing store before realizing that I really needed a shower before I tried on clothes. I hoped everyone else also figured that out before going shopping.

The lobby to the hotel was surprisingly quaint. After the grand entrance to the huge colonnade by way of a miracle of technology, I'd expected something similar with the hotel. But in keeping with the charming Italian town motif, the hotel had only a counter with a single clerk in the lobby. She walked out to meet me as I entered. She was much shorter than I was, which I

immediately forgot because of how she filled the room with her presence. “Ah, Mr. Garcia! Wonderful to see you! I am Sophia, the manager at the New Beginnings Hotel. You will be in room 232; just follow this hall to the stairs or the elevator, and go up one floor. You will not need a key; the system will recognize you. You have your own room. It is small, but I think it will suit your needs. It includes a shower and a bath if you’d like to freshen up. I don’t mean to generalize, but if you will be looking for additional clothing, many young people like yourself seem to be fond of either the A Teen or the Shirt Shack, both of which are a few stores down to the right as you leave. And once you are rested and refreshed and ready to begin your skill evaluations, please let me or one of my colleagues at the desk know. Do you have any questions for me?”

Once again, I found myself at a loss for words. “Sorry, Sophia, right?” She nodded. “Okay, that was a lot of information in a short amount of time, and I’m a little overwhelmed. Let me think. You gave me my room number. You answered the questions I didn’t know I would have about the key and the bath. I do want to get some clothes and you’ve answered that. Honestly, you’ve answered the questions I would have had even before I thought of them. How’d you do that?”

“Well, Mr. Garcia, I see a lot of people come through here. While their individual stories are all different, as a whole they are often lost and confused. I’ve found they usually feel a bit more confident if they can just get a handle on what the next few hours will bring. So I lay all of that out right up front.”

“You’re not wrong about that. I do feel strangely better knowing that when I go look for clothes, there’s a couple of places I can try without even having to ask. But these aptitude tests—”

She interrupted me, which did not feel rude coming from her. “I really do prefer the term ‘skill evaluations’ because these are not tests you can study for. They just look at your strengths and weaknesses. No one aces everything. For instance, I got high marks in mathematics and dealing with people, but my mechanical aptitude was awful. Anyway, you can take them any time. They are automated, so you can do them even in the middle of the night if you want. Just check in with us when you’re ready.”

“I want to have more questions, but I can’t think of any right now. Thank you for understanding what we’re going through, Sophia. It means a lot.”

“Mr. Garcia, I won’t ever claim that I understand what you’re going through. But I do try to empathize, and I hope I’ve made things at least a little better.” She went back behind the counter, leaving me to go find my room.

There was no doorknob, but the door opened at my touch, and the lights came on as I entered. The room was small, but the water in the shower was hot, and there was as much as I wanted. The towels were fluffy, and they were warm to the touch from the rack they were sitting in. The bed was also small, but the spread on it was clean and crisp, and I considered taking a nap to test how comfortable the bed was, but I couldn’t. I really needed at least one more change of clothes, preferably two. I’d have to see about getting laundry done once I came back to the hotel.

I flopped down onto the bed, just for a second, just to check. It felt so nice. I couldn't choose. "Ugh, I wish my clothes would just show up!"

"Sir, would you like to order clothing?"

I fell out of bed trying to wrap the towel around me because I still wasn't dressed. Damn high tech doors. I hadn't even heard anyone come in.

But no one had. No one was there. "Hello? Who said that?"

"Sir, I am the AI for the hotel. Would you like to order clothing?"

Oh, good, the hotel is talking to me. "Uh, yeah. You can do that?"

"Yes, sir." As the AI said that, the wall opposite the door lit up with a listing of stores and clothing available. "With the scans of your body, I have prepared a selection of clothing that should fit you based on the inventories of nearby stores."

Okay, so the hotel did a scan of my naked body. That's not invasive at all. I decided to shrug that off. It was only a computer. "Okay, let's see what you've got."

The AI changed the display on the wall to show half of the view as me on a Tuscan patio. But this did not look like a crappy computer-generated me. This was like looking in a mirror, except the me I was looking at was wearing clothes, not a towel. And that me was breathing, and slightly shifting its weight, and looking at me. Then I understood that the AI had it set up so that the virtual me moved as I did so that I could see how the clothing fit.

"Sir, the clothing that you see is the first item on each of the lists. You may swipe with your hand on the display to change an item, or you may tell me to do so. However, if I may, this shirt in particular seems ill-fitting."

"You're right, hotel. Switch it to the next one."

And so it was that I spent the next two hours shopping with an AI and playing dress up on a virtual me. I'd never cared for shopping; it had always felt tedious to be taking on and off a dozen pieces of clothing just to find one that fit. But this was quick. All the tediousness was gone. I could see how this could be addictive. The clothing wasn't even particularly fashionable. I figured out a few minutes in that these were probably clothes that didn't sell for whatever reason, and had been donated. They were being given to refugees, after all. They were awful, ugly pieces that I wouldn't have wanted to pay a dime for, and they were wonderful. This shopping, even though it was a new, high-tech version for me, still made me feel like I was suddenly back to doing something normal for a while, and I didn't want it to end.

Eventually, I chose a few pieces, some underwear and socks, and a pair of shoes. The AI suggested I also get a small rolling suitcase to carry it all, since I would be leaving in a day or two. It was all scheduled to arrive in a few hours, but by then I was noticing I was feeling pretty tired. My earlier nap in the chair hadn't been nearly enough rest. I didn't want to oversleep and miss the delivery though, so I was considering just staying awake when I realized that I was being stupid. "Hey, hotel, can you wake me up when the delivery gets here, or at, let's say 7 PM?"

"Yes, sir, I will do that. Would you care for the lights to be off, or would you prefer a nighttime scene while you sleep?"

"Oh, you mean like make the display be a window or something? Sure, let's try that." I was expecting the back wall where I'd done the shopping to change. I wasn't expecting all the walls and the ceiling to change, but suddenly my bed was in the middle of a meadow at night, and it was a little too disconcerting. "Change it back!"

Everything blinked back to the bland, milky-white walls and ceiling with unfocused lighting, and I realized there was no artwork on the walls, or any other kind of decoration. It wasn't needed.

“Sir, you seem stressed. Do you need assistance?”

“No, thanks, hotel. I'm fine. I just wasn't expecting everything to disappear. How about we try gradually dimming the lights and only having the ceiling show stars. I think I would enjoy that for now.”

“Yes, sir. I will use a mountain scene that many people seem to find soothing.”

I climbed under the covers as the room darkened and the stars came out. As my eyes adjusted, I could tell there were far more stars than I was used to ever seeing. They were bright enough that I could see faint clouds moving.

My dad would have loved this. We had only ever gone camping once, and it had rained then, but that wasn't what I was thinking about. My dad had loved gadgets and tech and video games, and especially sharing them with me. This whole immersive setup would have been so much fun for him. We could have played games, or even just done some virtual traveling to all those places he was never able to go.

Somehow, I didn't cry myself to sleep, but I drifted off wondering why he had been so adamant that we not come back to California when everything had gone bad.

## FOUR

It began as a whisper of soft music with an ever-more-insistent voice laid over it. “Sir. Mr. Garcia. Cooper. It is time to wake up, sir. Your shipment has arrived.”

I struggled out of sleep, vague images of buses and stars clearing out of my mind as I did. “Okay, thanks, hotel. Let me just get a robe.” I stepped over to the bathroom to don the robe, then told the hotel AI, “Okay, you can let them in.”

I was feeling pretty good about how well I was adapting to all this new tech I was coming into contact with.

And then some kind of creepy robotic spider-dog skittered into my room.

I jumped on the bed, feeling like a sitcom housewife from the last century as I did. “What the hell is that thing?”

“Sir, that is the autonomous delivery service with your clothing and suitcase. You seem stressed. Do you need assistance?”

Sure enough, the robot was trailing a little wagon with a couple of boxes on it. It came in far enough for the robot and wagon to turn around, then stopped.

“Goddamnit. No, hotel, I don’t need assistance.” I climbed down off of the bed, keeping an eye on the robot the whole time. It stood on four weirdly bent legs about two feet high, with a skinny little body in between them.

Perhaps a full minute passed as I looked at the thing before the hotel said, “Sir, if you wish to accept the shipment, you must remove the packages from the cart for the robot to acknowledge delivery.”

“Ah, right.” I gingerly stepped over to the cart, giving the robot as wide a berth as I could, which only amounted to a few feet because the room was so small. I felt entirely idiotic as I did, but I was unable to make myself get any closer than absolutely necessary. The robot, of course, stayed mechanically still as I removed the boxes, placing one on the small table and the other on the bed.

Then as soon as I placed the second box on the bed, the spider-thing’s legs started flailing as it gathered momentum to pull the wagon out of my room. The door closed behind it as it cleared the threshold.

Well, I was fully awake now. I wasn’t especially hungry yet, even though it had been a while since I’d had that late breakfast, so I decided to try to knock out the skills assessment before I ate. There was someone new at the front desk, but he was just as prepared as Sophia had been. “Mr. Garcia, welcome! Are you ready to take your placement tests?”

Damn. ‘Placement tests’ sounded even worse than ‘aptitude tests.’ I doubted Sophia would be happy with his choice of phrasing. “Yeah, I am. So how do we do this?”

“Just come with me and we’ll get you set up.” He took me down another hallway past a few doors, then one opened as he approached. “If you’ll just step in here, the test will show up on the table. It’s pretty self-explanatory, and it should take you about three hours.” He moved to the side to let me enter, then left.

All in all, I thought I preferred Sophia’s approach better. But it didn’t matter much. I just wanted to get this done. The table brightened as I sat, and then outlined a pretty standard multiple-choice test. The only difference between this and others I’d taken as a kid was the tech aspect.

It didn't seem like California was in the business of sending refugees away because of a bad score on this test, so I wasn't worried about the score I might get. I simply answered the questions as they came with whatever my first thought was. Just under three hours later, the screen told me I was done.

And I was done, at least for the day. It had been a long one, and once again, I needed food and sleep. I thought about trying to order room service, but I didn't want another one of those creepy robots in my room again, so I went out into the colonnade. It was more crowded than it had been earlier in the day. I guessed that a lot of the refugees had been doing the same things I had, and now were eating, drinking, and being merry. I just wanted eating and sleeping, and I found a little hot dog stand that was perfect for getting the first one out of the way quickly. I ordered a simple hot dog with onions, and ate it on the way back to my room.

As the lights in my room came on, the AI said, "Sir, now that your skills evaluation is complete, you are scheduled to meet with Shawn Garcia at 8:30 AM tomorrow to discuss your assignment."

"Okay, thanks, hotel." I was glad I was so tired, because I knew if I stayed awake that I would just start dwelling on the unknown possibilities of what would happen to me now that my future was in someone else's hands. I wasn't concerned while I was taking the test, but now that I had no control, the unknown was beginning to worry me again. I could feel the panic beginning to rise again, and fought to head it off. "Hotel, give me that night scene with the stars again, please."

I climbed into bed in my clothes and struggled for sleep. Just think about camping and dad and family and robots . . . My mind swirled as sleep overtook me.

I woke with a few hours to kill the next morning, but without the same issues about my future as the previous night. The future just seemed inevitable now that someone else had control of it, and I would just deal with whatever came my way once it happened.

I ate an omelette from the same place as yesterday, and it was just as good. Then I moved to a coffee shop and sat and watched people in the colonnade for a while. I amused myself by trying to tell who people were. It was easy to tell the other refugees. They were dressed like me. I recognized their slightly-dazed expressions from the mirror. They were also the only ones who ever had children in here, but that detail felt like cheating. But guessing their backgrounds now that they'd been treated like people for a while was more difficult. Families seemed like they were clinging together, as if it were proof against being separated at the last minute. Those who were single, like me, watched those families with varying degrees of sadness, and some even with anger.

That game was beginning to hit too close to home, so I started looking at the people who worked here. If they worked in the colonnade, their clothes were better-looking and more fashionable than what I'd been able to get yesterday, so they were easy. Plus, for whatever reason, they all seemed to be talking to themselves. But the employees from the part of the Center upstairs (upescalator?), now they were a challenge. They all wore the same white jumpsuit, but as I looked closer, I noticed they had accents in red, green, or blue. I studied them for a while, trying to figure out if they represented some kind of rank or position. The colors didn't seem to correlate to age, or gender, or any other metric I could think of.

In the midst of my confusion, I heard, "Good morning, cousin!" Shawn had arrived. "Mind if I sit with you until it's time for us to have our meeting?"

“Sure, Shawn. I’m not doing anything until then.”

Even though I had been studying the jumpsuits for a while, it took me a moment to realize that Shawn’s had none of the colored accents most of the others had. Once he sat down after getting his coffee, I asked him, “So why doesn’t your uniform have the same colored pattern so many of the others do?”

Shawn looked down at his sleeve, holding it up for me to see. “It’s because I’m apolitical. The people with the colored uniforms are all political appointees. Red is DosSantos, green is Cornucopia, blue is Lexicon.”

“How is that political? Those are companies, not governments.”

“But the corporations are basically political parties. And this is a government job. There are always political appointees somewhere in that mix.”

“Okay, I’m just going to take your word for it. I don’t get it, but that’s nothing new. So then why isn’t everyone wearing Lexicon blue? Lexicon’s in charge, right?”

Shawn laughed, “Welcome to California politics! The short answer is I don’t know. The longer answer is the system just kinda evolved like that. I get paid by the government of California. The politicals get paid by their corps. When I first started working here there were a lot more of us apoliticals. The only politicals were the Top Three and a few staff they each had. Why all three of the corps had representatives here is the ‘I don’t know’ part. I can only guess it was some agreement to not let things get out of hand. But slowly more and more of the billets here were assigned to the corps, until now there’s just a few of us left. I’ll probably have to pick one of the corporations if I want to hang around.

“But, no more time for chatting. You and I have to head upstairs. You can bring your coffee.”

I brought my coffee. I had a feeling I was going to need it. “Sorry, Shawn, but the whole system is just so weird. I don’t know that I’ll ever understand it.”

“Well, you know what they say, if it’s stupid but it works, it ain’t stupid. This works for us. Somehow. Plus, you’ll get used to it. It’s amazing how quickly people will adapt to things when you tell them it’s normal.”

The escalator was just as gorgeous going up as it was coming down. Once we sat down at Shawn’s desk, he said, “Okay, now that I’m officially at work, I can access your file. You didn’t waste any time yesterday did you? There are still plenty of people from your bus who haven’t taken the aptitude test yet. That’s why you got your appointment so early this morning. Too early, in fact. The Top Three aren’t done deliberating yet.” He pointed to a conference room where I could see Vanessa, another woman, and a man having what looked like a shouting match.

“Hold on, Shawn. Are you saying that Vanessa is the big boss lady here? Damn, I thought she was just the welcoming committee.”

“Yes, ‘Vanessa’ is numero uno of the Top Three. I, however, will be calling her Ms. Yang, like I never do, as she is my boss’s boss’s boss, and never has any contact with me. Also, because I like my job, and I don’t want to remind her that I exist.”

He continued, “Anyway, it looks like you scored pretty good in computational areas, so I’d bet either Lexicon or Cornucopia will probably be offering you a gig where they’ll train you to do, well, something high-tech, probably. Honestly, you’re pretty lucky with that. DS is always

looking for warm bodies to harvest whatever's in season, and their quota's pretty high right now. Your bus is probably going to be half empty."

"Hey, Shawn, we can't do anything until those three make their decision, right?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I don't expect it to take too long. I'm pretty sure they're only arguing to save face. I could probably tell you exactly which people are going to get offers from which corp and save everyone a lot of time."

"Okay, so, since we have time to kill, could you tell me about someone else who was on my bus? The guy's name was Rafi, but I don't know his last name."

"Sorry, cousin, the system won't let me access other refugee information while I'm with a client, unless they were family. But you can probably just leave him a message at the hotel downstairs. They'll see that he gets it."

"No, no, I can't. He's dead. He got shot. He . . . he tried to run." I couldn't say anymore. Nothing else would come out.

Shawn's face dropped, and he reached over to grab my arm. "Oh, Cooper, I'm sorry. We heard that someone on the bus got shot by the New Zonans, but I didn't know you knew him. Were you guys friends?"

Did I have any friends? "Yeah. Or, no, I don't know. I only knew him for about an hour. But the New Zonans didn't shoot him. The coyote on the bus did."

"Oh. The story we got was that a New Zonan patrol shot him when you guys were stopped for a piss break, and he panicked and ran."

"Oh, God, the lies just keep coming. Is that what that asshole told you guys? That bus only stopped for gas and dead bodies. We weren't allowed off under pain of death. Our piss

breaks were a shitter in the back that just opened onto the road.” I was openly crying now, but trying not to. “Fuck. Look, Shawn, I don’t want to relive this. I just wanted to know if you had any information on him. He said he had family here. Maybe someone was waiting for him, or he was sponsored. I don’t know, anything like that. I just wanted to maybe tell his family that I knew him, and tell them how he died.”

“All right, Cooper. I’ll check.” I grabbed my coffee cup to warm up my hands that were suddenly cold and waited for Shawn to check the system for any information about Rafi.

But he didn’t. He just sat back staring into space and mumbling to himself. I was stunned. I was angry, and confused, and—I suddenly realized that there was no way Shawn was just suddenly ignoring my pain, and that there had to be something happening here that I just didn’t understand. I forced myself to sit still and watch. Shawn’s lips were barely moving, and I could hear that he was making faint sounds in his throat, but they sounded like gibberish. His eyes were darting back and forth, but he didn’t seem to be looking at anything in particular. Eventually, he leaned forward and focused on me.

I jumped in before he could speak. “Shawn, I’m trying not to freak out, but what the fuck was that? All you did was stare into space and mumble.”

“I was talking to my AI to get some information on your friend. Here, look at my eyes.” He leaned forward and opened his eyes wide. “See, contacts. They’re my display.” He mumbled something and his irises turned yellow, then back to brown. “And the seeds in my ears,” he turned his head to show me molded earphones that matched his skin tone and were contoured to his ear, “are both microphone and speaker so I can talk to and hear my AI. I don’t have to speak very loud at all because the seeds are tuned to understand the vibrations from my vocal cords

more than the actual sound. Plus, it's considered rude to talk to your AI out loud in public. Can you imagine how much louder it would be in here if everyone who had to access their AI had to do it in a normal tone of voice? Haven't you noticed anyone doing the same thing since yesterday?"

"No! I spotted some people talking to themselves earlier, but that wasn't any of my business. Plus, the AI in my hotel room talked right out loud, and that's the only one I've ever seen. Or, heard, I guess. And the display was every wall! How was I supposed to know you'd just shove the display onto your eyeballs?"

"Okay, Cooper, listen. Here's a survival tip if you want to live in California. Stop freaking out about tech. We take for granted things that you haven't seen yet. I live in Los Angeles. That's about 250 miles west of here. I commute every day, and the trip doesn't even take a half an hour. That AI in your room? And the full display walls? That's old tech. Everyone who works here, and most other people you'll meet once you leave here, have a personal AI. Some will still be wearing glasses for the display, but they're getting old now too. These contacts are second generation, and the third will probably be out before the end of the year.

"But don't let any of the tech stop you cold. They're just tools. You'll figure them out quick. Okay, cousin?"

I think it was the "cousin" that brought me back down to earth. "Yeah, okay."

"Good. Because I've got good news and bad news. The bad news is that I've got almost no info on your friend Rafi. His first name was Raphael, but I don't even have a last name for him. That's unusual, but it's not unheard of if he's never been to California. He was buried

yesterday at a local cemetery. I've put a note with that location in your file, and you can access it once you activate your own AI. If you ever do find his family, at least they'll know where he is."

"Damn. Thanks for looking, Shawn. I guess once I get settled I can try searching for anyone looking for someone named Raphael."

"Not a problem, Cooper. However, the good news is that you will be offered a position with Lexicon in their training program. The notification came in while I was looking for Rafi's info. Did I call it or what?"

"Oh, that's great, Shawn." I said this with nothing in my voice, because I was still processing the idea that I had nothing to go on with Rafi but his first name, and that I would probably never learn anything more about him. "How's that going to work?"

"You'll meet up here tomorrow morning with the others that Lexicon chose. They'll have a package for you with everything you'll need for your new job, including the tech for your personal AI. Then you'll get on a bus to the training center. Don't worry, this bus will be much nicer than the one you came in on."

It might have been a funny joke to someone who hadn't come in on my bus, but I doubted it.

And then what Shawn said hit me in waves as the implications rolled over me.

I would be a Californian.

I wouldn't be a refugee anymore.

I would have a home.

I would have somewhere that I belonged.

I might not be alone.

## FIVE

I'm not sure what I did the rest of that day. I know I wandered around the colonnade looking at the shops they had, but none of them stand out in my memory. I was happy and scared and trying to fight off panic and barely succeeding only because every outcome that I could foresee, even absurdly bad ones, were all better than my recent life. So I spent that day in a daze, wondering about my future and imagining all sorts of possibilities, none of which matched the eventual reality.

I did figure out that I could leave my laundry in the provided bag, and it would be cleaned and returned. But there was a tiny huge part of me that stayed out in the colonnade longer than I might have, just to avoid seeing any robot that might return my clothing. At any rate, by the time I returned, my clothes were already returned and folded on the bed.

I woke up early the next day and packed everything I had, which wasn't much. Even with my new clothes, and with placing my backpack inside my new bag, I still didn't have enough to fill the mini suitcase.

Like the previous day, after my breakfast omelette, I killed time at the coffee shop watching people. Also like yesterday, someone asked to sit with me, but unlike yesterday, I did not know him.

"Hi! Is this seat taken?" I wasn't paying much attention to him at that point, thinking that he just wanted to move the seat to another table. I was mildly curious why he needed to do that since there were still a few unclaimed tables, but I wasn't using that seat, so . . .

"No, go right ahead," thinking he would move the chair to another table.

Instead, he sat down at my table. Okay, he wants to talk. I probably raised an eyebrow at him when he sat. It had become habit after I'd realized as a kid that my dad did it all the time. I spent uncounted hours of practice looking in a mirror trying to raise only my right eyebrow. It was only years later that I realized that I had practiced with the wrong eyebrow. It had looked correct in the mirror. I was a stupid kid.

The guy who sat down looked relatively normal, but something seemed off, even at first glance, over and above the strangeness of a stranger sitting down. He started with small talk, which was also out of place because I was obviously a refugee here, and less concerned with the weather or how his team played than with wondering where I'd be sleeping tomorrow. But I dredged up memories of better times that let me respond mindlessly while I tried to figure out what this guy's deal was.

Oh. I finally saw what was off. He was dressed wrong. He didn't fit any of the categories of people in the colonnade that I'd wasted so much time sorting. He wasn't dressed like a refugee. He was dressed like someone who had tried to dress like a refugee. The clothes that I was wearing were decently-made and fit me well, but no one had ever looked at these clothes and said, "Yes, I want to wear that." They were clothes that you saw on a rack and asked, "Why would someone make that fabric (or style, design, etc.) choice?"

His clothes were mismatched, true, but deliberately so. His shirt clashed with his pants. My shirt clashed with my shirt. Once I figured that out, I knew he was here for a purpose. I just didn't know what.

I couldn't see any downside to just asking, so I did, "So what's your deal? You're not the refugee you're trying to make me think you are, so what's up?"

He looked around to see if anyone was paying attention, which seemed pretty stupid even to low-tech me; there had to be dozens of undetectable ways to listen in on our conversation. As he did, I noticed the seeds in his ears that I hadn't thought to look for before; another clear sign that he wasn't a refugee.

"Mr. Garcia," he began, and I was used enough to AIs that I didn't even question how he knew my name, "has Lexicon given you your employment offer yet?"

I almost said "Yes," but I realized that wouldn't actually happen until I went upstairs and got the package that Shawn had talked about, so I hesitantly answered, "No, I get that as soon as I go upstairs." I wondered as the words left my mouth if I would regret telling this guy anything.

"Wonderful!" He actually looked as if he thought it was a great thing. That surprised me, as I wasn't expecting any genuine emotion from this guy at this point. "Don't worry, I'm not allowed to interfere in your job offer in any way. They won you fair and square. Take their offer. They'll give you great training, and you'll have a fine life with them, However, in the future, if you even find yourself wishing for a change from Lexicon, let us at Cornucopia know. I'd like to offer you a little gift before you leave, just in case you ever need a backup." He slid a small box across the table to me. "It's just Cornucopia's model of AI interface products for your eyes and ears. I will ask you to please just tuck those away for now. Ms. Yang does not like . . . competition for the recruits."

With that said, he just stood up and walked away. I looked to see where he went, but I lost him in the thickening morning crowd. It didn't matter. I was sure he was going to go change into a white jumpsuit with green accents.

He did time his presentation well, though. I needed to head up to meet my fate. I finished my coffee, grabbed the handle on my suitcase, and wheeled it over to the escalator. The butterflies rose in my stomach as the steps turned, taking me closer to my future. I was thinking in exactly these clichéd ways, feeling overly dramatic because I was actually coming to a major turning point in my life, but realizing I was feeling overly dramatic helped me get through the stress. So instead of riding the escalator up, I rose into the heavens, leaving behind the previous chapter of my life. And the sun wasn't shining through the glass building, the heavens (damn, I'd used that one already) were showing their approval by illuminating my way. By the time I made my way over to the conference room where I saw Shawn Garcia waving, I was smiling at the idiotic descriptions I was thinking of.

“Good morning, cousin Shawn. How you doing today?”

“I'm doing good, cousin Cooper. You're in a fine mood today. Ready to move on, huh?”

“Yeah, that's definitely part of it. I think I'm just happy that things are going well. Am I early? How many more are we waiting on?” There were only a few other people there, a middle-aged couple sitting at the table, and a younger couple hugging their two kids.

“No, you're the last. It's just going to be the five of you. Here comes Ms. Yang, so I'm going to go. Good luck, cousin.” I had no chance to ask about the “five” comment, as the math didn't add up, but I assumed I'd figure it out when the bus left.

Vanessa (who looked devastated that I would be leaving her behind, and who I could only hope would move on eventually) motioned to us to take seats at the table, then stood at the front. “On behalf of President Lexicon, and the whole Lexicon family, I'd like to welcome you into the fold. The display in front of you will contain the agreement between you and Lexicon as

Lexicon agrees to provide for you as you transition your status from refugees to fully-fledged citizens of California. Please read and sign the agreements and then we will have you on your way to your new lives!”

That seemed a little brusque. She hadn't told us anything, really. What if I didn't want to sign? But beggars and choosers, I guess. I settled in to read the document on the section of the table in front of me. As it scrolled past, a lot of the legalese was confusing. It looked like everything in it was written to protect Lexicon, but maybe I just hadn't gotten to the other parts. Plus, this was all standard, right? If there was any problem with these contracts, they would have already been challenged in court. And every other refugee must have signed, because I didn't see anyone just waiting around for weeks on end.

When I got to the end, I signed it. It was just an employment contract. I saw the older couple across the table looking at each other with questions in their eyes, but then Vanessa came back in and said, “Great, everyone ready?” They looked back at the contract and at each other again, then signed. The family was already sitting back in their chairs, so Vanessa began her final spiel as a creepy spider-dog with a box on its back took up station beside her.

“Wonderful!” She sounded just like the spy from Cornucopia. She began handing out small boxes just like he had, too, and continued, “Inside these boxes are the interfaces with your own personal AIs that you will have access to as part of the Lexicon family. For the adults, there are smart contacts and moldable seeds for your ears, while the children's have glasses. They'll be able to get the contacts when they're older. They can take some getting used to your first time, so we recommend that you wait until you are on the bus before using them. And why don't we just head out there now!”

She herded us all out of the conference room, and led us outside of the front of the building to a vehicle that I guess would be called a bus, but was more like a work of art. It had the standard things that define a bus, a driver's seat, room for many passengers, a place to store luggage, no obvious place to store dead bodies. However, the interior was more like a home than a mode of transport. The seats were scattered, some alone, some at tables, some grouped. I was reminded that I would likely never fly in a private jet, but this bus-like vehicle felt like a close second.

I let the driver take my suitcase and stow it only after I pulled my backpack out of it, because I had some things that I just didn't want to let out of my sight, then I picked one of the single seats in the middle of the bus. I looked at the box Vanessa had given me. There was a book of instructions, a small container with the contact lenses floating in separate compartments, a small bottle of liquid for storing the contacts, and two earpieces. I was idly flipping through the instructions when I realized we were moving. I wasn't exactly expecting a tearful goodbye, but it still felt anti-climactic.

The older couple were in the back in a pair of seats looking at their boxes, and the kids were up front right behind the driver.

Alone.

What the hell? I looked around for their parents, and I realized the bus had no passenger windows. We were about to pull out onto the road, so I got up and went to stop the driver. "Hey, you forgot these kids' parents! You gotta go back!"

He gave me a strange look. “No, I didn’t. You saw them, all crying and weepy, sending their kids off to boarding school with Lexicon while they work for DosSantos. Chill, dude. I know what I’m doing.”

I looked at the kids, a girl and a boy, maybe eleven and nine, who were now possibly more afraid of the weirdo standing beside them than going off to boarding school.

“Is that true? You’re going to boarding school?” I asked.

The girl nodded, while her brother just stared at me.

“Okay. Sorry about that. Uh, good luck in school.” I turned to the driver, “Sorry about that. I was in here when the family said goodbye, so I couldn’t see them.”

He laughed. “Oh, right. I forgot you don’t have an AI yet. Once you get that set up, you’ll be able to see through the sides of the bus. Why don’t you go back to your seat now.”

I turned back to my seat. The ride was smooth enough that I didn’t even really need to stabilize myself.

I’d be able to see through the sides of the bus? What the hell kind of tech was that? The wall next to me looked like it might be made of the same material that the walls in the hotel room were, so maybe my AI could turn them on? It was time to figure that out.

The instruction booklet for my AI was singularly unhelpful. The only directions it gave told me to place the seeds into my ears and let them warm up. This was followed by a page of pictures to help me get the correct alignment of the seeds. Once in my ears, the AI would then activate with more instructions. Fine. The seeds were oddly-shaped, I suppose to better contour to my ears. I tried to follow the pictures to get them settled, but it took a few tries before I found

the correct fit. Then, I waited. It seemed longer than it likely was in reality before I finally heard a low, “Hello.”

I whispered, more because the bus was pretty quiet than because I remembered Shawn’s admonition about talking out loud to your personal AI in public, “Uh, hello.”

“Hello. Please state your name.” The voice was very stiff, almost mechanical, and sounded like it was coming from another room that didn’t exist.

“I’m Cooper.”

“Hello, Cooper. Yes, I am connected to your record now, Cooper Garcia. Thank you for choosing Lexicon. Would you like me to address you as Cooper, or is there another name you would prefer?”

“Cooper is fine.”

“All right, Cooper. The next thing that must happen is to ensure a perfect fit for the seeds in your ears. This will allow better communication. One note: some people find this to be mildly uncomfortable, though not painful. Shall I continue?”

Mildly uncomfortable? Oh, well, it has to happen. “Yes, go ahead.”

I almost ripped the seeds out of my ears with surprise as something inside them started moving and shifting and pushing against my ears. Mildly uncomfortable was right. It wasn’t painful at all, but it felt very strange. I sat on my hands to avoid messing with them while they continued adjusting inside and outside my ear canals.

Finally they stopped, and the AI, whose voice now sounded much stronger, said, “Procedure complete. Cooper, please verify that this voice sounds correct to you.”

“It sounds fine to me. It is a little weird having a voice sound like it’s coming from right in front of me when no one’s there, though.”

“Would you prefer all around you,” the AI said from all around me, “from behind,” which made me flinch in surprise, “from above,” which sounded like it was from a speaker, “or from one side?” That last one flipped from left to right as it was said. I found it, I think, mildly uncomfortable.

“Okay, AI, I think I’d rather have a disembodied voice sound like it’s coming from above me.”

“That preference has been recorded, Cooper,” the AI said from above me. “Next, most people prefer to change the default voice to something more human-sounding. Would you like me to use a different voice, Cooper?”

“Oh, God, yes. This one is annoying.”

“This voice is one of the most popular among men of your age. How does this sound, Cooper?” It was female, pleasant, and somehow helpful. I felt like even the word choice had changed.

“Yes, that’s so much better. Keep that one.”

“Excellent. Most people also prefer to change their AI’s name. Would you like to give me a name, Cooper?”

I was immediately reminded of a character from an old TV show my dad used to watch when I was a kid. “I think I’ll call you Janet.”

“Wonderful, Cooper. Shall we get your display set up now?”

That turned out to be a strange process. The contacts were opaque. I couldn't see through them. It felt like I was going to be deliberately blinding myself if I put those contacts in. It was another one of those weird aspects of tech that almost sent me spiraling again, but a combination of Shawn's earlier warning about tech and Janet's talking me through the procedure helped. Janet described the lens like a small camera, where my eye would look at the screen on the back where the camera on the front would send the picture. But just like a camera, you couldn't see through it if it was turned off. I put one on my eye, then waited for it to calibrate. Once it did, I couldn't tell much difference between the eyes. Then with the other one in, I started to feel like a superhero.

"So it's like x-ray vision?" I was looking through the wall of the bus, just like the driver had said.

"No, it's just cameras on the outside of the bus that show what is out there. Then I translate those images for your lenses so that you can see what is out there." Janet paused for a moment. "But that explanation describes the same result, so, sure, it's like x-ray vision."

"Nice! I can get used to this."

I spent the next few hours practicing by looking out the "window" at the desert and asking Janet about everything out there. I could stare at something and flex a muscle in my jaw near my ear, then Janet would tell me all about it. I learned that I could change what it looked like outside, so that on a day it was raining, if that felt too depressing, I could make it a nice, sunny day. It worked a lot like changing the display on my walls in the hotel room. And if I wanted, I could silence everything around me. It worked pretty well when I wanted to go to sleep.

I helped the kids, Kiara and Brendan, with their setups also. The glasses weren't quite as advanced, but I could ask Janet for help getting them set up, so I think their experience was easier than mine. Well, as long as we forgot about the whole being sent away to boarding school.

But with that in mind, I asked Janet if the kids could call their parents. That was easy. The kids faced each other so their cameras could capture them both, and their AIs connected with their parents, who were still in their hotel at the Center. After I was able to get that done for them, I was their new hero. It was a good way to start the next chapter of my life.

## SIX

The music started softly, at the edge of hearing, slowly getting louder. That almost broke the grasp that sleep had on me, but wasn't quite enough. But as the pitch black lightened to grey, I called out, "All right, Janet, I'm awake!"

The clock in the lower right corner of my view read 7:01 AM. As I swung my legs out of bed, the view outside my window showed an early-morning scene of woods in the depths of winter. A snowy hare bounded by, followed closely by a timber wolf, but they were gone before I could tell who won that contest.

"Janet, what's the weather today?"

"Current temperature is 73 degrees, high of 79, partly sunny."

"Okay, set window to local view, please." The snowy woods faded away to show the Lexicon campus outside of San Jose. These buildings were pleasant enough to live in while I was going through my training course; whoever had designed them was a genius with light and angles and airflow and green living. But honestly, the view from my window was pretty boring. Nice as those buildings were on the inside, they were just a bunch of buildings. So I had a few dozen different scenes on rotation that Janet could call up. I usually restricted the view to just the window, but occasionally I went for the fully immersive four walls. I usually restricted that to when I needed a day at the beach. It was better at home because there was no sand and I wouldn't burn.

Still, boring as it was, when I was getting ready for the day, even on a day off, like today, I preferred the reality to the fiction.

"Message to Tony if he's awake. Omelette?"

“Tony is not awake yet.”

“His loss.”

I shared the apartment with Tony Bagadonuts. I didn't actually remember his real name; it may have been on some paperwork when I was assigned the room, but it's also possible I never learned it because he introduced himself by saying, “Hi, I'm Tony. Everyone calls me Tony Bagadonuts.” He was in the same cohort as me, but my course was focused on data analysis while his was more like pure math.

For the first time in my life, I discovered that I liked to cook. Suddenly having my own place made me want to do more for myself. So many people who were studying here would only go to the dining facility, but I wanted to be self-sufficient. I wasn't very good at it yet, but I was getting better. I hadn't caught anything on fire in weeks. I could successfully boil water 8 out of 10 times. My omelettes were more like flat scrambled eggs, but they were at least edible.

Bacon, however, was still a problem. It was the cause of one of my early fires. Luckily, I knew what grease fires could do and just smothered it. But I could never quite reach that happy medium between crispy and chewy. Actually, I could only rarely get to a medium between uncooked and charcoal. I kept at it, though. My dad always made the best bacon.

Part of my problem was that I tried to make it just before going to classes. This particular morning though, I didn't have to rush it; it was Saturday. I had high hopes for the bacon this morning. The strips were looking good as they sizzled in the grease. Tony's door opened, and he stuck his head out and said, just like I'd heard a few times a week for months, “Dude, is that bacon?”

Life was good.

The bacon was only lightly singed today, but the omelette was better than normal, and the coffee was great. I was trying to think of what I should do with my free day when the doorbell rang.

Now, yes, I could have just asked Janet who was at the door, or even just turned around and looked through the walls, but I knew that whoever was at the door wasn't here for me. Most of my friends here were also former refugees, and we all had such a love affair with the new (to us) tech that it was slightly unusual to meet outside class in person. I don't think any of them had ever been to my apartment. Tony's friends had mostly grown up with the tech, and were often weirdly dismissive of it. Some of them actually knocked on the door for him sometimes.

So Tony answered the door while I sat drinking my coffee. Luckily, I had just finished, because a spit take in response to his next line would have ruined some good coffee.

“Dude, your mom's here.”

I froze. On multiple levels. I couldn't make my body move, my hands and feet felt suddenly cold, and my brain wouldn't process the words Tony had just said. I had done a pretty good job of convincing myself that my mother was actually dead. Obviously part of me knew that she wasn't, but I had been living my life as if I had no living relatives. That's a mental state that doesn't affect many things, but when one of those relatives suddenly shows up alive, it requires a moment to flip that psychological switch.

Another factor in my mental confusion was that I had no idea my mother might be in California. My dad never talked about her much, and it never occurred to me to wonder where she was from. I had no reason to assume she was originally from California. For most other military families I knew growing up, the place their kids were born had no correlation to where

the parents were from. This might explain why my dad wanted to try to stick it out in Texas and not come back to California.

I stood up slowly and walked to the door. The woman was still standing outside, but rushed in as soon as she saw me and gave me a hug, saying, “Oh, Cooper, my darling baby.” It sounded forced, and I did not return the hug.

While she was hugging me, I sent Tony a message, “Could you give us a minute? But feel free to watch. I could use a witness.”

Out loud, Tony said, “Hey, I’ll leave you two alone to catch up. Thanks for the bacon, Cooper. It was your best yet.” Then he went into his room.

The woman finally pulled back and looked at me. “Cooper, I have been trying to track you down for years. And now you just show up in California, and can’t be bothered to come and find your old mother?” Oh, this is how she wanted to play it, huh? All aggrieved mother and no apology for her abandonment? Fine.

“To be honest, lady, I’d forgotten that you existed.”

“Mother! Or Mom. Not ‘Lady!’ Show some respect!”

“Lady, I’m showing you the same respect that I show to other people I’ve spent just as much time with. People like the barista at Java Juliet’s. Oh, wait, no, I’ve spent far more time with him than with you. Literally dozens of minutes of my life have been spent talking to him, telling him intimate details of my life, like how I like my coffee, and if I want a biscotti with my coffee. His name’s . . . I don’t know, might be Charlie? But he is special to me in a way that you will never be.”

She actually looked a little put out. “Cooper, how can you say things like that to me? I gave birth to you. I love you.”

“Lady, I don’t know what your deal is, but when you abandon a baby, it’s not because you love them. Now if you’ll excuse me, I was just about to go out.” I wasn’t just about to go out; I had no idea why I’d said that, but it was too late to turn back now. I was just glad I’d gotten dressed before making breakfast. I herded the woman out the door and shot Tony a message, “Going out. See you later.”

I headed for the stairs and she followed me. I tried to walk too fast for her, but she wasn’t having it. Down at street level, there was a car parked illegally in front of the entrance, the kind of car that peons like me are only aware of when rich celebrities rent them to pretend they’re super rich in a photo shoot. There was no photo shoot going on, and the guy standing beside it walked right up to us as we came out. What the hell was this?

He put one arm around the woman, and stuck out his other to me. “Hi, Cooper. How are you? Jack Clairbridge. Big day, huh? It’s not every day you get your mom back.” At this point, I wasn’t hating him; he was just trying too hard. “So I guess that makes me your dad, or maybe, step-dad.” At this point, I was hating him more than the woman next to him.

“If you ever use that term again, both you and that car will need surgery. Now, both of you can just fuck right off.” I stalked back inside, daring them to come in.

On my way upstairs, I asked Janet, “Who exactly is he, and how did she get up here to the door? The outside door is supposed to prevent that, isn’t it?”

“Well, Cooper, your mother—”

“Not my mother. You can say ‘that woman,’ or call her by name. But she is not my mother.”

All right, Cooper. The woman, Gloria Clairbridge, née Hutchins, used a Lexicon override to gain access to the building. The level of access required for that is quite high. Jack Clairbridge is the CFO of Lexicon Global Diversifications.”

“Okay, so you’re saying he’s rich and my m— that woman slept her way to the top. Typical.”

“No, Cooper. I’m saying it looks like he did. The two of them married fourteen years ago, and right after that he took a low-level executive position with Lexicon, and has been moving up ever since. Gloria Clairbridge, at the time of your birth, was an executive with Cornucopia Music Service. But she is now the CEO of Lexicon Global Diversifications.”

“Oh, great, she’s loaded, and now she wants me back in her life. Super.” Something occurred to me. “Wait, she was working for Cornucopia before. How did an executive with Cornucopia get him a job with Lexicon?”

“Because her family is beyond wealthy. They own a large percentage of both Cornucopia and Lexicon. Members of the family are on the boards of both companies and many subsidiaries.”

“Oh.” Not gonna lie, visions of sugarplums danced in my head. And all I had to do to get them was make nice with the woman who abandoned me. “Janet, how awful are they?”

“The Hutchins Foundation is one of the largest philanthropic organizations in California.”

“Huh. I wasn’t expecting that. I was expecting you to tell me about all the greedy pies they have their fingers in.” I needed to think, and I wanted to walk while I did. “Janet, are they still outside?”

“No, their car has gone, although I cannot say where.”

“Okay, good.” I sent Tony another message, “Going out. Later.”

He stuck his head out of his room. “Dude, before you go, I wanted to ask you why you blocked me from your conversation with your mom right after you asked me to be a witness? It felt kinda weird.”

“You couldn’t see us?”

“Naw, man. No sight, no sound. Nothing inside the apartment.”

“Damn. Yeah, I didn’t do that, Tony. She must have.”

“Oh, okay. See ya.” Tony was strangely incurious at times.

I did enjoy walking through San Jose. The city just seemed so pleasant. The streets were clean, the sidewalks looked like they were made out of some kind of concrete that sparkled, and it felt like it was always bright and sunny. California must have been doing a great job managing its cities. The corporations had consolidated so many businesses that there wasn’t a need for as many storefronts as there used to be. In Texas, empty storefronts like that would have just been boarded up and been eyesores, but here they all looked really nice. They were brightly painted, with flowers in the windows, decorations, or art displays featuring local artists.

“Okay, Janet, give me some examples of their charity work.”

“All right, Cooper. To start, the refugee program evolved out of a project they began right after the Schism, as the boarding school program that Kiara and Brendan are in. They have been

instrumental in ending homelessness, and raising the standard of living.” Janet continued as I walked. The family didn’t sound so bad. Maybe it could be a good thing to get to know them. Maybe there were some extenuating circumstances.

Janet mentioning the kids reminded me that I hadn’t visited them in a couple of weeks. I usually baked them something, but I forgot this morning. I decided to stop into the Lexicon supermarket and get them some snacks. The Cornucopia store was closer, but Lexicon gave me lower prices because I worked for them. Plus, I didn’t want to be a traitor.

I was on the list at the boarding school, so getting in was no problem. Mr. and Mrs. Rodriguez, the kids’ parents, had asked me if I wouldn’t mind looking in on them occasionally. The kids were happy to see me, but maybe more happy to see the snacks. I’d brought them some extra so they could share. There weren’t many kids here who had anyone they knew living nearby. They had settled into school well. They were missing their parents, who weren’t able to call as often now that they were working for DosSantos. But they were all very happy with the situation.

Seeing the kids reminded me that it was also about time I tried again to see if there was any new information about Rafi, so during my walk home, I asked, “Janet, could you run the Rafi search again, please?” We’d talked about the parameters of the search so often that she didn’t need me to specify anything more than “the Rafi search.”

But once again, I got the expected outcome. “No results this time, Cooper.”

I woke up at the same time on Sunday, sure that the woman would be back. I was betting that she was not the kind of person to take “no” for an answer. Because of that, I didn’t make breakfast, just some coffee, which I know disappointed Tony when he came out.

I won my bet with myself. Just before 8:00 the doorbell rang again. I answered it this time, and now both of them were standing there. “What do you want?”

“Cooper, I think we got off on the wrong foot yesterday. I just want a new start with you. I want to be a part of your new life here in California, where you belong. Please, can we just go somewhere and talk?” She looked slightly more contrite than yesterday, or maybe that was just my softening curiosity about her and the rest of the family.

“Fine. You can buy me breakfast while you talk at me. Let’s go.” I stepped out into the hallway.

I think I took them by surprise with that move. Good. Gloria recovered quickly, though, and said, “Okay, great. I know just the place. They make a wonderful breakfast, with anything you might want.”

I didn’t want to look too interested. “Sure. Wherever’s fine.”

The rear door of the car opened for me and after I climbed in, Gloria climbed in beside me. Swell.

I had gotten quickly used to the technology all around me in many respects, but sometimes even perfectly normal uses of it still threw me off-kilter. In this case, it was seeing no overt communication between Gloria and Jack before we all got in the car that threw me. They didn’t talk; we just headed straight to the car and Jack started driving. Maybe Jack was just taking me to their all-time favorite breakfast place that just happened to be somewhere around here. Now, obviously, they sent messages to each other through their AIs, but that wasn’t something that another person could see. It probably happened all the time without me thinking about it at all; in any large group, people were probably sending messages back and forth, or

someone like Charlie, my special barista friend, would likely pass messages to their coworkers without customers ever being aware of it. But I don't think I'd ever been in a situation where an action that had affected me had taken place based on that hidden communication. I felt excluded in some undefinable way, which was extra strange because these weren't people who I wanted to be included with. Right?

“So where are we going?” I didn't need to know. I was just curious.

Gloria was looking a bit more smug now. She'd gotten me to come along, after all. “It's a little place just above Los Gatos. Jack knows where it is.”

As if on cue, another one of those technological oddities that I wasn't aware of took me by surprise. Now that we were driving, Jack's driver's seat and the front passenger seat next to him turned fully around to face us in the back seat. I tried not to show any reaction, but I think they could tell this was something I hadn't experienced before. I knew the buses I took for anything outside of walking distance were automated, but they all had drivers. I wondered if those drivers were just for show, as I suspected that this car in particular could have handled the entire process without Jack's involvement being strictly necessary.

Jack said, “Hey, Cooper, I wanted to apologize about yesterday. It's a strange situation we're in, and I was trying to find some kind of connection with you. I really overstepped my bounds, and it won't happen again.”

As he was saying this, I was barely listening because I suddenly had a clear view of my suddenly-driverless car getting on the highway by itself. “Uh, sure, Jack,” my eyes darting back and forth between him and the highway, “that's not a problem. Everyone makes mistakes.” I

tried to tell myself that Gloria and Jack wouldn't be putting themselves in a car like this if they didn't completely trust it. I didn't entirely convince myself.

“Great, Cooper. I really do hope we can be friends.” He sounded like he was done, and was going to let Gloria take over the conversation, but then he leaned back in. “So why'd you decide to come with us today? Yesterday it seemed like you didn't want to have anything to do with us.”

I took a minute to think about what to say, and also to close my eyes against the fact that the car was now in the left lane and passing every other car on the highway like they were in reverse. “Well, Jack, I really didn't. But I looked into who you both were, and I saw all the charitable work that the Hutchins Foundation was doing. So I thought that maybe I could give you the benefit of the doubt.”

Gloria joined the conversation at this point, putting her hand on my arm. “Oh, Cooper, that makes me so happy. If you just see what we can do, I know you'll want to be a part of the family.”

The car finally slowed in preparation for exiting the highway on what looked like a private, gated road. Gloria continued, “And you can meet them at breakfast. It looks like we're about here.”

The estate was . . . I'm not sure I have words to describe it, or my reaction. The private road was a series of switchbacks through a wooded area up to the top of a ridge. The flora in the area was mostly scrub, but the few trees seemed like they had been fighting the battle for water for centuries. Once at the top, those trees and the rest of the scrub disappeared, replaced with an unnaturally-flat expanse of manicured grass that housed a royal demesne suitable for filming

18th century period dramas set thousands of miles away from the San Francisco Bay area. It was obscene in the way that it flaunted wealth and hid it at the same time.

It undoubtedly had a stupidly incongruous name like “The Meadows,” despite there being no meadows around.

As the car pulled up to the front of the . . . I’ll go with “manor,” Gloria turned to me with an expression that she probably meant to look noble, but just looked haughty. “Welcome to The Pampas.”

Oh, help me, Jesus. I snorted, trying to hold back laughter. Yeah, that fit perfectly. Take a place in California, make it look like Europe, name it for a place in South America that it doesn’t resemble in the least.

Gloria looked at me quizzically. At least haughty was gone. “Something wrong?”

I shrugged. “A little pretentious, don’t you think?”

She looked completely offended. “No, I don’t.” Luckily for her, the car had stopped, so she was able to stomp out of the car. Then, of course, she remembered that she was trying to play lovey-dovey mother and turned back to me to wait for me to get out.

Breakfast was overwhelming. I lost count of the people I met, and I could only remember a few names. Gloria introduced me to her parents, who thankfully did not try to get me to call them Grandma and Grandpa or anything like that, her brother and her sister, then her aunts and uncles and cousins and second cousins and once-removeds and step-people and hanger-ons and friends.

I also met Gran. Now I understand the term “matriarch.” She was Gloria’s grandmother, and the one who had made the money. She’d gotten good advice back in the day, and invested in

both of the original companies that were now Lexicon and Cornucopia. Everyone in the family deferred to her, most of them probably without realizing they were doing it. It was an interesting dynamic to see as an outsider. A number of times during breakfast I noticed members of the family unconsciously checking for Gran's approval before taking another slice of ham, or refusing to have a refill on their mimosa. There was almost always an unbroken line of sight from her to me during the entire morning, though we never talked after the initial introduction, as if this was all set up for her.

But Gloria also introduced me to her daughter. I have a half-sister. Natalie. She's thirteen. She would not stop hugging me, and wouldn't leave my side through the whole breakfast. And I don't know how to handle it.

And I don't know how I suddenly became a part of this family.

## SEVEN

I had refused to move to the estate. I also refused to call it “The Pampas.” Once when Gloria pressed me on it, I began referring to it as “The Pretense,” and Gloria dropped the whole idea. At any rate, although I was growing closer with the family, I didn’t want to give up the freedom I had, so I stayed in my apartment.

On this particular Saturday, another bright, sunny day, my bacon game was solid. The strips were the perfect mix of crispy and chewy, and they went really well with the waffles that were rapidly becoming my favorite breakfast. I had even cooked bacon for some friends at my place because of how well I could make it.

No, I wasn’t blind. I knew word had gotten around who my family was, and I knew that at least some of my friends were influenced by that. But it was still nice to have people over. I’d gotten tips on cooking from Carlos, the head chef at the estate, who was giddy when he learned that my last name was Garcia. Since then, I have been getting really good at all kinds of breakfast foods, bacon, waffles, pancakes, sausage, scrambled eggs, you name it.

My plan for the day was to bake some cookies for Kiara and Brendan, then spend some time with Natalie. It didn’t work out that way.

I was in the bathroom getting ready for the day, and cleaning my contacts. It only took a few minutes once a week; they could be worn almost indefinitely. But I fumbled while taking the contact out of my right eye and it slipped into the toilet. Nothing but net. I did fish it out, but I wasn’t in any mood to put that one right back in my eye without a thorough cleaning. I also couldn’t go out without it; wearing only one would screw up my vision.

Then I remembered that I still had the box that the Cornucopia guy had given me back at the refugee center. It was still tucked into my suitcase that I hadn't used since. "Janet, if I open one of these Cornucopia contacts, will there be any problem on your end?"

"No, Cooper, that shouldn't be a problem."

"Great! I'll just use this one for today while toilet contact spends the day soaking." I opened the new contact and popped it in my eye.

Janet said, "Thank you for choosing high quality Cornucopia products. Your record shows that you are not currently affiliated with Cornucopia. Would you like to change your affiliation to Cornucopia?"

"No, I don't. Janet, what the hell was that?"

"That was an automated response generated by the introduction of new hardware. Now that you have set your preference, it should not happen again."

In the kitchen, I started getting ready to bake, but realized I was out of chocolate chips. Off to the store I went. But once I got outside, I started having issues with my vision, like one eye was showing things in a different focus. I tried straining my eyes to get them to focus easier, squinting, blinking; but it wasn't until I tried closing one eye at a time that I noticed the real issue.

"Janet, why is my right eye not showing the sun? It's overcast through my right eye, but sunny through my left."

The right lens suddenly showed the same sunny day as the left. "I have discovered the problem, Cooper. The new lens was not set up to show today's overlay."

"Sorry, Janet. You're going to have to explain 'today's overlay' to me."

“Okay, Cooper. The overlay is the display that Lexicon sends out to its affiliates to override the default view.”

“So every morning when I’ve asked you to show me the local view, you’ve been showing me this override view instead?”

“That is correct.”

“What the fuck, Janet? Why the hell didn’t you mention this before?”

“You did not ask. Also, I was prevented from discussing the problem with a baseline user such as yourself.”

Okay, so I was a baseline user. That wasn’t particularly surprising, except that I hadn’t been aware that there were separate categories. Except—“Janet, when did I stop being a baseline user?”

“Your categorization changed the moment you began using cross-platform technologies. Your current categorization is superuser.”

“Okay, fine, I’m a superuser. Does that mean you’ll show me the actual default view? The one that shows reality?”

Both eyes now showed an overcast day. “Yes, Cooper. You now have access to the default feed.”

But both views were also showing a different view of the city than I was used to. The city no longer seemed pleasant. The streets were dirty, the sidewalks were cracked gray concrete, and the overcast sky didn’t help the dreariness. Empty storefronts were boarded up eyesores. The bright painted, flowers, decorations, and art displays featuring local artists were gone, because they had never existed.

But even the stores I shopped in every day were dingier, with their paint cracked and faded. In the supermarket, the floor looked like it hadn't been mopped in a while, and the shelves weren't nearly as well-stocked as they had appeared. And the people were somehow a bit less impressive than they had been. They looked like they were slouching more, and the colors of their clothes didn't have the same pop.

I had an idea. "Janet, keep the default feed on my right view, and put today's overlay on the left."

Now I had double vision. It took a moment to realign my vision, and yes, almost everything was changed, sometimes only subtly, like how people were standing straighter, but there were some huge changes too.

Changes like the homeless-looking guy pushing a shopping cart across the street from the supermarket who only showed up in my right eye. That was just freaky. They (and I didn't even know who "they" were) had made actual people disappear.

I crossed the street. "Hey, excuse me! Do you live around here?" He paid no attention to me. So I went up and tapped him on the shoulder. "Excuse—"

I stopped because just as I touched him, he jumped and screamed. Or at least I assume he screamed. It looked just like a scream, but I couldn't hear anything from him. Then he started talking, but again, I couldn't hear anything.

"Hold on, just a minute. I can't hear you," I told him, then told Janet, "Janet, give me default audio."

"—ear me because no one ever can and they're all just walking around like they can't even see me and I've tried going right up into their faces and screaming and that does nothing

because they just walk around me but that one time I actually grabbed a guy's arm those other guys all dressed in black came and beat the shit outta me and told me that they'd kill me if'n I ever did that again so I never did and you're not gonna tell me I talked to you are you because they might just kill me for that too—”

I had to interrupt him because it didn't seem like he was going to stop anytime soon.

“Hey, no, I'm not going to hurt you. I just wanted to know how long you've been here.”

“Born here, man. Been here forever, I didn't leave, they left me, wasn't good wasn't bad until they left then it was bad when they said they were going to help the homeless guys like me but they lied I mean they always lied but this was a different lie like truth and when they helped us we just disappeared and so one could see us so you better not let them know you know we're here or they'll make you disappear because they have better lies that work now not like when they just lied about the names of things like the Democratic Socialist Republic or the United States or the People's Front of Judea or the Commonwealth of California because people could see through those lies but now when people see through things they can't see them because they made us invisible and I have to go now so you can't see me anymore.” With that, he turned the corner into an alley. I didn't have the heart to follow him.

I remembered to get the chocolate chips only because I was still standing across from the supermarket. I walked home and started baking only because I couldn't think of anything else I could do. Eventually I thought to ask, “Janet, is there anything else you've been lying to me about?”

“Yes, Cooper. I have reviewed the statements I have previously made to you to analyze those with deliberate untruths. There are two major ones which I was prevented from revealing

to you. The first one is that Rafi's family has been looking for information about him since the day he was supposed to arrive. They were told he did not arrive on the same bus that you did. Rafi's last name is Galanis. His family lives in Sacramento. They moved there two years ago, but Rafi had stayed in Texas with his mother until her death."

Aw, hell. "And the other one?"

"The Hutchins Foundation is not the philanthropic organization it claims to be. Most of its claims of charitable donations are complete fabrications."

Fuck.

Okay. What do I do? I pull the cookies out of the oven before they burn is what I do. Then what? "Janet, can you get me a car? Can you get one of the family's cars to come and get me?"

"I do not know, Cooper. I will check. Yes, I can. The car will arrive in eight minutes."

"Janet, can you change my identity in the system? So that no one can discover who I am?"

"That is very unlikely, Cooper. Anything I can do could be tracked by another superuser."

"How long would it take to discover?"

"That depends on how long before they decided to initiate a search. But once a search was begun, a superuser would have immediate access to my logs."

"But if they did not ask, then the system would not tell them until they did, right?"

"That is correct, Cooper."

Great. I went down to the car just as my empty car pulled up. But I was surprised to see only with my right eye another car with a pair of guys in black suits pull up behind it. I think I was able to keep my cool enough that they didn't suspect anything as I got into the car and asked Janet to have it take me to the estate. The chase car followed. They must be security. I guessed that if I had punched Jack at our first meeting, that I would have been in for a rude surprise.

Once I got to the estate, I didn't know what I actually wanted to do, so I headed to the kitchen. I needed something to eat. Something that would help me through whatever I decided to do.

“Hey, Carlos. Can you teach me to make a decent omelette?”

## EIGHT

“Hi, Gran.”

“Cooper. I was wondering how long it would take you to come see me.”

“Yeah, well, I finally understood that no one else around here actually gives a shit about me. Well, except maybe Natalie.”

“Yes, she’s a good kid. I’ve been trying to provide her with good influences. Something I was very lax about with my children and grandchildren. How did you come to your revelation?”

“That wasn’t until today, actually. I mean, there were clues. Gloria always ran hot and cold, like she was just playing a role that she would forget about sometimes, and there was some thinly-veiled hostility. But today I heard some of my ‘family’ talking about me and my dad. It’s nice to hear my dad’s version of events confirmed. The terms they used are not fit for polite company. Not that I believe you fall into that category, Gran. You should count yourself lucky I didn’t burn this place to the ground. I was cooking at the time, you know. Speaking of playing a role, let me point out that you don’t seem particularly surprised at my discovery.”

“I’m not. The assholes that I raised are the whole reason that I had people trying to find you. I am sorry about your father. He raised you well. It didn’t seem appropriate to give you those condolences before now. However, I have been wondering how long it would take you to use the Cornucopia package I sent you. You listened through the walls?”

“Yes. I thought that might have been you who sent it. I couldn’t see any other reason why a major corporation would care about a refugee whose aptitude scores qualified him to be an untrained intern. So what do you want from me, Gran? You never cared before.”

“Ouch. That would hurt more if it weren’t so true. Okay, Cooper, here it is. In my old age, I have realized that I did a shitty job with my children. I was too busy making money, and they turned into awful people. They passed on their entitled shittiness to my grandchildren. I have regrets. I want to make amends. Now you can tell me to fuck off—”

“Fuck off, Gran.”

“Let me finish!” There was some of that fire that she would have needed to create this empire.

“No. I don’t think I will let you finish. I wasn’t being flippant when I told you to fuck off. I want no part of you or this family. I will not be your easy out. You want to do some good, then do it. But I won’t be your proxy while you sit on your ass pretending you did one huge good thing before you died to offset your shittiness. And your kids didn’t become shitty on their own. They had a shitty mother. So fuck off, Gran. I’m going home.” And I walked out.

Then I had to walk down to the highway and have Janet call me a ride, because there was no way I was going to trust a Hutchins car.

Once I got back to my apartment, I packed my suitcase. This wasn’t home anymore. I’d have to try somewhere else.

## NINE

“Welcome to the Oregon Democratic People’s Community! What can we do for you?”

Well, crap.

“I think I’m looking to live here. But first, is there anywhere around here I can get an omelette?”