

Lucas had asked the hitman to meet him in the parking lot behind the McDonald's, the least conspicuous and yet the seediest place he knew; he could have sworn he had seen suspicious-looking people passing white powder around in that joint. As he stepped out of that very same McDonald's, the sweltering midday sun almost knocked the air right out of him, and the Big Mac he had eaten, washed down with a medium McFlurry, was causing him to feel even more bloated than usual. He recalled the way his girlfriend—ex-girlfriend now—made fun of his weight, and in his throat up came again acidic rage and heartburn. He vowed that he will make the bitch pay. He will make them all pay.

To his dismay, despite his attempt to be inconspicuous, the hitman's sedan was sitting squarely in the middle of the parking lot; a sitting duck if something bad was going to go down. It was flamboyantly blue, the sedan, like a parrot who would, at any given moment, squawk out sentences that would incriminate its owner. He felt a knot forming in his stomach—and not just from his lunch—as he quickly walked, and then ran to where the sedan was parked, passing by McDonald's brightly-colored trash bins, Hispanic fatsos snacking on chicken McNuggets, and CCTV cameras rotating on street poles (their numbers seemed to have exploded in the last couple of weeks). He hesitated before the car for a split second—what if this was the wrong car and he had the wrong dude?—before pulling open the door to the shotgun seat and climbed inside.

On the night Lucas had learned about the existence of the hitman, he and his buddy Matt had been commiserating together through drinking. Mostly about their respective girlfriends—ex-girlfriends—but also about the sorry state of mankind. *Mankind*, that is. It seemed that everybody is somehow gay now. The 260-pound football quarterback who played for Lucas' home team turned out to be gay. The actor who starred in *Prison Break* turned out to be gay. The soldier who had tattled on the government disappeared for a month before turning up in Russia in a dress. Lucas was weary of this pandemic of homosexuality, and dreaded a day when he would wake up to find his bed being surrounded by an army of short shorts-wearing men with chihuahuas on leashes, yelling, in a lisp: “hello!” Matt had revealed that he actually had recurring nightmares of this happening. “But you know someone who's real manly?” he had sipped his beer before smirking. That man was sitting in the sedan right now. The moment Lucas laid eyes on the hitman he knew that this was a man's man. Manly denim vest. Bare and veiny arms. Tattoo of a Chinese character on the left shoulder. A single skull knuckle ring on the left middle finger. Long ZZ beard. Cool sunglasses. Hands on the steering wheel like a motherfucking boss. There was no air conditioning in the car and something stank. The stench of manliness.

“Well?” the hitman asked and Lucas thought, *this is the real deal*. He began to blather out his story; about how his girlfriend—ex-girlfriend—had dumped him and taken away his car (“I mean, it was technically in her name, but still!”). The hitman remained mostly silent as he listened to Lucas' story, interjecting an “uh huh” here and there. Sometimes Lucas wondered if he was boring the hitman, but he had that kind of mouth, the kind that won't shut up once it had opened. He was only able to stop when he paused for a breath and the hitman asked him: “so what do you want me to do?” The hitman had a hoarse voice, as if all the water in him had been squeezed out by the hot sun hovering outside the car.

“Naturally I want the bitch dead,” Lucas said. The hitman nodded and the car fell into silence. Lucas waited uncomfortably for a few seconds before recalling that he had a very important question to ask the hitman.

“So word on the street”—he was referring to Matt—“is that you can kill someone just by touching them? No gun, no knife, just a touch?”

This caused the hitman to laugh. The idea that someone could kill just through a touch had seemed ludicrous to Lucas when he had first heard about it. He had thought that it was just a figure of speech about how good the hitman was. But the look on Matt’s face told Lucas that he had meant it literally, and after Lucas had seen *X-Men: The Last Stand* on Blu-ray, he too had become intrigued. He had to admit that this was part of the reason why he had wanted to meet the hitman in the first place. If this actually happened to be true, then it will just be like Rogue, except ten times better because it would have been a *man* with the power. He looked at the hitman’s bare arms and a thought came to him: what if the hitman was going to jump on him, demonstrating his powers on the only other living thing in the car? He began to sweat—and not just because the car didn’t have air conditioning on. Then he reminded himself that the hitman was still doing business with a client, one with money, and he wouldn’t just throw away cash like that, the way Rogue stupidly threw away her power. And so he relaxed and looked at the hitman hopefully. Still guffawing, the hitman shook his head.

“Oh,” Lucas said.

“That must have been a figure of speech or something,” the hitman said. “I’m good, but not that good.” He removed his sunglasses and Lucas saw that his eyes were blue, with a liquid quality to them, and they reminded him of a drug he had once used in college but whose name he had forgotten. *It’s alright*, he told himself. *It probably gets this question all the time* But he could hear his girlfriend—ex-girlfriend—cackling. “You can still kill the regular way, right?” he asked, and the hitman laughed again.

After Lucas left the car, the hitman watched him through the car window as Lucas skittered across the parking lot, back into the McDonald’s to probably get a soda or something; he had looked parched while sitting in the car. The hitman had a theory that to get anywhere on foot in this kind of temperature, people could either walk or run. If they ran, they could get to their destination (hopefully with air conditioning) faster; but in doing so, they will have to expend energy, making them pant like some animal in heat. On the other hand, if they walked, they conserve energy; but they will also spend more time being tortured in the sun.

Some people, like Lucas Lucivero, will attempt to cheat by doing both in succession, unable to make up their mind. But ultimately they will end up doing one or the other. Lucivero, short on breath after sprinting for a few minutes, chose to walk. The hitman felt apologetic; he should have parked his car closer to the McDonald’s. As he turned on the air conditioning, his cellphone rang.

“Hey Amber,”

“Hi. How did it go?”

“Pretty well, I would say. The fucker didn’t have any money, though.”

Amber didn’t respond right away, and he realized that he was still pretending to be a member of Hell’s Angels. “Sorry,” he said, returning to his normal voice, “sometimes it’s hard to break out of character.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. They went on to discuss the logistics of Lucas Lucivero’s “hit”, like whether the hitman had ensured that he did not coerce Lucivero into ordering a

hit in any way (“Listen to the recording”, he said).

“Oh yeah, you will never believe what Lucivero said...”

“Did Brian tell you about the new case?”

“What? Oh I don’t think so,” he was more upset than he should about his funny anecdote being interrupted.

“Mary White; schoolteacher; wants her son-in-law murdered for five grand.”

He whistled. “Wow,” he said.

“She should be contacting you soon.” There was a pause. “Look, are you sure you don’t want to take some time off...”

“Oh no! it’s fine...”

“With what’s happening to Rose...”

“I’m fine,” he said. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Alright then,” she sounded unconvinced. “So are we clear on things?”

“Yeah,” but she already hung up.

To put it bluntly, the hitman often envisioned Amber as having reptilian blood, for her voice always sounded so cold, even when she was ostensibly extending kindness, like now. But then, as he drove onto the ash-like asphalt, he recalled the day of the funeral, when she had cradled the tiny casket in her arms. She had kissed it before it was lowered into the earth.

He resided in a townhouse that was a long drive away from the city where the meeting with Lucas Lucivero had taken place, and he liked that, for he shuddered at the thought of accidentally bumping into Lucivero while buying groceries, even though the possibility of that happening is low, as he and his wife only shopped at Trader Joe’s, and his clients, usually straddling on the lower end of the socioeconomic strata, probably shopped at Wal-Mart. Indeed, he had been surprised to learn that his new client was a schoolteacher. Then again, there was a first time for everything. Besides, the defining quality of his clients wasn’t their poverty, but their naïveté. They were always so ready to believe that all of their problems in life will be solved if this one person in their life—the cheating boyfriend, the bitchy girlfriend, the witness who saw them beat someone up—would *just die*, and that a total stranger dressed in a bikers’ gang outfit will just gladly help them in making it happen. He pitied them, for the way they were so easily fooled and for their foolish faith, a faith that was so unshakable it took on an almost holy aura. On the wall of the hitman’s cubicle there was a poster that said: “WHOEVER FIGHTS MONSTERS SHOULD SEE TO IT THAT IN THE PROCESS HE DOES NOT BECOME A MONSTER IN THE PROCESS.” He thought that a better line would have been: “WHOEVER WANTS TO BECOME A MONSTER SHOULD SEE TO IT THAT IN THE PROCESS THEY DO NOT BECOME A SAINT IN THE PROCESS.” It didn’t have the same ring to it, but it captured the irony perfectly.

He turned on the radio and listened as the radio host began the newscast. The older he got, the more the news of today and the news of yesterday seemed to blur together. Yesterday the country had enemies in Asia; today the country had enemies in the Middle East. Yesterday the economy was in the toilet; today the economy was in the toilet. Yesterday people were being spat on; today people were being shit on. It was the same tiring tableau over and over again, and he struggled to keep awake so that he wouldn’t fall asleep on the

wheels. All of a sudden, the radio host, in his rich and sonorous voice, began to sound very excited.

“...Interviewer colon, how did you know when your victims won’t be home? Linebreak Rose colon, bitch don’t you know know lowercase I have a third eye? Hashtag queen.’ Listeners, that was the caption to a gif on tumblr of Rose Ullmann rolling her eyes during her ABC interview. Yes, it would appear that our very own Rose Ullmann—Burglar Queen, as some are now calling her—is now one of the most popular people on tumblr, our favourite social network website! Even more popular than...”

“Son of a bitch!” a Mack truck with a double trailer popped out of nowhere on his left, and the hitman had to hit the brakes to slow his car down so that he could let the tall truck drive past him.

“...as some of you may know, it is a mystery exactly how Rose Ullmann plans her burglaries. She seemed to know, with an uncanny degree of accuracy, exactly when her victims will and will not be home. One robbed victim, a rather well-known socialite who would prefer her name not known, revealed in a tell-all press release that she went out for thirty minutes to throw away the clothes she had bought last week, and when she was back, she found her entire mansion ransacked. ‘How in God’s name did she know that the mansion was all empty because I had brought along my butler, housekeeper, maids (all twelve of ‘em), cook, personal shopper, personal trainer, and all of my security guards with me in my limousine?’ the socialite had pondered out loud to no one in particular during her press release. ‘And how did she know that I wouldn’t back back for at least thirty minutes (there was a lot of clothing to be thrown away)?’ Indeed, listeners...”

The hitman was still shaking. He never knew why he had such a problem driving beside big trucks. Was it how it had partially obscured his field of vision? Was it how unsteady it had seemed, like it was going to flip over itself and crush him and his sedan at any given moment? After he calmed down, he began to chuckle, for during that temporary blindness, he had very much wanted to throttle the driver of that truck—probably some poor fat fucker—even though he knew that the truck driver had done nothing wrong. It was a morbid—and ironic, considering his job—thought, but he took comfort in the fact that at least he hadn’t done it. And that if he were to do it, he would’ve done it himself, confidently and coolly and cruelly, and not relying on the service of someone else.

“...she is still pleading “not guilty,” listeners. But please, let us know, how do you think she accomplished all those burglaries? Do you believe in the official explanation, that she had camped out in the neighborhood all night, waiting for her victims to leave their houses? Or do you believe that she possesses the power of clairvoyance? Please, let us know at...”

The hitman turned off the radio. His car was now the only one on the highway, and he had an unobstructed view of the miles of desert that stretched away from him from both sides of the road.

The phone call from White came during the weekend. He was sitting in the living room, on the green sofa, watching reruns of *Duck Dynasty*. The air conditioning was on at full force. His wife, who was supposed to be in the garden tending to her tomatoes, was holding the ringing phone in front of him. He didn’t take it, and just looked up at her as she stood there, her entire body still save for her impatiently shaking knees. Finally, she just threw the phone onto the sofa and went back into the garden, and the phone lied there, still ringing. His wife

didn't really know what he did for a living (confidentiality was part of the deal), and half of him was relieved that she hadn't picked up the phone, for it would obviously be disastrous for her to speak with someone who was essentially a criminal. But half of him was furious at the way she had thrown the phone onto the sofa, with such disdain, and wished that she would've just picked it up.

He muted the television and the whirring of the air conditioning unit came back. Normally he would've made the call to a prospective criminal with his costume on and sitting in a bar or something, as he felt that he slipped into character more easily when he was in his costume and downing shots of tequila, like how people being interviewed over the phone was supposed to dress up in business garb and chew gum beforehand so that they would speak more professionally (he learned that from a career development workshop). But since White was the one calling, he had no time to prepare.

"Hello?" the woman on the other side spoke with a nasal voice, and sounded as if she was inhaling secondhand smoke through her phone. "Is this the hitman?"

"That's me, ma'am," he said, trying to sound like he had smoked all his life.

"Oh..." White whimpered, Her whimpers sounded like a dying cat pleading with its owner to play with it for one last time. The hitman waited for the excruciating noise to stop before saying: "And what can I do for you today?"

"I need you to murder my son-in-law," she said.

"Uh-huh," he said, and wondered if he could get away with watching television and speaking to a prospective criminal at the same time.

"He is molesting my granddaughter," she said, and it was like the living room was all of a sudden being filled with the screech of the dying cat as it was being nailed onto a crucifix.

"I see," he said.

"Can you make it look like an accident?" she continued. "Like a gas leak or a car accident?"

He was staring at the patch of carpet right under his feet. Once upon a time Rose had spilled something there, and an amorphous stain had made its home there. "That's what I do, ma'am," he said. "When they see his corpse..."

"...Nobody believed me when I told them..."

"...He would've died so naturally that it will look as if he had died..."

"...Even though I had seen it with my own eyes..."

"...Just from someone touching him." A pause.

"Excuse me?" Shit, he had no idea where that came from. She wanted the death to look *natural*, not *peaceful*. "My bad," he laughed. Shit. "I mean, I don't mean to be insensitive, ma'am..."

"It's alright."

"Listen, I'll see..."

"What kind of information do you need?"

"What can I do. Umm...why don't you mail me all the information you think I will need," he could picture her nodding, "and send them to this PO box." He gave her the address of a PO box that was being monitored by officers 24/7. All the while he stared at the shape on the carpet, even long after she had hung up. It looked like a puff of smoke rising from a pyre, on which the dead cat was being lit on fire.

When he wasn't out in the field, he sat in his cubicle, in front of his computer, in a climate-controlled office building, where one needs to swipe their access ID card to enter, to leave, or to print something from the printer. Where an insignia of a stern-looking bald eagle greeted everyone when they entered the building through the lobby. Across the narrow hall from him was a beautiful mahogany office that housed a not so beautiful woman, who snorted and squealed with loud laughter day in and day out. It was this almost spasmodic laughter that had caused him to fantasize about this woman's death (brain spilled everywhere), which in turn had caused him to miss an ephemeral "Incoming Email" pop-up that had appeared on the right-hand corner of his computer screen in the early morning. The email was only read, when, as he scrolled through his Outlook inbox mindlessly during the late afternoon (trying, at the same time, to adjust the height of his swivel chair so as to improve the overall ergonomics of the workstation), he saw the bolded subject header of an email pertaining to a package sent by Mary White.

The email was lengthy, with several attachments. The first one was a scanned photo of a woman and a young girl posing on the beach, in front of a sand castle that was being crumbled by the rising tide. The woman looked like Amber, except instead of Amber's auburn hair her hair was dirty blond, tied into a knot. She was wearing a floral dress and was kneeling behind the young girl, her arms wrapping around the girl in a hug. The young girl could not be older than seven, and had a petit triangular face, with pigtails growing out of her head. She had the same style of hair and dress as the woman behind her. All smiles both of them, and their eyes were squinting from the sun. To their right and concealing the sea was a massive yellow post-it note that contained the words, written in smudged red pen, "Sandy and her mother (PROTECT)." Even though the word "PROTECT" was in parenthesis, it seemed less like an afterthought and more like a commandment.

The email message mentioned that Mary White had also included other information in her package: an address, a map, instructions (not on how to kill but on where to find the spare key), when the target will be home, and so forth. The agents who had intercepted the package also noted that there were two fifty dollar bills, presumably there as a down payment. Interestingly enough, she had failed to provide a photo of the monster himself. The hitman found himself wondering about what the monster looked like as he swiped his ID tag and printed out the attachments and the email. He quietly sneaked out of the office building, leaving behind the insignia and badge of the Bald Eagle. In his mind, the monster looked like the creepy sheriff of the jail Rose was being held in.

He had called her the other day. It had not gone well.

"Mom's not there with you?" Rose had asked. His wife was one of the few people who still believed in Rose's innocence.

"No she's not."

"Oh."

"I know you don't want to speak to me..."

"No not at all..."

"...But I just need to know"

"What Dad?"

"Why?" It was at times like these when he wished that he could cry, like how his wife cried when Rose had appeared before them in her zebra-striped prison uniform. His wife had embraced their daughter while he had just stood there, unable to say a word or feel a

thing.

“What?”

“Why did you do it?”

“I told you I’m innocent.” She had sounded surprisingly disaffected by somebody who was pleading for her innocence. “I’m innocent,” she had said matter-of-factly, as if what she was going through was merely one of those video game she was playing and that at any given time she could easily press “exit” and actually exit.

“There was CCTV footage of you, Rose.”

“And you are fine with that? The government spying on us like this?” She had always been quite the libertarian.

“Look, I’m not talking about the burglaries. I think that I can almost,” he had been careful with his choice of words, “understand why you did them. And you donated all the money you stole. That was,” fuck it. “Commendable. But what I’m not getting, is why—” He had not been able to finish the sentence. He couldn’t remember the rest of the conversation very well, only that Rose had been repeating over and over again that she was innocent. No doubt this was how her lawyers and her mother had trained her. They knew that he couldn’t be trusted. After all, he was the one who had refused to bail her out. “She committed a crime and so she needs to serve her time,” he explained to his wife curtly. But it wasn’t as if he had physically restrained his wife from posting their daughter’s bail (he would *never* lay a hand on a woman or a child). In the end, Rose surprised everyone by choosing to stay in jail herself.

At rush hour, the highway would be congested with cars, exhaust pipes roaring, like newborn chicks chirping on conveyor belts as they were being sexed by faceless workers (this practice he had learned from a documentary on factory farming that Rose had made him watch). But now was not rush hour, and the hitman’s car was the only one on the road. He couldn’t help but feel that the Rose in jail was a far cry from the Rose he had known before. That Rose had been a girl scout, a die-hard fan of *The Princess Bride*, someone who had once given a random beggar on the street \$40.00. He and his wife were furious when they learned that she had given such a large sum of money away. Apparently the beggar had claimed that she had been evicted from her apartment and that she had three children to feed. They tried in vain to explain to Rose that the beggar was probably a lying drug addict, in which case she had just wasted her money, but she argued with them the whole night. She shouted that being swindled \$40.00 was better than not helping someone when she could’ve helped. She was 13 then, and was grounded for a week. But something she had said that night stuck with him after all this time. When the topic of debate swerved onto the the beggar’s character, Rose had proclaimed that “People aren’t just good or evil,” with air quotes around the words “good” and “evil” as if they and didn’t mean a damn thing in the world. He wished that he had rebutted her then, that while it was true that many people are inevitably morally ambiguous, there were people who were incontrovertibly good and there were people who were incontrovertibly evil. He stopped the sedan at a gas station, and after the gas tank of his sedan was filled, he retrieved the map Mary White had sent from the glove department, and kept on driving.

The neighborhood the monster was supposed to be living in was easy enough to find. A run-of-the-mill suburb, all the roads neatly laid next to one another, with no twists and

turns like some of the other, creepier, neighborhoods. At first the houses that the hitman walked past all looked distinct from one another, but upon closer inspection it became clear that they all looked the same, with the same green moat-like lawn, the same white iron-shut doors that separated the outside from the inside, being guarded by the same demonic-looking garden gnomes. The hitman had parked his sedan in a nearby neighborhood, one that didn't look too differently this one, and he was walking towards the monster's house in the night, carrying nothing but the gun hidden in his vest. He didn't know how he was going to pull off a "natural" death with a gun (Can someone be pistol-whipped to death? Then he can make it look as if the poor bastard had simply fallen off the stairs or something). But then again, he didn't even know if Mary White was telling the truth or not. Suppose she was mentally-ill? The hitman kept on walking, half-heartedly avoiding the CCTV cameras that rotated about the street lamps. He hadn't done anything bad yet, he reminded himself. It was just a look, and there was little point in thinking so far ahead and driving himself mad. If things were what Mary White had claimed them to be (though he had no idea how he was going to ask the little girl if she was sexually molested or not), then he could think about his next course of action.

Nobody responded when he rang the doorbell. From the outside, it appeared that not a single light in the house was lit. He waited for a while, and when there was still no response, he squatted down and, decapitating one of the garden gnomes that stood sentry on the lawn, he retrieved the spare key from inside the its empty ceramic cranium. He turned the doorknob while pressing his entire body weight against it—the damned door moaned "eeeeee"—and raised his gun. "It's the police!" he yelled.

There was no one to surprise. Instead he found himself staring into a short hallway with a corridor on his left. He put his gun back into his vest. The short hallway led into a space where the only visible things were the outlines and shadows of some grotesque shapes. The only light was coming from outside the house, through a glass screen door on the far-end of the room. It was the light from the neighboring houses, and he found himself wondering if any of the neighbors knew about what was happening to Mary White's granddaughter.

When he walked closer to them the shapes turned out to be chairs that were spread haphazardly around a long table, and in the darkness he navigated through them like he was rowing a ferry through rough waters. He could feel something behind him, but did not look behind him, for he suspected that whatever it is, it would disappear the moment he turned his back.

He stepped on something. He bent down and picked it up. It was a Barbie doll. Its dirty blond hair looked almost phosphorescent in the heat-oppressed darkness. What big eyes it had. He was at the kitchen now.

When he arrived at the kitchen he heard a whimper. Ethereal and faltering, it was coming from somewhere inside the pantry. He drew his gun.

It was a dog; a golden retriever, seeing how its fur practically shined in the darkness. It was curled up in front of the cabinets of the pantry, as if it was supposed to be guarding the racks of soil-colored spices, though it was obviously not doing a good job, judging from the way it lied on the hardwood floor, pathetically whimpering.

Suddenly the sensation of a gun barrel against his head. The dog began to bark. The gun felt cool, especially in contrast to the hot air inside the house. "Drop it, " a sleazy voice came from behind him, and the hitman's gun fell lifelessly onto the floor.

A tightening of a blindfold over his eyes. The clink of a pair of handcuffs over his hands. The frantic barking of the dog somewhere close to him. All this occurred without him turning around. “Kneel,” whoever was behind him commanded him, and the hitman did as he was told.

“I’m guessing you were the guy hired by that old woman?” The man’s voice was melodious, and the dog’s barking receded into a whimper.

The hitman decided to keep quiet.

Scoff. Footsteps pacing around. “It’s funny. You act as if you don’t know who I am.”

Should he know him? Was this one of the people he had once coaxed, now here to get revenge? The hitman searched through his memories, but they were all filled with blurry images of weak, sniveling men and women, their frightened faces looking up at him. Nothing concrete came to mind. “Well, I guess there’s a first time for everything.” The man’s voice coming directly overhead now. The man saying “this was their dog” without explaining who the “their” was. The dog yelling “woof woof.” Then silence. Then the sound of something heavy hitting the floor.

“Touch it.” The screech of something heavy sliding across the floor. The dead dog’s still warm fur. The man saying “No gun, no knife, just a touch,” A sudden itch on the left foot. Six-year-old Rose watching *The Princess Bride* over and over again and repeating the famous line from the movie: “My name is Inigo Montoya, you killed my father, prepare to die.” Rose saying “Of course I would avenge you, daddy!” The man saying “Goodnight and goodbye.”

Pounding on the front door. The man saying “Shit!” The sound of somebody climbing the stairs. The sound of the door being forcibly opened. Footsteps, growing louder and louder. Finally Amber’s voice, saying something indiscernible.

Mary White was arrested the very next day; the charge being federal murder for hire. The hitman never found out the truth behind her claim, for he himself was discharged the very next day.

“You are very fortunate,” Amber said.

“How did you know I was there?” he said.

“What on Earth were you trying to pull there?”

“How did you know I was there?”

She looked up at him in surprise. “Didn’t she tell you? Your daughter. She called us in the middle of the night, gave us the address of the house, and begged us to do something...”

He nodded.

“...although I had no idea how she knew you were there. Anyway, where was I? Oh yes. Like I’ve said, you were very fortunate that night. Lord knows that you were trying to pull...”

“I thought you’d understand.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“There was a girl who was being molested!” he was beginning to yell. “Of course I had to do something! Wouldn’t you? I mean, you’ve lost a child before...”

He expected her to slap him across the face, but she didn’t. She merely looked at him with surprise. “My daughter died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome,” there was no sadness on her face as she said this, “while what you are suggesting is vigilantism. Those two things

are completely different.” She looked down at her watch. “Look, you’re obviously going through a lot. Why don’t you take a break?”

He didn’t bother asking Amber what happened to the man he had met. It was just as well, since he never saw that man again. Then again, since he had been blindfolded that night, even if he did see the man, there was no way for him to tell that it was him. He didn’t dwell on this however, for there were other more pressing matter. During the trial Rose sat with her shoulder slouched forward when the verdict was reached. Guilty. Multiple counts of second degree burglary. One count of federal murder for hire.

Somebody had seen her during one of her burglaries. “I need that person dead,” the recording was playing back her voice. “Are you sure?” a man carefully asked in the recording. It had been one of his duties to ask again and again to make sure that he wasn’t coercing her into making a hit in any way. They had met, her and the man, and during their meeting she had inexplicably confessed all her burglary activities to him. Something in the man she had met—one of the army of agents hired by the government to weed out people like her—had made her trust him.

Still she pleaded not guilty, even though nobody in the courtroom believed her. She was led away in handcuffs and that was the last time he ever saw her. After the trial came the long and languishing days, stretching as far as the desert around the highway, of unemployment, of divorce, of surveillance, of the country winning “the war”—somehow they had gained the ability of finding out exactly where the insurgents were hiding—and of even sillier conspiracies on the radio: “People with superhuman powers are being locked up by the government!” Sometimes, when he shopped for rotting tomatoes at WalMart, he would see a woman with her back turned to him, and he would rejoice, thinking that it was Rose. But then the woman turned around and he could see that despite her blond hair, tied into a knot, he had been mistaken once again.