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Clemmons and Smith

Jerry McFadden watched as two logging trucks, heavy with rough cut trees, flared with flames and explosions. The trucks stood bumper smashed to bumper, the lead vehicle engulfing a shattered pine with all that was left of its mangled cab. The gas tanks had blown moments earlier in a display spectacular enough to scare away the firefighting helicopters. The surrounding forest sparked and caught, turning trees to pillars of flame. It was a god awful mess, but one that spelled Emmy Award in the spring.

“Debbi, do you think they’ve considered the risk posed by fire? It looks terrible out there.” That was Harry’s voice-over, so clear from Washington that he sounded just off camera. Debbi’s response from the fire scene was immediate, and equally clear.

“It’s true, Harry, that they’re having trouble containing the flames, but spokesmen for the Forest Preservation Union, the eco-terrorists responsible, have repeatedly vowed to do ‘whatever it takes’ to stop the government’s policy of clear-cutting in the national parks. If that means destroying the parks themselves, then, from their perspective, it’s worth the sacrifice.”

“An amazing story. Where does it go from here?”

It goes, Jerry thought, from Washington, where Harry originated, and Yellowstone, where Debbi originated, up to the Comlink 1 satellite and back down to Los Angeles, where the broadcast originated. The raw footage was mixed, arranged, and decorated with superimposed titles, then it jumped back to the satellite and down to 74 million season subscribers, 8 million one-time listing subscribers, and 2 million paying impulse viewers, across three time zones. And it went out live, without even a five-second delay, and commercial-free for those subscribers who could afford the higher rate. Technology was grand, powerful, awe-inspiring and, for the line

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producer controlling it, scary as hell.

Debbi hadn't heard his thoughts. She explained the logging consortium's failure to protect shipments from sabotage, and surmised how the terrorists had defeated heavy security and thrown firebombs into the trucks. She worried only about the particulars of her story, and the finesse of her camerawork. Getting it all on the air didn't concern her; it was Jerry's job to fret over the technical juggling act of live TV. What if the Forest Preservation Union had been elsewhere tonight, leaving Debbi without a story? What if bad batteries, or a misaligned dish, or weather, or even sunspots had impeded transmission? *See It Now* averaged four or five stories a week, but it took twenty-eight crews spread throughout the world to ensure that its thirty-minute time slot was full. Only a fraction of those reporter/cameramen made the air. Of those fragile, high-strung egos that didn't, they always complained afterwards. Even now, Jerry prepared a cut to Washington for a Department of the Interior reaction to Debbi's coverage, a cut that might not go through, or that might amount to little more than a "no comment" communique delivered through a low-level gofer. Regardless, Jerry had yet another satcam reporter to deal with.

"Almost there," Malcolm Little, the transmission tech, said from his seat to Jerry's left. "I've alerted Nick in Washington. We have him cued on delta feed."

Jerry checked the program clock on the wall. "Okay, send Debbi the twenty-second countdown, and cue Harry to hand off to Nick."

"Okeydokey." Malcolm played his fingers over the computer keyboard, and drew one finger through the air to move his on-screen pointer. "Cross your fingers. Twenty...nineteen...eighteen..."

"And so," Debbi intoned, the deadline invisible in her voice, "the President's fuel emergency plan for our dry national forests has once again run into stiff opposition from the radical left. This is Deborah Robertson, *See It Now*, Yellowstone National Park."

"Cue anchor."

Harry's handsome, sandy-haired face appeared on the broadcast monitor. "And now, for official response to this latest attack..."

Jerry stopped listening. He turned to David Montoya on his right, the source supervisor. "Is Sam ready? We'll need him in less than five minutes. Has he found his story yet?"

"Don't think so. You know Sam. He equivocates when you ask

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him a question he doesn't want to answer."

"Tell him that he'll equivocate himself right out of a slot if he doesn't come up with a story ASAP."

"You got it. Who should I queue in his place?"

"That guy in Rangoon. And tell Sam that. He hates war correspondents."

Montoya grinned. He worked his pointer, stabbing the air at the icon reserved for Sam Clemmons across town. He whistled Rosalinde's aria from *Die Fledermaus* as he waited for Sam to pick up.



Even in LA, the nights get cold. Peggy Smith hunkered deeper into her cheap fleece running suit, shivering against the breeze. She glanced at Sam in his camouflage jacket and wondered why he seemed untouched by the chill. He just stood there, looking into the dark, as if surrounded by the safety of his own front porch. But this was no front porch of Peggy's experience. They stood like targets in the light of a particular street lamp on a particular sidewalk in LA's Watts District, possibly the most dangerous neighborhood in America. It was stupid to visit these streets after dark. Hell, it was stupid to visit these streets in broad daylight. Nonetheless, she stood with her mentor, Sam looking confident that he would return alive to his cozy west side apartment, not to a dumpster with a hole in his head. Peggy thought this outing an efficient way to get oneself killed. Or worse.

She looked up, shielding her eyes, to the twisting, spiraling skeletons of steel that rose like futuristic weeds above the wall behind her back. She saw three towers, jury-rigged out of pipes, bed frames, cable, apparently anything that could take a load. The mixed materials connected and intertwined upward, the crowns of their serpentine structures too high for her to see in the darkness, their bramble-like framework too complicated for her to clearly discern. And this contorted mass of steel was only the armature. It was covered in a facing of varied, well, of various kinds of junk. Glass and pottery shards, coins, tile, and colored rocks. Even *uncolored* rocks. And thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of seashells. Sam called it some sort of artistic landmark, a world famous one, too. That might have been true years ago, but it was just another moldering hazard area now. She heard the periodic clink of facings

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dropping to the pavement, and the stuff littered the sidewalk. The connecting building that had once been an arts center crouched darkly nearby, as deserted as the surrounding neighborhood. The wall encircling the monument had once been faced in the same stuff as the towers. Now it was cracked, pitted stucco covered in gang graffiti. She wondered if you could condemn a work of art. This one needed it as much as any of the deserted buildings that shared its company.

“Aren’t you going to answer that?” Peggy asked. The call light on Sam’s satcam flashed a periodic amber.

Sam’s eyes left the surrounding neighborhood and stared at the camera sitting on the sidewalk between them. It was an ugly, anachronistic machine. In an age of hyper-miniaturization, when electronics grew ever smaller, lighter and thinner, the satcam hunched on the littered sidewalk like a dented, stainless steel shoebox. But that shoebox held a high definition video camera with night vision and thermal. It held a satellite up/downlink, a satellite phone, a GPS, and a sophisticated computer. Plus the designer, the boss of *See It Now*, had insisted the thing be combat-hardened. Inside that tough little box, it did the job of an ordinary news camera, its required Net assistant, and the uplink truck they both rode in. It was still ugly, but what did Peggy know? She was only an intern.

Sam stole a glance at his watch, then turned his gaze back to the streets. “Three minutes to air. If I answer it, we lose our slot.”

“If you don’t answer it, the boss has a panic attack.”

“Not my concern,” Sam said, deadpan. “I’ll give it a minute.”

“I really think you should answer it.”

“I can’t answer it. We don’t have a story.”

“You don’t answer it, we won’t have a *job*.”

Sam looked at her, smirking. “We? You’re an intern. *You* paid the *show* to be here; it wasn’t the other way around.”

Peggy hugged herself against the chill. “I want to make a good impression. I might want a job someday.”

“Then make an impression on *me*.” He spat. “Come on, Washington. This is your big scene. Where the hell are you?”

A chime sounded in time with the amber light.

Great, Peggy thought. As if their presence wasn’t obvious enough. That chime was a watch alarm going off in church. Someone would investigate. In this part of the city, Peggy preferred to go as

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unnoticed as possible.

“I really think you should answer that.”

Sam looked at his watch again, and groaned. He stooped to the camera, cut off the call signals, and pressed the MIC button. “Yo!”

“One minute, forty-three seconds. Are you up?”

Sam said nothing. He hung over the camera as still as the towering sculpture behind him, his head bowed. Peggy wondered when he would tell them the news, the news being that there *was* no news; the story was a no-show.

“We have a stand-in,” the camera said. “A war update from Terry in Rangoon.”

Peggy watched Sam’s jaw muscles tighten. She knew his opinion of war correspondents. They lived the glory life of journalists, as their duties carried the impression of danger and implied bravery among their ranks. Sam Clemmons and any war correspondent had essentially the same job, he often told her. But the war correspondent had an army for protection, while Sam Clemmons depended on street smarts and a sunny smile. Even the police were a danger to the reporter on the street, especially if they recognized a live camera in his hands.

“Give me a minute, Montoya. The story’s coming. It’s just a little late, is all.”

“We’re on a schedule. I’ll switch you out with Rangoon.”

Peggy’s head snapped up. What was that noise? More falling seashells?

“Don’t do that. This is big time, Montoya. He’ll be here. It’s his best shot at saying his piece.”

Peggy peered up and down the sidewalk. Her stomach sank. I should have studied accounting, she thought.

“Sorry. Reschedule. If your story isn’t there, you have no story.”

“The story—”

“Is here,” Peggy finished for him.

Sam looked up. Three figures approached from the west, three more from the east. He stood, scooping the camera up to his cheek. “Company, Montoya. Here’s the feed.” He thumbed the SEND button, pointing the lens toward one group of figures.

For a moment, Montoya offered no response. Peggy knew that he and Jerry received the picture in their studio across town. Jerry mulled a decision. Was this the real thing, or three old ladies out for

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a stroll? Yeah, right.

“Harry’s already starting your intro,” a new voice, Jerry’s voice, said. “We’ll have him stretch it out an extra minute so you can verify your contacts’ identities. Live in one minute, seventeen seconds... mark! Don’t screw up, Sam. We’ll all be pissed as hell.”

“Understood. See you in a minute eleven.” He signaled to Peggy. “Get behind me, and keep your ears and eyes open. You might learn something.” He pressed one eye against the eyepiece. A 64-bit LCD screen crowded the camera’s top housing, making the eyepiece unnecessary, but Sam preferred to immerse himself in the visual world of his secondary viewfinder. With his eye against that rubber bumper, he lived only through his machine, saw only what it saw. Peggy hooked a finger under his belt to remind him of her location. He kept the camera trained on the figures approaching from the west. She watched the ones to the east. She wondered which she preferred more, the approach of the expected “story”, or some unexpected strangers. Strangers could be no less dangerous than the gangsters you made appointments with.

The men to the east stopped about thirty feet away. The ones to the west kept coming. One stopped less than six feet from Sam, another stepped into the street and came up alongside the two reporters, boxing them in against the stucco wall. The third continued at a languid pace across their front and onto their western side. All the men were black and surprisingly young, not really men at all. They dressed alike in a uniform of black baggy jeans, black leather jackets, black tee shirts and white Nike *Airjets*, the kind with the leather and foam ankle straps. They wore red, black, and green berets on what looked like shaven heads, and the nearer ones carried a small tattoo above their right eyebrows: the head of a cat. This was the bunch all right.

The boy passing before them doubled back and crossed their front again. He seemed nervous, but nonetheless in control. He trained his eyes on Sam’s camera and kept them there with a haughty single-mindedness. Sam returned the attention.

“I’m Sam Clemmons of the Net and television news show *See It Now*. I guess I’m talking to Donald Washington, de facto chief of the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Fellowship.”

The young man continued to cross and re-cross their front. He reminded Peggy of a lion inspecting prospective prey. Is he hungry

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enough for these, or should he let them go? He managed this despite an undistinguished appearance. A shorter than average stature and probably too many donuts belied the message of the dark uniform and tat. Truthfully, only his eyes revealed anything to fear.

“So,” he finally said, “your white millionaire bosses sent a good nigger boy to talk to the big, bad niggers, is that the way I read it?”

“If you do, you read it wrong.” Sam’s camera did not waver from the boy’s face. “This is *my* story, *my* research, *my* idea. And my boss’s color isn’t relevant here.”

“All the bosses are white,” the boy said. “*All* the bosses. That’s why things *are* the way they *are*. That’s why my brothers sit in jail for doin’ nothin’ to nobody. That’s why I’m a hunted man. Yeah, I’m Donald Washington. I’m the one you wanted to talk with. Now, what did you want to talk *about*?”

Jeez, what a drama queen. Had he watched too many exploitation films?

“First things first. I’m due on the air in eighteen seconds, and we’ll have about five minutes. Can we work with that?” Peggy marveled at Sam’s control. Personally, she was scared to death.

“You called me out here for *five fuckin’ minutes*? Nigger, you waste my *time*.”

“Five minutes is a long time on television. Do we play?”

Washington stopped pacing. He regarded Sam’s camera with undisguised contempt. “What you got for *me*?”

“This is it, man. This is your chance to talk, unedited, to tell the world where you’re coming from.” The amber light started to blink.

“I got no problem with that,” Washington said, “but no bullshit, you hear? We don’t cut much slack to white-on-the-inside black boy traitors around here.”

The call signal chimed. Everyone nearby jumped except Sam. He thumbed the MIC button. “Stand-by!”

“Understood. I’m just here to understand, and help others understand. Now, we’re up, and I’m going live.” He thumbed the SEND button.

“This is Samuel Clemmons speaking from a secret meeting place in Los Angeles, where I and members of the Black Panther Fellowship will discuss recent events surrounding their revived movement. On screen is Donald Washington, the last remaining *free* leader of this newest incarnation of the leftist social advocacy group.

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Mr. Washington, the Los Angeles police took your primary leadership into custody eight days ago. What does that mean for your organization?"

Donald Washington looked into the camera. "The Black Panther Fellowship won't be destroyed by the taking of its *leaders*," he said. "This is no *club*, no loose association of poor black men crying about *emasculatation* and running pop-eyed from the white man's *oppression*. The Black Panthers is a *move*-ment, a necessary evolution in the will and strength of the black people of America."



Across town, a critical Jerry McFadden watched the broadcast monitor. Washington looked effective, he thought, maybe even scary in the harsh light of the street lamp. Sam heightened the effect by moving slowly, continuously, in an arc around his subject, adding a drama of slowly changing shadows and a more active, textured background that matched the drama of the boy's words. Washington was only fifteen years old, which made his words even more compelling.



"Two years ago, I was a gang member, a *Blood* brother. But today I walk in *Crip* territory, and I fear no evil. Marcus Tandy, Crips boss, had a vision to bring Bloods and Crips *together*, to change gang activity to somethin' that helped, not hindered this old black neighborhood. It was time for black men to start *livin'* for *somethin'* rather than *dysin'* for *nothin'*." Peggy marveled at Washington's control. He spoke like a man used to the pulpit. A bullshit runner all his short life, she figured.

"It was Marcus Tandy who changed a time bomb of our destruction to the instrument of our *salvation*. Out of the gangs came this latest Black Panthers." He spoke with his hands, gesturing with the latest, coolest finger-pointing and fist pumping. Peggy analyzed him as she knew few would, and found him convincing. "We took the name because of its heritage. In the 1960's, it was a political party building Black Power in the cities. In the '90's, it was a social justice advocate that looked out for the rights and the purity of black communities. Now, the Black Panthers is a *defense force* and a *community engine*. We're taking this community, and we're making it *safe* where the white man's police *won't* make it safe. We'll make

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it *prosper* where the white business machine kept it *poor* and *helpless*. We have teachers among us, and we'll use them to teach black children in ways that raise their pride in their heritage. We work with black churches and businesses to build *unity* and *enterprise*. This is the black community taking charge of its *destiny*.

"But Marcus Tandy is in jail today," Washington said, and lifted his chin. "Marcus Tandy, Bobby Hicks, Jamaal Peterson and Martin Montgomery. The law took them 'cause they're strong black men with powerful ideas. The power brokers tried to stop Martin Luther King, Jr., and they tried to stop Nelson Mandela, and now they try to stop *us* from showing black people their destiny."

"What about the charges?" Sam interjected. "Mr. Tandy and associates were arrested for weapons violations and drug trafficking. Is there no validity to those charges?"

Washington's eyes wavered. He faltered from his pulpit-style prepared speech. "Last time I checked, possession of firearms was protected under the constitution. As for drugs, the Fellowship discourages the use of drugs in the black community. Drugs are a bad influence. No Black Panther can stay a member and use drugs; our law forbids it. Now, if the white community wants to waste itself with drugs, that's their business."

"So, the Black Panthers do not sell drugs to black people. Do you sell to those *outside* the black community?"

"No," Washington said after a short, but noticeable pause. "But we approve of those who do."

Christ! Peggy thought. Does he *believe* all this? The white man this, the white man that. It was all the poorest of clichés. She and Washington were only four or five years apart. They shared the same skin color, probably listened to the same music and read the same books, if he read. But, was her growing up in a black working class neighborhood in Bakersfield so different from his life in Watts? Why so much focused malice? Peggy believed it was more self-inflicted than the result of White Oppression. Mr. Donald Washington was just an angry black boy with a bad attitude. The big sister in her wanted to slap him upside the head to get it back on straight.

"So, you attribute police interest in your organization to simple racial prejudice? They claim to be nipping a terrorist movement in the bud. What's your response to that?"

"How long we got left?"

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“Time enough. A minute, or so.”

“A minute, or so.” Washington looked at Sam a moment, and at Peggy. Peggy found no malice in his eyes as he acknowledged her presence for the first time, and that surprised her, considering his general disposition. Then the boy nodded, having reached some sort of decision. “Turn that camera around,” he said to Sam. “Show everybody where we are. It’s all right. There ain’t enough time for the heat to get here. I vouched for your passage through this neighborhood. *I* did. I wanted you to stand in *this* spot, in front of *that* monument. See those towers? That’s the Watts Towers, a sculpture, not a building. The man who built it was a genius. In the 1920’s, it was so far ahead of its time that nobody *understood* it. Los Angeles tried to tear it down before they realized what they had. They ran the artist out of town before the sculpture was even finished.”

Damn! Peggy was impressed. They had themselves a junior art historian.

“There’s a parallel here. The Black Panthers is a modern Watts Towers. We got an idea for the future that ignorant people can’t understand, and can’t allow to exist. But the Black Panthers won’t be torn down, and won’t be ignored, like this sculpture was ignored for *thirty years* before they recognized what it was. And the Black Panthers will not go away. It won’t disappear into neglect, like this sculpture got neglected over the *last* thirty years.”

Sam panned from the tower structure to Washington’s face.

“Marcus Tandy recently set an agenda for Black Panther activist work,” he said. “He set the Equal Opportunity in Government Act, now up for consideration in Congress, as the biggest obstacle to minority advancement in this century. Do you concur with Mr. Tandy’s view on EOG?”

“The EOG seeks to codify Black disenfranchisement. By holdin’ down the amount of representation our people get in the federal government, the white power brokers stay in control and keep us poor and hungry. The white man is *afraid* of us. Soon, we’ll outnumber him, so he tries *every rotten trick* to stay on top, to keep the niggers in they *place*. That’s why Marcus Tandy sits in jail. Well, I got a message for the power brokers of this country.” Washington leaned toward the camera. “If anything happens to those brothers in jail, this city will *regret* it. Our brothers’ absence from these streets

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won't make us weaker, it'll forge our strength and our resolve. We, the brothers of the Black Panther Fellowship declare *war* on the forces of ignorance and oppression in this nation and *all* its cities. We declare war on the slavery that's kept our people down for *five hundred years*. We declare... declare..."

He looked distracted. His eyes left the camera and sought his men. The west lookout held a cell phone and quickly approached his boss. "Rollers," he said. "103rd and Wilmington. Gotta go."

Washington turned back to Sam. His eyes lost their defiant, revolutionary edge. They were cold and lifeless as marbles. "You told them where we'd be?" His tone dismissed all argument. "You set this up."

Sam still held the camera, still composed and sent his pictures live into the living rooms of America.



Across town, Jerry stopped the planned hand-off to Harry, who always closed the show. "Get me CBS News! We might want to go overtime on this!"



"Set what up?" Sam asked. "What's going on?"

"We got police cars in the 'hood, man. You *led* 'em here. You set up this meeting and brought in the blueshirts for a grand finale to your fuckin' *TV* show."



"I have the night chief of CBS News," Little said across town. "What the hell do I do with him?"

Jerry snatched the phone from Little's hand. He glancing up at the broadcast clock even as he formed his first words to the higher ups. One minute left of broadcast time, then they stepped on the next scheduled feed, a situation comedy about a single mother with ill-mannered kids and nosy neighbors. Boy, were *those* viewers in for a surprise.



"Now, hold on," Sam protested from behind his camera lens. "I didn't lead anybody here. I've been up front with you. I wanted to get your story. I've no mileage in putting you away."

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Washington slammed into him with such force and speed that Sam dropped the satcam. It clattered to the concrete at Peggy's feet, and tripped her up as she tried to evade the attack. She landed on her backside right next to the western lookout, who gripped a gigantic pistol in the hand that so recently had held a phone. Actually, she had no idea as to the pistol's model, caliber, or specific length, but it looked plenty damned big to her.

"I ain't *gettin'* put away, you sonofabitch! As you can tell, I was *prepared* for your white black nigger bullshit! My people got me a *warning!* You, on the other hand, get *nothin'!*" Washington held Sam by his shoulders. He slammed him repeatedly into the rough stucco surface of the monument wall. "You get no *mercy*, you get no *appeal*, you get no *life!*"



"What the hell? What happened to the camera? Where's the goddamn picture?"

"We *have* the picture. Sam dropped the camera. It's sideways and out of focus. There! It's back up!"

The broadcast monitor showed a crazily wobbling image of littered sidewalk, then a dizzying fast pan that stopped on the sight of Washington slapping Sam against the stucco wall. Dust and bits of glass and seashell exploded behind Sam's back each time he hit the wall. Sam did not defend himself.

"I hope the cops get there quick," Montoya said. "That dude is *pissed.*"

"Christ!" Jerry said. "Who the hell's got the *camera?*"



"Mr. Washington," Sam said, "please, don't do anything you might regret later."

Peggy held the satcam trained on the two men. She didn't know what else to do. Running was useless; with those guns, they could kill her almost thoughtlessly, and probably would. And she sure as hell wouldn't cower before these bastards. She did what she hoped Sam wanted of her, the one thing that could temper Washington's actions. After all, everything he said and did went live to anyone caring to watch.

"Don't worry, white black boy, I ain't *never* gonna regret *this!*" Washington heaved Sam to the curb and watched him strike the

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filthy concrete and roll into the gutter. “*Waste the nigger!*” he ordered nobody in particular.

The street lookout stepped forward and pointed a pistol at Sam’s head.

The street exploded in blinding white light. Trash leapt up and slammed against the stucco wall, scouring everyone and everything in its path. The flying objects accompanied a driving gale and a rhythmic overpressure that could only mean the beat of helicopter rotors.

“STAY WHERE YOU ARE! THIS IS THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY POLICE DEPARTMENT! YOU IN THE STREET! STAY WHERE YOU ARE!”

Peggy panned upward toward the light source, but caught herself and angled back when she remembered Sam’s warning about searchlights. She didn’t want to burn out the camera’s digitizers, or blind herself in the lens-focused million candlepower beam. Instead, she found Sam still lying in the gutter, but making movements to haul himself upright. His would-be executioner stood frozen over him, pistol still aimed for a kill, but eyes squinting upward toward the helicopter. Washington signaled a cutting motion with his fingers and waved one arm. His people disappeared into the surrounding streets, all but the gunman hanging over Sam. Washington stepped up to Sam, showing no concern over the hovering helicopter and its transfixing spotlight. He stooped to speak to the man he had ordered dead. Peggy couldn’t believe that she, a sophomore in college, sent this scene to the nation.

“You,” Washington said, stabbing Sam’s chest with one finger. “I will reckon with you at *another* time, in *another* place.” He stood, signaled his last remaining henchman, and the two disappeared out of the helicopter’s cone of light.



Harry’s ad-lib voiceover was incredible, capturing the flow of events in even, confident tones, stopping only when a primary on-screen figure opened his mouth to speak. Jerry looked again at the broadcast clock. They were thirty-two seconds into overtime, well within the confines of an ordinary commercial break. Amazing the things that happened in mere seconds. The network would go with them. They even sent a reschedule alarm out to the personal computers and phones of every subscriber, and they readied to sell

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advertising if the story continued longer than another five minutes. Jerry just hoped the finale didn't include two dead reporters.



The helicopter pitched in pursuit of the Panthers, Donald Washington in particular. Peggy jumped to Sam's side just as the first police cruiser rounded the corner a block away. The cruiser pointed itself like a bullet in their direction. It sped by at what must have been sixty miles per hour, whipping glass, rocks and seashells into its wake as ferociously as the helicopter had blasted them away. The car headed east, the same direction the Panthers had run. It sped off the road and out of sight, across the plaza on the sculpture's opposite side. Those cops were hungry, and eager.

"Are you okay?" Peggy yelled to Sam. Sirens surrounded them, deafening, and growing still louder. "I didn't know what to do! Are you okay?"

"Run!" Sam croaked. He grabbed her arm and pushed her west along the sidewalk.

Peggy ran, clutching the camera as she might clutch a baby. Then she remembered her training, and brought the aluminum box down to her hip, lens facing forward, so that the viewers could follow the action. She heard Sam puffing behind her. He sounded terrible, his breath ragged.

"Right! Head right!" she heard him shout.

She cut the corner of the Watts Towers property and bolted faster into the shadowed darkness of grass and trees. The helicopter spotlight blazed like God some distance behind her, providing dim, if uncertain, illumination ahead. A decrepit chain link fence sprang up along her path, marking the weedy yard of a boarded-up house.

"Over the fence! Do it!"

She vaulted the fence, almost losing the camera, and stumbled toward the black wall of the building.

"Other side!"

Sam passed her near the ramshackle porch. She followed him around the far end of the house, then collapsed against the wall with him. Her legs trembled. She fought to control her breathing. *Jesus, God of Mercy!* This was not the plan when she chose an internship in telecommunications!

"Sorry." Sam spat black liquid into the weeds at his feet. "Staying around there. Not a good idea."

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“They were gone, Sam. The cops were coming. We could have waited for the *cops!*” She heard the rising tenor of her voice.

Sam held up an index finger to silence her. He took the camera from her hands. “Control, this is Sam Clemmons.”

“Sam, it’s Harry,” the camera said, reminding them both they were still on the air. “You took us for a ride there, buddy. Are you free to talk?”

Sam pressed the narrator button on the satcam’s top. All over the feed, his high-definition, 3D “talking head” avatar appeared in the upper left corner of TV and computer screens. Based on digital scans of his face, the animated image would keep pace with the words he spoke, a high-tech lip-sync. It could also speak for itself in his voice, the AI able to handle non-technical questions thoughtfully placed by Harry.

“Sorry, Harry, and I apologize to our viewers. As you saw, we had a situation.”

“We saw, Sam. We’re wondering who ran the camera, as we clearly saw you in the frame.”

“That was my intern from UCLA, Miss Peggy Smith.” He winked at Peggy as he spoke. “We’ll have to hire this one when she graduates, Harry. She’s born *See It Now*.”

“I’m sure our viewers agree. What now, Sam?”

“We’re headed for the car. It’s about ten blocks north of here. Coming along?”

“We’ll monitor your progress through a P-in-P, but I think we’ll take this chance to recap events for those viewers just joining us. Take care. We’ll check with you soon to see how you’re doing.”

“Sounds great. This is Samuel Clemmons, *See It Now*, Los Angeles.”

He switched the camera from SEND to HOLD as he placed it gingerly at his feet. “The avatar will entertain them for a second,” he said between labored breaths. “And, honey, the cops are the *problem*.”

Peggy sagged down the wall. The cops are the problem? This guy almost gets an extra hole in his head as a friendship gift from that testosterone-crazed nutball of a Black Power militant, and he says the *cops* are the problem. She thought about accounting as a career option. Dad liked accounting. It was a *real* job.

Sam spat again into the weeds and hung over the camera, his

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hands on his knees. “The police hate these things. Most of them are small; they fit in the palm of your hand. Ours are more noticeable, which makes us a magnet for cops with issues.”

“Then why don’t we use the smaller ones?”

“The smaller ones are for wusses. The smaller ones need a satellite truck.” He stood suddenly. “Okay, let’s go. I’ll feel better when we’re back at the studio.”



“Sam sounded awful,” Malcolm Little said. “I reckon that kid fairly beat the shit out of him.”

“What about that commentary on cops?” Montoya asked. “The Fraternal Order of Police will be flooding the phone lines ten minutes from now.”

Jerry ran his hands through his thick mat of hair. “No worry there. The only thing broadcasting is Sam’s avatar schmoozing with Harry.” Even so, Jerry didn’t care if the Fraternal Order of Police got their feelings hurt. He didn’t care if Donald Washington became a night depository for municipally owned and distributed bullets. But those two reporters (correction: one reporter and one intern) were his responsibility. And they weren’t out of trouble yet.



“The cops know me too well,” Sam explained as they skulked along the fronts of house after house. “And we aren’t friends of distinction, either, I’ll tell you that. They’d love to haul me in, just to be nasty, and they’d love to keep this camera a few days, maybe take it apart and put it back together again.”

“Don’t you think that’s a little paranoid?”

They ducked into the shadow of yet another building to avoid detection in a near pass of the helicopter. Peggy jumped at a frantic barking from within the house. Porch lights flared at the front and rear.

“Get on away from here!” a geriatric voice wailed from within. “We don’t want your kind in our home!”

Sam moved on, and Peggy followed.

“Not paranoid,” Sam said a moment later, “just hard fact.” He held up the camera so that she saw him switch back to SEND. “Okay, this is 103rd Street ahead. There’ll be patrols on it, so I don’t want to spend much time there. But we have to shoot across the

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railroad tracks to get to the park and our car.”

“How do you know your way around so well? Research?”

“I used to live here.”

Peggy grabbed his arm. “You’re just full of surprises, Sam. You used to *live* in this hole?”

“Doesn’t matter much *where* you live, but *how*.”

The street erupted in red and blue strobes. A white blade of spotlight stabbed out from the black recesses of a parking lot. The light impaled them against the drab backdrop of the deserted street. “Stop right there!” a voice commanded. “LAPD!”

“Run!” Sam pushed Peggy forward, and the two raced across the brightly lit stretch that was 103rd Street. Peggy felt naked crossing the five lanes of illuminated asphalt after the dark anonymity of the neighborhood behind her. Her back knotted as she waited for the cops to shout warning, waited for them to shoot. But, of course they wouldn’t shoot. They were *cops*, for God’s sake. Why on *earth* did she run from *cops*?

Because you aren’t white enough not to get shot, she decided.

Two more cruisers converged at high speed from both ends of 103rd. They braked grill to grill just where the reporters crossed into the vacant lot on the north side of the street. A cop chased them on foot, not twenty feet behind. Glancing back, Peggy saw his gun drawn.

“Fence!” Sam yelled. Peggy crashed bodily into the rusted chain link and bounced back dazed. Automatically, her hand flew out and grasped the mesh for balance. It was a tall one, about eight feet. She leapt at the mesh, grabbed hold with hands and feet, and spidered her way up and over the top. She let go, landing painfully on her side. Something crashed next to her shoulder.

“Get down! Get down *now!*” somebody shouted.

Peggy cringed as the policeman grabbed Sam and wrestled him to the scrub. He rolled his prisoner face down in the weedy earth and forced one knee into his back. His pistol arced up from Sam’s head until it pointed in Peggy’s direction. His message was clear. She didn’t even hear the warning: stay put, don’t move, or I blow your head off.

But he couldn’t blow her head off. He was a cop. Or he’d do it no matter what she did.

Peggy saw the camera beside her in the weeds.

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Amazed to think it, she did the unthinkable. She snatched up the camera, rolled over and onto her feet, and ran.



“Holy shit!” Little shouted. “She’s running! You tell me this girl’s an *intern*?”

“She’ll never make it.” Montoya shook his head. “The blueshirts are crawling that park like cockroaches. And she isn’t on dark-assed Graham anymore.”

“She’s even holding the camera right,” Little continued. “You *sure* she’s an intern?”

“She needs help,” Jerry decided. He reached for the phone.

“What about Sam?” Montoya asked.

Though they hadn’t seen Sam get taken, the policeman’s words had come through in digital clarity, with all the grunts, thuds and ringing chain link associated with the capture. Now they heard only Peggy’s heavy breathing, and occasionally her footsteps. Jerry thought that answer enough for Montoya’s query.

“Heliport? Got that stand-by handy? I need it in the air *now*, and an ETA to Watts.” He listened a moment, then relaxed in his chair. “Okay. I’ll be back with you in a second.”

“How long?” Montoya asked. He watched the quaking, jittery picture on the broadcast monitor, then Harry’s face as Little switched feeds.

“She’s already orbiting Interstate 110 and Century Boulevard.”

“She just *did* that, without asking?”

Jerry shrugged. “She’s one of Steve’s people.”



She listened as she ran.

“...the Watts Senior Citizens Center. It isn’t far, just to your north. You have to get there fast. Your dustoff has an ETA of one minute. If you aren’t on time, you ride home with the cops.”

Great, she thought, I can get myself a criminal record. Dad will *love* that.

She doubted she could make the rendezvous. She was tired, beat up, and lost. “North” meant nothing in this sometimes deserted, sometimes alive, always decrepit mass of concrete, siding and weeds. The police swarmed around her. To avoid them, she had turned aside so many times in the last few seconds that all sense of

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direction deserted her. She hoped she would see the vertolifter approach, and be quick enough to reach it before it departed.

With that thought in mind, she fell flat on her face in the blackened back yard she traversed. A dog set up a thunderous baying from within the house, and was suddenly silenced.

What a pathetic town, she thought. The people hide in their homes like rabbits avoiding wolves, too frightened to check out disturbances on their own property. They responded to danger by turning out the lights, like the proverbial ostrich with its head in the sand.

She started to rise, but froze half to her feet at the feel of metal against her cheek.

“Yeah,” the other person said. “It’s loaded.”



Chelsea Van Arsdale checked the play in her vertol controls. Some thoughtful engineer had copied the old helicopter setup, so the revolutionary machine always seemed familiar to her. She checked the chronometer in the heads up display in her helmet visor, then refocused on Jerry’s radio transmission.

“We’re doing this straight up, Chelsea, so they’ll be too embarrassed to bring charges. We’ll use a ‘protecting our reporters from the wandering criminal element’ angle. Be quick, because the whole thing’ll be on national TV.”

“Oooh, my big break.”

“Yeah, well, soon as Harry breaks the scam, every cop within a two-mile radius is gonna beeline to the pickup point, so you’ll have a huge audience.”

“I’ll wow ‘em, Jerry. Sorry, but I just hit forty seconds. I’m putting this thing in the pipe and going for your girl.”

“Good luck, Chelsea.”

“Luck is not an issue.”

She dropped power and slid into a graceful right turn, bringing the vertolifter to the minimum safe altitude for avoiding overhead wires. She pointed the aircraft east along Century Boulevard, the straightest route to her destination. She increased power and changed the angle of the fanjets to attain her maximum speed of 180 knots. That would bring her to the pick up point in just over thirty seconds.

Hopefully, her package waited to ride.

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"You're the one with him, that reporter guy." The dark was near total. Even so, Peggy recognized him as one of Donald Washington's five bodyguards. He wore the same distinct uniform, though he had lost the fancy beret some time during the night.

"Please," she said, still frozen half way to her feet, the pistol barrel just inside her vision. "We didn't call the cops. I'm just a college student. A telecommunications intern. And I'm thinking about changing my major. All I want out of life is to find the old folks home, or whatever it is."

"The Senior Citizens Center. Somebody pickin' you up?"

"Oh, I certainly hope so."

The pistol dropped. A hand gripped her arm and hauled her to her feet. "Git, little sister."

"You're letting me go?"

He snorted. "Consider it a thank-you. You and your buddy got the cops so buzzed up, maybe they forgot about me and the brothers. Go on, through that hedge, then cross the street."

"What hedge?"

"Just go *that* way." He shoved her off. "And stay on campus next time, baby. You don't belong out here."

Ain't that an understatement, Peggy thought as she stumbled in the indicated direction. In a moment, a black wall of hedge formed before her eyes. She felt the prickly, scratchy touch of its branches, then used the camera to hammer her way through to the other side.

"Sorry, America. Close your eyes and ears."

Beyond the hedge stretched the wide expanse of Century Boulevard. At an angle to her, across a no man's land of railroad tracks, stood the low concrete mass of what she hoped was the Senior Citizens Center. It, like the street, blazed with light. She heard faint strands of music coming from within. Rihanna, or one of those other old soul divas. An eight-foot chain link fence surrounded the property. Peggy groaned at the barrier, then flinched as a car passed, but it was normal traffic, not the police. A street with cars, and with signs of human habitation. After the last hour, it seemed such a strange phenomenon.

But, the police were somewhere nearby, or had those on foot lost her in the maze of weedy yards, back alleys, and chain link and stockade fences? What about the cruisers? Surely they watched the

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street. It was an obvious main drag with its four traffic lanes, turn lane, and wide sidewalks. It made a logical border for boxing in fugitives.

She heard sirens, as if in answer to her thoughts.

Two or three blocks east, three cruisers peeled onto the street and headed her way. Another appeared from the opposite direction. She ducked from a roar and a blast of air above, then saw the great locust form of a vertolifter shoot overhead and across the street. That was her ride.

Peggy threw herself into the street, pumping her legs furiously to clear the pavement ahead of the cruisers. She bounded across the tracks, hit the sidewalk beyond and ran, her heart pounding, along the fence to the gate too far away. The cruiser from the west braked violently behind her. She heard slamming doors.

She rushed along the fence. She watched the aircraft hunker over the parking lot on the other side of the chain link. Only a few inaccessible feet away. How long would it stay? Would she enter the parking lot only to watch it drift clear of the pavement and head for home?

She glanced back at the policeman puffing behind her. The other cars squealed to the curb behind him.

Peggy cleared the fence, grabbing its end post to whip her around back toward the vertol. The aircraft hovered just ahead, between two rolls of vehicles, its cargo doors open. All its lights blazed, including the white identification flood highlighting the *See It Now* logo. Peggy felt the aircraft's down draft whipping her hair and clothes. She knew she would make it.

She threw herself into the waiting cargo bay as several cruisers slammed to a halt not ten feet from the vertolifter's nose. She dropped the camera and wrenched the cargo door shut, exhilarated by her escape. Cops poured from their cars, and a public address system blared warning for the aircraft to set down. The deck wrenched beneath Peggy's feet, causing her to stumble and fall to her knees. The ship rose into the night air.

The vertolifter banked gently right. Through the remaining open cargo door, Peggy saw a glittering mosaic of red and blue lights centered on the parking lot of the Watts Senior Citizens Center. It was all very far below.

"Yes!" she shouted, slapping the deck with both hands.

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“Absolutely, primo *yes!*”

“Umm, when you’re done congratulating yourself,” the pilot yelled, “you might reopen that door and start shooting video! You’re still on the air, you know!”

Peggy flinched at her forgetfulness. She scooped up the camera and, cradling it under one arm, drew back the door she had slammed on impulse a moment before. The pilot banked obligingly, and the vertolifter dropped to a more dramatic altitude for video capture. Peggy checked that the green “on the air” diode still glowed, and pointed the camera toward the police cars below. She noticed a frantically blinking fault indicator in the viewfinder. That was no surprise. The camera casing showed multiple dents, a missing corner, and a shattered primary LCD. Dirt and grass encrusted the unit. She hoped they didn’t bill her for the damage.

“How about it, Peggy?” a voice said from the camera. “Any comment on your extraction from a war zone between police and Black Panther revolutionaries?”

“Umm, not really,” she answered, trying to think who owned the voice. “I’m just glad to be out of there.”

“I suppose your internship will be anticlimactic after this. And so might the remainder of our audience’s viewing.”

It was Harry Brackett, the anchorman. “I don’t know, Harry. Maybe this is just the beginning.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it. Well, we’ll recap the night’s events and return our viewers to their regular programming, updating on the situation as necessary. Thanks, Peggy. You’ve shown all the professionalism expected of a *See It Now* reporter in the field.”

“Thanks, Harry.” She had an inspiration. “This is Peggy Smith, *See It Now*, Los Angeles.” She released the SEND button. “Yes!” she shouted again.