

A city skyline at sunset with palm trees and a street lamp.

A LUCKY DEY THRILLER

DOUG RICHARDSON

**BLOOD
MONEY**

“Richardson delivers the goods.” — *INDIEREADER*

Monday

1

Somewhere in Kern County, California.

BEEMER CURSED.

Two words. Two syllables. A mental rim shot inside Greg Beem's skull. The simple phrase was perfectly descriptive, and summed up just about every seminal moment of the Beemer's twenty-nine years. The curse described a moment that was, in truth, formative. Beemer could catalogue his life with his very own cursed moments.

...I wet the bed.

...the gun went off.

...she's really pregnant?

...my parachute didn't open.

...that knife was sharper than I thought.

...the bitch actually left me.

...I really didn't mean to burn the house down.

Beemer's most recent cursed moment began at 3:16 A.M. on August sixth. Beemer remembered the time because, for some unknown reason, his eyes had flicked to the digital clock display on the dashboard of the Peterbilt tandem axle tractor rig. He was alone and behind the wheel of this beautiful piece of machinery. Nearly brand spanking new. Gray leather seats in the forward cab with a comfy sleeper bed behind. The dash was equally monochrome with an array of digital gauges and switches. The steering wheel was wrapped like the grip of a four-hundred-dollar tennis racket. But the interior was just the icing on a very masculine cake.

Beemer had actually fallen in love the moment he first set his eyes on her. The truck was glossy black with matte airfoils. Big ass stainless wheels. Twin chrome exhaust stacks flanking the cab. And towing a forty foot refrigerated trailer that was as dark as a moonless night. Damn she was pretty. A gear head's wet dream. Too bad she was stolen. If he could have bought her, Beemer might have considered changing his vocation to that of a long haul truck driver.

Beemer clutched, downshifting to slow his heavy load without having to jam on the air brakes. He felt the forty-seven thousand pounds of refrigerated trailer he was towing push from behind, as if it had a mind of its own, willfully nudging the man to ignore the warning, hit the gas, and damn the consequences.

The warning: a Kern County Sheriff's deputy a hundred yards ahead, astride the yellow center strip of Highway 395, waving both arms over his head in an international sign of distress. Beemer wished he could count the number of times one of his cursed moments had begun with this kind of signal. In the deputy's hand was a high intensity flashlight, the beam igniting the big rig's windshield, directing the driver to pull over. Beemer slowed and clicked on his high beams. The blast from the big rig's lights revealed the scene beyond the deputy. A single Kern County Sheriff's unit parked at an angle across the southbound lane. Driver's door and trunk lid open. And twenty yards further, an overturned Porsche Cayenne SUV. White. By the looks of the deformed body and black road char, the SUV seemed to have taken a few tumbles before coming to rest on the shoulder. The windows were either blown out or spider-webbed so badly they had turned nearly opaque. Totaled.

A seventy-thousand-dollar brain fart. A certain cursed moment for the owner or, more likely, the leasing company.

Not to mention the driver and passenger.

Beemer clutched again, releasing the gears, and eased his foot onto the air brakes. Ten sets of brake shoes uniformly pinched ten oversized ceramic disks. Once again, he could feel his cargo shoving the cab from behind. Controlled inertia. Forty-seven thousand pounds of restrained energy came slowly to a safe stop.

“Step out of the cab please,” said the deputy, his voice muffled by the tractor rig’s safety glass.

Beemer rolled down the window. As the deputy circled round and through the headlight beams, Beemer clocked the cop as young. Twenty-three years old tops. Maybe five-foot-eight. Shiny black hair, matted down across his forehead by a flop sweat. The deputy’s face was pale, nearly colorless in the dimness.

“Sir?” said the deputy. “I need your assistance. Need you to climb out and set up flares to your rear in order to control traffic.”

“What traffic?” said Beemer. Monotone. Still, he thought the delivery sounded a little like he thought it was a joke.

“I got accident victims...” The deputy bit his lip in frustration. What cool he had left was slipping away. “Goddammit, mister. I need your help!”

Mister? thought Beemer. The poor deputy couldn’t see past the fog on his own lenses. Beemer wasn’t much older than him. Wiser? Most likely. Experienced, too. Worldly. And practiced in the art of covering his ass—not to mention his precious assets, all presently behind him in a stolen refrigerated trailer rig.

“Alright,” said Beemer. “I’m on it.”

“Got the flares in the trunk here.”

“Right. So what the hell happened?”

The deputy heard the question, but didn’t answer. Not that Beemer needed to know. He could guess some of it. The Porsche SUV had soared past the eighteen wheeler not fifteen minutes earlier. Beemer had glanced down as he sped down the adjacent lane. He thought he’d seen a blonde behind the wheel. As for a passenger, he couldn’t make out if it was a man or woman. All Beemer had seen was the glowing ember of a lit cigarette, followed

by sparks as the butt was flicked out the window. *Dumb ass*, Beemer had thought. It was August. Hot. Drier than a dead gnat. Though this was the high desert, there were roadside grasses that could easily ignite. A fire would draw attention. Attention was exactly what Beemer wanted to avoid. Driving the rig at a safe sixty-two miles an hour, he figured the Porsche Cayenne and its two passengers were traveling something near eighty-five miles per hour. Its red tail lights had disappeared into the night.

“You know how to light these?” asked the deputy, passing off a bundle of road flares.

“Sure,” said Beemer. By now, he was close enough to see the front left portion of the sheriff’s unit. The bumper was badly deformed and the headlight was dangling by a pair of wires. Beemer could see paint transfers. White. Instantly, Beemer was revising the story in his head. At first, he had thought the speeding Porsche had lost control and flipped. The deputy was probably in the area and had stumbled across the accident scene. But the damage to the patrol car added a new wrinkle. Somehow, the deputy’s vehicle and the SUV had traded paint in some kind of collision. This would explain the young deputy’s demeanor. The flop sweat and fogged glasses. The panicked tone.

This was definitely one of those cursed moments. A flash in time shared by both the deputy and the big rig driver. Only the poor deputy clearly hadn’t recognized the importance of seeing the moment for what it was. Adrenalin had already pumped through his bloodstream, crossing the cerebral cortex, cementing the time and place of the incident in his memory for as long as he would live. But adrenalin can have dangerous side effects: impaired judgment and problem solving. Stab a competitive chess player with a syringe full of adrenalin before a critical move and watch his ability to plan ahead turn to mush. The key, Beemer knew, was to identify the cursed moment at the precise moment at which it begins to unfold. Training had taught him as much. Not to mention all the government-issued therapy. Awareness stems the adrenalin push and leaves the critical thinking lobes of the brain unaffected. The chess game can continue.

Beemer scratched the top of the first flare. Sparks. Then a familiar blaze of red-dyed flame. His thoughts were clear and unclouded.

The deputy had surely called for assistance. EMS, a sheriff's backup, Highway Patrol. Because of the obvious contact between the sheriff's vehicle and the Porsche SUV, an internal investigation would follow, making the big rig driver a witness. They would take his statements there at the scene with follow-up interviews at a later appointed date. Beemer would be asked to give personal information such as his identification, current address and occupation. At some point he would be asked to explain what the hell he was doing driving an eighteen-wheel refrigerator rig southbound on Highway 395.

This was too much information for Beemer to give. He had known it well before he applied the air brakes to stop. He also had known that he wouldn't have the time to give it. He was on a schedule. And there was no place for this sort of delay.

So how much time did Beemer have until assistance arrived? Ten minutes? Five? Two even?

The young deputy was on his knees, reaching into the SUV in an effort to help the passengers inside. As Beemer walked closer, he heard whimpering. Was it the blonde woman he'd spied from his truck's perch? Or her cigarette-flicking, potential fire-starting companion? *Unknown*, thought Beemer. And not that it really mattered a whit. He had only moments to execute his chess move and put this event in his rearview mirror.

The red glow of the flare lit Beemer's measured footsteps as he closed the gap between himself and the deputy, who was nearly prone with his shoulders wedged inside the turtled SUV. Beemer keyed on the holstered pistol on the deputy's hip. A standard Glock 19. *Quickly*, thought Beemer. *Remember to breathe. Then execute.*

"Shit!" yelled the deputy, wriggling from the SUV's passenger window. This is when he noticed the red glow of flare. He snapped his head toward the blazing stick. So bright he had to shade his eyes. "What the hell are you doing? You're supposed to place flares—"

The deputy saw his own gun in the hand of the big rig driver, thus experiencing his second cursed moment of the night.

"Aw, fuck!" said the deputy.

“Stealin’ my favorite curse, brother,” said Beemer, squeezing the light trigger. The Beretta gave a slight jolt and punched a neat hole through the deputy’s skull. As the deputy’s chest heaved one last time, his silvery name tag glistened in the flare’s light. Beemer wasn’t sure why—whether it was curiosity or habit—he leaned forward to note the name etched in black. A. Dey.

“Okay. So you seen it, Beems,” he said as if to cue himself to carry on. Next, he followed the smell of gasoline, dripping from a crack below the SUV’s right rear fender. Beemer stepped back, preparing to toss the flare into the growing puddle when he heard a woman’s voice.

“Help me...”

The voice was slight, barely above a whisper, yet distinctively feminine.

“Please...”

“Yeah,” said Beemer, keeping the adrenaline from crossing his cerebral cortex. He was still in control. Still thinking with clarity. Impulses in check. With that, he let go of the flare, tossing it square into the gasoline puddle. In a combustive flash, the SUV was fully engulfed in flames. A pyre that could be seen for miles. If there were helicopters in the area, it would be a beacon calling for help. No time to waste. Get back to the rig.

If Beemer heard the woman screaming from inside the burning SUV, he would be able to dismiss it into a remote corner of his memory. Catalogued with all the other cries he’d heard in his twenty-nine years.

Twenty-nine years? Aw, fuck!

Beemer climbed back into the tractor rig. As he restarted the diesel engine, he reminded himself that his thirtieth birthday needed to be a real humdinger. A go-hard, envelope-pushing night of partying. Preferably at some faraway island resort. He’d open a tab at the bar and invite all comers. Men *and* women. Preferably strangers because they would be easier to get along with and so much more appreciative of all the free food and liquor. They wouldn’t even need to know his name, but would be grateful to the sandy-haired surfing vagabond who had just turned thirty.

The sudden urge for a cigarette came about the same time the flaming SUV disappeared from Beemer's rear mirror. With his fingertips, he felt just below the shoulder joint of his left arm. Under his polo shirt was the familiar relief of a nicotine patch. Beemer was calculating when he had last replaced the patch when a northbound car surged past. The headlights appeared from around a corner, quickly switching from high beams to low. Beemer couldn't make the model or year. All he could tell was that it was gray in color. Nondescript as hell. American? Korean? Japanese? Most affordable cars looked the same nowadays. Especially when blasting by at seventy miles per hour. A solo driver, Beemer reasoned. A solo driver who would, in moments, be a witness. The driver would soon come upon the burning SUV. After the initial shock, the solo driver would fumble for a mobile phone and dial 911. How long would it take the emergency operator to marry the report from the driver with the call for assistance from the sheriff's deputy? Would it be instant? *No matter*, thought Beemer. Events were unfolding in their natural order. By the time the solo driver was officially interviewed, would he even remember having passed a southbound big rig barely a mile from the crime scene? Affirmative or otherwise, Beemer would be near his destination of Long Beach, California by then. Once there, his precious cargo would be transferred into a refrigerated shipping container and set on a journey halfway around the world.

No problem. No problem at all.

2

L UCKY DEY HAD never ever gotten used to it. Of the thousands of times he had been awakened by a telephone, it had always been with a start. As if jolted by a billion volts. It was in his DNA. His father was a heavy sleeper. The same went for his granddad. Sleeping had always come easily to Lucky. Rest his head, close his eyes, and slumber would be summoned. Anytime, anyplace. It was one of his gifts. He was a veritable Superman of sleep. But if Superman had kryptonite, Lucky Dey had the telephone. Whether it was the classic jangle of bells or some smart phone electronica or the gentlest of musical ring tones, Lucky would still feel the surge of juice and wake with a jump. So why not turn off the phone? asked one of many girlfriends who had witnessed Lucky's bad waking habit. Simple. Lucky was a cop. He was often on call. And until a mad scientist could implant a waking node in his brain to gently tickle him when he was needed, he would have to suffer the goddamn telephone.

“This is Lucky,” he croaked, clearing his throat only after he had answered. It was dark, but morning. He knew that much. It had been A.M. when he had closed his eyes. There’s no way Lucky could have slept through the day into night. Nobody ever left him alone that long.

“Captain needs you,” said the voice, that Lucky guessed was Chelsea’s, the part-time secretary, part-time 911 operator. Her voice was slightly throaty, with the occasional excited squeak at the high end when she finally got a joke. Very sexy. But also very married, like so many East Kern County women. So many of them were freshly scrubbed, earthy and real. Nothing at all like the ladies from down Los Angeles way. Kern County women wore their lack of sophistication like their denim. Tight and without labels.

“Goin’ on, Chelsea?” asked Lucky, fishing around his nightstand for the familiar feel of an Excedrin bottle. He snapped the lid with his thumb and dry swallowed two capsules. The headache hadn’t landed yet. But Lucky knew it would eventually arrive and settle near the base of his skull as it did most every day. “Chelsea?”

There was a pause at the other end of the line. Either that or Lucky had fallen back asleep. He opened his eyes, swept his apartment bedroom for light, landing on his television screen where the DirecTV logo bounced from edge to edge like an old Atari video game. To his left was the bathroom where the door was cracked, leaving a slice of incandescent light to bisect the small space.

“Chelsea?”

“It’s Tony,” said Chelsea, her voice cracking abnormally.

Ah, hell, thought Lucky. Of course she was calling about Tony, his half-brother younger by eleven years. Since Tony was four, Lucky had joked that his little bro was an accident prone miniature. Little Tony Tumbles, the family poster child for ambulatory care. The list of Tony’s accidental injuries could fill an orthopedics manual. When the Dey family lived in San Pedro, there had been a local orthopedics practice comprised of five partners. And by the time he was a high school sophomore, Tony was on a first name basis with every last one of those docs.

But young Tony, fully intent on following his big brother into all adventures, including the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, kept seeking more thrills. Motorcycles. Football. Even base jumping. Each extreme activity had ended in a bone-breaking dust-up that left Tony radiating with permanent pins and screws deep beneath his flesh.

"What's he done this time?" asked Lucky. He was sitting up now. That thin band of light from the cracked bathroom door touched his bare torso, revealing a landscape of scars. Bullet wounds. Stitches.

"They did everything for him."

"Who did everything? Wait. Did you say *for* him? Or *to* him?"

"I'm so sorry, Lucky. Tony didn't make it."

"What?"

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry for...my brother Tony?"

"Yes. Tony. Something happened out on 395."

"He was in a car accident?"

"I don't know. It's a mess out there—"

"And Tony is on the scene or at the hospital?"

There was a pause again on the other end of the phone. Lucky could hear Chelsea breathing. Or was it the buzzing in his skull? He could sense that the oncoming hangover was in a foot race with his daily headache.

"Lucky?" asked a new voice. Masculine with an edge of FM radio circa 1977 in it.

"Cappy?" guessed Lucky.

"Chelsea's all broken up about this. She's not sure you heard her right."

"My nimrod brother got into somethin' out on 395. Just wanna know where he is so I can bang his head."

"And you heard the part where she said Tony didn't make it?"

The tingling started just below Lucky's ankles, slowly tracing upward along the architecture of his nervous system. As if portions of him were suddenly dying on a cellular level. Then came the *déjà vu*. From when Lucky was a young L.A. Sheriff's deputy stationed at Lennox. A member of the Trace Street Crips had found his

way into the station lunchroom and dropped a shot of cyanide into an Igloo cooler of lemonade. Lucky recalled his mental state when it had been radioed Lennox-wide that the poison had been discovered. He had guzzled from the cooler of lemonade earlier. And though the cyanide had not yet showed any negative affects in Lucky, the news that he might be on a countdown with death caused him the very sensation he was feeling now while seated at the edge of his bed, phone to his ear, his “Cappy” making sure his top detective was clear on the inference.

“Your brother is dead, Lucky. Medics didn’t have a chance. He died along with the other two.”

Other two? Weren’t we talking about my brother?

The sick sensation coursing inside Lucky stopped at his ears, burning them hot until they stung.

“Tony, he’s...I heard you...I heard you...” stammered Lucky, trying to keep from throwing up in his mouth. He swallowed, then spat words out loud enough to split his own skull, “Whaddayou mean... Drew? What the fuck happened?”

“Still sorting it out,” said Captain Edward Andrews. “Got three vics. Possible t.c. between Tony’s unit and the civilian. A car fire. One maybe witness—”

“So he died in a wreck?”

“No. Shot in the head. We think the perp set the fire after,” said the captain. “Listen, Luck—”

“On my way in.”

“I don’t need you today. Just need you to—”

Lucky snapped the phone cord from the wall, effectively ending the call. For a matter of minutes, he sat at the edge of bed, nearly motionless, barely breathing, infected with a form of living rigor mortis. If in the future some shrink would have the chance to ask Lucky when the precise moment was that he had lost his last true connection to humankind, he’d have to say it had been then in that little stucco shithole. Number 112. Ridgecrest Palms Apartments.

“What fuckin’ palms?” Lucky had wise-assed on the first day he had moved from his Venice Beach shag palace to the little cookie-cutter one-bedroom apartment. For six months he had shared the space with his little brother who slept on the futon.

That was until Tony hooked up with a divorcee who owned a nail salon and moved in with her. Lucky had imagined he would look for a condo or maybe even a house. Invest in his new hometown. Finally possess that government tax deduction called a mortgage payment. That was five damn years ago. And the only stake he had made in Ridgecrest life was the detective job and a twenty-three foot Centurian Enzo ski boat that hadn't left dry dock in fifteen months.

Now his brother was dead. The weight of it was overwhelming on so many levels that somewhere inside Lucky a switch flipped that sent him into a remote functioning mode, without which he wouldn't have been able to shower or dress. He did, however, have trouble finding his gun. The apartment didn't rack up a square footage larger than that of a single wide trailer and was choked with unfolded laundry, cardboard boxes piled three and four high from items never unpacked from the L.A. move, a big screen TV perched atop the dining table, swap meet art purchased for the house he had never shopped for, water skis, and wake boards. In other words, the space was merely a crash pad furnished with good intentions and no follow through.

Lucky found his gun atop the cabinet just above the toilet. It was a reissue Colt model 1911, locked and loaded with a fat bullet in the chamber. Not exactly regulation for an off-duty cop, but what good was a *pistola* that wasn't ready to rumble? Lucky stuffed the weapon between his belt and the small of his back, slung on an antique high school letterman's jacket, and walked out into the dawn without locking the door behind him.

It would be the last time Lucky ever saw the place.

3

Interstate 5. Four miles south of Valencia, California.

The tractor-trailer rig was on the downslope, pointed due south, its big wheels, rotating forward a few feet at a time before stopping again. This was the usual morning commuter traffic where thousands upon thousands of vehicles converge into the San Fernando Valley section of the City of Los Angeles. *Damn*, thought Beemer, *how the hell do these folks do this every fucking day?* He could see the heat rising from the valley floor, adding to the mirage affect of the morning light glinting off the arcing rows of windows and paint jobs from all those Sunday car washes. Why the hell did this site remind him of Fallujah? Sure, there were similar heat signatures. The desert light. But nothing else. Still, Fallujah kept flooding back to him.

So what, douchebag? That shit's ancient history.

Beemer checked his instruments. Slightly less than a quarter of a tank of diesel. According to the GPS, plenty of fuel to get him the final fifty-seven miles to Long Beach. It was 7:58 A.M.

Temperature outside: ninety-one degrees.

Temperature inside the cab: a comfortable seventy degrees.

Temperature inside the trailer: twenty-five degrees and holding.

Damn cold. A bone-numbing chill that Beemer hadn't quite anticipated only hours earlier. He had cursed himself for not bringing winter gloves. They hadn't been on his to do list. How the hell could he have left gloves off his list? He had arranged everything else. The refrigerated tractor-trailer rig. The forged shipper's manifest in case he got stopped at a weigh station. Properly faked IDs. Credit cards. Of course he had a mask and guns for the heist itself. Just in case. Not that he had anticipated trouble. He had bought and paid for all the vault security codes.

Easy but for the gloves.

Beemer checked his face in the mirror. Particularly curious about the tip of his square nose. It was pink and freckled just the way it always was. No discoloration. Nor did his ears appear to look anything but slightly undersized and exposed by a haircut that purposefully resembled that of a Japanese manga cartoon. Dyed as black as the rented eighteen wheeler. During the robbery, he had stuffed his hair under a woolen cap.

The warehouse itself was part of a loose collection of industrial buildings, not quite defined as an organized "park," but more as an evolved locale on the edge of the city in the shadow of the mountains. There was a two-lane road that split a mile-long corridor of manufacturing and warehousing businesses—each two-acre plot surrounded by cyclone fencing topped with razor wire. Most exterior advertising was limited to simple signage by each gate. Casing the target, Beemer had practically memorized the order of businesses, most of which began with "Reno."

Reno Industrial Business Machines.

Reno-Tahoe Kitchen and Bath Supply.

Reno Farm Equipment Repair and Service.

Reno and Sons Tire and Retread.

Third on the left after the second stop sign was a low-slung corrugated structure and a smaller, annex with heavy ventilation. The sign at the gate was equally mysterious. Just a placard with the capitalized initials "C.B.P., INC." It was still early enough in the evening that the gate had not yet been closed. Nobody paid any attention to the big rig making a careful turn through.

The parking area was empty, lit only by two flanking street lamps at either corner. Another single light splashed across the warehouse's blank office entrance. Beemer kept the truck in a low gear, carefully riding the accelerator as he kept the semi to the left, drawing a wide circle around to the loading dock at the rear. Next came the hard part. Maneuvering the trailer portion of the rig as he backed it up to the bumpers. This was a skill Beemer didn't possess. In Iraq, he had driven enough heavy equipment to fake operating just about any kind of vehicle. But putting a tractor rig into reverse and steering a levered fifty-three-foot trailer square up to a pitch black platform? That wasn't something Beemer had practiced, nor had he ever been too concerned about prior to the actual night. He kept his eyes on his side-view mirrors, doing his best to gauge distances with only a pair of back-up bulbs to guide the way. Finally he felt the bump. A slightly metallic thud, sounding that the eagle had landed.

Beemer felt his heart up-shift with excitement. This is when he needed to be extra efficient. It was going to be one man, one warehouse, and one trailer with over three thousand cubic feet of freezer to load. He rolled up the trailer flap and then the warehouse door. Keyed in the code to the outer magnetic doors and entered the freezer unit. The temperature dropped forty degrees in a single second. Refrigerator temp. Beemer wasn't yet in the freezer. He searched for the door marked "C Closet," pulled on the lever and released a steam of utter cold. The freezer was fifteen degrees Fahrenheit, frosty white at the fringes, and forty feet deep in wax-coated cardboard cartons, each the size of a large microwave. He looked left, read the label on the first carton, yanked it off the top, and removed the lid. Inside were frozen pint bags, neatly stacked, each stuffed full of a frozen liquid that resembled crushed corn. Yellowish and marbled and labeled with precision. Measured in

mils. Recommended storage temp. Date packaged. The industry called this product by its initials. FFP.

Fresh Frozen Plasma.

Beemer recalled how he had laughed the first time he had heard of the newish blood product. It reminded him of the ads on television for frozen vegetables purchased from the Piggly Wiggly. But the importance and value of frozen blood products quickly took on a serious tone. Frozen blood products like plasma and red cell concentrate were in high demand in the war-ravaged Middle East. These were life saving interventions. A must for trauma surgery. And in a part of the world where massive blood loss was fast becoming one of the top causes of death, frozen blood products were nearly worth their weight in silver.

Using a hand truck, Beemer stacked and rolled the cartons from the freezer to the parked trailer. He lost count as to how many trips it took to fill the trailer. All he could think about was why the hell he hadn't thought to bring gloves. He griped at himself with every step. Into the freezer for more cartons, load, then roll to the refrigerated freezer trailer. No time for his fingers to thaw before careening back into the biting cold. He worried about frostbite every time he gripped the hand truck. But he was more worried about the timing. He made the choice to forgo searching for a pair of mittens—forgo comfort—for what he had prided in himself since dropping out of Stanislaus Community College for what he thought was going to be a career in the United States Marines: mad efficiency in everything he did.

In under two hours and in a freezing sweat, Beemer had loaded the trailer rig with so much fresh frozen plasma and red blood cells that the rear bumper had dropped a full seventeen inches closer to the pavement. Beemer had only estimated the weight, hoping greed wouldn't put him over the forty-eight thousand pound road limit. The excitement of finishing the job, wiping down the surfaces he had touched, rolling and locking down the trailer door, then slipping back into the confines of the tractor's cab, was cause for an adrenalin push into Beemer's bloodstream. The momentary high that came with the change in brain chemistry was welcome, not to mention ay-okay. This wasn't an *aw, fuck* moment. There were

no surprises but for his frozen hands. Perfect mental acuity wasn't required to put the semi-rig into a forward gear and roll back out onto the two-lane. With that, the black as night truck trundled into the high desert air, well camouflaged by the darkness, the GPS plotting an uninterrupted passage to Southern California.

So much for best laid plans, Beems.

Some of Beemer's fingers tingled. The pinky and ring finger of his right hand and the ring, middle, and index fingers of his left. He couldn't decide if it was a tingling or a burning sensation, both being potential signs of frostbite. He had cranked the heat in the semi's cab and made sure the windows were rolled up tight to guard against the symptoms he was feeling. The bad fingers appeared reddish but for the very tips which turned a whitish gray when he gently pressed them against the steering wheel.

The digital clock read 8:17 A.M. Since Beemer had last checked the time, he had rolled off only two point six miles. He surmised there must be some sort of accident somewhere, clogging the delicate condition of Los Angeles commuter traffic. All it took was a single fender bender in the wrong lane at the wrong moment to stop up miles upon miles of freeway like a root-infected septic line. For a minute or so he tried to imagine the severity of the accident. One car? Two? Three? Maybe a chain reaction pileup? Beemer hadn't a clue. The only thing he knew for sure was that somebody else was experiencing their very own cursed moment.

"Hello?" Beemer answered by rote. He hadn't really heard the mobile phone ring as much as he had felt the vibration from inside his shirt pocket. And knowing California's laws about driving while talking on a cell phone, Beemer made sure to uncoil the hands-free cord and insert the bud in his ear before accepting the call.

"It's Rey," said the caller. "Just checking to see if we're all good."

"Clean so far," fibbed Beemer. "Taking in traffic and all that shit."

"It's our version of weather," said Rey. "What we talk about here. Where are you?"

"Uh..." Beemer looked around. "Southbound 5 at just about the 210 freeway."

"Lemme guess. Clean sailing 'til you hit Valencia."

"Somebody knows their traffic."

“Born and raised, buddy.”

“Thought you were born in Guatemala.”

“That’s my older brother. He got to swim the Rio Grande with my mom. I started out my life at County USC.”

“Glad we got that worked out,” said Beemer, allowing the tone in his voice to make the point that he was already bored with the conversation.

“Whatever, right?” continued Rey. “By my clock, you’re about two, two and a half hours from touchdown.”

“My GPS says only forty-eight miles.”

“Rush hour, man. Nothin’ you can do.”

“What about another route?”

“Won’t matter, really. It’s all inbound. You’re swimming upstream in the rat race.”

“Swell,” said Beemer, instantly imagining an Alaskan snow wedge welded to the front of his stolen semi-rig. How far would he get if he hit the gas and moved all the lesser vehicles out of the way like chunks of road ice?

“No worries,” said Rey. “I’m here. My brother’s guys are all down and waiting to expedite.”

“Right,” said Beemer, not telling Rey he was going to have to refill his diesel tanks. Better Rey knew only what he needed. Primarily, Beemer’s ETA. And that wasn’t going to be for at least a couple more hours. “Call you when I’m closer.”

“You got it, pard.”

Beemer clicked off the call, wishing he had stayed on long enough to finish with an acerbic blast like, “Hey. And don’t call me ‘pard.’” Nobody was ever Beemer’s “pard” or partner. Beemer made simple and clear agreements and stuck to them. He expected those with whom he had made the agreements to hold to their end of the deal and understand the consequences to be suffered for failing to do as much.

Fatigue began to set in. He had been behind the wheel for nearly twelve straight hours. His body wanted him to find a spot to pull over, roll up the windows and escape into the bunk behind his seat. A little more than two hours until the hand-off. After which

Beemer could roll himself into the nearest hotel and, a hot shower and a couple of Ambien later, fall into at least nine hours of dead man's sleep.

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