

## —JAMMERS

by Bentley Little

When he was little, Coleman could not understand the concept of traffic jams. Each time his family was stuck on the freeway on the way to some destination or another, he would ask his dad why the cars were moving so slowly. His dad would patiently explain that this was a consequence of living in a crowded metropolitan area. Coleman would argue that packed freeways didn't just happen, there had to be a reason. He'd say that there had to be a car or truck at the very front, a vehicle either wrecked or stalled or moving too slowly that was causing the traffic jam.

"There is no 'front'," his dad would tell him. "Sometimes, you're right, there is an accident, but usually there's just too many cars for the size of the freeway and the lanes get congested and that causes the rest of the cars to slow down."

"But the traffic jam doesn't go on forever," Coleman would say. "There has to be a beginning. There has to be a car that's at the front of it."

"There is no front," his dad would repeat.

And Coleman would nod, pretending to understand, though he really didn't.

Now, flying over the Santa Ana Freeway in the station's helicopter, he looked down at the winding snake of traffic that snarled through the city below. Early morning sunlight glinted off thousands of windshields, creating what looked like a sparkling river.

The pilot glanced over at him. "Nervous?"

Coleman shook his head. His palms were a little sweaty, but he wasn't really nervous. This would be his first traffic update for a real radio station, but he'd been doing live broadcasts for the campus station for the past two years, and the prospect of being on the air didn't frighten him a bit.

"Four minutes," the pilot said.

Coleman adjusted his headset and checked his mike. He looked down at the packed freeway below.

At the front of the traffic jam.

He quickly looked over at the pilot. "Do you see that?" Coleman asked, pointing out the copter's window. Four cars, moving in sync, drove forward slowly in an even line across the width of the freeway. In front of the cars, the four lanes were clear, free of traffic. Behind them, vehicles were logjammed for miles.

The pilot glanced down disinterestedly. "Jammers," he said.

"What?" Coleman asked.

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“Two minutes to air time.” The pilot flipped a series of switches on the panel in front of him. The station’s traffic lead-in came over their headsets.

Coleman quickly shuffled his notes, freeway number and jotted down a sentence describing the tangled mess below. He wiped sweaty palms on the legs of his pants. “Traffic blocked on the southbound 605 from the 91 junction to Spring Street,” he said into the microphone. And he felt a thrill of excitement pass through him as he realized that many of those car radios on the freeway beneath the chopper were tuned into his voice. “There’s a chemical spill in the far right lane of the Golden State Freeway. . .”

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“I wish I’d had a camera,” he told Lena that night. “It was the most amazing thing I’d ever seen. Four cars, in a perfect row, moving about five miles an hour and blocking traffic all the way to La Mirada.”

“Why didn’t you mention it in your report?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted, surprised that he hadn’t thought of it before. He leaned back on the pillow, staring at the ceiling. “Jammers,” he said.

Lena looked at him quizzically.

“Jammers. That’s what Red called them. Jammers.”

“What does that mean?”

Coleman sighed. “I don’t know,” he said. “I forgot to ask.”

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Traffic was blocked on the southbound San Diego Freeway, and Coleman had the pilot follow the winding ribbon of cars to see how far the traffic jam extended. The helicopter, its front end lowered as it cruised at full speed, passed over Torrance, Long Beach, Seal Beach, and Huntington.

“There it is,” Red said, turning in a wide circle over the freeway.

Four cars were moving slowly southward in a straight line, blocking all lanes.

Coleman checked the time. He had fifteen minutes until his first report, and he’d already noted the condition of all necessary freeways. He turned toward Red. “Cruise in a little lower, will you?”

The pilot stared at him as if he’d just asked him to crash the helicopter into the side of a building. “I can’t do that,” he said.

Coleman frowned. “Why not?”

“The Jammers are down there.”

“And just who are these Jammers?”

Red shook his head. “You got a lot to learn, kid” The helicopter swung wide and headed north toward downtown L.A., moving in a straight line instead of following the path of the freeway.

“Where are you going?”

“Back.”

“What the hell’s going on here?”

The older man said nothing.

“Fine. Then I’ll just have to ask Andreas when we get back to the station. He’ll tell me.”

Red sighed. “I guess I should’ve warned you ahead of time. I should’ve laid out