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of the
Weekend
Warrior
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CHAPTER ONE

"Look." Wiley arranged his face and posture into a sub-verbal plea for empathy. "Victims have their problems, I have mine. Where's the compassion?"

It certainly wasn't throwing any pity parties in the back seat of the Suburban. Caitlin exhibited the same posture towards the two feet of leather-like expanse between them that Israel shows towards border strips. Getting a glance down that monumental cleavage, much less a hand or tongue, looked like long odds. But the day was still young, firm, and confused.

Caitlin's cosmetically perfect face masked her disgust, the way it masked everything else. Wiley didn't really need to trot out his personal museum of nasty character tags and drooling glances to rate her revulsion. He had her from hello. She didn't know what she'd been expecting, but this damaged, fashion-oblivious, grooming-challenged, goat-goateed barfly wasn't it. Wasn't even in the same cell footprint as it. The beautiful face remained professionally neutral as she Inquired, "So what is your main problem, Wiley? In the general sense of the question."

"They won't let me have firearms anymore. Or even blunt instruments."

"I'm glad to hear that." See, she could be sincere.

Wiley's eyes rolled with the smooth orbit of much practice. "You and my parole officer. Well, maybe it's not such a bad idea in my case. But how about you? Decent law-abiding little chunka rape bait who doesn't want to give it up to any AIDS-packing asshole who does happen to have a weapon?"

"Gun control cuts both ways."

"Sounds more like doublebit axe control. But, yeah, illegalizing things always works so well. You'll never see drugs or muggings after they make 'em against the law."

"Personally, I carry pepper spray." She'd wanted to work that in, anyway.

"Figures." Wiley put on a snotty bitch accent that didn't sound anything like Caitlin's actual snotty bitch delivery. "Would you like ground pepper on your cornea this evening, Sir?"

Caitlin's mask curled up around the edges for a moment. Wiley saw it, pressed in.

"Listen, Ms. Consumer Affairs…ever hear of environmental sensitivity? The rest of us out here might like to keep breathing. Not to mention it's an aerosol, right? Or do you think of the hydrofluorocarbon propellants as sort of salt in the wound if you're macing an environmentalist or some other ozone fancier?"

In the driver's seat, Mike caught Linsey's eye, keeping his grin out of Caitlin's line of fire. He'd been surreptitiously taping the whole thing ever since they left the station. You never knew when you'd get paydirt. She nodded to him, turned around over the seat with her mini-cam. Caitlin shot her a look.

"Might as well get max footage, since we don't know where it's going." Linsey shrugged. "Little verité, "Cops", live action type stuff."

Caitlin let it alone, turned back to Wiley, who was fooling around with the window control. "Linsey has a point. What are we doing in this segment? Why am I interviewing you?"

"My guess? They're starting to realize you're boring, honey. By now everybody's figured out that no matter how it looks, your jugs aren't going to fall out on the air. So they're losing interest."

Eye into the cam, Linsey showed nothing to the back seat, but her left foot kicked a delighted tattoo against Mike's right thigh. He turned up the gain on his microphone.

"Hey, don't shoot the messenger," Wiley demurred with spread hands. "I'm just hypothesizing. You people came to me. I'm supposed to put the "hard" back in "Hard Look," right?"

Linsey was disappointed. Caitlin didn't detonate; just froze into a platinum sculpture. Didn't even twitch a hand towards the pepper spray or Wiley's eyeballs like you know she wanted to. Damn. Instead she reached up to pat the impervious umbra of her expensive blonde job, a gesture the entire staff had decoded as a fetish of reassurance. No point in gutting this shlub until she got to the bottom of the whole dreary incident. She was dying to know why star On Air Talent and the audio-visual A team was driving around with this balding, tatty field rat.

So she spoke calmly. More or less. "But how? What are we doing? Where is this thing going?"

"Butch's Gun World." Wiley peered around SUV critically. "Why don't you get a van? Flasher lights, siren, recliner swivel seats. They should bring me in as a consultant."

"*Gun* World?" Caitlin did verbal double-takes when agitated. "Gun *World*?"

"And gun-like accessories for the modern urban habitat," Wiley nodded. "You yuppies all want loft living and lofty goals, but don't want to observe the protocols. The over-ride in the under-brush, see what I'm saying?"

Caitlin leaned towards him to scowl, "This show doesn't do gun segments."

Wylie peeked when she lunged forward, settled back as she withdrew. "Hey, whose fault is that? Thing is, "awareness" shows like this are dropping the ball on the whole weapons issue. If Consumer Reports tested the B-1 Bomber or, you know, Star Wars, we might have saved a brazillion or two. Hard to imagine them rating the Stealth Bomber as a Best Value." He framed the words with two-fingered "quotation marks".

Caitlin dragged her locus of loathing from the ruin of his fingernails to the bland assurance on his face. She leaned forward , cupping her head in her hands. Wiley reached out for a reassuring pat on the back, but caught Linsey's frantic headshakes and called it off. Copping back is a zero anyway.

Caitlin muttered, "They must have lost their damned minds."

Butch's might not be a world, but it stakes out some highly uncontested territory of the "Guns R Us" variety. Every prospect pleases the eye with blued, peened, chromed examples of how the West was won...and continues to re-win itself. The gaze falls on highlights that inspire inner thoughts such as, "Jesus, is that that legal to own?" or, "Now when they say, 'No background check on this one,' are they for real?" To Caitlin it was like moving through a creepy cavern lined with toothy vampire bats that might suddenly wake up and chatter into a grisly feeding frenzy. To Mike and Linsey it was "op of the month" and they quickly hooked up their feed cameras and booms, cruising the deadly wall décor with unfeigned delight and no visual irony.

Butch himself, who augmented his rangy cowpoke look with jeans, snap-button shirts, and a vintage Colt revolver, watched the preparations with a smile. His salesmen, both packing flamboyant heat, hung over the far counter, elbows resting on glass over schools of pistols hovering like barracuda in an aquarium. The tall one looked like James Coburn playing a mercenary, the chubby one looked like Chris Penn playing a guy nobody dreamed would turn into a serial killer whose seven state rampage brought premature bereavement to hundreds.

They dug the camera, the novelty and the close-up view of Caitlin's justly famous and professionally displayed bosom. Especially as it heaved in exasperation during her emotion-laden chat on her cellular phone. They normally agreed on very little other than the multi-faceted life advantages of superior firepower, but came to accord on the proposition that if that Jap the Padres picked up from Cincinnati could pitch a slider as nice as Caitlin could pitch a fit, the results would be Goodbye cellar, Hello home field advantage in Petco Park.

Meanwhile, Wiley flirted with the camera. He held a massive, Star Wars-class electric stun gun on his palm by his face, mugging like a spokesmodel pimping hair rinse or boutique coffee. Motioning Mike in closer with the omni-directional boom, he purred, "Note the slim black polycarbonate case, the sexy steel studs protruding like penis piercings but delivering one hundred eighty thousand volts of persuasion. Perfect tool for the third millennium, wouldn't you say, Butch?"

"I think of it like my TV remote, buddy. You point it at the program you don't like and Zaparoonie! Hassles deleted. It's really just a mute button for real life."

Wiley nodded, appreciating the wisdom of the remarks and aptness of the analogy. "But what people want to know, podnuh, is will this gizmo actually blitz some molester back to the stone age, or not. They're betting their buns on it, is my point."

Butch found the very idea of doubt amusing. "Here at The World we stand behind every product we sell."

The chubby salesman chimed in, "You wanna stand in front of 'em, that's your lookout."

Hard to argue with that one, either. Wiley moved on to more technical grounds. "But has it ever been tested on real, live crash dummies? Nobody ever does that with weapons." He leaned close to the camera with a confidential, wised-up look. "You starting to figure out that's what we're here for?"

Wiley's seduction and impregnation of the lens was interrupted by a curt snap from Caitlin. "Okay, cut!" His image flicked off the viewscreen, replaced by Caitlin, striding purposefully towards them, holstering her cell phone as if she'd just twirled it and blown smoke off its barrel. She obviously felt much better about the whole procedure.

"Listen up. I just spoke to Barry and I've got it figured out." She turned to Wiley with a "jig's up" demeanor. "I don't know why I got that email about you being a special guest producer. Though I have my suspicions."

Wiley stepped slightly back, moved the Stun Gun slightly forward.

"What they are actually thinking back in the office is a sort of George Plimpton/Geraldo Rivera reality thing. You stun yourself and we see what happens, then you tell us about it. Or, I'll be happy to stun yourself for you."

Wiley seemed mystified by this information. "*That's* what they're thinking? What is this, Jackass: The Electrocution?"

Almost imperceptible changes in the muscle tone of her face would have indicated to a close observer that Caitlin was starting to enjoy it. "They're thinking that for a reason. Namely because you told them that's what you were going to do." She rolled right by Wiley's feeble dismissive hand flutter. "And that is what we'll be paying you to do. Or not paying you not to do. So I intro you, you zap yourself with that gadget, I interview the remains. Ready, Freddy?

Butch was impressed. "Wow. That's more commitment than you'd get at Consumer Reports".

Wiley quickly sorted through the narrowing tree of responses and escape routes. "Let me tell you something I learned from those experiments they do with rats."

Caitlin, her control restored, savored the luxury of humoring him. "And what did you learn?"

"Don't be that rat."

The chunky salesman nodded to endorse the wisdom in that little caveat. Adding, "Being the deer sucks, too."

"So does being in charge of this segment," Caitlin snarled, ramping back up to command. "So Wiley. Are you ready? On your 'X'? Got your motivation?"

Wiley leaned his head over, slapping his ear as if he had a malfunctioning hearing aid, or perhaps an invasive mosquito. "Hello? Incoming? It's getting pretty clear to me that it's not my calling in life to, what would you say? Mortify my flesh to edify some freeloader watching a show without even Paying Per View. What I most need here is some creative space for observation."

Once again Caitlin felt control slipping through her expensively maintained fingertips. What the hell was it with this Wiley guy? And how could she put him up on blocks? Or stuff his head for her wall? "What? Are you babbling about?"

"About pure street cred, honeybuns. About the American male at large, the face of the crowd, the impact demographic, point of purchase sensibility. I'm Street Corner Talking, here. I'm all about, like, Bus Stop."

Actually, it turned out to be a pretty upscale, concerned commuter, type bus stop. The sign on the bench advertised a sushi bar. The waiting passengers wore suits and carried slim leather cases. They looked at the camera incuriously. The men checked out Caitlin a little more acutely, but played it cool behind their Wall Street Journals, not at all affected by the proximity to celebrity. The women scanned her quickly, registered the peculiarly female admiration/hatred, and subtly turned away.

Mike and Linsey had their gear on line and ready to position, but there's always some hold up. In this case Wiley, remonstrating with Caitlin in a somewhat pushy bid for understanding and a little slack. "They told me it's probably because when I was two I stuck my little dingus into a lightbulb socket. Might be another one of their apocalyptic stories."

"Apocryphal stories."

"If you'd been there you might have thought it was Apocalyptic Now. And I gotta admit, it sounds like the sort of thing I would have done. But you can see where it would breed all sorts of phobias, if you follow me."

"Do I look like somebody who follows your trainwreck of thought?"

"I'm talking about boinking a light socket. Come on, you're supposed to be a professional information hunter/gatherer. Let's focus up a little, right?" Wiley pointed at the suits at the bus stop. "Look at those cellphone-toting, corporate inside briefcase bearers. I could, you know, just stroll up behind them and twang my magic twanger on their asses while you roll tape. Hey, the latest in communication technology, yuppie scum. The medium is the message and the message is medium rare."

Caitlin kept her eyes on him as she barked over her shoulder, "Mike, if he makes a move towards them, take out his kneecaps."

Deeply offending Wiley's sensibilities. "Oh, man. I wasn't going to actually do it. I doubt my PO would be too impressed by the whatchacallit, scientific imperative. No, we do it the capitalist way: wait for our guinea pig, then offer to pay. Surely you remember back in those bygone days, 'Will work for money'?"

Caitlin inspected the skyline, then the mild damage her silkwrapped nails had done to the luxuriant skin of her palms. What she whispered was almost a prayer: "Somebody has to die for doing this to me."

Even Wiley's synthetic bravado was getting worn a little thin after the passage of fifteen strained minutes. "Christ, zip for four," he bitched. "It’s enough to topple your whole belief in the exploitation theory of capitalism. If it hasn't keeled over already. What good is it having all these desperately poor, homeless dipshits running around loose if you can't get them to do just about anything for a few bucks?"

Caitlin dripped disdain. "Oh, I think you might have conned the wino into it if he hadn't thrown up."

Wiley waved his non-fool-suffering hand. "Useless for our purposes, baby. What I was trying to tell you: the man was already stunned." Suddenly his brow cleared, his posture straightened like a Setter spotting a grouse. "Hey! Pick up on the tweaker. Coming right this way. Beautiful!"

Sure enough, a muscular young speed freak named Chad was jittering down the sidewalk towards them, enthusiastically scoping out everything in view and much, much more. At the sight of Caitlin, his eyes widened and pants tented. He headed over, also emulating a bird dog, in his case a Pointer. Wiley hastened to intercept him.

Watching Wiley's gesticulations while negotiating with the amphetamine fan, Caitlin weathered another freshet of damaged reality. If you can't control things, what could they *do* to you? Not an inviting area for investigation. She motioned to Mike and Linsey, "This is so out of hand I'm going on autopilot for awhile. Just shoot anything that moves and we'll sort it out later."

Linsey was already storing images of the speeder. "Jesus, he's more interested in the jolt than the money."

"That's his problem. Set up and I'll see if I can get them up against the wall."

Which she eventually managed to do. She eyed Wiley standing in front of the peeling posters for rock concerts and psychic healers, thinking that having him up against a wall was a tragic waste of a firing squad op. Standing a safe distance away from the vibrating Chad, she leaned over so he could speak in her hand mike. "So how are you feeling, Chad?"

"Me? Yeah! I feel great. Fucking excellent."

Oh good, Caitlin thought. I love asking questions to get answers we can't broadcast. "And you're ready and willing to experience the effects of the Dynamix 180 Stun Gun, then tell us about it?"

Chad stared at her with eyes like mating jellyfish, confusion feathering off into irritation. "What? Yeah, sure I'm ready. That's what's going down here, right? Hey, man! You said twenty bucks. What is this shit?"

"Actually," Caitlin said soothingly, "He should have said fifty dollars." She couldn't keep the venom out of, "Isn't that right, Wiley?" Chad's mercurial gaze wobbled between them, so she dialed back to the Soothe setting. "Don't worry, Chad. You'll get paid. Are you ready?"

Chad answered by pulling up his grubby T-shirt to reveal a six pack stomach, all fat long since burned off by the buzz. No doubt about it, Caitlin thought, this guy really says Street Crime in capital letters. Wiley might be a pustule on the butt of progress, but his plan's working out. Chad caught her stare at his midriff, made the obvious misinterpretation, and leered with badly receded teeth. And he knew exactly how to impress this bitch. "Beam me up, dewd," he told Wiley.

Wiley favored the camera with a "here I go" take, then placed the studs of the Dynamix 180 up to Chad's washboard navel and pulled the trigger. Chad launched backwards into a heap as if snatched by an invisible hand. Wiley stared at the stungun with new respect, as did Caitlin. Mike and Linsey were already covering Chad's twitching body.

Wiley stepped over to Linsey and gently pulled the lens up to take in his close-up and announcer voice. "The results of the application were extremely gratifying, especially to a longtime connoisseur of cat cartoons. Our subject stiffened and jolted in a true Tom and Jerry fashion. His eyes slammed up in his skull like Sylvester and he fell down in a very satisfying heap like the Coyote."

Linsey wrested the camera out of his clutches, returning it to Chad's unconscious form. Wiley continued as a remote voice over. "Unfortunately his skeleton did not light up and flash like an X-ray and he didn't break up into bouncing little chunks when he hit the pavement, as we've been led to expect. Life turns out to be a fairly shabby imitation of Art after all, it appears. We probably should have ordered the stunner from Acme."

Chad's eyes opened with a pretty good impression of the flipping roller shade effect so common in Toontown. He sat up and Caitlin squatted beside him, Wiley zeroing in on her skirt sliding up succulent thighs. She genuinely cared about Chad. It was her job. "How do you feel, Chad? Getting it together?"

"Or at least," Wiley chimed in, "As together as you had it before I zonked you?"

Caitlin managed to say, "Shut up, Wiley!" and "Are you okay, Chad?" in the same breath with different tones.

Chad was emphatic. " Man, that was filthy! What a fucking rush!"

"So you were immobilized and incapacitated? Incapable of aggression?"

"Fuck yeah!" Chad's eyes jitterbugged over to the Dynamix 180. "Hey, can you only set that on 'Stun'? Any other settings?"

From off camera, Wiley came through. "The mail order Acme model has 'Puree', 'Zombie' and 'St. Vitus Slam Dance'. But these guys don't know from going first class.

Chad shook his head admiringly at the stungun. "What do those things cost?"

"But wait," Wiley piped in, "Don't answer yet. You also get this lovely pepper spray dispenser. Just give him the thing, Ms. Consumer Coddler. They'll find him in a dumpster zapping himself shitless and selling plasma for C cells. Power to the people."

Caitlin rose and swiveled in the same smooth movement. She put her perfect face inches from Wiley's highly imperfect one and yelled, "Wiley, you shut the *fuck* up!"

Wiley stepped back from this manifestation, but not without getting a scan down the bodice. Linsey and Mike looked at each other, shocked. They'd never heard Caitlin swear before. She did it a decent job of it.

"Shut up and pay him, Wiley." She caught herself, visibly hauled back on the reins of reason. Wiley hunched a shoulder, shot his eyes sideways, inviting her to step away from Chad. Dumbfounded, she did it.

"Listen," Wiley said in a suave undertone, "If he's incapable of aggression, he's not really in any position to collect, is he? He got his free jazzing..."

Caitlin's expression and body talk made Linsey snap the camera from Chad to her, anticipating valuable footage of mayhem or homicide. It made Wiley take a step back.

"Kidding! I'm joking, okay? Christ almighty. I'm going to give him the money. What do you think I am?"

As devastating as Caitlin looked in flesh and blood, she was even more so on a television screen. A glance told you that this was a young woman destined to fulfill even her own gaudy vision of her future. She looked sexy and on top of things sitting beside Chad on the bus stop bench, the HARD LOOK logo winking below to her left. She spoke into her mike with professional cool.

"Incapable of aggression. At the touch of a button. We can do so many things at the touch of a button in our society: delete mail, call police, launch nuclear war. Isn't it worth eighty dollars to be able to push a button and stop street crime?"

She turned to Chad, her voice creamy and caring. "Thanks so much, Chad, for volunteering to help us give electric protection a Hard Look."

Then back to the camera, slick and automated, "I'm Caitlin Vanderkeller, On The Street. Now back to Barry and Corelle at Channel Nine Newscenter."

Barry and Corelle made positive sounds, surrendered their airspace to a commercial for talking geckos. Jerome the bartender reached to turn down the volume, then returned to stacking glasses. Specifically, the cheap, chipped glasses provided so the undiscriminating clientele of The Mimosa Club could convey alcohol from bottle to mouth. Most would have happily skipped the glasses and gone straight to the bottle, but that wasn't considered in the best interests of the management or public health.

The Mimosa was no longer a retreat for sailors whose memories of Subic Bay had lent an affection for tropical details and small, loose women; it was now a dingy, if not actually grubby, filling station for the permanently disaffected, disenfranchised and generally dysfunctional. If it had a theme song, it would be, "How would you like to go where everyone knows your alias"?

The room was too gloomy to even see the walls: a good thing, all told. The bar itself, however, was big and luxuriant. It had once been a peculiar American cultural item known as an "organ bar", where funlovers could place their drinks right on the instrument while singing along to skirling licks from forgotten airs. The bar was spacious because the organ had been removed and sold to stave off economic decline. Several of the clientele could make similar claims. The Mimosa had once been described as part of a system to convert blood plasma into alcohol. At varying rates of exchange. When a person sells their blood to eat, they've entered a rapidly narrowing loop, like that of a lasso. Selling blood to drink isn't quite like that. It's more a metaphor than anything.

Wiley sat at the pregnant bulge of upholstered frontrail where the organ had once wurled. It was as close as he got to a home. And the Mimosa's habitués and sons of habitués were his closest approximation of a family. Even if they weren't all there, they were there for him. His drinking and news watching companion, a battered barfly called Jasper, still gawked at the silent screen.

"I thought you said the show was about you?"

"Not *about* me," Wiley told him with the world-weary resignation of misunderstood celebrities everywhere, "I was the producer. You know, behind the scenes. You saw me in those shots, though, didn't you?"

" Looking good," Jasper nodded sloppily. "You really shock that punk's ass?"

"Duh? Why do you think call it 'reality television'? Of course, there's special effects, editing, technical stuff, involved.

"Know what I think?" Jasper asked this question a lot, apparently unaware of its absurdity. "I should get one of those things. Stun blaster jobs."

Jerome the bartender, who thought of the term "long suffering" as a job description, glanced up and issued another of his gravelly, no-bullshit, warnings. "Don't bring it in here, or you'll be out on your ass."

Wiley and Jasper avoided comment and eye contact by tossing back shots.

"All I need," Jerome groused, "You assholes start electrocuting each other."

Jasper waited the respectful pause before changing the subject. "So you really made it with that Caitlin piece? Yikes! Those knockers real?"

CHAPTER TWO

Rollie Moon was not ashamed to watch television. He'd devoted his life to print periodicals ("flushed" was the verb he currently preferred) but had no snobbery about electronic media. News is news is news, was his idea. And fluff is fluff and TV has no monopoly on that. Besides, he was a guy and most guys enjoyed Channel Nine News. MammoPorn, Rollie called it. Just out of the shower, he brushed his long hair dry while watching Jammi Jamison's athletic boobs bounce around in front of the weather map, ran a despairing hand over the fading tan and on his slackening surfer abs while admiring the soft curves and vixen face of co-anchor Corelle Pauls, brushed out his beard while awaiting the ice-sculpture perfection of Caitlin Vanderkeller on Hard Look. Which he actually did watch for mostly professional reasons. He wouldn't mind having a consumer advocate column at The Week, but hadn't been able to get it past The Egg Man. Might hurt advertising. Might get complicated. Might work.

Caitlin, probably number one on San Diego males' local Must Fuck lists, didn't grab Rollie's groin to any major extent, but he did have a sort of perverse interest in her. He admired perfection, and she was about as pristine a phenotype as you'd ever be exposed to. He didn't realize that was exactly what was keeping Caitlin down in the sub-minor leagues of San "Dago": she was just too perfect. Those who chose faces to go national knew Americans have a hard time relating to the immaculate. They like their phosphor idols to hint at the possibility they might live next door to somebody who didn't need bodyguards to keep people off their beach. They like flaws, prefer the ninety second percentile. True in Rollie's case: he didn't respond to Caitlin because he didn't see her as being in his mating pool, maybe even his gene pool. But she shone as an icon. And maybe a symbol of the perfection he was denied at work.

His interest rose markedly when Wiley showed up. He couldn't believe anybody so media-dysgenic would be featured amid the gloss, glitz and titz of Channel Nine. He's dressed worse than me, Rollie thought. Maybe they've decided they need more Everyshlump appeal. But as the segment went on, Wiley impressed him. Who would have thought? Definitely more fun than those yammering chipmunks on the rest of the show. More fun than anybody he was running in The Week, for that matter. Rollie found himself wishing he could seewhat they'd edited out of that bit, then caught himself at it and laughed. He clicked off the set and put on a CD. Zappa and the Mothers, "We're Only In It For The Money." Back when shaggy, unkempt and crazed paid off.

J. Danforth Scorment IV also watched Channel Nine News. Never missed an airing, as a matter of fact. He had a fatherly fondness for the women who brought the news to him. Well, sort of an incestuous father fondness, but it was genuine and massive. He adored Corelle's soft, yielding mystique, worshipped at the altar of Caitlin's porcelain hauteur, squirmed in delight at Jammi's prancing and nickering. He loved his girls to sweet, gummy little pieces and felt like they were his very own. Which, since he owned Channel Nine, was close to the truth.

Actually, "own", if closely examined, turned out to be a lot more complex than our usual sense of the word. Although we live in a society in which people think they "own" all-terrain Porsche's which would revert to the bank any month they couldn't come up with a sum equal to about half their rent, or that they "own" a condominium in Maui for two weeks each year, or that they "own" a sports franchise just because the team they root for defeated it three times in a row.

J. Danforth (known to the society pages and country club associates as "Dan the Fourth") had in fact been given the controlling share in the station by his mother, briefly grieving widow of billionaire Danforth the Third, who had bought the paper during his Media Collecting Period, fueled by the massive purchase clout of power utilities originally hegemonized by his father, Dan Junior, to the enrichment of stockholders and lawmakers but the general detriment of the often-maligned voters of California.

While his father had been a cagey steward of energy billions, and his widow even shrewder, having brought to the table a gold-digger cunning that she began developing even before the appearance of her weapons-grade breasts and legs. But it was obvious to all that the bloated carcass of Fourth did not harbor a business mind. In fact, it was hard to discern much mental activity at all. He'd been a handsome youth, textbook illustration of the dying breed known as "Playboys", and darling of Del Mar racing, Newport yachting, New Zealand skiing, as well as increasing disturbed International Star Fucking.

It turned out that even money sticks to a fool longer than control over media. The jackals, vultures, and crocodiles of the financial veldt stalked Fourth from waterhole to den to lair, nibbling off parts of his fortune like cheetahs culling a herd of wildebeests. At the point in time when he wallowed in a jacuzzi in front of his sixty inch set he had become a classic front, sock puppet to a nameless, faceless conglomerate of high-rolling Japanese, Las Vegans and Zurich Gnomes who interfaced with him only through the person of an accountant who had left Hong Kong in the knick of time, taking him with looted capital that would only have withered away under

Communist tutelage.

He still held some stock, but nothing approaching control, and was under strict orders not to vote it on his own whim under penalty of dire setbacks. At over four hundred pounds of poorly disciplined flab, J. Danforth would not thrive on the street. In fact, he had regressed from "Playboy" to more of a "Playinfant". He would have been best served by wearing diapers in a huge playpen. Which was not too far from actuality. He floundered up our of the hot, foamy water, wrapped an enormous custom towel around his stomach collection, and waddled over to a phone on the Louis Fourteenth sideboard. (He'd lost his cellular phone and servant pager in the burbling water, along with a waterproof vibrator, a string of half-inch beads and two martini glasses.)

He punched a number, waited with eyes on the screen, blurted, "Hey, Boo! You watching the news? Did you catch that guy zapping the kid in the breadbasket? Cracked me up! That's what we need more of, boy howdy." He didn't listen to the reply, just dropped the phone and thudded over to a double-door refrigerator that clashed violently with the tasteful, overpriced décor of his den. He threw open the refrigerator and freezer doors, rummaging happily. As he did, he idly worked his other hand deep into a certain fold in his flab where he knew from long experience there was securely hidden a penis.

At the other end of the one-ended call, Stevenson Yao, late of Hong Kong and the Pacific Rim school of business ethics, smiled ruefully at his wireless handset and replaced it precisely on his desk. Of course he'd watched what he thought of as De Tails at Eleven. Not only was the station his direct responsibility (and therefore also the maintenance, manipulation, housebreaking, and buttwiping of J. Dan the Fourth) his obsession with Caitlin Vanderkeller was of a higher and consuming stratum than the low-level, childish lusts of Occidentals. He idolized her at a level so spiritual it occasionally disappeared into thin, feng shui-modulated air. She was a goddess to him, like the lustrous white shapes he had first seen as a child among the crags of Tiger Balm Gardens. A willowy white Kuan Yin. He would have sold his soul to pose her like that, nude in a depilated, Noritake china way, perhaps delicately morphing into enamel, then spotless polished metal: a cyberYin like Sorayama's robot girls (of which he owned several larged signed proofs and many smaller editions.) Hair in a goddess bun, fingers entwined in a serene mudra, a lotus held just so. Calm, colorless, motionless, free of all clamor, corruption, traps of Birth. Ready for worship and corruption by Stevenson Yao.

But his soul was no longer his to sell. It was tangled in buyouts so complexly leveraged that it presented another of those bottomless "ownership" questions. He had masters, and they were powerful. Which made him powerful. And power was his favorite pull toy. He had perverse tastes in power politics. One example was his name. He had a perfectly good name, several in fact. Like many parents in parts of Asia well within the Western orbit, his parents had given him two names. To them he would always be Chang Jen. Or however the Commies decided to spell it, and the Western media idiot craven enough to adopt. But just as valid was the toney Western name for use at cram school, the Ivy League, office suites, clubs, and mah johng games where power and money flowed: Stevenson. His mother had a thing for intellectual politicians in the Lü Buwei and Han Fei mold and Adlai was the closest she could find.

But he insisted that all underlings, minions, and coolies in American call him "Boo" for obscure reasons perhaps understood by speakers of Chinese. He spoke Cantonese and Mandarin, of course, but also Japanese, English, and a great deal of German, which he thought of as "Swiss". But spoke to them in a crude pidgin, mischievously mixing Japanese and Chinese tropes to produce a patois he thought of as Loony Gooks. He wore nerd glasses and funeral suits to heighten the effect. He was starting to consider getting Yakusa body tattoos and wondering if he could spare a finger joint. He owned every Charlie Chan and Mr. Moto film ever made and intensely admired Peter Sellers. Who he somewhat resembled in an Asian way. To his superiors he spoke impeccable English. Or Japanese or Swiss or whatever.

He saw Wiley's bit and was at a loss over what to make of it. But now he knew.

Before Yao even checked in the next day, the Station had received a half-dozen calls complaining about the StunGun segment. It would have been much worse if they'd shocked an animal instead of a nominal human, but still. They also got over three hundred phone calls, letters, and emails demanding more Wiley.

Somebody who jumps in there and relates to things the way real people do, was a lot of the gist. Others were quite impressed by somebody actually, on camera, assaulting a street criminal and knocking him on his jitterbug ass. They wanted more about personal security. They wanted more reaching out and touching somebody. They wanted more Wiley. The big question around Channel Nine was: how do we give him to them? Nobody seemed to know where Wiley worked, lived, or hung out. Caitlin showed them his emails from generic servers, shrugged. She didn't like the looks of management trying to get hold of him. They didn't look angry or deadly enough to be a good thing. She hoped they didn't find the phone number he'd slipped to Linsey on their way back from the StunGun fiasco.

CHAPTER THREE

Wiley was, by Mimosa Club standards, over-dressed. He had on a suit, more or less, socks, laced leather shoes. Mustache and goatee trimmed, Men In Black shades. Yet he sat among them bummed out. Jerome, the bartender, sensed his heavy mood and set two shots of whiskey in front of him unasked. Wiley fired one down with a reflex elbow jerk.

Jasper, the club mascot, leaned closer to Wiley, mumbling, "Hey, so what, Wiley? So what, man? Fuck 'em if they can't take dictation, huh? You've been kicked on your kiester by bigger dickweeds than them."

A wheelchair ricocheted out of the narrow passage to the men's room, expertly maneuvered by a legless combat vet everybody called Strack. He sized Wiley up with his typically dope-glazed, world-weary eyes and wheelied over. In his deep, hoarse rasp he said, "So, you still on there, troop?"

"Nah," Wiley sighed. "I went in expecting to line out some new ideas for shows, go for a drive with Caitlin, case things. They gave me a check and told me to get lost."

Down the bar, Cathilda spoke up. A massive, blowsy, Black bawd, Cathilda was a conversational force to be reckoned with in the Mimosa. She was rumored (rumors mostly traceable back to herself) to have been a model and dancer. A rival rumor sprang up from a co-barfly, who claimed she'd been a bargain basement prostitute. He countered her stridulent challenge to this claim by mentioning a certain distinguishing feature in an undistinguished part of her anatomy and that if she could demonstrate him wrong about it he would withdraw his claim and pay her a thousand dollars. So far she had not taken him up on it. She had, in fact, punched his lights out with a longnecked Miller Lite. "I might not have good taste," she announced while he was resuscitated and helped to his feet, "But I sure as hell ain't less filling." In the Mimosa, she claimed her true calling: a shrill, loudmouthed busybody. Her input came down to, "Hey, you got a check?"

That called for the checkee to buy a round, which Wiley signaled to Jerome with a twirl of his finger.

Strack spun back to his accustomed spot, where two stools had been removed to accommodate his chair. A big man with powerful arms and corded neck, Stack could just see over the bar from his chair. If he needed more optical advantage, he was capable--and had proven it--of slapping his hands on the bar and vaulting up to stalk along it on his leather-shod stumps. "Hit me easy, Jeronimo," he rasped. "I'm driving."

Next to him, Goody lifted his refreshed highball glass in a salute to Wiley. A rather natty drinker in his seventies, Goody shaved close and used bay rum. He picked up a black plastic device the size of a cell phone and pushed it to his throat. When he hit the trigger, it vibrated, transferring those vibrations into his paralyzed vocal cords to create a croaking simulation of speech. Sounding like Donald Duck playing a mob heavy, he said, "Thanks, kid. Needed to wet my whistle." He sipped, replaced the vibrator at his throat, quacked out, "Sorry about your job."

"Fuck it," Jasper said. "Fuck jobs." This was a sentiment widely applauded in the Mimosa, especially when somebody who had somehow managed to get hired got, as so frequently, fired. "You don't need them, Wiley. Fucking day jobs. You're the man, Wiley. Wotta guy, wotta babe. Wotta grifter, boy howdy."

"Yeah, if nothing else, I got paid for no good reason," Wiley said, philosophically sopping up his second shot and reaching out for a refill.

"Got to shock that little fuckstick right in the yarbles," Strack reminded him.

"Got to screw that chick with the tits," Jasper added. "Wow, man, hotdamn."

"Careful, mutt, there's a lady present," Cathilda cawed.

"Smoking" Joe Gasperetti, a burly bounty hunter who favored the Mimosa as a sort of vacation from the even worse bars he normally frequented, mouthed the obligatory, "Where? Got her stashed under that Mao-Mao muumuu?"

"Yo MaMa," Cathilda snapped reflexively, tugging at her voluminous design by Omar de la Tentmaker.

"Ah, well," Wiley sighed. "It was a slice."

Jerome picked up the phone, shoulder-cradling it while pouring ersatz tequila into a glass of lemonade to produce Cathilda a margarita ala Mimosa. "Hey, Wiley. It's for you, bro. Stop giving out this fucking number."

Wiley craned to reach the phone, leaned over the bar to listen. He grinned. He beamed at the glaring Jerome and twirled his finger again. Ring a ding ding.

Despite her beauty, knockout figure, intelligence, and authoritative presence, Caitlin was not universally loved by her co-workers. Go figure. One of whom was thoughtful enough to make sure she was in the circulation loop of a letter which suggested, in vivid and memorable terms, that consumers would be better served by Wiley's aggressive, hands-on attitude. And that Caitlin could be of significant value if applied in a Vanna White capacity: dressing nice, smiling, and sticking her chest out.

After a few hours of alternating rage and insecurity, Caitlin stood behind the glass of the broadcast booth, mouthing Barry Covington's stock line as bitterly as a Satanist who can't forget his rosary recitations. "And That's The Way It Looks From Here." God, who dreamed that one up, Caitlin asked of the thick glass. It especially rankled employees who knew the more apt phrase would have been, "The way the teleprompter looks over there." He might see himself as Rather meets Morrow meets Buckley, and the Station might be reluctant to tell him different, but Caitlin wasn't alone in seeing him as an idiot savant programmed to recite input in the narrow windows of lucidity between his drinking bouts and orgies of tailor therapy.

The Station was apparently unaware of how Barry was seen by viewers. The only male "name" on the NineNews marquee, he was once thought of as a sort of pompous Charlie, pimping the Station's pulchritudinous Angels. But currently regarded as a pain in the ass who should just shut the hell up. His "Way It Looks" tagline had become a popular San Diego buzz-phase for inability to get the picture.

Corelle Pauls (nee Nata Speriolaphoris) was the latest, and longest-lived of his pert foils, a risky position that Caitlin adroitly avoided. She saw working with Barry as a promotion toward firing. Not to mention her interpretation of Corelle's co-anchor position as "second banana to a chimp". Corelle's tenure was not entirely because of her soft, inviting beauty and understated lush body reminiscent of Jacqueline Smith--AKA The Loveliest Angel. There was also her personality or, as Caitlin saw it, lack thereof.

Corelle had come to TV news not from journalism or "communications" departments, or even from the sham personality schools advertising as Broadcast Academies, but from modeling. Spotted in a Robinsons May sleepwear ad by Scorement. Under the chatty on-air personae she was sweet-natured and placid, a combination that made her easy to work with and caused Caitlin to classify her as a "cud muncher".

Gazing through glass at these two bozos doing what she could do far better but seemed unable to get her hands on, Caitlin felt mocked by the booth glass. Glass ceilings were one thing, and sort of understandable if you looked at them from above. But the invisible barrier that relegated her to a sideshow in the two-bit local circus while these clowns boffed around the center ring had her stumped, frustrating and feeling the effects of the most horrible narcotic to which she was prey: self-doubt. Worse, she needed to talk them out of something hideous.

"It's all about consumer awareness," Barry told her, angling towards being able to give her some fatherly/brotherly physical contact. "And you're the go-to gal for that."

Caitlin was mostly aware of how much Barry had consumed and angled away from his breath. And hands. "So let me do the segment by myself. Or let him do it."

Barry gave her an avuncular laugh and shook his distinguished coiffure. "The Brass want this guy. Been getting mucho calls. He's hot. He's back."

Caitlin experienced another moment in which the world seemed to have shifted polarity, leaving everything butt over teakettle. Wiley was hot. Might as well open up the big guns, lower her gunsights towards the fly of that exquisite worsted suit. "So you don't have enough juice to deal with this mope off the street?"

Barry's laugh was less genuine, but who could tell? "Not me, babe. Try talking to Justin." Yeah, right, Caitlin thought, talk to Justin. Which is just what she ended up doing the next morning.

Justin Watkins, the nominal station manager, was also among her least favorite colleagues to talk to. Justin ran the station with a harassed demeanor and a profound belief that there’s no such thing as a good decision. His yearbook quote would have been one that Mike happened to get down on tape one afternoon: “Lead? I can barely manage to manage.” His "least likely to" would have been: Get enough balls to fire his wife Sherree, the human resource from hell. The slacker ethic of the station often got termed, Justin Time. His ass-covering maneuvers were referred to as the Justin Case.

But it got worse. Yao himself was at the meeting, as well as that treacherous fungus Barry. Attempting to psych her up for the wonderful possibilities of working with Wiley again. And better yet, as a more or less co-host of her segment. Very stimulating concept, they attempted to assure her, could create some major TV, the kind of two-person team that worked so well for Siskel and Ebert, Burns and Allen, Cosell and Ali. We just can't wait to see how well you pull this off.

Caitlin reacted to that final sentiment by having a mild panic attack, followed by a spa session and shopping. The first time she'd chosen a blouse based not on what she thought of as "professional presence" but what she termed "prick tease factor." It was obviously a trench war between her and Wiley at this point, hand to hand combat for home, virtue and the way of life she held dear, no holds barred. He creamed her.

Caitlin had thought it out from the minute the absurd, debasing scheme was broached to her. She dialed on some enthusiasm in order to seize the initiative, announcing she would do some research to figure out what topic would most appeal to viewers. Her research consisted of hours of brain-cudgeling, augmented by what for her was quite a lot of drinking. She came up with the perfect ploy. Something she could sell on glitz and noise, but would be a quagmire for Wiley and the station, threatening people right where they lived. While hopefully bogging him down in some boring research.

"It's perfect," she told them at the next meeting. "People love their cars. They like gadgets and attracting attention. They're obviously concerned about security and see Wiley as having a handle on that."

Barry enthused, winking at her as always. "You've nailed it, Caitlin. Perfect. I can already see some great ways to introduce the segment." You'll see them better after Sean and Belinda write them up and give them to you, Caitlin thought.

"I rike," Yao said, nodding like a wind-up monkey. Which was all it took. Except fending off Yao's continued campaign to expose her to art.

They saw the possibilities clearly, a clever and aggressive plea for awareness and helpful tips on selecting the best protection for your beloved automobile. What they got was Wiley walking around a pay lot, kicking the cars into a cacophony of angry bleats and raving about it while Caitlin cringed on the sidelines in a whore blouse, trying not to look aghast. Nobody ever described television as an exact science.

After a frantic editing session that must have resembled Hirohito's high command trying to put a positive spin on alleged developments in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, two results were hammered out. One was that Wiley was once again fired. The other was a segment that tried desperately to avoid cars being kicked and focus on the finer things in life, like Caitlin's blouse. And the following vocal performance by a bloodshot Wiley:

> Volumes have been spoken about the annoyance of auto alarms. But not nearly enough. For one thing, we're still having to listen to the damned things shatter the night with their wretched repertoire of squeals and squalls and snide wah-wah like police sirens in old Eurotrash movies. This is because the topic has so far been confined to how rude and invasive it is to drench neighborhoods with the sound of electronic katzenjammer just because a cat jumped on your car or you were too stupid to open the door correctly. Or even because you're stingy about who possesses your damned stereo system, a matter which is hardly the problem of everyone within earshot.
>
> At first blush, it might seem that a more effective form of discussion would be trying to educate alarm owners to the fact that their noise toys are completely useless. Nobody pays any attention to them. In fact, if I saw some enlightened footpad trying to steal a car with its alarm bleating, I'd help him out, just to get the damned thing out of the neighborhood quicker. Unfortunately, you learn that "alarmists" aren't really concerned with preventing theft. They're interested in making noise and drawing attention to their cars—something that gets harder to do as all cars move towards looking exactly alike.
>
> So it becomes necessary to move the entire discourse to the obvious next level: discussions of how to discourage or get rid of alarms. Let's approach the problem calmly and professionally and tailor our response to the relative gravity of the situation. The use of steam rollers, high explosives, and noise-seeking missiles, in other words, should be reserved for the absolute last resort.
>
> Communication is always the first consideration in conflicts between our right to tranquility and some other dipnoid's obsession with inflicting manic shrieks and squawks. A best first step is a friendly note to the offender, drawing his attention to the problem and perhaps citing the salutary effects of quiet on the suburban organism. The note should be left in a spot where it will be easily seen, such as the roof or hood. The medium is clearly the message in such cases, so select your writing implement with care. I rather like using the awl attachment on my Swiss Army knife, held so that it protrudes between my clenched fingers. The "church key" type of can opener is also popular, but hard to control. Actually, it's hard to beat the plain old sixteen penny nail. And the price is right.
>
> Of course there are now alarms that verbally accost innocent passers-by, making written communications beside the point. They are an example of what this is all coming to because they violate the very basic principle that cars should not talk smack to people. We rejected sexy Japanese girl voices telling us our fluid levels are low and don't really find even television fantasies of talking cars very funny (witness "My Mother the Car"). Uppity autos have no place in real American life. Even Christine managed to kill people without giving them any of her lip. If we ignore this development we'll certainly end up chatted up by smarmy homosexual cars like the one on "Night Rider".
>
> The important thing in conversing with auto alarms is to be firm and to the point. If they say, "You are standing too close to this vehicle" (which they do in a really bitchy manner) just ask "You mean this new Targa with the lighter fluid dripping off it and the guy fondling the Zippo?" We should point out that converting a car into a fireball is an excellent way to get it towed away. Flames are a fun and festive way to make a point. Just ask anyone in the Ku Klux Klan or Department of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms.
>
> If the alarm's opening gambit is, "Move away from vehicle at once," Just ask how far away you should be when the tires explode. Another remark that alarm-equipped cars seem to consider a hot ice-breaker is, "System is armed". I wouldn't have it any other way. It would be truly unsporting to pump a clip full of nine millimeter rounds into an unarmed system. We should be fair about these things, even though it's an obvious case of Man versus Machine, not to mention sheer Moloch Materialism. The important thing to keep in perspective is that even the lowest criminals among us have the right to keep silence, so we should offer our neighbor's pretentious car the same right. In fact, we should insist.

The segment ran mostly because nobody was around by the time they got it edited, they had nothing else to go with, and Barry and Caitlin figured out it was the easiest way to make sure they never had to deal with Wiley ever again, ever.

"How hot will he be now?" Caitlin asked Barry.

"He's roadkill," Barry intoned, slurring only slightly. "Frisbee cat. History. Glad I'm not working the switchboard when the bitching comes in."

And as a matter of fact, the segment did light the switchboard up like a Tijuana disco. Drew more crazed email than sending your address to a Rolex retailer. Most of it positive. It turned out everybody hates car alarms, even people who own them. One call from some lunatic, who sounded like Mel Blount doing a Daffy Duck version of the Terminator, demanded that Wiley demonstrate the fireball effect. All demanded more Wiley. But viewers, Justin pointed out to Yao, are not the same as advertisers. We have to keep in mind where our bread is buttered. Yao nodded, replied with a similar metaphor involving yakisoba.

Thom Barker, for whom Advertising Director was not only a lead position, but a calling, was emphatic that Wiley was a booster shot for Black Plague. "Do you know how many ads we sell from that whole sector?" he yelled at Justin. "It's not just alarms. Those same nice folks--who used to buy our time--also install stereos and accessories, do detailing, maybe also windows and trick rims and neon lighting, all kinds of stuff. It's a major industry, and we just told people to set fire to it!"

Justin had already told him that Wiley had been fired, this time for good, so he just held up a frail finger against the tirade of trouble, answered his insistently blinking phone. He listened, went into a puzzled trance, punched hold while telling his secretary to give the caller what he asked for. He returned a rather vacant gaze to the blustering Barker. Who raved more before realizing he wasn't getting through. "Who the hell was that," he demanded.

Justin stared at the phone. "Oh, some guy named Hudson from Auto Sound Hut."

"See?" Barker screamed, "It's starting! You want alarms? I'll show you alarm on my sheet next week!"

The Mimosa ecosystem had a sound level that reacted to intruders just as any jungle reacts. The same way that a hardwood copse falls silent as a lithe predator glides through its undershadow, or a rainforest canopy erupts into the warning screeches of exotic birds and boisterous monkeys, the Mimosa was never unaware when a new phenotype entered their sphere.

The guy in the sharp suit didn't trigger more than the usual apprehension, but conversations fell to the level that allowed eavesdropping as he questioned Jerome. Who kept looking at the guy's face as he announced in a too-loud voice. "Who, Wiley? Well if he's expecting you, he'll probably be around pretty soon."

The guy hastened to explain that he hadn't made an appointment, exactly, just wanted to talk some business. While Wiley, four stools to the guy's left, raised his head from the cradle of a forearm damp with slopped-over mixer and brought his ever-shattered attention to bear on the guy in the suit. His motion drew the guy's eye and they made contact. Wiley slammed upright on his seat.

"Ack! Hey, look, Hudson, don't jump to conclusions, man. Tell Mel that sunroof thing was just sort of a trial run. I'm awaiting results right this minute. I was going to get it back to you this week." As the guy moved toward him, he invoked his ultimate invocation against harm, "We can work this all out."

"Good," the guy said. "Because Mel's got a contract for you. With Viper."

CHAPTER FOUR

Rollie Moon slumped at his desk, plucking at his beard. He was bitching and whining on the topic: No longer much fun being editor of Southcoast Week, and arguably even worth it. He was getting no argument from Karin Chones. Called "Casey" around the Week, for obvious reasons as well as the generally accepted concept that she was the editor you wanted when a story was a complete train wreck. Like so many female editors working under energetic chiefs, she was completely sold on Rollie and loyal to him unto death or even worse fates.

Attractive in a wholesome, pleasant way in her mid-thirties, Casey was tough as nails on the business end: ruthless with a blue pencil or telephone. Efficient, dedicated, and brassbound were words chosen by colleagues to describe her operating shell. Below that was a layer of soft, chewy nougat that many a social worker would scoff at as too candy-assed heart-bleeder. She would have taken whole countries home with her to mend their wings, breast feed them, and cry at their inevitable funerals. Deeper in was something harder to make fun of: the way-too-single heart of a childless mother hen.

She took care of the Week and wanted to take care of Rollie, but could see no way to do it without taking care of Hollis Overón. Or having him taken care of, like they say. She nodded sympathetically as Rollie told her what she already knew, convinced her of what she had already stitched onto her red satin battle banner.

"Okay, he killed Bar Of The Week. And put in that church review column. I can live with that," Rollie allowed.

"Easier than I can live with him suddenly deciding he's an editor," Casey said, grimly. "Every time he 'improves' a piece by switching the lead paragraph down the page I want to break his fingers."

"Or shitcans a perfectly good title and replaces if with a line at random from the body of the text?"

"Or one of his idiot quotations," Casey nodded. "Who can forget, 'Go To The Ant and Consider His Ways', on that welfare cheater's confessional?"

"I keep coming back to, 'Put Away Childish Things', on the pedophile piece. Where does he get that stuff?"

Casey involuntarily scanned the wide windows that separated the editor's office from the cubicles of Editorial. Staff moved around lazily, as though embedded in aspic. She told Rollie, "I hacked his computer. Password 'Jehovah', by the way. He's got a program like a thesaurus, but if you put in a word, it returns a phrase from the bible or some come-to-Jesus meditations book."

"Jesus Christ."

"Too many responses to sort, I'd guess. But if you put in 'child abuse', that headline is the first thing that pops up. You also get 'Suffer The Children To Come Unto Me'. So it could have been worse."

"I don't understand it. Things were going fine for him. Kyle has the money side of the paper running like a clock, I had the content on a par with any weekly in the country. Why'd he suddenly decide to get hands-on?"

"Right after he got Born Again."

"Are there any term limits on Abort Again? He's killing articles we've already agreed to pay for. For no reason."

"Worse. There are reasons. Just not shown to mortals."

"What does that mean?"

"He killed the one about the community center because the councilman who proposed it opposes notifying girls' parents about abortions."

"You're kidding."

"Not a bit," Casey said grimly. She didn't kid around about her research. "There's an invisible minefield. Any connection he spots, however tenuous, to evil democrats or abortion and condom providers or companies linked to Satan."

"Wait, wait. Satanic companies? Like Starbucks and Microsoft?"

"No, like Proctor and Gamble. There's a whole underground of people who spot Beelzebub's holding companies. He's on several internet forums about it."

"That reminds me, Case. You're reprimanded for spying on the owner's computer. Don't you know too much Knowledge of Him could give you brain cancer?"

Casey smiled slightly. "Well, his screwing around with content and looting of the revenues to finance his church stuff is going to give us unemployment, anyway."

"Why do you think I'm sniveling about this? Editors are unemployable. I'm too old and spoiled to survive on the streets."

"And I'm too much of a ball-breaker to be a prostitute."

She and Rollie shared collegial smiles. But... Rollie went on, "What can we do about it?"

Casey shrugged, "Catch him in bed with a gerbil circus?"

"Hey, Wiley's on TV again like he said," Jasper chirped. "But it's in Spanish."

"Cause it's Channel Eighteen, ya dumbass," Cathilda laughed. "Beaner news."

"Switch over to Twelve," Strack grated. "Get the white man version."

"Say *what*?" Cathilda evoked a deep sense of personal and racial outrage. "Excuse *me*? Who you callin'?" She was running out of openers without coming up with a message, and knocked off as the channel clicked over to a string of commercials on NewsNight Twelve.

Five minutes later, Wiley appeared on the screen, just as they'd heard. He was standing in an urban parking garage, looking at the camera with bleary distrust.

"You know how I feel about noisy alarms," he said. "But the main thing is, they're useless. Observe." He stepped to a nearby Cadillac Escalante, hoisting a baseball bat he'd been holding below the range of the camera. With a leer at the camera, he slugged the bat down on the windshield of the Caddy, reducing it to a starburst of gleaming cubes. The soundtrack was inundated by the shriek of a car alarm.

"Hmmm," Wiley mused. "Doesn't keep me from doing this." He took a Barry Bonds swing, blitzing the side mirror off and into a line drive across the garage, where it hit another car, setting off more alarms. "Let's see what happens," he smirked.

A speeded-up clock graphic at lower right showed the elapsing of fifteen minutes while Wiley spoke to the camera in a forthright, engaging manner, "Wouldn't it be better to have some sort of remote alarm that, oh, say... rings in your pocket, instead of out here where you can't hear it and it just ticks people off? Something like this.."

He stepped over to a glossy Mercedes and rattled the door handle. Then he pointed to a logo on the windshield. A close-up read: VIPER REMOTE ADVISORY.

"We'd better chill," Wiley said in a confidential undertone, and sat down behind another car, bat between his knees. He addressed the camera from that position, man to man. "Because you see, Viper Remote doesn't make any noise. It doesn't have to. It lets you know wherever you are--in the office, in bed, in the movies--that somebody's messing with your car. You can even set it to vibrate instead of sound. It's a two stage alarm, the second stage activates if a door is opened."

A handsome, muscular young man in a suit entered, holding a small, elegant remote in his hand. He looked the car over, beeped it with the remote, patted the hood lovingly. Wiley stood up and looked into the camera. "Viper: The kind of system even I can get behind."

Jerome clicked the set to mute while the bar applauded. Wiley stood up on the footrail, arms spread to accept their accolades. He raised a glass to friends present, tossed it off to more clapping and clinking of glassware. Jerome kept on working behind the bar, rolling his eyes at Wiley's performance. The phone rang and he picked it up.

"Hey, Limelight, " he yelled at Wiley. "It's for you. Some guy named Justin."

Wiley sat, and none too comfortably, behind his own custom "desk", wearing make-up and an incandescent Hawaiian shirt. A screen behind him displayed the "Wiley's Weekend Warning" type and logo. As he addressed the microphone, the screen switched to a segment title, "Morning Becomes Electric". Thus spoke Wiley:

"So it's the Monday to set your clocks forward, yada yada yada. The government taking a little slice out of your sleep time again. I'll tell you how to give a little setback to a clock, but first let's examine our context here." His delivery had been understated, even wooden, but he was warming up.

"For those who haven't figured it out yet, this show mostly deals with things to do on weekends. And there's no doubt that many of you dutifully go out and knock yourselves loose doing all these strenuous and dubious activities. But really, when you get right down to it, what is the greatest benefit of a weekend?

"You got it: Sleeping In. Rolling over to pound the other ear instead of getting with some cockamamie program. Snoozing away secure in the hope that the six o'clock alarm will never ring. Knowing you don't have to shave when you do get up. And it would seem so little to ask of life; merely to sleep, perchance dream a little. But there are those that actually interfere with the simple and uninalienable pleasures of sleeping in."

Suddenly Wiley, or something he'd ingested, was on. His face became pliable and expressive, his gestures fuller. He was cruising. Only three people knew that he was extemporizing. No script, just Wiley live.

"What sort of fiendish scum would do this--wake you before you are ready to go-go? Set pitfalls in the path of the beautiful dreamer? Let's examine several of these foul forces, devious devices, and eye-opening conspiracies--preparatory to calling for their speedy and brutal annihilation."

As he continued, a superimposed graphic informed viewers they could order a transcript of the show to read at home. A transcript that went on to say:

> Let's make it clear that we're not talking here about merely waking up in rude circumstances. That can be easily arranged. The easier you are, the more likely you are to wake up rude and rueful. But we're not blaming the victim here, we're after real culprits: outside agitators with no commitment to knitting up of your raveled sleeves. Disrupters, preemptors, agents provocateur of insomnia: Dreambusters.
>
> Take the simple alarm clock. Take it and bash it up against the wall. Good show. These ugly little devices, handy enough for ticking away the moments that make up a gray day, have forgotten their place in the scheme of things. They are trying not merely to tell time, but to make time, to arrange time, and with alarming frequency to seize the time. Are you, a human being and the clown of creation, to be ordered about by a tiny (if noisy) pack of gears or quartz? I certainly hope not.
>
> There are plenty of ways to put an uppity clock in its place. Some can be learned at hard-nosed martial arts dojos, many can be purchased over the counter along with the requisite ammunition. Or you can be creative: feed the clock to an alligator, stick it in a Polynesian dancer's navel, put it in a Russian Easter egg, run a few mice up it and see who salutes. Just don't take any crap off it.
>
> The simple doorbell, while not as intrinsically treacherous as the phone or clock, can be coaxed into the ploy, made an unwitting instrument of some cabal opposed to the much-remarked wisdom of letting sleeping dogs lie. I'm sure you've experienced the following example of such behavior. You slowly claw your way into some form of consciousness, seeing without really comprehending that your clock said 5:25 right before you obliterated it to bits. You're not really integrated enough to grasp that it's Saturday morning, your stomach and mind are flitting queasily away from memories of Friday night--just three hours ago.
>
> You dribble half your furniture over to the door and open without thinking (And why not, you've been doing everything else so far without doing what anyone would call thinking). There stand two drab women and three snot-nosed brats, chattering into your reamed ears that they are Jehovah's Witnesses. Eyewitnesses at that. Not an innocent bystander in the bunch. They hold a newspaper up to your parboiled eyes and what is splashed across the front page in red, 24 point type? "AWAKE!" Talk about fast-breaking news, huh? Their other paper is called "Watchtower" by the way...the same one Jimi Hendrix warned you against all along. These people are a menace.
>
> Best way to defend against them is sleep nude and answer the door naked. This sometimes produces side benefits. Another household hint is to keep a stock of Hare Krishna, Mormon, and Satanist pamphlets by the door to pass out to such disruptors. But we're talking a sorry state of affairs. Namely, Rude Awakenings.
>
> Your television set, which you generally regard as a pal--a bit pushy, perhaps, but essentially an entertaining, jolly good fellow--can get wicked on you. For instance, you nod off during Horrible Horror Theater and the National Anthem. You are blowing yourself some sweet Z's when a piercing tone brings you alertly to your lips. Just in time to hear them say they are leaving the air. But not to worry, they'll be back at 5:30 tomorrow morning. With a test pattern. Thus giving a rude awakening to some other fool.
>
> Telephones are the worst yet. They can turn on you with no warning, jangling your entire nervous system just to sell you phone service. People call you up to tell you you're the wrong number and don't even tell you what the right number is. They enlist you in a sad and wide-eyed lottery of the lost. You can't be too careful with phones; they're like having a little doorway into your world where any deranged somnophobe can pop by and weird out right into your ear. They are surrealistic by their very nature, as we can illustrate with this telling anecdote. Your waterbed, specially ordered a month ago, finally splashes down in town. Therefore setting up a routine fiasco in which you grovel up from sleep to mug the phone in time to hear, "Hello, this is Dreamland."
>
> Hello, this is Dreamland. The study of rude awakenings approaches the understanding of dreams. Since we are Americans, this treats of (need I say it?) the American Dream. The American Dream is, in many ways, merely to be allowed to continue dreaming. But the slumber party is being crashed. If this seems frivolous, let's not forget that the two-day weekend was first dreamed up right here in America. Earlier and elsewhere people slaved six days then went to church all Sunday. Sleeping in may indeed *be* the American Dream. And as the rude awakenings remind us, it is not a right but a privilege to be defended as zealously as any other perc. What other use is being part of a privileged class, eh?
>
> As an American you have a right to the American Dream, so guard it carefully or you might just wake up one fine day and find yourself wide awake. Don't laugh, sleeping in is very political. Every four years we have some yo-yo coming on with the latest variation of "Wake Up, America!" Sometimes he offers the smell of coffee, other times nothing but the bleak shores of consciousness, as though it was all a good thing, and somehow better for you than snoring off.
>
> Forget these terrorists. The first sign of a fascist is a desire to raise your consciousness. Let's keep our heads, everyone: consciousness sucks. No cause for snooze alarm. Do not go gentle, fight against the dying of the night. Extremism in the defense of forty more winks is no vice. Guns don't kill people, but dropping by before noon on Saturday certainly should. Tune out, turn in, drop off. Dare to dream. Only trouble is--gee whiz, you'd be dreaming your life away. And the only way to deal with trouble like that is to sleep on it.

Talk about striking a chord. Nobody had heard anybody defending their right to goof off and sleep in before. Much less sanctioning violence in the matter. Wiley was in like Flynn's milkman and starting to look like a Great American. A dingy, erratic new star shone over the Station. He was washed in notoriety and media attention, overpaid by reflex, mentioned by jealous comedians. But did he take advantage of his new clout? Use it for evil or selfish gain? Come on, what do you think?

CHAPTER FIVE

Wiley's integration (or "worm-in" as Caitlin characterized it) generated different levels of approval in different sectors.

Caitlin clearly hated his guts. To include all offspring, inhabitants, liens, ancillaries and wholly-owned proceeds of said guts. Her loathing, in short, was complete and irreversible. She didn't confront him with a crucifix or anything, but the thought of a stake through his heart often infused her with bitter cheer.

Barry, when sober enough to think about, merely thought it showed a lack of class and décor sense he had already detected in management and was kind and conscientious enough to memo Wiley some suggestions of tailors he thought might fit the income and range of comprehension of a man who would appear on television with an off-rack, probably even pre-owned, tweed blazer over a knit shirt.

Mike and Linsey considered him the Cultural Attaché from Planet Fun, and loved committing his wacked-out remotes to digital archives. This infuriated Caitlin, who considered the team to be under her personal tutelage (a relationship expressed to Wiley by Linsey as "her downriver AV niggahs") and saw their increasing assignment to Wiley as an act of outright theft.

Corelle, a genuine sweetie in a sea of phony intrigue, was receptive to Wiley's offer of pal-ship and willing to help him learn the business. The latter was of little help, since she didn't understand it much herself, mostly because she was, albeit in a lovely and gracious way, pretty stupid. The receptiveness was tested as soon as she let her guard down after a friendly beach walk led to stopping by the bar at World Famous and sampling some tequila shooters. Results inconclusive and not even very clearly recalled.

Yao, although bullish on Wiley futures, was violently averse to any sort of contact with him: physical, vocal, visual, or even whatever the adjective is for email. Wiley gave him the willies. Okay, Wirey gave him the "wearies". There.

This polarization of acceptance, camaraderie and *esprit* led Wiley to concentrate his drive to become an acquired taste in one direction where he sensed that his estimation could be increased: pert, pointy weathergirl Jammi Jamison.

Wiley took an oblique approach to that reversal. Jammi presented as squirrelier than Balboa Zoo on free peanuts day, but would be worth some angling because she walked around every day in the Body From Hell. She might not have been the brightest girl ever to breach the walls of fame armed with raw ambition, a cute smile, and a highly-tuned, drool-friendly, aftermarket-equipped body...but she pretty obviously knew what she wanted. Which was the usual: More. Wiley had already figured out that under the steely curves and airbrushed tan she was punched around by a clamoring briarpatch of neuroses. And that she was mainlining Exposure. It was just a matter of tinkering.

Wiley took the obvious shot of discussing her participation on his segment, and could see she wasn't biting. No problemo, it had just been a gambit. When she said she knew what he was after, he came back with, "Maybe what you should be thinking about is what *you* want?" That stopped her cold. She didn't remember a guy ever thinking about that before. In fact they generally dismissed the things she did want, while lunging towards her sleek and shinies.

Not Wiley. He produced her secret lusts like rabbits from a hat and waved them in her face. Preparing to go into production. Product placement with cute infomercial hostess. His own show with co-hostess. But then he said he could tell she liked doing weather and just walked off.

This was nothing Jammi's oddly under-sexed life had prepared her for. She was used to gym guys casing to see if her buff was as hard as theirs and unlikely to present any un-pretty sights during coitus. Since her pre-teen fumblings with boys, she'd kept naked males in the Ewwww! category, preferring a workout on the bars or weights to thrashing in back seats. The body she got the most pleasure from was always her own.

Of course she'd slept with suits to break into TV. Duh. But she hadn't fully explored the aspects of using men, and the idea that a guy she could screw for advancement yet still offer something for her own nasty thrills was a novel one. And Wiley, she quickly realized, was a Star. It would be like fucking Barry or Caitlin, except messier and more normal.

It was three days before she managed to happen across Wiley's path and finagle him into paying her attention. His product thing was going pretty well, actually. He was evaluating one now that he thought was going to be the one to go with. Why didn't she co-host his segment, see how it went? Since she saw the offer more as a gesture of faith than bed bait at that point, Jammi agreed. And looked smashing in a white apron and cute, cocked chef hat while Wiley did a bachelor kitchen bit. She did things like open the microwave while Wiley scowled inside, commenting along the lines of:

> As a technophobe and general reactionary, I bitterly resisted owning a microwave oven but finally got one when I found out they're not only faster, but healthier and energy saving as well. This seemed so counter-instinctual as to be Faustian. It was like learning that chocolate chip macadamia cookies are better for you than okra or tofu or similar members of the nasty nutrient group. Which is true, by the way; and you can tell any diet fascist who sticks their nose into your eating pleasure that you saw it on television so it must be a factoid. Hey, you watch my show; I can do that much for you.
>
> So what happened after I got totally hooked on instant radar cooking? My microwave broke down. What does one do about *that*, I ask you? Replace the reactor core? Rebyte the hard-bitten drive? Reset the phasers? Call Dionne Warwick? I just threw it away—without ever having found out if it would really explode a poodle. And immediately went into cooking withdrawal.
>
> How the hell do you get anything to eat without it, huh? Where do you buy stuff that the little trays won't melt in an oven? Who's got the time? No fear: I figured it all out and have prepared instructions for other bachelors who find themselves cold-turkey with only a conventional oven to heat it with.
>
> 1. Get hold of some meat, an edible substance constructed from used animals and widely available—in a range of colors and weights—at marked supermarket sections or special meat boutiques.
> 2. Place in a suitable container. "Suitable" mostly means "won't melt in an antiquated oven", but also, "won't leak hot grease".
> 3. Add vegetables if desired. The kind from cans are good, especially white or yellow ones, but not lettuce or that general kind of light-duty vegetable.
> 4. Here's your chance to get creative. Pour some liquids over the meat. The best liquids come from bottles stored in cabinets above eye level. These are edible, often tasty, and go very well with meat. Anything marked "Campbells" or "Picante" would be a good place to start. Never use liquids from cabinets below waist level with reindeer names like "Ajax", "Blitz", and "Comet"—they are frequently inedible and very seldom tasty.
> 5. Turn oven on until there is a glow inside it. The switch that lights it up immediately turns out to take a long time to cook the meat, so use the round one, which takes longer to light up the oven but cooks faster in the long run. It has settings like "Bake" and "Broil", but no really fun ones like you'd find on a blender. Neither appliance can be set on "Stun". Not deliberately anyway. You can select numbers for your cooking. When faced with numbers, I usually choose the familiar ones associated with cars. Being a Chevy man, I've found 350 to work well. A friend has had less luck with 460, but that's Ford for you.
> 6. As with microwave cooking, the meat will be done when you hear electronic beeps, except that with so-called "conventional" ovens the beeps come from a remote detector on the ceiling. which mysteriously detects doneness. If your kitchen doesn't have such a timing device, you can use old fashioned methods, such as waiting for a canary to pass out.
>
> Take the meat out of the oven, being careful to use a meat-lifting device (I like vice grips myself). The oven will usually have another switch just to blow the smoke away and let you see what you've been cooking (not always worth it). Allow the meat to cool; if you're in a hurry, just run it under cold water for a minute. Some sinks have neat little hoses like miniature hubcap-cleaner sprayers that make this easier and more fun. Cut the meat into sizable chunks and place the chunks on plates, the plates on tables. Kitchens are full of implements to deal with them from that point on. Dig right in.
>
> Once basic techniques for baking (or broiling, if you selected that option) are mastered, it's easy to whip up dessert. Ovens are great for brownies, cookies or cakes—it's how the pros make them. Simply buy a box of readymix in the supermarket "Cake" aisle. Grease the pan if you have any grease laying around. (I usually find plenty inside the oven). Pour the powder into a pan and wet it down. Add some eggs if you find any. Put the pan back in the oven (which you have left on as a cleansing process that burns away any residue of the meat) and cook on 427 or 283 or whatever until it resembles the picture on the box.

Single guys liked the show, so did women, who saw it as an indication of the sort of things they're always whining about anyway. The ad department liked it because they'd pre-sold lines of appliances and TV dinners. Jammi liked it because it got a great rating, possibly because of promos showing her in the frenchy apron leaning over to peek inside an oven.

Wiley again avoided her until she stalked him down. She didn't realize that she was practically begging him to show her the new product he said would make him the new Ronco. He reluctantly worked her into his only spare moment. He'd be available for a few minutes after a location shoot. Just a film test for the product. He'd line up a spokesmodel if he decided to push this contraption. Get a good name for it. Brands like Pocket Fisherman and Kitchen Magician don't just fall out of the sky.

Jammi wasn't sure about the location, a spa motel called Jacque Coozie that notoriously provided rooms with hot tubs and generally conducive atmosphere. She noticed light stands and a tripod left in the room, assumed that the object on the floor draped in dark flannel was the Mystery Product. Wiley let her in, immediately returned to scanning panels of negatives, shaking his head and ignoring her. "The steam messes it all up," he groused. "We should have done it over at Borrego Springs."

"Hot tub stuff," Jammi asked, once she got his attention. "Is that it?

Wiley laughed dismissively. "Old hat, honey. This is just a location. Bad one at that. Drove me nuts trying to get decent shots." He returned to his skeptical examination of the proofs, then remembered Jammi was present when she sat on the table beside him. "Oh, yeah. Hey listen, did you bring a swimsuit like I said?" She nodded warily.

"Okay, okay," Wiley sighed, rubbing his neck. "Look, there's no model shot going on right away. I just wanted to see how you looked with the thing. Any more shoots get done elsewhere, maybe just in a studio. What the hell."

She looked at him expectantly. "Oh yeah," he said while taking another look at the negs. "Why not slip in there and change? We'll see how you look."

When Jammi moved to the bathroom, checking the lock as she went in, Wiley stood and pointed to the other door. "Look, I'm all in knots. I'm going to take a soak before I do anything else. Join me if you like. We can talk for a minute while I unwind."

Jammi was double wary by the time she came out of the bathroom with an extremely minimal bikini plastered to her incredible form. She slipped into the hot tub enclosure to see Wiley lolling and rubbing his shoulders on the rim like a man with work cramps. As she entered he lifted a plastic glass and toasted her.

"Slither on in, the water's fine. I left you the best jet over there." He pointed with the glass. "This is great, actually. It'll get you, like, psycho/physio/spiritually prepared for the product itself."

It did look nice. Jammi slid into the water cushioned by her conviction that her strength, stamina, and kickboxing training would allow her to kick Wiley's ass if he tried anything. Wiley rubbed some more, sighed. "Feels much better. Feel good for you, too?" He smiled, she nodded. "Great. But let's talk about where you want to feel good five years from now."

Jammi slowly relaxed. She noticed bubbles blowing out of holes in her seat, but kind of liked the feeling. The longer she laid there, sipping some sport drink Wiley had graciously handed her, the better it felt.

"What's in this MetaboLite, anyway?"

"Date rape drug," Wiley laconically replied.

"You put Roofing in my drink, you scumsack?"

"Nope, an Old School classic. Alcohol."

Actually, "*caña*", Mexican sugarcane alcohol of close to 190 proof, odorless tasteless and ever clear. No need to be subtle with Jammi, though. Essentially a clean-living athlete, she was a total, it not teetotal, lightweight. What you'd call a cheap date.

She indignantly started up out of spa, but slipped and bellybustered back into the water. The splash soaked Wiley, turning his cigarette into a limp paper turd stuck on his lip. She couldn't help but laugh. She splish-spashed some more, then told him, "Boy, when I sober up, I'm gonna kick your nuts off."

"Relax," said Wiley, totally unnecessarily. "Grab a shower. The product's in the next room waiting for your full, fine-tuned attention."

When she came out of the shower, wrapped in a big fluffy white towel, Wiley held up a robe for her like a perfect gentleman. When she slipped into the sleeves he cinched the belt around her waist. The shower, permanently set to warm and steamy, had done nothing to dispel the alcohol vapors that were hanging soft pink flock and strewing cushy pillows throughout the spongy lace halls of her medula oblongata.

Wiley whisked the veil off The Product, which looked like a luxurious Harley saddle of sexy black fabric sitting on the floor. The seat was slit longitudinally like an old-fashioned bicycle seat. Even a saddle horn, with a circular ring around it to be gripped like a steering wheel. She examined it curiously.

"Is this another corny abs workout gadget? They all suck." She tapped her own tight six-pack to indicate what could be done with equipment Not Seen On TV.

"Not really," Wiley said, showing her a remote control device. "Watch this."

He touched the control, the saddle hummed, an inch-thick rod with a familiar bulbous taper emerged slowly from the center slot, extended to a height of about four inches, then withdrew into the slit.

Jammi goggled, then giggled. "Hey, that's obscene! You'll never get that on the air, Mister." Which was a pretty hilarious thought, sending her into sloppy laughter.

"Just on cable channels, where the real money is. You know, like Playboy."

Ah, that was a name to conjure with. Jammi's interest in The Product soared.

"But it has to be experienced to be truly appreciated," Wiley purred. "You're looking at the next great exercise fad. You must be dying to give it a test drive."

Well, matter of fact. Out of sheer curiosity, if nothing else. Jammi stepped over to the device, hesitated. What do you do with this thing? Wiley moved to her, positioned her astride it and gently sat her down. She knelt, then settled onto the saddle, the robe curtaining her legs. At Wiley's urging she leaned forward and grasped the pommel ring.

"It's all in this patented control box," Wiley spieled. "I've already dialed in lubrication, so..." He touched a button and Jammi eeped as the rod slid smoothly up, bumping against her bare pudenda.

"You're probably noticing the fail-safe feature," Wiley continued, "Just like an elevator door. Wouldn't hurt a flea."

Jammi wriggled a little to accommodate the gently insistent dildo and oohed as it slid into her. Then out. Then back in, without the pause this time. Slowly but surely.

"This blackbox has more control parameters than a 747," Wiley told her. "You can replace the business end you're currently experiencing whatever differently sized and shaped interfaces you care to face up to. You can also modulate the thrust amplitude..." He touched the box and Jammi felt the next cycle of the rod move into her much deeper. She was starting to think this gizmo might sell a few copies.

"Oops, don't overamp that thrust," she tittered. She could envision the infomercial possibilities of this little item, all right. This was how sex was meant to be. No teamwork needed, no sweating and slobbering. Just another body workout on a machine. The Naughtylus, they could call it. Or how about SoloFux? She chortled.

"That about right for you?" Wiley asked solicitously. Jammi nodded, her head staying down after the nod. "And there's this popular parameter, labeled Frequency."

At his touch the rod started moving faster. Not too fast, though. And not too slow. Just fucking right. After a minute or so she decided a little faster might be better yet. She was leaning forward against the "steering wheel" by then, eyes closed, the robe slipping off her shoulders.

"How many speeds has it got?" she asked in a soft moan.

"Enough to get the job done," Wylie assured her quietly. He moved the frequency up another notch and when Jammi gasped, he stepped to her and gently tugged away the robe, tweaked away the towel. He hung them over a chair and sat down in it, lost in contemplation of the hard, glistening glory of Jammi's high-maintenance body. He dialed on a few more rpm's, which seemed to do her a power of good.

In a low, calm voice he said, "Then there's things like the degree of twist." Another touchwheel tweaked and Jammi's eyes popped open, swimming. She glanced at him without seeing him. She'd never felt anything remotely like that before. Wiley decided to leave it on Twisteroo for awhile. SpiroGyra and Corkscrew could wait.

He lounged in the chair fiddling with the remote like a kid with a radio controlled airplane, sending Jammi's wondrous little frame through loops and spins and interior immelmans.

"This is the Double Time cadence," he announced as she whimpered. "And here's the Deep Burn sequence. Or how about, Long Climb To Summit?"

Jammi drifted in and out of consciousness, powergliding through golden clouds of sensation. And started feeling something else she wasn't used to and therefore hadn't yet learned to recognize as the swelling chords of a powerful orgasm. When it washed over her the reaction of her springy muscles almost drove her right off the machine, but Wiley had learned a lot about the remote by then and worked her like Hemingway playing a lunging marlin. She felt another orgasm build, then break over her like a thunderstorm. A few more burst pyrotechnically in her brain and she slumped forward, one cheek on the carpet, her hips still twitching in an absent-minded rhythm. She felt so good she just wanted to cry. No man she'd ever been with had ever cared how she felt about the whole shennanigans, if *she* got off. As Wiley shoved the saddle aside, knelt behind her and slished into her, she felt her automatic response and could only think, "This is just so *sweet*!"

Wiley, plundering her hard, chiseled curves, thought pretty much the same.

The next morning she woke up from the deepest sleep she could ever recall. She stretched like a creamed cat, feeling wonderful beyond her experience. Then she touched Wiley and realized she'd awakened with a colossal pain in the ass. No, I mean literally. She had a good idea what the twinge she felt "back there" meant and shook Wiley awake with accusatory abruptness. "Did you do what I think you did? *Where* I think you did?"

Wiley shrugged, "I would have asked permission, but you'd passed out."

Her luxuriant aura forgotten, she started whacking him anywhere she could reach. But he surprised her--yet again--by moaning, "Could you use that whip over there?"

That stopped Jammi in her tracks. She'd heard of such things, of course. But... "You mean you enjoy this?"

"Not *this*, so much, but the general idea."

Jammi went and got the whip and came back to the bed, where Wiley had rolled on his stomach and pulled the sheets down to expose his rump. She hesitated.

"Is there any special way you're supposed to do it?"

"Just follow your instincts, kid."

She gave an experimental lash, which Wiley responded to, but not all that gratifyingly. She tightened her grip, moved to bring more personal-trained muscles into play and laid a stinging cut across both buttocks. There was no mistaking his reaction to that. Jammi paused, delectable little naked morsel with big black whip, and pondered.

"So that hurt?"

"Oh, yeah, come on."

"And you like it?"

"What gave you that idea?"

"Well, then" she said, dwelling of the unauthorized ache in her own nether regions, "You're just going to *love* this."

Later she found out she liked it, too. All in all, it was a pretty impactive twelve hours in Jammi Jamison's sex ed. Even Wiley learned a few things. Like how it feels when somebody doesn't respect your orifices less traveled.

The odd thing was that their affair continued for several months. Less surprising is that it just got nastier, kinkier, and more damaging. Who knew?

(Ans: Anybody Wiley could get to listen.)