

CHAPTER 20

The jungle mazes of the world famous zoo streak past below the right wingtip; the postmodern skyline of downtown at eyelevel on the left, like some future Atlantis, standing sentry over an ocean biding its time. San Diego's beauty makes me feel even more alone. Incongruous. A yellow bow of sandy coastal splendor dressing up my gift-wrapped misery. I will spill blood in America's Finest City and the sunshine will bleach out the stains.

Inside the terminal I find a TV in a little bar just past the arrival and departure monitors.

You have got to be fuckin' kidding me.

Cindy—the Penelope Cruz look-alike—plans to *marry* that possum-eyed lecher? And the therapist who reported her missing was supposedly *stalking* the couple?

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I don't know which is more ridiculous: that the press bought such an obvious fabrication engineered to take the heat off Whitmore, or the bleating murmurs of 'bitch' and 'cunt' I'm hearing from the sheep around me. The only crime Mercy Anne's guilty of is trusting her gut. I like her already.

Well, since the 'love-birds' are 'honeymooning' at an undisclosed location, she just became my new best lead. At a minimum, she knows Whitmore. Maybe where he lives—or even known associates of the religious zealot variety. I need to get in touch with her ASAP, before she's had enough of the negative press and leaves town.

But I'm torn.

The Hotel Del across the bay in Coronado is—*was*—the largest safe house on the West Coast. Now it's a trap just like every other feeding destination in our hacked and deciphered database. I want to go there and warn others of the danger. Problem is, I'd be walking into the same trap, and sacrificing the biggest advantage I have right now: They don't know where I'm at. If the SOJ found out I'm onto Whitmore, they might relocate him, and they'd definitely concentrate their search for me here in the city in an effort to eliminate the *only* Naphil who's even aware of their renewed threat.

Shit, for all I know, there might not be any Nephilim in San Diego still alive to warn. I never read the fifty-three names sent to my cell phone before the connecting flight in St. Louis. Didn't risk checking for more murders in the four hours since. Can't risk a peek now, either.

The only thing I'm dead certain of, is that there are more enemy left to kill.

Which means staying on task and finding Whitmore to lead me to them. Which means finding Mercy Anne to lead me to Whitmore. So, first track down Mercy, then see if it still

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makes sense to go to Coronado. It's a cold mental calculus I've been forced into: keeping myself in the dark about the possible futility of my actions, so I can stay alive long enough to carry them out.

I rent a black Ford Mustang GT from Hertz under the name 'Patrick Daly' and drive until I see a payphone with an attached yellow pages. Mercy Anne's office number is listed and I dial it. She doesn't pick up, but the greeting gives me her cell number to call if this is an urgent, but non-life-threatening message. If my message is life-threatening in nature, the recording informs me, I should hang up and dial 911 immediately. I ignore the advice and dial her mobile anyway. Get her voicemail. She's screening her calls. No surprise there. After the most recent news report aired, she's probably been getting harassed. I leave the one message I know she'll respond to:

Hi. I'm not a cop, and I'm not a reporter. I'm the one guy who can help you find Cindy. You were right about Whitmore. Your friend's in danger. Meet me at Café 976 in PB as soon as you get this.

#

The mustang doesn't stand out in the least in Pacific Beach. And the excess horsepower is nice should I need it. With the far more affluent community of La Jolla peering down from Mount Soledad to the north, even a Lamborghini wouldn't draw too much attention.

I don't stand out either. Unlike my conspicuousness in Sarajevo, here in PB I'm just another buff surfer or muscle-head on my way to the gym. Blending in is a good thing when you've become a walking bulls-eye, and that's one of the reasons I'm having Mercy meet me in this touristy, Gen-Y dominated beach community. Another reason is, I know the area. It's just a

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few minutes up the I-5 from downtown and I vacationed in one of the cottages on Crystal Pier a few years back. Two weeks of drunken debauchery I'll never forget, and a welcome changeup to the upscale resorts I usually favor for R&R.

Familiarity aside, meeting Mercy at a café should also engender in her a sense of calm and trust. Coffee shops are safe and cozy places; public without being so crowded you can't monitor everyone who comes and goes.

I park in a residential area off the main drag, get out and start walking the four blocks still to go before the café. My stomach gurgles with bile and butterflies. I haven't eaten all day. The sushi and fish tacos here are phenomenal, but I'll have to wait in spite of the tempting wasabi and soy. Mercy should be on her way, and I want to scope out the approach to 976 before she arrives. She's not a threat, but the SOJ might have someone following her. Come to think of it, they could have her cell phone bugged. The one I just left a message on.

Damn. Another slip. As paranoid as I've been forced to become lately, it's still not paranoid enough.

Café 976 resides in an updated craftsmen on the corner of Feldspar and Cass, a block North of Garnet where most of the liquor licenses and nightlife resides. It sports an indoor / outdoor feel, with a covered wood porch on two sides, and additional open-air seating in the surrounding garden. Sparrows scavenge for bagel crumbs beneath the tables. Smokers foul the taste of their blood and sip French roast in between puffs, a fortunately rare opportunity in health conscious California.

Too on edge for coffee, I go inside and order a berry tea instead. Take a bench seat in the back corner of the dining area facing the door, and catalog the other customers: Several college

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kids highlighting text books; two tech-startup types with laptops sharing an electrical outlet; a pair of nip-and-tucked trophy wives sitting on the porch just outside the rear entrance debating who has the hottest pool guy--no one that doesn't look like they belong. I close my eyes, pretend to yawn, and take a deep, slow breath, sampling the air for the aroma of dangers unseen. But it's just grilled Panini bread and disappointingly low-grade coffee beans from the kitchen. A hint of rotting kelp when the breeze snakes through the window screens. Remnants of a cucumber facial and acetone evaporating from the cuticles of the manicured trophy wives. As innocuous as the soCal soundtrack: The hardened resin clack of the cue ball against a solid or a stripe on the pool table in the bar next door; the frothy locomotive wheeze of the espresso machine; detuned rumbles from passing choppers out in the street. The epitome of normalcy.

Until Mercy Anne walks in. Nothing normal about her kind of beauty.

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