

# ***THE DECEPTION PEOPLE***

***The “truth” is not always what it seems***

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**The Deception People**  
**Part of the *Out-Step* series**

**By**

**Réal Laplaine**



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# **Dedication**

To Ron for his inspiration



## **Special acknowledgement**

Special acknowledgement is extended to the following people, who have spotlighted criminal mass-surveillance and violations of privacy rights by agencies of governments who do so under the mantra of “*national security*” – agencies which consider themselves to be above the law and not accountable for such crimes.

Edward Snowden

Julian Assange

Glenn Greenwald

Laura Poitras



*“...every one of those stars is a sun, often far more brilliant and glorious than the small, nearby star we call the Sun. And many – perhaps most – of those alien suns have planets circling them. So almost certainly there is enough land in the sky to give every member of the human species, back to the first ape-man, his own private, world-sized heaven – or hell. How many of those potential heavens and hells are now inhabited, and by what manner of creatures, we have no way of guessing; the very nearest is a million times farther away than Mars or Venus, those still remote goals of the next generation. But the barriers of distance are crumbling; one day we shall meet our equals, or our masters, among the stars.”*

- Arthur C. Clarke

*"There will be in the next generation or so a pharmacological method of making people love their servitude and producing dictatorship without tears so to speak. Producing a kind of painless concentration camp for entire societies so that people will in fact have their liberties taken away from them, but will rather enjoy it, because they will be distracted from any desire to rebel by propaganda, or brainwashing, or brainwashing enhanced by pharmacological methods. And this seems to be the final revolution."*

- Aldous Huxley

*“One mind can act upon another at a distance without the habitual medium of words, or any other visible means of communication. It appears altogether unreasonable to reject this conclusion if we accept the facts. There is nothing unscientific, nothing romantic, in admitting that an idea can influence a brain from a distance. The action of one human being upon another, from a distance, is a scientific fact; it is as certain as the existence of Paris, of Napoleon, of Oxygen, or of Sirius.”*

*- Camille Flammarion (Renowned French astronomer and scientist)*

## ***A few facts regarding the phenomenon known as Out-Of-Body-Experience (OOBE)***

*Studies have revealed that one in every five people, on the average, have experienced an out-of-body phenomena one or more times in their lives, sometimes without even realizing what it was or referring to it as something else.*

*Many cases exist on record where people have described an out-of-body experience, whether experienced at near-death, during a painful trauma, during sickness, while undergoing therapy, during meditation or as a natural course of life. In these accounts they described things which had no scientific explanation.*

*Case histories exist where people were able to show indisputable proof that they had lived past lives.*

*Tests have been performed showing that at the exact point of clinical death of the human body there is a measureable change in some form of energy, however minute – as if some dynamic of life which was there, has now vacated the vicinity.*



*Treachery has no moral compass.*



## The Interview

Present is a Journalist from a major European news service, and a Senior Officer of the United States Department of Defense (the DOD) – referred to in this interview as *The Patriot*.

**Journalist:** ‘Thank you for agreeing to this interview.’

**The Patriot:** ‘Thank you for the opportunity to speak out.’

**Journalist:** ‘Can you elucidate for our readers why you agreed to an interview such as this, one which will surely put you at serious personal risk?’

**The Patriot:** Pauses to look at the floor. ‘I guess you could say that the rebel inside of me woke up after all these years. When I joined the Department of Defense, or DOD, some forty-five years ago, I had this dream, not unlike many others I’m sure, to fight for the American ideal. In those days, we were still in the midst of the Vietnam conflict. America was taking a real beating for engaging in a war which was clearly more about real estate than actually protecting democracy. I didn’t like the direction we were headed.’

**Journalist:** ‘Do you consider that you have brought about positive change?’

**The Patriot:** Wags his head with a look of resignation. ‘Sadly, no. The military machinery is a voraciously hungry beast which consumes but rarely gives anything back.’

**Journalist:** ‘By coming forward as you are, is it inevitable that you will be labeled a traitor?’

**The Patriot:** ‘Laughably, yes. And yet I have never felt more the patriot than I do now. Nonetheless, the government will resort to its usual old-school tactics. The minute someone tries to expose their activities, they drop the hammer, labelling the whistleblower as a traitor. One wonders how it is that such a government considers itself the hand of democracy when it tries so hard to silence freedom of speech.’

**Journalist:** ‘In our phone conversation some days ago, you said that the US Defense Department and the National Security Agency, the NSA, were two of the most toxic entities in the world today. Can you expound on that?’

**The Patriot:** ‘America used to be the paradigm for freedom in our world – a nation formed of constitutional rights which did not exist in the world of that time. Today, unfortunately, America has taken on shades of the very imperialism which it fought so hard to escape. And the new paradigm today is being forwarded by agencies such as the DOD, the NSA and even the CIA. Those agencies are the point-men for an entirely different agenda today.’

**Journalist:** ‘Some years ago an international poll revealed that President, George W. Bush, was considered the greatest threat to world peace. How is that possible for a nation which has a history of fighting for freedom and democracy?’

**The Patriot:** ‘It has been a process of attrition since the Cold War – but one which has been accelerated in the last two decades. More or less since 2001 and even before that, the US governing policies have transmigrated over to a definitive aggressive mentality – one where the governance has assumed the role as the defender of the democratic paradigm – or at least, it purports to that end. Unfortunately, that paradigm is not as noble as the mouthpieces of Washington and the media which espouses their utterances,

would have us believe. Since before 9/11, America's transformational policy has leveraged, and/or, created, whatever circumstances are necessary towards empowering its position in the world. The primary objective is economic superiority and the continuance of the American dollar as the dominant international currency standard. Hand-in-hand with this is ensuring that American boots are firmly planted on the ground in certain zones before Russia and China, the main competition in this arena, can do so. In this wise, the Defense Department and the National Security Agency were tasked with definitive oversight to ensure, strategically speaking, that America stayed ahead of the pack.'

**Journalist:** 'Such as doctoring up photos showing weapons of mass destruction in Iraq so that America was justified in its invasion there?'

**The Patriot:** 'That is just the tip of the iceberg. How about staging a supposed *terrorist* attack on the World Trade Center in New York City, with the clear-cut objective of stirring the soup of hatred throughout America and the world, with such a dramatic trauma that no one would object to what ensued – an American military invasion overseas, a declaration of war against “terrorism” – totally sanctioned and completely unchallenged.'

**Journalist:** 'So 9/11 was definitely staged – that's not just some conspiracy theory?'

**The Patriot:** 'Documents exist to prove it, although they are submerged from public sight. Every President since 2001 has capped off the truth in the name of “national security” – although it would be more correct to say that they were hiding the dirt from the public spotlight, because they knew the consequential fall-out if that truth was exposed. There have been many civilian professionals who have independently shown that the towers could not possibly have been brought down by those two planes alone; in fact, evidence exists

clearly showing that demolition-style explosives were used to maximize the damage. The whole terrorist paradigm is just an urban legend, and its continuance as “*the truth*” depends on perpetuating the story which so many people have accepted.’ He smiles. ‘It should be rather obvious to everyone that if George W. Bush used bald-faced lies to get America engaged in the most expensive war in its history in Iraq, then what is the probability that he also lied to the world about 9/11?’

**Journalist:** ‘How does the Presidency factor into this hidden strategic oversight, as you say?’

**The Patriot:** ‘Depending on the President, they can either be a mere figurehead, a mouthpiece who enables this scenario, or they can be someone significant, someone who truly tried to change things for the better. Presidents come and go, they are impermanent. However, the Department of Defense, the National Security Agency, and to some degree the CIA, and the programs set in motion which form their strategic platforms, have and will continue to outlive all Presidencies - unless we change that picture and restore control to the people who are elected to represent our nation.’

**Journalist:** ‘Are you saying that the Presidents have no part in these plans?’

**The Patriot:** ‘No. I am merely saying that more or less since Desert Storm in 1990, most Presidencies have played their roles as either mouthpieces or silent enablers to these plans. Clinton was an exception; and for all the good he did, and he did do a lot of good and he did try to keep America out of overseas military engagements, he was eventually forced out of office over a sexual misconduct incident, a charge which could easily have been leveled at a dozen other senior officials in the Administration of that time, had anyone bothered to look into their secret transgressions. Sexual misconduct is not really the capital offense it is made out to be at those levels, sometimes it is even an initiation process – but

it can certainly be the knife which kills one's career if someone decides that your value has seen its day.'

**Journalist:** 'Like JFK?'

**The Patriot:** 'In all probability yes. Amongst his many accomplishments, John F. Kennedy almost single-handedly prevented a nuclear war between the USA and the USSR, only to be defiled by his enemies because he may have engaged in some indiscretions with a certain celebrity of that time. The two factors are not even comparable. Nonetheless, they know how to engage in character assassination.'

**Journalist:** 'You intimated that the war on terrorism was actually planned well before 9/11. Can you expand on that for us?'

**The Patriot:** 'Desert Storm was generally regarded as an alliance to stop Saddam Hussein from invading Kuwait, whereas in truth, it was America's test case, so to speak, a chance to stage a military presence in a country as yet untouched by American military boots, and it worked. And even though Hussein was a problem, it didn't require an entire invasion to stop him. A small squad of highly trained special ops personnel could have been sent in, in the dark of night, put a bullet in the man's head and ended the dictatorship. The invasion would have fizzled. Countless lives could have been saved and billions of tax dollars too. However, the DOD and those pulling its strings, wanted the global theatrics – it served the bigger strategy.'

**Journalist:** 'So it's not all about protecting democracy, is it?'

**The Patriot:** Shakes his head. 'I wish it were so. I wish I could declare to the world that the intentions of these agencies were pure, but they are not. Only the men and women who put their lives on the line, who have bared their chests to the bullets, and who have spilled their blood in the desert sands, were pure of heart. They were fighting for an ideal –

something they believed in. But for those behind the desks, drumming up these scenarios – it is entirely about real estate, money and ensuring an American dominant presence overseas. Since America moved into Afghanistan and Iraq, the “terrorist” landscape has worsened, according to all the chatter coming out of the White House and the media. This is so much the case that a former President, apparently a man of peace and who even received a Nobel Prize, authorized accelerated military intervention, drone attacks and sadly, the killing of civilians in the name of stopping terrorism - and all for what? The answer is simple – the problem never was in Afghanistan or Iraq to start with – it was just a deception, a distortion of the truth designed to gain sentiment and support for American military invasions into lands which would otherwise be off-limits to us.’

**Journalist:** ‘Is global terrorism a significant reality – or is it hyperbole?’

**The Patriot:** ‘Well, to put this into perspective, more people die of drowning in their bathtubs and from all the auto accidents in America annually, than all the combined terrorist attacks each year. Terrorism is certainly not what the White House says it is, nor the American media, the mouthpiece which purports the voice of the government. Global terrorism is a propaganda campaign – and to a very large degree, that terrorism, where it does actually exist, has been exacerbated because America is imposing itself into lands where it does not belong. I can assure you that if we decided that Canada was a threat, and invaded that land, like we have done elsewhere, you would see considerable “terrorism” suddenly rising from the ranks of a formerly peaceful ally. There is a distinction between true terrorism and defending one’s rights. If an American drone bombed your community, killing your family and friends today, would you be pro-America or against it – and could you become a terrorist? Semantics is a

factor in this international theater – is the right to defend one’s land being redefined as terrorism in order to justify another agenda? Think about it.’

**Journalist:** Earlier you made reference to China and Russia, and that part of the strategic planning is to get American boots into hotspots before those nations get there. Can you expand on that?’

**The Patriot:** ‘Since the exponential growth of China’s commercial influence, and their consequent massive military expansion starting in the 1980s, China has become a very major concern to the White House. And with the free reign of Russian expansion which has tidal-waved across the world after the dissolution of the communist-bloc in 1991, it was considered that measures would have to be undertaken to enable American dominance in certain regions – creating a sort of invisible wall between them and us – one based on alliances and predisposition. The Middle Eastern zone, that is, Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran were prime real estate between China and Russia.’

**Journalist:** ‘How does the National Security Agency fit into this picture?’

**The Patriot:** ‘The NSA is an elaborate point-man – the guy who goes out ahead of the platoon and does reconnaissance to ensure that the rest of the soldiers don’t get ambushed. It has been tasked with providing a forward view, looking under rocks, prying open closed doors and such - sufficient to permit these strategic plans to move ahead with a minimum of backlash and a maximum of success. That is why laws exist to protect the NSA, blanketing their operations and giving them relatively free reign without oversight or inspection, even from the White House itself. The NSA answers to another master, and it is not the man or woman who sits in the Oval Office – that I can assure you of. While people like Edward Snowden correctly exposed the

criminal surveillance and abuses which the NSA has engaged in, what the general public and world at large do not realize is that the NSA is in fact there to ensure that these plans stay on track. Sadly, the whole “terrorist paradigm” which has played out since 9/11, was an integral part of the strategic planning; to create a general mindset and a smokescreen justifying the obese growth of the NSA’s power. That campaign has profiled the Islamic nations, making them out to be the enemy in this theater. And yet, before 9/11, the “Islamic” extremist threat was not the problem it suddenly appeared to have become. The world had been living with the Islamic-based culture for some fifteen centuries without issue. Religious differences and ideologies have always had the potential for sparking conflict, history is replete with such – but is it a global threat? This is where the curtain needs to be drawn back in order to reveal the true picture.’

**Journalist:** ‘Is it fair to say that global terrorism has replaced its predecessor, the threat of nuclear war?’

**The Patriot:** Nods. ‘Yes, and it is certainly a means of keeping everyone off-balance and worried – making the world seem like a dangerous place, enough so that they can maintain these backline strategies. Of course, the world is not a dangerous place – it is only as dangerous as men and women, such as these, are permitted to make it so – and unfortunately, the worst of them are not wielding automatic rifles in the mountains of Afghanistan or northern Iraq. They are wearing suits and ties, sitting in opulent offices in their banking headquarters, or wearing crisp uniforms and polished shoes in the very halls of our own governance.’

**Journalist:** ‘A Swedish spokesperson for a private military weapons contractor recently made a statement in response to a question posed about the humanitarian aspects of that nation selling military technology to an Islamic country, one which could then simply turn around and provide that technology to

extremist groups. To paraphrase his response, he said this - “It is an unfortunate fact that the business and industry of military weapons and the humanitarian dynamics of such have not caught up with one another.” What is your view on that statement – can the two ever reach an acceptable middle-ground?’

**The Patriot:** ‘First of all his response is calculatingly evasive and oxymoronic. There is no humanitarian side to weapons production, not really, except in the event of a true threat to peace and freedom, when it is necessary for people to pick up arms in order to squelch some over-actively war-monger. Devotees to this industry will spout off the usual diatribe, that without war there can be no freedom and that war has given us the freedoms we have today. On the surface, that appears to have veracity, because sometimes you do have to punch a bully in the mouth – that’s life and on that basis, some military force is necessary. But if you really inspect many of the conflicts engaged in our world, you will find another hidden agenda – usually a land grab, a power-play. Just follow the money trail – it always leads to the true reason behind war. Hell, the world knew that Hitler was building a war machine years before he ever launched it against Europe and Britain, and he was even doing so in direct contradiction to sanctions imposed against Germany which prohibited them from ever building up a sizeable military again in the wake of World War 1. Did anyone stop him? No. Why? Because war is a profitable industry to banking institutions, private military corporations, and those with greedy political agendas. You don’t really think that Hitler was capable of building the most advanced and largest military of that time with an impoverished nation – do you? He was financed. On the flip side, the cost of developing just one American fighter jet today could provide a paycheck to thousands of unemployed people for months or even pay for

the university tuition of thousands of aspiring young people. The tax payers dole-out more than enough in their hard-earned cash with which to provide an ample infrastructure to live the American dream – and yet a massive piece of that lifestyle is disappearing into the coffers of an industry that feeds on foreign aggression overseas. America today is seeing its worst deficit in history – in fact, technically, the country is broke, it's in the red. That would seem to say that the profits are not going back into the national coffers. War is not supporting the average American, it is stealing from them.'

**Journalist:** 'What do you hope to accomplish through this forum?'

**The Patriot:** 'People need to know the truth; they need to know that their own government, right here in America, has already raised the ramparts against them in order to protect its secrets. In fact, recently, a California judge declared that a lawsuit filed by a private citizen against the NSA for alleged violation of her privacy, was not justified because she had insufficient evidence of their surveillance. That same judge also declared that the NSA was justified in not revealing any evidence due to laws which protect its right to secrecy. That is not *blind justice* – in fact, it is, by definition, flagrant *injustice*, and it is oppressive. It is reflective of the infrastructural mentality which has already seeped into and is corrupting our culture. If it is permitted to continue – it will eventually destroy our freedom – not just here, but elsewhere, because unfortunately the American paradigm is being copied – particularly in its closest ally nations, such as Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere.'

**Journalist:** 'Are you worried about what will happen when we publish this series of articles?'

**The Patriot:** 'No. What worries me is that not enough people will act before it is too late. If that happens, we are

looking at a revolutionary scene all over again, right in our own backyard.’

Pauses.

*The Patriot:* ‘I think that Thomas Jefferson said it best:

***“When the people fear their government, there is tyranny; when the government fears the people, there is liberty.”***

## *The Falling*

It was the ominous silence that first flagged that something was wrong.

Being a mother of two, Peggy knew that silence from her two boys, Trevor, the eldest at six, and Troy having just turned five years of age, was usually a precursor to something else – often times something bad.

Both boys had a proclivity for finding holes in the fence and getting themselves into places they didn't belong.

'Boys!' she quietly huffed.

*'Why didn't I have girls?'* She asked herself.

But then again the visions of her own crazy teenage antics, the late nights, the string of boyfriends she engaged – all of which she had haunted her mother with, came back to her.

*'I guess there is a balance between the two camps.'* Her short-term debate finally conceded.

Nonetheless, the pervasive silence was disturbing.

She stopped her dinner preparations, looking out the kitchen window, gazing into the backyard of their home for signs of the two.

Of the two, it was Troy she most worried over.

Troy had a tendency to put himself into very perilous spots – most of them dealing with heights. One time he had completely disappeared on her. Frantically - she had searched him out, calling his name, when from high above, she heard

his voice. Looking up she saw her five-year old boy sitting on the roof of their two story farmhouse. Another time he had taken a bed sheet and had jumped from a steep hillside, assuming that like the birds, the wind would carry him safely to the ground below. His sprained ankle, the result of his painful collision, had been testimony that humans were not birds.

But these incidents and more, never seemed to defeat his precocious sense of adventure and his desire to stretch the envelope.

Peggy hung there at the window, hoping to see or hear their voices, but some growing sense of foreboding compelled her to look into the matter.

As she stepped out into their backyard, looking toward the distant forest and the field which stretched between, she saw Trevor running toward her – his small body bobbing up and down in a sea of barley.

She could feel his panic.

He reached her, gasping and heaving for breath, with tears streaming down his face, and then pointed to a solitary tree atop a distant knoll.

Peggy sprinted through the field – dread thickening in her heart.

She scrambled up the hill, and there, at the base of the tree she saw her worst nightmare.

Troy lay unmoving – deep red blood pooling around his head.

Her terrified scream filled the air - echoing over the fields and high up into the sky.

## *Twenty-Five Years Later*

Within the Pentagon, home to the United States Department of Defense, is a section referred to as 666, the Defense Department's cyber watchdog.

Ironically, 666 is also the biblical reference to *The Beast* – or more appropriately, the Antichrist, the Devil.

Possibly its designers had been afflicted by a sick sense of humor that day, or maybe just some apocalyptic dread had occupied them – who can really know what irony dominated their minds at the time.

666 is housed within a highly protected hub – located two stories beneath the Pentagon. Adjacent to this hub is a heavily guarded room, easily the size of two or more football fields - containing row upon row of computer servers, thousands of them - standing like sentries at watch. They call it the Vault.

Those who work within this facility have had their lives, their backgrounds, in fact, the very corridors of their most intimate relationships probed, scratched and checked in every dark and dimly lit crevice, right down to the minutiae of their sexual predilections – all to ensure that only the most reliable people arrived to this inner sanctum.

The first and primary mandate of Section 666 is to maintain oversight on the cyber world for the nation's defensive ramparts, looking for any signs of viral corruption, hacking or

compromise. Although 666 itself has no direct involvement in those military defense systems, they do act as its watchdog for the military hierarchy.

In addition to monitoring these primary military computer systems, 666 has the secondary mandate of keeping watch over the nation's infrastructural grids. To do so, they engage backdoor programs which allow them to monitor the cyber-world which controls the nation's telephony, internet and power-grids. The collaboration with privately owned national carriers is considered one of national security, not privacy-intrusion – although that particular perspective is considered moot and would certainly be challenged were it a matter of public issue.

In spite of the fact that it is early morning, on July 4<sup>th</sup>, the advent of America's Independence Day, some fifty five technicians are still manning their multiple computer stations, each of them looking forward to the arrival of the next shift so that they can go off and be with family and friends on America's national holiday.

Light chatter and bantering can be heard; the occasional lurid joke; giggles and laughter; and of course no office would be complete without the whispers of sex scandals nor even the back-biting commentary aimed at management.

Suddenly every computer in the room, easily some three hundred screens, blaze in a wash of white fuzz – as if a digital snow storm has just swept into the facility and consumed it.

The technicians desperately attempt to regain control. Servers are checked and rechecked. Power sources are verified – but nothing is found to be evidently wrong.

Within ninety seconds the shift supervisor is on the line to her superior, causing a domino-effect which reaches the ears of the Secretary of Defense within just minutes.

## *The White House*

*(Three days earlier)*

Constantine Le Dour, the President of the United States, sat at the large conference table looking down at two rows of sober faces staring back at her.

Representatives from each branch of the military, as well as the NSA, CIA, FBI, Homeland Security, her PR adviser, Chief of Staff and her most trusted voice and confidant, Jennie Castro – the Secretary of Defense – were present.

Before her ascension to the Oval Office, the President had never personally known Jennie Castro, who was, at the time, a civil rights attorney with an aspiring proclivity for taking on human rights cases. But Jennie Castro had come to her attention after a rather public case where she had successfully vindicated a landed immigrant from Iran, a man who had been accused by Homeland Security of having subversive connections, contrary to the best interest of national security, and threatened with having his green card revoked.

Naturally, with a surname such as Castro, it was ironic that she was now holding the post of Secretary of Defense. Moreover, and adding to that irony, was the fact that her family had actually fled from Cuba in the wake of Fidel Castro's usurpation of that island in 1959 and had sought asylum in America.

Jennie Castro understood, more than most, the true value of the freedom which the American institution offered, and for that reason, her passion to protect it had been a driving force in her life.

The two had become good friends in just a matter of months.

Then again, being the first female American President in history - Constantine Le Dour was also somewhat of an anomaly on the stage of American politics.

Born and raised in New Orleans, of a middle class family whose roots traced back to one of several waves of French immigrants arriving to the shores of Louisiana in the 1850s, her family tree made an interesting read; salted with a variety of smugglers, thieves, merchants, farmers and the occasional artisan to help balance up the more nefarious aspects of her lineage. Her father had been a renowned politician in New Orleans, and part of her inspiration to follow a political career.

With the growing gap between the very wealthy, the waning middle class, and of course the abysmally poor, the collective American voice was a vociferous one against more of the same politics which had dominated the landscape for decades. Americans wanted radical change, right at home, not in other lands, not in the deserts of foreign battles - but right here, within the domestic realities of their own lives.

Le Dour had presented a somewhat radical platform based on Libertarian principles, and of course the Dems and the Grand Old Party had scoffed at her – but in the end, the American people had shown that their voice was the only one that really counted.

She was a handsome woman.

On the cusp of her fiftieth birthday she still maintained a slim figure, with a hint of Mediterranean olive-skin, and long dark hair which flowed gently down to her shoulder blades.

The few wrinkles evident on her face did not bespeak of her true age.

Many had advised her, both on the campaign trail to the Presidency, and finally when she assumed office, that a more conservative look might better suit her stature. She had rejected all such advice – declaring that her femininity as the President would not become the subject of censure – not now, not ever.

‘What’s on the agenda today?’ she asked with more enthusiasm than suited the dour looks of those facing her.

‘Madam President,’ began the Chief of Staff, ‘it would appear that the matter of the *Fortress Act* is the first issue on the agenda.’

Le Dour tipped her head casually to one side, briefly considering the matter. She knew exactly what she was going up against. The growing collective mindset at the White House was that America would be, or could be, the inevitable target of a major cyber-attack which would disable or even hijack its computer infrastructure – including even its military.

In the eyes of Washington, terrorism had reached a whole new level of towering concern – and whether that concern was based on any fact whatsoever or just delusional paranoia which now seemed to grip the hearts of its very ambassadors – the *Fortress Act* seemed to be the placebo.

She looked toward the military brass sitting on one side of the long table. Their hardened demeanors, stiff-backed postures and crisp uniforms betrayed that they were men of a different sort than most of the rest sitting in this room. They were men of action, not of political discourse.

‘Is there some reason why we should put *Fortress* up to a vote with Congress at this particular time?’

The Chief of Staff nodded to the head of Military Intelligence, a crisply uniformed man with a table-top marine hair-cut and a stiff uniform which encased his body like a perfectly packaged FedEx box.

‘Madam President, Military intelligence has deciphered several cryptic messages suggesting that a cyber-attack is imminent,’ said the man.

‘An attack - from whom?’ asked the President.

‘We don’t know yet. The source is scrambled. But we have people working on it.’

‘And by this you are making the assumption that those

messages are from a foreign aggressor and not just a ploy of some sort?’

‘We can assume it is a plausible threat, yes.’

‘I see,’ she answered with a deliberate pause.

Ever since taking office as President, several months earlier, she had anticipated this day with dread. In fact, during the course of several meetings with her top military and intelligence personnel, she had been repeatedly advised that in the face of a likely cyber-attack, that it was her duty as the President to play their best card, an initiative called *Fortress*.

*Fortress* was an embracive, all-encompassing national-level computer system which would act as cyber-security-wall against any foreign incursions.

It sounded laudable, but as she well knew, there was a tremendous downside – as it would give the government federal control of any computer infrastructures which it deemed critical to the nation’s welfare, and security, in the event of a hostile attack.

But no matter how she played it over in her head, the result was the same - the *Fortress Act* was like dancing with the devil.

She felt as if she was walking the tightrope between maintaining constitutional freedom and enabling the “national security” hysteria, an act which could ultimately lead to federal oligarchy – if abused.

And unfortunately, history was already replete with political abuses – so she certainly didn’t need to stretch that envelope any further.

She leaned forward to address them.

‘Not to bruise any feelings, but one of my predecessors, several terms ago, flaunted the mantra, “*Weapons of Mass Destruction*” and he got a lot of people to drink his brand of Kool-Aid. We’re still cleaning up his mess and the deficit which he sunk this country into. So I am not about to take any

threat on our nation seriously unless you can provide me with unequivocal proof – certainly far better proof than a few emails.’

The room was dully silent for a moment before the same man spoke once again.

‘Madam President, the purpose of military intelligence is to offer potentiality, to speculate on plausibility, not just fact. If we were to wait for unequivocal and observable fact, the enemy would be at our doorsteps. It is our job to provide you with extrapolative insights which can be used to predict and prepare ourselves for all eventualities.’

The President rejoined. ‘I understand that, but a few anonymous emails, posing the possibility of a cyber-attack, is not adequate provocation for the initiation of a major and pervasive law such as *Fortress*.’

One hour later, following heated discussions with various officials who politely suggested the President was stonewalling – but in fact also alluded that she was naive, Constantine Le Dour returned to the Oval Office – tired and frustrated.

A sigh emitted from her lips as she plopped into the leather sofa – kicking off her shoes as she did.

A knock came to the door and her secretary poked her head in. ‘Madam President, the Secretary of Defense is here to see you.’

Constantine nodded.

Jennie Castro slipped into the room like a gentle breeze. Her slender fifty-four year-old body - befitting that of a much younger woman, swept across the room with the grace of a model on the runway of a Victoria’s Secret fashion show.

‘Kick off your shoes, girl,’ announced the President as Jennie lowered herself into the opposite sofa.

‘So, did I royally piss them off?’

Jennie grinned, causing the crowfeet at the edges of her eyes to accentuate.

‘You didn’t exactly aggrandize their egos, but I wouldn’t worry about it. As the first woman in the Oval Office you should flex your muscles and show them that you’re not intimidated by them.’

The President huffed.

‘It’s this whole damn *Fortress Act* – it’s a thorn in my ass. I’d just love to get my predecessor back in here and tell him where he can stick it.’

Jennie Castro smiled. If there was one thing she had come to love about the President it was the fact that while she could hold her own in any diplomatic dialogue, she was also aces at employing the oratory skills of a Louisiana truck-driver.

‘They’re not going to let up on you, you know that, right?’

Constantine nodded with a dour look on her face.

‘There are too many people in the private and corporate sector, as well as those within your own Administration, who have invested time, money and their political careers on supporting and ultimately launching *Fortress*. Not only that, it is a massive cash-cow, as you know. A lot of corporations stand to line their pockets; and of course its advocates are honey-potting the issue by promising more jobs to the American people.’

The President nodded.

‘I know,’ her voice reflected genuine ennui.

After a time she turned to look at her Secretary of Defense.

‘If *Fortress* goes in front of Congress and they endorse it, I can still veto it, but I think it’s going to be a tough battle, and one that my enemies are going to use to discredit me. I don’t want my first major step to be just another move in the direction of walling us in as a nation, making the world seem more dangerous. I feel that I need to reach out – create alliances, mend wounds – not create more.’

Jennie smiled. ‘I agree with you, Madam President. I too

believe that we must stave off *Fortress*. Too many people are backing it for the wrong reasons and by playing on the fear of the American people – they are misrepresenting the long term downside to this law.’

The President grinned weakly.

‘After two hours enduring the Situation Room you’re such a breath of fresh air…’

A knock came to the door, cutting off the President mid-sentence. Once again the President’s secretary appeared.

‘Madam President, the Director of the National Security Agency requests an immediate meeting with both yourself and the Secretary of Defense. He insists that it is a matter of quite some urgency.’

The President nodded.

As the man entered the room, so came the sense of a chilling and forbidding wind.

He stopped and stood in front of the two women.

‘What is it, Jack?’ asked the President.

‘One of our Sky-Scan satellites went off line fifteen minutes ago.’

The President tipped her head.

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means that someone managed to infiltrate the NSA and destroy the computer system which links us to that particular satellite.’

The President shuddered as his words penetrated to the depths of her very soul.

## *Miracle Institute, Minneapolis, Minnesota*

Dr. Melanie Cross sat in the small, clinically white interview room, momentarily assessing her patient, Troy Evans, who sat across from her.

At thirty-one years of age, she was an attractive woman with high cheekbones and a slim neck, all of which merely echoed the pleasing curves which graced the rest of her body.

Besides her simple beauty, she also possessed an uncharacteristic cherry-blossom hair, which waved gently to her shoulders.

A professional clinical psychiatrist, she certainly did not fit the stereotyped Freudian image of one. She could have been a model for a women's apparel magazine had her proclivity for helping others not sent her along an entirely different career-path.

It was her first session with Troy.

Troy Evans suffered from what the psychiatric profession referred to as EDD or Extreme-Delusional-Disorder. A mental illness wherein the individual experiences extreme paranoia, obsessions with being followed or constant fear of death. Although often appearing outwardly normal, such people are usually found to be under such mental duress that eventually they do crack – and their delusions can make them dangerous to themselves and the welfare of others around.

In Troy's case, an unusual one at that, she quietly remarked to herself, he had been sent to the Miracle Institute because he suffered delusions concerning a conspiratorial attack against the nation, the knowledge of which he claimed to have obtained during an out-of-body experience. Both aspects were seen as extreme.

Troy was pensive and his body language suggested a man who was extremely angry.

She wasn't sure if his anger was easily triggered, or deeply encysted, but either way she had to test the waters to see what she was up against.

'Troy, do understand why you are here?'

He stared back at her with deep inset eyes.

She noticed a prominent scar on the upper left side of his forehead.

'Yes, I do,' he answered curtly.

'And why is that?'

'Because I am a threat.'

She tipped her head.

'Can you elaborate?'

Troy leaned forward, placing his elbows on the small table separating them and clasping his hands – training his eyes on hers.

Troy knew exactly why he was there. And he also knew that he wasn't suffering from any mental illness. But that didn't quell the silent rage brewing deep inside of him – and it certainly didn't ameliorate his thirst for retribution.

'Why don't you ask me what you really want to know,' he glanced at the name tag on her white doctor's frock, '...Dr. Cross? Don't beat around the bush.'

'You claim to have discovered some kind of plot against the nation during an out-of-body incident.' The statement came with a subtle veneer of incredulity, layered, like thin icing on a cake.

Troy grinned – thinking to himself that if she wasn't so damn pretty he might have reacted differently to the tone of her question.

'That's correct,' he calmly replied.

'Is there more you can say about it?'

'You read my file, and while I'm sure that it painted a

picture of me as a delusional paranoid, it certainly did not tell the true story.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Because,' he fixed his gaze on hers with renewed intensity, 'I wouldn't be here if it did.'

'I see.' She paused. 'Are you saying that your incarceration is based on false premise?'

'No, I am saying that my assignment here at camp-mind-fuck is based on a deliberate attempt to shut me up so that I do not expose the plot and those behind it.'

'Who are these people you refer to?' she asked, hoping to encourage Troy to open up and inspect his delusion in more detail.

'Are you sure you want to go down that road?'

'Why wouldn't I?'

'Because, Dr. Cross, the elephant in the room is not about my sanity, but in fact, is about why the National Security Agency and Homeland Security have gone to great depths to conjure up a false case against me and to railroad me into this institution, under heavy guard. If you want to know the answer to that question, then I have to trust that you are going to do something about it - certainly more than just taking notes and asking me a string of psycho-babble.'

## *Collaborators*

The small meeting room was oozing with opulence, like strawberries saturated in the most expensive champagne and then topped off with thick whipped cream – the very lap of luxury accorded to royalty or monarchs of times long gone, and now, to those with the money to pay for it.

Minty green velvety-tufted chairs, easily half a century old, handcrafted in the ways of traditional French artisans in New Orleans, were perfectly situated around an oval-shaped coffee-table which had been finished to a pearly and lustrous veneer and which shined as if it had a luminescence of its own.

The walls were lavished with sumptuous wall paper, hand painted in Korea - in hues of lavender and pink orchids, sensuous to both the eye and the touch.

From the ceiling hung a chandelier which glittered like a thousand stars, casting a mesmerizing spectacle of light dancing across the ornate ceiling.

Seated therein, with a decanter of the finest wine from their 1938 stocks, were two men and one woman; however the woman was seated off at a distance from them – out of earshot to their dialogue.

The eldest of the two, Henry Rathe, was a modest and completely uninspiring looking fellow in his early 60s, with a very large and bulbous midsection, a balding head and fatty jowls which made his overall visage appear like Jabba the Hutt - of Star Wars fame.

Henry Rathe worked for the Department of Defense, the DOD, in its IT Engineering and Development section, as both a consultant and a senior systems engineer – in fact, maintaining the very hub of the nation's most guarded inner

cyber-core. He was not particularly high on the food chain, certainly not in any important decision-making capacity, but he was high enough to make a difference.

While most saw him as just another fixture, a superannuated one at that, he was determined to change the course of what little remained of his life. A life which had, until recently, been dedicated entirely to two institutional marriages – one to the Defense Department, the other to his ex-wife.

His wife had recently expired from illness, and the other, his career, was now approaching its twilight.

But another player had recently entered the arena of his life – and that player carried the scythe of death itself.

Within a year, maybe two at most, his doctor had informed him, he would be dead; the result of either his growing obesity which placed undue stress on his heart, or in fact, and probably more likely the case, the tumor now growing in his brain.

Faced with death's finality, Henry had made an important decision about how he wanted to live-out the remaining months of his life.

He discarded his long-held loyalty to the god of mediocrity in whose service he had dedicated himself for an entire lifetime, and now he served but one – the god of hedonism – *pleasure*. And he vowed to squeeze that god for all it was worth – that is, until his last dying breath.

Henry had set himself on a new course in life and his lust seemed boundless as he threw himself into the arms of expensive escorts, street-side hookers, recreational drugs, alcohol and as much rich and fatty foods as he could cram down his throat.

It was a sort of doomsday attitude – living life for everything he could get out of it before he came to the edge of the abyss.

He stole a glance at the fifty-three year-old blonde sitting

off to one side of the room. They had met in the bar the night before, and being a widower herself, with similar intent on living the hedonic life that she had been denied after years locked in a disastrous marriage, she too intended on getting more pleasure than want.

She smiled at him, her lips wrapped around the straw of her strawberry mojito. She arched her back slightly, causing her large breasts to protrude and to wobble – a seductive gesticulation intended to remind him of what lay in store.

It was because of his new lifestyle that Henry found himself engaged in a treasonous collaboration with the second man present.

For his part in the plan, he would see his off-shore accounts brimming – sufficient to fuel his needs until the Grim Reaper came knocking.

Tanner Corbett, the second man present, was the forty-one year-old CEO and founder of a private corporation called Viral-Sec, a private military contractor that worked for the US Department of Defense in the development of computerized software. His company specialized in malware, or computer viruses, which could be used to defend the DOD's cyber-assets, including viral programs which could be proactively engaged to target, and destroy, foreign computer sites.

Today, the cyber-world was the new battlefield. America's war against terrorism had spawned a whole new level of unilateral surveillance and even hijacking of computer systems for the purposes, ostensibly stated, of national security. It was the unfortunate domino-effect created by suspicion and counter-suspicion, threat versus counter-threat, and on and on, in the insane dwindling spiral of a military super-structure where men had forgotten that they were, after all, just brothers sharing the same planet.

Corbett was driven, day-in and day-out, with an obsession to achieve the top rung. His closest associates knew him to be

a highly narcissistic personality – in fact, even caustic and brutally cold when it came to dealing with any opposition or incompetence.

His shining star was power and wealth.

The more – the better.

Just several months earlier, Tanner Corbett had been introduced to a plan involving his latest project on behalf of the DOD, called *Opus* – the most potent malware ever developed on American soil. It was during the course of several clandestine meetings that he had been acquainted with this particular man, Henry Rathe - who worked in the belly of the beast, right in the heart of the defensive structure's cyber programming matrix.

'Is everything in place at your end?' asked Corbett with a discreet eye aimed at the blonde, ensuring that she could not overhear their dialogue.

Henry Rathe forced his eyes away from the woman, fixing them on Tanner Corbett with a dumb smile lazily hanging on his lips.

'She's kind of sexy, isn't she?'

Corbett shrugged.

'Whatever floats your boat, Henry,' answered Corbett with a deprecating tone.

'Yes, everything is in order,' said Rathe, noting the impatience in the other man's eyes.'

'So the virus is installed, precisely and exactly as instructed?'

Rathe's prodigious gut suddenly rumbled, like a giant waking from its sleep, the combination of far too much food and an over indulgence of wine.

'Yes,' he burped loudly.

'Good! And you are absolutely sure that detection is not possible?'

Rathe shook his head, his jowls jiggling like bowls of

jelly. ‘I’ve been working in this area since the 1980s, Mr. Corbett. No one knows those systems better than me, so don’t worry about it. As long as *Opus* works, then we’re all good to go.’

Tanner leaned back, nervously glancing around the room which was otherwise devoid of anyone else; but then again, a growing sense of paranoia seemed to be haunting him these days.

Henry Rathe spoke, his voice a monotonous hum in the otherwise quiet space.

‘You seem nervous.’

Tanner shrugged, turning back to Rathe with a condescending look.

‘I have a few more bases to cover than you do, Henry – and frankly, I have a whole life ahead of me. If we fuck this up, I go to prison for a life time. On the other hand, you probably won’t last more than a few months behind bars.’

Rathe tipped his head with a raised brow.

‘That’s a pretty dismissive attitude considering the role I play in this thing,’ he chimed with a flabby grin.

‘You’re getting paid for it – suck it up.’

Rathe repressed any sense of insult which was clearly intended. Personally he didn’t care what Tanner thought about him. He had survived decades working for the US Department of Defense, which seemed to have a monopoly on assholes, narcissistic pricks and megalomaniacs who thought that because they had sway over one of the largest military forces in the world that it entitled them to be card-carrying jerks. He could handle one more.

Henry raised his glass of vintage wine.

‘Well then, let’s toast to America’s next Ground Zero – should be a hell of a ride.’

## *The plot*

Dr. Melanie Cross reflected on her last session with her patient, Troy Evans.

On the one hand, she could understand his state of mind. He had been eviscerated of his freedom and forcibly locked up and declared mentally dysfunctional. No matter the circumstances, the sudden evaporation of one's rights played havoc on the individual – she had seen it in others committed to this and other institutions where she had interned.

Troy insisted that his ability to leave and return to his body, which he called *Out-Step*, was the very reason why he had accidentally come upon some secretive meeting wherein he had overheard plans for a domestic attack.

The more she probed him with questions, the more resistive he became, insisting that before he would tip his cards to her that she should demonstrate more than a bedside “psycho-babble” manner, which he called her profession.

In spite of his recalcitrance, she liked him. He had a streak of rebelliousness – a quality she admired because her life was so *normal*, so predictable - like connecting the dots on a page.

She headed back to the interview room where Troy was still sitting, waiting to begin their next session for the day.

Outside, guarding the door, stood a large orderly. It was odd to her, because Troy manifested no slightest violent tendencies – *so why the guard*, she wondered?

As she entered the room, Troy looked up and smiled at her.

She sat, crossing her legs and assuming a professional demeanor – intent on making a dent in his case.

‘Can we take another approach?’ she began with a pretty smile.

‘Sure.’

‘Tell me more about *Out-Step*?’

Troy shrugged.

‘What do you want to know?’

‘Why do you call it *Out-Step*?’

‘It wasn’t something I particularly deliberated on. One day it just came to me. Most people call it **Out-Of-Body-Experience**, or OOBEx, but that was a mouthful, and referring to it as OOBEx sounded like I had contracted a venereal disease,’ he grinned.

‘Ok – how does it work?’ her tone coming across more like a scientist asking another scientist about the contents of a Petri Dish.

‘Are you familiar with out-of-body phenomena?’

‘I have studied a little, but not much.’

‘Hmm.’ Troy chimed. ‘Maybe that’s because your field doesn’t acknowledge the human soul as the core of who we are?’

Melanie stiffened slightly, a defensive gesture which Troy saw in her body language.

‘It’s really not the issue here,’ she deflected.

‘Of course not. Anyhow, *Out-Step* is just that, it means, stepping out of the body. People experience it all the time, many without even realizing that they are doing so. And contrary to the scientific community, and your own illustrious head-shrinks,’ he smiled mischievously, ‘it is not paranormal. But of course that depends on how you view the human experience?’

‘Meaning what?’

‘The scientific field has not yet conclusively proven the existence of something more transcendent than the brain, or if they have, they haven’t officially published it to the world at large. Or maybe they simply don’t want to and they continue to internalize the whole package as just the workings of the

brain because it sells more pharmaceutical drugs. The scientific community keeps trying to convince us that the totality of our innate intelligence, our creative juices, our very personalities - are nothing more than the product of some chemical matrix in our brains.'

'And you don't agree with them?'

'Do I sound like I agree?' Troy lets out a huff. '*Out-Step* has demonstrated to me that we are not just a bunch of gray goo – in spite of all the authoritative utterances otherwise.'

Melanie politely smiles.

She thinks to herself that she must find a way through his delusions. *He would not be here if he had not demonstrated extreme delusional symptoms*, she reminds herself.

'How do you go about leaving your body?'

'I can't do it when I am tired or sick, or under heavy stress. Usually I am lying down in a quiet room. I relax, then I clear my mind of thoughts so that I am not distracted; and finally I just focus on the emptiness which moves in. It's pretty much a three-step process.

'What do you mean by *the emptiness*?'

'If you stop all the noise in your head, the mental machinery clanging about, and just focus on the silence, everything calms down and soon you can perceive a sort of mental void. That black void or emptiness is the more natural state for us.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'I know this is not a domain that your field gives any credibility, but assuming that we, as spiritual beings, do not just reside in the gray mush between our ear lobes, where do we reside, or for that matter, where do we go when the body dies?'

Melanie shakes her head. 'I don't know, Troy – where?'

'Think of it like quantum physics, if that helps. Quantum physics suggests that there are other universes, possibly

parallel to our own, which we do not perceive because the particles forming those, whether anti-matter or otherwise, are not the same as the world which we normally see and live in.’

‘Ok,’ she says with a tentative nod.

‘I can see the troops lining up in your head, doc. You don’t believe any of this – do you?’

Melanie begins to speak, but he cuts her off.

‘Are you aware of the fact that at any moment of the day, millions, if not billions, of electromagnetic wavelengths are buzzing through and around you?’

She nods.

‘And can you perceive any of those?’

‘No.’

‘That’s right – because electromagnetic wavelengths are generally not perceptible to the human senses. But they exist, by the billions, every minute of the day. The airwaves are literally filled with them – and we are creating those synthetic frequencies for our iPhones, our televisions, satellites, in fact, our whole cultural structure is now driven by that particular field of quantum physics.’

‘Ok.’

‘Try to liken that dimension to another dimension which the human soul can perceive, and in fact, resides, as separate from the body?’

‘As delusional as that may sound to you, doc, it wasn’t until I started practicing *Out-Step* that I discovered this other medium or dimension. Generally speaking, when we’re focused on the body and the physical world around us, we’re not thinking about this other domain. But when you step outside your body, and suddenly find yourself in another dimension, coexisting with the physical world, but not the same at all – you suddenly realize that you are so much more than just meat, bones and a brain – that our true existence transcends all of this.’ Troy waves a hand around the room.

‘How long does it take you to move out of your body?’

‘It varies – five, ten – fifteen minutes, maybe. It depends on how much noise I have to shut off in order to calm myself.’

‘Is it like meditation?’

‘I don’t know – I’ve never tried meditation.’

‘And once you are out, can you move around at will?’

‘It takes practice, but yes.’

‘How does that work?’

‘I can’t give you a scientific rendering for it, but I can say this – the rule book is not the same when compared to the mechanics of the physicality around us. There are no roads, you have no legs - there is just a sort of void. When I am outside my body I can see the physical world around me. I know where I am, and if I want to go somewhere I just have to envision it and then intend myself to that location. There is no sense of movement at all. I am in one place and then I am in another – with no apparent passage of time or distance.’

‘I see,’ she said, her lips protruding slightly as she pauses to consider his words.

‘Do you believe any of this – or are you just trying to figure out my insanity?’

Melanie tipped her head slightly, answering with a professional demeanor.

‘I am not judging you, Troy. But I must admit that this whole out-of-body thing is challenging to accept.’

Troy leans closer.

‘That is the crux of the matter, doc. If I can perform *Out-Step*, which I can, it means that I am not crazy - so then the real salient question you should be asking yourself is, *why am I here?*’

‘How did you manage to come across this meeting through your out-of-body experience?’

Troy drew in a breath, calming his emotions.

‘What do you mean?’

‘You just told me that when you want to go somewhere in the out-of-body state, you just decide it and you are there.’

‘That’s right.’

She tipped her head with a challenging look in her eye.

‘So how did you accidentally come upon this meeting?’ she asks, hoping that now she had a wedge in the door, a hole in the fence of his mental delusion.

‘To be honest, I don’t know. I’m still discovering my potential with *Out-Step*, so I can’t explain everything that happens to me. I do remember that on that particular day, that I decided to go somewhere new, somewhere different – but I didn’t fix a location firmly in my mind. Why I ended up in a hotel in Philadelphia, overlooking a room with these four particular men – I cannot explain. It just happened.’

Melanie studied him for a time. There was some quintessential sincerity about his words which she could not deny. Despite the outlandish nature of their discussion, Troy remained lucid. There was no emotional content, other than his repressed anger. Moreover, she had learned in her many years of counselling people that truth had a ring to it, a quality which was different from delusion, if not even, lies.

She probed deeper.

‘Are saying that time and distance have no relevance in the process of *Out-Step*?’

‘Doesn’t appear to. I can decide to be at the Eiffel Tower, or at the fast food joint down the street – it all happens in the same time frame.’

‘How do you know that you actually went to these places?’

Troy grins.

‘Ah, and now the penny drops. The defining moment. Am I just imagining all of this – right?’

She smiles with a look that simply invites an answer.

‘Have you ever visited the Eiffel Tower, Melanie?’

‘No.’

‘Me neither – at least, not in the flesh. The first time I ever saw it was through *Out-Step*. After my first visit, I checked the internet for everything I could find about it; and guess what?’

Melanie waited in silence.

‘Every detail was a precise match. I could never have known what I saw any other way, because I had never studied a single thing about the Eiffel Tower. I’ve done that now with many locations, near and far away, and the accuracy simply debunks the idea that it is delusion on my part.’

Troy smiles.

‘And these men that you overheard that day, they were discussing this plot?’

‘Yes. They spoke about a plan to launch a virus against the nation - something they called *Opus*. They also made reference to something called *Fortress* – but I have no idea what that is.’

‘And did they say talk about the target of this attack?’

‘No. But they did make a toast.’

‘What did they say?’

‘Here’s to the next 9/11.’

## *Infiltration*

Before the shock had even settled, the Director of the NSA launched his next salvo at the President and Secretary of Defense.

‘Madam President, besides this incident with one of our reconnaissance satellites, we now possess evidence showing that a cyber-attack is imminent on our nation in just three days from now.’

The President’s face morphed into pure shock.

‘What?!’ she exclaimed.

The man’s face remained sober as he continued.

‘Roughly one hour ago we received this anonymous email.’ He handed a sheet of paper to the President and to the Secretary of Defense.

‘It was literally just minutes after receiving this email that our satellite went off line. That means there yet remain another eleven targets – if they are true to their threat.’

‘How could someone intercede on an NSA satellite? That would require bypassing tremendous security systems and security walls?’ asked the Secretary of Defense.

‘The question is not who, the question is what? When we inspected the computer server that links us to that satellite – the programming was destroyed – totally fried.’

‘A computer virus?’ asked the President.

‘Yes. Unlike anything we have ever seen.’

The NSA Director capped his brief with this statement.

‘It is like a ghost – it leaves absolutely no signature and no digital foot-print. So we have no idea where to begin to look for it – or even how it was introduced.’

## *The Shocker*

By now, Melanie Cross was beginning to feel like a deer caught in the hunter's scope – with nowhere to run.

Troy Evans was becoming a complete enigma to her. What had appeared to be a simple case at first, was now turning into a bit of a nightmare.

Clearly, he did not display the usual signs of extreme delusion or paranoia associated with the label pinned to him. And even though his claims of out-of-body, and moreover, the plot against the nation which he continued to assert, were difficult to digest, neither of them necessarily implied mental illness.

She sat alone, in her office, staring out the window.

Was she losing her objectivity, she wondered?

Was she getting lost in the story and failing to see the larger picture of a dysfunctional mind?

Or was it possible that he was telling the truth?

Those questions were like IEDs, buried in the road ahead, threatening to explode under her.

With a sigh of frustration, she gathered up her notepad, adjusted her white frock, and then headed back to the interview room for her next session with him.

What was about Troy, she wondered, that caused her to back-step, to challenge herself?

She had done some study into the paranormal field – enough to gain some semblance of understanding. But she had never given serious thought to it – opting, instead, in the direction of mental therapy.

She had never considered herself to be close-minded. And most certainly, she had never viewed the mental health field,

in which she worked, as an absolute answer either. Despite her extensive training, it was still hit and miss – a throw of the dice. There was no one-size-shoe that fit all patients. A percentage of people recovered from their illnesses, or traumas, often times just because she listened to them, or in fact, because they had a chance to sit in a quiet room. Others were buried so deeply in their convoluted world that reaching them seemed impossible.

She was always looking for better approaches to help people – certainly a closer approach to the truth about the workings of the human mind.

Was it this particular facet of herself, some inner desire for truth, which was now screaming at her, telling her to listen to the man?

And yet, another voice was now at work on her. One which countered her thoughts with an oppositional argument – maybe even the collective voices of those who had preached to her during her education, that the mind and the brain were one in the same, and that human troubles were best addressed on that premise.

The troops were rallying on both sides of the mental debate and a confrontation was in the wind. The dull thudding sensation she felt in the pit of her stomach was the precursor to that coming battle.

Shelving her growing doubts, she made her way to the interview room, where Troy was already waiting for her.

‘Ready for our next session?’ she asked with affected enthusiasm.

‘Sure thing, doc,’ he answered with a warm smile and even warmer eyes.

‘What does it feel like when you get outside your body?’

‘Maybe a good analogy would be the sensation of jumping out of an airplane, free fall – a total disconnect from the norms of physicality which we are accustomed to.’

‘And do you feel in control when you are outside your body?’

‘Sure.’

‘How much detail can you perceive?’

‘I can generally see what I focus on. I can also hear sounds. I don’t get a sense of taste or smell – those particular perceptions seem to be uniquely tuned to the body.’

‘And you’ve documented all of this?’

Troy smiled. ‘I have catalogued hundreds of my own experiences since I was five years old, in as much detail as I could recall.’

‘Why then?’

Troy pointed to the scar on the left side of his forehead.

‘That is my trophy from the very first time I had an out-of-body experience when I fell from a tree, nearly cracking my skull in the process.’

‘Were you unconscious?’

‘Yes, absolutely. When my mom found me I was lying in a puddle of blood and I was out cold.’

‘But how can you remember being outside your body if you were unconscious?’

Troy grins.

‘That’s what I have been trying to tell you, doc. There are two entirely different singularities at work here. The body is one singularity. The human soul, another. That is why so many cases exist on record of people, during accidents, or operations, or even at the point of clinical death – experiencing out-of-body. In my case, even though the fall nearly killed me, that one experience opened up a whole new dimension.’

‘So you remember everything that happened to you after that accident?’

‘Yes. I can tell you what the ambulance personnel were saying as they rushed me into the emergency room; what the doctors were talking about as they fixed my broken body, and

I can tell you that my mother was crying for an hour, until a doctor came out to inform her that I was going to live.’

He grinned.

‘Like I said – this scar on my forehead is my trophy – my medal for having survived a thirty foot fall.’

‘Is any of this authenticated?’

‘I have never submitted myself as a guinea pig to be tested in some lab, if that’s what you mean?’

‘Ok, let’s go back to this plot which you discovered. Did you report this particular dialogue you overheard, to anyone?’

‘Yes, I reported it to Homeland Security, using their cyber threats report site,’ rejoined Troy.

‘And what happened?’

‘Within the week of sending that report three agents busted down the door to my apartment and carted me away.’

‘Why would they do that, Troy?’

‘I don’t know – you do the math,’ he glared, now suddenly consumed by the encysted emotions, emotions which he had tried to keep repressed, but like a boiling sea of lava, were waiting to spew out.

‘Three goons from the NSA showed up at my door accusing me of some trumped up charges about national security. For me, it’s simple arithmetic: but in this case one plus one doesn’t equal two – it equals bullshit - a cover-up.’

His eyes were now intense with the fervor running at a high pitch inside.

‘But Troy, why would the NSA try to cover up this supposed plot? It doesn’t make sense...’

The dam cracked and Troy’s emotions cascaded out.

He slammed the palm of his hand into the table.

A shudder reverberated through the small room.

The gorilla standing outside, guarding the door, came charging in.

Melanie raised a hand at the man.

‘It’s ok, we’re fine,’ she assured him.

He backed slowly from the room, his eyes fixed on Troy with manifest threat.

‘I’m sorry if I upset you, Troy.’

Troy took a breath and calmed himself.

‘Forget about it. I’m not angry with you – I’m pissed off that I have to explain myself, and at every turn someone is trying to convince me that I am nuts.’

Troy paused to compose himself.

‘I really like you, Mel, and I enjoy talking to you for lack of any other intelligent person to speak to here at your lovely resort – but for you to ask me that question seems to say that you are refusing to look at the facts.’

‘Ok?’ she gently prodded.

‘If I am not crazy, and I think that should be fairly evident to you by now, then it leaves only one option, that I am telling the truth. That’s what you have to consider. Not whether I am sane or not.’

Troy let out a long sigh, his face was like a canvass - with frustration painted in desperate and angry strokes.

‘None of this,’ he waved a hand angrily about the room, ‘is about me. You need to wake up and listen to what I am telling you. In a few days-time, in fact, sometime on Independence Day according to the dialogue I overheard, when everyone is happily charging up the barbecues and icing up the beers and Cokes, and getting ready for a celebration of America’s independence, an attack is going to strike this nation and from what I overheard, it’s going to hurt like hell.’

She watched him for a time, trying to assess her best approach.

‘So, what’s the verdict, doc? Are you interested in knowing the truth, or do you want keep up the charade that I’m crazy and that you are Nurse Ratched?’

Melanie sighed lightly.

‘It’s a lot to process, Troy. I really want to believe you, but this goes beyond the parameters of what I am here to accomplish. You’re asking me to buy into a major conspiracy – whereas I am just a therapist – that’s all.’

‘Right, and I was just a graphic artist – just one man, but I am still trying to do something about it despite being locked up in this shithole.’

‘I understand that, but I am not the judge nor the jury that put you here, and I am not your enemy.’

Troy leaned forward looking her straight in the eyes with a penetrating glare.

‘That may be true, Ms. Cross, but you are certainly guilty of being disingenuous. You say that you want to help me, but in truth that help is just a one way street. It’s got to be your way. It can’t be that I am telling the truth because that would mean that you would have stand up against a system that has earmarked me as a delusional nut-job. And that, pretty lady, is the reason why you are playing this particular card – you are afraid of the consequences of admitting that what I am telling you is the truth.’

Melanie felt frustration welling up inside.

‘It’s not like that, Troy.’

‘Sure it is, it is exactly like that.’

Melanie didn’t know how to respond, and clearly, yet another session had come to a rather bitter end.

‘I think we should continue our talk another time,’ she said as she began to stand.

‘No, before you go I want to say one more thing.’

She nodded, hesitantly lowering herself back into the chair.

‘Last night you went out to a French restaurant, called Chez Ami, with your boyfriend, Carl – right?’

Melanie was stunned by the forthrightness of his statement – in fact, she was completely speechless, as if her vocal cords had just frozen in place.

Troy used the moment to drive the wedge in even deeper.

‘You ordered a fish dish with white rice and broccoli, and Carl had veal with red wine, as opposed to your French Sauvignon.’

He paused to watch as the look of unabated horror spread across her face.

‘How did you...?’ she began to ask, her voice squeaking as she spoke.

‘How did I know? Because, I have been telling you the truth all along and you haven’t been listening. So now I’m forced to push the envelope and to make it personal.’

The look of shock on her face was testimony to the fact that he had finally gotten home to her.

‘And just one more thing – your boyfriend is a complete ass - you should dump that creep.’

‘What!?’ she rejoined, her shock growing ever deeper inside.

‘He kissed you good night and told you he was going on a business trip to Los Angeles for a week – right?’ He paused. ‘In truth, when he dropped you off last night, he called another woman and they spoke about meeting up in Chicago for a romantic romp.’

Melanie reflexively pushed back from the table – nearly bolting to her feet. Her body was tense - like a steel cord, and beads of sweat were forming on her forehead.

‘That’s enough, Troy,’ she declared as she tried to calm the ribbons of shock rippling through her like bolts of electricity.

‘We will continue tomorrow.’

She attempted a professional smile, but it came across more like a jittery crease.

As she approached the door, Troy spoke once again.

‘By the way, you looked great in that black sequin dress and those Prada high-heeled shoes.’

## *Tick Tock*

Melanie Cross did not sleep a minute that night.

All she could think about was how could Troy have known those personal details about her?

The irritating sense of jealousy that her boyfriend might be cheating on her was a mere annoyance, a minor gust compared to the titanic storm otherwise brewing inside.

Now she was definitely caught between two approaching storm fronts, each with ferocious winds tearing at her. On one side was her academic learning which had taught her that human behavior was supposed to be explainable within certain parameters. On the other side was her sense of conscience, the quintessential matrix which defined human beings from lesser species. That force was playing havoc on her mind and threatening to pull the rug right out from under her feet.

She needed an outside perspective, so she marched to the office of her superior, the Chief Psychiatrist at the Miracle Institute, Calvin Akron, a highly respected man in the field, and in fact, her mentor.

Calvin looked up at her over a pair of bifocals, with an amiable smile forming on his lips.

He was a tall man, bald, with a wrinkled and aged visage.

‘What’s the long face about?’ he asked.

‘I have some concerns about this patient you assigned to me.’

‘You mean Troy Evans?’

‘Yes,’ she affirmed as she sat in a chair across from his desk. Melanie’s aspect was sober, and her body language, normally relaxed and quite casual, was now stiff and tense, bespeaking of her troubled state of mind.

Calvin lowered his glasses to the table, assuming a pedantic-like posture.

‘Something is very wrong with this case.’

‘How so?’

‘Troy Evans was committed here due to extreme delusional disorder symptoms. I find no such symptoms on him whatsoever.’

Calvin raised a brow.

‘Interesting.’

‘In fact,’ she continued, ‘he manifests lucidity and continuity in his dialogue and in his behavior.’

‘Except for the fact that he claims to be able to leave his body at will and that he also claims to have discovered a conspiracy through one of his out-of-body experiences,’ chimed Akron with a hint of facetiousness.

‘I have questioned and challenged him quite extensively over the course of three interviews and there seems to be some validity to what he says.’

‘Are you sure you haven’t just fallen for his story?’

Melanie paused.

‘If you are suggesting the patient has gotten to me in a compromising manner, then I find that objectionable. I have maintained my objectivity throughout our sessions, but at the end of the last session I felt he was telling me the truth about his ability. However bizarre or paranormal that may be from our standpoint as practitioners, he proved that he could do it, which suggests plausibility with regard to his other claim.’

‘I see,’ this time Calvin Akron’s demeanor became serious.

‘What did he do to demonstrate his supposed ability?’

‘Let’s just say that he revealed several things about myself which he could not possibly have known otherwise. The details were unequivocal and their accuracy could not be dismissed as the conjuring of a delusional man, no matter how brilliantly devised.’

‘So you believe him when he says he can leave his body and that his story about this conspiracy?’

‘He has shown me that his claim of out-of-body phenomena is not delusional rant. As to the plot against our nation – I can only say that if he is telling the truth about one, then why would he lie about the other?’

Calvin drew in a deep breath, expelling it slowly before responding.

‘You understand the term - *Hannibal Effect* – correct?’

‘Yes,’ she answered, knowing that the term had been adopted from the film, *Silence of the Lambs*, where Hannibal Lecter, a sociopathic serial killer, manipulates the mind of the investigative agent on his case.

‘Need I remind you that some mentally dysfunctional patients have been known to wear down their therapists and ultimately to get them to buy into their delusions.’

‘I understand your concerns, Dr. Akron. But I have not been duped by this man. What he said was undeniable corroboration to the effect of supporting his sanity.’

‘Ok, what do you propose?’ he asked with a cant of his head and eyes which conveyed his continuing sense of doubt.

‘I don’t know exactly, but I believe we are missing information vital to Troy’s circumstances. Possibly we should refer the matter back to Homeland Security and talk to the agent who handled this case and challenge the evidential material, and maybe even request a review. If there is any chance that this plot is not a conspiracy, then it would make sense to take the safer road.’

Calvin Akron watched her in silence.

‘Tell you what I will do – I’ll contact Homeland Security. Possibly they can provide more information to us which would help in evaluating Troy’s case – or at the very least, assist us in navigating this speed bump you have encountered.’

## *The Cabal*

It was a beautiful sunny day in San Diego, California.

A balmy ocean wind paraded off the Pacific as Tanner Corbett, the CEO of Viral-Sec, stepped from the airport terminal.

Twenty five minutes later he was sitting in his air-conditioned office, atop the *One America Plaza* – a thirty-four story structure overlooking the waterfront.

Tanner took a moment to compose himself. A lot of details were still spinning around in his head - most of which he could not say nor ever record for fear that it might eventually trace back to him.

The trip to Boston had been successful.

There he had met with the man who headed up a special NSA task-force, and who, in effect, was just an ambassador for someone higher up within the agency.

His role was to play interception and to internalize the entire operation, keeping everything contained and neatly packaged and with no loose ends which might expose them. He and his two men were concealed under a cloud of invisibility, the world of black-ops, which the NSA could invoke in the name of its many initiatives.

They had discussed various potential risks, weak links in the chain, which the agent would keep an eye over. And in the event of any trouble, Tanner merely had to pick up the phone, give the details to the man, and the matter would be tended to.

In fact, Tanner Corbett had no idea of the existence of Troy Evans, nor even the threat which he had already posed when he had tried to expose the plot to Homeland Security some

weeks before. The NSA agent and his men, tipped off by their boss, had effectively corralled up the problem.

Tanner then took a short reprieve at the Greenbrier Hotel, in West Virginia, where he met Henry Rathe – possibly the most important element in the entire plan. Rathe was the linchpin, the very key to planting *Opus* in the central servers, targeting the twelve specific cyber infrastructures throughout the nation.

As much as he found the man to be quite objectionable, with his obesity, that prodigiously repellent stomach which seemed more like a monstrous appendage, and the way he fondled and coddled the blond who had joined him at the hotel, Henry Rathe was still the perfect agent provocateur. He was right there, at the heart of the beast, and no one would likely suspect one of the DOD's most trusted IT Engineers to be involved in such an elaborate plot.

Tanner chuckled to himself. The very irony of the whole thing simply amused him.

Here he was, heading up a corporation, employed by the Department of Defense in the development of digital weaponry, and now he was engaged in a clandestine operation, at the behest of some of the very men who had hired his company, to help unleash *Opus* against the unsuspecting nation.

In a short time from now, his company, Viral-Sec, would secure a massive contract, once the *Fortress Act* became law, and all of it based on chasing after a ghost called *terrorism*.

He found it quite amazing that the whole terrorist paradigm could be leveraged, with such ease, in the manipulation of the minds of a whole nation.

In fact, it suddenly brought back old memories of times as a child, when his mother used to tell him stories about the bogeyman, a mythical creature which lurked in dark corners at night, threatening to eat children who behaved badly. His

mother had used the myth adeptly, for many months, to scare him into compliance. But then the day had come when he wised up to her ruse, realizing that it was all untrue, and on that day Tanner Corbett also realized the power of a good lie.

Ever since then he had followed an inextricable career path, following the dots, lie after lie, deception after deception, leveraging and manipulating the darker byways of corrupt power – eventually leading him to his ascension up the food chain within one of the most powerful agencies in America.

*Opus* had been born from his association with the DOD, who had contrived the idea for the ultimate malware, one which could be used to devastate the enemy domain without the collateral damage of loss of human life, and moreover, the destruction of physical properties, real estate and natural resources.

In their first meeting on this subject nearly two years before, the *high brass* from the Department of Defense had stated their aims.

“We want *Opus* to be the “Atomic bomb” of the cyber-world – the means of stopping an enemy in their tracks – the ultimate weapon.”

Tanner’s company had been tasked with its development. Based on blue prints provided to him, Viral-Sec had successfully tested several Beta versions of *Opus*. One of the developmental versions turned out to be so exceedingly destructive, that even the DOD had decidedly put the whole project on ice. They took every aspect of the project out of the hands of his company and locked it behind thick-steel-doors – in the Vault beneath the Pentagon itself.

The whole affair had been somewhat disturbing to Tanner Corbett, and like Dr. Frankenstein who had brought his creation back from the dead, Corbett truly wanted to see *Opus* put to use – not sitting in some underground tomb.

And in this regard, he was not alone.

Six months after the *Opus* Project had been shelved, Tanner was invited to a secretive meeting. There he met with several top brass from the Department of Defense, as well as a very senior member of the National Security Agency. They proceeded to lay out their plan for a mock terrorist attack on America.

These very men, pillars of the DOD and the NSA, national icons in the eyes of most – had devised an attack which would surpass even that of 9/11 – and one designed to shock the nation and its governance into a malleable state of compliance.

Jokingly, they had referred to the current US Administration as a “*Women’s sewing circle*” implying that the President was a passive force who would never endorse their plans for *Fortress*. Not without some definitive provocation.

‘We’re going to use the terrorist paradigm to drive the stake deep into the hearts of the nation,’ one of them had said. ‘And in the end, it will be the greater good – assuring America of continued global dominance.’

‘Ok, so what do you need from me?’ Tanner had asked.

The NSA official leaned forward.

‘We need you to figure out how to break *Opus* out of its holding tank.’

‘Wait a minute,’ Tanner threw up his hands, ‘we designed that software, but I’m not a thief. And besides, the DOD controls the Vault – so why don’t you guys do it?’

The NSA official grinned – although there was not an ounce of humor evident in his eyes.

‘We’re not asking you to break into the Vault because that would be nearly impossible. It is heavily fortified. Not even we, from our positions, could easily access it without alerting dozens of people. But, since your company developed *Opus*, you know more about it than anyone. We want you to design an extraction program which one of our engineers will use to secretly accomplish the task.’

‘I don’t get it. If you have an engineer who can get near to those servers, he can figure it out better than we can?’

‘No, he cannot. There is no physical way of extracting *Opus* from those servers without immediate detection. It is designed like a maximum security prison – to prevent either information, or in this case, a rather deadly malware, from being hijacked. What we need is a program that our man can use which will literally conceal the extraction process. When he does his routine maintenance on those particular servers, the program should permit an undetectable escape of *Opus*, without setting off any alarms.’

‘Wouldn’t it be easier to just redevelop another Beta version for you?’

The man shook his head.

‘No, that would be too obvious and it would trace back to your company. We want *Opus* – and you know why – right?’

‘Of course. It’s ruthless and it has a self-destruct protocol which eviscerates any digital footprint.’

‘Exactly. This needs to be a perfect crime, with absolutely no traces of the malware. That way, no investigative thread is possible.’

One of the other men leaned forward and spoke.

‘It’s not that complicated, Tanner. One of our very own engineers who is intimately involved with overseeing the DOD defense servers, not to mention other backup servers for national grid-systems, is on-board with this plan. He will help you to design the navigational protocols. You just have to build a path which permits *Opus* to find its way out, and he will take it from there.’

‘What makes this man so reliable?’

The NSA official smiled.

‘Money – of course?’

‘You’re sure this can work?’

‘Yes,’ answered a DOD man. ‘I have known this particular

engineer for the better part of thirty years. In fact, he helped us in the design of the Vault, which as you know, houses the most guarded computer systems for the US government. If there is a hole in the fence of that security system, he will be able to show you how to leverage it. What he doesn't know is how to control *Opus* – and that's where you come in. We don't want the beast getting out of control. We want it in a holding pen until we are ready to release it.'

'I assume there is something in this for me?'

The others grinned.

'Of course. When the attack strikes, it will tidal wave across the nation as the most heinous terrorist attack ever. The public outcry will be immense – considering the staggering losses that will affect the lives of millions of people. It will make 9/11 look like a walk in the park in comparison – and believe me, the pressure on the White House will force their hand into legislating the *Fortress Act*, just to abate the tidal waves washing up at the front doors. And when that happens, your company will be heading up the whole development cycle.'

Massive dollar signs suddenly filled Tanner's mind with an orgasmic sense of power.

'Ok, I'm in,' said Tanner. 'But you do realize that you can never let a particular Beta version of *Opus* out into the general cyber population. If that virus gets out into the airwaves, we are talking disaster on a scale you cannot even imagine.'

## *Doubts*

Troy lay awake most of the night – as he had done now for most nights since being locked up.

The loss of his freedom was abrading to his very soul.

It was utterly debasing to have his existence reduced to sitting in a ten by eight-foot room – like some mindless whelp.

Nothing about his situation could ameliorate the rage he felt. It was like a swelling sea in a blistering storm, its waves growing and gaining momentum.

To a large degree it was this very rage which kept him fighting and not sinking into the depths of apathy.

He remembered the faces of those involved; the three agents who had stormed his apartment that day; the kangaroo “court”; the pulpy-faced judge who served some other agency than justice itself and who had falsely committed him to this place.

He would not forget them.

Not ever!

Troy repeatedly ran the details of the dialogue through his head. He did not want to lose one iota of what he had heard on that day – it was the only power which he possessed right now, and which they feared. Probably the only reason he wasn’t already dead.

There had been moments where his conviction had wavered, wondering if he would have been better off had he not pursued his practice of *Out-Step*. But the rhetorical voice of doubt was always subdued by a deeper and much more powerful voice, one which reigned-in the intruder and reminded him that *Out-Step* had enriched his life.

In those moments of weakness, he had also reminded

himself of a quote which he had once read, words which helped him to navigate the lonely road he traveled. It was a brilliant piece which Albert Einstein had penned:

***“The one who follows the crowd will usually go no further than the crowd. The one who walks alone is likely to find himself in places no one has ever been before.”***

Calming the stormy seas of his mind, his thoughts drifted back to Melanie Cross – his doctor.

He liked her. In fact, he liked her a lot.

Besides the fact that she possessed a coy and subtle air of sexuality about her, he sensed that she had doubts and was challenged about his case.

If he could just pry open the door to those doubts – maybe she would become an ally.

Troy knew that the clock was ticking in more ways than one.

Once the attack was launched, he knew they would get rid of him for good. They would never let him go free, to announce to the world what he had overheard.

He would be dead in just a matter of days – of that he was certain.

## *Dead End*

Melanie Cross had tried to follow the instructions of her mentor; she had tried now for nearly forty-five minutes into her fourth session with Troy, to block out the questions, the doubts, the debate which raged in the back of her mind, and somehow, in spite of anything, the voice of her conscience still rang through – like the haunting tune of a siren’s song seeping through a fog-ridden sea.

The words of her mentor, Calvin Akron, still echoed....  
*“Mentally dysfunctional patients have been known to wear down their therapists and ultimately get them to buy into their delusions...”*

Was she really becoming the victim of a manipulative person? Was she that weak?

She shuddered at the thought.

As much as her professional ego was fighting back at her for dominant relevance in this mental conflict, she could not let go of a conscionable sense that something was terribly wrong.

Troy watched Melanie as she scribbled some idle notes, detecting her troubled state of mind.

She cleared her throat to speak, but he beat her to the punch. Now was his chance to drive the wedge even deeper, he thought. And time was desperately short.

‘What is it about me that challenges you?’

Melanie was hesitant to answer the question, feeling as if by doing so that she was conferring control of the session from her to him.

‘I am trying to make sense out of all of this?’

He smiled.

‘So my intrusive presentation about your dinner date with that ass,’ Troy huffed, ‘wasn’t a sufficiently compelling argument in my favor?’

‘Take my position, Troy. First you intrude on my privacy, which was a little weird; and secondly, you keep talking about an attack which is disturbing.’

‘I’m not the first whistleblower to come along.’

‘True - but you are the first one that I have come across.’

‘Don’t tell me, you’re a card-carrying flag-waving patriot who believes every utterance that comes out of the portals of the White House?’

‘No, of course not. But I really don’t want to go there, Troy. Let’s focus on you.’

‘But I do want to go there, Mel. This is the entire crux of the matter. As long as you think that I am just spouting off some delirious conspiracy theory, as long as you buy the tripe being fed to you by others, you are going to miss the forest for a few trees.’

‘Have you honestly considered the possibility that I might be telling the truth and that others are playing the deception card?’

‘How can I know that, Troy? Your file only provides a brief synopsis. For all I know you were planning some plot of your own.’

Troy restrained his growing frustration.

‘Seriously – are you going to play that card?’ he tipped his head. ‘Do you truly believe that the NSA and Homeland Security would put a potential terrorist here in camp-mind-fuck?’ He drew in a deep breath to quell his rage.

‘You need to wake up and smell the bullshit. If I was a real threat to the nation they certainly would have put me in Gitmo or somewhere they could keep an eye on me. I am here to serve an end, to keep me under their control, out-of-sight, and you are being manipulated, Melanie. You think that you are

supposed to treat me, but in truth you're just a détente, a babysitter - someone who is supposed to keep a lid on this whole thing until they accomplish their ends and when they're done, when that attack is over, they are going to get rid of me.'

'You can't be serious about that?'

'I'm dead serious. Are you prepared to have my death on your conscience?'

She lowered her eyes from his, staring blankly at the notepad in front of her.

'I know it's tough to be you right now. It would be so much easier if I displayed a mental disorder, if I was a sociopath with draconian intentions – but I am not that person, Mel, and I think you know it.'

Melanie emitted a subdued sigh – trying to repress her frustration.

'I think you're fighting yourself and no one else. Your real challenge is not to find out what is wrong with me. Your challenge is to face up to the truth of what I am telling you.'

## *Agent Reynolds*

Jim Reynolds was having just another average day at work, average as could be called such for a special agent with Homeland Security.

Reynolds was sixty-one years of age, and not far from his retirement, having been with Homeland Security Chicago more or less since its inception.

Most everyone at the agency, except those few who were even older than he, referred to him by various terms of endearment, such as; The Pillar, Pops, Old Man, Dick Tracy, Gramps and even Gandalf.

Jim took it all in stride – it was a natural consequence of becoming superannuated – if not even, obsolete.

Hovering over his second Starbucks coffee for the day, he perused Homeland Security data bases for new information on the case he was currently working. A landed immigrant by the name of Sergej Szabo, who had recently arrived from Serbia and now resided in Evanston, just outside Chicago.

Little was known about the man; only that his background suggested possible connections to an extremist Serbian militant group during the Serbian-Albanian war nearly two decades before, and that possibly he might still “pose a threat to national security,” one of the favorite mantras bandied about the agency.

Even Jim Reynolds harbored an unstated objection to the ease with which Homeland Security, and in fact, the NSA, progressively profiled American citizens, whether denizens or landed immigrants - as *potential threats*.

“*The Threat List*” was little more than a shopping list based on computer generated names of those who “might” have

questionable backgrounds or connections, and who “might” pose a threat to national security based on arbitrary markers which the computer system was designed to search-out. Those markers included such things as lifestyle, family connections, land of origin, ethnicity and now, since the Patriot Act, the cataloguing of email and phone calls for any reference to search words which might indicate terrorist-like connectivity.

The umbrella was being stretched perversely.

Unfortunately, the minority of those listed on the Threat List were homegrown Americans, those whose shady backgrounds and connections in the criminal realm, suggested far more relevancy in terms of potential harm to the American way of life.

You could, in fact, be a suspected criminal, even a murderer, and not be on the *Threat List* to the nation’s security. But indeed, if you had a name like Abdul or Aashir, or you had relatives back in Iran, Iraq, Pakistan or Afghanistan - then the computer profile started to weave itself, thread by thread, quite automatically – and even prejudicially.

Jim Reynolds was old school when it came to crime fighting. He didn’t believe in pre-classification. For him a criminal was a criminal after the fact of breaking the law, and not before.

He had learned about real criminality at a very young age - having grown up on the south side of Chicago where the social veneer did little to protect youthful minds from the actualities of a miscreant world.

He had been exposed to violence and crime in his neighborhood, where ethnicities such as the Italians and the Irish mixed it up in fist fights and brawls whenever and wherever the opportunity presented itself. Where petty theft was considered little more than an initiation process for membership into local gangs; and the more heinous crimes were not a wrong-doing, but rather, a way of life.

The theatrical stage of his early years had compelled him to jump the fence, setting his life on a different course, and by the age of nineteen he had enrolled with the Chicago Police Academy.

After many years on the force, working his way up from street cop to detective, he had segued over to Homeland Security – hoping for a new challenge.

He missed those early days, his old beat and the street-cop confrontations. There were times when he found himself day-dreaming, savoring the sense of adrenaline rushing through him, the chases, the sheer life and death adventure.

Now, staring at the one-eyed monster, his computer, he hoped that before his early retirement next year that he would go out with a bang and not a pathetic hush.

He took a sip on his coffee when his phone rang.

‘Jim,’ said the receptionist, ‘there’s a call from a Dr. Melanie Cross, who works at psychiatric hospital in Minneapolis.’

‘Put her through.’

‘Ms. Cross, I am agent Jim Reynolds, how can I help you?’

‘I am calling you about a patient of mine, Troy Evans. You were his case officer according to our files.’

‘I was, I processed his case, although I was not the investigating agent.’

‘Would it be possible to ask you a few questions?’

‘I am happy to answer whatever I can.’

‘You said that you processed his case – who investigated it?’

‘The investigation was carried out by a field office, an adjunct of the NSA.’

She paused before asking her next question.

‘Why is the key document which details the nature of his case, marked as classified – appearing to have been censored?’

Jim thought about it for a second.

‘That particular document was prepared on our behalf by the NSA office – so I am not privy to any more information than what you see there.’

‘But according to the summary judgment, Troy was labelled *as dangerous and a threat to society due to extremist views and of questionable mental stability*. That is a quote by the way,’ she said.

‘Ms. Cross, as I said, I was not the investigative officer – I was merely asked to process his papers and to help expedite his case because he fell within our territorial jurisdiction. Why you are asking these questions?’

‘I have spent several sessions with Troy, and I find no corroborative evidence in his behavior, nor even in his assertions, that he is either mentally ill or that he poses a danger to society.’

‘I see,’ said Jim with a pause. ‘As I recall, he claimed some kind of conspiratorial plot against the nation which he says he discovered while outside his body.’

‘Correct.’

‘Do you believe him?’

‘As to his ability – yes. As to the plot, I don’t know. But as he has proven one to me – it suggest that he may be telling the truth about the other.’

‘Isn’t this a matter you should refer back to the court?’

She let out an evident sigh. Jim detected her frustration.

‘Isn’t that being somewhat dismissive? We are, after all, talking about the life and the freedom of a man.’

‘Ms. Cross, I am not trying to sound dismissive. And if you would like, I am quite willing to review the case.’

‘I would like that, yes.’

‘You sound troubled by this matter – why?’

An awkward silence ensued before she answered.

‘To be frank, based on what Troy has described to me, I think there is a basis for investigating this supposed plot.’

Jim leaned back in his chair, still holding the phone to his ear.

‘Do you think that someone put him away to shut him up, is that it?’

‘Is that so implausible?’

‘Ms. Cross, Homeland Security and the NSA are not in the habit of locking people up in order to stop them from whistleblowing.’

‘I would challenge that statement, agent Reynolds, considering recent exposés on the more nefarious aspects of the NSA and attempts to shut up other whistleblowers, but I didn’t call you to stir the soup of foment, I called to ask for your help.’

Jim deliberated for a moment.

‘Ok, I’ll look into it.’

‘One last question for you,’ she said.

‘Yes?’

‘Has anyone else contacted you on this matter?’

‘No, Ms. Cross – you are the first.’

## *Duplicity*

Dr. Melanie Cross cancelled the rest of her appointments for that afternoon and dedicated herself to poring over Troy's case.

She now knew that it was up to her to find the truth.

The fact that her own mentor had promised to look into the matter, and had not even bothered to call Homeland Security, as promised, now piqued her suspicions.

Many hours passed before she even noticed it was dark outside. In fact, it was her empty stomach growling at her, like a hungry tiger, which betrayed her obliviousness.

She rubbed her tired eyes, reticent to go home until she could find something to pacify the distortion of facts which accosted her.

A cemetery-like hush engulfed the facility and the only audible sound which broke its taciturnity was the rhythmic slopping of a night cleaner's mop echoing from the far end of the corridor.

Throughout the day she had studied everything she could find on the subject which Troy referred to as *Out-Step*, and which was otherwise called by different names, including OOBE or "**O**ut-**O**f-**B**ody-**E**xperience", "Exteriorization", "Astral Projection" and "Mental Projection".

She had even spent some time reading through a book authored by Robert Monroe who had experimented throughout the late 1950s and for some many years to follow, in the subject of out-of-body phenomena. His works were quite compelling, and quite well rendered.

There were varying schools of thought on the subject. Some concluded that the claim of separation from the body

was nothing more than a mental exercise, a sort of existential extensional-*ism* wherein the individual was mentally projecting themselves. While some scientific studies merely saw it as over-extended imagination, or at best, a sort of disconnect from reality; likening the phenomena to that experienced by drug users when they achieved a euphoric state of ecstasy.

Adding to the tempest now raging in her head was the memo which had shown up on her desk earlier in the day while she was out getting a cup of coffee. It was from her superior, Calvin Akron, a mandate to the effect that if she did not provide him with a report first thing the next morning, showing definitive progress with her patient, that he would reassign Troy to another doctor.

Suddenly her timeframe was reduced to a matter of a few hours.

*Why?* She asked herself. *Why was her mentor taking this sudden turn? Did he consider that she had lost her objectivity? Or was there something else afoot?*

Her mental storm continued to grow – like a volcano on the verge of exploding.

She glanced at her watch, it was now close to 9:00 p.m. and the sky was filled with specks of light glittering from distant galaxies.

Her attention was drawn once again to the gentle swish of the cleaner slopping his mop, now just outside her own office. It was then that she got the idea.

She stepped from behind her desk, pressed the wrinkles from her dress and smiled at the man – mustering as much effeminate glow and charm as she could.

‘I am Doctor Cross and I need to get into an office down the hall in order to get a case file; could you let me in?’

‘Sure,’ he said, recognizing her and also captivated by her bewitching smile.

They stepped over to Calvin Akron's office whereby he unlocked the door for her.

'Thanks, I'll be just a minute.'

She quickly located Troy's file in the cabinet behind the desk, pawing through it until something caught her eye. She made a copy of it and then placed the original back in the file.

Back at her desk she read the document which had been dated earlier that very day and which was typed on official letterhead from the National Security Agency. It read...

Head Psychiatrist – Miracle Center Institute

Mr. Calvin Akron

Subject: Troy Evans

Dear Mr. Akron,

The matter regarding treatment exercised by your facility on Troy Evans is of great importance to our agency and to our nation.

You have seen the various reports, as summarized by the Chicago Homeland Security office. With that, we wish to express our concern that your facility apply the fullest possible treatment protocols on Troy. No stone can be left unturned in order to get him to reveal everything he claims to know of this supposed plot against the nation.

We are also concerned, as you have reported, that his current doctor is making such poor progress in this respect. Possibly you should consider reassigning him to another who can get results.

In the interest of our national security, it is also considered of greater good that Troy remains there until further notice. Compensation is of no concern. It is also vital that he is kept within the wards with no outside contact until we determine his complicity in this supposed plot.

## *Escape*

After a rocky sleep, certainly more rocky than restful, Melanie Cross arrived to her office the next morning with a plan.

Calvin Akron's memo still stared up at her from the corner of her desk, as did the letter from the NSA which she had left there the night before.

It was hard to believe that in just twenty-four hours her entire world had been turned upside down.

Her own mentor, possibly the one man she had most respected in this field, was secretly collaborating with the NSA and had lied to her face.

In fact, he was using her.

All through the night she had questioned and challenged herself, fighting the battle between expectant loyalty and the compelling voice which screamed out at her from the very depths of her soul - telling her that she had to take the *right* road – not the easy one.

And although most would undoubtedly challenge her epiphany, that “moment of clarity”, as pure insanity itself – the scales had been irrevocably tipped in favor of the voice of reason, and not misplaced loyalty.

She prepared the necessary document on her computer. She had done it dozens of times before with other patients – it was nothing new. Except there was one very major twist this time.

Gathering up her personal belongings into her handbag, she stood there, silently taking a moment to view her small office one last time, a hint of sadness welling up inside. All of her adult life had been dedicated to achieving this rung on the ladder, and now, it seemed that she was standing on the edge

of a very narrow bridge leading over an abyss - about to throw it all away on one impulsive gamble.

Melanie stepped into the corridor, locked the door and as she turned, she came face to face with Calvin Akron, the Chief Psychiatrist.

The elderly man tilted his head with an inquiring and suspicious look aimed her way.

‘Going somewhere?’ he asked.

‘Just dropping some stuff off in my car,’ she deflected.

Akron’s face became more solemn in aspect.

‘I assume you saw my memo?’

Melanie repressed the anxiety mushrooming inside.

‘How could I miss it,’ she replied less than amiably. ‘And thanks for the vote of confidence by the way,’ her tone quickly morphed with evident hostility.

His eyes narrowed - his face becoming even grimmer in aspect.

‘Unfortunately, you left me no choice. In fact I was coming by to see you on this very matter.’

‘Why the sudden change of tactic?’ she boldly challenged him, her respect for him having been vanquished by acrimonious disgust.

He slipped his hands into the pockets of his white scrubs, putting on an air of authority.

‘Because, Melanie, we are paid to get results, not to coddle our patients. You are walking on egg shells with respect to this man. What he needs is a firm decisive handling, which is why I have authorized that Troy Evans be treated in Section Five.’

‘What!’ Melanie’s voice suddenly rose to a high pitch, echoing flagrantly and loudly off the walls of the corridor. Several people turned to look in her direction.

Akron’s eyebrows raised.

‘This should be no surprise to you. I told you that I expected results.’

‘And I came to you for help two days ago – and this is how you show it?’

‘I warned you then that you were losing your objectivity – and clearly, you have. The fact that you are unable to provide me with a simple report showing progressive therapy, tells me that you are too immersed in some internal conflict to be able to provide Troy with the help he needs.’

Melanie squelched the ire exploding inside of her.

‘You’re being disingenuous and you know it. First of all, Section Five are a bunch of butchers - not doctors, and secondly, you’re not interested in helping Troy – your orders are to get him to reveal whatever he knows about this plot,’ she lashed back.

Akron flinched at the statement – as if offended personally by her attack.

‘That’s a brutal statement.’

‘It’s the brutal truth,’ she rejoined.

Akron’s face hardened at the challenge and he folded his arms across his chest, reasserting his authority.

‘I’m not continuing this conversation here. You can appeal my decision in writing – but right now, Troy Evans is being treated for what he is – delusional and potentially dangerous – and that’s final.’

‘Well, ok then,’ she began, her eyes now burning with resolute passion, ‘I’m sure that your friends at the NSA will be more than happy to know that their little puppet is complying with their mandates.’

Akron’s jaw tightened like a vice. ‘What exactly are you accusing me of?’

‘You figure it out you pretentious prick’ and then she stormed by him.

Melanie headed straight for Section Five, a part of the facility where heavy drugs and sometimes even shock-therapy were applied to particularly uncooperative patients in order to

make them more malleable. Unfortunately, that malleability sometimes came with a heavy price – all too-often leaving permanent damage to brain tissue and sometimes even incapacitated motor functions.

She heard the commotion even before entering the room.

Two large orderlies were struggling to strap Troy to a gurney. He kicked at them and even leveled a fist into the jaw of one, but the orderly was built like a bear and between them they easily subdued Troy and clamped his arms and legs tight against the gurney. Then they gagged his mouth to squelch his rage.

Troy's eyes fixed on hers as she entered the room. They were filled with fury as he lurched upward in a futile attempt to free himself.

Melanie felt her own anger bubbling up as she watched Troy, as he strained against the straps which cut into his skin.

One of them grabbed Troy by the head, pushing it forcibly into the gurney, while the other snapped a strap over his forehead – locking it tightly in place. Troy's abdomen and lower body surged upward again and again, like a tight steel cord tensing and springing – but each time the binds simply snapped him back. His face was red with unaccountable fury, and the veins on his neck were enlarged as the blood pumped feverishly through him like a river engorged by a sudden downpour.

She turned to the residing doctor, a man whom she barely recognized and who was busily preparing an injection.

He looked at her name tag.

'Ah, Dr. Cross, so this was your patient?'

'He still is,' she asserted.

The man flicked his brows dismissively.

'Well, I've been authorized to up the dosage to make him a little more cooperative.'

'But he hasn't been administered any drugs in his treatment protocol,' she pleaded.

‘Precisely why he has been referred to us,’ the man said as he fiddled with the needle. ‘If you disagree then please take it up with the Dr. Akron,’ he continued with impassivity.

‘I can take it from here,’ he pronounced to the two orderlies who then slumped out of the room with the grace of two cows in tandem.

She looked back at Troy’s pleading eyes, and then she turned to the doctor.

‘At least let me help you,’ Melanie feigned with a pretentiously calm demeanor and an affected smile. ‘He needs a sedative to help calm him.’

‘If you think it is necessary – go ahead.’

She stepped over to a nearby cabinet and prepared a needle with a large dose of their heaviest sedative; one usually reserved for knocking out patients during psychotic episodes – those who have become so violent that they could harm themselves or others. Typically, the drug took hold in just seconds, paralyzing muscles and inducing a deep state of unconsciousness.

As the man leaned over the gurney with needle in hand, Troy heaved upward once again, arching his back and painfully straining his arms and legs against the straps.

‘This one has some fight in him,’ declared the man with a small serpentine smile. ‘If you’re going to sedate him, do it now,’ he announced as he continued to stare into Troy’s eyes.

Suddenly the man felt a piercing pain – like the sting of a wasp.

He clamped a hand to the back of his neck and spun around, and with a growing shock in his face, he stared at the needle which Melanie had just plunged into him. Blood stained its tip.

For a moment he stood there, quite stunned, and then he lurched forward on shaky legs, clawing at her, like a rabid

dog. But already, his motor functions had begun to seize-up under the influence of the drug now coursing his veins.

Melanie deftly sidestepped his reach.

The man opened his mouth to call out to the orderlies, but she swung her left foot into his groin with an audible smack.

He doubled up and hit the floor with a groan.

For a brief few seconds he teetered there, his lungs heaving as he fought against the drug which now charged through him, numbing the very synapses which provided motor control to his muscles and vocal cords, and systematically paralyzing his brain into an oblivious state of stupefied gray matter. Naturally he had never experienced anything quite like it – although he had happily administered the drug to countless patients under his charge.

Finally the toxin overcame him. His eyes rolled back in their sockets and he slumped over unconscious.

Melanie removed the gag and then unstrapped Troy.

Troy sat up - massaging the welts on his wrists.

‘Why are you doing this?’ he asked.

‘Because I’m a doctor, not a fucking Nazi,’ she said with surprising venom in her voice. ‘I didn’t sign on for this shit.’

‘Wow, now that’s the side of you I was hoping to see.’

She pulled an envelope from her pocket. ‘These are your walking papers, signed by the Director himself.’ An impish smile formed on her lips.

‘Not only do you have a mean kick, but you’re also an accomplished forger. I’m impressed.’

Melanie rolled her eyes, trying not to think about the deep hole she had just plunged herself into.

She peered through a small window into the adjoining corridor.

‘Isn’t this going to get you into serious trouble?’

‘That ship has already sailed,’ she answered with a glance at the unconscious man at her feet.

‘Follow my lead – we’re on the clock.’

She led Troy down a corridor to a back stairwell in order to minimize exposure, thereby taking a shortcut through two card-activated security doors.

As they approached the reception area on the ground floor, a large and formidable security guard hovered ominously by the exit, like a dragon guarding its lair, looking on as Melanie handed the release papers to the clerk.

The clerk looked up appraisingly at her and then to Troy and then back to the paper. She repeated the same movement several times, much the same as one might experience at a border control between two countries.

Troy slipped his bruised and chaffed wrists into the pockets of his pants, trying to hide them from sight.

After agonizing minutes, the woman finally pulled a stamp from her drawer, tamped the document and then initialed it.

With a curt smile she looked up at Melanie.

‘You’re all good to go, honey.’

They passed through the front door as swiftly as possible, still under the scrutiny of the security guard who stood nearby.

Melanie was doing her best not to reveal the nervous quaking which consumed her. She smiled tremulously at the hulk.

As they exited the building and stepped into the parking lot she heard a commotion behind her and looked in horror as the same two orderlies who had strapped Troy to the gurney, now raced toward them.

‘Run!’ she screamed.

## *Terror's Grip*

Terror gripped Melanie in a way she had never before known.

As she arrived to her car, her breath came in frantic fits.

She fumbled for her keys – her hands suddenly soaked with sweat and the signals from her brain to her muscles so confused that every part of her body seemed to be growing more and more sluggish.

Up until this day her life had seemed normal, at least by conventional standards of normality. But now, a vortex threatened to pull her into its maws - and all she could think about was the singular act of escaping.

As she slipped into her car, Troy slid in next to her.

She jabbed the key into the ignition and stamped down on the gas pedal, when suddenly the passenger side door flew open and a large hand speared in, grabbing Troy by his right arm and then yanking it with such brutal and wrenching force that Troy let out a painful cry.

Melanie reflexively hit the brakes.

The hulk, the very security guard whom they had just passed at the doors, yanked viciously at Troy, like a shark gnashing on its next meal.

Troy twisted his body towards Melanie, momentarily throwing the man off balance. He braced his left foot against the interior of the car and propelled his right heel upwards, smashing it into the hulk's jaw with a bone crushing resonance, and knocking him backwards.

Troy screamed, 'Go!!!'

As Troy reached to close the door one of the orderlies suddenly appeared and plunged through the passenger-side,

wrapping his arms around Troy's torso, like a sumo wrestler, and then yanked him from the car.

Melanie watched in abject horror as Troy's body sailed outward, and then, in a last ditch effort, as Troy wrapped his left arm around the frame of the door and clasped onto it with all his might.

In her panic she stepped on the gas, causing Troy's body to jerk and slam back into the vehicle with a painful crunch.

She frantically weaved around some parked cars, desperately trying to figure out what she could do to shake the orderly's grip. If she stepped on the accelerator, Troy could be seriously hurt, but if she did nothing more, it seemed inevitable that he would lose the duel.

Troy's anguish was exacerbated as the orderly obstinately sprinted next to the vehicle, savagely jerking on his arm – trying to break his grip. With his feet dragging along the asphalt, and his body dangling outwards as the brute pulled at him, it appeared like some bizarre and surreal circus act.

Troy felt his grip starting to weaken. He screamed out, the pain and frustration mounting as the man continued to pull at him.

It was then that Melanie saw her only chance. She aimed for a short retaining wall which encircled the perimeter of the parking area.

Troy barely saw it coming, and in an instant of desperation, he pulled back with all his might, freeing his arm and then clutching the door with both hands as it swung dangerously outward on a direct collision course with the wall.

## *Larry Morris*

‘Morning Jim,’ the receptionist greeted him while handing off a note.

‘He asked that you return his call as soon as possible.’

Jim dialed the number scribbled on the piece of paper.

‘This is agent Reynolds from Homeland Security Chicago.’

‘Ah good,’ the voice answered. ‘I’m Larry Morris, special agent with the NSA. I just spoke to your superior and cleared this matter with him.’

‘Ok?’

‘The case you handled on our behalf, Troy Evans, well... he just escaped from the hospital where he was incarcerated.’

Jim Reynolds was struck with surprise. The strange coincidence that he had just spoken with Troy’s doctor the day before, and now this?

‘Escaped?’

‘Well, to be more accurate, it appears that his shrink helped him get out – so both are now considered fugitives and we need them found and back in custody.’

‘Why me?’

‘It’s your jurisdiction and you are familiar with the case.’

‘To be honest I only processed his papers – you guys did all the actual leg-work.’

‘True, and we’ll be out there soon to back up your efforts. In the meantime, we can’t let too much water pass under the bridge on this one.’

Reynold’s mind was now running at a high speed – and the question which noisily clanged about was *WHY?*

‘I don’t get it, why is Troy Evans so important to the NSA?’

Morris answered without hesitation.

‘National Security – simple.’

‘All this attention seems extreme for such a low-profile guy.’

Morris paused for a moment before answering.

‘Let’s just say that people in higher places don’t want him running around town spreading rumors about a plot against the nation. Beyond that, when I get there, I will brief you some more.’

Jim Reynolds wasn’t happy with any of the answers he was getting, and in fact, the voice of reason inside his head had just started up another dialogue – and that was always a sign that something was wrong.

## *Fugitives*

Melanie awoke with a start.

She lay there for a long time just staring at the ceiling of a semi-darkened room.

A few vagrant rays of morning sunlight managed to spear through a crack in the curtains. Dust motes paraded in their beams – like the spotlight on a darkened stage.

Even as her sleepy grog began to dissipate from her head, her mind was desperately trying to make a connection with what seemed to be a surreal nightmare and the reality that she was actually a fugitive, hiding out in some two-bit motel in western Minnesota.

The decadent surroundings added to her depressing mood; with its musty odor and repulsive 70s décor – a complete dichotomy to the fashionably designed apartment where she lived in the suburbs of Minneapolis.

As her eyes adjusted to the early morning light and the dim ambience of the room, she saw Troy sitting quietly across the room, watching her.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Waiting for you.’

‘What time is it?’

‘8:33,’ he answered with a quick glance at his watch.

She wrapped a blanket around herself and disappeared into the bathroom.

Half an hour later they were sitting over coffee at a nearby diner.

‘Is there any news about us?’ she asked, sipping her coffee.

‘No – no media. I’m pretty sure that no one is about to broadcast our escape, considering what we know.’

Troy stared out the window as he spoke, enjoying his sense of consummate freedom once again.

For a brief moment the pictures of their escape ran through his mind, like a movie, the surreal frames passing by in slow motion. It had all happened so fast, as he gripped the car door, the anguish as the orderly pulled on his arm, the sudden realization the door was swinging outward into the path of an approaching brick wall, and the crunch - as metal and stone tore into one another – a sound which still rang in his ears.

Troy had managed to let go of the door just seconds before it struck the short retaining wall, sending the door crashing back with such violence that it would surely have crushed his hands if he had not let go.

Fortunately, the brunt of his impact was taken by his right shoulder. Although he had a painful lump on this head and innumerable bruises to show for it.

That could not be said of the orderly. The man had obstinately refused to let go of Troy's arm until the last moment – and he too had smashed into the wall with an ugly crunch. When last he saw the man, he wasn't moving.

In spite of the pain riveting his body, Troy had been driven by a cogent impulse to survive – spurred by the images of his recent incarceration and the rage which still imbued him. He forced himself to his feet and jogged to where Melanie had come to a stop. As they pulled away, he looked over his shoulder as several more people ran for the car.

He shook away his reverie and turned back to see Melanie now studying him.

‘What’s on your mind, Dr. Freud?’

She smiled and raised a tired brow.

‘Oh, I’m just contemplating how messed up my life is now.’

‘It’s a bit more complicated, isn’t it?’

She sipped her coffee. ‘That would be an understatement.’

He leaned closer.

‘What made you change your mind about me?’

‘Nothing made sense.’

Her gaze drifted idly from him to the distant trees as she stared out the window.

‘Honestly, what was I supposed to do, Troy?’ She paused, swirling the remnants of coffee in her cup. A waitress came by, as if taking it as a cue, and refilled the cup without asking. As she walked away, Melanie looked up at him.

‘And besides, the tipping point was when I found a letter in the head psychiatrist’s office, from the NSA.’

‘About me?’

She nodded.

‘He was instructed to keep you locked up, and they seemed very concerned about this plot. The whole thing struck me as disingenuous.’

‘Ok, that makes me feel somewhat vindicated.’

Melanie smiled.

‘We were lucky to get you out of there before those animals started working you over.’

‘To be honest, that guy scared the shit out of me.’

She raised a brow.

‘Sodium pentothal would have been mild in comparison to what they use in Section Five,’ she added.

‘That left hook to his groin was really impressive.’

She grinned.

‘Yeah, it was, wasn’t it?’ her mood lightened for a brief instant.

‘So what now?’ she asked.

Troy rocked his head.

‘We have to assume that they will use the full weight of their technology to track us down.’

‘What does that mean?’ asked Melanie with a look of sublime horror.

‘It means that we can’t use our credit cards, we can’t use our cell phones and we have to stay away from public places where there are cameras – basically, we need to disappear off the grid.’

‘And then what?’

‘Then we find someone who can help us.’

‘But who?’

Troy shrugged.

‘This is my first time as a fugitive from the law. But how hard can it be – considering I just escaped from a mental hospital – right?’

His facetious tone sent a shudder through her.

## *Den of Wolves*

Jim Reynolds looked around the small conference facility, sizing up the faces of those looking back at him.

There was an elephant sitting in the middle of the small conference table – and nothing they had said to him was making it go away.

To his right sat his superior, the Operations Chief for Homeland Security Chicago, and across from him sat special NSA special agent, Larry Morris and his two assistant agents.

Although he would never come out and say it directly, all three NSA men looked proverbially stereotyped; donning navy blue suits, matching ties, white shirts – and short hair, cut to marine standards – as if hairdressers today had lost the ability to do anything particularly original.

Jim studied Morris. He estimated the man to be in his late forties, standing around five-nine in height, with a steely look and a beguiling grin which seemed more or less permanently affixed to his face.

The two men sitting next to Morris were clearly ex-military. Their hardened and fixed gazes, and the bulges evident under their suits, betrayed their vocation. One of them had a pock-marked face – like the craters of the moon’s surface - not the kind of guy you wanted your daughter to bring home to meet the family.

‘I still don’t get it. Why is this guy so important?’ asked Jim.

Morris shrugged dismissively.

‘Look, Jim, cut yourself some slack. My orders are to get Troy and his shrink rounded up and to cut this thing off at the pass before he goes around spreading news of some apocalyptic event. It’s cut and dry.’

‘That’s where you and I part paths, Morris. I have studied his case file back and forth now, and I don’t see what you guys are apparently seeing.’

‘Ok?’

‘How do you translate a graphics designer, with no history of extremist affiliations, no criminal background, no history whatsoever of mental illness, who grew up in some haystack east of bum-fuck-Egypt, suddenly equating as a national security threat? It doesn’t add up.’

Larry Morris sized up the man across the table from him. Clearly, Jim Reynolds was not just a soldier who did only as he was told. His challenging, if not even, oppositional attitude, was disconcerting. He would have to gain the man’s trust in order to get his cooperation, and that meant baiting the hook with more information.

He leaned forward on his elbows – assuming as he did, a more somber air.

‘Alright, what I am about to say is a national security issue – and it is vital that it goes nowhere beyond these walls.’

Jim nodded – having been parroted that same line countless dozens of times before.

‘We think that there could be plausibility to his story.’

‘Which one? That he can perform Casper the Ghost tricks or that he discovered a plot to attack the nation?’ Jim’s voice carried a facetious tone.

Morris grinned.

‘The plot, of course,’ answered Morris.

‘Since when do we lock up suspected terrorists in psychiatric wards?’

Morris tipped his head and glanced at the Operations Chief and then back to Reynolds.

‘We decided it was best to keep him on ice, locally speaking, until we could determine the validity of the story, and to be sure whose side he was actually on.’

‘But a mental ward? That’s a commitment, not a holding pen,’ retorted Jim.

Morris continued with a casual dismissive tone.

‘It was necessary, and we had hoped by doing so that he would eventually break and talk.’

‘And what if he is innocent – what if he has nothing more to reveal?’

Morris paused yet again before answering, as if considering his next words carefully.

‘Well it’s a bit more complex.’ He hedged. ‘We also think that Troy might be complicit somehow?’

Jim Reynolds leaned back in his chair.

‘Now you’re confusing the shit out of me.’

Morris clasped his hands in front of him – putting on an air of authority – none of which impressed Jim nor even ameliorated his challenging attitude.

‘Look at this from our perspective for a moment. Evans claims he can leave his body and that he discovered a plot to attack the nation in one of his incidental outings. First of all - *hello!* – that’s extreme and a little weird, right?’ A devilish grin formed on his lips. ‘Secondly – what are the chances that he *just* happened upon a clandestine conversation, as he claims, in some hotel? One in a million; one in ten million – or none at all? The bottom line is that his story doesn’t add up – he’s lying.’

Larry Morris leaned back, tilting his head with a challenging eye.

‘Tell me something, Jim, why are you suddenly so suspicious of us? When the case was passed onto you to process several weeks ago, you happily went about it and you even sat in that court proceedings which passed sentencing on Troy. Why the sudden guilt-complex?’

‘It’s not a guilt-complex, Morris. Yes, I did accept the case and I filed his papers on behalf of the NSA, assuming that

everything was water-tight at the time. But I didn't do the investigation, you guys did. And now that I've had a chance to think about it some more, it does raise some questions.'

Morris' eyes narrowed.

'Or maybe a certain Dr. Cross stirred the soup.'

Jim's eyes riveted on his.

'Yeah, we know she called you. In fact, she made that call the day before she helped break Evans out of the facility. What did she say, Jim?'

'She asked me to look into his case again.'

'Why?'

'She felt that Troy was not mentally dysfunctional, and that he had proven to her that his claim of out-of-body was in fact believable. On that basis, she was concerned that maybe his assertion of this plot was not the work of a delusional mind.'

'And that was enough to light a fire inside of you?'

'It was enough to get me to review the case.'

The air between the two men was quickly frosting – and tensions were heightening.

The Operations Chief interceded.

'Dial it down, Jim. We need to work with the NSA and get these two rounded up. We're not going to find any answers challenging one another. You take point on the investigation. The NSA will ghost you, but it's yours to head up. Once we have these two back in custody the NSA will take charge of them. Clear?'

Jim nodded with silent dissent.

As he looked back at Morris he felt the hair on the back of his neck bristling.

He didn't like the guy – and he didn't trust him.

## *Running*

Following an exhaustive drive, using only small country roads and not the highways where speed cameras and tolls were common, both Troy and Melanie sighed with relief when they finally crossed the state line and pulled into a remote restaurant in South Dakota.

The sun was setting and what little was left of daylight appeared as a thin line of crimson on the distant horizon.

They ate a meal in relative silence.

Troy was still sore from the altercation with the guard and the orderly during their escape. And yet, in spite of having two large men ravishing his right arm, it was, amazingly, still intact.

He looked up at Melanie, the darkening patches under her eyes, the worry lines and the furrows on her brow, betrayed her deep sense of agitation.

‘Holding up?’ he asked.

She looked up at him – pulling herself from distant thoughts.

‘I guess so.’

‘We are going to have to ditch your car. We’ve been lucky so far.’

She nodded with a feeling of dismal concession.

Her entire life had just been inverted – and losing her car seemed like just another turn in a road that inevitably would lead them to the edge of a cliff – one step away from an abyss.

Troy continued to watch her with a growing sense of guilt that her life was now so terribly mired within the convolutions and insanities of his own.

Maybe it was selfish of him to feel this, but he was glad

that it was Melanie who was here with him. In spite of their short-term, and rather unusual relationship, there was something about her – something special which had made him feel akin to her from the start.

‘Tell me some more about *Out-Step*,’ she said, breaking his mental ambulation.

‘Like what?’

‘What does it feel like to be outside your body?’

Troy smiled.

‘Well... I guess it’s better than sex.’

She raised a brow.

‘Really,’ an impish grin formed on her lips.

‘Wouldn’t that entirely depend on the person you’re having sex with?’ She tipped her head questioningly.

Troy smiled at seeing the positive change in her mindset.

‘Maybe,’ he said with slight chagrin at just having been out-gunned.

‘When I am outside my body the feeling is incomparable to anything which I have ever sensed. I feel completely free, as if I am unencumbered by anything.’

She listened in silence.

‘For instance, when I move around – whether it’s just a few feet away or some distant country, there is this sense of instantaneousness – in less than a nanosecond I am here and then I am there. Can you imagine that kind of freedom?’

Melanie subtly nodded her head, but in fact, she couldn’t really conceptualize it in terms of the reality which she had been educated to think within.

‘So you don’t experience any time-space sensation at all?’

‘No. If you fly in a plane you can at least see the landscape rolling by below – so you know that you’re in motion. But in the out-of-body experience, none of those mechanics are in play. You just decide where you want to go, and then you are there.’

Troy watched her eyes, reading from them that Melanie was challenged to accept what he was saying.

‘It goes against everything you’ve been taught to think – doesn’t it?’

Melanie nodded. ‘Yeah, it does. But you must have had your own doubts, wondering if you were just imagining it all?’

Troy nodded.

‘I did. In the first years I had a lot of doubts. I challenged myself continuously and sometimes I just stopped doing *Out-Step* for months. But one day, something happened which convinced me beyond any doubt that I was not imaging it. And on that day, I stopped questioning myself.’

‘What was it?’

‘At that time we lived in a rural area, outside of Minneapolis, pretty much out in the boonies. Our closest neighbor was half a mile down the road. One night when I was twelve years old, I was resting in my bed and I decided to slip outside my body.’

‘Did your parents know about your ability?’

Troy shook his head.

‘No way. My parents are devout Christians. Any mention of *Out-Step* and I would probably have been considered possessed by Satan himself.’

‘Anyhow, I heard a sound – like a crash. I was so shocked by it that I slammed right back inside my body – thinking that maybe something untoward had just happened. I walked around the whole house, and everything was calm – as you would expect in the dead of night. My parents were asleep, even the dog hadn’t woken. So I went back to bed, calmed myself down and then stepped out again and the oddest thing happened – I could still sense the vibrations from that crashing sound. I decided to check it out and intended myself to the source. Sure enough, on a country road some five miles from

our house, two cars had collided in a head-on. Both drivers were either unconscious or dead.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I went back and dialed an emergency response number, and told them about the crash. The next morning we watched it on the news. Both men had died on impact, and the accident had happened at precisely the place I had described to the emergency service.’

‘Compelling.’

‘Yeah, no kidding. And a bit shocking to be honest.’

‘That seems to suggest extra-sensory perception. I mean, for you to have heard the crash from five miles away.’

‘It was things like that which compelled me to keep digging even deeper into *Out-Step* – realizing that there was a lot more potential to be discovered.’

‘Aren’t you afraid that you won’t make it back to your body, or that you will get lost somewhere during *Out-Step*?’

‘That’s never happened. No matter how far I have ventured, or for how long, I always retain some connectivity to my body. When I want to return, the process simply works in reverse – it’s instant.

‘Sounds so simple.’

‘It is.’

She paused for a time, and in her eyes he could see the dark clouds moving back in.

‘Mel, it’s not going to do any good worrying about our situation. To beat the odds we have to start thinking outside the box. We need to find someone who can help us – someone who has no vested interest in keeping me silent. And besides, we only have two days left until this attack is meant to happen.’

She drew in a deep breath, trying to calm herself, but the dark and heavy clouds crowded in - more menacing than ever.

## *The Shack*

The *Shack*, was a family restaurant on the outer rim of Brandon, South Dakota, servicing both locals and passing motorists who travelled the I-29.

Lissie had been working at the *Shack* since she was twenty-seven, and now, at the age of thirty-three, she knew that her biological clock was ticking away, louder now than ever before, as the window of opportunity to bear children, and to live a somewhat idyllic life in a house, with her own man – was quickly diminishing.

Brandon was a small town, and the availability of suitable prospects was even smaller.

Lissie possessed certain assets which were on her side. She was a good looking woman, she enjoyed horseback riding, she loved kids, and of course, there was the fact of her F-sized breasts. As a consequence, it was never difficult attracting attention from the opposite gender, the real problem was attracting someone who cared more about her than her bosom.

Nonetheless, they were an integral part of the package, and they were hardly a liability.

There was one man whom she very much liked – if only she could break the ice between them.

Lou Manken was a deputy Sheriff for the county and a regular at Lissie's counter, where she waitressed.

As usual, he made his way to the *Shack* for his daily ritual – a piece of apple pie and coffee during his beat, one which covered a sixty mile radius around the town.

As she refilled his coffee cup, she bent over to accommodate a front-row view of her cleavage.

‘So Lou,’ she began with an inviting smile, ‘caught any bad guys lately?’

Lou nearly choked on his pie as his eyes rested on the hilly landscape which suddenly loomed up in front of him.

‘Nah. Just some retard who escaped from a nut house in Minneapolis. The Feds want us to keep an eye out for him,’ he said while forcing his eyes upward to look her in the face.

‘Hmm, what’s he look like?’

The Deputy Sheriff reached into his jacket and pulled out a crumpled print-out, unfolded it and laid it on the counter for her to see.

‘I seen that man in here earlier this morning along with some pretty look’n gal,’ Lissie casually announced.

The deputy’s eyes shot wide open, in fact, even wider than when he had rested them on her breasts just seconds before.

‘You ain’t shit’n me, Lis?’

‘I remember every face I serve, Lou.’

‘You see which way they went?’

She flicked a long red-polished finger nail toward the window. ‘They turned onto I-29, heading north.’

Lou leaned over the counter, kissed her on the lips and then he raced to his car, calling into the Sheriff’s office as he did.

Electrified by her sudden success, she went about happily servicing her customers, unaware of the chain of events she had just set into motion.

## *The Sound of Love*

It had taken Troy several hours to document everything he had overheard that day. And because it was the first time since his incarceration that he had access to a computer, it was a great relief to finally get all the tiny details out of his head.

Every small facet which he had ascertained had to be recalled from memory and assembled, like a puzzle, in order to form a composite picture. And while twenty minutes of conversation would seem simple enough, it was a real challenge to remember everything which had been uttered between the four mystery men.

Remembering back to that day, he also recalled the sense of growing consternation he had felt at that time - realizing that he was suddenly very vulnerable, just a single man who was facing a very difficult choice. The feeling of self-preservation which stared back at him, taunting him to take the easier road, the one which assured no complications, was compelling.

He knew then that if he exposed what he had discovered that he would also have to expose himself and his greatest secret – and one which would be used to invalidate him, to categorize him as discreditable – if not even worse. And of course, all of that had happened.

But *Out-Step* had taught him many things about truth. It had opened many doors to him which he would never otherwise have discovered if he had not followed that path. Truth was not always the popular or easy road, and it certainly didn't always agree, by a large measure, with aggregate thought and societal norms, but it was the only road, insuperable as it seemed at times, which led to true happiness.

Troy broke off from his mental pondering and stole a

glance at Melanie who sat next to him, busily working at a computer station in the internet café.

She caught him looking at her.

‘What?’ she smiled.

‘Nothing,’ Troy deflected.

‘Stay focused,’ she said with feigned annoyance, whereas, despite any outward appearances, and worse, the morbid anxiety which hung over her like an axe which might fall at any moment, some other emotion was at work deep inside. She couldn’t pay it much attention, not now, and it certainly seemed poorly timed in fact to even consider – and yet, there it was.

She rolled her chair toward him.

‘I just found a journalist at the Chicago Tribune and I think she is the one you should send your report to – at least for starters.’

‘Why her?’

‘Just a sense, I guess.’

‘And how does that make you feel?’ he asked with a smile, purposely goading her.

‘Oh I get it, now we’re reverse-role-playing,’ she lightly jabbed him with her elbow.

‘She seems sincere about exposing the truth.’

‘Well, if you feel good about her, that’s good enough for me.’

‘That was easy.’

‘Clearly, I’m no match for you, especially after what you did to that doctor.’

‘Yeah, my defining moment. Anyhow, is your document ready?’

Troy let out a hesitant breath.

‘As ready as ever, I suppose,’ but his face reflected his apprehension about once again exposing himself to the world. The last time he had done so, it had cost him his freedom.

Within moments, Melanie had composed an email in Troy's name and sent it to the journalist at the Chicago Tribune.

They resumed their journey northward, not wanting to stay in one place where they could be recognized, and certainly as far away from crowded centers as possible. By late-evening they had found a motel on the perimeter of Brookings, South Dakota, where they paid in cash and parked their *new*, used car, where it was less visible from the street side.

Melanie was looking forward to learning more about the man, whom, ironically, she was finding herself more attracted to by the day.

Logically speaking, if in fact there was any logic to the forces which drew people together, she knew that his personality was diametrically opposed to her own, which should have been a sign that an intimate relationship was probably doomed.

And yet, at no time in her rather mediocre life had she ever met anyone quite like him. It wasn't his manliness that appealed to her. It was him – some quality, deep inside, which quaked her, caused her to feel more alive, more imbued with life, more challenged to push the envelope of her own existence. No one before Troy had ever questioned her integrity so brutally and so honestly. And that meant something to her. It meant that he had a strength inside of him that would only make her stronger.

She also knew that the circumstances of their situation could itself be fabricating a deceptive infatuation – a sort of girl-love for the dangerous type, the hero, the outsider, the maverick. But Melanie knew her own mind well enough to know she had never let her emotions escape to the degree that they could shroud her powers of analytical objectivity. It was one of the reasons she had survived in a field where empathy and human compassion for the suffering could tear a person apart.

*'I've made some lousy choices in men.'* She thought. And already, the images of her now ex-boyfriend, Carl the Turncoat, were insipid and fleeting, just like him.

*'But who does make perfect decisions in the world of love?'* She thought. *Who can truly know the potential for ultimate happiness in a sea where calm waters can turn to raging storms in the blink of an eye?*

How many people had she counselled and tried to help, their broken lives and their broken hearts the result of failed and turbulent relationships, lost loved ones, betrayal and treason?

*Love is our greatest strength and our greatest vulnerability* – she reminded herself.

As she stepped from the motel bathroom, she found Troy, still dressed, stretched out on the bed and fast asleep.

She laid down next to him, listening to his breathing for a time; and then she pushed her body against his and soon drifted off.

## *The Journalist*

Jim Reynolds felt like a fish in a glass bowl.

Larry Morris and his two men were constantly checking in on him, sometimes even staring over his shoulder as he worked the case – trying to find clues which might lead them to the two fugitives.

Some progress had been made - a Deputy Sheriff reported that they had been seen at a diner in South Dakota, but then they had lost the trail and no speed cameras had betrayed their location since.

They were now monitoring all the towns and routes along the I-29, reportedly the direction they were last seen going. They also kept a constant watch over their credit cards as well as monitoring calls to and from their families and friends – anything which might provide a digital footprint to follow.

Obviously the two were smart enough to use only cash, and Jim suspected that they must have ditched Melanie's car somewhere.

The very fact that they had disappeared off the grid only added to the disturbing cognitive sense which he felt about the whole affair.

The image which the NSA had portrayed; that Troy was a mentally dysfunctional personality, was somehow diametrically opposed to the obvious fact that he was smart enough to convince his doctor to help him to escape, and then to evade the entire intelligence community and its web of highly sophisticated surveillance eyes. All of which seemed to say that Troy Evans was anything but delusional.

Added to the mental debate which raged inside his head

was the fact that he sensed that Morris and his two men were running on another agenda.

Homeland Security was not in the habit of doubting nor even investigating the NSA, and doing so would certainly not gain him any brownie points. In fact, it could easily earn Jim a reduction to a clerical job, or maybe even a one way ticket out the back door.

In spite of that mental straightjacket, Jim had learned to listen to his sixth sense.

Some people experienced bad reactions to peanuts.

Others turned on allergies in the presence of cat hair.

A friend of his turned on hives whenever he got close to a blond woman.

In Jim's case, it was different. In the presence of someone with crimes, skeletons in their closet or some criminal intent, two things happened; the hairs on the back of his neck would spike, like a stiff hair brush; and, he would get this sickly feeling in the pit of his stomach, as if someone had just punched him in the gut.

He had learned to be vigil to those signs, and in the main, it had paid off.

Morris and his goons catalyzed those very reactions in him – and that made him all the more suspicious of their intent.

As he sipped on the remains of a chilled cup of coffee, his mobile phone rang.

‘Is this agent Jim Reynolds?’ a female voice asked.

‘Yes. Who is this?’

‘My name is Macy-May Clarkson – I am a journalist with the Chicago Tribune.’

‘What can I do for you, Ms. Clarkson?’

‘I just received an email from a Troy Evans, suggesting that I contact you about a supposed terrorist attack that is going to happen on Independence Day.’

## *Two Days Remaining*

‘Madam President,’ said the Secretary of Defense with a respectful nod as she entered the Oval Office.

Constantine Le Dour looked into her face and saw the telltale signs reflected in the distressed eyes of Jennie Castro.

‘Just give me the bottom line, Jennie – it’s been a long day with more than enough bad news already.’

‘The task force has not found anything yet. In fact, I even added the DOD’s top IT Engineer to head up the search, and they are still coming up dry.’

President Constantine crossed her arms, peering down at her desk as she spoke.

‘Is it possible that this threat is being used to force my hand on *Fortress*?’

Jennie Castro tilted her head.

‘I have been wondering the same thing, Madam President. But even so, I think we must consider it as a legitimate threat and do everything we can to avert it. And besides - if this goes sideways, if it gets out on the general airwaves, it could be the very catalyst which puts enough pressure on you and Congress to legislate *Fortress*. In spite of our personal and mutually held views about the true nature of 9/11 and the whole terrorist paradigm campaigned by your predecessors, far too many of the American voters believe there is actual threat to their way of life. The *Fortress Act* would be a welcomed safeguard to those who don’t see the bigger picture.’

The President was silently contemplative.

Jennie Castro continued. ‘What worries me is how did they infiltrate the NSA computer system?’

‘So, you do think it was an inside job?’

‘Yes – but until we know something about the virus and how it was entered, we would be broadsiding the problem, like shooting cannons into a forest in order to kill just one sniper. We’ve had our best people tearing apart that infected server, and like the NSA Director said, whatever attacked it just disappeared - like a ghost.’

‘Shouldn’t we start looking within our ranks?’

Jennie Castro shook her head.

‘I would advise against that, Madam President. People are already talking about this special task force, and rumors are echoing up and down the corridors, both here and at the Pentagon. If we start a witch-hunt, it could get to the press. God only knows what kind of spin the media would conjure up.’

‘This whole thing is really starting to scare the shit out of me,’ said the President with a deeply worried look.

‘I know. That’s why I am considering another option.’

‘Ok?’ said the President as she leaned forward in her chair.

‘But you’re not going to like it – not one bit.’

## *The Abyss*

Following many hours of tiresome and vigilant driving, always on the look-out for speed cameras, police, a suspicious face, or for that matter, avoiding open ground where an overhead satellite might spot them - Troy and Melanie stopped at a roadside café to give their weary bodies a break.

As the sun began its descent towards the west, and late afternoon shadows crept higher and higher, like ambassadors of imminent darkness, and reminding them of the toll that exhaustion was exacting on them.

For nearly two days now, they had been living under the mantle of constant fear. Every face was a potential informant. Every building entrance and every street corner could easily harbor yet another hidden camera which might betray their presence.

And neither of them could make a call to family or friends, knowing that the intelligence community would be waiting, listening in like wolves, ready to pounce.

In fact, since his incarceration, Troy had not talked to a single friend or family member for over a month now. For all he knew, those who had ambushed him and locked him away, had also informed his parents and even local authorities that he was missing, maybe even dead. Whatever story best suited their ends.

Melanie's stomach was in knots as the stress factor mounted like a ticking bomb.

'Cheer up,' whispered Troy in her ear, breaking her restive state.

She huffed. 'I just want to get this over with and get back to a normal life.'

‘There is no “normal” life for us anymore.’

‘Wow, that’s reassuring.’

‘Delusion never was my strong card,’ he grinned.

‘What if the journalist doesn’t contact Homeland Security as we suggested? What if she just shreds the document as pure conspiracy?’ a subtle panic permeated her words.

She slumped deeper into her chair, feeling a sense of utter deflation.

Troy squeezed her arm, pulling her back from incipient despondency.

‘Look,’ he said, peering into her eyes with an intensity which suddenly snapped her from the grip of some dark and foreboding place, ‘We’re not going to fail.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘I have learned a lot of things from practicing *Out-Step*, and one of those is that there is still magic in the world. We have truth on our side, and that can cut through any amount of bullshit and lies which these people can conjure up.’

She sighed, her lips forming into a weak smile.

After a moment of silence, she asked.

‘Why haven’t you been doing *Out-Step* recently? Maybe it can help us?’

‘I wish I could, Mel, but I haven’t slept a full night in almost five weeks. I’m so tired that I can barely think straight. On top of that, the stress and anxiety exacerbates the situation – making it very hard to successfully perform an out-of-body.’

She grinned.

‘And yet you managed to intrude on my dinner date the other night.’

‘That was different.’

‘How?’

‘I wanted to see what you looked like without that stupid frock covering up your body?’

She shook her head, thoroughly enjoying the flirt. In fact, she took it as a cue to bridge over to another subject.

‘Out of curiosity, what’s happening in your love life?’

Troy smiled.

‘I thought we were done with the Dr. Phil hour?’

‘No, this is me asking – not your therapist.’

Troy shrugged.

‘Women just can’t get enough of me.’

Melanie rolled her eyes and pointed a threatening finger.

‘Seriously?’

‘My lifestyle isn’t conducive to intimate relationships.’ His eyes drifted from hers to the nearby street, sensing for some reason that an ominous danger lurked ever near.

‘Why – don’t you like women?’

He turned back to look at her with a shocked face.

‘Are you joking? What is there not to like about women. They are the beauty of our race. I just don’t know how to let someone inside when so much of my life is defined by *Out-Step*. How do I say that to someone I like? ‘*Yeah, I really like you, let’s hang-out – and oh, by the way, I practice leaving my body several times or more every week.*’

‘Have you even tried?’

He shrugged. ‘It seemed kind of futile. The few short-lived relationships I’ve had generally ended on a sour note when I told them about *Out-Step*.’

‘What are you looking for in a relationship?’ she asked with a slight tease in her eye.

‘I don’t know. Someone intelligent, pleasant to be with, good looking - you know, my best friend.’

Melanie was about to probe deeper, when, in her peripheral vision, she caught the movement as a police cruiser came to an abrupt stop next to their used Volvo.

‘Shit!’ she said with sudden dread as she motioned with her head.

Troy watched as the state trooper stepped from his vehicle and closely inspected their car and then the license plate. Within seconds he was on his radio.

‘Let’s go!’ he grabbed her by the arm and they exited the café through a back door, landing in a narrow alley.

They ran hard and fast until their breaths came in wheezes. Melanie was about to step out from the alley when a police cruiser screamed by with its lights flashing and sirens filling the air with a paralyzing shriek. Troy yanked her backwards quickly.

They waited for it to disappear down the road and then they ran across the street and began a zigzag maneuver through a residential zone.

Perspiration ran down their faces, cutting small rivulets into their skin as they sprinted in short bursts, trying as they did, not to draw undue attention to themselves.

Nearing the edge of town, they stepped out onto an open street and walked at a near run, when suddenly several police cruisers gunned around the corner ahead of them. Their tires squealed as they burned into the asphalt, sending a cloud of deep black smoke trailing upwards.

Melanie yanked Troy to the right, pulling him into a small space between two houses.

Behind them the police cars slammed to a halt and men poured out, commanding them to stop.

Emerging from between the structures, they tore out into an open field. Desperation and the visceral instinct to survive drove them forward against, what seemed, impossible odds.

Suddenly they skidded to a stop, barely so, just as they arrived to the edge of a deep ravine.

For an instant they both stared down into the depths of gloomy darkness below.

The setting sun had cast shadows into the abyss, making it impossible to see anything but a dim forbidding terrain.

Venting upwards from the narrow gorge was the sound of rushing water and a faint misty plume.

Melanie's eyes were filled with abject terror as the approaching men ordered them to drop to the ground.

Troy clasped her hand.

'Do you trust me?'

She nodded.

At which they both stepped off the edge and plunged into the black void.

## *Breathe*

Six uniformed police officers poked their heads over the narrow and forbidding chasm into which the two fugitives had just vanished.

Deep below they could hear the sound of the rushing water, but no details could be seen whatsoever in the growing murk of twilight – and certainly no sign of the two who had stepped into its waiting maws.

Below, in the misty dark, Troy and Melanie hugged the near vertical canyon wall, their chests heaving, their bodies soaked and the adrenaline pumping through them at a mad rate.

Fortunately, a recent rainfall had temporarily engorged the normally shallow stream – otherwise both would have sustained serious injury, possibly even death, after their daring plunge and the bone-jarring impact.

Nonetheless, Melanie's ankle hurt, and both had cuts and bruises in several places.

They waited, their breathing still coming in fits, while fighting off the trepidation, and as the voices of the police above, boomed and echoed off the cavernous walls around them.

It seemed like an infinity elapsed before they could no longer see the heads of state troopers peering down into the ravine; their forms silhouetted against the twilight sky above, while beams of light from their flashlights bounced off the walls of the narrow gorge – coming ominously close to where they stood, shivering and hugging the cold stone wall.

They set off, scurrying along the perilous strip of rock and dirt which girded the fast flowing water.

After a tortuous journey, clambering and slipping repeatedly over a wet, moss-covered terrain, they came to a barely visible foot-path leading steeply upwards. They scaled it and soon found themselves standing several blocks from where the police were still searching for them; their flashlights bobbing and thrashing in the growing darkness, like threatening serpentine eyes.

They ran for several more minutes with the sound of sirens still filling the night air.

Leaving the residential area behind, they headed back toward the highway and there they found an old garage with a weather-faded sign lit up by a single dangling bulb: USED CARS FOR SALE.

Fortunately, they still had some cash left over from the sale of Melanie's new car.

They found the proprietor tinkering away on an old vehicle in the back of the lot, and following a short cash transaction, they drove off with an old and used Dodge Neon.

## *Conflicted*

Growing up on the south side of Chicago, Jim Reynolds had learned at a young age that there were two ways to deal with life – one could simply avoid issues by whatever means, or one faced them - head on. In between were shades of gray, the zone where *maybe* and *doubt* were king and it was not a place he had ever found to be of any value.

When it came to people, his general approach was similar – there were those he liked or at least had no reason to dislike, and those he didn't like or did not care to associate with.

Right now he would have preferred a direct confrontation with Larry Morris, calling the man on the carpet and telling him exactly what he thought of him – that he didn't trust him; and that his arrogance and his condescending attitude would best be placed in the darkest recesses of his ass. Unfortunately, an overt display of disloyalty would not go so well and it certainly wouldn't solve this case nor assuage his concerns.

Reynolds was no neophyte to the game. He had seen it all – the good, the bad and the very ugly. And while most of the men and women he had worked with or associated with during his career in law enforcement - were themselves good people, with the best of intentions – they were still people after all. And people had their share of indiscretions, their weaknesses, secret skeletons hidden in closets somewhere, illicit affairs, graft, or just plain fear – none of it very nefarious or troublesome – just life as life is. The real bad ones, however, were the ones who pretended to work for the system, when in fact it was a mere cover for a much more deep-seated criminal agenda. He had seen those ones too.

One of the compromises he had learned to live with was

that even the best of humanly divined systems had its faults, for the simple reason that it was humanly divined. He was not perfect, and he never claimed to be – and his innocence had been an early casualty of the war he fought against crime. But there were lines he had never crossed over, and never would – those being the fundamental pillars of his integrity.

Jim arrived back to his office in a conflicted state. The email from Troy Evans, which the journalist had just shown to him, had sparked a whole new storm of doubt.

As he stepped into his office he saw Larry Morris casually poking about, like a fox in a hen house.

‘Where have you been?’ asked Morris.

‘Grabbing some food,’ deflected Jim.

‘We just got a fix on them. Some redneck cops in Watertown, South Dakota, had them in their sights and then they lost them in a ravine.’

‘A ravine?’

‘Yeah, apparently they jumped into a ravine and those fuck-wits still can’t find them. Leave it up to some country hacks to lose two fugitives out in the middle of nowhere,’ announced Morris with arrogance.

He walked to the door and looked back at Jim with narrowed eyes.

‘Look Reynolds, I know you don’t like me - and to be honest, the feeling is mutual, but we have a job to do, so get whatever shit you need and meet me downstairs – we have a flight to catch.’

‘To where?’

‘I figure that they will keep heading north. Lots of open country up there in North Dakota. We’ll head them off at Fargo before they can make it to the Canadian border – if that is their plan.’

## *Love Revealed*

Their near escape in Watertown and the tense, watchful drive to Fargo which followed, had left them exhausted, both physically and emotionally.

Not to mention the swollen ankle which Melanie had sustained when she hit the bottom of the shallow stream during their daring plunge, nor the many painful bruises and cuts which now decorated their bodies.

When finally they had located a suitably low-profile motel on the outskirts of Fargo, both Troy and Melanie took showers and then dropped into the bed, the exhaustion forcing them into a deep and almost instantaneous sleep.

Several hours had passed before Melanie awoke – not to any particular sound, but in fact, it was the total taciturnity of their surroundings which piqued her senses. It was, if anything, a complete paradox to their life over the past days.

She looked over at Troy – and surprisingly, he had his eyes open and was staring up at the ceiling.

‘Couldn’t sleep?’ she asked.

‘A little. Actually, I was enjoying the sound of your snoring.’

‘I don’t snore!’

‘How do you know, do you hear yourself sleeping?’

Her lips protruded with their usual pouty look.

‘I don’t snore, thank you!’

‘You know that when you get pissed off that you do something with your lips – right?’

‘Enlighten me, Dr. Evans.’ Her affected tone of slight annoyance was an intentional camouflage for the fact that she was actually enjoying the banter. Not to mention that it was a

welcomed change of subject, distracting her from the dreaded reality of their circumstances.

He turned to face her, leaning on his left hand as he did, and for the first time, Melanie realized that he was just wearing blue jeans, and just how trim and taut his body was. She looked back at his face.

‘First you tilt your head, just a bit to the right, as if you’ve just been offended, like a bull might tip its eye at the matador who just tried to lance him; and then you pinch your lips together which makes them protrude with a sort of pouty school-girl look.’

‘Really?’

‘It’s kind of cute, actually.’

She pulled the blanket further up over her breasts, realizing that she had fallen asleep with just a towel wrapped around her. Then she mirrored his position, leaning on her right hand and looking him in the eyes.

‘Tell me, Dr. Evans, what is your assessment of me?’

‘I wasn’t sure about you at first, but now I am thoroughly convinced that you are not a card-carrying Kool-Aid-drinking shrink.’

‘How revealing. You don’t give my profession much stock, do you?’

‘I don’t think that all mental-health practitioners are bad, if that’s what you mean?’

‘But you don’t really think we’re creditable?’

‘Let me reverse the question on you. Do you really believe that you are just a pile of goop, that all the best of you is just the synthesis of some chemicals and neurons operating in some complex matrix in your brain – more or less the basis of the mental health field which sells that idea to their patients? Or do you think that you are more than that?’

‘You mean something spiritual?’

‘Whatever you want to call it, Mel. Religion doesn’t have a

monopoly on spirituality – we are what we are in spite of labels and other abstractions we assign.’

She paused. ‘I don’t know for sure.’

‘This is my argument with the mental health field. You declare yourselves the experts in the human mind and behavior, and yet you treat people at a superficial level. You aren’t sure what you are dealing with, and you certainly don’t acknowledge the higher consciousness which many others concede must and does exist. Instead, you start off with the basic premise that you are treating a physical entity, that its problems can be tapped and solved on the basis of neurons and synapses and chemical imbalances in the brain. You never tell people the truth of who they really are, and that is where I consider the mental health field to be disingenuous – if not even deceptive.’

‘You can’t dismiss the entire field on that basis,’ she lightly challenged.

‘I’m not trying to do that, Mel. And I have no doubt that many mental health practitioners are sincere people who really do want to help others. But you asked me why I don’t put stock in your profession and my answer is simple – it is because your profession does not acknowledge the existence of the most important element of all – the higher consciousness, the human soul – whatever you want to call it.’

‘Wow, ok,’ she said, slightly offended, and her demeanor showed it.

An awkward silence ensued.

Troy smiled at her with a warm look in his eyes.

‘Don’t take it personally, this is not about you, Mel. I think you have a really good heart. I also think you are one of the bravest people I have ever met and that you’ve got bigger balls than most guys.’

‘Again, wow! You really know how to charm a girl, don’t you?’

Troy felt a tinge of chagrin.

‘Just out of curiosity, did you have any idea what we were jumping into back there when we stepped off that cliff?’

‘Not a clue.’

‘And here I was thinking that maybe you had taken a brief moment to at least inspect that ravine before we jumped?’

‘Would it have made a difference? Would you have taken the other option?’

Melanie shook her head.

‘Can I ask you something personal?’

He nodded.

‘Earlier today, before we made that run for our lives, we were talking about the lack of intimacy in your life. You defined a relationship like being with your best friend. So what makes that friend special from other friends?’

‘I don’t know exactly. But I do know that it can never be someone who expects me to compromise who I am in order to live up to their image of who I should be. That’s a ticking time-bomb that will eventually explode, no matter how much I might love that person, or vice versa.’

‘What else?’ she eagerly probed.

‘Actually, I’ve started to consider that maybe the only workable relationship would be with someone who is the polar opposite of myself; someone who challenges me – and yet, someone that I could find a happy middle ground where the two of us could enjoy the best of who we are without compromise. You know, more like two ships sailing side by side, both enjoying the cruise but neither abdicating their right to navigate their own lives.’

‘Are you afraid of intimacy?’ Her eyes probed his.

Troy looked away, his countenance suddenly clouding over with an introspective maundering.

He sighed and looked back at her.

‘Maybe.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Are you afraid of rejection?’

Troy’s jaw tightened subtly, but noticeably, just enough to tell her that she had pressed a sensitive button.

It was then that she had an insight into the life that Troy must have endured and the solitude he had surrounded himself with in order to protect his world from those who did not understand him.’

Troy had a far-off look in his eyes as he spoke.

‘The problem is that mainstream culture doesn’t permit a wide margin of acceptability for things it doesn’t understand within the parameters of what it considers to be normal. Tell people that you believe in intelligent life on other planets and right away a certain element of them will ostracize you. In my case, whenever I have tipped my cards concerning *Out-Step*, I have felt myself suddenly stranded on some desert island – with looks of doubt and incredulity staring back at me. And if they didn’t show it, they were thinking it and generally speaking, they never warmed up to me. So yeah, I guess I have an issue with *rejection*.’

‘Do you really prefer solitude?’

‘No, I don’t. But I do prefer living with truth.’

‘Maybe you can have both?’

Melanie shifted her body with a subtle gesticulation which only a woman can master – arousing his sense of manliness.

Troy was suddenly tuned to the presence of the sweet scent of body wash permeating the air. It was a tantalizing moment – shining through the morass of dark emotions which had consumed him for weeks.

In just a matter of two days Melanie had transformed from being a part of the system which had taken his freedom away, to being his closest, and quite possibly, best friend in the world.

‘What are you thinking about?’ she asked, seeing the wheels of thought turning in his world.

‘You.’

‘What about me?’

‘I’m still asking myself why you gave up so much in order to help me.’

Her lips slowly protruded as she became quietly pensive for a moment.

‘What can I say - you bring out all the best in me? I’ve never considered doing anything like this – not ever. I was the all-American success story. An independent woman, successful career, my own apartment, living the good life and never stepping beyond the bounds of normality. And then you came along and screwed everything up.’ She smiled at him.

‘You’ve only known me for a week.’

Melanie sighed – shaking her head as she did.

‘I know, and that’s what is so strange.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Do you believe in love at first sight?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know about true love – but I do know that since the day I first met you that some spell has been working its magic on me.’

Her face brightened at hearing those words.

‘My spell,’ she lightly laughed. ‘And here I was thinking that it was your spell at work over me.’

Her voice trailed off and her eyes drifted from his.

Troy watched her in silence.

She turned to look at him.

At that instant their souls were bared.

They knew they were in love.

Insane circumstances.

Impossible odds.

Fugitives with little hope of escaping the net that was closing in on them.

Polar personalities in every way.

A formula for failure.

But love knows no limits.

It sees no bounds.

It answers to no master but itself.

Melanie leaned toward Troy - touching her lips to his.

Her warm tongue sent shivers streaking through him.

Troy inhaled her scent like his next breath of air.

## *Conspiracy or Truth*

When Macy May Clarkson, the journalist at the Chicago Tribune, had first read the email sent to her from Troy Evans, she was doubtful at best, hopeful at the least, and certainly more inclined to think that it was some kind of prank.

The very idea of a staged terrorist attack from within the government, and moreover, the discovery of such through some paranormal antics, that was too much even for her journalistic mind to easily process. And besides, without supporting facts, filmography or some other evidential material with which to light the fuse of interest in her – the whole matter was quite likely the conspiratorial workings of a dysfunctional, disordered mind.

And yet, on the other end of that spectrum, such a lead could also be the springboard to something even bigger.

Being the aspiring journalist that she was, and not an established veteran of the trade, she knew that her ascension up the pecking order required that she make the stories that would be the building blocks to her career. To a very large degree it was about being in the right place at the right time, since journalistic material could often be compared to a mere leaf in the wind – fleeting and transient at best.

As she reread the email, the words of her college teacher echoed in her head; “*Good journalists can smell a story like a shark smells blood.*”

Macy May didn’t exactly get the scent of blood from the email, but the report sitting on her screen was so outrageous that its very outlandishness did pique her interest.

The first person she had called was agent Jim Reynolds of Homeland Security, simply because the report mentioned him

as the case officer. He was also local and had shown interest in meeting her immediately.

After a rather dull and seemingly pointless meeting with him, one which provided no corroborative material whatsoever, she rang directly to the Department of Defense in Washington, requesting to speak to someone in the DOD's cyber-development department. Someone who might be able to give her some insight as to the likelihood of such an event ever happening – or not.

After a brief explanation to the DOD operator, she was put on hold.

Being a journalist, she knew how to lure people into a dialogue – intentionally baiting her message with just enough information to tease them to take a bite.

A gruff voice answered.

'Who am I speaking to?'

'My name is Macy-May Clarkson. I'm a journalist at the Chicago Tribune.'

'And what is this about some cyber-attack?' he asked, a trace of incredulity hinted in the tone of his voice.

'May I ask what your position is at the DOD?'

'My name is Henry Rathe, and I am a senior IT Engineer.'

'I assume that you are familiar with cyber malware, otherwise this call would not have been forwarded to you?'

'Correct,' he answered curtly.

'I received a report, a tip of sorts, from a man who claims that our nation will be the target of a serious cyber-malware attack in the next twenty-four hours, in fact, tomorrow, on Independence Day.'

'And what do you expect me to do about that?'

'I was hoping that you could tell me if such an event is even possible?'

'What do you mean?'

'Aren't there security protocols to prevent such?'

Henry Rathe felt as if he had tumbled into the same rabbit hole that Alice in Wonderland tripped into. It was surreal that a reporter from the Tribune was questioning him about the plausibility of the very plot which he was engaged in.

Sweat broke out over his entire body.

‘Ms. Clarkson, of course, we have security protocols for such matters.’

‘Is there a malware that you know of, which is capable of penetrating major servers for critical infrastructural systems – as my source suggests?’

‘No one can answer that question. Every day we battle with new viral digital enemies which could compromise our systems. It is an on-going war, Ms. Clarkson, and I assure you, technology is always advancing. Whether or not such an attack is possible would depend on the potency of the malware.’

‘May I ask who your source is?’ asked Henry.

‘I would prefer not to tip that card just yet, Mr. Rathe. Would it be possible for me to meet someone here in Chicago, someone who might be able to answer more questions? I would be more than happy to show them the email. Quid pro quo.’

‘Let me see what I can arrange.’

‘Thank you.’

With a dull panic consuming him - Henry nervously navigated his way out of the building – wondering all the way how it was possible that their secretive plot had made it into the hands of a journalist. Moreover, what were the chances that her call to the DOD, had ended up at his desk?

*Was that fate, or just bad fucking luck,* he asked himself?

Once outside the building he dialed the number, waiting anxiously as the sweat continued to bead and streak down his pulpy face.

‘What is it?’ the voice sternly asked.

‘We have a problem.’

## *The Compromise*

The President was in shock as the words just uttered by her own Secretary of Defense seemed to echo with disturbing resonance.

‘What are you saying, Jennie?’

‘I have been meeting with a few of our top people, people I trust, and it is their assessment, and one that I agree with, that it is literally impossible for us to scour every vital computer system in the next ten hours before this supposed attack is to be launched. Moreover, according to Aldous Connor, who is heading up the task force, there is an 80 to 90% chance that we could still miss a virus, if planted. There is no fool-proof method of detecting every virus until we know what it is. Anti-viral programs are constructed to fight known antigens, based on repeating patterns, search-strings - digital footprints of which we possess nothing as yet concerning this particular virus. In effect, we are shooting in the dark because we cannot see the target. All of which suggests another approach.’

‘Jennie, I can see the logic in calling in some reinforcements – but how can you even consider the Chinese?’

The Secretary of Defense leaned forward, her hands clasped in her lap and a look of dire solemnity in her eyes.

‘Madame President – if this attack is launched, it will probably be the worst domestic assault on our nation in history. Whoever is behind this has already demonstrated that they possess the means of shutting down one of our deep-op satellites. That is unheard of. Based on this, we must assume the worst - that they could target our military defensive systems, the very core of the cyber-infrastructure which

supports our economy, or even our energy grids. Any of those elements, if rendered destroyed by this virus, would cause a nationwide panic which would tidal wave around the globe. The effects on the markets, the sudden international panic that America is under attack from some hidden terrorism, which no doubt the media would pander, would cause destabilization on a global level. So yes, in that regard, I believe that my suggestion is quite justified.’

‘I am with you until you start talking about including the Chinese.’

‘I understand it sounds radical – but the idea is not unprecedented. During World War II, the allied nations realized that by partnering up with communist USSR, even though an enemy to democracy itself, they would stand a better chance of crushing Hitler’s war machine, and the strategy worked. We are in a similar situation now. We have just a matter of hours before Independence Day – and the amount of stones we have left to turn over to see if a virus is hidden there is quantitatively beyond our means of accomplishing in that time period. We need extra eyes, and we need good ones.’

‘But how can the Chinese help us without compromising ourselves?’ asked the President, still dubious.

‘The Chinese possess the largest cyber-espionage team in the world – second to none. They use it to snoop around our cyber-infrastructures, constantly learning what they can about our systems and our technology. We know they’re doing it because we do the same to them. It’s a mutually accepted reciprocity, kind of like *friends with benefits* – and we don’t necessarily shoot every one of their agents who manages to sneak past a firewall, and they accord us the same. The compromise permits us to find weaknesses in our ramparts. And frankly, when they do find a hole in our security walls – it helps us to build a better one. The Chinese are very good at this game and they have many more people dedicated to

cyber-hacking than we have at our beck and call in just the short time remaining.’

‘So then what, we just invite them in the front door?’

‘No, Madam President – we invite them to help us, because they can. I am quite certain the Chinese President will see the merits of preventing an American economic-collapse. China stands to lose a lot if the international commercial byways and markets are rocked by a sudden debacle in our nation. As you well know, it would shake confidence across the boards – and depending on the extent of the attack, it might even cause enough damage to set us back. China depends on America just as much as we depend on them. It’s a mutually symbiotic relationship – something I do not need to lecture you about.’

The President sighed with a deep sense of apprehension suddenly consuming her. Coming from Jennie, whom she trusted implicitly, the argument was starting to sound pragmatic, although it still sent shivers through her.

‘All I ask is that you consider this option. We can navigate the Chinese team into certain sectors, keeping them away from our more sensitive systems, such as Military and Defense – but believe me, with their massive team, they could easily help us to scour the national grids without ever dipping into anything that would really compromise us. And, we can always go back and change the locks on the doors afterwards. I believe that compromise is better than the other option.’

## *The Drone*

Larry Morris and his two agents cruised the early morning streets of Fargo in their rental car, in search of any sign of the vehicle.

A speed camera, just outside of town, had provided a faint image of the two fugitives in an entirely different car – a 1996 Dodge Neon, just some hours before, so he knew they couldn't be far away.

He had deemed it best that Jim Reynolds go off on his own, in a separate rental, looking for the two. The air of tension and growing distrust between them was becoming both tangible and distracting to his task.

Morris had debated the value of simply dismissing Reynolds from the case, and taking it over himself, but he knew that it was not a good idea. It would draw unnecessary suspicion to him and his team, and he needed the cover of Homeland Security with which to camouflage their actions. The more layers, the more convolutions would exist and the less transparency overall – it was simple physics.

Since it was already three hours into Independence Day on the east coast, his superior was anxious to get Evans and his doctor rounded up and neatly dispensed with. Consequently, he had already received five text messages since arriving in Fargo - pressing him to get the job done.

Morris had not been privy to all the details of the planned attack, but he knew enough of the scope and nature of it to put him on the inside of the cabal, with an invested interest in ensuring its success. If the house of cards tumbled, he would be included in the collateral damage – so failure was simply not an option.

‘How many more motels are left?’ asked Morris.

‘Two more,’ one of his men uttered while squinting at a local map with a penlight. ‘Should be one just up ahead on the left,’ he pointed.

Larry checked his watch, it was close to 3:00 a.m.

Just then one of his agents announced ... ‘There!’

Larry looked over and sure enough, the outline of the Dodge Neon wavered in the dim light of a waning moon.

‘Go to the front desk and see if the clerk can identify them,’ he commanded.

Moments later the agent returned. ‘Room 201, on the other side of the building.’

Moving with quiet stealth, so as not to raise any alarm, the three men had soon positioned themselves outside the room, at which point they kicked in the flimsy door, bursting it inward like so much kindling and then poured into the room with their guns poised.

‘Fuck!’ exclaimed Morris, gazing into the empty space.

‘Deploy the drone,’ he barked out as he marched from the room with a belligerent stride.

## *The Dark Street*

Five blocks away, Troy and Melanie ran along a dark and deserted street, consumed by fear and desperation.

They hunched down behind a building to catch their breath. Their sweat-covered skin glistened in the light of the moon and their breaths came in heavy wheezes as they gulped in the air.

‘We need to get to the train station,’ said Troy between breaths.

Melanie nodded, while thinking about their near escape back at the motel.

It had all happened so fast. She had been lightly dozing in the nook of Troy’s arm, after the most memorable love-making she could ever recall, when she heard the sound of a car-engine suspiciously murmuring in the otherwise tranquil quietude of the night.

Her sense of suspicion had compelled her to glance out the window when she caught sight of the vehicle moving through the parking lot, like a shark stealthily combing the seas for its next meal. Some intuitive sense had set off the alarms and within seconds she and Troy were out of the room and running at breakneck speed.

‘Let’s go,’ Troy said, and they stepped onto the dark and desolate street, lit only by the cold glare of a street-lamp.

As they neared the train station, a figure stepped from the shadows.

They froze.

## *Face to Face*

When Jim Reynolds received the call from Morris, informing him that the two had bolted from their motel and had left their car behind, he knew exactly where to go, at least, logically speaking.

At this time of night, the two would try to find the fastest means of escape – and Jim had gambled right.

He emerged from the shadows by the train station just as Troy and Melanie approached.

They stopped dead in their tracks.

‘I just want to talk,’ announced Jim. ‘You remember me, right?’

Troy nodded, his initial shock momentarily appeased. ‘You’re the agent from Homeland Security – you were at my court hearing.’

Jim Reynolds looked around the quiet street and then he nodded at Melanie Cross.

‘We’ve never met, Ms. Cross, but we spoke on the phone a few days ago.’

‘Are you here to arrest us?’ asked Melanie.

Jim paused, caught in a miasma of doubt and indecision.

‘I don’t know yet. But we don’t have much time for you to convince me about your story. There are others here who are only interested in getting you two back into custody.’

He stepped even closer to be able to see Troy’s eyes and the nuances of his body language.

‘Is it true about the attack that is supposed to happen today?’

‘Yes,’ answered Troy without delay.

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘Because I am.’

Jim paused, his hesitancy clearly manifested in his look.

‘Is this entirely based on ...?’

‘My out-of-body-experience?’ Troy finished the sentence for him.

Jim tipped his head with a nod. ‘Yes.’

Troy stole a glance at Melanie and then back to the agent.

‘I don’t know how to prove it to you, agent Reynolds. You’re going to have to take it on faith, or wait to see what happens.’

Jim Reynolds gritted his teeth as the frustration heightened inside him.

‘Faith is not a good criteria for stopping national terrorism. Tell me more about the attack?’

Troy felt suddenly confused.

‘Didn’t you read my original report? If you had, you wouldn’t be asking me that question.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I sent a detailed report of everything I knew to Homeland Security.’

‘I searched every document that I could find about you – I never saw any such report,’ replied Jim.

Troy quietly fumed.

‘Someone removed it from the system.’

‘Why would they do that, Troy?’

‘To protect their asses, obviously.’

‘So you think this is a big cover up?’

‘Have you ever heard of *Opus*?’ asked Troy. ‘Or for that matter, *Fortress*?’

Jim Reynolds glanced nervously up and down the dark and lonely street and then back to Troy.

‘I met with the journalist from the Tribune. She showed me the report you sent to her and that is the first time I have ever heard of those particular terms.’

‘Ok, so you know as much as I do then.’

‘How can I be certain that you’re not just dreaming this all up?’

Troy shook his head.

‘You really think that the NSA would storm my apartment and then railroad me into a psych-hospital on hyped-up charges if I didn’t know something?’

Troy’s voice began to tremble as the pent-up anger suddenly fissured the dam behind which he had kept it encysted.

‘I’m really getting tired of explaining myself. If you want to know the truth go talk to those NSA goons who ambushed me.’

Troy’s eyes glared at the man.

Melanie squeezed his hand, trying to calm him, but Troy’s body was tense, like a steel coil ready to spring.

Jim fixed his eyes on her.

‘Do you believe him?’

‘I stand by what I told you on the phone. And besides, since that talk I found a memo from the NSA which was sent to my direct superior, which mandated that Troy was to be kept incarcerated indefinitely. That memo also expressed deep concern about what else Troy may have revealed concerning this *delusional* plot. It was then that I realized that Troy had to be telling the truth and that the NSA was using us as his jailer.’

‘Who signed off on that letter from the NSA?’ he asked.

She unzipped her jacket and reached into an inner pocket, her hand emerging with a piece of paper folded several times. She handed it to him.

‘See for yourself.’

Jim held the paper into the light of the overhead street lamp and suddenly felt the hackles stiffen on the back of his neck.

‘Larry Morris,’ he whispered.

Just then the quietude of the early morning was broken by a high-pitched buzz – as if a swarm of giant bees had just descended over them.

They looked up, and there, hovering by the street lamp, was a small drone, a disc-shaped object about the size of a lap-top computer, with several cameras on its underside and propellers on top and on four sides.

Jim recognized the model. Mini-surveillance drones were becoming the tool of law enforcement agencies.

Two cameras swiveled down at them with robot-like eyes.’  
‘Shit!’ whispered Jim.

## *Caught in the Trap*

A car charged down the street with an angry and threatening roar, like a ferocious bear moving in for the kill.

Its tires suddenly screeched and bit into the asphalt – sending up a cloud of dark smoke.

Three agents stepped out, two with guns trained on Troy and Melanie.

Troy recognized them – his fists balling up as he did.

Larry Morris approached Jim with a smug look on his face.

‘Having a nice chat, Reynolds? His sarcasm was thick as mud.

Jim said nothing.

‘Get them in the car, now!’ he barked to his men. Morris eyes never left Jim’s.

‘Your part is done – we’ll take it from here.’

## *National Interests*

Following a lengthy consultation with the Secretary of State over the proposed alliance with the Chinese, the President finally capitulated.

With only a matter of hours until Independence Day and no other viable solutions forthcoming to avert the imminent crisis, the choice between either inviting the Chinese to the party, or in permitting the nation to become the target of some apocalyptic attack, was somewhat of a knee-jerk decision in the end.

It was only the second time the President had ever spoken to her counterpart in China, the first time being shortly after she had assumed Office.

Their short, but poignant dialogue, would, quite possibly, ring down the corridors of time, if ever it became a matter of public record.

‘Madam President,’ began the Chinese President, ‘This is indeed a very serious situation and I appreciate that you have approached me on this matter.’

He tipped his head to one side, with a look of slight challenge in his eyes.

‘Just to be sure that the air between us is cleared of any smoke, I must play the devil’s advocate in asking you several questions at this juncture. Can we be frank with one another, omitting any need for diplomatic overtures?’

‘I would prefer that, Mr. President,’ she answered.

‘Good. Because we have yet to officially meet and discuss matters of mutual concern to our nations, something I hope to be able to do in the near future.’

‘As do I.’

‘My first thought,’ he began, ‘was the obvious one – did you suspect that China was behind this attack?’

‘No, I did not. But that is not to say that others in my Administration have the same view.’

‘And why do you trust us, merely on a handshake, on something as intrusive as scouring your national cyber-grids for this malware?’

‘To be honest, I was against it at first. But others in my Administration, possibly wiser than I am, got me to see the larger picture. China has no need to usurp America. You have already carved out a very large portion of the global market. There is nothing to be gained by pulling the rug out from under our feet. In fact, a major disruption of our economy would be counterproductive to your global interests.’

He tipped his head.

‘Indeed and I would agree with that assessment,’ he chimed.

‘My second question for you is this. I am curious about your general stand on matters with regard to China?’ Again he tipped his head toward the camera. ‘It is important to me to know who I am allying with in this regard.’

‘It is my intention to establish stronger ties with you and your nation, to help strengthen our global alliance, and not to weaken it with more competitive egotistic strutting. I know we have our differences. I know that China and Russia have been working on building a stronger alliance to the exclusion of America. I see this as a sign that we have alienated ourselves from that circle – and I hope to repair those bonds.’

The Chinese President nodded, a small grin creasing his lips.

‘Madam President, I appreciate your candor.’

He paused to collect his thoughts.

‘I know time is at a premium here, and I do not wish to delay the matter, but there is one final question which I feel is

important to answer and one which help me to feel more relaxed about our relationship.’

Constantine Le Dour nodded, maintaining an air of equanimity, while restraining the storm of apprehension inside.

He continued with a modulated and rhythmic voice.

‘America maintains its policy of military aggression overseas in the name of what you call *democracy*. Some have referred to this platform as imperialistic, one where America has become the declared protectorate of nations victimized by supposed tyrannies or terrorism, giving you an unchallengeable right to place your boots where and when you see fit. No other superpower in the world has such a monopoly or such entitlement.’

‘What is the question, Mr. President?’ She asked, knowing full-well that he was about to launch a subtle, yet decisive blow.

‘America has engaged in war in two nations, Afghanistan and Iraq – ostensibly in the name of fighting terrorism and protecting democracy. As a result, you have also firmly fixed American boots in those lands – and yet, the terrorist problem seems no less than it was before. America has also recently engaged in a proxy war in Syria, and you continue, in spite of other rhetoric, to keep Iran in your cross-hairs. You send drones into Afghanistan and Iraq, deliberating on who should live and who should die according to your intelligence profiling – all with relative impunity. No human rights courts or international courts ever try America for such acts. On the contrary, they are tacitly sanctioned, or at the very least, tacitly condoned. Now, if China were to do the same today, with no less the intent of safeguarding our interests, or even the greater good, would you see this as an act of war, as a threat to America’s seemingly sole entitlement to such activity?’

The sharp point of the spear had been delivered straight to the heart of the matter.

She pinched her lips as she carefully considered his words. He had her backed against the wall, the disadvantage which he hoped would force her to reveal her true mindset.

All of her education in politics, and her experience in diplomacy, suddenly coalesced in her mind. If necessity hadn't been such a major factor at this particular moment, that coalescence could easily have turned into a storm – but instead, the need to protect America from this attack, if indeed the world, forced her thoughts to solidify with the clarity of a sunburst in the wake of a terrible storm.

‘Mr. President – I don't need to spout rhetorical diatribe at you on this matter – and to do so would simply make me appear disingenuous and would be an insult to you. This is not and never has been a clean theater, and unfortunately, I have stepped into the shoes of men who have, to a very large degree, either supported this platform of aggression, or enabled it. In answer to your question, a sensitive one at that, despite our mutually shared business and trade fronts, China is still regarded as a nation under the rule of communism. Until that particular factor is addressed, your nation will never receive the complete trust it should be accorded as the great nation it is. I am not judging you in this matter. I am merely being honest with you. At the same time as I am saying these words, please understand that I do not vouch for the unnecessary violence and war which my nation has spawned in the name of democracy – as you say. I think there is a line there, not even a fine line, between truly defending freedom, and something else altogether, and that line was crossed a very long time ago. I hope to be able to redefine the edges of a very murky playing field and to restore focus in this matter.’

She paused with a tired sigh.

‘I hope you take no offense at my forthrightness. I wasn't voted into office because of my rhetorical skills, and certainly not as a result of my deplorable tact. Americans wanted

transparency in their government. And in that regard, I am being transparent with you and my request for your help is sincere. And I hope that you see it as a display of the level of trust which I hope to develop between us. Maybe I am an idealist, but I believe that my duty, in this seat, is to provide a new paradigm for our nation, one based on an alliance of humanity, not an alienation between us and “*them*”; with our united goals focused on saving our planet from ecological disaster, exploring the stars for new options for humanity, advancing technology and knowledge for our mutual benefit. We can no longer fight over borders when the world population is expanding exponentially. In due time, those borders will mean little in the grand scheme. We need to focus on developing the infrastructure to effectively deal with the fact that we are, in spite of ethnic and ideological differences, all living on the same platform.’

The President of China smiled, a gracious smile.

‘Thank you, Madam President, for your honesty and sincerity. I look forward to meeting you at the most opportune time. I will have a team of our best people assembled and made ready to assist you. Good luck!’

## *Two Worlds*

Standing at the front of the room with a large white board to one side of him, and a projection screen on the other, was a man whom you might have passed on the street and mistakenly assumed, as one might misjudge a book only by its cover, that his smallish stature and disproportionately large stomach, his boyish grin and light blue eyes shrouded by overgrown eye-brows, was just an aging teacher, maybe a clerk in the bowels of some forgotten library, or even a Hobbit.

And yet, Aldous Connor – Senior Analyst for Design and Development at the DOD, was anything but - for he played an integral role in maintaining the nation's defensive ramparts on the cutting edge.

And though his outward appearance was unassuming, if not even comical, and his character unconventionally humble when compared to the traditional swagger and pomp of the high-brass which strutted the esteemed halls of the Pentagon in crisp uniforms, Aldous Connor still had his fingers in some very important pies.

Ironically, as if the very wheel of life had made a full turn on him, Aldous Connor was unknowingly staring into the eyes of the very beast which he had helped to create – a monster which threatened to wreak havoc on the nation in a matter of hours.

Two years earlier, Aldous had proposed the blueprints for a potent computer virus which could be used to bring a potential enemy to its knees in just a matter of hours. His reasoning for its creation had been completely altruistic. The digital arena was the most pervasive of all, everything was controlled or affected through the cyber-world today. A nation's military

power and much of its supporting infrastructure was largely balanced on pillars molded of digital binary code. And like a skyscraper sitting on the head of a pin, remove the pin and the superstructure collapses.

‘Why waste lives waging conventional war,’ he had said in his pitch to the DOD’s high brass.

‘Why spill unnecessary blood when all we have to do is launch *Opus* and within minutes, an hour at most, we can bring the machinery of war to a complete standstill?’

When the Department of Defense had authorized the development of *Opus* through the private contractor, Viral-Sec, Aldous Connor had felt tremendous pride. It would be his crowning accomplishment – defense with minimalized damage and death, and he could go to his grave knowing that he had helped to diminish the bloodshed inherent in war.

In fact, it was for this reason that he chose the name *Opus*, as opposed to something more sinister. *Opus* meant *an artistic or great work*, and in his eyes, this was truly the case.

But alas, the project had been terminated less than a year into development, when Beta testing showed that the potential for devastation simply exceeded their imagination. Technology had proven that even the best of intentions could be perverted into something heinous.

Aldous Connor looked at the group of men and women who now faced him – a special task-force of nearly one hundred IT engineers and specialists. Their worried and tired faces betrayed the depth of apprehension which gripped them. Like a platoon of soldiers about to charge into battle against an unknown and terrifying enemy.

A large wall-screen reflected the faces of another room full of people, sitting thousands of miles away in Beijing, eagerly awaiting the same briefing.

It was, no doubt, a surreal scene to all.

He began.

‘We are tasked with finding a viral infection and to corral it off before it can do further harm. Many of you have already been working on this for the last two days – and no doubt, you are as tired and frustrated as I am.

‘Unfortunately, we know nothing of its structure, only that it has the potential of causing considerable and irreparable damage, and that it is capable of evading detection from our best anti-viral programs and firewalls.

‘It leaves no signature and no repeating pattern which we have been able to find. It could be a *cavity virus*, hiding in dark digital recesses, or it could be *polymorphic*, changing itself as it replicates and infects the hosting system, and so making detection nearly impossible. The bottom line is we don’t know what we are up against. But we do know that it will be launched against eleven more cyber-sites, sometime after midnight. For this reason, and due to the sheer magnitude of the task which faces us, a seemingly impossible one at that, the President herself has asked for the assistance of the Chinese, and as a consequence, Dr. Chang and his team in Beijing, stand ready to help us.’

The thin balding Chinese man, with a wispy gray-white beard and bright eyes nodded his head through the digital portal.

Aldous nodded back and then turned to the group.

‘Our approach now is to compartmentalize the search, according to digital grids. Each of you is part of a team, and each team has been assigned a definitive zone. Your task is to search the digital highways in your specific sector, for any signs of this intruder.

‘Do not assume that this virus is like any you have ever encountered. We must assume the likelihood that we are dealing with an entirely new species of malware.

‘Good luck.’

## *Beaten*

Larry Morris wasted no time.

As soon as they arrived back in Chicago he had Melanie Cross taken down to a holding cell in the basement of Homeland Security, while he and his two men took Troy to another private room where they proceeded to interrogate him.

Morris stood, his arms folded, glaring down at Troy who sat in a chair with his hands tied behind his back.

The other two agents stood to each side of Troy with their shirt-sleeves rolled up, revealing their many tattoos - clearly demarking them as veterans of battle.

Now, behind closed doors and without the need for deception, Morris and his men had removed their masks. Their true agenda was now betrayed by their hardened looks and threatening eyes.

They had a mission, and Troy was their target.

Morris looked like a wolf hovering over a wounded deer, salivating and relishing the anticipatory taste of blood.

‘Time’s up, Troy – who else have you talked to about this?’

‘Sorry, but I don’t talk to assholes, Morris.’

No sooner had the words parted Troy’s lips when a large fist slammed into his rib cage, knocking the very air from his lungs and sending a jolt of anguish screaming through his body.

Troy gasped as he tried to breathe.

‘I’m going to ask again, who else have you talked to?’

Troy grimaced, glaring back at the man.

‘Save yourself the pain - tell me the truth.’

‘Go fuck yourself!’

The next fist struck Troy squarely in the side of his face, sending him crashing into the floor. Spasms of pain rocked his world as the pain echoed in his brain.

The two agents picked him up and threw him back into the chair like a sack of potatoes.

A stream of blood coursed Troy's face from a gash in his cheek.

'Before you decide to play hero – consider that pretty little thing sitting downstairs. If you don't talk I am going to beat her until her brains splash on the wall.'

Troy spit out a mouthful of blood on the man's shoes.

Morris leaned closer.

'You think you're a tough guy, don't you, Evans? Let me tell you something. There is nothing you can do to stop this attack from happening – hell is going rain down today. And yes, we know all about that report you sent to the journalist at the Chicago Tribune. Thanks to you, she is going to have a very short life. Now ... talk!'

'Go to hell.'

Jacobs swung his fist into Troy's face, cracking his lip and splashing more blood.

Troy reeled from the blow.

'Do you want to reconsider your answer?'

Troy was finding it hard to think coherently now.

Morris nodded to one of the agents. The man grabbed his hand and bent it backwards, so hard in fact that Troy was sure his wrist would snap.

He groaned as the pain escalated to an unbearable level.

Morris watched on without the slightest empathy in his soul. He knew he would either break the man, or kill him in the process, but he didn't care this time. He would perform his due diligence, try to get him to reveal what he knew, and if not, he would end it, here and now. He couldn't afford to have Troy alive any longer than necessary.

Just when Troy thought the agony couldn't get any worse, the man torqued his hand.

Troy let out a cry.

Larry Morris glared at him.

'So, tough guy – want to talk?'

Troy heaved, his breathing coming in fits between the shock wave still coursing his brain.

Despite the fact that his world was rocked with pain and his future looked dimmer by the second – all he could think about was Melanie. She was the one bright star which would not dim.

Troy wasn't worried about his own mortality.

Death did not terrify him because he understood it.

He knew that this life was just a precursor to the next, and that the cycle of existence was like walking down an endless corridor of consecutive doors – he would live again, and again, and again.

The only pain which caused him real anguish right this minute was the idea that they would get away with this attack against the nation, and that they would hurt, or even kill Melanie as well.

Troy fixed his eyes on Larry Morris.

*Maybe he could outsmart the man. His arrogance was his weakness. Maybe he could leverage it by making Morris think that he was winning,* he thought.

'Ok – dickhead. If I tell you what I know, will you spare her life?'

A devilish grin creased the man's lips.

'That depends on what you have,' hissed Morris.

'If I give you a list of the other people I sent the report to, will you spare her?'

'If you give it to me now – I'll consider it,' he lied.

Troy took a deep breath. He had bought them a few more minutes, at best.

They untied Troy.

Troy massaged his wrist – he could barely feel his hand as the pain had numbed it.

He didn't even want to think about what his face looked like.

Troy ran the back of his hand across his chin.

Blood smeared it and the pain was exacerbated.

Morris handed Troy a pad of paper and a pen.

'Write their names there.'

Troy paused.

Larry Morris pulled his gun from a side holster, and placed it against Troy's forehead.

'If I don't see some names on that paper right now, I pull the trigger.' His voice was cold as ice.

Troy put the pen to the paper, trying to make his mind work.

Morris pressed the nozzle harder against his forehead – digging painfully into the skin.

Just then a mobile phone buzzed.

Larry pulled it from his pocket and read the text from his superior in the NSA.

'Put him in the cell with the girl. I'll deal with them myself. You two get out there and take care of that journalist.'

## *Agony of indecision*

Agent, Jim Reynolds stared from his office window at the early morning Chicago skyline.

It was a blank stare, the kind you might experience when your world is spinning out of control and all you can do is let it happen, because there is no anchor and no lifeline to grab onto - nothing to stop yourself from sinking deeper.

The sun was just cresting the horizon and in the distance Lake Michigan gleamed, as it always does, reflecting the first ambassadors of a new day, as sunlight flickered and rippled across its surface in multi-hues of pastel colors.

During the short flight back to Chicago, Jim had been utterly immersed in a conflicted state of deep reflection – trying to reconcile the dystopian scenario which now faced him - in fact, threatening to consume his world into the maws of some hellish hole.

Although generally proud of his accomplishments – that pride was now being submerged in a sea of self-disgust. It was the quintessential power which came with indecision. A treacherous swamp that inevitably consumed anyone who permitted themselves the luxury of wallowing in it.

He glanced at his watch. It was already 6:30 a.m.

Since returning to Chicago, he had repeatedly checked his phone, looking at the media channels to see if there was any news of an attack – but all seemed normal at the dawn of yet another Independence Day.

In spite of that, the aching inside would not go away and leave him alone.

Some inner cognizance was telling him that he was being haunted by the very guiding hand which he had followed

throughout his career - like a lighthouse navigates the sailor through treacherous waters – his guiding light was *JUSTICE*.

Without justice there could be no true society – only tyranny, brutality and oppression.

He knew that.

And he believed in that principle – which is why he had endured some forty years in law enforcement.

But now it seemed as if that guiding hand was desperately hanging on with just a bare thread.

Was he compromising himself and everything he thought he had stood for in his life?

Was it right to let the NSA do as they wished?

Was it right to exercise blind “justice” in the name of *national security*?

Or was he just being an acquiescent coward?

Bowing down to a system which he had pledged allegiance to, but just a system nonetheless?

Every question was like a boomerang – coming back at him, adding to the weight of his conscience and pulling him ever deeper into the sludge.

## *The Reckoning*

Following the interrogation period with Troy, which Larry Morris liked to refer to euphemistically as a *reality-adjustment*, he immediately dispatched his two agents to go meet the journalist, Macy May Clarkson, as instructed by his operator at the NSA.

The message from the Deputy Director of the NSA had been clear; Troy, his doctor and the journalist had to be dealt with, and now.

He mused over the rhetorical nature of those words – ambiguous terms which purposely omitted the harsher and more brutal ones, such as, *kill*, *eliminate*, or any other incriminating statements.

In the hazy and misty world of the National Security Agency, words had double meanings, semantics were ambivalent and allusions were as thick as storm clouds covering a sunny sky above. One had to read between the lines and interpret the meanings, simply because superiors, such as his, were often times just narcissistic cowards, hiding behind the veil of secrecy. They would never put themselves in a position where they could be compromised or accused of having blood-stained hands.

Instead, they resorted to ambiguity, equivocation and dissimulation – so that in the end, if anything should go wrong, the boney fingers of guilt would point to the doers, such as himself and his men, who would take the fall, and not to those who dictated the terms of engagement.

Nonetheless, it was his job. He had done it before, and he would do it again. Once in the murky waters of covert ops, there was no turning back. There was only keeping one's head

above water, watching out for other sharks, and ultimate survival.

He answered the SMS and then pocketed his phone.

Now he would go finish the job he had started. He would get Troy to write the list of names, then he would put a bullet in both of their heads and make them disappear forever.

Larry checked the clip in his gun, holstered it, and as he turned - Jim Reynolds was standing there.

His eyes were fixed on him, like a hawk watching an adversary.

‘What do you want?’

‘What are you planning to do with Troy and Melanie?’

‘That’s none of your business. This is an NSA matter now.’

Jim stepped deeper into the room with a belligerent stride.

‘Why is the NSA so interested in capping off Troy and his therapist? And don’t give me any more of this bullshit about “national security”.

‘I’ve already explained that to you.’

‘You know Morris, you’re a shitty liar.’

‘Really – please enlighten me.’

‘I called a friend of mine who happens to work for a private defense contractor employed by the Defense Department. Have you ever heard of *Opus* or *Fortress*?’

Morris deflected with a shrug, ‘Should I?’ he lied.

Jim stepped even closer.

‘I can see right through that veil of crap you put up. You know exactly what I am talking about, and in fact, so does Troy – which is why you and your boys have been working so hard to round him up.’

As good as Morris was at lying, his eyes betrayed him and the stiff manner in which he held his body clearly suggested that he was guarded – and worried.

‘I understand now why you guys vetted that report you sent me, the one I used to put Troy away. I also know why his

report, the one he sent to Homeland Security weeks ago, disappeared. You must have some friends very high up in the system to be able to get away with that kind of stuff.'

'Are you done?'

'No, I'm just getting going, Morris. I suspected you from the first time we met. You had that quality about you that I have seen in the face of every two-bit criminal I have had the pleasure of putting away.'

'And what is that?'

'Arrogance – criminals wear it like a flashing light on their foreheads. It's the one thing that usually gives them away. Their condescending arrogance, their disrespect for other people - it is that attitude that makes criminals think that they are better than everyone else and entitled to break the rules.'

'Is there a point to this lecture – because I'm getting bored?'

'Yeah, there is. I'm not letting you and your two monkeys do whatever you plan to do with Troy and Melanie.'

Morris stiffened, this time not even attempting to disguise it.

'You really want to go there, you want to go up against the NSA?'

'That ship sailed, Morris.'

Jim was on the vigil now, watching the man like a mongoose watches a cobra. He was snaky.

'Well, if that's the case, I'm just going to have to call your superior and let him know that you just turned traitor.'

Morris started to turn, as if reaching for a landline, but then he spun, like the turret on a cannon rotates at high speed, and then he launched a fist straight at Jim's face.

Jim managed to deflect the incoming torpedo, which grazed his chin. Then he landed a hook directly into Morris's face. Blood spurted from the man's nose.

Morris stumbled backwards, drawing a hand over his face

and wiping the crimson that now flowed from his broken nose.

‘Mother fuc...,’ he exclaimed as he reached for his gun in a fit of rage.

In a split second, Jim did the same.

Both men fired, nearly point-blank.

Morris’s gun flew from his hand as Jim’s bullet shattered the bones in his wrist. He screamed out in agony. More blood sprayed into the air.

In the same nanosecond of time, a bullet cut a deep gash into Jim’s left side. Blood instantly seeped into his shirt and it hurt like hell.

Morris reached for his gun using his remaining good hand – but before he could do so, Jim landed another blow into his face, knocking him out cold.

Jim grabbed a shirt hanging from a nearby coat rack, wrapped it around Morris’s wounded arm in order to stem the profuse bleeding and then called 911 to get paramedics to the location.

As he stood, he heard the buzz coming from a pocket in Larry’s jacket. He fished out the phone and read the message just sent from one of his men.

It confirmed that they were now on site at a small café on West Madison, waiting for the journalist from the Chicago Tribune.

## *A Cold Wind*

Agent Nichols and Agent Forbes, or at least those were the aliases they currently went by, sat on the patio of the coffee shop in downtown Chicago, where they were instructed to meet the Chicago journalist.

It was a beautiful sunny morning; normal by all accounts and appearances; and certainly there was nothing in the air to hint at what was about to happen.

To anyone else sitting on the terrace of that coffee shop, these two men did not particularly stand out in the crowd – unless of course you were trained in combat skills and could detect the nuances of their body language.

They were guarded men, and their hawkish eyes never stopped scanning the local terrain, as if they were still sitting in some overseas battle zone looking for enemies to kill. The bulges under their suits suggested that they were built to fight, and their hardened looks was certainly testimony that death was no stranger to them.

It was because of these qualities, and particularly their impressive kill-list during their term in Iraq, that the Deputy Director of the National Security Agency himself had selected them to be part of a special unit under the charge of Larry Morris. A team which he had sole propriety to – and who did special operations at his bidding.

Macy May Clarkson walked with a snap in her stride – anxious to get to her meeting and to find out more about this mysterious email which she had received the day before from Troy Evans.

After her short conversation with the IT Engineer at the DOD, a man named Henry Rathe, she received a call from

Larry Morris, an agent of the NSA, who informed her that he was sending two people to meet with her to go over the report. The tone of his voice and the interest which he seemed to show, had sparked her interest in pursuing the matter.

As she stepped up to the table, both men turned in unison and looked at her with steely eyes.

And with it came a sudden foreboding – like a frigid wind icing over her very soul.

## *Jailbreak*

Everything had happened so fast.

Jim had not planned on a gun-fight inside Homeland Security, and yet, the confrontation was an admission of guilt which only strengthened his resolve.

Fortunately, Larry Morris was either a lousy shot, or the gods of fortune had cast the dice in Jim's favor, because Morris's bullet, while it had made a nasty gash in his side, had just missed his rib cage. It bled rather profusely, but it was not life-threatening. Jim pressed a make-shift compact against it to stem the flow.

He anticipated that at any moment now, a stream of people would come running through the door at having heard the gun shots, but then it occurred to him, with great relief, that it was Independence Day, and even Homeland Security retained but a small skeleton crew to watch the shop - most of whom were several floors up manning the computer hub at this time of the day.

Nonetheless, he had only minutes before emergency responders would show up as a result of the call he had just made.

He looked down at Morris, still unconscious with the rag, now soaked in crimson with his blood, wrapped around his arm. *He would survive – which is probably more than he deserved*, thought Jim.

He raced to the sub-section, and unlocked the cell containing Melanie and Troy.

As the cell door clanged open, Jim stepped in to see Melanie, her eyes filled with rage.

Troy was leaning his head against her shoulder. His face

was beaten and swollen, with traces of blood still caked to his lips.

‘Shit!’ exclaimed Jim.

‘We have to leave now,’ he commanded before Melanie could say or ask anything, and together they helped Troy to his feet.

They managed to exit the building, turned a corner and stopped to catch their breaths just as two police-cruisers screeched to a halt in front of Homeland Security – followed by an ambulance.

Jim dialed up the Chicago PD.

He was pretty sure that Morris’s two goons were not meeting the journalist to have a cup of coffee and that if he didn’t do something fast, she would soon be dead.

‘This is special agent, Jim Reynolds, with Homeland Security, ID number 483-761,’ he said to the police dispatcher who answered. ‘I need units dispatched to a coffee shop on the corner of W. Madison and S. Western, now. Two men, wearing dark blue suits, are meeting a journalist by the name of Macy May Clarkson. They must be subdued before they can harm her. They are armed and dangerous.’

The dispatcher at the other end rapidly took down the details, then she passed the information to her unit supervisor who promptly confirmed Jim’s credentials. Within minutes several police cruisers were racing to the scene.

In the light of early morning, Troy’s face looked even worse.

‘How are you doing, sport?’ asked Jim as he glanced over his shoulder to ensure no one was following them.

‘I’ve had better days,’ mumbled Troy.

After several more blocks they slipped into a small café and sat where they could not be seen from the street.

‘Is there anyone at Homeland Security who can help us?’ asked Troy with an exhausted wheeze. It felt like he was

trying to talk with a grapefruit stuffed in his mouth, and it certainly sounded like that too.

Jim shook his head. ‘It doesn’t matter right now, who would believe me anyhow?’

Melanie fixed a disgruntled glare on Jim.

‘Wait a minute – we still have to try.’

Jim shook his head, frustration written all over his face.

‘If I march back into Homeland Security and start talking about this plot, they are going to ask me why I just shot an NSA agent, and why I am aiding and abetting two fugitives. I would be in a shit-storm of trouble before I could get two words out of my mouth.’

‘Then why did you go to all the trouble of getting us out of there if we’re just going to sit here?’ she challenged.

Jim felt his frustration starting to boil over.

‘What do you expect me to do, Melanie?’

‘I expect you to help us stop it from happening.’

Jim chuckled derisively.

‘Stop what? Nothing has happened and it’s nearly 8:00 a.m. on Independence Day.’

Troy charged into the dialogue with a heated tone of voice.

‘For the record, while Morris and his two goons were giving me a new facial, Morris specifically said that there was nothing I could do to stop this attack from happening.’ Troy grimaced at the pain. ‘He said that hell was going to rain down today. Those were his words, Jim – not mine!’

Jim Reynolds took a deep breath, controlling his emotions.

‘Troy, I am not trying to discount the fact that something is obviously going on – but please, take my perspective. How am I supposed to convince anyone of this attack when nothing has happened? If I step back into my office people are going to stick me in a room and interrogate me about the bleeding NSA agent who might even by now have told them his version of

the story.’ Jim shook his head. ‘I’ll be lucky not to be charged with assaulting a federal officer.’

Troy could hardly restrain his mounting frustration from spilling over. On top of that, spasms of pain still stabbed at him from the beating he had endured, and his head throbbed with a malicious headache.

As the air between them became perceptibly tense, Melanie realized that Jim Reynolds was actually fighting himself. Much the same as she had been doing when faced with similar circumstances some days before.

‘Jim – isn’t it time to stop equivocating?’

He turned to look at her, his eyes narrow and brimming with anger.

‘I know you helped us escape, and you probably saved our lives. But there is a much bigger game in play. Why do you think I sacrificed my career, and possibly my life, to help Troy?’

She paused to look at Troy who sat in silence, his eyes reflecting genuine ennui and a flagging drive.

She continued.

‘I made those sacrifices because I believed him.’

She sighed with evident frustration.

‘I’m so damn tired of being told every day how dangerous our world is; listening to leaders vomit up the same rhetorical diarrhea – all of it designed to make it seem as if terrorism will wipe out our way of life.’

Melanie glared into his eyes.

‘Now that I have a chance to expose these people, to stop another charade like 9/11 from ever happening, – I’m not giving up. We have literally walked through hell to get this far and I am not going to stand by and let these people get away with it. The question is – what are you going to do, agent Reynolds? Are you going to help us or not?’

Her words stung him like a hard slap to his face.

Jim sat there, contemplating.

‘You really think that one man can change this – that one person can fight a whole system?’

‘I do,’ she rejoined.

Her words filtered through the sands of doubt which clouded his mind.

And it suddenly occurred to him that he was sitting on the fence.

On one side of the fence was the man he had once known – the man who would charge dauntlessly into dark alleys and abandoned buildings in search of criminals – all on the principle of defending right from wrong. On the other side of the fence was a quivering and cowering weakling – a mere shadow – someone who was more concerned about his retirement than anything else.

He finally shook his head, emitting a sigh of concession and a slight grin forming on his lips.

‘Ok, Joan of Arc, what do you suggest we do?’

Melanie’s challenging visage quickly softened.

‘Send Troy’s report to someone higher on the food chain – someone who will listen. There must someone who isn’t in bed with these snakes, someone you can trust?’

Jim considered it for a long moment.

‘Actually, I do have a friend in the DOD who might be able to give me some inside information. Troy’s report might be useful. How do I get a copy of it?’

To their surprise, Melanie unzipped her jacket, slipped her slim hand down the front of her shirt, and pulled back the cup on one side of her bra. From it she extracted a small flash-drive hidden within.

Jim Reynolds could hardly suppress his surprise as she handed over the miniature storage device.

‘Just one of the perks of having breasts,’ she declared with a devilish grin.

## *Crater-Face*

Macy May Clarkson sat quietly watching the two men as they looked over the document sent to her by Troy Evans.

‘How did you get this?’ one of them asked.

His cratered-face and cold eyes were filled with silent threat.

She felt the incipient trepidation starting to ripple through her, as if perhaps she had made an error in agreeing to this meeting.

‘By email,’ she answered.

‘Have you sent this to anyone else?’

‘Just an Engineer whom I spoke to at the DOD. And I also spoke to an agent from Homeland Security – by the name of Jim Reynolds.’

The two men stole a surreptitious glance at one another and then back to her.

‘I was told that you would provide corroborative material in this matter – so what’s going on?’ she demanded with a nervous intonation in her voice.

‘You need to come with us.’

She instantly soured at that comment.

‘I never agreed to go anywhere with anyone. I agreed to a meeting with you because your boss, Larry Morris, said that you might provide clarification.’

The man’s lips parted with a toothy grin, somewhat vampire-like in character, and as he did his eyes narrowed to a threatening glare.

Macy May began to stand when she felt something shoved into her ribs and looking down she saw the nozzle of the gun held there by the second man to her left.

A trembling wave coursed her entire body and her lips widened as the inchoate scream began to morph inside.

‘I wouldn’t do that,’ the other man said with a voice as cold as ice, pressing the nozzle of the gun painfully into her side. His expression was utterly deadpan and his eyes were as lifeless as those on a shark closing in for the kill.

The man with the cratered face spoke. ‘We’re going to calmly walk over to our car. If you do anything stupid then we will put a bullet in you,’ he smiled insincerely.

Their vehicle was parked on the street-side adjacent to the café. As they approached it the air was suddenly filled with the sound of sirens destroying the normality of the early-morning mid-city ambience.

The two men turned in unison as several police cruisers skidded angrily to a stop and as officers came out of the cars with guns trained on them.

‘Let the woman go,’ the nearest officer commanded, having already caught the gleam of what appeared to be gun nestled against the woman’s side.

‘We’re with the National Security Agency,’ rejoined crater-face.

The police officer tightened the grip on his weapon. ‘Just the same, let her go and we’ll talk,’ he insisted.

The air was tense and no one was fooled by the ploy.

Crater-face stared back, silently sizing up the opposition. For him, this was just another battle-scene and something for which he had been trained to deal with. Besides, they could not engage in a casual conversation with the cops since the journalist would surely blow the whistle on them.

That left one option.

In a matter of seconds he had marked his targets, while his colleague had done the same. It was old-school battle tactics – if surrounded, split the opposition in half and then shoot to kill.

‘Ok,’ he feigned as he turned to look at Macy May with a grim and threatening mug, and then with a subtle glance at his partner, crater-face deftly slipped his gun from his jacket, turned and shot the officer in the chest – propelling the man to the ground with an ugly crunch.

He pushed Macy May to the ground, jammed his right knee into the middle of her back – and pinned her there.

The explosive concussion of gunfire filled the air like a war zone.

The café terrace instantly transformed from a tranquil sea of hushed dialogues, into a wild and panicked melee as people screamed and ran.

Macy May lay helpless, her cheek pressed into the cold and gritty pavement – anticipating that any moment now, a stray bullet would find her.

## *Opus Strikes*

It was precisely 9 a.m., Eastern Standard Time, when the third attack struck the nation.

The second attack had already occurred just one hour before when the DOD's primary computer defense systems, those monitored by the Pentagon's watchdog unit, Section 666, had been rendered dysfunctional.

Of course, news of that particular debacle was not made public, not that it hadn't sent the Pentagon into a flurry of panic over the fact that the first line of computer systems used to monitor one of the largest military structures in the world - suddenly disappeared in a storm of digital fuzz.

But now, *Opus* was targeting the public and commercial sectors - delivering a devastating blow to the nation.

The Bank of America, the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest holding company in the nation, and globally the largest investment corporation, was largely asleep when the intruder crept through its cyber security walls, penetrating and then destroying the very mind of its banking system within just minutes.

One hour later, at 10 a.m. sharp, at the John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City, one of the busiest hubs in the world, the radar and electronic beacons which provided a three dimensional visual of the skies above, with some twenty three planes now converging on the airport, disappeared. In the blink of an eye, airport traffic controllers were completely blind, with no eyes in the sky, and airplane pilots suddenly found themselves flying aimlessly, as if someone had just turned off all the lights on a dark and desolate road.

Havoc reigned.

## *Shock*

Dr. Aldous Connor was supposed to be spending time this very day with his three daughters and their families, and a relative army of grand-children, enjoying a traditional countryside picnic and barbecue which he had looked forward to.

He was nearing the twilight of his career, and with age came the ever growing appreciation that family was the most important factor in his life.

But this year would be different, instead of attending the celebration, Aldous was hunched over several computer screens, fighting off exhaustion, as his eyes searched the digital highways for any signs of the killer virus.

All around him, in a massive auditorium-size room, were row upon row of tables, with computers spread across them and a literal sea of electronic cables sprawling over the floor like the tentacles of some off-world creature.

It was a tremendous undertaking, one which a team of engineers had set up in just hours, in order that this team could work exclusively on searching out the Loch Ness monster of the cyber-world.

A team of caterers kept food, drinks and coffee arriving in corpulent quantities – and bathroom breaks were mandated to be swift, with no social media, nor calls from or to family or friends – *“Just do your business and get back to your station”* – that was the mandate – and everyone seemed to be playing ball.

There was a tangible sense of urgency in the air, if not even dread.

When news of the first attacks came, the entire room erupted into a melee of consternation.

## *Vindication*

Melanie Cross tried to empty her mind as she stared at a small television screen mounted on the far wall of the café where they sat.

The streaming images and the background noise echoing from the television acted like a placebo to her anxiety, a distraction to the noise which rumbled in the corridors of her mind.

None of her formal education had prepared her for any of this. In fact, it dawned on her how insufficient her life-schooling had been, omitting the basics of survival. There was no manual on what to do if society suddenly ejected one, or if, by chance, the supporting infrastructure disappeared, leaving one helpless and on one's own to carve out a means of sustenance and survival.

Had it not been for Troy and his relative calming attitude, and the fact that the sale of her new car had provided them with sufficient cash to survive these past few days, she would have been destitute – mentally and physically.

It struck her as rather pathetic to think that humanity was being victimized by its own luxury.

Troy was silent next to her. His head gently lolled to one side and his eyes were closed.

She found it difficult to look at him – his face was so disfigured and so bruised that it catalyzed her silent rage.

Her eyes drifted back to the television. The expletive burst out with a life of its own.

‘Oh shit!’

Troy bolted upright, pulled back from his light sleep.

‘What is it?’

She pointed to the television.

The media headline read:

**AMERICA STRUCK BY TERRORISM!**

‘It’s actually happening,’ whispered Troy.

The news detailed how the Bank of America had been attacked by a mystery virus, incapacitating the banking giant’s entire national computer data base and sending hundreds of thousands of users across the nation into a total panic. Right on the heels of that news was an announcement that JFK’s entire airport tracking system had been eviscerated – necessitating the use emergency radio-band communication devices to contact close to thirty-six airplanes now dangerously circling or converging on the airport.

‘Oh my, god,’ said Melanie, a look of panic in her eyes. ‘You were right.’

Just then, Jim Reynolds stepped back into the coffee shop and saw the shocked look on their faces.

‘What’s happening?’ His eyes drifted up to the small television set and the echoing news.

‘Shit!’ he looked at Troy.

Jim slipped into a seat facing them.

‘I just got off the phone with my contact in the DOD. She says that there is a massive task-force working around the clock to find some kind of viral threat to the nation. The place is practically on a shutdown.’

Although disturbing, the news gave Troy a sudden resurgence of life. He felt an immense weight lift from his head – as if a two ton gorilla which had been clinging to him, fell away.

For nearly five weeks now, his life had been a living hell. He had been criminalized, labelled insane, and dangerous to society – all because he had tried to blow the whistle on what was now becoming reality.

‘I can help them – put me in contact with that task force, Jim,’ he suddenly demanded.

Jim Reynolds looked at Troy with incredulity in his face.

‘I think you took a few too many hits to the head, buddy.’

Troy leaned forward.

‘No, I’m serious, Jim - I can help.’

‘But how?’ asked Melanie.

Troy looked them both in the face.

‘You forget, I was in that room – listening to that conversation and I saw their faces – every damn one of them.’

‘Holy shit,’ Reynolds suddenly exclaimed.

## *Nightmare Realized*

In just the short time of their dialog, the news headlines had already morphed, announcing the collapse of the elaborate computer system which monitored thousands of shipping containers at the Los Angeles Port Authority every day, bringing the shipping and freighting lanes in America's largest western port to a halting standstill. The loss would be staggering.

It took only moments for Jim to contact his friend at the DOD and to convince her to hand the phone to whomever was heading up the special task-force.

Twenty minutes later he was connected directly to Dr. Aldous Connor.

'Dr. Connor,' he said after rapid introductions, 'are you familiar with something called *Opus*?'

Connor felt a premonitory shock streak through his entire body - even before the man had said another word.

'Yes, I am,' he hesitantly answered. 'Why do you ask?'

'Because, I am sitting next to someone who discovered a plot some weeks ago, during which several men were discussing unleashing *Opus* on this very day.'

Aldous Connor's face suddenly washed pale.

As the mental dots made a rapid connection, he also realized the nature of the beast they were now up against.

'Of course,' he whispered.

'Agent, Reynolds, is your source absolutely positive that they used the word *Opus*?'

'Yes.'

He asked Jim Reynolds to hold a moment while the Secretary of Defense was patched into the call.

‘I have the Secretary of Defense patched into this call – please explain what you know.’

After a detailed explanation, there was a long silence.

Finally, Jennie Castro broke it.

‘Dr. Connors – is it conceivable that *Opus* is actually being used against us.’

Aldous let out a deep breath.

‘It would explain why this virus is so potent and why there is no digital footprint.’

‘But I was under the impression that the project had been shelved and that *Opus* was under lock and key?’ she added.

‘As was I.’

But the shock was settling in as Aldous came to grips with the obvious fact.

‘Madam Secretary, I have no idea how this could have happened – but it certainly has the earmarks of *Opus*. I know – because I helped to design it.’

Already, the President had been alerted and she too was standing in Jennie’s office, overhearing the call.

Jennie spoke. ‘Agent, Reynolds, we are going to put you and Mr. Evans in direct contact with someone here who will show him photographs of every employee, starting with the DOD. If he can identify them based on what he remembers, then we can at least go after the perpetrators behind this plot. In the meantime, Aldous, you must assume the worst - if this is *Opus*, then we must renew our efforts.’

‘I understand,’ the man’s voice echoed hauntingly.

No sooner had the call ended, than the assistant to the Secretary of Defense charged into her office.

‘Madam President,’ he conceded to her presence, ‘and Madam Secretary, we just received word that Chicago O’Hara’s primary traffic grid has gone down, and the entire power grid for central Atlanta has also disappeared, leaving the core of that city in the black.’

The President turned to the Secretary of Defense.

‘Jennie, what the hell is *Opus* and why don’t I know about this?’

‘Madam President, *Opus* was a developmental cyber-weapon. It was vaulted about ten months ago after the Beta versions proved to be so destructive that even the DOD was hesitant to continue with the program. It was supposed to be a non-issue.’

‘But how could it be used now?’

‘I don’t know,’ she shook her head with befuddlement. ‘The Vault, where it is kept, is virtually impenetrable, except by the technicians who do maintenance, and there are security protocols which make it next to impossible to extract the viral versions which are stored there.’

‘Is there something else about *Opus* that I don’t know? Dr. Connor’s voice seemed to convey a lot more concern than his words did.’

The Secretary of Defense looked at her with a worried look in her eyes.

‘There was one Beta version of *Opus* which was so lethal that it alone was the reason that the DOD decided to lock it away.’

The President waited anxiously.

‘In the tests, it demonstrated the ability to indiscriminately go from one computer system to the next, following the neural-cyber-network, and destroying everything in its path. Once it gets started, it simply doesn’t stop.’

‘So you mean that version could spread anywhere?’

‘Yes, Madam President. Just like any virus, unless a means is found of stopping it, it keeps going. Short of cutting the power, no one could figure out how to stop that particular version of *Opus* – and that was the terrifying prospect, that if it got out, it would be apocalyptic on a global scale.’

## *Hubris (Def: arrogant pride)*

Tanner Corbett was up at the crack of dawn – taking in his morning coffee as he sat relaxing, enjoying the waxing sun which was already chasing away the ghosts of darkness and the chill of a seaside morn.

In just a matter of minutes, *Opus* would strike the nation.

A certain thrill permeated him, like someone witnessing a solar eclipse for the first time ever, or the birth of their first child, but in this case, Tanner’s perversity afforded him a golden moment of self-adulation in the knowledge of the catastrophe he was now leveraging against his nation – and the fruits to come.

But then again, contrary to all his theatrics, Corbett was not the patriot he so pretentiously portrayed. The only patriotism he had ever felt was a consummate loyalty to himself and his own interests. If someone else’s survival was aided in the process, it was purely incidental and certainly not intended.

He had been assured that by playing his role in this whole affair, that his company would be awarded significant contracts in the development of *Fortress*, which in effect, would be the largest digital protection cyber-net ever developed on behalf of the nation. He could devote teams of people, for years to come, just working on and maintaining *Fortress* alone. It would be a cash-cow with a bottomless pit.

*Fortress* would become the new national watchdog, administered by, and only by, the government itself – in the name of *national security*.

Many would argue against its use, seeing it as an intrusive arm of federal control over the private sector, and factually, it was. Which is precisely why this particular incident had been

spawned. The attack on this very day would drive the knife deep into the heart of America, inflicting so much pain and terror that no one would object to federal controls and oversight of its primary cyber-grids, just like no one had really objected to the legislation of the Patriot Act in the wake of 9/11.

In fact, Americans would demand it.

And of course, the blame would be laid at the doorstep of extremists, *mythical terrorists* – and someone would likely claim responsibility for it, even if only to publicize their mission. And so, the war against terrorism would gain a whole new impetus.

The scent of imminent success seemed to fill the air, engorging his ego.

And success was a drug which Tanner Corbett could not get enough of.

## *The Traitor*

Henry Rathe sat slurping a coffee from a large mug, trying to appear as if he too was tenaciously engaged in the same rattle and hum of desperate panic which surrounded him, as people feverishly worked to find any signs of infestation by the virus which the media had now dubbed ‘The Killer’.

Of course, being one of the senior designers for the DOD, he had already been approached and questioned at length as to how, if possible, such a virus as *Opus*, could have been introduced – if in fact that was even the case.

Rathe had assured the investigators that it was impossible to extract *Opus* from its holding cell in the Vault – and that even he, as adept and familiar as he was with the system, could not have done so without detection.

His sincerity, in fact, his over thirty years of unmarred performance within the DOD was his badge, the credentials which quickly shifted any suspicions away from him.

He basked in the satisfaction that with the extraction program provided to him by Tanner Corbett, *Opus* had been able to figure out its own backdoor retreat – replicating itself as it did – just like any virus might split and leave an identical version behind. It was a brilliant program, easily introduced while he had been doing his routine maintenance procedures weeks before.

The extraction program also included a fail-safe system, what they called a “Cap” – much the same as the safety pin on a hand grenade. The Cap would keep *Opus* dormant, until released.

In fact, he mused with a silent chuckle, the irony was that as the investigators swarmed into his office, interrogating

himself and the other IT engineers who maintained the Vault – they were actually standing next to the very server where the beast itself was temporarily caged.

## *Conspiracy Exposed*

By the time Jim Reynolds had convinced Aldous Connors of the veracity of his source, and the additional ten minutes it took to do the same with the Secretary of Defense – O’Hara Airport had been shut down, and once again, the alarms were sounding as dozens of planes were suddenly cut off from any communication with ground-control, unable to locate airport beacons or radar which normally directed them where to land.

And of course, as fate would have it, inclement weather in the windy city, Chicago, had churned up heavy rains and winds which now accosted the airport -like hidden snipers just waiting to land a lethal shot at some unsuspecting target.

It was a nightmarish scene with two major US airports scrambling to avoid mid-air crashes, and with tens of thousands of lives at stake.

With the grace of the Secretary of Defense, Homeland Security Chicago had been instantly contacted and informed that Jim Reynolds and his party were to be admitted back to the premises without question and were to be provided with a private room.

Naturally, as Jim, Troy and Melanie walked back through Homeland Security, Troy with his face beaten and swollen, the air was both tense and awkward as people watched on, and as questions buzzed through the corridors like a swarm of bees.

The three sat at a computer station, with a live feed straight to the room where Aldous Connor sat in Washington D.C. Behind him, in clear view, stood the President and next to her Jennie Castro – the Secretary of Defense.

Jim Reynolds plugged in the flash drive which Melanie had

given him, recalling for a brief instant where she had kept it hidden. The image somehow lightened his mood.

He clicked on the document so that everyone could read it.

Within moments, eyes were wide with shock.

The President leaned forward and looked into the screen at Troy, wanting to see, more closely, the man who was the source of this report. She could not help but notice the conspicuous state of his face.

‘Mr. Evans,’ she began, ‘what happened to you?’

Troy attempted a grin, but it didn’t come off as planned, looking somewhat maniacal in effect.

‘A minor altercation, Madam President.’

She cautiously smiled.

She then nodded to Aldous Connors who began.

‘Mr. Evans, we are going to show you a series of photos, starting with employees from the Department of Defense. Please see if you can identify any of these people.’

The process seemed to go on forever – and there was a tangible feeling of tenseness which was growing by the minute as Troy sat quietly watching as picture after picture scrolled by.

After nearly twenty minutes of anxiety-filled anticipation, Troy spoke up.

‘There!’

‘You are absolutely sure that he was one of the men in the room?’ asked Aldous.

‘Totally.’

The President turned to the Secretary of Defense with a look of sublime horror in her eyes. Before the shock of that revelation had even started to abate, Troy spoke again.

‘Him too!’

Now her shock was quickly morphing into ire – the President quietly fumed.

After another fifteen minutes they had come to the end of

the DOD personnel roster and Troy had identified three of the four men.

The President spoke then.

‘Mr. Evans, I hope you are right about all of this.’

Troy tipped his head.

‘Madam President – I have spent weeks burning their faces into my memory. And I will stake that the fourth man is probably from the NSA.’

‘Why do you say that?’ she asked.

‘Because, it was the NSA who tried to stop me from exposing this whole thing. The agent who was intimately involved in locking me away, Larry Morris, is not the mastermind – he’s too stupid,’ said Troy with a sense of pure satisfaction at having just declared that fact to the nation’s leaders. ‘Someone higher up the food chain is pulling that man’s strings.’

‘Thank you, Mr. Evans. On your advice, we will show you NSA roster next,’ said the President with an authoritative nod to a White House technician who rapidly accessed the data base.

The President and Secretary of Defense left the room, while Aldous Connors returned to his team, leaving someone behind to continue working with Troy.

‘I’m so mad right now that I could kill,’ fumed the President as she stormed into her office, with Jennie in tow.

Constantine paused for a long moment, arms folded across her chest as she calmed herself.

A knock came to the door and the President’s Press Secretary poked his head in.

‘Madam President – a word?’

She motioned the man into the room.

His face was gray with worry.

‘We’ve got a hell-storm on our hands. The media is demanding a Presidential statement.’

Constantine Le Dour drew in a deep breath.

‘No, not yet, Tim. First we deal with the attack, then we root out those behind it, and then I will step in front of the cameras and tell the nation the truth.

He continued.

‘But, Madam President, the stock market has just sunk to its lowest point since the recession in early 2008. It looks like we’re under attack by terrorists – at least that’s the spin the media is taking. People are running scared. We need to say something to stabilize this scene.’

Constantine steeled herself. She was not going to make some placid announcement which accomplished nothing in the end except to further the propaganda about yet another terrorist attack. And she certainly couldn’t blow the whistle on the actual perpetrators – not until they had all of them identified and corralled up with bayonets held to their heads.

Like her father, a former New Orleans politician, had once told her; ‘Honey, if you don’t have somethin’ valuable to offer people – then just keep your mouth shut. Worst kind of politicians are those who say things they think others want to hear. People don’t remember politicians who make false promises, they remember the ones who kept their word.’

‘My mind is made up, Tim. Inform the press that I will make a formal statement later today, once we have a grip on this thing.’

‘And if they generate more panic?’

Constantine tipped her head at her Press Adviser.

‘Honestly, Tim, grow a pair. Since when doesn’t the press generate sensationalism?’

The man conceded and left the room.

The President turned to Jennie Castro.

‘Put a team onto keeping an eye on those three assholes and tell me the minute that Troy identifies the fourth man.’

## *Chinese Salvation*

Dr. Chang, although not burdened by the stress and anxiety that was clearly assaulting his counterpart, Aldous Connors, still felt a pang of empathy for the man.

He could only imagine the pressure that Aldous was under considering the magnitude of the potential for disaster.

In his shoes, no doubt, he too would be worried sick by now.

Several computers faced him, one of them dedicated to maintaining a live secure vid-cam between himself and Aldous Connors.

It was oddly surreal to Chang that after so many years heading up CED, China's **Cyber-Engineering Department**, as well as overseeing a special team of cyber-specialists whose sole duty was to hack into foreign cyber-systems; that he was now afforded a direct link into the heart of the beast itself.

National proclivities aside, he felt a certain kindred connection to Aldous Connor. They shared certain parallels. And ideologies aside, they could probably have been the closest of associates – maybe even friends.

Once again it raised a flag of silent dissent in him, one which he could never reveal for fear of mortal consequences.

*What sanity was there in all these abstractions which people pinned to themselves in the name of nationalism?* He asked himself.

It was the same question he had posed to himself many times before. The differences were abstract, just colors on a flag. In truth, men were men, part of one species and any flaunted differences was just egotism strumming a different tune.

Chang sipped on a fresh cup of Chai tea as he assessed a string of code streaming by on one of several computers.

To anyone untrained in this field, it might have looked similar to the famously popular Matrix movie, just a bunch of translucent green numbers; 0s and 1s, streaming endlessly down the page, pure mumbo-jumbo. But to Chang, who had spent a life time in the cyber world, the nuances were as flagrant to him as a singular face in a crowd of a thousand Chinese.

It was the amazing quality of the human mind – the ability to dissect subtle nuances, the smallest of details, and then categorize them as either similar, different or identical – which in effect were the composite elements of intelligence itself.

He had often wondered how it was that such a mind, possessed by most every human being, was also capable of engaging in such feral brutality – the devil’s spawn, war!

He forced his attention back to the monotonous duty of watching a river of code passing by.

As his lips touched the cusp of the tea cup, something caught his attention.

Chang lowered the cup to the table, and leaned forward – staring into the screen.

Like a ghost, it had been there and then it was gone. Some elusive and vagrant anomaly in the normality of the code he had been watching, like one of those visual tricks where strings of numbers followed a consistent pattern until suddenly, an odd number had been injected. Just a phantom – a bare prick in the cognizant thread.

*Was it just hopeful thinking?* He asked himself.

*Maybe a trick of his tired mind?*

Chang tapped the scroll key, reversing the process until, to his surprise, the ghostly apparition appeared once again.

On an adjacent computer, he checked the programming protocols for *Opus*, those which had been provided to him by

Aldous Connors.

His eyes flashed back and forth, from one computer screen to the next, meticulously comparing the code, over and over again until there was absolutely no doubt left in his mind.

Chang turned to the other monitor facing him, seeing the tired and worried face of Aldous Connor who had his head buried in a computer.

‘Dr. Connor.’

Aldous was unresponsive.

‘Dr. Connor,’ repeated Chang with more volume in his voice.

Aldous Connor tiredly looked up - removing his glasses as he did. His eyes were red with strain and already a patch of dark was forming under each as sleeplessness exacted its toll.

‘Dr. Chang,’ he smiled amiably. ‘I apologize – it’s been rather stressful at this end.’

Chang raised a dismissive hand.

‘I have found something.’

Aldous leaned closer to the screen – his eyes suddenly becoming brighter, more intense.

‘It appears to match the code for *Opus* – but with one alteration.’

Aldous listened intently.

‘What I am looking at is missing the secondary mandate.’

Aldous suddenly stiffened in his chair.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I have an identical match for the code which you sent me – except for the fact that there is no self-destruct mandate built into this particular rendition.’

Aldous felt a terrible quaking in the pit of his stomach, as if he were facing something horrifying – and he was.

By this time, several other personnel, overhearing the conversation, were gathering around the computer listening in with Aldous.

‘Dr. Chang, is there any indication as to what the target is?’  
Chang shook his head.

‘There is no indication of the source-code, that is, which server I am looking at, nor even, the target. But the timer-code clearly shows 12 p.m. Eastern Standard Time - today. That seems to mean that this virus is going to be released in over just an hour from now.’

Chang continued to watch as Connor’s face morphed with evident shock.

‘What does this mean, Dr. Connors?’

Aldous shook his head.

‘Our worst nightmare.’

## *Alter-Ego*

Henry Rathe stepped into his car and pulled out from the parking lot at the annex of the DOD.

In his rearview mirror he watched as the building receded in the distance.

For thirty-three years he had worked there – designing, refining and advancing the cyber-mind of America’s defensive fortress. And now, in one fell-swoop, like a hawk suddenly snatching the unsuspecting fish idling in the shallows of a lake, he too had descended upon his own nation, laying in a path of destruction – one which would be remembered in history as one of the most treacherous attacks on American soil.

Oddly, he felt no pang of conscience about his deed. No sense of sentimentality nor even treason.

For sixty years he had lived a simple life, following the rules, a patriot to the cause – keeping pace with the tight-lipped world of the DOD, while designing ever greater systems with which to protect the nation and to thwart its envisioned enemies.

He had been exemplary in most aspects, portraying the loyalist – married for thirty-one of those years, with a nice home in Maryland, paying his taxes, taking yearly vacations - all the hallmarks of a good solid citizen.

But all of that had changed when his wife had died of cancer just over a year ago, and when he had discovered that he had a tumor growing inside his brain.

His doctor had said that exploratory surgery would have a 20/80 chance of success. Henry had opted to live out his remaining days - figuring that a shorter life was better than no life at all.

But something had changed inside him. Some sense of irreversible futility had seeped into his soul and poisoned it.

Henry Rathe's world had flipped.

Good had become bad.

Bad was now good.

His new criteria was simple - if it gave him pleasure, in this, the twilight of his life, then the lines of delineation between right and wrong were entirely irrelevant.

It was a fatalistic attitude - and he knew it.

But now, standing on the edge of eternal darkness, and not being a man of religion nor even karma or belief in the afterlife, Henry reckoned that once he was buried it was a matter of finality.

Unfortunately, he was the unknown victim of his own mortality.

How and why he could have made such a critical mistake could be chalked up to human error, stupidity, or even arrogance – but in his case, it was actually the effects which the tumor was having on him. For it caused him momentary blackouts, sometimes lasting a few seconds, sometimes as long as a minute or more. In the interim he would experience a form of mental discontinuity, as if the neuropathic signals from his brain had just stopped working. It was a blank spot in his mind, and one which he could not even remember. Each time he recovered from such, it simply felt as if he had drifted off momentarily.

On that specific morning, just three weeks before, he had undertaken his usual and routine maintenance of the servers located in the underground Vault – a practice which he had engaged for nearly thirteen years. It was, in fact, the last server he was working on when his brain froze, just as he was selecting the file containing *Opus*.

His cognitive world blinked out for twenty seconds, but his reflex action still caused his finger to tap on the file. Henry

Rathe had mistakenly clicked open not one, but in fact, two files. Not only had he uploaded the correct version of *Opus*, with its built-in timer, but another version, a deadly intruder, was now piggybacking its sister program.

And when the timer would release *Opus*, the deadly Beta version would also charge in, wreaking havoc on every computer system it infected, with indiscriminate and brutal lust.

## ***Modicum (Def: a short distance remaining)***

Melanie yawned as she stretched her tired and aching body.

The days had already blurred for her, becoming an indistinguishable series of events which had led them to this moment.

It was still a surreal picture, one which she could never have envisioned for her life – and yet here she was, working directly with the nation’s leaders and her team of investigators, trying to stop the apocalypse from happening.

Earlier this morning she had been sitting in a holding cell in this very building, wondering if she would ever see her family again.

The dichotomies were bizarre.

*Maybe Troy was right – maybe there was still magic in the world?* She wondered.

She watched as picture after picture slipped by on the computer screen, and as Troy, half slumped over in exhaustion, tiredly tapped the keyboard, trying to identify the fourth man whom he had overheard in that hotel room.

It was close to noon time and judging by the flurry of activity outside the doors of the office where they sat in Homeland Security Chicago, the news couldn’t be good.

Troy turned to Melanie, his lip still swollen and a large glaring bruise on his right cheek staring back at her.

‘I’m really proud of you,’ she said as she squeezed his arm.

Troy grinned, causing him to groan with pain.

‘Thanks, but you’re the one who deserves the kudos. Had it not been for you, Dr. Frankenstein would have turned my brain into goo by now. So this is all on you.’

She leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek – in

fact the only part of his face that wasn't bruised, cut or swollen.

Just then a flurry of activity appeared on the computer monitor facing them.

'Troy,' a female voice cut the air.

Troy turned to look at the face of the woman – her eyes were intense and her jaw firm and clenched as she spoke, betraying her urgency.

'My name is Jennie Castro, I am the Secretary of Defense.'

'Yes, I know who you are.'

'Troy, a particular version of *Opus* has just been discovered in a remote server, one which we cannot yet identify and which is due to be released in just minutes from now. If that particular version gets out, it will probably spread to every computer it can connect to, both here and elsewhere. The resultant destruction, globally speaking, would be beyond estimation.'

'Ok, what can I do to help?'

'I need to know if those men that you overheard ever mentioned any other words, even something that might remotely assist us in narrowing the target. It might not have made any sense to you at the time, but it could give us a clue as to where to look.'

Troy nodded and played back the dialogue in his mind. *How many times had he done this?* He thought.

Jennie Castro stole a nervous glance at a clock on a distant wall. They were down to just minutes.

The large room in which she sat was as silent as a mausoleum. No one spoke. Not a word.

In Beijing, Dr. Chang and his team also sat in relative silence, waiting to see if their efforts had staved off the attack.

Jennie Castro was silently praying that Troy Evans would remember something. If not – the future didn't look very good.

Of course, the logical question one might ask, is if Dr.

Chang could see the virus from his end, why couldn't he detect which precise server it was on? The answer was simple. The source code was being occluded by *Opus*.

The brilliance, if not even the pure insanity of *Opus*' technological advance, was that its algorithms provided it with polymorphic ability. Like a skin-changer, it could alter its pattern, sufficiently so as to make detection nearly impossible. And like an advance marine force, preceding the main attack force – it was designed to destroy enemy communication systems, making communication in and out impossible, a sort of localized black out. Because of this inherent programming protocol, *Opus* was the perfect Ninja-virus. It could move in, occlude its presence, strike and kill, and then disappear completely.

In fact, it had been just a fluke, maybe even an act of god that Dr. Chang had even spotted the intruder at all.

'There is something,' Troy suddenly piped up.

'One of them used the term *The Palace* – as if in reference to a particular place. It didn't make sense to me at the time so I didn't give it any importance.'

Jennie Castro turned to Aldous Connor with a questioning look.

'*The Palace*?'

Aldous thought for a moment and then it struck him.

'Oh my god. The *Vault*... of course! The technicians who oversee our central servers in the underground Vault, refer to it as *The Palace*.'

The Secretary of Defense glared at the man.

'Is it possible that someone could have loaded *Opus* into our most secure servers – right under our noses?'

'It would be extreme to consider that possibility.'

'Why?' she insisted.

'The Vault was established in order to protect those systems as a security protocol after 9/11, so that we had a

secure backdoor entry to the most critical cyber infrastructural platforms in the nation, in the event of a national debacle, or attack.’

The Secretary of Defense looked at her watch.

‘Obviously someone broke in,’ she declared.

‘How do we stop it?’

‘We have to cut the power to the Vault, that’s the only way at this point’ answered Aldous.

‘But how?’

Aldous was flustered.

‘There are no protocols for it because we never considered that the Vault could be compromised.’

Jennie Castro’s look conveyed the ultimatum without further words.

Aldous picked up a phone.

‘Get me the Senior Engineer on the watch,’ he demanded with a desperate tone.

Aldous looked at the eyes of dozens of people who stared back at him.

The room was utterly silent as the minute hand on a nearby wall-clock clicked methodically toward 12 p.m. – just three minutes away.

## *Falling from the Sky*

Flight BA-595 from Gatwick, London, was supposed to have landed at Chicago O'Hara nearly fifty-three minutes ago.

Its fuel tanks were now reaching a critical point.

And while the cabin crew and the pilot, Captain Andrews, had tried to assure the passengers that there was an unexpected delay and that all was in-hand, a tangible sense of panic was permeating the plane.

The ground-to-air radio beacons were dead, providing absolutely no navigational assistance whatsoever. Their emergency back-up radio was also next to dead after nearly an hour of repeated use, and what little communication they had received from O'Hara tower, simply directed them to maintain their present altitude until further notice – putting them on an elliptical path in the skies over Chicago.

What they didn't know was that emergency ground crews were already battling with two planes which had attempted an emergency landing due to low fuel levels, one of them having skidded off the runway, clipping the other and then crashing into a power station. The main runway was now blocked with massive amounts of debris, and countless injured and dead.

Unfortunately, passengers were already screaming about the fact that through their cabin windows could be seen many other planes, above and below them, dangerously near.

Captain Andrews had never experienced anything quite like this in his twenty-three years of flight time. He had 224 passengers and his own crew, all depending on him at this moment, and he was locked into a circling pattern with an inestimable number of other jets all around him - doing the same. If he veered off course, taking matters into his own

hands, he might in fact endanger the lives of everyone aboard his plane and another. At this close proximity, two jets could easily collide.

‘What do you want to do,’ asked his co-pilot with a look of deep concern, thinking just then about his own mortality, his pregnant wife back home in London and his two young daughters.

Captain Andrews gritted his teeth – feeling a sense of complete frustration.

‘We stay the course,’ said Andrews. ‘Meanwhile, find me an alternative landing strip, even a stretch of highway, where we can land. We have another five minutes of fuel for cruising – after that, I’m taking her down whether sanctioned or not.’

## *The Kiss of Death*

Catherine Jenkins had been monitoring the life signs of the elderly woman under her charge for two days now.

The seventy-one year-old Mrs. Prath, had sustained a severe heart attack some days before and was under heavy sedation and life support systems were keeping her alive during her recovery period. A critical change in the balance could mean a rapid decline and even death in just minutes.

So of course, adding challenge to her job, when the power in the core of Atlanta suddenly died, and the back-up power generators which the hospital kept in reserve for just such an event, did not kick in, Katherine raced to Mrs. Prath's room.

In a split second she saw what she feared would be the case - all the machinery had died, pitching the room into blackness.

She checked the woman's vitals and detected nothing.

'Shit!' she exclaimed as she grabbed the breathing bag and began to pump air, manually, through the tube which fed into the woman's mouth.

She continued to check her vitals with her other hand, but nothing changed.

Katherine pumped harder.

Still no change.

Sweat began to form on her brow and dripped down into her eyes.

She knew that she had only a minute or two to get the heart pumping and oxygen to the brain, or she would surely die.

## *Seconds to Apocalypse*

Jennie Castro stared with a sense of growing consternation at the wall clock, as someone at the other end of the line got the head shift-engineer to the phone.

Already a team of people had been dispatched to the lower level of the annex structure beneath the Pentagon.

They now had only two minutes remaining before 12 p.m.

Finally a voice answered.

Aldous Connor handed the phone to her.

‘This is the Secretary of Defense, I am authorizing you to pull the plug on the Vault – cut all power to every computer. You are to do this now and without question.’

‘But...’ the man jittered with evident hesitation, ‘Madam Secretary that would disengage thousands of servers. I can’t do that without a direct mandate from the President herself,’ his voice twittered with trepidation.

Jennie Castro was about to launch an assault at the man when a hand firmly grasped hers and the President pried the phone from her tensed fingers.

Constantine Le Dour spoke with a firm voice of authority.

‘This is President Le Dour. Cut the power on every single computer in that Vault, and do it now, or I will personally hold you responsible for the consequences.’

With sixty-five seconds remaining, the senior engineer, now in a state of panic and not even understanding the full depth of why he was being required to do so, ran to a nearby master panel with a covey of security personnel on his heels.

He fumbled with the keys in his pocket, his hands now becoming wet with perspiration as the anxiety flooded his system with adrenaline.

Finally he had the right key. He slipped it into the lock, turned it, and watched as two panels slid apart.

Thirty-three seconds remained.

He then inserted a secondary key into the locking system. The system being designed to prevent anyone without access from being able to sabotage the nation's central mind.

Already a crowd of people, security personnel and even members of other departments, having heard what was happening, had arrived to where he was standing, all of them nervously glancing at their watches as precious final seconds ticked by.

As the secondary panel slid open, they had but five seconds left.

The man hesitated a brief second, but then recalling the words of the President, he reached up and punched the emergency kill switch, shutting down a literal sea of computing minds.

## *Silent Death*

The trading floor at the New York Stock Exchange was filled with a vociferous sound, the collective voices of hundreds of people yelling and clamoring to be heard over the din of alarm, as markets had already started to crash.

The cataclysmic attack on the Bank of America had started the hysteria.

As news of each successive attack riveted the Exchange, the panic morphed to sheer consternation as investors desperately tried to navigate the impossible waters now facing them and as the value of the American dollar plummeted.

As if it couldn't get any worse, at precisely twelve p.m., *Opus* struck its final blow as every computer screen linked to the NASDAQ suddenly vanished in a sea of nothing.

Overhead monitors blinked out – their contents mysteriously vanquished, and a ghostly buzz permeated the air as the informational highway which fueled the largest financial stock exchange in the world, was suddenly rendered dead.

A strange silence descended upon the men and women who stared, wide-eyed, as a macabre hush engulfed them, something which they had never witnessed before.

## *One Bullet in the Chamber*

Moments later, the news reached the President that the NASDAQ had just crashed and that the entire New York Stock exchange, the financial nerve-center of America, had just been effaced.

The President turned to the Secretary of Defense with shocked eyes.

Jennie spoke. ‘That was number twelve, Madam President, which means that the Beta version of *Opus* got out.’

Jennie Castro felt her chest suddenly constricting, as if a metal ring had been clamped around her and was choking the air from her lungs.

‘If we don’t stop it now, it will penetrate security walls and start spreading globally. That would be an end-game.’

The President gritted her jaws as she considered her next step.

‘Ok, enact **Shutdown**,’ she declared. ‘Kill the grids in New York City, do it now.’

**Shutdown** was an emergency protocol and one which only the President could invoke. Although the contingency for invoking such was considered extreme, especially since by doing so, it would essentially depower millions of homes and businesses, stopping a deadly virus such as *Opus* was certainly an apt use of it.

Starting with the *New York Power Authority*, every major power supplier in New York State was contacted on their emergency line. The proper codes were provided, and then the desperate waiting ensued.

Minutes passed by – precious minutes during which time *Opus* could easily have penetrated the security walls which

protected other systems, both within the nation, and overseas – and already, it could be wreaking more havoc.

A desperate and ghostly silence strangled the room.

No one spoke – and it seemed as if no one even breathed.

A nearby clock ticked.

Each thrust of its second hand felt like the pounding of a hammer in every ear – blistering, painful – with anticipatory dread that if they did not succeed in stopping the virus now – that there was little chance of ever doing so.

The President's mind was quaking with a sense of nervous hysteria.

*What would she tell the nation if Opus got loose? She wondered with a sense of nervous hysteria.*

*And for that matter, if it jumped borders and crossed oceans, how would she explain that a weapon, designed by the US Department of Defense, had just caused incalculable damage – critically affecting the lives of billions of people and in all likelihood resulting in global economic collapse?*

She sighed with dread.

*Was this the end of a life-long dream, a career as the first female President? Death at the hand of some digital monster that she had nothing to do with creating and yet which had been unleashed during her watch?*

Finally, the abyss of silence was broken as word came back that the power to New York City had been cut. A dramatic hand of finality which also affected countless homes and businesses in New Jersey, Upstate New York and even reaching as far as southern Ontario, in Canada. In effect, plunging that entire portion of the eastern seaboard into its darkest hour in many years.

And now they waited.

## *Powerless*

As the fuel alarm sounded loudly within the cockpit, Captain Andrews calmly, but firmly, instructed his co-pilot to announce emergency landing procedures.

Over the loudspeakers, the passengers were suddenly confronted with their worst nightmare, and informed to brace for impact.

Stewardesses raced up and down the aisles, ensuring that everyone was strapped in, and directing them into the standard crash-landing position, with their heads bowed forward.

Unable to pick up any decipherable chatter from the airport tower at O'Hara, Captain Andrews had decided on a bold move. He was not going to wait until his plane fell from the skies.

His co-pilot had found a small abandoned airstrip, north of Chicago. It was barely enough to land a small plane on, and certainly not regulation size for a 737 such as his, but it would have to do. And given the fact that the plane was now running on fumes, he only hoped he had enough to get there.

For minutes now he had been mentally visualizing the flight configurations of the other planes which maintained their own elliptical holding patterns above and below him, as well as to his right and left – a nightmarish scene at best.

And then, without another word, he banked his plane a hard right, slipping through a narrow window and dropping a thousand feet before leveling off. Above him, not more than 500 feet, another passenger jet swept by, like a gentle bird, the roar of its engines sending a shudder through every passenger.

'Ok, eighteen kilometers, bearing 33 – that's your mark,' said the co-pilot.

Andrews nodded, while keeping the nose of the plane aimed below the horizon, steadily dropping the altitude. At their current speed, they would be there in just over a minute.

‘Lower the landing gear and bring the flaps down 50%,’ he ordered.

The co-pilot complied.

The combination of empty fuel tanks, lowered airspeed and critically low altitude had now put the plane at a point of no return.

Captain Andrews would either land or crash – there were no other options.

The pastoral countryside, patterned in rectangular farm plots of pastel green and gold hues; some idling roads and farmhouses which dotted the landscape – passed by below.

To those looking up into the air – it might have been just another airplane – except this time, it was swooping over them, dangerously close – like some bird of prey of Jurassic times.

‘There!’ pointed the co-pilot.

Captain Andrews also spotted the small strip.

From their current altitude it appeared more like a stick of gum sitting on the sidewalk far ahead.

Captain Andrews pulled back on the throttle, dramatically lowering his airspeed.

‘Up flaps,’ commanded the Captain.

‘1.5 kilometers,’ announced the co-pilot.

The passenger cabin was a glum scene. People prayed and whispered to one another, final words of love and shed tears - some whimpering, while others quietly made peace with the inevitability of incipient death.

Ahead of them, the small landing strip, cracked and lumpy with overgrowth – the result of nature’s invasion after years of disuse, loomed.

‘Drop the flaps, now!’ boomed the Captain’s voice.

The engines suddenly coughed and then died, their fuel source now empty.

The plane glided down with a bare whisper, the only sound was that of air trailing and whistling off its spoilers.

With only a fractional window with which to successfully touch down on the narrow and short runway, Captain Andrews waited until the sliver of asphalt had nearly disappeared under the nose of his plane, and with just some fifty feet remaining between them and the earth, he pulled back on the stick bringing the nose upward at a steep and unnatural angle, causing the plane to groan and shudder.

Like a giant bird, it suddenly heaved up.

It was a horrifying feeling to everyone except the Captain. Even his co-pilot, a neophyte to the game, was quietly praying.

With no lift remaining, the plane dropped, like a rock. Its rear landing-gear slammed into the asphalt with an ugly and bone-jarring crunch.

The plane nosed-down, its front wheel crashing into the runway with an equally painful smash.

Captain Andrews engaged the braking system – maximizing them into a near death-grip. Plumes of black smoke engulfed the bird as it bumped down the runway – the heat and friction reaching a point where the oil lubricated parts and the bearings began to flame.

Sweat poured down his face, soaking his entire body as Captain Andrews gripped the wheel, fighting against the torque which pulled the plane dangerously to the right.

The beast twisted as it slowed, and finally, it struck the edge of the asphalt, its front wheel dipping into the soft dirt.

Like an athlete exhausted from a torturous run, the plane nosed down into a small hillock, exhaling its final breath – and then it groaned to a stop.

## *Desperation*

Nearly two minutes had passed since Mrs. Prath had stopped breathing.

By now, Katherine had started to pump the woman's heart, trying to get it going again, while intermittently squeezing the respiratory bag in order to force air into her lungs.

'Come on!' she exclaimed.

Perspiration streamed down her face.

The woman's visage remained ashen and lifeless.

When the elderly woman had first come under her charge some days before, Katherine had felt a certain kinship for her. The woman was the same age as her mother, when she had died. Katherine was still plagued by her mother's passing. She had fallen over unconscious one day and Katherine had found her there, in her kitchen, as lifeless as the cold floor upon which she laid – her death caused by a brain aneurysm.

She had been helpless then to save her own mother.

Somehow, Mrs. Prath was a living and breathing embodiment, a vicarious symbol through whom she could perpetuate the life of someone she loved and missed more than anyone in the world.

'Come on – damn you! Breathe!' she screamed.

In her desperation, she let go of the air bag and climbed onto the bed and then, with both palms, she pressed into the woman's chest.

'You are not going to die on me,' her voice echoed.

'Breathe goddamn you!'

The image of her mother, her ashen and lifeless face suddenly froze in her mind.

Katherine let out a cry.

Tears pooled in her eyes, blurring her vision.

Frustration now charged her system, as she continued to pump the woman's frail and lifeless form.

Another nurse, hearing her, ran into the room and grabbed the breathing apparatus and began to pump it once again.

Suddenly a choking sound emitted from the lifeless body.

Mrs. Prath's eyes shot open.

She gasped the air like a parched desert swallows the vagrant rain.

Relief washed over Katherine as tears streamed from her eyes – like warm rain on a summer day.

## *Exposed*

Henry Rathe had been asleep for barely two hours when the knock came to the door of his two story house.

He donned his clothes and then clumsily made his way down the stairs. Opening the door he was shocked to see five men facing him – each wearing FBI jackets and stern looks.

‘Mr. Henry Rathe?’ one of them asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Sir, you’re going to need to come with us.’

Rathe conceded without protest.

A fatalistic smile formed on his lips.

*‘How did they find out?’* He asked himself.

Of course, he could not have known, nor would he ever, that in fact it was a young man from Minneapolis, by the name of Troy Evans, who had eventually blown the whistle on the whole scheme.

Troy had been tasked by the Secretary of Defense to try and recollect any obtuse details from the dialogue which he had overheard.

The first detail which surfaced had lead them to the Vault, the source of the infection.

But another, seemingly irrelevant comment which Troy recalled, had brought down the house of cards.

One of the men had made reference to an anonymous accomplice, referring to him as *HR*. It was a bare thread, a mere whisper in the totality of their discussion, and yet, in a spark of insight, one of those bolts from the blue, Aldous Connors had drawn a mental connection straight to Henry Rathe.

In the course of his work, Aldous had crossed paths with most of the DOD’s primary IT engineers and developers – and

those who maintained the innermost mind, the Vault itself. He recalled that on one or two occasions, they had referred to one of their associates as *HR*.

During the intense interrogation which ensued, it was pointed out to Henry Rathe that only ten other people in his department were capable of extracting, or even loading *Opus* into the servers in the Vault – and none of them were suspected.

It didn't take long for Henry's mettle to weaken.

Like ice in the face of a hot sun, his constitution eventually waned and melted as they plied him with question after question.

Finally - his defensive ramparts started to crumble.

A twisted smile formed on his lips as he came to the perverse realization that he was tired of playing the denial card and that he wanted to seize the glory of the moment as his own.

*And why should I defend the others – I'm going to be dead sooner than later?* He thought.

If this was to be his swan song, his final moment in the spotlight, then he would take it with a bow and nothing less.

'It was supposed to be the perfect plan,' he began – his voice but a dim whisper.

That first utterance was the fracture in the dam, a small fissure which resulted in a flood.

Henry Rathe revealed all.

And as he did, he also recalled back to that day with Tanner Corbett, when they had met at the Greenbrier Hotel, in West Virginia, where Tanner had arrogantly proclaimed if ever they were caught in the act, that he would probably spend a lifetime in jail, while Henry wouldn't last more than a few months.

It seemed like poetic justice that he was helping the man make his prediction come true.

One hour later, Tanner Corbett was arrested by the FBI in San Diego, and charged with treason.

## *New Terms of Engagement*

When news came that the power shut-down in New York City had successfully isolated *Opus*, caging in the monster and preventing it from spreading any further, the President had breathed a tremendous sigh of relief – while others around her cheered, and some simply sat down and cried tears of relief.

Of course, there was immense collateral damage incurred as a result of having shut down one of the largest cities in America, a global financial nerve center in fact, but it was a bullet that everyone decidedly took as opposed to letting the beast wreak more havoc.

Already the death toll was rising around the nation – fatalities caused by circumstances which would trace back to *Opus*. It would not be a good day to be remembered – not ever.

President Le Dour had just survived a most grueling initiation process to the Oval Office, which few before her had ever encountered.

That was not to say that her predecessors had been less engaged or less challenged in their own way – but certainly, no one before her had endured the harrowing experience of waiting, in anticipation, to see if a deadly computer virus had been unleashed upon the world.

On her way to the Situation Room, she took a moment to stroll, alone, through the hall of fame, casually glancing at the photo gallery of the nation's former Presidents, recalling to mind as she did some of their more notable accomplishments.

She paused to smile at the image of President Eisenhower who had successfully navigated America through the worst world war in history.

The next photo, President Truman, wiped away her smile. She considered the man a coward, someone who had capitulated to the darker side and had ordered two Atomic warheads be dropped on the civilian populace of Japan – murdering at least 200,000 people and all for nothing considering the Japanese had wanted to begin talks of surrender.

Then came John F. Kennedy's picture - her personal hero and icon. One of the most loved Presidents, JFK had averted a near brush with a global nuclear cataclysm between America and the USSR over the Cuban Missile Crisis. His leadership and his staunch hold to his principles had staved off an event which could have redefined the very nature of humanity's existence.

And of course, Ronald Reagan, she grinned at his charming face. Reagan had been the President who challenged Gorbachev, then leader of the USSR, to dismantle the Wall, the symbol of Communist oppression and through the process of his negotiations had helped to dismantle the largest communist nation, restoring freedom to millions of people.

*Would today be her defining moment?* She wondered.

*Or would she best be remembered as the woman who had averted a catastrophe?*

Le Dour was under no delusion about the depth of corruption which seethed through the very heart of the government. She knew that the road ahead of her would not be an easy one. She would have to lead the nation back to health, and in that charge, she would excise the cancer which had infected it, however painful that process would be.

She arrived to the large conference facility at the White House, the Situation Room – where she found herself facing the same people as several days before.

The last several days had matured her by years, it seemed. It had also steeled her to the principles which she had built her political platform on.

She smiled at the anticipant faces.

‘We’ve got a hard road ahead of us,’ she began.

‘The four men from our own ranks, whom you now know were complicit in launching this attack, will spend most, if not all of their lives in prison. However, in my books, they are only the tip of the iceberg. Those they served, those who privately funded and enabled them, those who stood to gain by their perversity in trying to create another false act of terrorism against our nation...’ she paused to let that sink in, ‘...are going to be exposed. If we can’t trust our own governance, we cannot serve the people who have entrusted us with the power to do so. I for one intend on serving those who elected me.’

President Le Dour walked to one side of the room. Behind her, on the wall, was a portrait of George Washington.

‘On the other hand, we’re not going to engage in a witch hunt. In the main, we know their agenda – and ultimately, that will be their undoing.’

Her eyes narrowed and her face became manifestly dour.

‘But right here and right now, I am personally dropping the gauntlet. As my closest staff, the people I should be able to most trust, these are the terms of engagement if you want to remain in my Administration for the next four years. It’s a take-it or leave-it proposition and non-negotiable. If you’ve got a foot in the other camp, we will find out about it. If you’ve got another agenda, you’re going to stand out like a sore thumb. I’m not going to stand at a podium and declare ourselves to be the global protectorate of democracy anymore, while enabling the greedy to trim off the fat for their own bank accounts. Those days are over. We’re going to be talking about jobs, security, education, technology, putting America ahead where it counts – exporting knowledge – not war.’

She crossed her arms and stared hard and long.

‘We are going to stand up for those values which we teach our kids in school. We don’t educate them to kill other people.

We don't teach them to profile segments of humanity as good and bad, Chinese, Russian or Islamic – the process of objectification which permits war and hostility to be waged against other human beings. Those days are over. The only paradigm I will espouse during my tenure is one of true democracy – not one that pretends to be a democracy and then goes out and picks fights with anyone it chooses to. The American culture has not permeated the world by force of military. It never has and it never will. We have won the hearts of the world, where we have, because of blue jeans, iPods, Hollywood, Elvis Presley, Bruce Springsteen and fast food; and moreover, and more importantly – a way of life. As long as we continue to invade other nations and try to enforce our form of democracy on them, they will fight us, and terrorism will grow. So, we're not going to enable that process any more. We're going to build our nation and export our culture and our knowledge through the only channels which have ever worked – cultural infusion and peace. If you disagree with that platform, there's the door – just walk!' she pointed.

She looked into the faces of the military generals who watched on, their steeled poker looks revelatory of their withheld commentary.

'I know this doesn't bode well with some of you, and frankly, I don't give a shit anymore. Naturally, we will maintain a military force sufficient with which to defend our borders and in need, to help our allies – but we are not going to lavish away the tax payer dollars entrusted to us, in order to aggrandize a military machine which lines the pockets of private corporations and bankers who feed on war and death. Not on my watch.'

She grinned.

'Of course, you can find a reason to impeach me and put someone in my place who is more sympathetic to the other agenda. But I assure you that I have no sexual escapades or

secret affairs hidden in my closet; and I most certainly have never been bought-out by corporate campaign sponsors. I worked my way to the Presidency entirely on my own nickel. So, short of a bullet to my head, you're going to have to deal with me for the next four years – maybe even more.'

The room was utterly silent.

'Those are my terms as the President of your nation, and in less than an hour from now, I am doing a press conference and publicly announcing those very terms to our nation – to the world. I am going to tell them exactly what I have just said to you because that is precisely why they elected me to this chair – they wanted transparency. They wanted a President who did not draw the line between the government and the people it served, cutting the informational highway and keeping them in the black in order to hide its own secret affairs. And I am certainly not going to vomit up that tripe about "national security". America hasn't been invaded, nor even attacked for over two hundred years. And before you lecture me about 9/11 – think again, think really hard - because I have already ordered the tomes of hidden documents to be exhumed from the vaults, and I plan to expose the truth about that incident and show the world that it was not the hand of terrorists who committed that atrocity – certainly not the terrorists they have been lead to believe.'

Jennie Castro, the Secretary of Defense, was quietly cheering her on – practically forcing herself not to jump up and applaud the President.

'You have to make a decision, do you want to be part of an Administration that sets our nation on a road that will restore the American dream, or do you want to pretend to be a player while marching to another drum?'

She tipped her head at them.

'The choice is yours. My door is open for any resignations. I won't hold it against you if you decide to leave – and there

will be no public disavowal and no questions asked whatsoever. But it will be the only get-out-of-jail-free-card that you will ever get from me. If you stay, and you play according to any other terms than these, then I will definitely hold it against you – and that's a promise.'

## *Six months later*

It had been six months since the attack on America's cyber infrastructure – an event which had resulted in the deaths of over several thousand people nationwide.

The tragic loss of life came in many forms; including traffic lights which had suddenly stopped working - resulting in disastrous collisions; hospital life-support systems failing; powerless homes where the elderly or sick had panicked and critically injured themselves; and of course there had been two passenger jets which had collided on the runway during an attempted emergency landing at Chicago's O'Hare airport – resulting in a disastrous death toll.

The cost to the American economy was staggering. Countless billions of dollars in reparations to fix cyber-infrastructures which had been destroyed in the wake of Opus.

In terms of damage, it was the worst catastrophe in the nation's history – and analysts were still challenged as they crunched the numbers in order to determine the net effects.

It would not be remembered with the same sentiment as 9/11 – but it certainly had made its mark in history as the most heinous act of treason ever. And moreover, because the attack had been spawned by members of the US government itself, the ripple effects were far more ponderous.

A special Presidential investigative body was preparing its final report on the 9/11 attack, one which would send shock waves resonating throughout the world.

It would change the political landscape forever.

But that was the future.

Henry Rathe had long since expired in prison – having hung himself with a bed sheet.

His passing was barely remarked upon.

Tanner Corbett, the former CEO of Viral-Sec, was serving a life-time sentence. His company, Viral-Sec, had filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy, and no longer existed.

Others who were complicit in the plot, whether serving minor roles or simply exercising blind complacency, had been plucked from the ranks of governance and were either doing jail-time, or had been released from their employment.

A new budgetary system was in the works, which imposed strict control parameters on the expenditure of the tax dollars, providing algorithmic beacons which would alert Congress as well as other facets of the government, as to misappropriations, excesses of expenditures into the hands of private corporations, and ultimately providing greater transparency as to how the American tax dollar was being spent for the good of the nation and not to spawn more war.

The hammer of justice had been served.

Meanwhile, as to be expected, two Hollywood film studios were racing to be the first to get out their movie renditions of the event.

Statistically speaking, the usual media coverage on foreign terrorist threats, had dropped by 92% - as if, by coincidence, no one was particularly interested in hearing about terrorism anymore, and even more *coincidental* was the fact that terrorist threats seemed to have magically diminished.

Certain it was that the President and her Administration were no longer harbingers of the terrorist paradigm, and if Washington wasn't fanning the flames, few others around the world were interested in picking up the torch and running with it.

Dr. Chang, and his team in China, were publically and formally thanked by the President of America, for their part in helping to avert a major catastrophe. As a result, US/China relations were already on the up and up, simply due to the fact

that the two nations had let down their guard, trusted one another implicitly, and discovered that it was possible to do so.

When the dust storm in the White House had settled, the President personally invited Troy, Melanie and Homeland Security agent, Jim Reynolds, to Washington. There, she presented Troy and Melanie with the Presidential Citizens Medal in recognition of their extraordinary deeds performed on behalf of the nation. Jim Reynolds received a Presidential Commendation for his exemplary work in the matter.

At a dinner with the President, the Secretary of Defense, and Aldous Connor, and many other members of her Administration - the President tipped an eye at Troy and whispered.

‘I’ve been meaning to ask you, can you really leave your body whenever you choose to?’

Troy nodded.

‘And you can go anywhere?’ she asked with a hesitant tone in her voice.

‘Yes, Madam President.’

Constantine Le Dour leaned back, crossing her arms across her chest.

She tipped her head to Jennie Castro with a playful look in her eyes.

‘Maybe we should hire this guy. Imagine what we could do with those skills?’ she flicked her eyebrows as an impish smile creased her lips.

## *The Next Threshold*

Troy sat at the table of the small street-side café.

The café brought back memories of his ordeal.

The wounds had long ago healed, but there yet remained a sublime vestige of that experience which still ghosted him.

It wasn't the pain he remembered - it was the sense of trepidation that came with having lost his freedom, and nearly, his life, at the hands of people who had the power to abuse a system and who would have succeeded had he and others not interrupted their plans.

One of the casualties from that whole affair had been his sense of innocent naivety.

It was an awakening for Troy and one which had catalyzed him to pursue *Out-Step* with intensified vigor.

He sipped on his coffee, watching the passers-by on the street.

So deeply consumed by thought, Troy wasn't even aware that Melanie was already standing there, watching him.

'Uh-hum,' she announced.

He turned and smiled at her.

'I hope you weren't watching that blond who just passed by,' she said with an affected look of anticipatory jealousy.

'She was cute,' he teased.

Melanie huffed while slipping into a chair across from him. She ordered a coffee and some pastry.

In spite of the disparities in their personalities, their relationship had continued to bloom. From a common seed of mutually shared experiences and moreover, the ultimate trust they felt for one another – their friendship had consummated into something even more.

‘So, what’s on your mind?’ asked Melanie, noticing that Troy was pensive.

‘Are you sure you want to hear this?’

Her lips bunched up in the same pouty way that he liked.

‘The last time you asked me that question we ended up running for our lives across three state lines.’

‘Don’t panic. I haven’t found any new conspiracies, not yet at least,’ he grinned. ‘But I have made some interesting inroads with *Out-Step*.’

‘Hmm, is that why you look so tired?’

‘A minor sacrifice. And besides, you snore – so it’s a good use of my time.’

Melanie grinned. ‘So you claim.’

‘Anyhow, I’ve been testing myself, to see how far I can go from my body when I am outside of it.’

‘And?’ she mumbled over a mouthful of pastry.

‘Pretty far, actually.’

‘Like where, the moon, Mars...?’ she lightly bantered.

‘Much further.’

Melanie nearly choked on her pastry.

‘Seriously?’ she asked after a gulp of coffee.

Troy flicked his brows. ‘Yes, seriously. You would be amazed how easy it is to visit places that are beyond the means of the technology we currently possess.’

‘Wow ...’ she chimed. ‘You keep me surprising me.’

Troy slipped back into a quiet mode, pensive. She waited for him to talk – knowing that he was churning up something.

‘Now that you’ve survived a few chapters of my life, what’s your take on *Out-Step* – professionally speaking?’

Melanie embraced her coffee cup with both hands as she considered her answer.

‘To be honest, you have proven to me that it is creditable. I think it deserves some real investigation and codification.’

‘If only more people saw this subject as you do.’

‘Give it time, Troy. Knowledge is a precursor to change – but change doesn’t necessarily happen overnight.’

‘You keep surprising me too with your wisdom.’

Melanie reached over, touching her hand to his.

‘Someone has to keep you tethered to this world.’

‘Indeed,’ he grinned.

‘You were about to tell me about some recent insights you had with *Out-Step* – I’m all ears,’ said Melanie.

‘It goes back to what I was saying, that I have been testing myself to see how far I can go.’

‘So you were serious about travelling to other parts of the solar system?’ asked Melanie with a quizzical look.

‘Not just the solar system, Mel. I am referring to places much further away.’

‘But how is that possible? The closest systems to us are light years from Earth.’

‘Let me explain this from a different angle, ok?’

She nodded.

‘Do you remember what the speed of light is?’

‘Not off the top of my head.’

‘Light travels at 186,000 miles per second, or about 299,000 kilometers per second.’

‘Ok?’

‘To put that in perspective, it means that the light from our own sun takes about eight minutes to reach us. And light from the brightest star in our sky, Sirius, takes over 800 years to reach our eyes; while light from the furthest recorded galaxies is estimated to take billions of years to reach Earth.’

‘Ok, so what’s the point of this science lesson?’

‘With the exception of those stellar objects close to our own, most of what we see in terms of light from other galaxies is just a picture of the past – we are looking at a snapshot from a very long time ago. In some ways, astronomers are more like archeologists studying fossilized

light from deep space – they are not seeing the universe as it exists at this very instant in time – they are measuring it through a portal.’

Troy paused.

‘So here’s a crazy idea for you. What if, through *Out-Step*, one could visit distant galaxies, see any location in the universe as it is right at this moment, millions of years before astronomers and cosmologists would ever record the fact? What if we could study the universe as it is, and from that, gain an understanding of its scope and size, and moreover, how it is evolving right now?’

‘You’re suggesting that through the out-of-body experience that the time-space factor could be eliminated completely?’

‘I am. In fact, the tests I’ve performed, prove it. Just like I can move to the Denny’s Restaurant down the road, or to Athens, Greece, in the same nanosecond of time, so too can I visit our moon, or a distant galaxy, almost in the same measurable time.’

Melanie stared at Troy for a time with a mesmerized look in her eyes.

‘That sounds so bizarre.’

‘At first, I thought so too. But now that I’ve done it many times, I’m not questioning myself anymore. As fantastic as it may sound, I have visited distant systems that we can only dream of ever visiting. Stephen Hawking would be blown away if he could look into the maws of a black hole – not only hypothesize about its existence, but see one. It’s quite overwhelming.’

‘And you have?’

He nodded with repressed excitement coursing his system.

‘Of course none of this is creditable from the perspective of science, not yet. But if I could find a way to substantiate what I see in these outings, this could be the catalyst which jumps that gap between what science now sees as paranormal, and

elevating *Out-Step* as a whole new tool of science – opening up doors to knowledge.’

‘Imagine what potential this has to change our view of the universe and life? Replacing hypotheses with facts.’

‘What you’re suggesting could really upset the apple cart too.’

‘I know,’ chimed Troy.

‘The last time I checked, Einstein said that no particle in the universe, at least in theory, can travel faster than light. So how do you explain that?’

Troy responded. ‘I don’t have to debunk Einstein or anyone for that matter – because they are measuring the world around us which can be seen, or touched, or perceived. But we are not physical. The soul of a person is not operating in the same dimension and it cannot be measured in terms of the laws which apply to the world. That is why people who have experienced out-of-body can see and do things that are inexplicable when compared to any known paradigm. That is why science can’t measure our true essence with calipers and scales. And that is why I can be hovering over a crater on the dark side of the moon or I can be looking at the brilliance of a giant star in some distant galaxy, all in a split second of time.’

‘Wow,’ said Melanie, her eyes glazing over as she considered his words.

‘That is such a mind twister.’

‘I know,’ replied Troy.

He paused before continuing. Frustration growing on his face.

‘Here is my problem. The more I push myself, and the more I discover, the more bizarre it sounds. If I were to open my mouth and declare all of this to the world, many would just call me weird, others would mentally ostracize me, some would buy it, but science would largely scoff at me. The question is – how do I bridge this over into something

creditable, something which can be used to advance the culture?’

‘That is a heady question, Troy. I wasn’t expecting this depth of conversation over a cup of coffee.’

‘I know it sounds like I am obsessing, but I’m not.’

She smiled at him.

‘This sounds a lot like the guy I first met many months ago, who knew a secret which the rest of the world would not accept at the time. You never gave up back then, in spite of all the impossible odds – so I figure that you will find a way to get people on board with you.’

‘I hope so.’

She tipped her head at him.

‘Do you remember when we were standing on the edge of that cliff, with police surrounding us, and you asked me if I trusted you.’

Troy grinned.

‘Look where it got us.’

Her smile reminded him why he loved her so much.

## Epilogue

Dr. Carlton Faber is a neurological specialist, and a graduate of King's College, the London School of Medicine.

He also specializes in Psionics, a subject matter sometimes dubbed as "Mental Engineering" - which deals in the study of paranormal abilities such as telepathy, telekinesis and other supposed abilities of the mind to which science has not yet lent any firm accreditation.

The forum, at King's College, where he is speaking, is crowded to the rafters with students, faculty and other guests.

Faber begins.

'There are several theories about our origin as a species.

'One of the more popular ones, although still just a theory, follows the Darwinian tangent of spontaneity - that is, evolution from the primordial seas, from amoeba, up through the ape, to our current highly advanced state.

'Many adhere to the belief that everything exists by the grace of a Supreme Being.

'And, though less popular, but by no means less plausible, another theory suggests that we were placed here, by no accident, to eke out our existence, and that our forebears are out there in the distant stars.'

He pauses to look at the faces staring back at him.

'For the purposes of this lecture, I invite you to set aside your own personal convictions in this matter.

‘What I am about to relate to you does require a certain degree of open mindedness – as is the case with any new scientific discovery. New frontiers offer challenge to existing ideas. The process of discovery can be both exhilarating and unsettling.’

He presses a remote in his hand.

The large screen behind him illuminates with the picture of a human skull and the brain within.

He points a red laser at the brain.

‘That tiny point there, barely the size of a grain of rice, is called the *pineal gland*. You can’t even see it clearly because it is so small. Here is an expanded view.’

A second image appears.

‘The pineal gland receives the second highest blood flow of any organ in the entire human body, next only to the kidneys. Assuming that there must be a logical reason for this, that it was not just an arbitrary design flaw in the human physiology, or a fluke of Mother Nature – a good scientist poses the one question which has resulted in many of the great advancements in history – *why?*

‘Researchers have discovered that this tiny gland, which you could balance on the tip of your baby finger, is engaged in the *awake* and *sleep* cycle of the human body. It is sensitive to light and darkness. It is involved with the secretion and/or production of both serotonin and melatonin, hormones which affect mood, appetite and sleep. That is essentially what science knows of its functions. It still remains an enigma, and it was this mystery which drew us to further investigate the pineal gland. However, we approached it from a different perspective.’

He presses the remote – another image appears.

‘Most or all of you recognize that – it is a microchip, also small enough to balance on the tip of your baby finger. That particular chip is identical to the one in your mobile phone

today – it is the central processing unit which interfaces between you, as the user, and the digital world around. That chip is capable of distinguishing between a billion to the order of a billion bytes of electronic information which is passing by our ears every second of the day. The informational highway which permeates the air around us, is detected by that tiny chip, and it is capable of delivering to your phone the emails, the messages, the films, the broad-based internet which you use. It is an amazing piece of technology, the cutting edge of quantum physics – and yet, we are still discovering new and greater horizons within this technology.’

He grins at the audience.

‘I pose this for your consideration – is it conceivable that the human brain possesses a component, such as this, one which is particularly sensitive to certain frequencies or wavelengths, and which interprets those wavelengths into the messages which are then carried through the neurological highways from our brains to our bodies – just like the chip in your phone translates your mechanical action of pressing certain buttons, into a final result?’

He pauses to watch the audience.

‘Does that sound incredible to you?’

‘On this premise, we conducted many tests, under the most controlled circumstances – and we did so as scientists. We discovered that the penial gland does not respond to any band or frequency that we could synthesize mechanically. However, we did discover, quite by mistake, as is the case with many great scientific discoveries, that there is something which seems to influence it.’

Faber points to the audience.

‘How many here have experienced this scenario. You are sitting in a restaurant, a pub, on the metro and you suddenly become aware that someone is looking at you? You have no idea why you feel that way, you just sense it?’

Hands rise in the air.

‘We tend to relegate this phenomena to something called the *Sixth Sense* – in other words, it doesn’t classify as a normal body perception – it is something different, inexplicable, and yet, many, or most of us, have experienced it. In fact, I have no doubt that there are men in this audience right now who have gawked at some pretty lady, somewhere, only to feel chagrin when she turned to look at you. What is that phenomena? How do we explain something which is completely intangible, and yet, which has the power of penetrating us, causing us to react, to perceive that another person is watching us from a distance, or admiring us from across the room? Science has no explanation for it.’

‘Our research, so far, suggests that there is a force, quite separate from the body, which coexists within or outside the body, a type of energy which tends to channel in the direction of the pineal gland. We have not yet established that the pineal gland then translates or interprets this energy into neuropathic messages which travel to the body, simply due to limited technology with which to measure the infinitely small wavelengths, but there is very strong reason to suggest that the source of that energy, or frequency, which focuses on the pineal gland, is in fact YOU.’

Another image appears on the screen showing the human body and a sphere outside of it.

‘We conducted some experiences taking a human body, a corpse, one which had just expired – and we discovered, as have others before us, that at the time of body death something seems to vacate its vicinity. There is a measurable, although very small, amount of brain activity which goes on after death, purely on a level of cellular shut down. But when you compare that, to a live person, and you measure the degree of energy, however minute, which exists within the cranium, and even around it, it suggests that clearly, some other presence is there.’

He smiles.

‘I can tell from some of the faces looking at me, that this sounds incredulous – but please try to maintain an open mind before you shut any doors. If we, as humanity, can develop a microchip which is capable of such sensitivity, that it can pluck out from the billions of wavelengths circling the globe, the precise and exact algorithms which you have just requested of it each time you press a button – why wouldn’t that same paradigm exist, in some form, within the human brain? A functionality, an organ, which is sensitive to a specific type of wavelength, one that is so small, and yet, so powerful, that it can be interpreted into the commands which pass along our neural pathways?’

He throws up a hand.

‘Of course we could just cast this off as another theory, and stay the course with the popular versions – that all we are, that the totality of our greatest abilities, is simply the result of some chemical mix and neurological phenomena in the matrix of the gray goo between our ear lobes. Unfortunately, it is my belief that by holding to such that we are enabling a regressive mentality – much the same as those who believed the world was flat in spite of evidence to the contrary. And I have yet to see a Petri dish with a sampling of the human brain, on its own, without any outside influence, vocalize a thought, or pick up a paint brush, or write a poem. It’s just goo – and without something to tell that goo what to do, it remains goo.

‘Our research, though not complete, demonstrably proves two things. There is a force, or energy, operating within the human body, which emanates from outside the brain itself – and this force disappears at or around the time of body death. That is unequivocal fact – and is not explained by any other paradigm. Secondly, the focal point of this energy is the pineal gland. How that energy exactly interacts, how the pineal translates it, if it does, suggests that there is an interface of

some sort – like the chip in your phone. Something is pressing the button inside our brains, and something else appears to be translating that action into the neurological signals to our body. Some of this is hypothesis, but only the latter, the rest is based on observable phenomenon.’

‘It is an amazing discovery – one which will inevitably lead to even greater ones.’

Faber presses the remote causing a large question mark to appear on the screen.

‘Philosophers and even the Ancients before us, possessing no apparent technology with which to prove their ideas, referred to the pineal gland as the “Third Eye” or the “Seat of the Soul”. Maybe they had it right?

He pauses to look at them intently.

‘There is a downside to this research. As our fellow scientists many decades ago came to realize, their discoveries in the field of nuclear physics became of primary interest in creating a weapon of mass destruction, quite opposed, I’m sure, to their ambitions as pioneers in that particular field.

‘So is the case with this research which I have given you just a taste of. In as much as it opens up many doors, possibly revealing the very mysteries of our existence, it also permits a door to a darker side, and one, which no doubt will be followed with equal zeal by a certain element of society.

‘The knowledge that certain wavelengths of a very high order, emanating from an outside source, are possibly an integral part of the interface between the brain and the body, could also be leveraged against humanity.

‘Mind control through subliminal wave-frequency input? Who knows?’

Faber shrugs.

‘That is the extent of my disclaimer on this subject, because too much of anything, or the abuse of anything good, can become a destructive pill.

‘But I for one, as are many, am a true believer that the only course for mankind is the one that leads to a totality of understanding of our existence. As long as there remains mysteries hidden behind closed doors, that ignorance will be our enslavers.’

Faber presses the remote and a picture of universe appears.

‘In closing I want to say this. There are, according to cosmologists and astronomers, billions upon billions of stars out there. The length and breadth of the viewable universe is beyond our scope to even measure accurately at this time. And whether the Big Bang came first, or the hand of God was there all along, does not change the fact that the interrelationship between the human body and the human soul, or whatever name we give this apparent energy source, have now been shown to be quite possibly entirely different singularities – meaning, that the source of each may not share any commonality except that we do share this universe.

‘Are there other universes?’

‘Will quantum physics reveal parallels to our own?’

‘Who knows?’

‘But certain it is that we are on the threshold of discarding conventionalism and the mediocrity of old-world conclusions, which to-date, have not truly answered the most fundamental questions of all.

*‘Who are we and where did we come from?’*

‘As I said, we can choose to discount all of this; we can choose to relegate it to the paranormal, or to religion and to ignore it as a creditable science.

‘However, ignorance makes a poor bedmate, and it is never a safe port for any ship.

‘Only truth provides us with the means of successfully navigating the seas which lie ahead of us.

‘Thank you.’