

# **DICK THORNBY THRILLERS BOXED SET**

**Dick Thornby Thrillers 1-3**

**#1 Net Impact**

**#2 Wet Work**

**#3 Flash Drive**

Donald J. Bingle

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# **NET IMPACT**

**Dick Thornby Thriller #1**

Donald J. Bingle

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**For Jean Rabe: the best friend any writer could have.**

## PROLOGUE

The squad moved through the unfamiliar terrain with practiced ease. Hawk was on point, scanning the all-too-near horizon methodically. Peregrine and Shrike trailed at an oblique angle to either side at least a grenade-blast's diameter behind, side points in a classic diamond pattern combat formation. Completing the geometry, Pigeon trailed the same distance yet again behind them, swiveling his head back at uneven intervals to watch their six.

The landscape sloped sharply, but unevenly, upward toward the cloudless, frozen blue sky. Huge slabs of rock, graffiti-free this far from respectable civilization, were strewn about their path like a young girl's jacks across the floor.

Hawk flicked his vision involuntarily heavenward as if a giant, red rubber ball might be descending to crush the squad while the enormous, granite jacks were swept up by a gargantuan eight-year old. He chuckled softly at his own paranoia. He'd seen plenty of bizarre things in his time, to be sure, especially in this strange land. This mission, in particular, presented dangers both from the terrain and from the authorities, should the squad be detected and an assassination team scrambled. But big, rubber balls wielded by colossal eight-year olds were not among them.



He slowed for a moment to verify the coordinates for the rendezvous against their tortuous progress through the wilderness, checked the time on the bulky, multi-functional chronograph on his left wrist, and then pressed the sub-vocal microphone hanging down from his headset against his neck with his beefy left hand.

He spoke without opening his mouth, in essence silent to everyone not hooked into the squad's encrypted digital frequency with a properly-tuned, algorithmic descrambler. The sub-vocal mike took a bit of getting used to, but with some practice it was so effective it sometimes seemed as if the squad members could read each other's minds. "We're close." Hawk gestured with his right arm at the arc of boulders blocking their vision up-slope. "In there, no doubt."

He stopped in his tracks and made a circular motion with his right hand while sending another sub-vocal command. "I want a three-sixty scan of the perimeter, around and above, before we go in."

Peregrine, Shrike, and Pigeon all stopped and began their scans, each starting with their individual sector priorities. Hawk trusted the group, trusted his men—this wasn't their first stroll in the wilderness—but he obeyed his own orders, doing a full sweep in all directions. Starting at twelve o'clock and then shifting in uniform increments through a complete arc in all dimensions, he systematically studied the view with a focused, penetrating gaze. After he completed the process using his own keen eyesight, he repeated the routine with the magnification turned up full on his precision optical scanner, a device that was a damn sight better than military grade and for which he had paid a pretty penny of his own hard-earned cash to possess.

The place was desolate and almost Spartan in its lack of significant landmarks. They never would have found the location for the meeting without a GPS device. The terrain was trackless, featureless, and empty beyond imagining. There were no buildings in line-of-sight. Not even a simple yurt could be found tucked into one of the numerous draws and valleys. No mine entrances could be spied perched on the sides of the steep slopes. The broad expanse of sky above was vacant, as if from a time primordial. Not a single plane or jet trail marred the uniform cobalt; no birds wheeled and screeed in the thin air at this altitude. The silence of the area was palpable—they hadn't seen any wildlife on the ground since Peregrine had flushed a deer hours and hours ago.

When everyone had confirmed what Hawk's own observations had told him, he motioned for the group to continue forward in combat

formation. Even though he hadn't signaled for it, a quick glance back told him they had all, like him, instinctively crouched lower as they moved into the circle of boulders for the anticipated rendezvous.

Hawk had to scramble hand-over-hand to make his way through the arc of boulders that ringed the meeting place like jagged teeth. Despite his attempts to be stealthy, he dislodged a few loose stones, which skittered down as he sought purchase in the crannies between slabs of lightly-veined, gray granite. He cursed at himself for the clumsy noisiness of his approach. When he finally reached a vantage point, however, perching like a bit of meat caught between teeth badly in need of flossing, he could see there was no one in the circle of stones to have heard his less-than-professional approach. He did a full scan of the surprisingly grassy, level area forming an oval in the midst of the protective rocks. The giant chunks of granite appeared from this vantage almost as if they had been placed with Stonehenge precision to fortify the simple field. When he found no sign of the squad's rendezvous counterparts or anyone else, he motioned the team forward and secured a protected covering position with a broad field of fire on the inner slope of the rocks.

One by one, the rest of the squad entered the circle and set up secure positions along the eastern arc of rocks and crevices to await their contacts. Hawk checked his chronograph and snarled softly. The other side was late.

Never a good sign.

The waiting was merely tedious; the second-guessing he was doing while he waited was torture. His mind raced, now unoccupied by the mundane mechanics of a stealth march through unfamiliar territory in a land more foreign than he had ever encountered before. It was a civilization that played by its own rules and was ruled by a largely faceless coterie of zealous bureaucrats who had immense power and their own hidden agendas. Things could happen here you could never believe, even though the powers-that-be proffered their citizens a façade of freedom and a semblance of self-determination.

In a place like this, things could go suddenly and terribly wrong.

So the worries raced through Hawk's mind. Was the squad being set up? Were the rebels they were to meet really rebels and not government goons on their own clandestine mission, a mission targeting his team's destruction? Had their long, lonely trek to this place been detected? Worse yet, had the squad members been identified and massive retaliation already been put into action, not just

here for him and his squad, but back home where everyone he loved worked and breathed and played, unaware of his role in this world, never assuming he could be this person and do the things he had done?

A chirp from Shrike broke his reverie. A force was moving into the teeth opposite their positions. The clatter of stones cascading down the far side of the fortress rocks gave the approaching group away even before they could reach the jagged openings allowing entry to the field spread out below. The noisy approach didn't say much for their capacity for stealth, but then again, his own earlier approach had been considerably less than ninja-like. He started to smile at the thought, then caught himself. This was no place for self-deprecating distraction—not here, not on a mission. The noise could be a ruse. He signaled for the squad to do another quick scan in all directions just in case the noise was a deliberate distraction for a move on them from the rear.

Professional paranoia. That was his job. He'd learned from the best.

A quick series of chirps and calls from the squad revealed his paranoia was misplaced, this time. He didn't care. One day it wouldn't be and he would live to talk about it. Except, of course, he couldn't talk about it with anyone outside the organization. And inside the organization you just didn't do that kind of thing—it ruined the whole macho bullshit mystique of being a big balls covert op.

Oh well. There was a lot he couldn't talk about. That, too, he knew too well, was part of the job.

Finally, what he prayed were his squad's true counterparts in this rendezvous came into view. The first to appear in the v-shaped opening between two boulders stood up straight in full view and gave a hearty wave to the seemingly empty field. Silhouetted by the bright light of the western sky, he presented a target that was a sniper's wet dream. "Anybody here yet?" the shadowy figure yelled, then looked around the interior of the circle of stones. "What an awesome place for a party!"

Rebels. It had to be real rebels. It was hard to fake that kind of oblivious stupidity.

Hawk used a small metal mirror from his pocket to flash light in his counterpart's face to attract his attention. Once Party Dude noticed the signal, Hawk stood and motioned toward the middle of the field. Party Dude gave an excited wave and motioned back to the rest of his people to follow him over the rocks and down to the field

itself, then leaped and skittered his way to the grass with agile grace. Hawk signaled for Shrike and Peregrine to move to the field, too. Pigeon stayed in his roost, crouched in a crevice with a view both inside and outside the granite perimeter. There was no reason to show their full hand yet. Hawk could call Pigeon in when he needed the contents of his backpack. Besides, someone needed to keep an eye out for threats, whether internal or external to their little gathering place.

Hawk moved down toward the field. It was an awkward climb down, so he didn't rush. Instead, he moved with the deliberate, methodical style of a trained professional. Not only would it be embarrassing to tumble down the slope in front of their counterparts, but he also wanted to convey to these rebels that he and the members of his team were competent and responsible—not some fly-by-night goons for hire. The stakes were, after all, enormous, most especially for the rebels. If this exchange was traced, they didn't have the kinds of resources Hawk and his team had to protect themselves or just to disappear, if it came to that.

As he made his way down-slope, Hawk took in more details about the rebels and the situation, comparing and contrasting the two groups' approaches to the mission. Hawk's team was coordinated, disciplined, and alert. Party Dude's team was disorganized and casual. Hawk's team had arrived on time. Party Dude's crew was late. Hawk's team dressed in simple, loose clothing in a variety of dark, natural shades—the kind of thing that allowed easy movement and provided passable camouflage in most outdoor settings without looking like military or hunting camo gear. On the other hand, Party Dude's casual, fashionable clothing featured more logos than the average NASCAR jumpsuit.

The various swooshes and crests and polo ponies on Party Dude's gear each would have been understated and tasteful in a class-conscious preppy kind of way if worn in isolation. In combination with all the other understated and tasteful logos, along with a few more garish pieces of affinity-wear touting energy drinks, software, and special-effects laden movies, the ensemble was quite dizzying and, frankly, exhausting to behold.

Party Dude's five-member (that Hawk could see) team followed their leader down, each exhibiting the same fluid movement and the same tacky fondness for logoed fashion-wear. It was like they all shopped for overstocked and irregular clothing at the same Stop and Swap flea-market in rural Tennessee. The group members were all

Caucasian in terms of their facial features, but their movements had an Oriental feel to them. Hawk didn't really care—whatever they looked like and whoever they were, he knew who they were doing this for and that made all the difference in the world.

The other group took the field and started pitching tents before Hawk's squad finished descending. Hawk arched an eyebrow as he strode to the center of the field, proffering his beefy hand to Party Dude for a shake. Party Dude gave him a fist bump, instead, which Hawk did his best to adjust to.

"Welcome to our shindig, bro," exclaimed Party Dude.

"Bitchin' to be here, man," responded Hawk with faux gusto. He didn't know whose benefit all this jovial camaraderie was for, but it was best to play along. "Staying the night?" he asked, gesturing at the hodge-podge of mismatched tents quickly being assembled.

Party Dude gave a wide grin. "Absolutely, bro, absolutely. Nobody comes this far for a meet and greet. They come to party. Relax. We'll chat. We'll eat. *We'll discuss areas of mutual interest.* We can have sex, if you're into that kind of thing."

Hawk stiffened and not in a sexual kind of way. "Er, no." He waved his right hand dismissively and tried his best to give a hearty, casual laugh, although it came off a bit ragged. "Uh, I gave it up for Lent." Lent had ended months ago, but Hawk was pretty sure this guy wouldn't know that.

Party Dude took the rejection in stride. "That's cool. Lots of grunting and groaning and what does it get you? Better than that, I've got a bootleg of the latest *Transformers* sequel coming out next month. We could watch, or maybe I could swap you a copy for something cool. Got anything?"

And there it was—the code phrase he had been told to expect: "a bootleg of the latest *Transformers* sequel." Even though it sometimes felt completely ridiculous to do all this clandestine spycraft crap, especially when you were standing in a field in the middle of nowhere with nobody else watching, it paid to have ingrained good habits over the long run.

Hawk smiled. "Nothing that good, I'm afraid. Just the never-released pilot for *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*."

Party Dude frowned.

Hawk knew why. He hadn't offered the appropriate item in trade. He never gave the response to a code-phrase right away. Someone who knew the right phrase to offer, but not the expected response,

would always eagerly accept whatever they were given. Someone expecting something else would hesitate. Or come back around for another try.

Or shoot you. It wasn't a game without risks.

Party Dude considered for a moment, then wrinkled his nose. "I could get that on eBay. Besides, Alyson Hannigan makes a much better Willow. What else you got?"

Hawk smiled. "I've got a listing of hidden features in the new *Grand Theft Auto* sequel coming out next week. Interested?"

Party Dude gave him another fist bump. "Interested? There isn't a guy in the world that doesn't like cars, tits, and explosions." His head tilted to one side. "Except maybe the Pope. . ."

Hawk laughed out loud. "Don't know about the tits and explosions—but he's got a Popemobile. Anyone else you know got one?"

Now it was Party Dude's turn to laugh. "They oughta let you boost one of those in the game. Now that would be rad."

"Sounds like we have a swap, then," said Hawk, eager to get the business end of the transaction done, not that what they were really swapping had anything to do with robots, cars, or whores.

"Sure, bro, after the party."

Hawk was disappointed not to finish up the business quickly, but he understood Party Dude's concerns. Maybe he didn't trust someone on his team. Maybe he thought his group had been detected traveling to this remote place. Maybe he was worried about what a recon satellite would show over a short time lapse photo spread. He had said it all on their first exchange: "Nobody comes this far for a meet and greet." He and his squad had to hang and chat about topics relevant to Party Dude's cover so his presence here could be explained credibly to whoever might inquire. So, it was pop culture for males 18 to 30 years old for a few hours.

He could do that. But Hawk did wonder if this meant his subscription to *Entertainment Weekly* could be written off as a legitimate business expense ... as if his simple, pedestrian tax returns reflected anything at all to do with this facet of his life.

Hawk chatted with Party Dude a bit more, then wandered over to tell Shrike and Peregrine to settle in for the night. Meanwhile, Party Dude's team started a campfire. Hawk had no idea where they got the fuel—trees were sparse this high up—but he understood the choice for their rendezvous spot better now that he knew this shindig was

part of the cover. It had to be a spot where the fire and the gathering wouldn't attract others. Although a simple campfire can be seen from miles away, the circle of protective rocks prevented that here. Of course, the light of a campfire could always be seen from above, from a higher elevation or aerial reconnaissance. But this site was already well-elevated and an aerial view via high-altitude spy plane or even passing satellite surveillance tasked to take a look would show nothing more than what appeared to be an overnight campout/party.

Party Dude was cleverer than he looked.

But apparently not clever enough.

Without warning, there was a flash and the camp erupted in chaos as an invisible shockwave of pressurized air radiated out from where one of the rebel's tents had once stood. Hawk's combat sense screamed at him that there had been an explosion, but there was no smoke, no fire, and no charred debris. Instead of the sharp boom of an explosion, there had been a deep rumble. Hawk scanned the area, flicking his eyes from point to point in rapid succession, desperate to acquire more data. The data, when it came, made no sense at all. He watched as some sort of strange orange death-ray bolted down from an unseen location far above, vaporizing everything it touched in an instant. In the immediate aftermath of the momentary pulse, people and objects in the surrounding area were knocked asunder.

Rebels were shouting, fleeing, searching for cover, and firing small arms randomly into the sky. Untrained civilians often react badly to danger, but panic comes in a heartbeat when people are simply being vaporized by an invisible enemy with an impossible weapon.

There was no reason to be subtle anymore. "Abort! Abort! Abort!" screamed Hawk, as he dashed toward Party Dude's tent, calling for Pigeon to do the same, in the hope of making the exchange before it was too late. The tent disappeared in a bright flash of orange light, however, as Hawk approached. He skidded to a stop, just barely avoiding being touched by the bizarre orange glow. He looked helplessly at the weapon in his hands. He would use it, if he had a target, but this situation, this bizarre death from above made fighting useless. He raised the gun as he scanned the field looking for an enemy, looking for some way to retaliate or simply defend, but he did not fire.

In the few seconds it took for Hawk to assess the situation, it deteriorated even further. The orange light fell upon the field again and again. Each time a tent or a rebel or a gigantic, granite boulder simply *disappeared*. No debris, no crater, no wounded left behind.

Chaotic cries of confusion rang out from the rebels, but there were fewer voices with each passing moment and it wasn't because the panic was subsiding.

"Take flight," Hawk yelled to his squad over the tumult of the remaining rebels' shouts and the soft bass whoomph that accompanied each appearance of the orange energy beam wreaking destruction on the remote meeting place. The secretiveness of the sub-vocal microphone was not needed for the urgent and obvious orders Hawk needed to convey, both to his men and to their rebel counterparts. "Scatter now!" He slung his weapon and obeyed his own order.

Someone was going to pay for this screw-up, Hawk vowed. He glanced back at the obliterated camp as he gained height in his effort to escape the strange fortress of stones. A lot of people were already paying for this screw-up. He hoped he wouldn't be one of them.

Hawk doubled his speed. Survival was his only goal. He didn't care what it looked like.



## CHAPTER 1

Dick Thornby didn't look like anybody's idea of a spy. He didn't have the steely stare and the long, lithe body of the spies of popular fiction. He wasn't wearing a designer evening jacket. Nor did he have the non-descript, average height, average weight, bland, gray, middle-management look of the men favored by the CIA, FBI, and other acronym agencies of America.

At 5' 10", with the stockiness of a former offensive lineman, it was easiest for Dick to buy his clothes at the big and tall men's shops proliferating in the increasingly portly suburban communities back home. Dressed in a cheap suit and tie he'd picked up in just such a place, he was perfectly disguised as yet another small-time American businessman deplaning from the long haul to Auckland, New Zealand—in coach. He was well aware his employer could afford to send him first class, but such extravagance did not match his cover, so he passed on the luxury, despite the discomfort.

Instead, he trudged down the gangway to the terminal with the rest of the unwashed masses, everyone groggy from sleeping fitfully for too long in seats too small for comfort. It was easy to stay in character with the crowd—grouchy and bone-tired from the trek. He waited in weary resignation for his bags, then dutifully got in the immigration control line. With a well-worn passport and his traveler information form in his left hand and a rumpled trench coat draped over his right, he performed the familiar traveler shuffle—wait, push your bag ahead with a foot, shuffle forward, and wait again. Finally, it was his turn.

The courteous immigration officer gave him a cursory glance, then flipped open his passport and stamped a page. A moment later the Kiwi official waved him through. No strip search today.

Once in the airport concourse, Dick maintained cover by exchanging U.S. dollars for New Zealand dollars at the crappy airport rate, just like other unprepared tourists. Turning toward the exit, he squinted at the brightness of the morning sun as he took in the rest of the terminal. He reached into his carry-on bag and donned cheap, dark, aviator sunglasses and a rumpled, fabric fedora matched to his trench coat, then surveyed the scene again.

He looked like a dork, he knew, but the tacky accessories completed the middle-class traveler ensemble. Sometimes it was good cover to look like a dork.

Besides, the sunglasses were actually anything but cheap. In reality they were highly sophisticated micro-enhanced lenses issued by his employers at the Subsidiary. Along with allowing communications from headquarters and providing heads-up video/Internet display, the sunglasses had a variety of other handy features.

Most Subsidiary operatives used a sleek, modern, wrap-around style for their special shades, but Dick was not nearly cool enough to pull that off without looking conspicuous. Aviators matched his look much better. Of course, just like the fancy wrap-arounds, or even everyday sunglasses from a discount superstore, the aviators let his eyes roam at will without raising suspicion. Along with the hat, the glasses also foiled most facial recognition software. The cheap, loose-fitting jacket and baggy suit pants he wore concealed his muscular physique, as well as the scars he had picked up along the trail from college football grunt to team leader with U.S. Army Special Forces to Chicago cop to Subsidiary operative.

Dick didn't know who had dropped this latest hot potato into the Subsidiary's lap. He didn't need to know and he didn't care. All he knew was that bad guys were dealing arms. Not just chicken-shit automatic weapons (though those killed enough civilians on their own), but major hardware and top-secret design specifications. In this case, someone had stolen high-grade security-clearance plans for a state-of-the-art item that could help turn the tide in a major conflict and absolutely blow away the enemy in a minor one.

Dick's job was to get the plans back—surreptitiously if possible—but at any cost necessary, if it came to it.

Looking around the terminal again, Dick spied his immediate goal. No, not a buxom bimbo ready to brief (and debrief) him or a local contact masquerading as a limo driver. Those things didn't happen, not in the real world. Instead, his first goal was to drag himself to the discount car rental counter and book a car using the same fake name he had used on arrival. Then he drove around Auckland a while pretending to look at potential sites for expanding his phony franchise-sandwich-shop cover business.

Misdirection accomplished, he dumped the rental car at a downtown parking garage, grabbed his luggage, and headed for the garage's dingy restroom. There he donned a muted tan and green

flower print tropical shirt and casual khaki pants, along with a brown, kangaroo-leather and nylon mesh Australian style hat, one with neither side tacked up. He splashed a bit of cold water in his face, rubbing it vigorously to create a bit of a blush, as if he had already been on vacation a few days and gotten just a bit too much sun. Then he walked out of the washroom and into a nearby tour agency, a different man.

At the vacation counter, he booked a bus tour under a new alias, this time adopting the persona of a Canadian school teacher on holiday. The all-inclusive ground tour featured a bevy of retirees spending their children's inheritance on a once-over of the big North Island highlights: hot springs, geysers, scenic vistas, and sheep. Lots and lots of sheep. Dick ogled the sights with his elderly companions as the bus headed south. He finished the three-day tour at Wellington, on the southern tip of the North Island. That same day, he ferried across the Cook Strait and into Queen Charlotte Sound, disembarking at Picton, on the South Island. There he changed IDs again, becoming an American tourist and bird-watcher.

He wasn't a chameleon, wasn't "the Shapeshifter," the legendary Subsidiary operative he heard had the ability to blend in anywhere, be anyone. And the changes in ID weren't because anyone was following him. He had checked in all the usual ways. Nothing. Just a middle-aged, overweight English lady, who made moon-eyes at him from a distance during the North Island bus trip. It was clear to him she wasn't a spy—she was too out of shape and too obvious about watching him. She was just a spinster who was hoping for a fling on holiday, but who never worked up the gumption to actually speak to him.

No, he was clean along his whole route as far as tails of any kind were concerned. Still, changing clothes, accent, and identity was routine. If you cover your trail, no one can track you, whether forward to mission destination or backward to source, no matter when you get noticed.

Espionage is all about making the other side work for their information.

In Picton, Dick boarded a train for the long trip southeast to Dunedin, where the mission proper was supposed to take place. He settled in for the ride, getting off at the longer stops just long enough to watch birds and make notes about them in his copy of *Birds of New Zealand*. Bird-watching was one of his favorite tourist disguises. It

gave you an excuse to look wherever you wanted to and to wander off from the chitchatting crowds alone.

Chitchatting carries risks.

The easiest way to lie is not to have to talk in the first place. Dick wasn't a skilled linguist, so he mostly got sent on missions to English-speaking countries. But even when you speak the same language as those surrounding you, a false accent can be spotted easily. A faker's greatest fear is always running into some tourist from wherever he is claiming is home. No matter how good, your accent and your knowledge of home will never match up to that of the true residents.

Sure, you can take classes and learn to speak any language with any accent you want, local or foreign—the Defense Language Institute is particularly good at that sort of thing—but going to class to learn to speak twenty different kinds of English didn't appeal to Dick. Especially, not when he could accomplish what he needed to by simply hanging a pair of birding binoculars around his neck.

Besides, he got a charge out of the fact Ian Fleming had lifted the name “James Bond” from the cover of a bird-watching book left in the Caribbean hotel room he was using to pen the first 007 adventure. Masquerading as a bird-watcher brought the whole fact/fiction spy thing full circle.

Finally, the train arrived in Dunedin and Dick joined the tourist throngs in all the standard visitor activities at the station, oohing and ahing at the incredibly long, covered platform, snapping pictures of the Victorian-style clock tower, and shuffling into the station to gawk at its thousands of tiles laid in geometric designs. At the station shop, Dick picked up a few postcards and a local paper. He also asked the clerk to get him one of the souvenir pins in the display case, which caused a bit of confusion. He kept asking for a “pin” and the clerk kept handing him various souvenir “pens.” Even when you spoke the language, the local idioms could screw you up. Who knew they called pins “badges” here?

As the arrivals cleared, Dick sat on one of the platform's benches to read the paper, paying particular attention to the classified ads. After circling one or two, he made his way to a pay phone and dialed a local number. He had a brief conversation, writing down an address in the margin of the paper as the chat concluded. He hung up and immediately went to the main entrance of the station and hailed a cab.

Forty-five minutes and one short test drive later, Dick was the proud owner of a used 2005 Yamaha TDM900, dickering the owner

down to \$12,000 NZD. The sporty bike featured a smooth-running engine with a throaty purr and enough thrust to provide a jolting burst of acceleration when needed and to sustain high-end cruising speeds without straining. The front shocks were also sufficient to permit off-road capability, which could come in handy. On the other hand, the bike wasn't new enough or flashy enough, even in red, to draw too much attention from thieves or passersby.

Dick paid cash and tucked the motorcycle's pink slip into a pocket of his knapsack. (The vehicle title wasn't actually pink here in Kiwi-land, but then titles weren't really pink anywhere as far as he knew.) He'd dump the bike (with the keys in it) after the mission and never record the purchase. Odds were high the ride would get lifted and either stripped for parts or passed from one low-life hood to another in poker games over the next five years. If, instead, the bike was returned to the ex-owner by the local constabulary, the perplexed fellow would likely just grin, apply for a replacement title for the one he had "lost," and re-sell the bike again, doubling his profit.

Purchasing a used bike like this made Dick's movements much more secure than a stolen vehicle or a rental car with a GPS device. He was on a legal ride that wouldn't be tracked. To be sure he wouldn't be stopped for existing warrants and warrants on the license tag, Dick simply stepped away from the seller and made a quick call on his secure cell-phone before consummating the sale. The call was routed locally through the Kiwi cell network, then scrambled and uploaded by the agency's in-country infrastructure—most likely a branch office of Catalyst Crisis Consulting, the management consulting company that acted as a cover organization for the Subsidiary—to an untraceable satellite communications interface two generations beyond the United States' Echelon System, and beamed down to the Subsidiary's HQ back in the States. A few keystrokes by a computer whiz on the other end and Dick had confirmed the owner and the tag number for the vehicle were on the right side of the local authorities.

All this was, of course, routine. Dick didn't know exactly how the Subsidiary was funded, but in his experience it wasn't exactly cash conscious. Still, mundane craft like this was both a normal and cost-effective way to do business in a tourist-friendly country like New Zealand. It was unnecessary and would be mind-blowingly expensive to scramble a jet to insert him into hobbit-land via a HALO (High Altitude/Low Opening) drop or some nonsense like that. He didn't put that kind of thing past the Subsidiary's capabilities; there was just

no reason to do it when you had fake identification, plenty of time, and solid, dependable, clandestine workhorses like him.

Dick studied a local street map and familiarized himself with the roadways. Then he took a quick spin to do more of the same and to get a feel for the quirks of the bike. Once he was comfortable with his ride and his environs, he drove thirty minutes outside of town on the north side of Otago Harbor to Port Chalmers, where the deep-water docks hosting cruise ships and cargo containers were located. He parked the bike a few blocks away, grabbed his binoculars and bird book, and headed toward the waterfront.

He triggered the communications prompt on his micro-enhanced sunglasses. "Asset in place," he reported. "Surveillance commencing."

He was surprised when Glenn Swynton, the Subsidiary's overseer of operations, answered his call, instead of some low-level communications tech.

"Anything of note to report?" queried Glenn, all British and efficient, as always. "I was just updating Director Tammany on the status of all missions *in situ*. I'll put you on the box and you can brief us both."

Great. Now he was reporting in to both his boss and his boss's boss—everybody's boss—Dee Tammany, Director of the Subsidiary. True, she wasn't usually the prick that Glenn was, but Dick had expected a two second conversation with some mope in the ops center, not a quiz by the powers that be. What time was it in Philadelphia anyway? Didn't these guys ever sleep?

He cast his complaints away and mustered up his best official reporting tone: "Arrived on schedule without incident. Local transportation secured. Target area in sight. No activity to report. Everything quiet."

He heard Dee give a brief laugh. "It's always quiet before the bad guys show up."

"Roger that, Director."

"Don't let us keep you then. Good hunting," replied the Director in a tone which was both friendly and dismissive at the same time.

"Keep us informed," added Swynton in a tone which was both dismissive and demanding at the same time. The Brit had a knack for that.

"Roger and out," replied Dick. He could be a good little soldier. But he was an even better operative.

## CHAPTER 2

Dick's mission in Dunedin was to find a Kestrel. Not the feather and bones variety—those weren't indigenous to New Zealand. No, the Kestrel he was looking for was made of polycarbonate filament, Mylar sheathing, and high-tech optics and electronics.

The Kestrel 84 was the latest state-of-the-art workhorse in the ever-burgeoning field of UAVs—unmanned air vehicles—the miniature spy planes used for reconnaissance, targeting, and, in some cases, delivery of precision, ground-directed explosives.

Although first conceived in Dick's great granddaddy's day with the Kettering Bug (basically a torpedo with biplane wings) during World War I, UAVs really got underway in the 1960s. Back then, camera-laden, radar-jamming Firebees flew thousands of largely unheralded missions in Vietnam. The Americans (and others) began developing UAVs in a major way in the 1980s. By the 1990s, Pioneers were helping to target artillery during the first Gulf War and being used in place of in-country human intelligence in Bosnia.

The road wasn't always easy or smooth along the way. Billions were spent on R&D for UAVs prototypes that just never worked the way they were supposed to. That's the nature of military contracting, in general, and aviation development, in particular. But the development of cheap and sophisticated GPS devices and lighter, stronger components eventually turned the tide.

Of course, bigger was usually the way of U.S. government weapons. Strapping modified Hellfire missiles onto the largest of the drones, the Predator, turned UAVs into an unseen terror from above during the second Gulf War. They also were critical in locating and destroying targets in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the War on Terror. Air Force "combatants" sitting in air-conditioned warehouses in California piloted the big boys. (They might bitch about traffic like everyone else, but not many people get to alleviate their road rage by vaporizing a terrorist cell and three goats after a long commute.)

But better wasn't ignored for the sake of bigger. Other, smaller UAVs, like Shadows, Ravens, and Dragon Eyes were developed that could be flown from nearby command centers, or even from the field by the grunts who deployed them. The Maveric, used by Navy Seals, was designed to look like a lazily circling turkey vulture from the

ground. Ultra-light materials and inflatable wings allowed small UAVs like the Wasp, or TiGER flying hand grenades, to be carried by the average soldier.

The Kestrel 84 was of the smaller variety. Marrying cheap GPS, even cheaper laser pointer illumination, and digital photo and communications technology with amazingly sturdy, but light, frame construction, the Kestrel could be carried in an inconspicuous, protective tube during deployment. On the front lines of a confrontation, an infantryman could then quickly assemble and launch the device. Once aloft, the UAV could reconnoiter the battle scene, paint targets for laser-guided weapons, and jam field communications.

The Kestrel 84 had a large wing-size to weight ratio, which meant it could stay aloft a day or more. It was also easily guided by a simple digital controller with a high-resolution flat-screen video which automatically broadcast GPS coordinates. The real beauty of the video array was that linkage between the camera's auto-focus chip and the GPS software meant that the coordinates broadcast were not those of the drone, itself, but the coordinates of what the camera was viewing at the cross-hairs in the middle of the vid-screen.

Best launched from a roof-top or minor elevation (the top of a panel truck was good), the Kestrel 84 could be flown right from the front lines. Anyone who played a lot of Ultimate Frisbee could even get the Kestrel airborne from ground level with a good, strong wrist flick. Small and high-flying, the Kestrel presented such an insignificant visual and radar profile and was so quiet as to be practically undetectable from the ground. At the same time, it had a feature that could make its presence known if desired. The so-called "buzz-kill" option broadcast the whiny buzz most closely associated with model aircraft fields in order to let enemy personnel know they were being surveilled. In early operational deployments, that clever piece of counter-intelligence intimidation was responsible for more than one clandestine gathering of drug lords or jihadists breaking up and bolting for cover.

Yep, the Kestrel 84 was a nice asset to have on your side. Yet, despite their forward deployment by U.S. forces in various hot-spots around the world, one had never been captured. A small charge hooked into a coded ultra-low frequency carrier array (the same type of thing used by nuclear subs to verify launch codes without surfacing) created a nice self-destruct mechanism which had the functional equivalent of a dead-man's switch.



That no-capture record was still intact, but some yahoo defense contractor too busy back-dating options and not busy enough securing his top secret military files had been hacked and the materials, construction, and coding specs of the Kestrel 84 pilfered.

If the hack had been accomplished by a terrorist organization, the harm would have been irreparable. Plans would have been traded by Al-Qa'eda cells, Iranian nationals, and IRA splinter groups at light speed. The technical specifications of the top secret device would have filtered down to Basque separatists, Honduran rebels, and Cupertino, California computer game designers not long after.

The Subsidiary had determined, however, some geeky kid here in the land of the Kiwis had performed the hack. The kid was apparently stupid enough to fail to understand the consequences of what he was doing (to himself and the world), but smart enough to mastermind the hack and understand what he had stumbled into. Of course, the kid was also greedy enough to want to profit from his endeavors.

The powers that be in the Subsidiary—probably Glenn Swynnton—had alerted a few contacts in local law enforcement who had worked with the agency in the past, but the kid had disappeared by the time the local constabulary arrived on scene. Their investigation suggested the kid genius had connected up with a local gang—no doubt through some bully who had regularly beat on the kid during his early teen years at school. The bully or bullies apparently had sufficient contacts in the underworld of drugs and guns that they understood what the kid had found and knew how to auction it to the highest bidder. While the hacker probably had been paid off with a few tens of thousands of dollars (New Zealand) and a couple of hookers for the weekend, the gang, an offshoot of the Pan-Pacific Indigenous People's Front, was looking for a seven, maybe eight, digit payout. The prospect of a payday like that meant there would be plenty of muscle, plenty of weaponry, and plenty of technical expertise associated with the sale, verification, and exchange, probably from both sides of the transaction.

Dick didn't know anything more about the exchange, except that a communication intercept suggested Pao Fen Smythe, a Hong Kong based trafficker in arms and information, had been in touch with the local Maori gang affiliated with the PPIPF to set up the time and place for their "transaction."

Once Pao Fen's organization had the Kestrel 84 plans, it was just a matter of time before very bad things started happening. Soon the

Taliban would be deploying counterfeit Kestrels to spy on infidels in Afghanistan. Not long after, Al-Qa'eda cells in the U.S. would be using them to scope out security measures at nuclear power plants upwind from jam-packed football stadiums.

The sale of the top secret plans was supposedly going to be at Port Chalmers harbor tomorrow. That's why Dick was here today, away from his family yet again, scoping out the waterfront, checking for unusual activity and learning the ins and outs of the port environs.

Port Chalmers' main docking facilities were on the north shore of Otago Harbor, about thirty minutes east of the city center. A gleaming white cruise ship was docked in the midst of the "secure area," a chain-link fenced open space with a small visitor's center. The quarantined area had a security gate for verifying passports and cruise ship IDs for those coming in and for checking packages for contraband fruits and other foodstuffs for those coming ashore. It also contained a series of adjacent docks for small boats offering sightseeing cruises and fishing outings. Farther east, past several warehouses, two huge cranes for loading cargo ships towered above a concrete field of cargo containers and an adjacent dirt yard filled with piles of wood chips and row after row of huge logs.

For a place that touted its eco-tours and green-friendly conservation practices, New Zealand exported a shitload of forestry products. Every few minutes another tractor pulling a long trailer stacked with six or eight huge tree trunks would barrel down the narrow shoreline road, slow briefly at the gate for the lumber and container yard, then lurch into the yard. There the rigs would halt while a huge, pincer-armed loader removed the logs from the trailer one-by-one and added them to the end of one of the long rows of tree trunks, until the stack was as high as the arm of the loader could reach.

Like all guys, Dick got distracted for a few moments watching the big machines work. When his son, Seth, was still in elementary school, Dick had often taken him to the high-rise construction sites downtown to watch the equipment. Seth would make roaring sounds as the engines strained and Dick would "beep" along with the warning device whenever something backed up, giving Seth a playful, ticklish poke in the ribs in time with each "beep," "What's that?" Seth would ask between giggles, pointing at one of the giant yellow machines. Instead of answering with "truck" or "bulldozer," like most dads, Dick was always very precise in his response. "That's a John Deere Excavator,"

he would reply. “That there’s a Caterpillar Backhoe Loader.” Seth would repeat the name in a whisper after each identification, frowning his brow as if it would help him remember. If the kid ever needed to know the difference between a high-speed dozer and motor grader, Dick was a great father.

From his experience with Seth watching construction workers handle their rigs, Dick could easily tell that the driver manipulating the loader was good. The pincers of the loader were worked with finesse. Even though there was no barrier at the end of the row he was working on, the guy laid the timber down with enough precision and subtlety that the huge logs didn’t slip down or roll off, fraying the end of the stack.

After a few moments of big machines time, however, Dick got back to the task at hand. The trade wouldn’t be in the open near the cruise ship—too many witnesses for the protective firepower sure to be associated with the exchange to go unnoticed. The cargo container and wood-stacking areas had similar issues—too busy, too open, and too visible during the day, and too suspicious after dark. That meant the most likely location for the trade was one of the nearby warehouses.

Dick took up a position on a small rise in the shore road. The spot had a fair view of most of the warehouses to the east and was in the shade near a shelter for the local bus service—a place where he could see, but not draw a lot of attention, even in the Aloha shirt and floppy hat he was wearing.

He flipped open his bird book to the chapter on gulls and shore birds, raised his German-made Leica binoculars, and started the long, laborious work of studying the warehouses one-by-one, noting doors and windows, obvious security features, lighting, and traffic patterns. He used the information to draw conclusions as to which warehouses were abandoned and which ones were too busy to be the likely location of an exchange. It was tedious, mind-numbing work; not nearly as interesting as what the spies in the movies were always doing. It was more like police stakeout—hours of waiting around, the boredom punctuated only by an occasional doughnut and the awkward fumbling associated with having to pee into a cup.

Eventually, however, Dick narrowed in on a warehouse—Pellman’s Secure Storage—just off the edge of the secure area for the cruise ships, between there and the wood and cargo storage fields. The place

was well-maintained and reasonably secure. There was even a security presence.

For starters, a guard stood on either side of the main entrance opposite from the side facing the visitor's center. Two more guards were patrolling the perimeter (one moving clockwise, the other counterclockwise, around the building at all times—a security routine only a thug would think clever or effective). That made four guards surrounding this single warehouse. One more guard, maybe a sniper, looked only in the direction of Pellman's as he paced on the roof of a taller warehouse nearby. Dick concentrated on the rooftop guard's position, but was unable to locate any sign of a sniper rifle or shooting nest. Still, that made five guards—a bigger security force for this one warehouse than the sovereign nation of New Zealand had allotted to guard the entire port facility.

The large security presence made Dick twitchy. The information he had received said the exchange wasn't occurring today, but there was a lot of manpower on site already. The exchange could be happening this very moment, while he stood loitering outside.

Suddenly, a firm hand grabbed Dick's right shoulder. "Excuse me. What are you looking at?"

Dick's combat senses took over and he wheeled quickly around, dropping his binoculars to thump lightly on his chest as they reached the end of the strap. He grabbed the hand on his right shoulder with his own left hand, dipping that shoulder and shifting his weight as he prepared to fling his opponent over his shoulder. He stifled his movement and the expletives that flew to the tip of his tongue as his "assailant" came into view. A middle-aged haus-frau wearing a loose t-shirt and culottes, along with a sun hat and a pair of Swarovski binoculars, cringed back from his touch with a light yelp and a confused expression.

"Oh, s-sorry, you startled me," Dick stammered, dropping her hand and taking a half-step back. He nodded in brief apology and then gestured broadly toward the warehouses along the waterfront. "I think there's a Lesser Black-Backed Gull in with the Kelp Gulls over on the east side of the roof of the Visitor's Center, just this side of those big warehouses near the cargo containers."

The woman eyed him with obvious suspicion, then lifted her binoculars and peered at the roof of the Visitor's Center. "You mean those Dominican Gulls?"

Dick smiled. Birdwatchers loved to show off their superior knowledge. “Kelp Gulls are also known as Dominican Gulls. I’m talking about the Lesser Black-Backed Gull I thought I saw walking about near the middle of the flock.”

The woman looked doubtful, but peered at the rooftop again. “I don’t see it. You must be mistaken,” she said with a sniff. “The Lesser Black-Backed isn’t found here anyways.”

“A few have been spotted in Australia, so it’s possible one has made its way here, too. That’s why it would be such a find.” Birdwatching was an easy cover to fake when talking to those not knowledgeable about such things, but when you ran into somebody who knew the birds and the lingo, you still had to have a cover story that stood up. No birdwatcher would look at a flock of gulls for hours on end without a damn good excuse.

The woman took another long peer through her expensive binoculars. “I don’t see anything but Dominicans.”

Dick feigned disappointment by slumping his shoulders exaggeratedly. “You’re probably right.”

“You know,” said the woman, a hint of triumph in her voice. “If you travel round the bay to the Otago Peninsula on the south side, there’s a Royal Albatross Center, as well as an Eco-Tour which features both Blue Penguins and Yellow-Eyed Penguins. I’m told it’s quite spectacular.” She sniffed again. “Much more interesting than gulls. Blue Penguins are ‘lifers’ for most birders.”

Dick noted her cruise ship ID hooked to the strap holding her binoculars. Cruise ships rarely stayed in port for more than a day. “Thanks,” he said enthusiastically, “I’ll try those spots later in the week.” He gestured toward the small boat docks. “Just waiting on a harbor tour boat right now. Thought maybe I’d gotten lucky during the wait.” He deliberately left it ambiguous as to whether he was waiting to go out on a tour or waiting for someone to get back from a tour. Ambiguity is your friend when you lie for a living. “In the meantime, maybe I’ll take another look.” He swung his binoculars back up and began to stare again at the flock of Kelp Gulls.

The woman obviously had no more tolerance for his gull fetish. “Well, I hope you get lucky. But I don’t think it’s likely.” He heard her stroll off to the bus shelter and start up a conversation with a young woman who had been waiting patiently for the next bus.

Dick maintained his concentration on the roof of the Visitor’s Center for a few minutes, then slowly slid his gaze back over to

Pellman's Secure Storage and took up his monitoring task yet again. After a while, he sauntered over toward the security gate and pretended to watch some sparrows for a few moments as he observed the security procedures for a busload of tourists returning to the ship after an early morning excursion. Satisfied with what he learned, he headed back into the center of the city, checked out information at a tourist kiosk that told him what cruise ship would be docking tomorrow and what the dockside to downtown shuttle bus schedule was. Then it was back to the docks for another quick check of his target site. He parked the motorcycle nearby and took a shuttle bus back into town to his hotel, checked in with the powers that be, and made an early evening of it.

He had a long, dangerous day ahead of him. His stint as a soldier, back in his younger days, had taught him both decision-making and reaction times were improved by getting a good night's sleep before a mission. Besides, if he was going to die, he preferred not to die tired.

## CHAPTER 3

Dick slept in. The scheduled meet wasn't until the end of the afternoon and things could go quite late afterwards. If all went well, he would be riding his motorcycle all night to get to Picton, then hopping a ferry to Wellington for an early-morning flight out of the country. If things didn't go well, he might need all his wits and strength just to deal with the situation. Besides, he wasn't fully acclimatized to the time differential. Finally, he got up, dressed in a pair of jeans and a loose bowling shirt and went downstairs for a filling brunch, heavy on protein and fats, but light on carbs. He also had three cups of the bitter swill that passed for coffee on this island—it never hurt to caffeine-load when you were about to start an op.

At midday Dick went back to the Dunedin train station and mingled with a group of tourists from the cruise ship docked for the day. He found a perch near one of the spectacular stained glass windows on the landing for the second floor—correct that, first floor (ground level was known as ground floor, not first floor, here)—and took a few shots with his camera. It didn't take long before someone else came by to do the same thing, an English couple by the sound of their accents.

“Excuse me, sir,” Dick said with a slight Tennessee twang. “I'd be most appreciative, if'n you might take my picture in front of this here window. You can get a post card of the place, but nuthin' says you been there like a picture of you in the shot your own self.”

“Certainly, certainly,” replied the gent. “I had the same thing in mind.”

“Well, then,” he said with a wink as he walked over. “You do me and I'll do you and the missus. Take a picture, I mean.” He smiled at the woman while he handed over his digital camera to the husband, then turned his attention back to the man and the camera. “You'll need to press this here button first, 'cause it's all backlit from the window and I want everyone to see my smile, not just some dark shadow blockin' the light.” His eyes flitted around the man's person and possessions as the gentleman looked intently at the camera. “Then just press here when I say 'sex.'”

The woman twittered. “I thought you Americans always said 'cheese.'”

He turned toward the woman, taking a half step back, and bobbed his head once. “Meanin’ no disrespect, ma’am. Cheese is good, ’specially if’n you’re from Wisconsin, but sex is better. It always makes me smile ... and it never gives me gas later.”

The couple chuckled amiably as he moved into position in front of the bright window and the man squinted into the colorful light to frame the photo.

“Sex,” drawled Dick and the man clicked the button.

Dick moved quickly to the man’s side, nodded approvingly at the picture on the digital screen of his camera, then took the man’s camera to return the favor. The couple obligingly shouted “sex” when he signaled them, drawing a few curious looks from those milling about on the floor below. It didn’t take much persuading to get the couple to smooch in silhouette in front of the window for a second shot. Then the tour bus driver strode through the station, gathering his gaggle of sightseers, and Dick returned the photographer’s stuff—well, almost all of it—as the now giggly English couple darted for their motor coach.

Dick fingered the credit card sized piece of plastic in his hand for a moment, then thrust it in his right front pocket and started walking away from the train station, back toward his hotel, where he made his preparations for the rest of the day.

An hour later, he hung his binoculars around his neck and a large camera bag over one shoulder, heading for the downtown stop of the cruise shuttle bus operations. The day was sunny and warm—from what he understood, it had been unseasonably warm for several days—but he wore dark clothing nonetheless. He had changed into dark gray trousers, a black t-shirt covered by a dark, gray and blue patterned Aloha shirt in muted tones, along with a black baseball cap festooned with the silver fern that was one of New Zealand’s national symbols, and his dark, cheap-looking, aviator sunglasses.

He waited with a growing crowd for the two o’clock shuttle bus back to the cruise docks. The bus was twenty minutes late. As soon as it arrived, it was mobbed by cranky travelers loaded down with cameras, video recorders, light jackets, and shopping bags full of souvenir purchases. While the front rows quickly filled, Dick made his way to the back, dropped into the middle of a seat for two, and pulled his cap down over his eyes, as if resting from a rigorous day of looking at unfamiliar things.



It took more than a half hour before the bus groaned to a halt at the security gate to the cruise dock area and the door swished open to admit a security guard. The guard—an eighteen or nineteen year old girl with a deep tan and crisply pressed khaki pants and a shirt festooned with security authority patches—asked to see the passengers' cruise cards and some sort of photo identification, like a driver's license (passports, Dick knew, were held by the cruise line during a voyage). The type A personalities in the front row already had their cards out and ready to go. Everyone else grumbled and fumbled until their groping hands tumbled upon the necessary identification.

The girl's verification of identification for purposes of entering the secure embarkation area became more and more cursory as she moved back. Dick wearily held up the cruise card he had swiped from the English gentleman earlier in the day, fanned toward the clerk with one of his many U.S. licenses peeking out from behind. He hadn't even bothered to alter either card to match the other in name; he had noted the quality of the security the day before when he was birdwatching. Sure enough, when the security gal got within three rows of Dick, she spied the ship's logo on the cruise card and gave a short wave of compliance, then quickly made her way back to the front of the bus. She disembarked and headed into the security office, where a soap opera was playing on a portable television set.

He didn't blame the crisply-uniformed gal or the nation of New Zealand for the crappy security. This was just the preliminary process. The ship had its own, better, security procedures, involving checking digital photos imbedded in the magnetic strip of the cruise cards, and airport quality metal detectors and x-ray screening of carry-on items as you got onboard.

Dick, however, wasn't going onboard, so dock-side security was all he needed to deal with. And, face it, there was nothing that interesting or valuable in the cruise ship security area itself to warrant more scrutiny or muscle than security gal possessed, just some overpriced shops selling last minute souvenirs, a bank of pay phones for cruise ship personnel to call back home to Romania or the Philippines or whatever, and a bar where you could drink cheaper than onboard a cruise ship.

Dick browsed the shops and picked up a local Tui brand beer at the bar, swigging it casually as he pretended to be interested in postcards, pins (badges), and genuine New Zealand wool products. Eventually, he sauntered through a back exit from the mini-mall of touristy shops,

into an alleyway full of loading docks and rubbish cans, to the one valuable thing the cruise ship security area did have—a chain-link fence bordering the adjacent commercial security area.

He needed a back way into the commercial space filled with warehouses, cargo containers, and timber. The security gate up on the shore road for the cargo facility was manned by several beefy security personnel armed with automatic weapons. Truckers pulling the long loads of local timber were waved through quickly—they were undoubtedly all recognized by sight and the open nature of the cargo (basically wheels strapped on either end of a pile of freshly cut logs) left no room for stowaways. But others seeking entrance to the secure commercial area were checked thoroughly by the guards. Maybe that was because there were rail containers full of valuable stuff to steal and maybe it was because local thugs used the nearby warehouses for their own purposes. It didn't matter to Dick.

What did matter was that Pellman's Secure Storage was where the meet involving his targets was going to be at sunset. The best way to get into the secure commercial area in which the warehouse was located was from the unguarded border fence between the two allegedly secure areas. Dick hid behind a rubbish bin until the two guards he had seen the day before made their pass through the alleyway behind Pellman's Secure Storage, criss-crossing one another without even a guttural grunt of greeting. Both turned east to continue their circuit as they reached either end of the alley. The rooftop guard several buildings away was out of sight—his viewpoint offering no angle on Dick's chosen position in any event.

Without further hesitation, Dick darted to the fence, feeling the familiar surge of adrenaline and narrowed concentration that always kicked in during an op. He used a small wire-cutter to make a slit near one of the metal posts standing at six foot intervals in the chain-link fencing between the two areas. There, the slit would be harder to see on casual observation. He slipped through the gap and then used a small twist-tie to tack the opening shut so it would not show after he left. Dashing across the small alleyway on the other side of the fence from the Visitor's Center, he ducked behind a roll-on, roll-off waste container and jumped up to a loading platform for Pellman's Secure Storage.

Two minutes rewiring the box for the security system nearby and less than thirty seconds picking the lock on the personnel door next to

the big-overhead door for loading cargo made a liar out of Pellman, whoever he was. Pellman's Storage was by no means secure.

Dick entered the building with quiet, deliberate speed. There were guards in front of the warehouse and, he assumed, in it, too. At first chance, he moved up from ground level, the default line of sight for anyone patrolling inside, clambering to the top of one of the taller wooden crates and jumping lithely up to the lowest level of the steel shelving filling most of the warehouse. It was darker here, the shelves blocking the lights at ground level, as well as obscuring the sunlight filtering in the frosted glass ventilation windows high above. Dick pressed the temple of his aviator sunglasses twice, activating the low-light vision feature. He climbed higher and higher into the shelving as opportunities arose, creeping without sound ever upward and forward toward the main entrance to the warehouse.

As he had expected, the area near the main entrance was devoid of shelving. Aside from a few empty pallets and a propane powered forklift parked haphazardly on the south side of the main doors, the floorspace was clear. Frosted glass skylights and a sixty foot drop from the ceiling to the concrete below provided great visibility, even when he switched off the low-light feature on his glasses. Of course, the openness would also allow anyone down below to see him lurking on the edges of the shelving.

To prevent that, he reached into a pocket on his camera bag and ferreted out a small electronic device. Accessing another pouch on the bag, he pinched off a piece of clay—okay C-4 explosives, but the stuff wasn't dangerous without a detonator—from a larger bloc. Shimming up a support post at the edge of the shelving, he stuck the explosive on the corner of one of the glass skylights. It would grip better there than on the corrugated steel of the ceiling and it would be less obvious there than on one of the shelving struts. Once the putty-like substance was in place, Dick pushed a small electronic device into his makeshift adhesive. He pointed the narrow end of the device down, angling its small aperture toward the center of the empty space on the floor below. Then he slid down to the top shelf and retreated behind a skid of green and yellow farm equipment parts.

Once concealed, he pulled out what would look to a casual observer to be a simple cell phone and pressed buttons until a picture appeared on screen showing the open area in the warehouse, as viewed from the camera he had attached to the C-4 stuck on the skylight. He fiddled with the brightness and contrast for a few minutes until he was

satisfied not only with the resolution currently on screen, but with his ability to adjust it quickly to increasing light, should the meet occur with the main bay doors open. Then he uncoiled the ear buds from a small pocket on the side of the leather case for his phone and plugged the jack in, twisting one bud into his left ear. He hunkered down to wait.

Soon one of the patrolling security guards approached. Dick poised with his fingers over the controls on his phone. As he watched the guard cross the open area, he adjusted the gain on the device's microphone until he could hear the man's plodding footfalls at an acceptable level through the earbud. That way he knew he would be able to immediately hear any conversation taking place below without chancing blowing his ear-drum because the volume was set too high. Volume worries were also why he only ever inserted one ear bud when listening in electronically—you never want to risk your hearing in both ears at the same time. Besides, he wanted to keep one ear open for ambient sound about him, just in case anyone approached his surveillance nest.

It was a long, stiflingly hot wait. Dick took note of the routines of the guards as they made their rounds, but there was not much else to do for several hours, except sweat and watch the shadows on the wall lengthen as the time for sunset drew near. He twisted his wedding ring idly and thought of Melanie while he waited. Sure, a lot of years had gone by—their boy, Seth, was practically grown-up now. And there wasn't the same heat as on their honeymoon in Jamaica—all room service and lovemaking and no sun, surf, or sand. But they still held hands at the movies and would always sneak a kiss while they watched the credits after everyone else left the theater. Besides, they had plenty of happy memories to keep them warm.

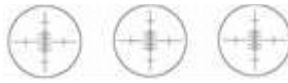


*When Seth was little, he went through a Magpie phase. If he saw something shiny, he would just reach and grab for it: dangly necklaces; discarded gum wrappers on the sidewalk; knick-knacks on low-lying tables; cans in the recycling bin; whatever. Still, Melanie kept Seth under control. She held his hand, she steered the cart down the center of the grocery aisles, and she always carried single-use wipes to clean-off Seth's hands when he picked up something less than sanitary.*

*Dick was not quite so attentive, which might not have been that much of a problem, except it was Christmastime and all around lights flashed, decorations sparkled, and tinsel glittered. He let his guard down as Seth played in the living room and Melanie finished preparations for their annual holiday party. Before he knew it, he heard a commotion and turned to see Seth pulling on a branch of the Christmas tree in an attempt to reach a shiny, silver ornament.*

*Even with all his training and reflexes, he couldn't move fast enough to stop what was coming. The tilting tree reached the tipping point just as he lunged for it. While he protected Seth with an instinctive forearm thrust to the tree, he succeeded only by deflecting the ungainly evergreen into Melanie as she entered with a bowl of party punch. In the flash of a moment, the tree was a jumble of broken decorations, the punch was a puddle of fruit juicy red on the beige carpeting, and Melanie was a soaking human backsplash.*

*Instead of getting angry, though, Melanie simply looked down at the mess and then back up at Dick and Seth, her unmistakable lopsided, one-dimple smile flashing beneath her sparkling green eyes. "I think I'm a bit punchy," she pronounced. Dick scurried for towels and volunteered to mop up the mess while Melanie changed into something drier, but she insisted on helping: "We're a team," she said. "You never have to do things solo, when you're part of a team. You never even need to ask for help."*



Dick never did ask for help; he was a self-reliant guy. Most spies are. Still, he almost always wore his wedding ring on missions. It was a simple gold band without engraving or other identifying characteristics, so it didn't put his cover or his family at risk. It reminded him who he really was, why he was doing this for a living, and who, ultimately, he was protecting. It also provided a handy excuse for breaking off conversations he didn't want to have. "Gotta go meet the missus," he would mumble, then wave and wander off to attend to more important, secret business.

It was up to him to protect Melanie (and Seth), to protect the world, from anything and everything evil and dangerous. He knew it was corny, but he loved his spouse. Recently, though, he wasn't sure she could say the same thing.

Suddenly, a barked command drew him out of waiting mode. The two inside guards he had tracked during the afternoon, now joined by the crisscrossing outside guards and yesterday's rooftop lurker, made a

quick, full sweep of the warehouse and took up positions at the perimeter of the open area. The main bay opened and the two door guards he noted the day before stepped in. They turned and motioned in a black Range Rover with tinted windows. It pulled well into the warehouse and parked.

A large, well-dressed, dark-skinned man got out of the driver's side (the right side here in New Zealand). After scanning the area, he opened the rear passenger door and a much shorter, wiry man alighted from the vehicle. The man in charge was wearing upscale casual-wear in light colors and a Panama-style hat, which, at first, obscured his visage from Dick's camera's viewpoint. But then the man's head tilted up to say something to the driver and the lens got a good freeze-frame: Pao Fen Smythe.

## CHAPTER 4

Dick fine-tuned the gain on the microphone in the device he had stuck to the corner of the window, high above the scene of the meeting. Pao Fen snarled terse commands at his lackeys. The muscle snapped to without hesitation or complaint, producing a folding table and two chairs, which were set up in the middle of the open area. Then the guards and the driver took up positions around the perimeter of the area, two on each side, one facing out, and one facing in toward the table.

Pao Fen sat in one of the chairs, pushed well back from the table, his legs crossed at the knees, feigning nonchalance as he waited. But Dick wasn't fooled. The arms dealer was tense. Pao Fen's right leg bounced slightly and he looked at his Rolex with ever-increasing frequency.

Finally, there was a muffled shout from outside and Dick heard the murmur of a vehicle pulling up in front of the open bay. The guards tensed as showtime approached. Pao Fen took a final look at his precision chronometer and stood up languidly in place, his head swiveling slowly toward the bay door.

A man Dick did not recognize walked into the frame. A good foot taller than Pao Fen, he wore dark slacks and a loose short-sleeved shirt. His short-cropped hair was dark and he sported geometric tattoos of the style favored by the Maori tribesmen on the North Island. Apparently the two sides had chosen a mutually inconvenient location.

The Maori leader extended his right hand to Pao Fen.

Pao Fen ignored the proffered handshake. "You're late," he said, his aggravation evident even in the flat monotone of the clipped statement.

"Yes, I am," replied the stranger, his tone even, refusing to take the bait. "But now I'm here." The accent had an English cast to it, like all New Zealand variants.

Pao Fen sneered. "I don't like to be kept waiting, especially for a meeting that was quite unnecessary in the first place."

The taller man shrugged. "I like to know who I'm dealing with. Besides, there's the whole exchange part of our business. Goods must be exchanged."

Pao Fen took off his hat and turned to his left for a moment, away from his companion, as he laid the hat on the table. His left eye twitched and he reached up to smooth down his slick, black hair. “A stupid and unnecessary complication which distracts from the main transaction. Any fool can see it increases risks for trivial gain.”

The eyebrows of the second man turned downward and his brow furrowed. “So does insulting one’s host in his own land, especially when one has hopes of doing business.” He turned as if to go. “We have other interested buyers.”

Pao Fen’s left eye twitched again. He ran his tongue over the front of his teeth before replying with obvious forced politeness. “I meant no offence. I wished merely to make clear no future meetings should be anticipated. All future transactions will be conducted ... at a distance ... in the manner of ... the funds transfer here.”

The local turned back. “Very well. Let’s get on with it.”

Pao Fen snapped his fingers and one of the guards on the south end of the perimeter, the guard facing the meeting, slung his weapon and hopped into the forklift nearby. It quickly disappeared off-camera, but Dick could hear the whine as hydraulics extended the forks high above the head of the driver to retrieve a crate on one of the platforms in the upper reaches of the shelves. He thanked his lucky stars he had not set up his surveillance nest in the row where items were being retrieved.

Soon the forklift returned, a pallet holding a large crate cradled in its tines. The load was lowered to the floor between the table and the open bay door. With a curt nod from Pao Fen, another guard, this one from the west side, grabbed a crowbar and stepped forward. Pao Fen tapped his right foot and plastered a forced smile on his face as the guard opened the crate. The local man walked over and peered into the crate as packing straw was tossed out onto the floor, reaching in to shift things about to look deeper into the crate.

“It’s all there,” growled Pao Fen. “A Stinger surface to air launcher and enough rockets to take down six tourist-laden 757s, if you aim well and you actually believe that’s going to help your cause. Mind that you pay attention to the battery maintenance for the ejection motor. It can be a problem if you don’t follow procedures.” He motioned at the layer of material lower in the crate. “Underneath, you have a dozen AK-47s, two cases of grenades, and a Barrett 50 caliber, the M82A1 version, with Optical Range Scope and armor-piercing and incendiary rounds. It’s all fine merchandise, but why you needed us for this



manner of low-level inventory, I have no idea. There's a half-dozen dealers at gun shows in the U.S. who will ship you small items like this with no questions asked. Give me a fortnight and I'll wager I could find a drug gang in Auckland or Wellington willing and able to supply such rubbish."

The man at the crate stopped poking about and looked over at Pao Fen. "Let's just say it helped establish your legitimacy. Besides, what's wrong with one-stop shopping?"

"As you wish," responded Pao Fen with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Enough of the party favors, let's get down to the *raison d'être* for tonight's gathering."

Finally. The Subsidiary sure as hell didn't send him almost ten thousand miles to deal with this low level static, although he suspected the threat posed by militant Maoris to jumbo passenger jets would be a surprise to the intel community when he reported it. Hell, half of the computer jockeys in intel probably thought there was nothing more dangerous than hobbits down in Kiwi-land. But, enough of that. Where were the plans for the damn Kestrel?

When Dick returned his attention to the screen, the Maori leader was looking over his new weapons. A younger Maori, carrying a laptop computer, was walking into view from outside, where the visiting vehicle had parked. Finally. Dick tensed for action as he assessed his tactical situation.

The Maori tech set the laptop computer on the table. He sat down, opening up the laptop and powering it on. The tech's fingers flowed efficiently over keyboard, but Dick couldn't make out the screen. He swore silently. Even the keyboard itself was blocked from the camera's view from this angle, so he doubted the tech guys could get much from the digital memory of his spy device.

After a few moments, the Maori computer geek swiveled the laptop screen yet farther away to face Pao Fen.

"As you can see," he said, "we are ready for the exchange."

Pao Fen gave the tech a steely stare. "You understand, we are paying for the sole copy of the plans. We are buying an exclusive. No copies, no other buyers." He turned to the Maori leader. "If we find out otherwise, there will be consequences."

The tall Maori stopped gawking at his purchases and looked up. "You have brought what we wished to acquire. We don't double deal."

Pao Fen's mouth twisted into a tight smile as his eyes returned to the laptop and scanned the screen. He nodded. "Very well. As soon as we have the plans, we shall give you the Ma . . ."

Everyone jumped as the deafening blast of a cruise ship horn drowned out all speech, all hearing, all thought. Dick grabbed the wires and flung the earbud from his left ear in an instinctive reaction. With the gain up on the camera microphone, his left ear was still ringing even after the horn blast ended; he just hoped it wasn't bleeding. His instincts were good. Another shrill blast cut through the warehouse, so forceful as to cause dust motes in the air to shimmer and throb in time to the frequency.

He forced himself to ignore the sound and concentrate on what was happening on his video screen. The guards were obviously tense. While two had their hands over the ears, letting their automatic weapons dangle on their slings, the rest were keyed up, looking for targets, their trigger fingers twitching. The Maori tech had his fingers in either ear, cartoon style. Pao Fen grimaced at the overwhelming clamor. The Maori leader's face bore an angry scowl.

The horn blasts triggered Dick's combat reflexes. The tension on the warehouse floor was rising and he instinctively knew something bad was about to happen. His mind went into tactical overdrive, preparing for the worst. Eight guards, including Pao Fen's driver, stationed in pairs on each side of the open area, plus the tall local, the young Maori tech, and Pao Fen Smythe. Eleven opponents. And him with no back-up.

Without even thinking, he assigned all of his adversaries names. Eight reindeer: Dasher (Pao Fen's driver) and Dancer to the north near the haphazardly parked Range Rover. Prancer and Vixen, the two criss-crossing guards he had seen before, by the door to the east. Scanning southeast, past the forklift and crate to the south were Comet and Cupid. Almost straight beneath him were Donder and Blitzen on the west. Even though he knew Pao Fen Smythe's name, the man in charge with all the toys automatically became Santa in his mind. The tall local was the Abominable Snowman. The Maori tech he dubbed Rudolph.

It wasn't Christmas, not for months, but the names popped unbidden into Dick's mind. All those Christmases watching *Rudolph: The Red-Nosed Reindeer* when Seth was still young, no doubt. How bizarre was that?

He cast the disturbing thoughts juxtaposing family and work aside. *Stop reminiscing and pay attention!*

“Damn tourists!” The Abominable Maori leader pounded a fist on the table just as the second blast ended, causing the laptop to bounce and turn slightly. Dick got the briefest glimpse of bright blue in the corner of the screen that bumped into view. Then a third blast buffeted the warehouse again.

The camera-view vibrated with the horn-blast, then suddenly began to zoom in rapidly on the scene below. For the briefest second, Dick stared at the remote control for the tiny spy device—the camera didn’t have that kind of telephoto zoom capability. Then he realized what was happening. He dropped the remote at the same moment the camera hit the concrete floor of the warehouse. The horn blast had shaken it loose from the C4 holding it to the window.

Dick was moving to the shelf at the edge of the opening when he faintly heard someone say: “What the hell is that?” He couldn’t tell who had spoken, but it didn’t matter. All that mattered now was the laptop. The plans for the Kestrel 84 were on that laptop and it was up to him to retrieve it, if he could survive the coming fire fight.

Just another bad day at the office.

Time to take care of business.

He pulled a Micro Uzi submachine pistol and a couple of spare 32 round magazines he had tucked under the waistband at the small of his back, beneath the loose fitting, open Aloha shirt. He quickly edged toward the end of the shelving unit. Without bothering to look or aim, he held the machine pistol angled downward and away from his body and let off a burst of random fire down below to seed as much panic as possible. He hoped most of the combatants would comply with the implied request of his barrage and seek cover. Those who didn’t protect themselves would undoubtedly stand slack-jawed in the open, looking for an adversary to shoot at. The ultimate decision on which path to take, Dick was convinced, depended on the ratio between their respective IQs and their testosterone-fueled macho bullshit aggressiveness.

Dick loved testosterone-fueled macho bullshit aggressiveness in an adversary. He snicked a new clip into position to replace the one emptied in his two-second burst, then used a shelving support to swing into full view of the space below. Most of his foes were proving their intelligence by dashing for cover, but three of the reindeer had bigger egos than brains. Prancer and Vixen, to the east, and Comet to the

south, were all standing in the open, guns angled upward, scanning for something to shoot at. When they glimpsed him, they started firing, even before they had swung their automatic weapons around to target their adversary. He didn't mind. They were wasting their ammunition. Besides, the cacophony of gunshots, impact thuds, and ricochets was creating an unholy din of thunder, which would help confuse the bad guys. He knew how many opponents he faced; they had no clue. For all Santa and Rudolph knew, the entire New Zealand army was assaulting them—if New Zealand had an army. Dick wasn't sure, but he thought they had sent like three guys to Iraq.

Whatever. Despite the already deafening noise inside the warehouse, Dick was about to make things louder. Creeping forward, he sighted the forklift through a spot between a machinery crate and another shelving support and aimed for the propane tank fueling the device, then squeezed off a single round. The sound of his shot was lost in the echoes of the tumult below.

The shot pierced the tank cleanly. Pressurized gas spewed out, enveloping the forklift and its surroundings in a choking, blue haze. Prancer actually laughed when he saw the propane gas was merely escaping and that the tank had not blown up, like it would have in the movies. Vixen and Cupid were merely wrinkling their noses from the ethanethiol added to make the odorless gas smell.

Dick smiled. Time to find out how stupid these mugs really were.

He poked his weapon out into the open for a second, then pulled it back and threw his arms up to shield his face and head. His defensive position meant he never knew whether it was Vixen or Cupid who commenced the spray of automatic weapons fire toward his little hidey-hole. Whoever it was, flame burst from the end of his weapon as he did so, igniting the cloud of expanding propane gas, guaranteeing at least part of the herd wouldn't be joining in any more reindeer games.

The resulting explosion rocked the warehouse, sending crates and merchandise crashing down from the swaying shelving units and shattering every skylight on the east side of the building. Slivers of glass sliced down through the black smoke coursing up from the fireball. Dick could hear curses and cries of pain as the greasy black smoke began to pour through the now broken skylights into the twilight sky above.

He snatched up his camera bag and scrambled down to the concrete floor of the warehouse. Donder and Blitzen both crouched

behind a pallet of dog kibble in the next row over, peering over the lumpy top toward the center of the open area. Blitzen frantically shouted for someone to tell him what to do.

Dick delivered a response via high-velocity rounds ticked off with efficiency from his machine pistol. Donder and Blitzen died like the good little foot soldiers they were: scared and clueless and stinking of blood and shit.

Ignoring the smell, Dick moved forward into his adversary's former position, a good place to hole up for a moment while he assessed the scene. Anyone who knew where Donder and Blitzen had taken cover wouldn't be firing indiscriminately toward them. At least that was the theory. Still, he had to hurry; firefighters were no doubt scrambling to put on their boots and rush here even now—and they were used to driving on the wrong side of the road.

A quick scan of the area revealed Prancer, Vixen, and Comet were all, as he had expected, down from the explosion. Dead or unconscious, he didn't care. He would be gone before they woke up in any event. That left Cupid to his right, Dasher and Dancer somewhere behind the black Range Rover to his left, and Santa, the Abominable Snowman, and Rudolph someplace straight ahead, probably crawling toward the cars in an effort to escape. He couldn't see them. Smoke billowed from the forklift and from packing material and cargo set ablaze on the south side of the warehouse door, where an inrushing breeze ferried oxygen to the flames.

He didn't have time to search and destroy—he only had to confuse his enemy. He ran forward into the smoke, heading east, where he hoped to find Rudolph with the laptop. As he bolted, he shouted “Don't shoot!” as loudly as possible. His ruse had the desired effect. After a brief hesitation, guns blazed into the opening toward where Dick had shouted. Dasher and Dancer blasted away on the north and Cupid followed suit on the south. It had taken a moment for the remaining reindeer to process that the voice crying out was not one of the herd, so Dick was well east of the spot they fired at by the time the team reacted. With any luck, the young bucks would shoot each other, or at least pin each other down while they traded fire. He didn't wait around to test his theory or his luck.

The air cleared as Dick sprinted toward the open bay door on the east. He saw Santa—Pao Fen Smythe—running down the alleyway to escape. He started to raise his weapon to fire, but lowered it a heartbeat later. Offing Santa would make any day a good day, based

on what he knew of the scumbag, but Santa was not his primary objective. *Stay on mission.*

The engine in the dark Lexus outside purred to life, and Dick saw the Abominable Snowman jink the gearshift into drive. Again, not his objective. No passenger was visible, so he let the Abominable Snowman thunder back to his cave on the North Island.

Rudolph possessed the laptop. The laptop held the plans for the Kestrel 84. Rudolph was the one he needed to find. Too bad his freakin' nose didn't glow.

Fortunately for them both, though, Dick knew Rudolph's IQ was probably higher than the IQs of all of the remaining reindeer combined. The kid was a tech, he was smart enough to take cover in a firefight, and he was smart enough to hide. He would probably be smart enough to deal.

Dick scuttled a few yards away from the door and quickly rifled through his camera bag, pulling out the remainder of the C4 he had brought, along with a detonator. He armed the C4 with precise, rapid movements, then ran to the corner of the bay door and slid the deadly device along the concrete into the middle of the open area, where he could still see it in the clearer air near the floor. He fired two shots into the floor a few feet on either side of the block, just to focus attention on it.

"Hey, tech boy," he yelled. "That's four pounds of C4, under my control. Enough to take down this warehouse and you in it. You're smart; you know what it can do. If you're lucky, the concussion will kill you so you don't slowly burn to death when you're trapped by the falling debris."

Dick waited a few moments for a response. None came, although the shots from the north and south finally subsided.

"Smart enough not to give away your position by responding, I see. Or maybe unconscious. I'd bet on smart." He paused again, before continuing. "Slide the laptop out the door and in ten minutes I'll be too far away to detonate the explosives. Or I can destroy the laptop and you, too. Your choice. It's no nevermind to me."

He saw a shape moving through the smoke from the north toward the bloc of C4. He fired. His first shot was sufficient to take down the shape—Dancer, he thought—but he held down the trigger for a burst, just for effect.

“Now you’ve gone and made me impatient,” Dick yelled. “Ten seconds.” He smiled to himself, “Counting down by primes, asshole. Seven, five, three, two ...”

The laptop came skittering out of the warehouse into the alleyway with surprising force. It looked a little beat up, but he didn’t care. He loosed another burst of automatic weapons fire into the doorway with his right hand while he scooped up the laptop with his left hand.

“I’ll be waiting a bit to see if anyone comes after me, so just settle in. In ten minutes, I’ll be out of range.” He waited ten seconds and fired off another burst. “Still here.”

With that, he took off at a lope, the opposite way down the alley from the direction Santa and the Abominable Snowman had gone—no need looking for more encounters. He could sneak through the wood products yard and circle back around to his bike while the authorities were sifting through the rubble, trying to figure out what happened. Speaking of which, as soon as he reached the end of the alleyway and turned the corner where he would have some cover, he reached for the detonator. He pressed the button and the C4 ignited in a white flash that lit up the sleepy twilight and reflected back from the white hull of the cruise ship, now well on her way to the mouth of the bay.

Even though he was at a relatively safe distance, he flinched and instinctively ducked down for a second at the flash of the explosion. He always scoffed when super-cool movie spies walked away from an explosion without reacting. Dick did nothing to suppress his survival instincts; he didn’t care if he looked cool. Not only did ducking present a lower surface area to the blast wave propagating outward, making it less likely to knock you over, bending down also meant that any errant shrapnel flung unusually far was more likely to hit you in the ass than in the back of your head.

He’d rather put his ass on the line any day.

The secondary explosion from the Range Rover followed about thirty seconds later, occasioning another flinch. The armaments and ammo would pop off over time, holding firefighters at bay for a considerable period, no doubt. About forty-five seconds had passed since he had recovered the laptop, which, he thought, made him a liar.

A liar, but a survivor. One who left no witnesses and no clues, not if he could help it.

## CHAPTER 5

Dick breathed in the smoky air with a sigh of relief as he jogged past the warehouses, along the waterfront toward the stacks of native timber in the nearby storage yard.

The heavy equipment for handling logs was parked and motionless in the timber facility. No doubt there was a guard, but he knew the guy would be preoccupied with the explosion and fire two warehouses away, either watching the timber nearest the conflagration with hose in hand, lest the fire spread, or heading for the road to direct emergency equipment when it arrived; Dick could finally hear the sing-song wail of fire engines in the distance. In either event, Dick was not worried about confrontation.

Instead, his thoughts focused forward, to his mandatory break between missions. Melanie and Seth used to rush to greet him when he got home from “business” trips. Seth would ask what he had brought him and Melanie would smile and squeeze his (hopefully shrapnel-free) ass while she gave him an enthusiastic kiss. But not anymore. Now he was met by sullen scowls and it wasn’t because of his lame, touristy gifts or a sudden decline in the quality of his kisses or the firmness of his ass. Things had not been going well at home; Melanie had wearied of his chaotic schedule and frequent absences and he was increasingly a stranger to his son. Seth was more interested in computer games, action movies, and chatting with friends, than he was in construction equipment or fatherly advice on school and sports. Dick hoped to make up for lost time with both Melanie and Seth during the break—maybe a family road trip. He’d give it some thought on the long flight back.

With a sudden jolt, his reverie and the laptop he was carrying were both shattered by a high velocity round fired from somewhere in the backlit gloom behind him. He ducked into the nearest row for cover. Crap. One of the damn reindeer must have escaped. He peered back, looking through a “v” formed by two huge pieces of New Zealand Radiata Pine.

It was Dasher, Pao Fen’s driver. No doubt he had taken off running through the warehouse the second Dick had hefted the C4 through the door. If Dasher was true to his name, he could have exited out a back door and circled back along the waterfront after the



explosion. Dick should have been watching his six and not daydreaming about playing catch with Seth while Melanie made lemonade in her fetching yellow sun dress.

His family would be the death of him yet.

Dick pulled his Micro Uzi again, ready and willing to shoot it out with Dasher, but then caught the sound of sirens again, now much closer. Even with ammo popping off in the blaze, the police might investigate gunfire, especially if there was an extended battle. He would have, back when he was a cop. Cops had little to do during a fire, he knew, except keep the crowds at bay. Truth be told, cops mostly sat around at a fire with their thumbs up their asses while the firemen did the dangerous stuff.

He had a better idea than a running gunfight in the dark, surrounded by cops. He ran part-way down the row between stacks of logs, then scrambled up the left-hand stack. The jutting ends of the cleanly sawed-off logs made it an easy climb. In just a few seconds he reached the high edge, then used his upper body strength to slide atop as he let go of his toe-holds. He kept as low a profile as possible and surveyed his position.

This would do.

He shoved the remains of the shattered laptop into his camera bag and fished out a small, cylindrical shaped device, then waited and watched.

Dasher lurked at the corner of a line of logs one row over. In a burst of speed, the wisest, or perhaps just the swiftest, of the reindeer darted across the open space between the rows of stacked logs, then pulled up. Dick's assailant snuck along the end of the pile on which Dick laid in wait. Dick pulled the pin on the M84 stun grenade he was holding, then shoved the flashbang as deep as he could down a crevice between two ancient logs, without regard for the scrapes to his knuckles in the effort. He pulled his hand out from between the two massive trunks, then skittered away with reckless abandon along the top, away from the end where Dasher was creeping.

Counting to himself, Dick closed his eyes tight and threw his hands over his ears just before a brilliant flash of light and powerful, booming shockwave thundered from the midst of the stacked logs. The grenade produced no fragmentation, but the blast pulsed the logs up and out, eliminating the contact friction holding them in place, sending the short end of the stack rolling, unencumbered at the open end, toward the dark water of Otago Harbor. Blinded by the powerful light of the

flashbang, Dasher probably never saw the rolling avalanche of native wood that tumbled toward him. All Dick heard was a muffled cry of surprise as the logs rolled down and over Dasher, trampling the last of the herd.

Dick jumped quickly off the row of logs, just in case it unraveled completely. He ran for the main road at the far end of the storage area. The thoroughfare was clogged with emergency vehicles, some still arriving, some parked haphazardly across the right-of-way. Fortunately, all eyes were on the fiery conflagration engulfing the warehouse and he was able to exit the cargo yards without difficulty or interrogation.

In ten minutes, he was at his bike. He recovered the bullet-ridden laptop from his camera bag, dumping the armaments and most of the other gear the bag had been carrying into the bike's storage bin. Snagging a large Zip-Loc from the miscellaneous gear, he dropped the computer in, zipped it closed, and tucked the Zip-Loc in his camera bag. He shouldered the camera bag and mounted the bike, starting up the motor and twisting the throttle. The vibrations confirmed the motorcycle was running in good order, even though revving the powerful engine created little sound above the explosion-punctuated roar of the nearby fire.

Dick headed off, cutting around side streets to avoid the thick of equipment in the immediate vicinity, then threading his way through stopped and blocked traffic. In just a few minutes he was screaming down the main road as additional emergency equipment screamed back at him as it rushed toward the scene of what had by now become a massive conflagration at the cargo and timber port. This was the easy part. In two hours he would be on the road headed toward Christchurch. In fifteen hours, he would be just another tourist winging his way back to the states from a vacation in New Zealand with a few souvenirs.

Of course, life wasn't easy. Not at work. Not at home. Certainly not when fleeing full-out on the wrong side of the fucking road from what was sure to be reported as a major terrorist incident with stolen goods and enough explosives and ammo to topple Grenada or Nevis or one of those other bullshit island nations that didn't count for squat except during the opening ceremonies at the summer Olympics.

The line of stopped vehicles tipped him off more than a click before the actual blockade. He rumbled the bike onto the shoulder, as if to move up the line, then halted to survey the situation. Kiwi cops

were interviewing drivers and searching vehicles up ahead and they seemed to be taking their time and doing it carefully. Worse yet, a squad car was moving down the lane of stopped vehicles at a slow, but even, pace. No doubt one function of the approaching policemen was to inform drivers what was going on and solicit their cooperation. The other function, though—the real function Dick knew from his years on the force—was to keep an eye out for someone, someone like him, who would rabbit rather than face the scrutiny of a security point.

Dick hated to be predictable, but he really had no choice. He was hemmed in on this stretch of road, with no real alternate route. The more he dithered, the more the distance between him and the cop shrank. He turned the bike back into the roadway, making an effort to avoid being spotted by cutting between a panel truck and an empty van used for hauling tourists to sheep shearing demonstrations. He got into the unclogged lane heading the other direction and kicked the bike up a gear, moving away from the blockade and the police car at a deliberate, but unpanicked pace, his eyes glued to his rear view as he started to slowly add on speed.

Then he saw the mars lights of the police cruiser flick on—it was K-Mart blue light special time in Kiwi-land—and he geared up again, twisting the throttle savagely to redline the engine and gear up yet again. The police cruiser lurched forward to follow.

He didn't have much time. Things were congested back at the port and every moment was another moment the police could be on the radio calling in back-up, broadcasting his position, his description. For all he knew, they could be calling in choppers. And there was no way he was going to get into a firefight with the cops. Sure, he'd killed innocent people before and he would do it again. It was one of the prices paid for keeping the world safe from the really bad guys. But he had been a cop. Once a cop, always a cop. He wouldn't engage the police, not if there was any other way.

He slammed down the road—he was actually catching up to a fire engine racing ahead in the distance, but he paid that scant attention. Every moment was spent looking right, toward the bay. Finally, he saw what he needed.

A bevy of watercraft had congregated not far off shore, the passengers ogling the explosions in the warehouse district to the east like fireworks on Venetian night back when Dick lived in Chicago. A long, unobstructed pier poked out from the shore, ending about twenty meters from a guy who was resting on the handlebars of his

idling SkiDoo as he watched the fiery show. Dick gunned the motor of the Yamaha, straining it yet further and jinked the bike to the right, onto the entrance for a parking area near the pier. The rear end of the performance bike slid out from under him as he took the sharp turn without losing speed, but Dick muscled the powerful ride back into position. He aimed for the pier, popping a wheelie and standing up as the motorcycle came to a short curb separating the parking area from the sidewalk leading to the pier.

The police vehicle in pursuit was surprisingly muscular for such an eco-friendly little country. Its tires squealed in protest as the cop driving braked for the turn-in, but Dick was rapidly losing interest in the police pursuit. His entire attention, his entire focus was riveted on the rapidly approaching end of the pier and the idling SkiDoo. He cranked the throttle tight to the maximum and rocketed off the end of the pier.

Before the bike even began its arcing descent toward the salty water of the bay, he made his move. He launched himself off the bike, causing it to veer awkwardly to the left in recoil as he jumped to the right, aiming for the SkiDoo and doing a half-somersault to bring his legs forward. The well-muscled Kiwi hunk who had been enjoying the pyrotechnics was still reacting, his eyes following the flashiness of the revving, shiny bike as it leapt for the water, when both of Dick's feet caught him square in the chest. The hunk was propelled off the side of the surfer, his arms flinging themselves across his six-pack in instinctual reaction to the blow, when Dick slammed into the seat of the already running vehicle. Dick reached for the controls with one hand, maxing out the throttle, causing the rocking SkiDoo to surge forward away from the flummoxed, soaking rider and into the spray caused as the bike splashed down into the bay.

As he grappled for control of his escape craft with his right hand, Dick reached into his left pocket and fingered a small electronic gewgaw, triggering the self-destruct device contained in his bag of tricks, still in the back compartment of the now submerged and rapidly sinking bike. The charge did its work, exploding with a white hot whoomp. The special mixture of phosphorous and explosive compounds of the self-destruct not only destroyed the gear, but ignited the remaining explosives. An expanding white ball of annihilation rose from the depths of the bay and burst forth, showering Dick, the bewildered boating onlookers, and the hood of the police cruiser screeching to a halt at the end of the pier.

Glancing back, he could see the local cop calling for back-up, but Dick didn't worry. Most of the local constabulary was undoubtedly on scene at the warehouse fire. They would be hard-pressed to bring any resources to bear where Dick was headed: the southern coast of Otago Harbor.

Unlike the bigger coastal towns in Australia and New Zealand, Dunedin didn't have a pricey, spectacular bridge connecting the headlands of the bay at a height sufficient to allow seagoing vessels to cruise unhindered beneath. To get from one side of the bay to the other, it was either take a boat, or drive pell-mell for forty-five minutes down one side of the bay, through the center city, and back up the other side of the massive body of water.

The police in the cruiser could commandeer a boat to follow him, but by the time that happened, he would be more than half-way across the bay. A concerned boating citizen could initiate his own pursuit, but Dick smiled at the possibility. Would you go after someone who had just launched their motorcycle into the bay to steal a surfrider, then blew up the evidence by remote control? Sure the authorities had radios and manpower, but he bet both were currently focused on the conflagration still brightly blazing to the northeast. Besides, those limited resources would only be effective if he was hemmed in someplace back on the northern coast; here the cops had no idea where Dick was going to land on the long and desolate southern coast.

He never even knew if they tried to catch him. In a surprisingly short time he was back on dry land and making good speed in a boosted BMW away from the Otago Peninsula, away from Port Chalmers, away from his mission—moving toward his real life. A change of clothes, vehicle, and cover ID, and Dick was soon winging his way across the empty Pacific Ocean, alone with his thoughts. He didn't even have the vital laptop within reach anymore.

He'd been forced to put the trashed laptop in his checked luggage; there was no way to get a laptop with an obvious bullet hole past security without raising suspicion. He knew HQ would be pissed if it got lost, but lost luggage is generally held for at least a year before being auctioned off—it would be as good a storage place as any in the meantime. He could go back and find it if he had to. Besides, he had upgraded to first class for the long flight home. First class baggage might be pilfered, but it was rarely lost. The airlines knew better than to screw over people who could afford to hire lawyers.

Dick had picked up a few cuts, scrapes, and bruises from his encounters at the warehouse and the log storage yard. He spent part of his long trip home figuring out what lies to tell his family about how he had gotten them. It was a damn crappy job that made you lie to your family, even crappier than his cover job at Catalyst Crisis Consulting as a technical specialist for wastewater treatment facilities.

He leaned back and closed his eyes. With the international dateline, he would actually arrive back in the states about the same time he had left New Zealand. Good thing he wasn't paid by the hour.

As always on long flights, he turned his thoughts to Melanie and to better, happier times: Melanie in her bridal-shower-gift lingerie; Melanie giggling as they made up silly songs one time in the middle of the night; Melanie cradling Seth after seventeen hours in labor. Melanie.

Maybe his happy memories were clichés, but that didn't make them any less real to him. That didn't lessen how they made him feel, how they got him through the bad days. He was just a regular guy; he wasn't a poet. He was a spy.

And even though he was a spy, Dick loved his wife. Imagine that. Dick smiled as he imagined just that.

Then sleep caught up with him and the scene faded to black.

## CHAPTER 6

Dee Tammany bounced on the balls of her feet, then jumped lightly back and to the right, then left, fists up, the soft waves of her brunette hair flouncing in time to her footwork. She looked for an opening, but found none. Her opponent, six foot four if he was an inch, grinned as he looked down at her. Like her, he was moving on the balls of his feet, but without bouncing—just slow easy steps to keep his torso square to her shifting position. His fists were also up, but in a relaxed, easy way. He clearly knew he had the upper hand. Dee shifted again, as she took in his chiseled body, the incredibly broad shoulders and heavily muscled arms forming the wide section of a triangle that narrowed down, moving past a heart-shaped tattoo reading “Mother” above his left breast, to a narrow waist beneath six-pack abs.

God, she loved the look of younger men.

He used her distraction to his advantage, choosing the moment her eyes had flicked down to his waist to rush in to her right side, her weak side as a southpaw. He attempted to grab her right arm at the elbow, no doubt to pull it forward and twist her around so he could get a choke-hold on her from behind with his massive left arm. She dropped her right shoulder as he moved in and spun, throwing out her left leg to try and catch him behind the knee as she escaped, but he sidestepped the move without even looking at her leg. His dead, brown eyes fixed always on her center of mass.

Damn it, she thought, as she bounced back again, squaring up their now-reversed positions, if I hadn't chosen a sports bra this morning, I might be distracting him instead of vice versa—even though I'm old enough to be ... his older sister. Too much work and not enough play was having an effect on her—and she knew better than to play at work.

“You're not focusing, Dee,” he said as he began to circle slowly, always to her weak side, with silent, ballet-like moves. “Is your mind on something else?” His dark eyes remained steady on her, giving nothing away.

Admitting she'd been admiring his physique was not an option, not even with Marco, her live-in security guard/driver/sparring partner. It wasn't professional. More important, it wasn't smart. So, she lied. It came easily. Even before she became a spy, long before she became Director of the Subsidiary, the most secret of all the secret espionage

agencies in the world, she had gotten a double major in communications and psychology. She not only knew how to lie with easy assurance, she knew how to make it convincing to the recipient of the lie at a deep psychological level. “It’s the ‘Mother’ tattoo,” she taunted. “You don’t seem like a mama’s boy. It’s so incongruous, it’s distracting. Is that why you got it?”

Despite his Mediterranean complexion, Marco flushed red from the scalp beneath his close-cropped black hair, past the gunslinger moustache, and across his chest, accentuating the heart-shaped frame of his tattooed tribute to motherhood. His dancer’s steps faltered for just a half-second. “I told you before, I was drunk ...”

Dee flicked her right wrist to the side as a feint as she leapt toward him, feet first, low and to the left, attempting to get both her legs in the narrow gap between his as she dropped. She succeeded and swept left with her left leg, trying once again to catch him behind the knee as she simultaneously crooked her right leg, purposefully over-balancing her fall to force her knee up into his groin. She knew he would countermove, but he had a Hobson’s choice: keep his footing and endure the knee to the crotch or fling his left leg back to avoid the assault on his manhood and spin to the floor as his pivot leg collapsed mid-spin.

Instead he surprised her by throwing both legs straight back and springing ever so slightly forward, so her left leg caught his rock-hard calf and her right knee sailed cleanly under his now-levitated body. For an instant, her opponent seemed to hang in mid-air above her, parallel to the floor, before gravity’s relentless attraction pulled them both crashing to Earth. The training mat cushioned the assault to her backside as she hit, but Marco’s body whoomphed down on the top half of her body a split second later. “Mother” descended straight into her at eye level and Marco’s abs and hips crushed down on her torso, forcing the air from her lungs, even as he attempted to catch and cushion his fall by forcing his arms into the mat.

As Marco rolled lithely off her to her left, Dee curled her knees up and rolled to her right side, her ribs heaving. She winced and tried desperately to catch her breath. As her vision cleared from the pain, she saw her live-in assistant, Mitzi, standing in the doorway to the exercise room. Mitzi had some papers tucked under her left arm, and was holding the usual morning breakfast tray: a pot of coffee, a small glass of orange juice, a bowl of hot Kashi, and assorted fruit.



“If you were Angelina Jolie, or even Katherine Heigl, I could have sold a picture of that to the Enquirer for one, maybe two, million. How come no one ever invites me to the play room for fun?” Mitzi was young, mischievous, and Dee’s only connection to the “real” world in which people who weren’t professional spies lived.

Marco remained silent, standing quickly and striding to the far wall of the room. He draped a towel across his shoulders as Dee uncurled and elbowed her way to a sitting position.

“Katherine who?” asked Dee, still sitting on the floor.

Mitzi rolled her eyes and set the tray down on the table on the windowed side of the exercise room. “*Grey’s Anatomy*?”

Dee shook her head as she got up and headed to the table for breakfast. “Psychology major, not psychiatry. Never had to take those med-school courses.”

Mitzi rolled her eyes again and shook her head. “You need to get out more.”

Marco sauntered over, his eyes flicking over the tray, his right hand reaching out to snag a piece of fruit. Mitzi slapped it away, with a wink. “And you need to get out. Boss lady’s got work to do.” She took the sheaf of papers from under her left arm, unfolded them and dropped them onto the table next to Dee’s Kashi. “Stuff’s happening in the world.”

Dee furrowed her brow, snapping into business-mode. She sat down and ate mechanically as she concentrated on the papers. “Anything big?” she asked, flipping through the captions on the various sheets.

Mitzi shrugged her shoulders as she started to leave the room, close behind Marco. “I didn’t see anything about the upcoming fall television shows, so I didn’t bother to look.”

Dee didn’t smile and didn’t look up. Time to go to work.



Less than an hour later, Dee had finished both her morning briefing paper and her breakfast, had showered and dressed, and had been driven by Marco to her office at Catalyst Crisis Consulting, LLC—the management consulting company which provided an extensive menu of analytical and security services to companies, governments, and wealthy individuals around the world, but also provided cover for the

activities and facilities of the Subsidiary. Glenn Swynton, the Subsidiary's operations liaison, was already at HQ when Dee arrived.

Glenn was always at HQ from what Dee could tell and he always was impeccably groomed. Today Glenn wore a tailored charcoal suit which looked like it might have sprung out of the display window of one of the fashionable bespoke boutiques on Savile Row in London. Dee had no idea how Glenn did it—she would bet the contingency budget he couldn't get a suit like that made in Philadelphia. Maybe he had measurements on file and a kick-ass professional shopper on retainer across the pond. Dee might have asked, but Glenn also always had an aristocratic edge to his cool, English accent that did not encourage banter or friendship. Dee had long-ago accepted that their relationship would always be professional and practical, much like Glenn, himself. Cordial enough to prevent friction, but never warm and, God-forbid, never casual.

"Have you seen the Dunedin footage?" said Glenn by way of greeting.

"I read the briefing synopsis on the way in," replied Dee as she made her way past Glenn to her desk. "I haven't seen pictures."

Glenn thumbed a remote and a flat-screen panel flared to life across from Dee's desk. The high-definition, plasma screen displayed with vivid clarity the red and yellow and orange and black of a huge conflagration engulfing the warehouse district and adjoining lumber and cargo container yards of the harbor at Port Chalmers, near Dunedin. Although the sound was turned off, the picture jiggled visibly as a series of burning tractor-trailers in the cargo container yard exploded, sending metal flying in all directions.

Glenn folded his arms without mussing his double-knotted, one-of-a-kind silk tie. "Damn American operatives. Once, just once, I'd like to see one of them handle a warehouse surveillance without blowing the bloody thing up."

Dee ignored the dig. Glenn Swynton could be a haughty bastard and a tough son-of-a-bitch, all at the same time. That's why he was responsible for interfacing with operatives and, on occasion, extricating them from whatever trouble they got into with the various agencies and governments of the mundane world. The agents needed someone to run interference for them with the authorities, whether legitimate or clandestine. They also often needed a fierce chewing-out and a firm hand. Glenn provided whatever was needed without flinching. But, when he wanted, Glenn could also be the most

diplomatic liason Dee had ever met. That's why he also had the task of coordinating meetings, both with other espionage and law enforcement agencies and with the various national representatives who had established the Subsidiary after 9/11.

If Glenn was being this blunt, he was obviously trying to goad Dee into some kind of response. No sale.

"When was this taken?" asked Dee, inclining her head to indicate the screen.

Glenn sniffed. "The feed is real time, of course. The initial explosion and resulting fire began almost thirty-six hours ago. The local fire brigade had insufficient resources to bring the blaze under control before it spread to the entire port facility. Beside the immediate losses to merchandise, goods in transit, and lumber exports, the damages to the port facilities themselves—cargo cranes, warehousing facilities, refueling stations, and the like—will take years and millions of dollars to rectify. The New Zealand government is absolutely bonkers over it and for good reason. Truth told, every contact we have in the South Pacific is asking questions and not waiting for a response before they draw their own conclusions."

While Dee was not indifferent to the collateral damage the Subsidiary's missions sometimes produced, she also knew more than anyone the loss of life, property, and stability the Subsidiary had prevented during her tenure. Even with this setback, the agency was well into the plus column. She refused to take Glenn's bait.

"What did Thornby say when he got back?"

Glenn's eyes narrowed. "He said 'Mission accomplished, I think,' then dropped a bullet-riddled, non-functional laptop on the table for the computer techs to try to put back together again. Then he headed home for his mandatory rest period between assignments."

Dee frowned. "That's it?"

Glenn's mouth pursed, giving him the kind of severe look male models had when they strutted down the runway showcasing the types of haute culture clothing he wore everyday. "He said everything else was in his remote report after the warehouse meet. Apparently some Maori terrorists, if you can imagine such a thing, were trading the plans for the Kestrel 84 for cash, small arms, and weaponry which would allow them to shoot down wide-bodied passenger jets. No new detail as to how they got the plans in the first place. The hope is that the only copy is on the recovered laptop." Glenn tilted his head toward the tech bullpen, arching an eyebrow. "Luke Calloway, that tall, Aussie

tech in the computer department, has the laptop now. Luke said it may take awhile to reconstruct the laptop's databases, if it can even be done. If the plans are not there or if the Maoris were smart enough to back up the files elsewhere, we will have destroyed the economy of Dunedin for the foreseeable future for no benefit whatsoever."

Dee sat in her ergonomic chair, then looked up to fix Glenn with a dismissive stare. "I doubt passengers jetting into New Zealand would see no benefit to our agent's activities, if they ever knew what the armed faction of militant Maoris intended."

"These nativist cabals are all talk, no action, I'm sure," replied Glenn coolly as he flicked off the video display and turned to exit, his perfectly coiffed brown hair remaining somehow motionless both during the spin and as he finished the abrupt turn.

Dee said nothing, but she hummed *Hail, Britannia* to herself with a wry smile as she set about her morning tasks.



Pao Fen Smythe paced back and forth in front of the huge, mahogany desk in his Hong Kong offices, his teeth clenched, his eyes twitching as they darted from side to side. Even in his own high level of agitation, he was self-perceptive enough to know his body showed—and all of his subordinates knew—he was seething in irritation.

Why? Only a select few in his organization knew what had transpired in New Zealand. Fewer still actually understood exactly what it was about his Kiwi misadventures that had put him in such a foul state. His irritation was not fueled by the personal danger he had faced, nor by the minor scrapes and bruises he had suffered in making his escape from the botched exchange with the Maori PPIPF thugs who were playing IRA wannabes. His anger was not focused on the minor loss of inventory destroyed in the warehouse fire. Nor could his aggravation be blamed on the loss of any significant sum of money; the exchange of funds had never occurred. No, Pao Fen was only truly upset because of the lost opportunity to get his hands on the Kestrel 84 specs.

When the exchange had been interrupted—no doubt because of shoddy communications security on the part of the Maoris—Pao Fen had missed a chance to snag a piece of information that would set him

apart from his competition. The Kestrel 84 specs could be sold for a tidy sum, more than the Maori realized. Moreover, the specs could be sold again and again and again, to governments and insurgents across the globe.

No doubt the buyers would use the device to gather information that would allow them to do terrible, unspeakable things: bombings, kidnappings, terrorism. No doubt some of their targets would be innocents: religious adherents, civilians, children. Pao Fen couldn't care less. The deal was his only concern. How could it be resurrected?

His Maori contacts were all either dead or laying low, so there was no progress to be made there in re-initiating the buy. But, Pao Fen knew, New Zealand was not the only place he could look. In fact, his best cyber-technicians had been on the case since the night of the warehouse debacle. No one had reported any progress, however. In fact, no one had reported in on the electronic search at all. He knew it was probably because no one liked to give him unpleasant information. It's not that he ever shot the messenger—well, not since he was a low level thug for one of the Nine Families of the Triad. But he did have a tendency to swear like a sailor in Mandarin.

He'd have to work on that. Even executives in criminal organizations needed to hone their management skills. And management skills for an arms merchant were largely people management skills. His organization sold everything from AK-47s to purloined plans to black market Exocet MM40 missiles purchased from third world generals who wanted to buy retirement chalets in the Swiss lake country. Procurement, illicit transportation, inventory, security, and sales were all people-intensive activities.

He'd try to be pleasant to the cyber-tracking supervisor, no matter how unpleasant the news. After all, the tech workers were some of the most difficult to recruit into an old-style organized crime organization like the Triad. Mundane hackers were easy, but the more sophisticated and proficient the skill set, the more likely the individual could make more money at considerably less physical and monetary risk working for Baidu or HiPiHi or some tech start-up offering stock options that could quintuple or more in an initial public offering—a financial liquidity event most criminal organizations could not duplicate.

He strode to his desk and picked up the phone from the opposite side, punching in a number with fierce stabs of his index finger. There was no need to be pleasant until the underling actually arrived.

“Please come by my office as soon as convenient,” he cooed with distaste. “I would like to get an update on your search.” He paused for a short reply. “That would be most appreciated.”

He walked around his desk and forced himself to sit down, leaning back and interlacing his fingers behind his head in an effort to relax. He still remembered his martial arts training as a child and called upon it to calm himself, slowing his breathing and relaxing his muscles one-by-one as he waited for the underling to arrive.

The supervisor, a wiry, middle-aged man who was very precise in his movements, entered his office about ten minutes later. The underling bowed and then approached Pao Fen’s desk, waiting until Pao Fen motioned to sit in one of the stuffed-leather and lacquered-wood chairs on the opposite side of the desk.

Pao Fen wanted to bark “Report!” but he stifled the urge. “It is pleasant to talk with you again, Ki Wan Shen. Have you had any success in locating the plans for the Kestrel 84 or the individual holding them?”

Ki Wan Shen’s cheek twitched, but the man did not flinch as Pao Fen had thought he might. The wiry supervisor hesitated a moment, however, before shaking his head. “We have been unable to locate the item sought in our searches thus far. We may need to employ resources elsewhere.”

“Please do whatever is needful,” replied Pao Fen, doing his best to keep any edge out of the command. “What about the individual who last held the plans?”

“It is most perplexing.” Ki Wan Shen leaned forward in the chair. “We have searched the area in which he was last known to be located most thoroughly and have been unable to track him.”

“Given the ... unraveling ... of his support structure, shouldn’t he be somewhere nearby?” One trick Pao Fen had learned long ago for dealing with computer techs was to always use euphemisms. Words like “elimination,” “demise,” and “destruction” tended to make them uncomfortable. And an uncomfortable employee is an employee with an up-to-date résumé circulating both here in Hong Kong and possibly even in Silicon Valley, if they had hopes of an H-1B visa.

Ki Wan Shen frowned. “Certainly, individuals do not disappear or travel large distances without ... support. Perhaps he had unknown allies or ... others ... who may have spirited him away.” The supervisor stopped, then bit his lower lip.

Pao Fen could tell the man wanted to say more. “Please continue, supervisor.” If the man refused, Pao Fen was unsure he would be able to stop himself from pistol-whipping the information out of him. Instead, he gave a broad smile, doing his utmost to ooze sincerity.

“If you or our ... associates in the field ... could identify the party who disrupted the physical exchange in Dunedin, that information might aid our search. As it is, we have cast a very wide net attempting to locate those involved in suspicious trading activities.”

Pao Fen’s eyebrows shot up. “That is a wide net, indeed. Does it not strain our searching resources?”

The supervisor relaxed back into the chair. “We have managed to attach ourselves unseen to certain government searches of a similar nature.”

“Then I’m sure you will be successful. Soon.” replied Pao Fen with a head nod of dismissal. He hadn’t really meant the last word to come out as a separate sentence, with the threat implicit in such narrative structure, but the old ways died hard.

When Ki Wan Shen had left, Pao Fen no longer felt compelled to look pleasant. His face once again felt tight, his furrowed brow rigid. He knew that when alone or dealing with functionaries who required intimidation instead of coddling, a stern scowl was his countenance of default. He picked up the phone again, stabbing as before with his finger, this time dialing a different number.

“Come here, Mr. Lee” he commanded without bothering to exchange pleasantries. “I need you to find someone and something for me.” He hung up without waiting for a response.



Hawk pinged the squad members individually, each on their own separate, pre-arranged emergency frequencies. For good measure, he mixed in identical calls to another dozen or so random frequencies, just in case anyone was listening. Despite the relatively low value of the information that could be gleaned from his call, he didn’t want to take any chances. After all, something had already gone wrong and in a big way. That meant infiltration of either his organization or the rebels’ organization, a leak, or damnably sophisticated electronic surveillance of the entire realm of operations.

None of that could be good.

Accordingly, despite his other precautions, he was also careful and quick with his message: “Do not respond. Do not respond. Rendezvous Theta Six.”

As soon as Hawk finished sending the messages, he turned off his com unit, then destroyed it. He dumped the remains and took off again at top speed, implementing a string of evasive maneuvers just to be sure.

The thing was, he couldn't be sure, not anymore.

He headed for a remote destination where he had stashed a spare com unit and some other gear against future need. That future had come and it didn't look good.

Hawk wished there was someone outside the squad he could talk to, but he was alone. Even when surrounded by others, he'd always felt alone.

Bad times foster self-reliance and build character—that's what a counselor had once said. Given how much his life sucked lately, he must have one hell of a lot of character.

He continued on. He didn't know what else to do.



## CHAPTER 7

Even though he had slept most of the way on his return from half-way across the world, Dick was weary as he sped along the New Jersey Turnpike toward home. It hadn't always been this way. Back when he played football in college, he was charged up and, let's face it, horny after a tough game on Saturday. He would party hard, go parking down at the quarry with Melanie (before they got married—before they had to get married), and still show up for his shift at Chicken Unlimited on Sunday mid-morning with energy to spare. Same thing in the Army—not that he saw much real action in his eight years there. Storming the beaches on Caribbean islands to evacuate some med students or take some petty dictator into custody didn't really get the adrenaline pumping that much. He missed out on the first Gulf War though no fault of his own, except unfortunate timing of a career change, so he actually saw more action as a Chicago cop than he had in his Army days. But even after chasing gangbangers down alleyways and skulking through the dangerous hallways of public housing complexes, late into third shift, he had always felt pumped up and raring to go for more.

Now it seemed like he was weary even before the mission started. It wasn't the work. He'd made a good career choice when the Subsidiary recruited him. The benefits and pay were better, much better, than he had gotten in the Army or the C.P.D. and he didn't need to deal with all the extraneous crap that determined whether a government worker would ever see a raise or a bonus, no matter how much it was merited. He didn't have to worry about departmental budgets and politics and tax levies. Better yet, he never had to answer loaded questions from naive “investigative” reporters looking for a ratings boost, no matter who it hurt. Dick also liked to work on important stuff and nobody did more of that from what he had a need to know than the Subsidiary, and he was sure he couldn't even see the half of it. The freedom of action to do what he felt best, whatever the consequences, the relative lack of bureaucracy, and the nifty tech gizmos were just extra toppings on the pizza.

Maybe it was just that he was getting older. He had a kid in college—okay, junior college—himself for Chrissake. Cell phone batteries weren't the only things that wore down both from time and overuse. But, deep in his heart, he knew his weariness was inversely

proportional to his distance from home, increasing or decreasing depending on which direction he was heading.

Nothing dramatic had happened to hurt his home life. Neither he nor Melanie had been unfaithful, he was sure. Her one-dimple smile was for him alone. But time and his increasing and increasingly lengthy absences had taken their toll. Dick was less and less a part of the team.

None of his jobs had been especially family friendly. None were conducive to attending the long line of Kodak moments fathers were supposed to have with their sons—the soccer games, the family camping trips, the vacations to sunny amusement parks, the photo sessions before the prom. He'd missed most of those moments. And, as Seth had become older and more rebellious in his teen years, Dick had been busy. Protecting a Canadian oil pipeline from eco-terrorists, thwarting the assassination of the German Chancellor during a diplomatic visit, and preventing neurotoxins from being dumped into the Glasgow water supply, those were important moments, too—not that he could tell any of that to Seth or Melanie.

The Subsidiary was very specific about what he could and couldn't say about his job to anyone, including his family. At his pay grade—at all pay grades for all he knew—that meant he couldn't say a thing. Melanie and Seth believed Dick was a consultant at Catalyst Crisis Consulting, LLC, providing technical advice regarding the operations of large-scale wastewater treatment projects. The cover was very useful in explaining sudden international travel, a modicum of discretion in discussing business in polite company, an intermittent work schedule that was far from nine-to-five, and a healthy pay-check. On the other hand, missing Seth's science fair awards because he was trying to prevent leaking sewerage at an aging cow-shit processing facility in north Texas didn't carry the same weight as the truth, that he was part of a black ops team sabotaging centrifuge facilities in Iran so its nuclear weapons capability would be delayed.

Of course, his family could never know that. It wasn't their fault. And it made his life harder—lying to his family.

As Dick finished the drive, exiting the turnpike and making his way past the driveways and shade trees of their upper middle class subdivision in New Jersey, he decided it was up to him to buck up, to try harder, to make things work, despite the challenges. He needed to reconnect with Seth and he longed to put a smile back on Melanie's lovely face and make her worry-lines disappear. It was mid-morning

when he arrived back home. The day was warm and sunny and wonderful in every way.

He would start today.

Dick parked in the driveway, popped the trunk to grab his travel bags, and walked with a deliberately jaunty step toward the front door. The porch light was on despite the time the day. Although Melanie always left it on at night when he was out of town or Seth was out with friends, to make sure they wouldn't stumble if they came home in the dark, she was too eco-conscious to let it burn in the daytime—he had never gotten around to putting it on a light sensor like he had promised. She would have undoubtedly put in the sensor herself, if Dick hadn't stripped the screws on the cover when he had installed the compact fluorescent bulbs last year with his power screwdriver. He could picture the bemused expression on her face as he had grumbled about the chore.

"The new bulbs use sixty percent less energy," she had chided, her green eyes twinkling beneath her stylish, yet practical, brunette hair. "We're saving the planet in our own little way. You shouldn't be grouchy about saving the world, even if it is a little inconvenient at times."

If she only knew.

Still, it was odd that the lights were still on. Maybe she'd slept in or just forgot. Maybe it was a reminder to him to put in the damn sensor so it would turn itself off during the daytime.

He went inside. The house was still, the curtains closed against the late summer heat. "Dad's home," he called out, but got no response. He dropped his bags and wandered to the kitchen, opening the side door to the garage. Melanie's Subaru was gone, as was Seth's scooter.

Dick had surprised Seth with the scooter on his seventeenth birthday—one of Dick's few parenting highlights since he had joined the Subsidiary. Seth loved that scooter and genuinely had loved Dick for giving it to him. Dick knew it gave the kid a range, a feeling of freedom, and a level of both coolness and responsibility that a bike no longer could at his age. Melanie, he knew from her squint-eyed expression, had not really approved, but she supported his decision.

They were a team; at least they had been then. He was going to rekindle that old team spirit. He wondered for a few wistful moments if she still had her old outfit from the Pompom Squad.

But then his training kicked in and the mood was lost as more observations trickled into his conscious mind unbidden. Dick took in the staleness of the air and the silence of the house.

Nobody home. Not for some time.

His forced enthusiasm leaked out, leaving a blue cloud over his mood that rivaled the blue cloud of propane before the warehouse explosion less than two days before. He held his emotions in check. There was no reason to be angry. His family didn't know he was coming home this morning. And, even if they did, they didn't know he wanted them to be there, that he had resolved to make this mandatory down-time between missions a turning point in his declining familial relationships.

He headed for the master bedroom upstairs. A shower and a shave would do him good, would perk him right back up. Maybe he could look into some possible family vacation itineraries before Melanie and Seth got back from their respective outings.

He saw the envelope on his pillow, the lavender rectangle standing out from the forest green print of the comforter and pillow covers. In Melanie's hand, it simply said "Richard" on the outside.

Richard. That couldn't be good.

As his weariness seized him again and a tightness gripped his throat, he opened the envelope and pulled out the note.

"Dick," it read, "I can't just keep waiting around, waiting for happiness to return to my life, especially since it no longer returns when you do. We used to have fun, we used to be a team, at least when you were home. Lately, it just feels empty. I deserve more. I need to find my own happiness, my own life. I told Seth I was visiting my mother in Montpelier, but I'm not. I'll call every evening until you're back and we decide together what to tell him. Please let him enjoy the end of his summer break and don't burden him by talking to him about us before we connect and make some decisions. Your frequent absences are burden enough already. Be safe. Melanie."

Crap. He sat down hard on the bed, letting the lavender notepaper flutter downward, sinking like his mood, until it hit the floor. His mind was numb and blank. He had no tactical or strategic response to the assault he had just suffered. After ten minutes, he got up, shuffled to the stairs and down, pushed around bottles in the liquor cabinet until he found the bottle of Glenfiddich the guys on the police force had given him at his going away party. He grabbed it up, using two fingers to snag a tumbler with the same hand, and made his way back up to

the bedroom. The single malt had a smoky flavor that reminded him of the lumber yard as he escaped the warehouse fire in Dunedin. He began his mandatory rest period by downing enough of the scotch his memories were wrested from him and he passed out.



Dick woke to see Seth standing over him, the teen's softly-stubbled face set and hard beneath his tousled, sandy hair. He wore a green T-shirt Dick knew to be Seth's favorite, depicting a vaguely Oriental scene overlaid with the words "Free Tibet Now!"

"Mom's not in Montpelier at Grandma's, is she?"

The taste of stale liquor coated Dick's tongue. He was still groggy from his binge, but a pounding headache was cutting through the haze. "What? Huh? Yeah, I mean, no, sure she is. Your mom's visiting Grandma." He struggled to push himself up to a sitting position with his elbows.

Then Dick saw it, a lavender blur in Seth's hand. The lavender fluttered to the rumpled bedspread. "I know you're lying. I always know when you're lying. Why do you always have to lie? Why can't you just trust me with the truth?" Seth spun toward the door and stalked away, the sudden motion across Dick's foggy field of vision making Dick lightheaded and nauseous. At the door, Seth hesitated for just a moment, then turned back. "I take that back," he said, and for a brief moment relief cleared Dick's lightheadedness. "You don't always lie. Most of the time you're not here to lie. You can't even be bothered to lie. You just leave without saying anything." Seth left the room before Dick could respond, before he could even get his mind in gear. A moment later, Dick heard the boy thumping down the stairs.

Dick stifled the urge to vomit and bolted up, ignoring the sharp pain that shot down his spine as it throbbed in his right temple. He flung himself toward the stairs, yelling after Seth, before he could get to the front door and leave Dick truly alone. "Wait, Seth, wait! Your mother and I, we just have to talk, that's all. It'll be all right, I promise." He got to the staircase just in time to see Seth reach for the knob and open it, the summer sun backlighting Seth into a dark blur in Dick's eyes.

As Dick squinted to make out any detail, the dark blob turned toward him. “You make lots of promises. The only ones you keep are to your job. I don’t put stock in any of ‘em anymore.”

Dick didn’t know what to say. How could he explain Melanie’s note, her actions, when he didn’t fully understand them himself? The bright light behind Seth’s head could only mean one thing; Dick had slept through much of the day and it was already afternoon. “It’ll be supertime in a few hours,” Dick shouted in the best imitation of his parental authority voice he could muster in his condition. “Where are you going?”

The dark blob shook its head. “You don’t care what I’m doing when you’re gone. Why do you care when you’re here?”

Dick had no immediate answer ready to offer. The darkness turned to move out the door. “Your mother will want to know when she calls,” Dick croaked feebly.

Seth’s voice softened as he replied. “I’m going over to Brian’s. We’re tubing all weekend. I’m staying over at his place.”

Dick panicked. Part of his addled brain seized upon the notion that if Seth walked out that door into the light, Dick would lose him forever. He tried desperately not to sound desperate. “Hey, tubing, huh?” he bantered with faux nonchalance. “I used to go tubing back in my college days, down in Missouri mostly. Really cool ... or rad, I guess they say now.”

Seth turned again to go.

“Why don’t I take you and your friend, Brian, camping up in the Adirondacks or someplace this weekend?” he continued, his voice tightening, cracking to a plea. “We could hit the river, tube a bit ... er ... you know, hang out. I’m between jobs for a couple weeks.”

The shadow began to move once more into the light.

“We could call your mom. Maybe she would join us. You know, a family thing ... and Brian, any of your buddies who want to come along and tube. My treat.”

Seth sighed, a world weary sigh that to Dick’s ears belied his son’s young years. “That might have been ‘rad’ when I was twelve, Dad, but I’m not twelve anymore. Besides, we don’t do the same kind of tubing you used to do, believe me.”

Dick gave up pleading, switching back to false bonhomie. “Sure. Surf skis, that kind of thing, no doubt, now. Well, have fun. Be safe.” He waved feebly, as his nausea reasserted itself. “I’ll let your mother know what you’re up to. Er ... say ‘hi’ to Brian for me.”

And then Seth was gone. Dick lurched for the bathroom.

His embrace of the porcelain in the master bath meant he didn't get to the phone until the sixth ring, right before it would've kicked over to voicemail.

It was HQ. He had to come in for a meeting. So much for his two week mandatory rest period.

An hour later, Dick was showered, shaved, and heavily caffeinated. He sped down the New Jersey Turnpike to the one place where he was still needed, still wanted: the Subsidiary.

Sometimes when he was in transit or on a stake-out, waiting endlessly for the brief, critical flurry of action to come, Dick tried to imagine telling Melanie what he really did for his life's work.



*"I'm really sorry, honey, but I won't be back in time for the parent/teacher conference. Duty calls."*

*"So," Melanie would respond with an edge to her voice, "you're telling me once again that you're choosing a shit-clogged sewer pipe over your own son."*

*"No, not at all. Look, I'm not really in Puerto Rico advising on improved flow rates in wastewater treatment facilities, I'm ... I'm in Nigeria ..."*

*"Nigeria? Do they even have wastewater treatment facilities there?"*

*"I'm not working on treatment facilities. I'm a spy. I'm gathering intelligence on tribal warlords ..."*

*"Dick, listen to me," Melanie would say, concern warming her voice, "don't go all Walter Mitty on me. Your days gathering intelligence for the Army or the police department, those days are over. You work for a consulting firm."*

*"No. No, that's just a cover. I really work for this agency called the Subsidiary."*

*"Whose subsidiary? Are you trying to tell me you work for the CIA?"*

*"No, not the Company's Subsidiary, just the 'Subsidiary.'" It's not an American espionage and counterterrorist agency, it's an international one, but even more important, an autonomous one, created in the aftermath of 9/11. That way it can identify and assess threats on its own, independent of the biases and turf battles that screw things up in all the government agencies the world around."*

*"Look, if you're shackled up in Schenectady with a hooker, just tell me, Dick. I won't be happy, but it's better than this Nigerian bullshit about secret agencies founded by God knows who ..."*

*“No, really, just listen, honey. I can tell you who. The founders, the overseers, of the agency are ... well, they’re like an expanded list of the same countries as on the United Nations Security Council, but without any of the pissant minor players like Cameroon and Finland that circulate in and out of the U.N. circle for reasons of politics and prestige. The countries in charge, they’re, you know, the superpowers and wannabe superpowers who are most concerned with global stability, security, and economic prosperity.”*

*“So you work for a cartel of rich people who want to maintain the status quo and they tell you what to do? Is that supposed to make me stand up and salute?”*

*“Look, we do good however we see it, by whatever means necessary. The national representatives, sure, they can submit a problem for us to resolve and, true, they don’t shake things up for no reason. But we can submit an action of our own for approval, too, without worrying about jurisdiction or budgetary limitations. And once the Subsidiary takes up a case, there’s no turning back. No namby-pamby bureaucrat or diplomat can pull the plug on an operation. Consequences of our actions may not always be predictable, but the Subsidiary always pursues a problem to the very end: win, lose, or draw. I’m making a difference in the world, Melanie—a positive net impact. I’m making the world better for you, for Seth, for everyone.”*

*“You’ve lost it, Dick. I’m calling the VA Hospital to get an appointment for you to see them about PTSD, just as soon as I call the credit card company and freeze our account before you spend our mortgage money on gambling or hookers or fighting Nigerian warlords.” Click.*



He’d imagined the conversation a hundred times, but it always ended the same way, with Melanie hurt and confused. He couldn’t tell Melanie the truth. The Subsidiary wouldn’t let him and she would never understand. He had to live with his life of lies, instead.

Besides, there was really no reason to practice a conversation with Melanie in his mind.

Once again, he wouldn’t be home when Melanie called.



## CHAPTER 8

Luke Calloway searched through the drawers in the computer tech workroom of the Subsidiary's Philadelphia Headquarters until he found a set of jeweler's tools. He laid the tools out on the workbench and set to work on the laptop which had been dropped into his hands by one of the field operatives and Glenn Swynton almost the moment Luke had arrived for his shift.

The assignment surprised Luke. He was really more of a software guy than a hardware guy and, strictly speaking, Glenn Swynton wasn't his boss, Deirdre Tammany was. And even though she was a handsome woman on those rare occasions when she smiled and even though she was friendly enough to tell everyone to call her "Dee," a boss is a boss. Glenn was liaison for the operatives, but Luke wasn't an operative—just a tech plucked straight out of university in Melbourne, Australia less than three years ago. On the other hand, Glenn Swynton was a senior staff member who could be a real ball buster if you got on the wrong side of him.

He didn't want to do that. He liked this gig. Interesting work, gonzo cash, and cutting edge stuff. Besides, the project was a good change of pace compared to the run-of-the-mill research, hacking, and communications tasks his team of computer geeks usually tackled. Reconstructing the laptop's databases would likely require a combination of both hardware and software skills.

Luke felt he was up to the task. How hard could it be? After all, the bugged piece of electronics was just a simple laptop, not a hardened, ultra-secure, hyper-encrypted and booby-trapped portable device like the nuclear "football" dutifully toted around by a Navy attaché everywhere the President went. Something like that he would leave to the hardware and demolitions professionals, while he sought cover at a distance. This was something he could handle.

Of course, the laptop had been in a bit of a bingle ... a smashup he thought they called them here ... and had incurred quite a lot of damage. The bullet that had pierced the laptop had gone clear through, ripping whatever components it touched to shreds. (Jesus, did the field agent think the polished aluminum case was a titanium shield or something?) The flat screen was toast. The keyboard wasn't much better; enough input sensors had been severed to make it

impractical to use. The combination CD/DVD drive was perforated and the lithium-ion battery pack had been nicked, causing it to short and discharge in a burst, singeing some nearby circuitry.

None of that really mattered, though. Those were all peripheral; none of those things were the computer. The chip and the hard drive were the keys. Both were intact, although a bit dirty. Luke cleaned them, thinking his assigned task would be a cinch once he had dropped the salvaged components into a comparable device and booted up.

That's where things got a bit tricky. The files were encrypted with a 128 bit algorithmic lock keying off a password requiring manual entry. A password that long bugged up chances for access to be sure. That was the bad news. The good news was that passwords that long were nearly impossible to remember unless they were based off of real world phrases or sentences, which significantly increased the odds of cracking it. He checked the operative's report on the recovery of the laptop. There was no indication the tech had consulted a Personal Data Assistant or piece of paper before entering information into the laptop, so the user had to know the password by heart.

Luke set up a brute force codebreaker which utilized a database of English language phrases 128 bits long and started it running. It was a long shot—if the tech was any good at all, he would avoid the lines of movie dialogue, boasts of sexual prowess, and pop cultural catchphrases an amateur would probably use for such a lengthy input—but it wouldn't hurt to let it run while he tried to get at the problem a few other ways.

Accessing from the Subsidiary's resources the code for the actual Kestrel 84 plans which had been hacked and stolen, Luke set up packet searches that looked for encrypted information in sizes mirroring the unique combination of substantive information packets of the purloined data. It wouldn't allow Luke to access the information on the laptop, but it would tip him off it was there. Several hours passed before he gave up the approach as fruitless. Either the information wasn't there or it had been sufficiently manipulated or altered that it wasn't distinguishable in that fashion.

Luke broke for a quick lunch in the break room—no food or drink allowed in the computer tech workroom for obvious reasons—loading up on caffeine and sugar to sustain him for the duration. The combo had always worked when he was on a coding marathon at university. Luke was having a dessert of fruit-flavored, sugar-loaded Skittles when he caught a disdainful gaze from Glenn Swynton through the window

of the break room door. He immediately bolted for the workroom to resume his task.

Back at it, he spent the afternoon going at the problem utilizing a variety of techniques which the Subsidiary had “obtained” from the National Security Agency by means he preferred not to delve into. Knowing how tightly the NSA held onto their techniques, and having read the American’s Patriot Act, the whole process made him feel a bit twitchy. It hardly mattered, since the approaches were a full-scale bust in any event. Besides, even though the Maori tech supposedly had the plans to the Kestrel 84, it didn’t mean the kid was super-sophisticated about his encryption. He just used a commercially available encryption device with a god-awful long password.

Numeric? He turned off the brute force English phrase attempt and started up a similar routine based on numeric progressions. Simple stuff at first: pi to one hundred twenty-six decimal places, lists of prime numbers, Fibonacci sequences, star dates set forth in the order they appeared in the original run of Star Trek, that kind of crap. He let it run for a bit while he thought. The kid was probably just a hacker geek like any hacker geek anywhere in the world—well, except the guys in the Philippines, who seemed to have a hard-on for viruses and not much else. This hacker geek was just from New Zealand, so he had a few pop cultural peculiarities.

Luke spent several minutes on the Internet and tried entering a few Kiwi references as passwords, like the names of New Zealand cities in order of population, increasing then decreasing, and by latitude, north to south, then south to north. Nothing. He even tried jersey numbers of the team members in the All Blacks, the New Zealand national football team, to no avail. It was a fool’s errand in most cases to manually try to guess a password. Hell, the kid was a Maori. He had no idea, for instance, if the Maoris were even big football ... soccer fans.

Suddenly it hit him. The kid was a Maori.

He re-accessed the NSA materials, searching through their brute force phrase tracking protocols. Damn it if they didn’t have it. Nobody, but nobody but the NSA would have something like this.

He had hooked up a brute force English phrase password cracker. After a short download and the addition of a few additional symbols to his accessible fonts, Luke started up what he had just downloaded from the NSA databases: a brute force Maori phrase code cracker.

Seven minutes and seventeen seconds later, the encrypted files were unlocked. He had just become Glenn Swynton's best friend for the week, maybe for the whole bloody month. He let out a whoop and began to review the unencrypted files.

Two hours later, he had scoured the cache, the RAM, the file storage, the history of visited websites, even the computer identification numbers. He put together an executive summary and emailed it to Glenn, with a cc to Deirdre Tammany.

Three minutes later he received a return email scheduling a presentation early that evening via the virtual ops center with the Subsidiary's Headquarters staff, Dick Thornby (the agent who had secured the laptop in Dunedin), and the various national representatives overseeing the Subsidiary's mission. He confirmed he would attend—like he had a choice—and began fine-tuning his presentation.



Dee sat in her office as the sun reddened the western sky, going over her notes in preparation for the upcoming meeting of the Subsidiary's overseers.

As always, the meeting of the national representative oversight body for the Subsidiary would take place via virtual conference room. There was no mechanical reason for Dee to actually be at HQ to initiate or attend the conference, nor any essential reason for physical attendance by the personnel who would be making reports: Dick Thornby, the operative who had secured the laptop in question as directed (well, except for the fire still smoldering at the Dunedin harbor); and Luke Calloway, the computer tech who had reconstructed the laptop's data after breaking its encryption. Still, like most bosses everywhere, Dee was a Type A personality with control issues. She liked to direct things in person, if possible, where all the cues (visual, verbal, body language, odor, etc.) could not only be accessed, but also focused upon for real-time assessment. Too much of her interaction with Glenn Swynton, for example, was by audio or video and that relationship wasn't exactly optimal.

All of the HQ attendees (Dee, Glenn, Luke, and Dick) gathered together in Dee's conference room for the larger, virtual meeting. The large room had what looked like a typical corporate audio/visual hook-

up, with a wide-angle, zoom-capable camera pointed at the four of them at one end of the table. The Subsidiary's computers used the live feed to generate a signal which depicted the group's virtual reality avatars. Similarly, instead of a screen showing the other participants' physical images to HQ personnel, the screen showed avatars representing each of the overseers of the governing countries as designated by an accompanying flag. No one knew the persons representing the various countries; no one could ever know their names or their faces. That way, the information could not be obtained by the enemies of the Subsidiary (whether evil or anarchist opponents, do-gooder regulatory agencies, or misguided and naive members of the press) by torture, investigation, or inadvertence.

The group waited without chatter while the avatars flickered to life and the flags popped up to indicate virtual presence. Everyone was prompt; it would be the height of arrogance to keep a group of individuals this powerful waiting. Besides, despite their other duties, whatever they might be, Dee believed in her heart of hearts not one had anything more important to do than to guide the Subsidiary down the right path.

There were ten national representatives: Australia, Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Voices were, of course, electronically modulated and altered by a sophisticated real-time audio synthesizer to prevent identification. Recently, the system had even been upgraded so that instead of producing a flat, electronic voice or the generic Midwestern drawl favored by most broadcasters, the electronics overlaid a recognizable—if somewhat cliché—accent matching the appropriate nation to the random tone and pitch assigned to the speaker for the particular session. Dee Tammany wasn't sure she liked the effect; it was distracting, sometimes bordering on cartoony. Just to ensure there was no confusion about who was speaking even with the accent guidance, however, the flag of any individual speaking glowed to identify him or her as the speaker.

The Russian avatar's flag glowed. "This meeting is convened, all members being present. Director, please state your business."

Dee gave a curt nod. "This meeting concerns the theft of plans for the Kestrel 84, Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, and the potential for increased effectiveness of terrorist, anarchist, and criminal organizations should the technology for such device proliferate." She

paused for a breath before continuing, but was immediately interrupted.

“Such mission has already been authorized,” said the Japanese representative. Although the inflection was smooth, the abruptness of the statement clearly conveyed irritation. “Our process is quite clear that once a mission has been authorized, the mission goes forward at the Subsidiary’s direction, despite any subsequent events or misgivings as to where the investigation may lead or what it may uncover.”

“You are correct, representative,” replied Dee, moving quickly to continue before she lost control of the agenda. “Each mission authorized by you for the Subsidiary continues to conclusion or abandonment. The purpose of this meeting is to report that the mission has concluded without success and is being abandoned.”

A light show of colors flicked across the screen as the national representatives murmured and grumbled in consternation and surprise. The stars and stripes glowed with patriotic fervor as the American representative spoke up in a randomly assigned Texas twang that was just a bit disconcerting, bordering on humorous. “This theft of U.S. technology is a potentially devastating threat to national security. Even aside from our national interest, the technology is inherently destabilizing and, thus, a legitimate concern of this organization.”

Dee hit a control button, forwarding an executive summary of Thornby’s report to the group. “As you can see, this mission was initially predicated on communication intercepts involving Pao Fen Smythe, a well-known arms merchant operating principally out of Hong Kong. The communication suggested Smythe was arranging to purchase the technical specifications and plans for the Kestrel 84 from certain New Zealand nationals ...”

“Maori boys,” interjected the Australian representative.

“Yes, oddly enough, a radical element of native Maoris within the Pan-Pacific Indigenous People’s Front who seek to end New Zealand’s tourist industry.” She nodded toward Thornby. “Agent Thornby ‘attended’ the meeting set up between Pao Fen Smythe and the local Maori to exchange the plans, along with other armaments.” She flipped to the last page of the executive summary. “As you can see from the report ... and news reports from New Zealand ... the Subsidiary disrupted the planned exchange.”

France spoke up. “Pardon me, but it would seem these operational matters are within your purview, as the Director of the Subsidiary, and

the purview of Monsieur Swynnton, as operational liaison between our agents and the intelligence community at large. While I think it is fair to say I speak for all of us when I say the destruction of the Dunedin port seems to have been unnecessary as well as unfortunate, these operational issues and excesses are your problem, not ours, at least at this time.”

Glenn Swynnton interrupted. “I assure you, representatives, we will deal with any and all operational excesses.”

Dee reasserted control. “But you are correct, representative, that this meeting should not be ... and is not ... about operational issues.” She pressed a couple buttons on her console. “As you know from Agent Thornby’s report, the laptop which presumably contained the Kestrel 84 plans was recovered and, although damaged, returned to our facilities. Our chief computer tech, Luke Calloway, was, as you can also see from the report I just transmitted, able to thwart the laptop’s impressive security features and access all of its files and databases.”



Luke fidgeted while the representatives perused his report. This was his first report to the national representatives and he wasn’t sure what to expect.

After a couple minutes, Dee spoke again: “As you can see, there was no evidence the Kestrel 84 plans were ever on the laptop.”

“And what was?” inquired the Indian representative.

Luke spoke up, doing his best to tamp down his Aussie accent, not so much because he was trying hard to assimilate to America, but because he had learned from experience that the Australian tendency to make a long “a” sound like a long “i” confused people. (Half the people he introduced himself to in Philadelphia thought his name was “Calloway”—the other half said almost nothing to him but “G’day” and “Crikey!”) He cleared his throat. “The laptop had the kind of things you would expect to find on a young computer geek’s laptop, for the most part. Terrorist Threat, that’s a first-person shoot-‘em up video game, scores of emails regarding pop culture, girls, and plans for the weekend, a shitload ... pardon my French ... I mean, pardon my language ... of porn, and software accessing several M-M-P-O-R-P-Gs ...”

“Several what?” interrupted the Brazilian representative.

“Is that a technical computer term or yet another American military acronym?” queried the Russian representative.

Luke felt a warm flush of embarrassment cross his face. “Er, no. Uh, the acronym stands for ‘massively multi-player online role-playing games.’ The computer contains downloaded software which allows it to connect to virtual worlds like Reality 2 Be. More relevant to our investigation, the laptop contained a listing of small arms and the surface-to-air missiles we know were an actual part of the exchange, plus online banking software for a dummy entity no doubt used by the Maori to fund their efforts, and a database of airline flights to and from New Zealand by passenger carriers.”

France spoke up again. “This still all seems pretty operational to me, but I will nevertheless ask some questions. Couldn’t the Kestrel 84 plans be almost anywhere? Another laptop, a CD, a flash drive? Couldn’t they be multiple places?”

Dee nodded. “They could. The thing is ... we have no indication they were ever in the hands of the Maori.”

“What about emails or other communications with Pao Fen Smythe concerning the Kestrel 84?”

Dee started to answer again, but this time Luke beat her to it. “Nothing.”

Glenn chimed in, too. “As you know, the original communications intercept triggering the mission was a phone communication.”



Dee didn’t like how the meeting was going. The national representatives were inquisitive, Luke’s presentation was less than polished, and Glenn kept interrupting. She took back control of the conversation by speaking in a firm, authoritative tone. “I’m sure the representatives know what they know and I do not wish this to be an operational review. The point is, my analysis of the operational information we do have suggests the Kestrel 84 plans were never accessed by the Maori, and are not in imminent danger of being sold to terrorist organizations. Everything suggests the Maori were intent on obtaining surface-to-air missiles for their own political cause, but nothing suggests they had the kind of cash to obtain those devices from someone like Pao Fen Smythe. Hence, a subterfuge. By offering him something even more valuable, but both costless from their



perspective and intangible, they lured Smythe into importing what they wanted. Their scam also had the possibility of getting them a sizeable cash kicker.”

“Wouldn’t Pao Fen Smythe have been a formidable man to stiff?” asked the U.S. representative, sounding like a good ol’ boy.

“Yes, he would,” replied Dee, “if he had survived the encounter.”

“But he did survive,” interrupted France yet again.

“That doesn’t mean that was the plan,” said Dee. “The Maori may have had other assets at the scene. The plan may have been to eliminate Smythe after delivery of the missiles.”

“But,” came the Texas twang again, “there wasn’t any gunplay before ...uh ... we crashed the party, right?”

“No, there wasn’t,” Dee confirmed, “but they would have waited to confirm funds receipt before taking any action. Based on Agent Thornby’s account, the laptop may have been being used to confirm receipt of wired funds.”

“Any evidence of such a wire transfer, Mr. Swynton?” asked China. Dee felt her blood pressure rise a bit in irritation. Some of the more culturally traditional representatives from male-dominated cultures tended to bypass her position by dealing directly with her subordinates. She let it slide, but she didn’t have to like it.

“No,” replied Glenn.

“No,” replied Dee a bit louder, hard on the heels of Glenn’s answer.

Thornby chimed in, “It was clear to me from their conversation that funds were not being exchanged in person. Pao Fen seemed pretty pissed to be doing anything in person. The Maori tech kid, though, he did some stuff on the computer and then said they were ready for the exchange and Pao Fen, he said that as soon as they had the plans, they’d send the ... Ma ... Maples ... or something. I didn’t hear it clearly. That’s when things ... sorta started happening. I assumed he was sending the funds in Canadian dollars.”

Glenn’s face colored in apparent anger. “You didn’t include that in your report. Canadian dollars aren’t called Maples. They’re called dollars ... or loonies.”

“Gold coins from Canada are referred to as Maple Leafs, but they’re not generally exchanged via normal banking account wire transfers,” volunteered the representative from the United Kingdom.

Luke looked up with a start and turned toward Thornby. “You sure he didn’t say ‘maypoles?’”

Thornby looked confused. “Maples, maypoles ... who knows?”

“What’s a maypole?” twanged Texas.

Dee stared at Glenn, who raised both eyebrows, and then they both turned to look at Luke. “Yes,” said Dee, her fingers tapping the table in a light staccato. “What’s a maypole?”

Luke flushed red. “Maypoles are the currency of Reality 2 Be, it’s a virtual world on the Internet. There’s dozens of virtual reality worlds: Home, Lively, Entropia Universe, Second Life, The Sims, Gaia Online, There.com, Spore, Habbo Hotel. The Chinese have one called HiPiHi.” He gestured at the avatars and flags in the virtual conference room. “You guys use all this hi-tech virtual stuff every day. Didn’t you ever think of what the average bloke would do with it?”

No one responded and Luke continued. “Well, regular people use virtual reality, too. Some virtual worlds, like World of Warcraft or City of Heroes, focus on gaming and battles—weapons, explosives, Kung Fu, magic, and anything else you can think of. Other worlds focus more on social intercourse. People go there and chat and hang out with friends and stuff, but not necessarily as themselves. They create avatars. They role-play, pretending to be cooler, tougher, sexier, funnier, better-looking, and more dramatic than they are in real life. It’s like a hyper-reality. Everything is bigger, better, and flashier—all of the subtle nuances and filters of the real world are turned off. That has a lot of appeal for a lot of people. Consequently, massive amounts of money and effort go into building virtual worlds and massive amounts of money are made there, and not just on games. You can shop, both for virtual goods and for real goods. Some require real money, some virtual money. Theodore Maypole—he’s the CEO of Reality 2 Be—he named the currency of his virtual world after himself.”

Thornby shook his head as if to clear it. “The Maori were being paid in Monopoly money?”

“Oh, not at all,” responded Luke. “Maypoles are exchangeable for United States currency at a fixed exchange rate of one hundred maypoles per dollar. You can convert cash from the real world into the game, make maypoles by building things or selling things or whatever online, and exchange the funds back into real money whenever you want.”

France interrupted yet again. “What do you mean, building things?”

“Buildings, games, puzzles, designer clothes, whatever an avatar might want to have or use in a virtual world,” explained Luke.

“You can get real money for building fake things?”

“Sure,” continued Luke. He obviously had an easy familiarity with Reality 2 Be. “Let’s say you want a T-shirt with a logo on it for your avatar to wear. You design one on your computer using a photography or art program or whatever and download the data to your avatar, who either wears it or carries it around or puts it up for display in a shop. You can then sell the object by transferring the code which creates the object by simply handing it to another avatar. Your avatar can get maypoles from other avatars or give maypoles to other avatars simply by meeting them and handing items back and forth. The folks at Reality 2 Be are even coming out with an ATM card which will let you access your converted maypoles at any cash machine.”

The United Kingdom representative spoke up. “That means any sum of money could be exchanged by anyone, anywhere, outside of all banking regulations and oversight.”

“That means someone could exchange or disseminate any type of information whatsoever, without any government oversight,” added the Chinese representative. Not a happy thought, Dee knew, for the representative of a country as tightly controlling as China.

There was a whistle from the U.S. representative. “Bad guys gotta love that.”

Dee frowned. The Subsidiary had a tough time enough catching bad guys in the real world. Adding extra virtual worlds they could do business in wasn’t going to make her life any easier.

Glenn stated what they were all now thinking. “So they could have been exchanging the plans for cash in a virtual world.”

“Jesus, Luke,” said Thornby, “how do you know all this stuff?”

Luke’s eyes flicked downward. “Well, I spend some time there ...”

Dee interrupted. “I apologize, representatives. While I had thought the investigation had come to an unsuccessful conclusion, I was wrong. I shall not trouble you further with ... operational matters. This meeting is adjourned.”

As the flags began to flick off, she turned to Luke. “You spend time there?”

Luke’s eyes hardened. “It’s a game. I spend my free time how I want to.”

“Ever exchanged items surreptitiously?”

“Some friends, we help fund Chinese dissidents and smuggle out information about government atrocities ...”

“I demand this man be arrested!” thundered the large-screen panel, which still showed one active avatar, the red of the Chinese flag pulsing bright.

Damn it, thought Dee, as her hands flew to the control panel. “This meeting is over,” she barked as her button killed the feed.

The meeting was over, but she knew the mission and the battle with the Chinese delegate had just begun.

## CHAPTER 9

Sitting in a swivel chair with lumbar support in an air-conditioned conference room, Dick Thornby was considerably more uncomfortable than he had been squatting high up in the shelving in the stifling warehouse at Port Chalmers in New Zealand. He was about to see someone cashiered, he was sure, and that was always awkward and unpleasant. To top it off, Dee Tammany was not particularly pretty when she was angry. Her grey-green eyes darkened with her mood; he wasn't sure they wouldn't darken all the way to black.

"How long?" she demanded, her nicely-shaped right ankle bouncing up and down at the end of her crossed leg.

Luke looked flushed, perspiring despite the cool comfort of conditioned breezes flowing from the air vents. He stared back at her, no doubt doing his best to look hard and collected, but his eyes flicked around the room, giving his nervousness away. "How long, what? How long have I been keeping in touch with my friends back home? How long have I been gaming and chatting with people on the Internet on my own time?"

Glenn took over. He looked just as unhappy as Dee, but he seemed somehow more professionally detached. As operational liaison with the agents, he had probably been through this drill more times than he could count. "How long have you been an agent for a foreign organization working to overthrow a world power?"

"I'm not a foreign agent ... I don't smuggle secret weapons plans or arrange hits or anything like that. I just believe in liberty and freedom of information and democracy and human rights and ... isn't that what we're supposed to care about here?" Luke was defiant, but his voice cracked a bit when he spoke.

Glenn was all business. "Freedom is good. Democracy, too, if you have a literate middle class who can support it. Survival is kind of nice, too. Of course, that means a certain modicum of stability and economic prosperity, with trade and reasonable diplomatic relations and political dialogue, not the chaos and killing and anarchy and disease and disruption which comes from civil wars and insurrections and terrorist vendettas."

“The groups of Chinese students I was in contact with aren’t terrorists. They’re non-violent ...”

“That’s not your call,” barked the Director. “That’s a political decision. Not part of your function, your job description here. Instead, you’ve undercut the Subsidiary’s position vis-à-vis a national sponsor and compromised my credibility, not to mention this agency’s credibility.”

Glenn gave Luke a stern look. “That’d better be all you compromised, Mr. Calloway.”

Jesus, Dick thought, he can’t have been stupid enough to have used agency equipment, can he?

“I’m s-s-sure I don’t know what you m-m-mean,” replied Luke with a gulp.

Thornby felt like one of those thugs at a Mafia meeting, sitting calmly when he knew the guy the Don was screaming at was about to get gacked right at the table. He looked down at his shoes.

“You said you did this on your own time. That still compromises the Subsidiary. What I want to know is whether you did this entirely utilizing your own personal equipment?”

“The equipment here is better, more secure ...” Luke blurted out.

Dick suddenly felt a vibration in his shirt pocket. He slipped out the phone to check the caller I.D. It was Melanie. Not a pleasant conversation, but perhaps better than the one he was sitting through. “Excuse me, Director Tammany, Mr. Swynton, I have an urgent family call, if you won’t be needing me further.”

Dee looked as if she had forgotten he was even in the room. “Take it in the hall,” she snapped, “but don’t go far.”

Dick stood and began to leave the room as he flipped open his cell phone. He held it up to his mouth for just a moment. “Just a second, please.” He lowered the phone and continued on to the exit without waiting for a response.

Once in the hall, with the conference door firmly closed behind him, he walked a few more paces and held the phone back up to his mouth. “Hello, Melanie.”

“You know I hate it when you do that. Answer or don’t answer.”

“I wanted to take your call, but I was with people. Now, I’m not. Now I can talk.”

“I hate to just be kept waiting while you finish your meetings. I don’t know why you think your consulting is so damn important it can’t wait, instead.”

“Clients aren’t more important than family. I just kind of hoped that family was more understanding than clients. Besides, I’m talking to you now, right now. I’m not making you wait.”

There was a bitter laugh on the other end of the line. “I’m still waiting. I’m waiting until you get home from your latest project. I’m waiting for you to take some responsibility for your son growing up. I’m waiting for you to pay some attention.”

“But I am home, I mean I’m back. Two weeks off. Didn’t Seth tell you? I thought maybe we would take a family vacation together.”

“You didn’t answer when I called the house.”

“I ... I’m back in Philly, for a meeting. Shouldn’t be long.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

“Look, I’ll call you, just as soon as I finish up here, and we can sit down and talk. Everything will be okay. Where are you at?”

“Just hit re-dial. I’ll have my cell with me.”

She hung up and Dick was alone with his thoughts. He paced the hall, anxious to tell Melanie he was on his way, to fix things. That’s what guys do, they fix things. It’s in their genetic make-up. They don’t empathize or console. They problem-solve. Accordingly, his mind was awlirl with possible fixes. Maybe not a family trip, but a trip for just him and Melanie. Someplace romantic. Paris or Casablanca or the Greek Isles. Yeah, someplace slow and quiet and sunny. He and Melanie could reconnect. It would all work out.

He looked at his watch. Had Dee and Glenn forgotten he was here? He smiled ruefully to himself. Maybe they were just taking their time disposing of the body ...

Finally, Glenn opened the conference room and motioned for him. “Please come back in, Mr. Thornby. We are ready to proceed with our briefing.”

Briefing?

He walked back into the conference room. Everything was the same, except Dee Tammany was standing by the big screen now. Luke Calloway looked a bit pale and haggard, but there was no blood on the carpet.

Dee acknowledged Dick’s return with a brief nod. “Mr. Calloway has agreed to accompany you in the completion of our mission.”

His head swiveled from Dee to Luke, at the opposite end of the table, and then back. “I don’t understand. My mission is complete. I’m on mandatory break, with ... some family issues that ... need attention. You have the laptop. The Maoris are all dead or in hiding,

as far as we know. And we have no idea where Pao Fen Smythe is, not that we think he ever got the plans for the Kestrel 84 anyway, if they were ever even stolen. What's left to do? And how would dragging along a computer jockey help?"

Glenn sat back down next to Luke. "Your mission was to recover the plans. You haven't finished the job. Mr. Calloway is going to assist you in doing so."

"You mean he's not fired?" Dick shot a glance at Calloway. "No offence, Luke. But it sure sounded to me like you should be."

"Mr. Calloway's status is not your immediate concern, Mr. Thornby," replied Glenn as Luke pursed his lips and hung his head. "He has been quite valuable in certain aspects of this and other missions. While he has engaged in unsanctioned behavior, our and his immediate concern is to further the mission of the Subsidiary, not our own personal feelings."

Dee spoke again. "Mr. Calloway believes he knows where the plans are for the Kestrel 84 and time is of the essence if they are to be recovered before they are duplicated or exchanged with Mr. Smythe or someone else. Your break and family plans will have to wait."

So much for fixing things up with Melanie on Santorini. "No offense again, but does he have any field experience? I don't need an amateur giving me away. How many hours on the ground does Luke, here, have?"

Dee gave a wan smile. "He has specific expertise in the realm you need to navigate." She nodded at Glenn, who hit a few buttons on the control panel. "Here's your next destination," continued Dee as she nodded toward the screen.

The bright colors of the plasma flat-screen quickly coalesced into focus, showing a panoramic landscape of vivid colors beneath a stylized logo and the words: "Welcome to Reality 2 Be."

What the hell? "No disrespect, Director," said Thornby, "but I don't know squat about fake worlds and stuff. I've got enough problems dealing with this one."

Luke's fingers skittered over the keyboard. Menus and information flashed onto the plasma screen in rapid succession. "We're not going inside Reality 2 Be," he said without any slowdown in his manipulation of the screen images, "Well, not inside the world." A screen popped up showing a sprawling corporate office tucked into a swath of green grass amidst rolling hills in a heavily forested area. "We're going to Reality 2 Be's corporate offices."



“We are?” blurted Dick. “What makes you think Maypole and his guys are behind any of this? Just ‘cause they created an environment where crooks can deal with each other in anonymity without government oversight doesn’t mean they’re directing the effort. By that logic, we’d have nuked Switzerland years ago.”

Luke answered. “The most logical way to locate the Kestrel 84 plans, if they are disguised as an item in Reality 2 Be, is to search the world for artifacts of the appropriate file-size and characteristics.”

Dick understood. “Or to search for persons ... or avatars, I guess it would be ... exchanging or carrying large enough sums of maypoles to pay for that sort of merchandise.”

Luke nodded. “And while you can use a simple search routine to locate specific places or locations of a specified type—you know, dance clubs, concert venues, brothels ...”

“Brothels?” said Dick and Dee in unison.

Luke blushed and flexed his fingers, interlacing them for just a moment and then wiggling them as if working out a cramp. “Er ... yeah. There’s some kinky places in virtual worlds. Brothels are on the tame end of the scale.” Luke pointed at the keyboard. “You can’t do an in-world search for complex items or large sums of maypoles. If you could, people would run the searches, then come kill your avatar, loot the body, and steal your stuff. It’s kind of like the third-world that way—you don’t flash your cash unless you’re with friends or in a safe place.”

“You can get killed in virtual reality?” Dick shook his head.

“Not in some worlds, but Reality 2 Be is both a virtual world and a gaming world, so, yeah, your avatar can get caught in a cross-fire or whatever and then, boom, you lose anything he was carrying. That’s why they have virtual banks and stuff, although one of those failed a while back and the depositors, they torched the place in protest.”

“Don’t they have, I dunno, virtual cops or something?” asked Dick.

“Some, but most things are policed by the members themselves. You can complain to the people at the company about something another avatar did, but by the time they look into it, the goods and the maypoles may have been transferred hundreds of times, maybe to innocent third parties. Some people have actually brought lawsuits ...”

Dee frowned. “Real or virtual?”

Luke shrugged. “Both, but courts in the virtual world don’t really have much power and courts in the real world, well they don’t really understand this stuff much more than Dick, here. No offence.”

“No defense,” replied Dick with a wry grin. “You learn what you need for your own life; there’s plenty out there I don’t understand, like what makes our magic sunglasses work or how they know nobody’s fixing the vote on American Idol or in the Electoral College.”

“So,” continued Luke, “like I said, players can’t search for that kind of thing, but the powers that be at Reality 2 Be, they can. They should be able to search for and track avatars by category of goods carried or amount of maypoles exchanged. They would need to do so to make sure no one is running a Ponzi scheme or counterfeiting maypoles, for example.

“There’s counterfeiting in cyberspace?” asked Dee. The Subsidiary had enough on its plate keeping the real world safe from economic collapse due to large-scale counterfeiting and wire fraud. It looked like they were going to have to expand their horizons.

“Oh yeah, plenty of fraud in virtual reality. And, since maypoles are exchangeable into real dollars at a fixed rate, if someone counterfeits the cyber-cash, they’re effectively counterfeiting the real thing, except it all comes out of the pockets of Reality 2 Be.”

Dick sighed. “So can’t you, you know, hack in and do the searches? I mean, isn’t that what you guys do, hack things?”

Luke smiled. “Yeah, that’s what we do. The thing about gaming and virtual worlds, though, is that they are mostly populated by geeks who know their way around a security algorithm. Not only are they the targets of the usual anarchists—Filipino virus coders, point of access bombers, and identity theft crooks—they’re the target of compu-nerds who just want to get an edge on the game or make a better life for themselves in the virtual world than they have in their parents’ basement. The sites are literally besieged with hacks.” He gestured broadly with his hands. “Look, I could try to hack remotely. I can put the whole tech group on it if you want.” He bobbed his head in Dee’s direction. “But if we’re in a hurry—and we are—we need to gain access to the servers controlling Reality 2 Be and run the searches directly.”

Dee gestured at Dick. “That’s where you come in. You need to take Luke and gain access to the necessary equipment at Reality 2 Be’s corporate offices. You leave immediately ...” She glanced at the screen. “... for upstate New Hampshire.”



While Luke was grabbing some equipment from the tech room, Dick tried to reach Seth at the house and then at his cell phone, without any luck. Finally, he made a call to Melanie. She didn't even say "hello."

"Let me guess."

Dick bit his lip. This wasn't going to be pleasant. "Uh, yeah, change in plans. I gotta go see a ... client. Bit of a delay before I'm back home."

He could feel the frost in the silence before she even replied. "I'm not there, remember? And at this point, I'm not sure I care. Tell Seth, though I doubt he cares either."

"Seth's not at home."

"He's not? Where is he?"

"I don't know, he went camping or tubing or something with Brian, maybe some other guys. He doesn't pick up on his cell—maybe they're in a dead spot."

"You don't know where your son is," came the response, accusatory despite the monotone delivery. "He might be in a dead spot. Of course, he might be dead. You don't know."

"Look, I left a voicemail. I'm sure he's fine. He can take care of himself. He's a smart kid. Besides, I did teach him a few things when he was growing up about protecting himself."

"Yeah," came the bitter reply, "he'll be perfectly safe if someone comes after him with a paintball gun or a Lazer Tag toy. You were just playing soldier."

"That's what I am."

"Were. Now you're just another shitty absentee father ... with no patriotic excuse."

If she only knew, if he could only tell her. Instead, after a few moments of awkward silence, he fell back to a familiar refrain. "I've gotta make a living. Seth will be fine."

"You don't even care where he is or what he's doing?"

"I do care," Dick huffed, becoming more and more exasperated with this conversation, with his life. His voice grew louder, firmer. "You're the one who left him at home while I was out of town ..."

The thing about cell phones is, you don't even hear a click when the other person disconnects.

As he listened to the silence transmitted at the speed of light to his cell phone, Dick was as disconnected with Melanie as he could possibly be.

## CHAPTER 10

Dick was unhappy as they headed out of the city, inching through traffic to get to an open road leading to their New Hampshire destination. This wasn't where he was supposed to be. This wasn't what he was supposed to be doing.

Besides, he hated having to drag this Luke kid around with him. The tech was a definite operational impediment. Luke was lanky and fit, but not really muscled, so Dick had no real idea how fast the kid—what was he, twenty, maybe twenty-two?—could move, how much endurance he might have, or how he would handle himself in a fight. At six foot three, with shaggy blond hair that made him look like a surfer dude, and an in-your-face Aussie accent, the kid didn't even blend in well, visually or aurally. To top it all off, it was obvious the tech whiz was nervous about the assignment. The kid kept checking his watch.

“Forget to set your DVR or something?” Dick asked in order to stop the irritating practice before it became a truly annoying habit, but without purposely pissing his protégé off.

Luke started at the question. “Uh ... I was supposed to be someplace.”

Dick snorted. “So was I.” He glanced over at Luke's furrowed brow. “Don't worry, kid. If she's a keeper, she'll forgive you.” An image of Melanie walking out the door to their suburban house flitted into his mind, unbidden. “At least the first hundred times or so.”

Luke wrinkled his nose momentarily and gave Dick a tight, lop-sided smile. “You're the seasoned veteran. I guess I'll have to trust you.”

Respect. The kid was okay. They rode in silence for a few minutes. Finally, Dick decided they should get down to business. “How long?”

Luke looked over at him from the passenger seat of the car with a blank stare for a few moments, apparently working to get the gears starting to mesh in his mind. “Six or seven hours or so, depending on how fast you drive. It's over four hundred miles.”

Dick sighed. Even if the kid wasn't a jerk, working with an amateur was not going to be fun or easy. “No. I already know that. I looked at the map before we left. How long do you need to access the servers or whatever it is you have to do once we get inside the place? Five

minutes? Five hours? It makes a difference as to how we approach the infiltration.”

Luke grimaced. “I don’t know. Ten minutes minimum, just to hook in and get through basic firewall protection.” He threw up his hands. “But if we don’t have a password and things are encrypted the way I expect them to be, it could be hours. Hell, it could be forever.”

Dick thought it over while they inched their way out of the city traffic, heading for I-95 North. “Then we should get a password.”

“Oh, okay,” said Luke with a sarcastic sneer. “Can I get an order of fries with that?”

“Sarcasm is not an efficient means of communication when you’re on an op. You got something to say, say it.”

“All right. Passwords don’t grow on trees.” Luke paused, then continued. “Sorry, metaphors aren’t probably efficient communications either. Passwords aren’t generally written on index cards pasted to the side of the computer, not in a place as security phobic as Reality 2 Be. And they won’t use ‘sex,’ or ‘password,’ or ‘3point14159,’ or any of the fallback passwords amateurs use.”

“What’s that?”

“What’s what?” asked Luke. “Ambiguous antecedents don’t seem very efficient either.”

Dick wanted to backhand the kid, just to get him in line, but it really wasn’t Luke’s fault. He wasn’t a field operative. So he just let it slide and continued his conversation. “3point14159. What’s that?”

Luke smirked. “Pi to five decimal places. Didn’t you go to college?”

“Fighting Illini. Football scholarship. Plenty of physical education credits; no math courses required. Then Army. Then Chicago Police Department. I never took calculus or any of that stuff, but I do know seventeen ways to kill you that will look like natural causes on an autopsy.”

Luke’s smirk disappeared. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You do that. And I’ll keep in mind you’re out of your element and not shorthand things. You need a password; we need a hostage.”

“That’s kidnapping,” squeaked Luke. “That’s life without parole. Hell, in New Hampshire, they might still have the death penalty.”

“Supreme court has outlawed the death penalty where there are no deaths involved, so maybe not.” He smiled. “Besides, that’s only if you get caught ... and they take you alive.”

Luke was quiet for the next several hundred miles as Dick put together his plan.



Hawk tapped his foot impatiently, sitting in a straight-backed chair shoved into a corner of the seedy hotel room that was the squad’s pre-arranged rendezvous point. He had arrived a few minutes before the designated time to sweep the locale for unfriendlies, but only found the usual riff-raff that frequented dumps like this: pervs, under-aged hookers in garish attire, roving wannabe gangs of vandals and petty miscreants who would tag you with their initials in stylized green letters if you stood still too long, and the occasional lost newcomer who would leave the neighborhood without his meager possessions, if at all.

Pigeon and Peregrine popped in at the appropriate time. It was clear from their appearance both had dumped gear to hasten their flight speed and avoid the mysterious orange death ray which had ambushed the meet. Peregrine had dumped his backpack, but still held onto his weapons with fierce determination. Pigeon’s backpack, of course, was the most vital thing he carried and he still had it, but he had dumped his weapon, his binoculars, his canteen, and his climbing gear to make it out of that godforsaken wilderness deathtrap and back here in one piece.

Hawk said nothing to the pair, who arrived within seconds of one another. Instead they all waited for Shrike to show up. No sense saying everything twice, especially if you couldn’t be sure someone wasn’t trying to listen in, even here, even now, in this tawdry dump.

Minutes ticked by.

Pigeon began to fidget. “If he isn’t coming, we shouldn’t just be sitting around. He might have been killed; he might have been compromised.” Pigeon looked up to the water-stained ceiling, with its inert ceiling fan, as if he feared an orange ray of death would blast through it and obliterate him, then looked back at Hawk and Peregrine. “They might be tracking us. You didn’t bring back anything from the meet, did you? They might have bugged us.”

Hawk could tell Pigeon was losing it; the guy’s imagination was running wide open and picking up speed. “Go ahead,” Hawk said, his

voice more of a request than a command. “Say it. Say out loud what you know we’re all thinking. It’s the only way we’ll move past it.”

Pigeon’s eyes narrowed. “You say it.”

Hawk shrugged. “You’re thinking, we’re all thinking that Shrike, maybe he got obliterated by one of them death rays, but we don’t really believe that. What sticks in our heads is maybe, just maybe, Shrike set us up. Maybe he sabotaged the meet. Maybe our contacts all got fried or, worse, captured and interrogated. Maybe they’re all dead now. Maybe they just wish they were. Maybe we’re the leftover mess the bad guys have to clean up. And while we’re running for our lives, maybe, just maybe, Shrike’s counting his pay-off on a beach in the Caymans or some other island tax-dodge.”

Peregrine chimed in. “Yeah, I’ve thought it, but I don’t believe it.”

Hawk wrinkled his nose. “Me neither, not yet. Maybe Shrike just got delayed. Secondary pre-set rendezvous is twelve hours away. You know the location. We’ll just have to wait to see if he shows.” Hawk stood and began heading for the door.

Pigeon moved to block his path. “That’s easy for you to say. I’m the one carrying around millions of maypoles. I’m the one who is the most likely target if Shrike was a mole ... or if they have some way to track the funds.”

Hawk shook his head. The group would never be the same, would never work together and trust the way it had before. Not after this. “Fine.” He tossed Pigeon his MAC 10. “You take my weapon to defend yourself if the bad guys start chasing you. I’ll carry the cash.”

Pigeon didn’t say a word in response, but he took the weapon and shouldered off his pack. Hawk grasped it by one strap and headed out of the room into a hallway littered with cigarette butts, empty liquor bottles, and a few dead rats. Pigeon skittered down the stairs and away as quick as possible, but Peregrine covered Hawk’s rear until they split up at the subway station.

Pigeon was paranoid. Peregrine was careful. There was a difference, a big difference.



Beverly Lange checked to make sure her DVR was recording all her favorite shows, then put down food for her kitten, Mr. Scruffies, grabbed her keys and lab coat, and headed for the door. The sun was

just setting over the White Mountains as she drove south from Conway toward her job in Freedom, New Hampshire. As the sky darkened, so did her mood. That was happening more often lately, as her thoughts would turn to her dreary routine. Here she was, in her mid-twenties, single, with a good job and a nice apartment, and her life was boring. She had her cat, she had her books and her movies and her television shows to keep her entertained, but she was all alone.

Working night shift as a computer geek didn't help her social life, of course, but her employer's computers were the lifeblood of their business. They had to be monitored night and day. Someone had to do it and she had been the one assigned nights instead of one of her counterparts. After all, each of her counterparts on day shift had a family or a spouse or a life that would be interrupted by having to work night shift. She had a kitten, already litter box trained, thankfully, and, let's face it, they sleep most of the time anyway.

Oh well, at least she wasn't as pathetic as some of the geeks who abandoned the real world to live in her employer's virtual realm, Reality 2 Be. She saw the reports. Sure, there was all sorts of activity: meetings, games, building and selling things, relieving people of their maypoles by legitimate and some illegitimate means (the latter of which had to be monitored and stopped before they got out of hand), gossiping, even engaging in virtual sex. It's easy to see how the virtual world could draw you in. But she never understood the fringe groups that were online eight, ten, sometimes sixteen or seventeen hours a day. Didn't these people have a job, a life?

Maybe she would go to the Renaissance Faire down by Manchester this weekend. She'd met a couple of the folk-singers at Barb's summer party last year. She could actually interact with some people in the real world, maybe go out to a bar after the Faire closed down for the evening.

A little excitement. That's what she needed.



## CHAPTER 11

Even using bypasses for most of the major coastal towns, it was quite late when Dick exited the interstate and started making his way to their target destination on increasingly less-traveled roads : NH 16 North, then east on NH 25, also known as Ossipee Trail Road. On his left, Ossipee Lake reflected the starlight on its smooth surface as Dick scanned both sides of the road, looking for an indicator of the company campus for Reality 2 Be. Finally, he saw it—a tastefully lit sign with the logo and the words “Reality 2 Be” above and “Corporate Offices” below.

It seemed like a pretty backwater place for a corporate headquarters, snuggled up in a small town in New Hampshire close to the Maine border, but he guessed real estate prices were low. More likely, management figured some of the techie types they were constantly recruiting would be attracted to the whole back-to-nature setting close to hiking and skiing and all that crap. Even more likely, Maypole, the CEO of Reality 2 Be, had a rambling, rustic mansion with a dramatic view of the mountains on a couple hundred acres nearby and headquarters was located for his sole convenience.

Dick nudged Luke awake and nodded toward the sign before accelerating lightly and driving past the entrance. He traveled on to the next intersection to the right, turning onto Green Mountain Road to circle back behind the corporate offices of the virtual reality company. It was easy to “hide” the car by backing it into a small patch where a culvert had been tossed into the ditch and covered over with gravel to allow farm implements access to a field. The make-shift parking spot was near the intersection with High Watch Road, where the computerized mapping in the heads-up display of his micro-enhanced “magic” sunglasses showed he would have multiple paths to escape the area if need be.

He grabbed a pack from the trunk, dialed his sunglasses for night vision, and gestured for Luke to follow him with his computer handbag of equipment. As they walked away from the car, he tossed Luke a soft-cover book. “Page one hundred seventy-four,” he said in a low voice as they headed back up the dark road toward Reality 2 Be. “Long-Eared Owl. Likes woods near open country. Long wings, long ears, but more narrow ears than the triangular ears on a Great Horned

Owl. Makes a whole bunch of different low hoots and whistles, so it's pretty easy to say that whatever we heard, we thought was it."

"Huh?" was Luke's inarticulate reply. It was obvious the kid was still waking up.

"Always good to have an excuse for walking through the fields and woods in the middle of the night. Pretend you're a new birder and I'm teaching you how to find 'em for your life list. You should be able to convey clueless but willing to learn without too much effort. Just like it was natural for you."

Dick kept up a quick and quiet, but not stealthy, pace as they made their way to the back of the grounds for Reality 2 Be's offices. The night was wasting away and he didn't know how much time Luke would need.

Finally, they came to a clearing. Across fifty feet of perfectly groomed lawn was the loading dock for the office building. They were lucky. A lone figure in khaki pants and a loose fitting shirt leaned against the building near the doorway, the glow of a cigarette in his right hand. The guy took a long drag and the red tip brightened.

Dick tilted his head toward the figure, then spoke to Luke in a soft whisper. "The whole non-smoking office thing has been great for those of us who enter buildings without permission on a regular basis. Security goes to the crapper 'cause everyone is sneaking out for seven minutes of nicotine every hour. Since they don't want to record how much time they spend outside smoking on break, the nicotine fiends usually disable the security alarm and leave the door propped open. That way they don't have to keycard in or out.

Luke's mouth was set in a thin line, but Dick got a tiny smile out of him as acknowledgment. "Is he our hostage?"

Dick shook his head and frowned. "Nah, he'd see us coming over the lawn and freak for sure. We'll wait 'til he goes in, then try the door or wait just outside it for the next smoker." A scent caught Dick's attention and he flared his nostrils, taking the smell in by means of a long deep breath. He smiled. "Too bad. Weed. He could have been a good target if we'd arrived earlier. Might've been able to convince him it was all a hallucination by the time we were done." He looked at the smoker wistfully. "Or maybe that we were drug enforcement." He gave Luke a wink. "Stoners are crappy security risks. They're either stupid or scared or don't give a crap. Any of those can work for me."

Luke said nothing in response and they waited in silence until the smoker headed back inside. Then, Dick motioned and they scurried

across the open lawn to the loading dock door. Dick reached for the handle, but Luke stopped him. “Shouldn’t we have masks or something?”

Dick smiled. “Cover still holds. We’re just looking for a restroom instead of taking a dump in the dark. Always look and act as innocent as possible until you need to actually be the bad guy. It can get you out of a jam.”

Dick pulled open the door and looked around the hall casually, as if he really might be scouting for a john. Luke followed in, doing a little “gotta pee” dance as he came in the door. Dick gave him a hard look. “Don’t oversell it.”

They started down the hall and Dick pointed to signs with arrows indicating the various departments. “What do we want?”

Luke pointed to a sign. “Tech Support.”

They navigated their way through several sections of high-walled gray cubicles until they came to a door with a small glass window in it. Dick peeked in to find a row of computer equipment and a young woman in a white lab coat hunched over a keyboard, her back to the door. He motioned for Luke to take a look, then nodded toward the door with raised eyebrows and a thumbs-up. Luke gave him a thumbs-up in response.

Dick tried the knob with slow quiet pressure, but it was locked. Automatic lock, no doubt. He shrugged and gave a rap on the door.

Before the young woman could even make it to the door and possibly stand on her tiptoes to look out the window, he called out, putting his hand to the side of his mouth so it wouldn’t carry throughout the building: “Got some pizza leftover from the new project meeting. Want some?” He ducked down as he saw her get up and turn toward the door.



Beverly was surprised. Locked away in the computer room, she was almost never invited to partake in late night pizza, half-melted ice cream cake when someone had a birthday, or impromptu hallway soccer matches using a ball of wadded up story-board paper. She told herself it wasn’t that she was disliked, just that security procedures mandated the computer room be locked at all times and she was therefore out of sight and out of mind of her late night co-workers.

She was just happy to be included this time. She headed to the door and turned the handle without bothering to look through the small window to see who it was—at 5'2", looking up to see out the window only allowed her to glimpse the top of the person's head anyway, except for the gangly new kid, Bruce, in accounting.

As soon as the latch clicked, the door exploded toward her, pushing her back and to the right, throwing her against the desk she had been working on. She hit with enough force she knew she would have a bruise in the morning. This wasn't funny. She twisted back toward her prankster colleagues to give them a piece of her mind, but when she did she saw two men she didn't recognize. The first, a stocky, middle-aged guy, rushed in, pulling a second, taller and younger, surfer-type. This was more than not funny—this was assault. She took in a deep breath to scream her lungs out, but before she could make a sound, the older guy slapped a beefy hand over her mouth. She struggled, not so much to get away—there was no hope in that, the guy's arms were like steel beams—but to make sure her nose was clear of the guy's hand. She still had to breathe.

Her attacker seemed to sense her difficulty and shifted his hand, loosening his grip from crushing to merely painful. He jerked his head toward a nearby laser printer and barked at the surfer guy. "Grab a sheet of paper and write 'Working—Do Not Disturb' so the words show through the window when you tack it up. Move." Then her captor reached into his pack and pulled out a couple pairs of latex gloves, tossing one set toward the younger guy and wriggling his free hand into one of the others. He shifted hands holding her and repeated the gloving process with his other hand. Their attack had frightened Beverly, but the significance of their precautions truly terrified her. She began to shake uncontrollably.

The guy holding her felt her tremors and gave her a surprised look, loosening his grip a bit further. He held up his free hand in a calming gesture, then put a finger to his lips. "Just stay quiet and I can let you go." He slowly let go and took a tentative half-step back as the surfer worked on putting the sign up over the door, isolating her from the view of even Bruce from accounting, not that he would be likely to come by anyway. As soon as she was free from her assailant, she leaned away from him, instinctively drawing her arms protectively across her chest, pulling her lab coat closed.

The older guy took in her movement and seemed to understand her fear. He shook his head and raised his hands for just a moment.

“Don’t worry. It’s nothing like that. I didn’t mean to frighten you.” He waved his right hand at the computer gear stuffed into the climate and humidity controlled room. “Our only interest is in the computers. Keep quiet and cooperate and we could be gone within a half-hour.”

Beverly pushed herself upright from the table and did her best to stop trembling and compose herself. She started to look up, to look them in the eye to show her strength and defiance, but then thought better of advertising the fact she could identify both of them. She turned her gaze downward instead and focused on calming her ragged breathing. Her mind was awl. Part of her wanted to believe him, wanted to believe she wasn’t going to be raped and killed, that these ... these idiots were actually committing a felony ... multiple felonies, including kidnapping for God’s sake ... in order to gain some advantage in a virtual world. She knew some of Reality 2 Be’s customers were compulsive, but this was unbelievable. It was the unbelievability of their crime that kept the other part of her terrified it was just a story, that unimaginable things were about to occur she would never be able to forget. She slowed her breathing and fixed her gaze on the floor.

“That’s it,” cooed her attacker. “Good idea. Let’s keep the eyes on the floor. That makes it simpler for everyone.” He stepped toward her again, but in a calm, slow movement. “Now, I’m going to bind your hands with a little zip tie, here, not too tight, just so you don’t reach for a phone or an alarm.” He did so, then looked back at the younger fellow, who had finished tacking up the sign and donning his own gloves.

The older guy looked at the security badge pinned to her white lab jacket, at least that’s what she prayed he was looking at. “That’s very good, Beverly. Can I call you Bev?” She nodded without looking up and he continued. “Now, as long as you’re quiet, there won’t be any reason to gag you. Is that okay with you?” She began to speak, but stopped herself and just nodded. “Great. My friend here, he just needs to access your system for awhile.” The fellow talking moved her to the side, next to a tall bank of servers. “Let’s just give him some room and let him work.” The older guy nodded for the other one to sit down where she had been working.

The younger guy was trembling almost as much as she was as she shifted to her right. He sat down quickly in her chair and adjusted its height. Then his fingers started punching keys. “She’s already logged in, so that helps,” the typist said as he continued. Beverly didn’t look at her assailants directly, but she did shift her gaze up to look at the

screen, to try to figure out what they were looking for. The older guy started pacing in the brief confines of the computer room as the minutes ticked by and the surfer's feverish hacking continued, screens flashing by. After a half-hour though, the pace seemed to lag and the hacker's under-the-breath epithets began to increase in intensity and frequency. Finally, he stopped altogether.

"I can't access a world search function here, at least not anything more useful than an enhanced version of what you can access in the game itself. There's not a parameter for file size, amount of maypoles carried or exchanged, nothing."

Thieves? These guys were trying to steal maypoles?

"I thought you said you could do it from here. The company has to be able to do enhanced searches to monitor things, don't they?"

The young guy growled. "I know what I said, but I can't find anything on the server menus."

The older guy stopped pacing and started clenching and unclenching his fists. Finally, he pointed at Beverly, who was standing, still quietly quivering, with her face pressed against the side of the server, doing her best not to aggravate her captors or even look at them. "Ask her," he said.

The young guy turned to her. She didn't look at his face, but he clearly had an accent. English? Welsh? He sounded like a cross between Russell Crowe and Pierce Brosnan or maybe Errol Flynn. "Beverly ... Bev, honey, I need to search the Reality 2 Be virtual world for certain objects, certain files and coding that are located there or are in the possession of certain avatars."

She cleared her throat; she had no saliva. "I ... I don't know how to do that."

The hacker flicked a gloved hand dismissively. "I didn't ask you to do it. I can do it, if I can access the oversight menu hosting the main world grid. But I can't find that. Where do I go to gain access to the main world grid menu? Will I need an access code?"

She looked down at the floor even more, if that was possible. "You can't do that from here." She wasn't being heroic. It was the truth. But she knew they wouldn't believe her.

The older guy interrupted. "Where? Another office, another room? Can you show us?"

She shook her head as tears began to fall. "Please, I can't ... You can only oversee the servers hosting the main world grid from the location of the servers themselves."

The young guy jerked in astonishment. “You mean to tell me you’re using off-site servers for your main world grid? That seems unlikely.”

The older guy grabbed her arm and squeezed. She knew they wouldn’t believe her and the old guy, he seemed to have a temper. “Don’t lie to us, Bev.”

“It’s true,” she whispered.

The young guy shook his head; she could see the shadow on the floor of his unkempt blond hair flinging from side to side. “That can’t possibly be true ...”

“Why not?” barked the other one as Beverly continued to watch the shadows which had crept into her simple life.

The surfer threw up his hands in frustration. “Companies like this, they’re manic about secrecy and access to the servers. That’s their whole business in a box of silicon chips. Offsite you’ve got no real security, no control over who might be accessing the servers.”

The older guy squeezed her arm just a bit harder. What a dick! “What about it, Bev? Is he right? Is the company manic over security for the host servers?”

She wasn’t about to volunteer anything, but she wasn’t risking her life, such as it was, for her employer. She wasn’t going to risk anything in reality to save some stupid virtual reality. So she answered. “Yes.”

“Crap,” muttered the older guy as he loosened his grip somewhat again. There were a few moments of silence. Everyone was obviously thinking. Finally, the older guy grunted and made an expansive gesture with his free hand. “Manic about security? We practically walked in here.” He nodded his head toward the equipment. “They got enough machines in here to do the job?”

The hacker glanced around. “Not even close.”

The older guy scowled. “Most of the building is cubicles. Unless they have a hell of a basement, there’s no interior room big enough to host much more equipment than this.” He retightened his grip on Beverly. “There’s another facility with the servers, isn’t there? This is all customer support, accounting, that kind of crap, isn’t it?”

She hadn’t volunteered, but they had guessed. They were smarter than she first thought. “Yes.”

“Where? Tell us where.”

“I can’t.” Once again she was telling the truth.

“You mean you won’t.”

Tears started flowing again and she cursed them in her mind. She cursed the tears and she cursed these strangely odd attackers and she

cursed her dreary little life. “I mean, I can’t. I don’t know. It’s all very hush-hush. I’ve never been there. Only the senior programmers go and they’re gone for days when they go. But I don’t know where.”

She cringed as the older guy’s fists clenched and unclenched repeatedly. It looked for a moment like he was going to slap her around.

Suddenly, the younger guy sat up straight from his slumped position at the keyboard. “Do they turn in expense reports?”

“What?” said Beverly.

“Huh?” said the older guy.

“Expense reports. You said they’re always gone for days. That means they have to stay someplace, travel someplace, or something. You said this site handles accounting and stuff. Can you access the expense reports?”

Her eyes flicked up to meet the hacker’s for just a moment. Maybe, just maybe he had saved her from his partner. Words began to tumble out of her mouth, unbidden. “I ... yes, all of the accounting data can be accessed here. We have general ledger coding, inventory, payroll, accounts payable, accounts receivable, financial and internal accounting control programs ...” She took a breath, before continuing without thinking. “But ... I would lose my job. Those reports have personal data. Social security numbers, bank account numbers for wire transfer of reimbursements.”

“No one will ever know,” promised the hacker. “We’re not identification thieves.”

“Yeah,” added the older guy, “we’re ... gaming enthusiasts who just wanna get an edge.” It sounded lame to her, like even he didn’t believe it was true, but she knew that people ... most especially guys ... do stupid, pointless things all the time, like running with the bulls in Pamplona or lighting farts. The older guy’s voice firmed as he continued. “Besides, you really don’t have a choice. Trust me on that.”

Even though she recognized the back and forth as a classic good cop/bad cop routine, intentional or unintentional, it did the trick. She relented. She even relaxed a bit as she and the hacker spent the next forty minutes speaking computerese to one another, entering passwords, skimming menus, and searching accounting databases. The older guy started pacing again, looking at his watch at increasingly short intervals in obvious frustration. “Jesus, it’s an expense report,” he finally blurted. “How long can it take to look up an expense report?”



The young guy waved his partner off. “We’ve already looked at more than a score. The one thing we know for sure is that the server complex is in the greater Denver metropolitan area, but there’s something odd about all the reports.”

“Stop right there,” commanded the older guy—he obviously thought he was in charge. “Bev here, she doesn’t need to know more about what we think is odd or what we’ve figured out. Right, Bev?” He gave a stern look at his cohort. “If you have found out all you’re going to find out, then let’s get the hell out of Dodge. I’d like to be out of this place before dawn. So would you.”

The hacker nodded. A wave of relief washed over Beverly.

The older guy tossed a packet of alcohol towelettes to his companion. “Wipe off the keyboard, the door knob, and anything else you touched or sweated on—gloves on or no. I’ll take care of Bev, here, and be with you in a minute.”

Her relief drained away. A gripping horror squeezed her heart. She could see the hacker’s face go pale and a look of revulsion flutter over his countenance before he spoke up. “Take care of ... What do you mean, ‘Take care of?’”

“It’s real simple,” said the older guy as he started opening up desk drawers at the table where she had been sitting. When he found her purse, he took it out and opened up the wallet.

“You’re robbing her?”

“Shut up,” growled her tormentor, as he rifled through the wallet, sorting through it and pulling out three items. He held them up before her once-again tear-filled eyes. “This,” he said in a professorial tone, “is your driver’s license, with your home address and, by the way, your social security number.” He held up a second item. “This is your address book and, judging by the lack of a wedding ring on your finger and your last name, my guess is this entry here is your mother, maybe your sister, but a blood relative who you probably love and all that.” He held up a third item. “This is your kitty cat, a young Persian by the looks of it.”

He leaned down to her, his face nose to nose with her own runny nose. “I’m taking these three items with me. I know where you live. If you move, I’ll still know how to find you. I know where your mother lives. I know how to find your adorable little kitten. If anyone, I mean anyone, finds out we were here tonight, if any alarm is raised, if any report is filed, there will be consequences ... life and death consequences ... to one or two or maybe even all three of these loved

ones.” She flicked her gaze over to the hacker, his face red and contorted as his partner threatened her life. “Just because my friend here is a nice guy, don’t think for a minute I am. I won’t even tell him. I’ll just do it. I’ll just do your mother, your sweet little cat, you.”

She began to sob hysterically. She wished she had never wished for more excitement in her life.

The old guy moved toward the door. “We’re done here.”



They were back in the car before Dick let Luke speak ... or, more accurately, yell.

“What the hell was that?” Luke exploded as Dick started up the car.

Dick gave his partner an even, emotionless look as he answered with seeming nonchalance. “What the hell was what?” Truth told, he hated this part of his job. Bev was just some bright techie girl who, no doubt, worked night shift ‘cause she didn’t have much of a life outside of work. And here he had made her narrow little world darker and scarier. Still, he had to do what he had to do.

“You didn’t have to threaten to kill her,” Luke stormed as Dick jinked the car into gear and started pulling onto the back roads, headlights still off. “She was scared enough, for God’s sake. You didn’t have to say you’d kill her mother.”

Dick turned the car to the east as they came to a more major road, flipping on the headlights. “You’re right,” he answered as his hands worked the steering wheel, crossing hand over hand for the sharp turn. “If this was Cambodia or Albania or Kazakhstan, I would have just offed her. It’s simpler, it’s safer for me, for you, for the Subsidiary. But I don’t get my jollies that way and leaving her alive probably maintains a lower profile. There is a good chance the brass at Reality 2 Be will never know we visited their offices—a better than even chance.”

Luke stewed, squirming and fussing with the shoulder restraint on his seatbelt. “You didn’t have to traumatize her.”

“I do what I have to. The mission comes first.” He accelerated the car into the night. “She needed to be traumatized and, frankly,” he continued, catching Luke’s eye and staring straight at him for a few beats, “so did you. This is not a game. This is not Reality 2 Be. This is reality. And if you can’t handle what we do in reality to make it just a little safer for everyone, then you should leave and go play grab-ass

in some software shop in Seattle or San Jose or back downunder and leave saving the real world to professionals.”

Luke was silent for a full five minutes before he spoke again. “One more question?”

Dick rolled his eyes. “Sure.”

“Where the hell are we going? This isn’t the way we came.”

Dick smiled. “We were, what, ten miles from the Maine border at that place?” He looked over at Luke. Maybe the kid could learn. “When you’re on the run, always cross a jurisdictional border as soon as possible. It won’t stop a hot pursuit, but it tends to bollix up law enforcement just enough to give you an edge. Always take the edge.”

Dick drove into the night, his mind racing.

## CHAPTER 12

Dee Tammany loved her commute.

Her life was her job, no doubt about it. Recruited straight out of college by the CIA, the hard and dangerous world of intelligence gathering and covert ops consumed her waking hours and frequently interrupted her sleeping hours. She loved the challenge of it, the intellectual and psychological puzzles it brought to her, and the chance it provided her to make a real difference in the world, whether the world ever knew of it or not. Oh sure, there were times she cursed the job. Certainly the demands and geography of her CIA stint had been a significant factor in her divorce from Brody. And the politics, first at the CIA and now at the Subsidiary, could be petty and annoying. Worse, the responsibility for the agency, for her operatives, for the fate of unknowing, innocent people around the globe, at times pressed down on her with a weight she did not think she could bear.

That's why she loved the drive to work. It was her only respite, a brief interlude between office and townhouse that left her with time to process her thoughts and retreat into more pleasant reveries.

The office was a constant whirl of decisions and reports and keyhole satellite imagery. Every mission, every budget allocation, every meeting with the representatives of the nation states which had created the Subsidiary was, she knew, even if it was not obvious at the time, a life or death determination for someone, somewhere. Maybe it would be the agent she sent out on an operation with misgivings as to whether his or her skills measured up to the task or maybe it would be a frightened young girl in a tent in some third-world backwater as thugs the Subsidiary had failed to stop—or even chosen not to stop for some greater geopolitical reason—came with guns and an animalistic thirst for power and control.

Her townhouse was supposed to be her sanctuary, a place where she could feel safe and relax, guarded by Marco, her live-in protector, trainer, and chauffeur, and coddled by Mitzi, her college-aged housekeeper and connection to the pop culture that most people take for granted: television, music, movies, games, food, and clothes. But despite the safety of her abode and Mitzi's enthusiasm and affection, too often work would still intrude. Dee was easy to reach there and she had had more than one pajama talk with Mitzi interrupted by

pompous diplomats insisting on a virtual meeting or by urgent communiqués concerning ongoing operations.

In the car, almost no one bothered Dee. Even in traffic, the time interval between Catalyst Crisis Consulting's—and, hence, the Subsidiary's—headquarters overlooking the “clothespin” sculpture on Centre Square in downtown Philly and her townhouse on the western border of the Rittenhouse Square neighborhood was not long. The two locations were two miles apart at the most. She'd walk it if time and Marco would ever allow it, but most days Marco drove her to and from work in Catalyst Crisis Consulting's discreetly armored limousine. It was certainly more secure, especially since she often carried sensitive documents or equipment, but, with traffic, it wasn't a lot faster than walking.

On most days, however, the commute was a brief respite from the madness of her work life. Things that arose in that short travel interval could wait for just a bit, until she had arrived at one place or the other, depending on the time of day. Since Marco took care of the driving and keeping a weather eye out for security threats, she had no responsibilities in the car. Sometimes she read—reports from work when she was swamped, and lighter, recreational fare, often paperbacks recommended by Mitzi, when she wanted to unwind. Although Dee had convinced Mitzi to stop putting paranormal romances in her book bag, there was still an occasional bodice-ripper mixed in with the epic fantasies, humorous travelogues, and biographies that were always available when she was in the mood to relax.

This morning, she was chuckling at a passage in one of Mitzi's pop culture recommendations, the surprisingly amusing biography of a former *Jeopardy* champion, when Marco interrupted. After lowering the bullet-proof security/privacy panel separating the passenger compartment from the driver's area in the modestly-sized limousine, he caught her eye in the rear view mirror.

“It's Glenn. He needs to talk.”

Dee's brow furrowed and she gave a slight growl. “Glenn needs to get a life. Tell him I'll be at the office in ... what, six or eight minutes?”

Marco shook his head as he eased the car left one lane. “Already tried that. Can't wait ... blah, blah, blah ... Chinese representative ... blah, blah ... curses and threats ... blah, blah ...” Marco's hardened expression faltered and his nose twitched. “... er, from the Chinese representative, not Glenn.”

Dee half-smiled. “The Chinese representative only talks to me instead of Glenn when he wants to curse and threaten. Besides, just because Glenn, being a proper English gentleman, doesn’t verbalize his curses and threats, doesn’t mean they’re not there between the lines, believe me. This whole call is one big ‘get your ass to work and do your job’ from Glenn.” She dog-eared the page she had been reading and dropped her book back onto the cushy leather seat next to her. “There’s a reason Glenn works at headquarters. In the field he would’ve been fragged by friendly fire long ago.”

Marco smiled, his white teeth gleaming beneath his gunslinger moustache. “Just say the word, boss. I could use some live target practice.”

She smiled back. “If you killed him, I’d have to get a sock puppet or mannequin or something to stand in, so at least three of the national representatives wouldn’t have to dishonor themselves by talking to a woman as an equal, Besides, I’d have to do his job ‘til we got a replacement. So, no thanks. Just give me the call.”

“Line three,” Marco responded as the security panel slid back into place.

Dee punched a button and picked up the receiver on the secure phone. “What?”

“The Chinese representative has been trying to reach you for a half-hour.”

Dee’s eyes flicked to her watch. “He calls early. He stays on the line late. The guy has no phone manners whatsoever.” She sighed. “What’s the crisis?”

“He called to see what we had done about Luke Calloway. When I wouldn’t tell him, he went apoplectic. Even with the electronic voice replacement software, you could tell the guy was hopping mad. He used swear words even I hadn’t heard of.”

“That is impressive.” She paused for just a moment in preparation. “Conference him in.”

There was a click and the line picked up an almost subsonic hum as the second line was added.

“Greetings, esteemed representative ...” began Dee, before she was interrupted.

“I demand to know what has been done about the traitor spy, Calloway.”

She refused to be riled. “As I am sure Mr. Swynton has told you, that is an operational matter which is our concern at the Subsidiary and not within the purview of the national representatives.”

The electronics were not able to modulate out the venom in the Chinese representative’s rant. “It is most certainly within the purview of the national representatives when an operative of the Subsidiary is running independent clandestine operations aimed at the overthrow of the legitimate nation state of one of those representatives. It is not proper conduct for the Subsidiary’s resources to be used to spy upon one another!”

“Isn’t that what you were doing when you stayed on the line to listen to my conversation with Calloway?” she thought, but was too well-trained to verbalize. Instead, she replied in a smooth, business-like tone: “I am fully aware of the protocols for use of agency resources.”

She could almost see an Oriental face flashing red like the Chinese flag would brighten during an exchange in one of the virtual meetings. “Calloway must be interrogated concerning his activities. Given our interest and our knowledge concerning other spies and anarchists he may have contacted, we insist he be turned over to our government for such interrogation.”

Dee’s voice grew colder. “Even if that were not also an operational matter outside of your purview, the answer would be ‘no,’ but since you put it so impolitely the answer is ‘hell, no.’”

Glenn threw himself in front of the impending verbal explosion from half a world away. “The Subsidiary is fully aware of the inappropriateness of Mr. Calloway’s behavior and I promise you, man-to-man, we will conduct a thorough investigation of his activities.”

Dee took the cue. “In the event our investigation reveals anything it would be appropriate to share with China in the furtherance of the Subsidiary’s purposes, we will share such information. In short, this is our problem, not yours, but rest assured we will deal with it.”

The line was silent for several seconds before the response came from the representative of China. The modulated voice was calmer and slower. “Rest assured that if you do not deal with this problem, then we will.”

There was a click and the low hum on the line ceased. “Are we sure we’re alone on the line?” asked Dee.

There was a pause, then Glenn responded. “We are alone and secure.”

Dee stared out the window at the carefree world as she talked, focusing on everything and nothing at the same time. “Backchannel through your contacts in China that we’re taking this very seriously and that things are not going to end well for Mr. Calloway. We need to keep them off our backs and off his until we finish this mission.”

“Can do,” was Glenn’s terse response. “What are we going to do with Luke Calloway at the end of the day?”

Dee looked at her discarded paperback. Like *Jeopardy*, the answers at the Subsidiary came only in the form of more questions.



On an intellectual level, Pigeon didn’t question the approach. Hawk had explained the spycraft of it explicitly. Dropping off the grid, disappearing from their usual haunts and routines, would make it that much easier for anyone trying to track them to notice an anomaly and finger them as possible suspects. To avoid that, Pigeon and the others needed to do their best to behave normally, interacting with others as if nothing had happened, was happening. It made sense.

But at an emotional level, the approach was driving him to absolute distraction. He kept looking over his shoulder to see who might be about, watching him, spying on him, reporting on his every move. He felt a constant need to be alert, on guard. He craved the feel of a weapon in his hands, but you couldn’t just saunter around with an automatic weapon, your finger on the trigger. So, instead of wearing his pack on his back as it was designed, he slung it over one shoulder, only partly zippered. That way his right hand could snake inside and rest, coiled around the trigger of Hawk’s MAC 10, the safety off, the weapon set for full auto.

He stepped off of a wide street in a busy, developing section of town, into the neon-bedazzled entrance of a dance club. The club itself was dimly lit, throbbing with a heavy techno beat, and packed with throngs of pulsating, happy patrons dressed in everything from slinky, sequined gowns to almost nothing at all. The crowd was in a fine mood, dancing and drinking and groping each other to the beat of the music. Guys pressed into girls, shouting above the din of the music lame, but somehow still incredibly effective, pick-up lines, then scampering off to one of the even darker side rooms for some casual sex.



He wasn't interested in music or sex, not today, but this was one of his usual haunts. He thought he would feel better in the middle of a crowd, especially a friendly—sometimes very friendly—crowd. But he had been wrong. The dark shadows were somehow sinister, every stranger somehow suspicious.

“Hey, good looking! Wanna dance?”

She was a leggy redhead in a slinky green gown that showed plenty of décolletage. He thought maybe he'd seen her here before, but he wasn't sure. He wasn't sure of anything anymore.

“Strong and silent type, huh? Why don't you take your arm out of your pack and put it around me?” She winked. “I'm sure you can find something to hold on to back there.”

His eyes darted about. Was he being set up? “Maybe in a minute,” he stalled. “You been here before?”

She giggled. “Lots of times. Seen you before, too. You look a little tense this time, though. Maybe I can help you relax, you know, relieve some tension.”

Pigeon remembered why he came to this club. The women were incredibly forward. He felt his concerns lift away. He sidled up to her. “Sure ... uh ...”

“Brandy,” she cooed, “but everybody calls me ‘Red.’ What's your name?”

“Uh ... Pigeon,” he replied, his hand loosening its grip on the MAC 10.

She stood on tiptoes and leaned into him, her breasts brushing his chest and her hair caressing his face as she put her lips to his left ear and gave it a nibble. “That's nice, I guess, but I want it to be really good for you. What's your real name?”

Pigeon froze, the fear welling back into his body in a rush. He pushed back from her with his left arm as his right hand once more sought the reassuring comfort of the smooth, cool metal of the MAC 10. “Why ... What do you mean ‘my real name’? Why would you need to know that?”

She tried to keep leaning in, wriggling seductively, as she gave a suggestive smile. “Don't you want me to call out your real name, big boy? It's so much more fun than make-believe when you're ... you know ... intimate.”

On any other day, it would have enticed him. It was ... she was ... alluring, exciting, seductive. But not now. His emotions convulsed. He backed away. “No. No names. No real names.”

She looked disappointed, her mouth in a pout, but did not give up. “Whatever you want, honey,” she purred.

He turned and ran for the door. Shouts rang out from jostled patrons whose drinks were spilled or whose whispered conversations were interrupted by his mad dash for freedom, but their angry voices just spurred him onward.

He burst out of the dark club onto the bright expanse of the broad street, blinded momentarily by the contrast. He ran to his left with reckless abandon to gain distance from the club and the oddly inquisitive femme fatale. He didn’t really care where he was going. He just wanted to get away. He picked up speed, unmindful of whether he bumped into anyone on his headlong flight. For a moment, a glorious brief moment, he saw nothing but sunlight and bright blue sky and felt that freedom was in his grasp.

That’s when he heard the helicopters. Sleek, black, and angular, three WZ-10 attack copters whumped toward him, noses down, gaining speed. He could see the 30 caliber cannon on the nose of each one and the two stub winglets holding HJ-10 anti-tank weapons. The Chinese had found him. He could run, but he would only die tired.

Suddenly, he knew this is what must have happened to Shrike—why none of them would ever see Shrike again. He also knew what had ultimately happened to Shrike was most assuredly going to happen to him. Hawk and Peregrine, they would have put up a coordinated fight—just maybe they could get out of a situation like this. But not him. He dove for the ground, spinning to face upward as he fell.

His world seemed to decelerate into slow motion—every detail crisp and clear. Without removing his right arm from his unzipped backpack, he squeezed the trigger on the MAC-10 as he fell, bullets spitting in rapid fire succession through the cloth and into the air in an uncontrolled arc he prayed would somehow hit something vital on the sleek, five-rotored, Chinese manufactured craft. He longed to see a showy explosion rip one of the copters to shreds, sending fire and shrapnel to envelop the others and bring down the full complement of his pursuers, but he couldn’t bet on that and wouldn’t wait to see if it happened.

With his left hand, he reached for the button that would end his existence in this world forever. He could never come back, he could never see the results of his last action, but there was no way he was going to risk Hawk and Peregrine and his mission and everything else

by being captured and analyzed. He didn't know exactly what these guys could do to him, but he didn't want to find out.

There. There was the button. Still falling, as he faced the sky, he pressed it.

Pigeon was a fine red mist before he could hit the ground.

The speed of light beats gravity every single time.

## CHAPTER 13

At first, Luke had just pretended to sleep on the ride back. He wanted to avoid talking to Dick anymore about spycraft or why terrorizing innocent young women was the right thing to do in his world ... their world. But soon the stress and physical and mental exertion of their all night escapade got to him and real sleep came. He woke up in heavy traffic mid-day as they approached Philadelphia once again. He shook away the cobwebs and massaged his face with his hands, before looking over at Dick. The older man looked haggard, but alert, at the wheel, muttering expletives at other drivers as they powered their vehicles from lane to lane haphazardly trying to gain headway in the traffic.

“You want me to drive?” asked Luke, stifling a yawn.

Dick gave him a glance and a harrumph. “Might have appreciated the offer, oh, four or five hours ago. Wouldn’t have let you, mind you, but would have appreciated the offer. Now it’s just window dressing to ask.”

Luke refused to let the guy get another rise out of him. He let the remark slide. “Why wouldn’t you have let me?”

That question drew a chuckle from Dick. “Kid, you don’t understand operatives at all, do you?” He drove on a bit, his head tilted as if in thought. “Let’s just say the short answer is that all spies are control freaks. We control everything we can about a situation. We only trust people we know we can trust.”

Luke was taken aback. “You don’t know if you can trust me to drive a car down an interstate expressway?”

The lingering smile disappeared from Dick’s face. “You were conducting clandestine activities utilizing the Subsidiary’s equipment in an effort to undermine a sovereign state that helps fund your paycheck. I don’t trust you to aim for the bowl when you piss.”

“And the long of it?”

Dick glanced over at him. “Huh?”

“You said the short answer was ‘all spies are control freaks.’ What’s the long answer?”

Dick motioned with his right hand toward the instrument panel of the car. “You probably noticed this isn’t the latest model of sedan. Any guesses why?”

Luke shrugged. “Blends in better. Less likely to be identified by a witness.”

Dick gave a half-smile. “Not bad for an amateur. Those things are true and good, but they’re not the real reason.”

Luke looked at the dash for a moment. “I give up.”

Dick nodded his head at the steering wheel. “No airbags, not for me ...” he nodded toward Luke, “... and not for you. No ABS brakes either.”

Luke thought, but nothing came. “You don’t trust me to not hit something if I don’t have ABS brakes?”

“No ABS brakes because it’s damn hard to do a one-eighty spin at speed if you can’t lock the wheels long enough to get into a skid. You can ... well, at least I can ... use the emergency brake on some models in a pinch, but it doesn’t have the same feel or finesse as a foot pedal.”

Luke simply nodded. Dick continued. “No airbags because you don’t want them going off when you have to bump a car off the road in front of you; it also keeps the bad guys from disabling your vehicle by backing into you and causing the bags to deploy. Those things can break an arm if you’re in the wrong position and you have to cut them out of the way just to be able to steer.”

“Oh.”

“Pretty good clearance on this bucket, too. Means that if I have to cross a median strip or drive through a wall or across a field or something, I’m less likely to rip out the transmission or leave a traceable piece of evidence behind.”

Luke thought for a moment about what he had gotten himself into. “You drive through a lot of walls?”

“Only when I’m followed by assassins in low-slung, sporty cars, especially convertibles.”

Luke turned around and studied the traffic. Was that a BMW convertible three cars back? “Is somebody following us?”

Dick sighed. “That was a subtle way to check, that’s for sure. But, no. Nobody’s on our tail. That’s why it’s taken us longer to get back than to get there. I made a few unexpected route changes along the way, just to be sure.”

“Oh,” Luke said again. “I didn’t notice.”

“Yeah,” replied Dick, “you were asleep. But don’t worry. Sleeping when you can is operationally very smart. Besides, you need to be in top form for the next step.”

“Reporting in?”

“No.”

“You’ve already done that using the virtual reality feature of your sunglasses?”

Dick gave him a severe look, then turned his eyes back to the road. “I was driving, remember? Hard not to run into things if my glasses are glazed over with screen displays of Glenn Swynton and Dee Tammany chewing my ass out. Besides, there was no reason to wake anyone to tell them I failed yet again to locate the plans for the Kestrel 84 and, oh yeah, by the way, I threatened an innocent little kitten and somebody’s mother in the process.” He sighed and glanced over at Luke. “It’s not pleasant, but it’s best to man up to bad news in person.”

Luke pondered for a few moments. “So, if reporting in isn’t the next step, what is?”

The older man shook his head. “Figuring out where we go next.”

Maybe he still hadn’t woken up fully, but Luke was confused. “You’re lost?”

At the next stop in the stop-and-go traffic, Dick turned to face fully sideways and gave Luke a long stare. “No, you moron. You’re lost if you don’t figure out where Reality 2 Be’s server farm is. As long as you’re useful, you’re still hanging on, even if it is by a slim thread of bloody razor wire. If you aren’t helping on the mission, there’s no reason not to feed you to the goons from China.”

“Oh,” replied Luke. He was certainly awake now.

“And don’t think Australia being on the oversight board will save you. The Aussie rep won’t even try.”

Luke had not imagined anything worse than getting fired. Now he started imagining a lot of things worse than getting fired. None of them were good.



Pao Fen Smythe leaned forward in his desk chair, his elbows on the deep rich grain of the mahogany desktop. “You know that is not the way I do business,” he snapped, holding the old-fashioned receiver away from his ear while his prospective client vented. Pao Fen disdained the newfangled headsets so many others favored. Not only did he regard them devices suitable only for salesmen and clerks, he shivered at the thought of someone yelling in his ear and having to fumble about for a volume control to do anything about it. A lot of

people in his line of business yelled. Gang leaders, revolutionaries, heads of state, they all liked to bark orders and yell at anyone who didn't kowtow to their every whim. Pao Fen didn't like their attitudes, but he loved their cash, so whenever anyone screamed at him or treated him like dirt, he just increased the price twenty percent and delayed delivery a few days. The smart ones got the message after a few transactions. The rest just paid more for the privilege of abusing him with their self-importance.

"This is not information you can find on Wikipedia or Jane's Defence Weekly. It is not something you can get by having a call girl set up a drunk Second Lieutenant so you can blackmail him with pictures if he doesn't cooperate. My reputation is on the line here and I will take whatever amount of time is necessary to confirm the completeness of the information and its value to my customers."

The client clamored on. Finally, Pao Fen was able to get a word in. "I understand your offer, but you must understand that our expenses have increased, as have our risks. The minimum bid has increased by one million."

He held the phone away from his ear, interrupting the tirade only to say "of course, Euros—nobody deals in dollars anymore," when he saw a light flash on his phone. "Thank you for your understanding. Bids are due at the end of the week. I must take another call."

He pressed the flashing button on his phone without waiting for a reply.

"Report," he said, then did nothing but listen for several minutes. "I told you New Zealand was a dead end, Mr. Lee. Where do you plan to look next?"

Again he listened. "You know, even subscribers are not encouraged to go there." He nodded as he took in the reply. "I will make arrangements. Pace yourself. They say there is 25% less oxygen there due to the altitude, although with the pollution here, you may find the air quite pleasant. Be mindful of your visibility, however. The Americans are increasingly vigilant and arbitrary in their dealings with foreigners of late."

He hung up the phone. It had been unwise to contact potential buyers before he had the Kestrel 84 plans in hand. Now things were delayed and the fiasco at the Dunedin warehouse district had made it abundantly clear someone—some competitor or agency or law enforcement authority—had gotten wind of the theft of the plans and possibly his involvement. What had once been a lucrative transaction

on the side had now become a bet-the-company transaction. He didn't mind gambling, but he liked a fixed game better.



Luke was alone again in the tech room at the Subsidiary's Philadelphia Headquarters. Dick had dropped him at the tech lab and, thankfully, gone off without him to report on their activities in New Hampshire to Dee Tammany and Glenn Swynnton. Luke felt dirty about the whole business. It was bad enough to have done what he did, what he helped do, to that poor girl. It would be worse yet to recite the details about it like he was giving a staff report or justifying a line item during a budget review meeting. It would be even worse if the bosses here started criticizing them for leaving a live witness behind—that would be more than he could handle.

Luke knew violence was part of the arsenal of methods the Subsidiary used to keep the world safe. He had even been involved before in reports or live communications in which gunplay and death had been component parts. But, before it had somehow seemed apart from what he did here at the Subsidiary. The violence was always at a distance, involving people he never met or saw. That made it somehow artificial, like the violence in his games.

The only acts of violence that had ever touched him emotionally were the reports of the atrocities committed by Chinese authorities on dissidents and democratic freedom fighters in the horrendous Chinese prison system. Those shocking reports had gotten him involved in funding Chinese dissident activities, including spirited out activist diaries and reports over the anonymous gaming network of Reality 2 Be.

Welcome to real reality.



Seth tossed the controller down and rubbed his eyes, leaning back in the big, comfy recliner. Brian set his controller down with more care, then belched and toddled toward the bathroom. They had been playing on their computers all night and their marathon session had



been more exhausting than non-gamers ... mundanes ... generally thought. Not only were Seth's thumbs dented with the imprint of the toggles from the controller, but the knuckles on his thumbs and the lining in the carpal tunnel of each of his wrists screamed with repetitive motion stress. His eyes were dry and gluey and his brain was weary, fried by the constant decision-making and puzzle-solving of their computer quest.

He heard the toilet flush and saw Brian stumble back into the room, his slack face, disarrayed hair, and jerky gait giving him the appearance of one of the walking dead—the George Romero kind, back when zombies were slow and not too bright.

Seth started to smile, but decided it took too much energy. “You look wasted, dude.”

Brian's lip curled in a snarl. “You should talk. Not only do you look like fried crap, you stink like it, too. How do you work up so much B.O. sitting in an easy chair?”

Seth turned his head and sniffed, jerking his head back as the stench assaulted his nostrils like smelling salts somehow gone rancid. He felt woozy. “It's the adrenaline working its way out, probably. Besides the Naugahyde on this chair doesn't breathe, so the sweat just sticks ...”

Brian held out a hand, palm forward, as he plopped back down on the couch. “T-M-I, dude. Way too much information. I don't wanna know where you've got sweat sticking to you because of the chair, man. Just use the couch next time.”

Seth rolled his shoulders to work out some kinks. “Point taken. We got any leftover pizza or something for brunch?”

Brian got up with a groan and made his way over to the dry bar off the basement family room of his parent's house. He poked at a cardboard box, lifting the lid and peering inside. “Some. It's been sitting out quite a while ...”

Seth shrugged. “Just nuke it for ninety seconds. That should kill off anything really harmful.”

Brian reached into the box and grabbed the remainder of the pizza. Congealed cheese kept the pieces glued together as he slid them into the microwave without bothering to use a plate. He set the timer and pressed “start,” then looked at his watch. “You gotta check in with the ‘rents or anything?”

Seth's mood darkened. He shook his head. “Nah. I'll call Mom later. She tends to sleep in on the weekends, even when she's not

sitting around some hotel room 'cause she's walked out on my dad. Besides, cell phone reception sucks down here."

Brian nodded, but said nothing.

"And Dad, who the hell knows where Dad is?" Seth continued. "Working, probably. That's my dad's life: work, work, work. Once he figured out I was old enough to take care of myself, he stopped even trying to keep track of where I was or what I was doing, which can be a boost when you wanna go to a party or a concert or ..." he waved his hand around at the room, "... when you wanna hang with a friend all weekend, but it kinda sucks when you wanna learn how to drive a stick or something."

Brian scrunched up his nose for a moment. "I always thought your dad was pretty okay, you know, as far as 'rents go."

"Yeah, he's okay. Taught me some stuff about his job a couple times—stealth tricks-of-the-trade when we were teamed up playing Lazer Tag. You know, security stuff he learned in the Army or when he was a cop. Other cool stuff, too, like how to make sure you're not being tailed and how to hold a gun. Safety stuff, too, like how to get out of a locked room when there's a fire."

The microwave dinged and Brian popped the door and used his fingers to slide the steaming pizza onto a reasonably clean plate he picked up from the counter, swearing every time his fingers touched the tomato sauce. "Ow, damn it. How do you do that?"

Seth continued to work out the kinks in his muscles. "If you can't go through the door, you go through an interior wall. Most modern houses are just plasterboard over studs sixteen inches apart. You tap a couple times to find the studs and just crash through the wall in between."

Brian carried over the pizza, sucking cheese and grease off his burnt fingers. "You mean I could just crash through the wall here?" He pointed at the side wall.

Seth shook his head. "No, numb-nuts. We're in a basement." He waved his hand at the wall. "That's just cheap paneling over concrete. You'd crack your head open if you tried to crash through, not that that would do any real damage."

"I knew that," replied Brian. "Your dad teach you anything else interesting? Cause, I mean, you seem to know a lot of stuff."

A staccato flash of memories warmed Seth's weary mind, but he didn't relate any of them to Brian. "If I told you anything else, dude, I'd have to kill you."



Dee Tammany and Glenn Swynton listened to Dick's entire report without interrupting for questions, although Dee's left eyebrow arched a bit when Dick reported the steps he had taken to assure the silence of the young woman at Reality 2 Be's corporate offices.

There were a few moments of silence after he finished before Dee spoke up.

"Not exactly a rousing success, was it?"

Glenn interrupted before Dick could answer. "At least he didn't blow the place up this time. Good show there, sport."

Dick burned to say something in response, but he just kept his teeth clenched.

Dee responded, looking at Glenn through hard, unblinking eyes. "I wouldn't mind that, if it had accomplished the mission, but there was apparently nothing in New Hampshire worth destroying." She turned to Dick. "I concur with your decision not to kill the girl. There's no need to kill innocents and it might have tipped off the powers at Reality 2 Be someone was looking at their activities. But I wish you had managed to fulfill your mission parameters without involving her. I'm not thrilled about you terrorizing her and I wonder whether even that will be effective at keeping her quiet."

Dick's response was even and low-key. "We needed her to gain access. The threats are usually effective, at least in the short term."

Glenn bristled. "Usually?"

Dick tilted his head to one side. "I got a good motivation spread here. Fear for herself. Fear for her mother or her sis, whoever was in her address book. Fear for her cute little kitty, for God's sake. In my experience, threatening pets is better than threatening random relatives. You never know when someone secretly hates their mom or thinks their brother can take care of himself or whatever, but pets are almost always innocent and beloved in the eyes of the owner and they can't be effectively warned to be on guard."

Glenn's eyes bored into him. "But ..."

Dick ran his tongue over his teeth while he thought for a second. "Look, I don't want to get the kid in more trouble than he already is, but ..."

Glenn seemed almost ready to pounce. “But he undermined your threat?”

“Not on purpose. He just gave a shocked look at me. It might make Bev, the girl, less inclined to believe we’ll follow through.”

“I’ll take care of it,” said Glenn simply.

“We don’t need her killed,” warned Dee, her eyes narrowing to slits with concern.

“Nothing like that,” replied Glenn. “I’ll just see to it Bev and her pet and her mom or whoever get a few Hallmark cards in the mail in the next day or two. ‘Thinking of You,’ that kind of bollocks. All anonymous. All untraceable. But from destinations near and far, so she understands the scope of who she’s dealing with.”

“That’d work,” Dick agreed.

“I’ll also make some discreet checks with my contacts at the New Hampshire State Police,” Glenn continued, “just to be sure no alarm has been raised.”

“That still leaves several concerns about the mission.” Dee wasn’t the hard-ass Glenn was, at least in Dick’s mind, but she was still all-business. “Where do we go from here?”

“The kid, Luke, he’s working on that. We have a lead indicating the servers are in Denver. He’s narrowing down the search based on some of the stuff we downloaded in New Hampshire.”

“So he’s still useful?”

“Yeah, oh yeah,” replied Dick. He knew where this was going, but Glenn went ahead and said it out loud anyway.

“Sooner or later his utility on this mission will end, though, and there’s no way the Subsidiary can trust him on future endeavors. You know what that means.”

Dick knew. Another part of the job he didn’t like.

Dee spoke up. “Even if we were inclined to ... be lenient ..., the Chinese wouldn’t tolerate it. They’d take unilateral action. That would be unfortunate for the Subsidiary’s relationship with its sponsoring states.”

Dick gave an unbusinesslike grunt. “It would be more than unfortunate for Luke. They’d want to extract things, probably not just stuff about Reality 2 Be and this mission either. Things would end slow and painful.”

“When the time comes, quick and painless is fine,” murmured Dee.

Glenn proved once again to Dick that he had less of a soul than anyone else he dealt with at HQ. “The important part is the ending, though, however you need or want to get there.”

The ends justify the means. Since it wasn't a corporation or a governmental bureaucracy, the Subsidiary didn't go in for all that “mission statement” and “corporate creed” bullshit, but if you had to pick five words that summed up everything about the agency, that would be it: The ends justify the means.

Dick simply nodded. He knew his job. He'd better get on with doing it.

## CHAPTER 14

Luke's fingers skittered like impromptu jazz over the keyboard, making a matrix out of the expense report information for Reality 2 Be's senior programmers. Bev was right; they did go on trips for several days at a time on a fairly regular basis. Almost all of those trips were to Denver. Maybe if he mapped out the locations of the hotels used and checked the mileage utilized on the rental car receipts he could get a rough idea of the location of the server farm. Then, cross-referencing with power consumption information hacked out of the utility company or repair reports from air conditioning servicemen, he could narrow down things a bit more.

It was a good approach, an excellent approach, even if he had to say so himself because, of course, no one else knew what he was doing. The only problem with the approach was it was completely useless when he tried it; there was no information in the expense reports on hotels or rental cars. He checked for taxi receipts as a surrogate for the latter, but came up empty, completely empty. His eyes scanned with rapid efficiency through the data. All the other usual information was there. Entries for tips, drinks, food, and ground transportation on the New Hampshire side of the trip, as well as for airline flights (all first class) into the Denver area. All of the Colorado flights were into the relatively new Denver International Airport, as opposed to Colorado Springs, an alternate Luke knew was preferred by some computer types who had business at the Denver Tech Center, a corporate park on the far southeast side of Denver favored by cutting edge electronics and tech companies.

Dick expanded the search to pick up the highest levels of company management. There were a few trips to Denver by the company brass, but they showed the same pattern of receipts—no hotels, no rental cars, and no taxis. Of course, the CEO and the Chief Information Officer, they both used Reality 2 Be's corporate jet, a Gulfstream IV, instead of commercial carriers. First Class apparently wasn't good enough for the big boys. It probably wasn't that the Gulfstream was so much more comfortable than First Class, although he would bet his paycheck the flight attendants were younger, prettier, and more attentive than their unionized commercial counterparts, but you almost never had to wait with a corporate jet. The smaller airports that

catered to the executive jet crowd weren't nearly as busy as the commercial airports, which meant you could come and go pretty much on a moment's notice.

Luke Googled a bit until he found a listing of general aviation airports in the Denver metro area, then pushed down into the general ledger codes of the expense reports to find out which one they might be using for the corporate jet. It was one more data point—executives didn't like long car rides to their destination, even though they, like the programmers, were apparently being picked up by a limo or some sort of transport owned by the company's Denver operations. No way they were being ferried around in the backseat of somebody's Honda Civic.

He sifted through the information looking for charges for the corporate jet. Not only are jets damn pricey to buy, they have expenses most people never even think about. Not just pilot salaries and the cost of the jet and the fuel, but hangar costs, maintenance fees, inspection fees, licenses, catering fees, ongoing pilot training costs, satellite weather advisory fees, refueling services charges, and landing fees. When he found the landing fee information, it was more than interesting. It was damn unusual and expensive, to boot. He just stared at it for several minutes trying to think of an explanation.

The corporate jet was landing at Denver International Airport, too. Everyone was going to DIA and there was nothing in the expense reports to suggest they ever left.

Suddenly, it all made sense.



The jagged, snow-pocked peaks of the Rocky Mountains ended with surprising suddenness. The view out the window of First Class in the United Boeing 767-300, shifted from the dazzling whites and greens of the mountains to the mottled brown-green of the dry, baked earth of the Denver metro area. Barren, gullied plains spread north and east as far as Matt Lee could see. Passengers on the opposite side of the plane oohed and ahed and pointed at the skyscrapers of downtown Denver as the plane descended below broken cloud cover and bounced through the always turbulent winds roiling over the precipices of the Front Range. Straining to get an angle, he caught a brief glimpse of the gleaming white peaks of the tent-like architecture

at the Jeppesen Terminal at DIA, Denver International Airport, before the plane shifted to line up its landing.

He would take some time, both to gather supplies he could not bring with him on the plane and to acclimatize to the altitude and the surroundings, but he couldn't dally too long. He had a simple, straightforward mission to accomplish. He was going to leave this pleasant-looking, sunny place with what he came to retrieve or die trying.

An attractive stewardess, Peggy according to her name tag, came by with his sports coat, laying it across the empty seat next to his so it would be handy once the flight had landed. "Are you coming to Denver for business or pleasure?" she asked, her perfect, straight, white teeth gleaming as she smiled. He'd heard once that beauty contestants and others who had to smile constantly for their jobs sometimes put petroleum jelly, Vaseline, on their teeth to make their lips slide more readily over the teeth and produce a glossy smile. He wondered if Peggy did that. He wondered what other things Peggy might do. He wondered how long her layover lasted. He needed to acclimatize and a little exercise would aid that effort. With an athletic build and a classically angular Oriental face dominated by his own bright, flashing smile, finding company when he traveled on business was never difficult.

"Pleasure, I hope, as well as business," he replied with an easy nonchalance. "I was hoping I could find someone nice to show me some sights."

Peggy laughed and winked. "What sights did you want to see?"

Matt leaned forward, allowing him to whisper in her ear and to get a nice view of Peggy's cleavage as she leaned down to talk with him. "Any sights you'd like to show me."



"I give up," said Dick as columns of numbers rolled up the computer screen in the Subsidiary's tech lab. "What exactly am I looking at?"

The information was as dry as a high-end martini, but it left Dick neither shaken, nor stirred. Luke, on the other hand, was all aquiver. The Australian-born tech whiz was apparently too excited to sit, so instead paced rapidly to-and-fro in the limited space behind Dick's



chair, stepping and spinning and turning and stepping in fast succession. The nerve-wracking caged beast imitation was broken only by jabs of Luke's pointed finger thrusting past Dick's ear, first on the left, then right, then right-left-right as the invoices underlying the data in the matrix flashed onto the screen. Each one elicited the same unhelpful commentary from the computer geek. "Look, there! See? And look there. See?" Dick was getting a little "see" sick, if truth be told.

Dick furrowed his brow, focused his concentration on the invoices he was being shown, and tried to discern a pattern. Finally, he made the only observation he could think of. "Seems like these guys spend a hell of a lot of money just to land a plane, but what does that prove? That they're egocentric, narcissistic, Type A personalities who care more about their personal convenience than the bottom line? Welcome to corporate America."

Luke stopped pacing and his hands wriggled as if wanting to grab something and strangle it. "It's not just that it's expensive to land, especially compared to other airports not so far away. It's where they're landing. They're landing at DIA."

"So?"

Luke brushed by Dick to manipulate the mouse for the computer, pointing and clicking faster than Dick could follow. "And look, there. See?"

Dick's hands wriggled as if wanting to grab something and strangle it—Luke's throat. He stifled the urge and simply raised his hands in surrender. "I give up. What am I supposed to see?"

A jabbing finger flew by the side of his face once again. "They disembarked at a gate. At a terminal gate! There's the charge."

Dick didn't bother to look at the screen, turning his head instead to look at his agitated companion. "Don't most people get out at a gate?"

"Commercial passengers, sure," exclaimed Luke with obvious exasperation, "but not general aviation. They go to a hanger or one of the general aviation tarmacs."

Dick rubbed his temples. "So, these guys are spendthrifts. Sue me. Better yet, sue them."

Step, turn, step, spin, step. The pacing began anew while Luke continued to rant.

"Don't you get it? These guys are never leaving the terminal. There's no cab, no limo, no rental car, because they never leave.

There's no hotel expense, because they never leave. They fly into DIA instead of Jefferson County Airport or somesuch, because DIA is where they're going."

"You mean ..."

"Yes," exploded Luke, "I mean that Reality 2 Be's missing computer server farm is located in a secret underground facility beneath Denver International Airport!"

For a moment, Dick had thought he understood. But Luke's last statement caught him completely flat-footed once again. "What? How do you get from 'they're staying at DIA' to 'secret underground facility'? Are you a whack job?"

Luke gave Dick a stern look. "Well, there's no place for that kind of server farm in the above-ground facilities. It's all concourses and lounges and ticket counters and overpriced fast-food restaurants. It's gotta be underground."

Dick stopped rubbing his temples and massaged his face with his open palms. He hated working with amateurs. They saw too many spy movies and developed a warped sense of reality concerning espionage.

"Look, Luke, you seem like a level-headed fellow ... or bloke, as you would put it. But what you're suggesting is impossible. Not unlikely. Not surprising. Impossible. Evil villains seeking to dominate the world don't just build vast underground fortresses in dormant volcanoes or underneath Cuban lakes or major international airports. Who would do the work who wouldn't talk? Deaf mutes? How would the neighbors not happen to notice? Mass amnesia? Where would they get their power? Dilithium crystals? Who would provide site security? Deaf mute commandos? You couldn't in a million years keep something like that hidden. People would talk. Evidence would exist. The truth would leak out."

Luke had calmed down considerably during the course of Dick's diatribe. He gave Dick a wry smile. "You're absolutely right. Nothing like this could be completely hidden. Something would leak. The word would spread." He leaned forward to manipulate the mouse again, this time with a slow and deliberate movement. "It already has."



Hawk was on time. He was always on time. It was his responsibility as a soldier and his duty as a leader. Still, he didn't have high hopes for the upcoming encounter.

He moved with a purposeful stride, not rushing, but not loitering either. Except for the scheduled encounter, there was very little at this place that held any interest for him. Ignoring the distractions to either side, he peered well-ahead of his position and saw exactly what he had expected to see. Peregrine was sauntering toward him at a casual pace, his head turning from side to side to assess the passersby.

Hawk and his teammate were moving in from opposite sides of the mall and walking toward the fountain and benches at center court. The mall, itself, was a huge, grandiose temple to commercialism in all its tacky glory. It drew customers from near and far to buy and shop and buy and talk and buy some more. All around him, the usual stores catering to middle-America, as well as a few specialty shops, were arrayed with gaudy window displays beckoning to the throngs of teenaged girls that strolled through the place in packs of three and four. The girls giggled at private jokes and pointed at merchandise and sometimes pointed at him, winking and giggling and mouthing "Oh my god!" to one another when he gave them a stern look. He wasn't quite sure if the jail bait found his chiseled muscles and air of authority attractive or whether he intimidated the shit out of them. He didn't really care. He wasn't here for flirtation or small talk or ... oh my god, a dalliance with the underage shopaholic groupies. He certainly wasn't here to shop for things he didn't really need or want or sometimes even understand. He was here on business, serious business, life and death business.

He sauntered into the central court and sat down at a bench at the edge of the jetting center fountain. It was a good spot to meet and talk. The fountain made it difficult to hear any conversation from nearby benches or walkways, foiling any electronic bugs if the site of the meet or any of the expected participants had been compromised. He wasn't being overly-dramatic. Shrike had disappeared and Pigeon's mood at their last meeting had given him a bad feeling about the boy.

Peregrine sauntered up, looked at the empty seats on either side of Hawk, and sat down, a tight frown set on his face. Hawk had known Peregrine would be at the meet. The question was, were they the only two left in the squad? If so, things were even more serious and dangerous than he had ever expected them to be on the mission. It was a simple operation, nothing but an exchange. Information coming

to him—really his taskmasters. Cash going to the rebels. He had done plenty of similar jobs before without these kinds of problems.

Hawk nodded at Peregrine.

Peregrine nodded back. “I’ve got two grand local that says Pigeon never shows.”

Hawk started. It wasn’t like Peregrine to throw around that kind of cash, not even in local currency. Truth be told, the guy was cheap. Hawk shook his head. “No bet. How can you think I would ever encourage a bet against the squad, even by taking the other side? It’s ...”

“Bad karma?”

That almost made Hawk smile. “It’s poor leadership. It’s disrespectful.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Peregrine seemed to be ogling some of the feminine flesh on display, but Hawk’s focus never wavered from practiced security protocol. He kept up a lookout, his eyes moving at regular intervals from spot to spot, first the way he had come in, then down the snaking arm of the mall to his left, then to his right, searching for Pigeon or some threat in lieu of Pigeon.

Despite his security training, he didn’t take any special note of what looked to be an eight-year old boy until the youngster ran up and grabbed his elbow. Crap! Didn’t the Viet Cong use kids to carry improvised explosive devices into the midst of unsuspecting personnel? His instincts screamed for him to snatch the kid up and over his head into the fountain, then beat feet out of the perimeter of the blast and take cover. But he didn’t do any of that. He was in a shopping mall, dammit, not Tikrit.

The kid wore a brightly colored shirt with horizontal stripes, blue jeans, and trendy, high-end athletic shoes. He had black hair and green eyes and was cute as could possibly be. Peregrine looked at the kid with terror on his face. “Hey, mister,” said the kid and Peregrine flinched, sliding to the far end of the bench.

Hawk smiled. “What, kid?”

The kid scrunched up his nose. “This guy, he gave me these new shoes just ‘cause I said I would give you a message.” He held out a grubby fist with a folded piece of paper in it.

Hawk scanned in all directions looking for Pigeon or for someone else showing too much interest in his conversation with the young boy. Nothing.

“You know,” Hawk said in a calm, soothing voice as he took the proffered slip of paper, “you shouldn’t talk to strangers. Not to him, not to me. And you probably shouldn’t let them buy you presents or ... agree to do the things they might ask you to do. It’s not safe.”

The boy laughed. “You’re funny!” he cried out as he scampered away, running and jumping high with his bright new shoes flashing as he moved into the crowd of shoppers.

Hawk looked over at Peregrine, who seemed to have relaxed somewhat, although his frown was still present.

He held up the note. “I told you not to bet against the squad.”

“Pigeon’s still a chicken-shit or he wouldn’t have asked a kid to go someplace he was afraid to go himself.” Peregrine leaned forward to look as Hawk opened up the message. “What did he say? Is he okay?”

Hawk flinched when he saw the words. “It’s not from Pigeon. It’s from Shrike.”

“Huh?”

## CHAPTER 15

“Huh?” Dick shook his head in confusion, as if shaking things about his brain would make the oddly-shaped pieces of information he had received fall into some logical order. “Whaddya mean word’s already leaked out about a secret facility hidden at Denver International Airport?” He spread his hands and looked around the room, as if seeking support from someone, but, of course, there was no one in the room but him and Luke. “Nobody sent me the memo. It doesn’t show up on my free gas station map.”

Luke looked confused. “They give away free maps at petrol stations?”

Dick scowled at the youngster. “Just explain to me how people could know about a secret facility at DIA, but not know about a secret facility at DIA.”

Luke rubbed his stubble with his right hand. Finally, he looked at Dick and spoke in almost professorial tones. “Look, let’s say you want to build a huge computing facility, but you want it to be secret and secure, what do you need?”

Dick shrugged. “Bunches of computers, a lot of space to house the computers, power for the equipment, and people to run the facility.”

Luke nodded. “The computers and servers and routers—that’s the easy part. You can buy those lots of places and it’s pretty easy to hide your trail if you don’t want someone to know who’s buying them or how many the single facility is actually buying. Let’s skip that. No sport in it.”

“Fine.”

“Let’s take a look at the facility needs first. You need a very large warehouse or similar facility and good hookups to the power grid, as well as optic fiber and cable facilities. Are you with me so far?”

“No need to be patronizing, kid.”

Luke flushed. “Sorry. So let’s say I wanted to build an extremely large facility and I wanted it to be hidden and easy to protect. Where would I put it?”

Dick scrunched up his face. “Underground. Easy to control access. No one sees it’s there. Hell, temperature is probably easier to maintain at a constant level, too, and you don’t have to worry about

wind or tornadoes or snow causing problems. Tough to push that much dirt, though, without being pretty obvious—unless you're strip-mining nearby."

"Or," Luke said, "building a really large building or facility above the secret one. People don't understand construction. They know there are foundations and pylons and drainage and utility issues, stuff like that. But most people looking at the initial stages of constructing a high-rise, for example, have no idea why things are being driven into the ground one place, while dirt is being removed in another." The kid consulted some notes. "A hundred and ten million cubic yards of dirt was moved to build DIA, according to their own public estimates—that's more than thirty percent of the amount of dirt moved to build the Panama Canal—and the airport's built on flat ground. Think about what a big project that is. And the bigger a construction project, the easier it is to build something pretty massive in the midst of it—even right underneath it—without it really being noticeable. Stick an elephant in your living room, everyone notices. Paint one bright pink, but drop it on the Serengeti Plain and people might not even notice. And if someone did notice, others might not even believe him."

Dick leaned back in his chair. "That makes sense." He wriggled a bit to get comfortable. He could tell Luke was just warming up.

He was right. "How much do you think it cost to build DIA?"

Dick scratched an itch on his nose while he thought. He knew the project had been tens of millions of dollars over budget. "I dunno. Couple billion, I guess. It's pretty big and kinda fancy looking."

"It is that," Luke agreed. "Try five billion dollars. Five. The new airport facility the Chinese built more recently for the Olympics was only three and a half billion."

Dick laughed. "Yeah, but we have union labor here. They've got slave labor there."

Luke didn't even smile. "Let's keep moving," he said quickly with a grimace of distaste, as if Dick had just farted during a business meeting. "Airports have great hook-ups for electricity, cable, optic networks, satellite arrays, and on and on and on. DIA has five hundred thirty *miles* of optic cable, along with more than eleven thousand *miles* of copper cable. You need that stuff to make sure you've got dependable access to air traffic control, communication with aircraft, hook-ins to airline reservation systems, and a massive number of people popping open their cell phones every time another jumbo jet

lands—and that’s every couple minutes. So you’ve got no problems connecting into the mother-lode of electronic and communications grids.”

“Given,” murmured Dick. The kid could be a bit uptight, even twitchy at times, but he was clearly in his element here. Dick was kind of enjoying Luke’s enthusiastic explanation.

“We’ve already covered security, with the underground location. But, as a bonus, airports are reasonably secure plots of land. They were even before 9/11, but more so now, so nobody is going to be sneaking up on you.”

Dick merely waved his hand for Luke to continue.

“At the same time, you need to have employees, supervisors, evil overlords, and what-not come to visit. That’s a lot of people coming and going and it would get noticed if you were someplace remote. The roads would be too busy. It would be hard to hide the employee parking lot.” Luke paused, letting Dick ponder the issue for a moment, before continuing to the answer Dick knew was coming. The kid would have been a pretty good teacher if he hadn’t gotten sucked into the spy game. “Airports have huge parking structures. They’re served by public transportation and shuttle buses. People are coming and going all the time. No one notices a few dozen or even a few hundred extra people coming and going, when more than a hundred thousand people are doing it by air or land every day. The employees don’t even have to hide where they work. There are probably computers for the airlines and the control tower and all that crap all over the place at DIA. The workers can just say they are computer geeks for the airport.”

Dick wrinkled his nose. “But the computer skills needed for airline reservations aren’t necessarily the same ones needed for running Reality 2 Be or whatever an evil overlord needs, are they? Won’t somebody notice?”

Luke laughed out loud. “Trust me. Nobody who doesn’t work in computers has the slightest idea what people who work with computers actually do. My friends all think I design computerized investment algorithms for a hedge fund. It’s not a hard cover to pull off—not like yours, with trips to odd places and no ability to stay in contact with your friends and family.”

Dick winced, but Luke just continued on.

“All I have to do is mumble a few arcane programming language names and a bit of jargon and all my friends just nod politely as their



eyes glaze over. They just grab another can of Four X from the igloo while I'm cooking up steaks on the barbie and make sure never to ask me about work again."

Dick thought of all the times he had tossed off phrases like "effluent parameters" and "treatment co-efficient" when people, even Melanie, had asked him about his cover job as a wastewater treatment consultant. Nobody really wanted to have a conversation about that kind of shit at a social gathering. The cover Luke was talking about could work. Still, it wasn't foolproof.

Dick leaned forward in his chair. "Everything you've said makes sense. But it's not tight. It's harder to notice the construction, but someone would—maybe some grunt pushing dirt in ways that don't make sense to him. All those employees, they have to go down corridors and get into elevators that people who work at the airport would begin to wonder about. You admitted it yourself. You said word of the facility had leaked, but people don't know about it. That doesn't make sense to me. Either people know there's something secret there or they don't. You can't have it both ways."

Luke turned the screen of his computer to face Dick. "Spend much time surfing the Web?"

Dick gave a dismissive wave. "Seems like a big waste of time to me. I do what I need to do for the job, but that's it. My leisure time is the old-fashioned kind. Watching sports on the big screen with a beer in my hand. Used to play football."

Luke beamed. "Me, too!"

Dick chuckled. "The other kind, kid." Luke looked positively crestfallen that their moment of male bonding had been ruined. "My kid, Seth, he seems to spend a lot of time on the computer. At least that's what his mother says." Dick's mood suddenly darkened. "I'm away a lot. Too much."

"Then you've probably been through DIA quite a few times. It's a major hub airport."

"Sure. So what?"

"Ever notice anything peculiar about the airport?"

"You mean aside from the fact they delayed opening it for a year and a half 'cause they couldn't get the automated baggage system to work?"

Luke's eyebrows hopped up. "Great way to explain cost overruns and why the place was filled with computer techs and electricians for months after all the construction workers had gone away, isn't it?"

Dick had to admit it. “True.”

“But that wasn’t what I was getting at. I mean the facility itself. What about it?”

“Out in the middle of nowhere. Flat for miles around. The architecture for the main terminal is fancy, like I said before. The roof is a huge white tarp of some kind, fixed to poles that jut way up into the sky. It’s supposed to make the roofline look like snow-covered mountains or something like that. Your tax dollars at work.”

A picture popped up on the screen of Luke’s computer. The sharp white peaks of the passenger terminal stood in sharp relief to the blue sky above. “The Jeppesen Terminal’s got a nice look to it. Unique. Peculiar. Maybe even avant-garde. Probably makes the average bloke think nothing of it when the artwork inside is similarly ... unique. Ever notice any of the artistic details inside?”

Dick thought back. “The place is kind of weird. They have these bright blue paper airplane shaped metal things hanging from the ceiling where you get off the underground tramway.” He started. The *underground* tramway. “And there’s, like, propellers in the tramway shaft that twirl in the wind when the train goes by and sculptures of, like, hands holding a pick axe coming out of the wall down there, too.”

Luke’s hands flew over the keyboard. Pictures of the art Dick had mentioned pulsed onto the screen. “What else?”

The images came flooding into Dick’s memory. Odd stuff. Not odd enough to cause any worry or problem. Just stuff that made you go “Huh?” He began to gesticulate as he recited what he had seen to Luke. “There’s weird stuff imbedded in the floor at what appear to be random places. Swirls of metal or what look like dinosaur footprints or fossils or something. Random words or letters.”

Words etched into fancy-looking stone appeared on the screen. “Dzit Dit Gaii,” read one. The grain of the marble was almost too strong to read the next one, but it seemed to say “Cochetopa.” “Yeah, that stuff,” mumbled Dick with a wave of his hand. “I always kinda assumed they were Indian ... you know, Native American, blessing the place or explaining where the stone came from.”

“Some are native languages, some just nonsense according to the websites. Nothing to do with the source of the marble, some of which was shipped in at pretty hefty expense from locations all over the world, even Australia, not that you would know that from just walking about the concourse.”

“Yeah, that always sort of bothered me, come to think of it” mused Dick. “Here there are, weird symbols all over the place, but no brass plate explaining what they’re supposed to be. It’s like a bizarre museum where there’s no information on what the displays are.”

More rapid keystrokes. Picture after picture after picture. Just as Dick remembered it. “What about the art?” asked Luke.

“Not my taste, that’s for sure,” replied Dick. “Big murals. Kind of a Mexican style, I think. One had dead babies and coffins in it, which I found distasteful and, well, disturbing for, you know, public art. But Mexicans have that whole ‘Day of the Dead’ thing, so maybe it means something I’m just too uncultured to understand.”

The picture appeared on the screen. A few more keystrokes and various portions of it were enlarged. Luke clicked on to other pictures and did the same thing as he identified the images. “Here’s a six-pointed star on a child’s outfit. Here’s a kid wielding a sledge hammer. A flaming city in the background. A hallucinogenic plant. A civil defense symbol on a badge a child is wearing.” He let the screen linger on the next image. “This guy looks like a Sasquatch skeleton in a Nazi uniform, if you ask me.”

The pictures flashed on and on as Luke continued at an ever-increasing pace.

“If you went outside for a smoke, you might have noticed that the stone over the time capsule they buried when the airport opened has a Masonic symbol on it. The ceremony was organized by ‘The New World Airport Commission.’ An offshoot of the New World Order? You know, the secret organization actually running the world in collaboration with Skull & Bones.” Another picture appeared. “If you look at an overhead shot, you can see the runways make a swastika pattern.”

“That’s not a swastika,” Dick blurted out. “They ... they have runways going different directions so they can land planes safely no matter what the wind patterns are.” Dick wriggled in his chair. This was getting ridiculous.

But still, Luke continued. “There are websites claiming witnesses to the construction of the airport have been silenced or have simply disappeared. Reports of strange odors coming from below. Even local newspapers have done stories on the different conspiracy theories.”

“Theories? Plural?”

“Oh, yeah,” responded Luke. “Some say alien lizard creatures are using small children as slave labor to hollow out a huge cavern where the citizenry will be herded to serve their evil masters when the end of the world comes. Secret societies are mentioned in password-protected online whispers. Other sites claim the Prince of Wales is buying up land in the area for sinister reasons.” The pitch of Luke’s voice had been rising as the images and explanations got more and more outrageous, reaching the cracking point.

Dick leapt out of his chair, gesticulating in agitation. “You’re not telling me you believe any of this crap? It’s bizarre. It’s fantastical. It couldn’t possibly be true.” He gave Luke a hard look. “Please reassure me you are not going to tell Dee Tammany and Glenn Swynton you’ve uncovered a plot whereby alien lizardmen have conspired with the Prince of Wales to kidnap missing children so they can build a hellish holding pen for the unholy two miles beneath Denver International Airport while the righteous fight the Antichrist using stolen Kestrel 84 technology.” He glanced to either side before continuing. “My job may suck—my family certainly thinks so—but I still wanna keep it. Suggesting any ... any of this ... will get both of us blacklisted as mental cases faster than you can spit. You can’t possibly believe any of this is true!”

Luke leaned back from his keyboard and interlaced his fingers behind his head. When he spoke, his voice was once again deep and calm and professorial. “I don’t believe a word of it, mate.”

Dick tried to shake the confusion from his mind. Then what was the kid’s point? He wanted to ask, but the words just wouldn’t form properly. Instead he simply blurted: “But, then ... What? ... Huh?”

This time the kid chuckled. “I don’t believe it. I didn’t think you’d believe it. The average Joe on the street, as you would put it, wouldn’t believe it for a minute, either, even if by some bizarre twist of all we know and understand any of it was true.” He held up his hand, index finger raised, in triumph. “That’s the point.”

Dick sat back down with a weary plop. “It is?”

“Let me explain. If I were an evil overlord who had built a secret underground facility underneath a massive public works project, I would definitely try to get some input into the art and architectural committees. Donate some work. Pay for certain artists. Suggest certain avant-garde design features. Then, when people began to wonder about some things, like why so much dirt had to be moved to construct a facility on a flat plain, or how come they dug six stories

down beneath where a runway was scheduled to be, or why certain corridors or elevators are off-limits to even the airport security personnel, I would post an anonymous comment here, a wacky website there, drop a few speculations into an overly-loud conversation at an airport bar, and so on. Suddenly, it's *The DaVinci Code* mixed with Area 51, *Men In Black*, and *The National Enquirer*."

"You mean these sites are fake?"

Luke shrugged. "Probably not, at least not most of them. It's even better if those spreading the unbelievable rumors are, in fact, true believers. Scarily fanatical in some cases." He paused for a moment as if in thought. "Paranoia can be your friend when you are trying to create a situation like this and you can induce even rampant paranoia with minimum effort. Move around a few paintings for unexplained reasons. Release a noxious odor when someone is sneaking where they don't belong. Refuse to answer inquiries about the art or the words or the construction. It doesn't take much and, voila, a few conspiracy theories are born. A few late night calls where no one's on the line and those spreading the stories become convinced they're being watched and threatened because they're on the right track. The theories become more complex, more sinister. Many are strange, even creepy. Some of those spreading the story try to fit it into their pet theories about other conspiracies."

"Couldn't this get out of hand? It sounds like this could bring unwanted attention to the site." Dick was suddenly glad he had never been assigned to spend time with the PsyOps guys when he was in the Army. Screwing with people's perceptions, ultimately with their minds, was scary stuff.

Luke didn't seem put-off at all by the question, or the subject. "That's why outlandish conspiracy theories are great and multiple conspiracy theories are helpful. It doesn't matter if some of the theories are reasonable, the fringe elements taint the entire field. That means the serious conspiracy enthusiasts and the full-bore whack-jobs will tend to cancel each other out, especially in terms of credibility. If you're lucky, some conspiracy buffs will get even the most obvious, easily verifiable facts wrong. Then, if and when responsible people research the various theories, the true things you don't really want the public to know get lumped in with a bunch of inaccuracies and bizarre ruminations. Consequently, the truth is ignored as coming from a non-credible source or simply lost in a blizzard of bullshit." He smiled.

“Once you get a conspiracy going, people find ‘facts’ that fit it and ignore those that don’t.”

Dick perked back up. “Like the whole ‘Paul is Dead’ thing.”

“Huh?”

“Paul McCartney. The Beatles. Please tell me you’ve heard of The Beatles.”

Luke sighed. “Like the baby-boomers would ever let anyone go through life without knowing about The Beatles. Criminy. It was more than forty years ago. Give it a rest.”

“Let’s avoid the music criticism class, shall we? I tried that with my kid once and it didn’t make for a winning father/son memory.” Dick motioned with his hands as if setting the subject physically aside. “Back when The Beatles were hot ... well before you were born, okay? ... some kids at Michigan State or someplace got this rumor started that Paul was really dead and had been replaced by a look-alike. But the other band members, they couldn’t say on pain of death or something, so they placed clues on all the album covers and in the songs. There was even stuff back-masked onto the records.”

“Back-masked?”

“Stuff recorded backwards in the background, so you could hear it when you played the record backwards.”

“Sounds unlikely.” Luke’s brow was furrowed and his mouth was pursed in distaste. “I mean, how would anyone ever find that? Do people actually spend their time listening to backwards music in America?”

Dick tilted his head down and gave the kid a stare. “You find it because you are looking for clues to support a theory you’ve already heard someplace and found credible for some reason. Once the rumor started, people looked for support all over the place. In the music, in the album cover art, in the lyrics. And the back-masking crap was the bonanza of the whole idiotic quest.” Dick wrinkled his nose before he made his confession. “I’ll admit it, I did it. Even though this was really before my time, when I heard about it, I had to check it out. I wound the turntable backwards by hand to hear the back-masking. Some of it was pretty creepy.”

Luke tilted his head down and furrowed his brow yet further, his half-squinted eyes lasering in on Dick. “So you think Paul McCartney is dead. Then who do you think paid Heather Mills millions of pounds in their divorce case?”

“No, I don’t believe Paul is dead,” spat Dick. “The back-masking crap was probably just John having a laugh. The point is ...” Dick pointed his hand, index finger extended in mimicry of Luke’s earlier motion, “... once the snowball got rolling, people found clues all over the place, more than could have ever been planted as a lark or a publicity stunt. You were right before. People get compulsive ... they get crazy ... about conspiracy stuff.”

Luke nodded. “Exactly. There is a facility underground at Denver International Airport. One that has nothing to do with alien lizards, Prince Charles, or the end of the world, as we know it. One that has everything to do with Reality 2 Be’s server farm for their virtual reality game.”

Dick thought for a few moments. “One problem.”

“Yeah?”

“Wasn’t all this construction done well before Reality 2 Be ever existed as a game?”

Luke nodded. “Yeah. I’m still working that one out.”

## CHAPTER 16

“Holy crap!” muttered Peregrine. “I thought Shrike was, you know, dead. Gone. Never to be heard of again.” He leaned in even closer. “What does he say?”

Hawk read the words on the paper the young boy had given him, then handed the note to his twitchy companion. The words, written in block letters on plain white stock, were clear enough: “Compromised. Can’t meet. Can’t ever meet. Not here. Not by other means. Not anywhere. Run. Hide. Disappear. Now. Forever. Sorry. Shrike.”

It was all so odd. Shrike’s fear seemed orders of magnitude greater than Peregrine’s or even Pigeon’s paranoia. Could the danger really be so great? Was this message even really from Shrike?

Perhaps it was his intense focus on Shrike’s message that made him dismiss as unimportant the marked ramp-up in volume of the general background hubbub emanating from the distant reaches of the four different wings of the mall. But then a booming whoomph and explosion rattled both the foundations of the mall and his composure. Even as Hawk dropped to the floor beside the bench, his combat instincts took over—not just seeking safety and cover, but analyzing and categorizing the sounds he heard. Ear-splitting explosions reverberated through the canyons of the shopping mall, followed closely by a clanking noise and the echoing chatter of what could only be machine gun fire. He’d heard that combination before, but only on a battlefield.

He looked over to Peregrine, covering beneath the next bench over. “What the ...” But then there was another blast from a different arm of the mall and then another and another, drowning out all thought, all action. Soon, though, the anguished screams of the crowd rose above even the sustained chatter of the machine guns as everyone in the mall seemed to rush toward the fountain. Everywhere Hawk looked matronly shoppers and teenaged girls still clutching bagsful of expensive purchases were running at him in full panic, shrieking and OMGing and trampling over anyone who fell during their headlong rush to the center. It was as if Godzilla was attacking the four far-flung entrances to the mall simultaneously and the fountain was the city center of Tokyo. He heard more and more booming crashes



echoing in an eerie cacophony of destruction from all directions. Smoke and construction dust billowed toward him, overtaking the fleeing throngs, causing them to scream even louder.

The entire scene was unreal. How could this be possible? Who could orchestrate such a thing? The property damage alone would be billions and the citizenry wasn't about to stand for this kind of chaos. Who could possibly be so powerful as to be able to launch such an attack and so stupid to actually do it? And for what, the money he carried in his pack, the information he carried in his head? This was too big to remain a localized incident. This would have repercussions ... real repercussions.

Peregrine bolted, flying towards the nearest store that had an outside exit.

Hawk crouched beside his bench watching the universe's biggest shopping mall be blasted into smithereens, whatever the hell a smithereen was.

Who?

How?

That's when he saw the tanks. Chinese Type 99 main battle tanks, each with a 125mm smoothbore main gun blasting away at the mall fixtures as two machine guns mowed down the crowds to their fore. Even the rapid fire of the machine guns was not sufficient, however, to clear a path. The tanks just bore on, though, slowed not only by the debris and confines of the mall, but by loss of traction to their treads as the armored vehicles plowed heedlessly through the crowd.

Hawk saw one brave soul turn to face the enemy as those about him fled in a mad rush to clear a path for the relentless tanks. For just a moment, the foolhardy hero stood alone in the tanks' path like that anonymous individual in Tiananmen Square had years ago during China's first and last mass demonstration for democracy.

The tanks never hesitated. Hawk turned away at the last second so he would not see the impact, but he heard the "thud" and the mangled cry that ended abruptly as the tanks continued their onslaught. Another nameless hero ground down by the Chinese Army.

The message had been from Shrike. And it had been true, truer than Hawk could ever have imagined. What had he gotten himself into? Had Shrike's cover been blown? Had his? Were the Chinese after him? If so, it was a game he could not lose.

He did his best to follow Shrike's advice: to run, to hide, to disappear forever. But he doubted he could leave this place of devastation without leaving a piece of himself behind.

And that, he now knew, could be the death of him.



Luke might not have it all figured out yet, but Dick knew the two of them were headed for Denver, one way or the other. That meant a few awkward conversations were in Dick's future. Since he preferred those conversations be in his past, he decided he might as well get them over with. He always did what he had to do.

He left the computer tech room and headed to an empty conference room, flipping open his cell phone and opening the screen that showed recent missed calls.

None.

That was depressing.

He punched in the speed dial for Melanie's cell phone and mentally prepared the message he would leave when the voicemail triggered. There was no way she would pick up his call and, at this point, he didn't really blame her.

The voicemail switched on after the fourth ring: "This is Melanie. I really want to talk with you, but I won't use this thing while I'm driving, walking, eating at a restaurant, watching a movie, or meditating. I'm not sure why I have it at all. But if you leave a message with your name and number, I'll eventually get back to you and then we can talk, really talk." It was the same cutesy message Melanie had used for years, but he was somehow depressed by it now, just the same.

"Hi, Melanie. It's Dick. I hope things are going better for you and I do want to talk. Really talk. But I have to go to Denver on an emergency for work. Same old shit. Won't bother you with the technical details. Shouldn't be more than a couple days." He finished his canned lie and began to flip the phone closed, then suddenly stopped, opening it back up before it disconnected and holding it back up to his face. "Love you, Melanie. Miss you, too." He flipped the phone closed and sat alone in the dark conference room for almost a half-hour.

By the time he left, he was sure no one would be able to tell he had been crying.



“Damn! Did you see that? Did you see that equipment?” Seth had leapt up from his computer and was pacing about the basement rec room at a furious rate. “Did you see what they did? The community will never stand for it. They’ll go bonkers, absolutely ape-shit. You can’t allow stuff like that. It trashes the whole economic underpinnings.”

Finally he slowed his diatribe and his pacing enough to focus on his friend, Brian, who was simply staring at his own computer screen, his eyes wide, his hands shaking as they rested atop the controller he had so furiously been toggling and manipulating only a few moments before.

Seth continued his rant. “I’m shocked, too, dude. The property damage has gotta be enormous. I mean, yeah sure, it’s all virtual, but it still costs real bucks in the real world to buy the virtual land and build the virtual stores and code the virtual inventory so people can shop in-world. The retailers will be freakin’ apoplectic. I can’t believe there won’t be repercussions.”

Brian finally spoke in a hoarse whisper. “There’ll be repercussions, Seth. That’s the problem. I think there will actually be ... actually be ... repercussions. To me, to us.”

Seth stopped pacing and stared at his friend. “What are you talking about? That wasn’t our fault. No one can blame us. Why would someone come after us for what happened at the mall?”

Brian looked down at his controller. His hands were still shaking, but with obvious deliberate effort he managed to press the sequence of buttons which replayed the last five minutes of screen shots from their computer game.

Seth witnessed the gory spectacle of destruction again, this time from a slightly different perspective, until the screen went blank.

“I’m dead, dude,” murmured Brian. “I’m dead.” He looked over at Seth. “So are you. It’s just a matter of time.”

Seth plopped down on the sofa and began to think hard. “I’m not dead, not yet,” he told his friend, his voice firming as he spoke. “And I don’t intend to go out without a fight.”



A few minutes after he left the conference room, Dick was in the office of Dee Tammany ... for the second time in one day. He didn't really like all this "reporting-in" crap. He liked to work alone. Still, he'd gone through the process enough times in the Army and the Chicago Police Department to know the drill. It was like the pretend lawyers on television always told their pretend clients before pretend depositions: Answer the question with a "yes" or "no," if possible. Don't volunteer anything. Finish as soon as possible.

His last conversation in here had not been pleasant. At least Glenn wasn't here this go around. Dick grunted for attention, then waited quietly while Dee finished reading a piece of paperwork. He didn't wait for pleasantries when she looked up.

"Luke's pretty sure he knows where the facility is. I'll be requisitioning some equipment."

"You didn't need to see me to requisition equipment," replied Dee.

"There will be some weapons and ... we'll need to bring them from here, rather than pick them up on the other end. Charter jet from a private airfield—it's the best way to get the equipment into the secure area at the airport itself." Dick waited for her to react, to ask for him to explain, but Dee said nothing. "The secret facility is underground at the airport."

"I know."

"You know?" Anger flared inside, but he kept it at bay. "When were you going to tell us?"

Dee spoke in a flat, matter-of-fact tone. "I know because I was monitoring your conversation with Luke in the tech room."

"You're spying on your spies in spy headquarters?"

"Luke's a proven security risk. I do what I have to do. Given the situation, you can bet Internal Audit is listening. All the rooms here, except my office, Glenn's office, and the main conference room, are surveillance-enabled."

Dick gave her a hard stare, before turning and heading for the door. "Then you already know everything I was going to report," he said with just a touch of a snarl as he exited the room. Had she "monitored" him crying in the conference room, too?

Sometimes he hated his job.

## CHAPTER 17

“Are you ready to go?” asked Dick by way of greeting when he returned to the tech room where Luke was still fussing with his computer.

“To Denver?” asked Luke without looking up.

“Yeah, to Denver. That’s where you decided the servers are that you need to access directly. Did you have another destination in mind?”

Luke finally looked up, his expression placid. “Reality 2 Be.”

Dick was getting irritated. His conversation with Dee had been unpleasant and unsettling and his phone call to Melanie had been plain depressing. He didn’t really need mysterious puzzles from the conspiracy-meister. “An hour ago you told me Reality 2 Be’s server farm was underneath Denver International Airport. Have there been developments I don’t know about?”

“Yes and no.”

Dick’s fingers twitched. “Which is it? ‘Yes?’ Or ‘no?’”

Luke’s wide eyes conveyed puzzlement and innocence. “There have been no developments countermanning our supposition that the server farm for Reality 2 Be is located beneath DIA. The additional development which has occurred is that I have come to the conclusion we must infiltrate Reality 2 Be at two locations.”

“You mean somebody has to go back to New Hampshire?”

“No,” replied the young tech with a shake of his head. “Somebody has to go into Reality 2 Be, the virtual universe, at the same time we’re infiltrating the server farm.”

“Don’t look at me,” protested Dick. “I already told you before I don’t know nuthin’ ‘bout virtual reality.” He waved toward the bullpen, where the rest of Luke’s geek companions were still busy handling communications, setting up computer covers, and hacking into information databases for the Subsidiary. “You got a bevy of geekaholic gamers right next store. Can’t you get one of your tech guys to infiltrate Reality 2 Be? They’d certainly be better at it than I would.”

He had expected Luke to smile at his characterization of the Subsidiary’s tech squad, even if his tone had been a bit gruff, but Luke didn’t smile at all. His face was set, motionless, serious. Deadly serious.

“I think we both know it would be best not to get anyone else involved in our trip, don’t we?”

Damn it. The kid had figured out he probably wasn’t coming back. And he was worried that anyone else involved, any of the gang of technology nerds he had worked and laughed with for several years, would be put at risk of elimination if they knew too much or, worse yet, witnessed what was inevitably going to happen. Not only was Luke doing what he had to do for the mission anyway, despite that knowledge, he was protecting his friends at the same time. That would make things that much harder for Dick when the time came.

Dick pretended to ignore the question. “Why does someone need to be in the Reality 2 Be universe? And why can’t it be you?”

“Just because we can use the server farm to find where the data on the Kestrel 84 is located in-world doesn’t mean we can grab it easily. But if we can go in-world to meet the avatar carrying the data, maybe we can take it away or at least find out information about the avatar that facilitates retrieving the information off the servers.”

“And why can’t you ...”

“I might be busy. Besides, you taught me how to infiltrate a secure office building. The least I can do is show you how to navigate in-world at Reality 2 Be. Who knows, maybe when we’re ... you’re ... done with the mission, you can online game with your kid or something.”

Seth liked computer games, Dick knew. That’s why he spent so much time in his friend Brian’s basement ... at least, according to Melanie. God, he hoped the kid wasn’t getting too immersed in that first-person shooter crap. From all he heard, those games were getting more violent and more graphic all the time—not quite the same as playing cops and robbers in the back yard with SuperSoakers.

Damn. He needed to call Seth, too.

He pulled himself back into the moment. “Sure,” he replied. “Do I get a joystick?”

Luke gave a wan smile. “They’re called ‘controllers’ now. But, yeah, you can get a joystick, too.”

What exactly did that mean?



Seth picked up his controller and sat back down in the genuine Naugahyde recliner. “We have to go back into Reality 2 Be again. You understand that don’t you?”

Brian made no move to pick up his controller. “My avatar’s dead. Yours has obviously been *made* by someone with more power in-game and probably out of it than I ever want to know about.” His head twitched from side to side. “No way, man. Game over.”

“We were in the midst of doing something kind of important when things started going bad,” replied Seth, leaning forward in the chair. “Or did you forget that?”

Brian’s brow wrinkled. “Let’s just give the money back to the people who gave it to us. Let ‘em get someone else to finish the mission.

Seth shook his head. “They contacted me. I don’t know how to get in touch with the people who sent us. I don’t even have a drop for what we’re picking up—I’m just supposed to send the activist diaries to *The New York Times*. I can’t ask for a replacement team. It’s us or nobody.”

Brian folded his arms across his chest tight. He looked to the side, staring into the corner of the basement near the dartboard, as if he was afraid to look his best friend in the face. “Look, dude. I’m all for the cause and everything, but our mission, our exchange of maypoles and information, that’s all a lost effort. Our rebel contacts are gone, man. Toast, if you don’t remember. We’ll never see any of them in-game again. Never.”

Brian wouldn’t look at Seth, but Seth continued to stare at his friend, his tone even and forceful as he responded. “People are depending on us, Brian. Not just avatars. There are people controlling those avatars that need the maypoles we have to give them to fight and survive. And we need the information they’re supposed to be giving us. It’s not a game; it’s life or death.”

Brian snorted. “Death seems more likely. Your avatar would be resting in pieces inside of five minutes if you reactivated him and he’s the one with the shitload of maypoles.” Brian paused, unable or unwilling to continue for a moment. He trembled and seemed to hug himself even tighter to make the trembling stop. “And that might be the least of our worries.”

Seth scrunched up his face. “So we’ll make new avatars.”

Brian finally turned toward Seth, his face pale. “Dude, they’ve obviously got our computers’ identification numbers. The bad guys

are connected into the system in some way. Even with new avatars, they'll know it's us and it won't take long to figure out." Brian shook his head and turned away again. "And our new avatars wouldn't have the maypoles, anyhow."

"So, we'll use different computers. Someone's gotta do what needs to be done." Seth paused and thought. "Your mom and dad both have laptops, right?"

Brian turned sharply back toward Seth. "Jesus, Seth, my dad would have a conniption if I used his work computer."

"So, we won't tell him."

"But it's got, like, confidential work information and stuff on it. What if it gets screwed up or someone, you know, with scary awesome hacking abilities accesses his business information?"

Seth's brow furrowed as he gave his friend a sidelong glance. "No offence, Bri, but your dad works as a regional manager for Target. What could he possibly have on his computer anyone would want to see?"

Brian seemed to relax a bit. "I dunno. Pictures of next season's clothing line?"

Seth laughed out loud. He was relieved when his good friend, his best friend, joined in. "Yeah, I'm sure some thugs working for Wal-Mart are busily beating that vital information out of some mook from Target as we speak."

Brian unfolded his arms. "Yeah, okay." He got up from his chair and headed toward the staircase. "I'll get my folk's laptops."

"Lock the basement door when you come back down. At least we'll be able to shove the laptops under the cushions before they catch us using 'em."

Brian halted halfway up the stairs. "We still gotta get the maypoles from your avatar, dude. Or this is just a big waste of time."

"Already working on that." He tilted his head to one side. "It'll take a bit of time. We have to create and equip new avatars, even play them for a while to establish a credible in-game cover. Then we'll get the maypoles."

"We can't just trade for them," Brian mused. "That would be too obvious. We'd just put the bad guys on our tail."

Seth shrugged. "So, we'll just steal them. A mugging would be believable."

Brian's eyebrows turned down. "And you think the powers that be in the game will buy that kind of random violence and theft?"



Seth leaned back in the chair once more, already playing the scene out in his mind. “Oh yeah,” he responded. “People do stupid, violent things for money all the time.”

## CHAPTER 18

Matt Lee was amorously occupied when the phone call came, but he didn't let it break his cadence. He always answered his phone by the fourth ring and he always finished his tasks, whether they be lethal or carnal in nature. He continued boffing Peggy as he took the call. After all, the President of the United States had discussed Bosnian troop deployments while being serviced—talented people were good at multi-tasking. He clicked on the call and the voice of General Tsao Cho of the People's Liberation Army came static-free through the Blue-Tooth earpiece he always wore.

"Please proceed immediately to New Jersey for an assignment."

"I'm occupied at the moment," Matt responded, causing Peggy to gasp and open her eyes, which had been closed in the throes of their lusty lovemaking. She obviously had not seen the flashing blue light indicating an incoming call. He winked at her without breaking rhythm. "I can be there in two days."

Peggy smiled and melted back into her sexual ecstasy with a languid shudder and a contented moan.

Right, thought Matt, as if I am going to spend two days with you. Another two hours and he would be back to the terminal to start on his assignment for Pao Fen Smythe.

"Perhaps you did not hear my statement," responded Tsao Cho without emotion. "There appears to be some noise on the line. I said 'immediately.'"

Matt managed to make Peggy moan again, this time louder, just to tweak the placid General. "I have another assignment I need to finish first."

Still the General did not raise his voice. "Your freelance activities for Pao Fen Smythe are tolerated because they—or details regarding them—are occasionally useful to the state. Certainly, Comrade Smythe also provides you with levels of remuneration which allow you to maintain your current, decadent, lifestyle, which, in turn, allows you to be available to us as an asset without any obvious connection to The People's Republic. No matter the assignment, if discovered, our counterparts in espionage will presume a connection to the Smythe organization and not state-sponsored activity."

Blah, blah, blah. There was more about the tolerance for his lifestyle, the hostilities and prejudices his country still faced, and the needs of his government in dealing with a dangerous world. By the time the General finished droning on, Peggy had finished with a quivering climax and rolled over to fall asleep smiling. Matt slid over to the side of the bed and sat up. "That cover falls apart if I start skipping off in the middle of something important."

"You seem to find time when you need it," replied the General without irony.

"What's the job?"

"Two murders in New Jersey." The General never shied off of describing Matt's duties by using euphemisms. Matt liked that about the guy. There were no "hits," "eliminations," "terminations with extreme prejudice," or "erasures." There were just murders. And the occasional murder by arson or terrorist bombing. Matt knew what he was, what he did. He didn't mind the honesty one bit.

"Can't you get someone else?"

"We already did. The complete job is twice as big as we're giving to you. Four targets. A cell working to overthrow the government. But our first assassin is bogged down. He took out one of his targets, but is having trouble locating the second. We can't let too much time go by or the rest of the cell could get wind of the first victim's demise and take precautions."

"So I'm cleaning up somebody else's screw-up." Matt knew that failing to complete a project for the General was not conducive to a positive career trajectory. The first assassin would be in a yurt in the outer provinces overseeing radio intercepts within the week if he didn't off the second target soon.

"That's not your problem," replied the General without emotion. "Focus on the job."

"High profile? Hard targets?" Matt was already thinking about how much time the task would take and how he would put off Pao Fen in the meantime.

"Low profile. Extremely soft targets."

Matt smiled. A flight out to Newark. Pick up a sniper rifle from one of his New York stashes or contacts, then duck into New Jersey. Locate targets. Sight. Bang. Shift sighting to second target. Bang. Walk away. Less than eight hours on the ground if he was lucky. Then a flight back to Denver. He could sell that kind of delay to Pao Fen.

The General continued as he was making his calculations. “It needs to look like an accidental death.”

“Accidental? Or just non-professional?” Non-professional would eliminate the use of a sniper rifle, but a nine millimeter round at close range in the gut, angled upward, could look like a mugging gone bad if done right and still wouldn’t take too long to set up.

“Accidental. Do I not always mean what I say?”

“Of course, General. You are very specific and precise, as always.” Matt frowned and tilted his head from one side to the other, then rolled his shoulders to work the tension out of his muscles. No guns or knives at all. No car accidents either. Too many variables and the damn crumple zones and airbags were just getting too good to be sure the accident would inflict lethal injuries, especially with the speed and quality of medical care in the U.S. He stood up and headed to the bathroom.

Murder by arson, then.

“Details will be forwarded by the usual secure means.”

Matt doubted China’s encrypted emails were quite as secure as the General thought. The NSA did some pretty good work from everything he read, but he knew they were inundated with more and more electronic data every day. They could find something if they were looking for it, but he doubted they were looking for him. He said nothing about the NSA to the General, though. “Fine,” was all he said as he lifted the seat to the toilet.

“Fine,” the General replied.

The connection was cut off before the sound of splashing liquid could further demonstrate Matt’s ability to multi-task to his superiors.



When Dick had built his avatar for the Subsidiary’s virtual meeting room system, it had been a fairly simple process. Hair color, height, weight, eye color, clothes (business suit or casual), and facial features. Being a field operative, Dick had avoided creating an avatar which matched his own features as bad spycraft—his looked a lot more like Pierce Brosnan than could be explained by coincidence. But Reality 2 Be had a lot more choices.

“Human or non-human?” asked Luke as they got underway.

“Huh? What are the other choices besides human?”

Luke called up a chart on-screen. “Giants, orcs, trolls, gnomes, elves, dwarves ... all the Tolkien and Dungeons & Dragons type stuff ... elementals, ghosts, goblins, witches, poltergeists ... all the late-night horror movie stuff ... comic superheroes, animate vegetables, insects, animals, and furrries.”

“Furrries?”

Luke blushed. “Like man-sized plush toys or stuffed animals. Beanie Babies on steroids. Some people find them ... er ... erotic.”

Dick had seen plenty of things in his life, but erotic stuffed animals were not among them. He glanced at the screen. “They must come better equipped than human avatars. This prototype looks like a Ken doll.”

Luke blushed even redder. “Don’t worry about that for now. Human, then?”

“Sure.”

“That’s probably good. You’ll be more comfortable with it and humans don’t stand out in most situations.”

“Most?”

“Well, if we sneak into a virtual castle populated by alien lizardmen, a human is going to stand out.”

Dick clicked a few menu choices. “What’s your avatar look like?”

Luke tilted his head to one side. “What do you mean? I’ll generate one as soon as you’re done.”

“But you’ve been in-world before, so you must have an avatar. What’s he, she, or it look like?”

Luke looked away, as if he couldn’t meet Dick’s gaze. “Uh ... human male, a bit brawnier than me. But I can’t use him.”

Dick stopped clicking on menus for a moment. “Why not? We’re on a mission. It wouldn’t be unsanctioned ... like before.”

“He was ... might have been ... compromised. It’s possible he’s being traced and tracked. It wouldn’t be safe to use him if someone in-world is out to get him.”

“It’s just an avatar. So what if he gets gacked?” Dick regretted both the topic and his choice of words as soon as he said them, but it would only get more awkward if he backed off now. “You’re not, like, emotionally attached to your avatar, are you?”

A short burst of hollow laughter escaped from Luke’s mouth. “No, not really. Nothing like that.”

“Cause I’ve heard that happens in role-playing games.”

Luke sighed and shook his head. “Don’t believe everything you hear about RPGs or the Internet. There are a whole lot more young males emotionally attached to their cars than to their avatars, and the reasons for the attachment are pretty much the same in both cases. Both represent significant investments of time and/or money. Both project the image you want to project to the world—or at least those portions of the world you care about, primarily other young males. Both take skill to operate and can be upgraded with fancy, shiny accessories. The only big difference is that in a role-playing game, whether Internet or old-fashioned table-top, acting in character—acting as if you are the character in the make-believe world—is part of the game. Part of the fun is acting as if the game is real. People get so used to behaving like their character in-world that sometimes they do it instinctively—they talk and act in-world in ways that are appropriate to their character, rather than ways that make sense from a real world point-of-view.”

Luke’s explanation made a certain amount of sense to Dick. Although he wasn’t one of them, he knew plenty of guys who named their cars. Hell, some guys named their privates. And lots of people did stupid or risky or just plain oddball things to impress their friends or move up the pecking order in their own little world. He nodded at Luke. “I get what you’re saying, but you know better than that, so there’s got to be some other reason you’re still queasy about using your old avatar. Right?”

Luke gave a curt nod in response. “I’m more security conscious than you—or Dee—give me credit for, I guess. I don’t want to get ‘made’ in game.”

“How would that happen?”

“The way the software works, your avatar is the thing which identifies you to the universe, to the servers that run the game, but the information is embedded in your avatar’s coding, like DNA in the real world. If someone ‘gacks’ you, as you so tactfully put it, then there is some possibility they can trace to your computer’s individual protocol address, access the information used to create your payment account, and identify you in the real world.”

“But the Chinese, they already know you did stuff in the game world that they don’t like.”

“Sure,” replied Luke, “but I’m still holding out some faint hope that they don’t know what avatar did those things. If they already do, or if

my avatar gets gacked and traced back to me, they might be able to identify my contacts or my fellow travelers.”

Dick rubbed his face. “I noticed my sign-in screen had me identified as a fourteen year old Filipino, but that I have an American Express card.”

“I used a stolen credit card to set up the game fee payments. It seemed the most credible choice.”

“It does seem like it would be pretty dangerous to go wandering around Reality 2 Be if someone could off you for your credit card information.”

Luke laughed softly again, but this time the laughter sounded genuine. “It’s not that much like the Wild West in there. Your ... or in this case ... Margaret Swenson’s ... credit card information is encrypted. While getting a piece of your avatar would let another player with sophisticated computer skills track down your personal data—in this instance the fake info about the Filipino kid, it wouldn’t get the stolen credit card info, not unless they could break the encryption or had access to the server farm and could obtain the base encryption algorithm.”

“Like the folks at Reality 2 Be.”

“Sure,” replied Luke, “but it would be pretty obvious if they were ripping off their own customers. Word would get around. Gamers talk to each other.”

Dick tilted his head to one side and nodded briskly, then stopped, lost in thought. “Or the folks running the secret facility under DIA,” he mused aloud.

Luke whistled. “This could be not only older than Reality 2 Be, but a lot bigger.”

“Yeah,” replied Dick. He looked at the computer screen. “Buy some clothes and crap for my avatar, will you? I’ve gotta add something to my equipment request for our trip.”



Matt Lee looked over the electronic dossiers. They were thin. Two civilians from New Jersey. What could they possibly have done to piss off the Chinese government so much it was sending a professional assassin to murder them? It must be something serious. The Chinese, they didn’t play games.

## CHAPTER 19

When Dick got back to the computer tech room, Luke had two computers set up next to one another on one of the high tables. Controllers lay to the side and there were stools drawn up to the table for them to game side by side.

“Did you get me fully dressed?” asked Dick as he sauntered toward the two screens. He swung a leg over one of the stools and plopped down, eyeing the avatar rotating slowly in the middle of the screen. “Logoed spandex? I look like a superhero sponsored by Nike, for god’s sake.”

Luke smiled. “That’s why I named you ‘The Swuush.’”

Dick saw the name at the bottom of his screen. “Shouldn’t that be spelled differently, you know, with two o’s instead of two u’s?”

“Trademark infringement,” laughed Luke. “There’s a protective program for sponsoring organizations to prevent trademark infringement.”

Dick wrinkled his nose and slitted his eyes, looking askance at the logos prominently displayed on each and every piece of clothing The Swuush was wearing, including a neon green headband with the words “Do the Dew” splashed across it. “This isn’t going to make me conspicuous?”

“You can take off the headband if we go sneaking around anyplace. In the meantime, you look relatively normal. Advertisers supply all sorts of gear and clothing in the virtual worlds—most you can buy with points you get from soft-drink bottle caps and fast-food promotions. Your cover would wear that kind of thing—it’s cheap and commonplace.”

Dick arched one eyebrow. “Sounds like my cover has low self-esteem.”

“Not at all.” Luke slid onto the other stool. “This wouldn’t be your cover’s main avatar. That would probably be a giant troll stacked out with more magic, loot, and firepower than you can imagine. This avatar, he would just be used to steal stuff—maypoles, gear, whatever—that could be cashed in or swapped in order to gear up his main guy.”

“Why doesn’t he just max out the stolen credit card, exchange the cash for maypoles, and buy whatever he wants?”



“Good question,” said Luke with a nod, “but that would most likely trip the parameters marking the card as stolen. A small, monthly game charge could, on the other hand, go quite some time before getting noticed by the owner and reversed. Besides, some players create their own unique equipment. There’s plenty of cool stuff you can’t buy. You have to make it, steal it, or trade for it. That’s how we tumbled into this whole mess, remember?”

“Yeah,” replied Dick with a sigh. “I remember.”

Luke showed Dick the sequence to call up and enter the Reality 2 Be game world. Soon they were on a flat, featureless plain.

“Kinda dull place, isn’t it?”

“They leave the entry portal desolate so as to not aggravate any parental units who may be supervising their kid’s entry into the game world and, of course, to allow people room to learn how to walk.”

“Huh? Learn how to walk?”

Luke held up his controller. “It’s not as easy as you think. It’s not instinctive. You have to press this controller button and push up on this toggle to put your right foot forward, then ease it back while your other hand mimics the same movement for your other leg.” Luke demonstrated with his own spandex clad avatar, named The Dewdster, walking in a circle around The Swuush.

Dick gave it a try and The Swuush jerked and twitched its way across the screen. It was hard work, damn hard work to get his pudgy fingers to manipulate the toggles of the controller with sufficient finesse for the scene not to look like a cheap zombie movie. Worse yet, he could tell Luke was working hard not to laugh out loud.

“Why do they make it so hard just to play the game?” growled Dick as he continued to manhandle the controller, before finally giving up and letting it lay lax in his beefy hands.

“It’s a lot easier if you spent a lot of time playing computer games as a kid. You know where the buttons are and how sensitive they are to various movements by instinct.” Luke shrugged. “It probably also discourages the parents from hanging around while you learn how to play.”

When Dick looked back from Luke to the screen, his avatar was floating away. “What the hell?” he shouted as he grabbed the controller, stabbing at the controls and causing The Swuush’s legs to spasm in random jerks without gaining purchase.

Luke laughed again. “Newbies have that problem all the time. They tend to rest their thumbs a bit too heavily on the toggles or fail

to neutralize all inertial momentum when they intend to be stationary. It makes them float a bit.”

“You can float? Isn’t there gravity in this world?”

“Not so much. It’s factored into certain things, like liquids. Blood, rain, drinks—they all fall when not contained. You also fall when you leap or trip. But gravity’s not incorporated into everything. Targeting trajectories, for example. Most weapons just shoot straight as a laser here. It takes more computational power to factor in a weak force like gravity, when inertia works for most purposes. It also makes it easier to hit what you’re aiming for with a ranged weapon, which keeps the customers happy.”

“So, if I don’t toggle with precision, I’ll just keep going?”

“Only in the air. Friction counteracts inertia pretty effectively on the ground. That’s why if you’re going to travel a considerable distance ... and Reality 2 Be is one massive universe ... most people tend to fly. It’s just faster and easier.”

Dick stared at him. “You can fly?”

“Why not?” replied Luke. “It’s a pretend world. Why shouldn’t you be able to fly?” Luke leaned over and showed him the sequence of controls that operated the flight characteristics. They weren’t instinctive, either, but were much easier to learn than how to walk.

The two companions flew together, one a bit more unsteady than the other, for a few moments. “Why in the world did you start me out with walking?” asked Dick. “This is much better.”

“You might have to walk where we’re going. Ceiling might be too low. There might be impediments or even traps. C’mon, mate. Back to the ground and practice walking, then running.”

Dick marveled at the weird stuff one needed to learn to be a spy. And to think, kids did this crap for fun.

It took a while, but he finally got the hang of it. He could walk, run, turn, jump, duck, and fly. He might not look good doing it, but he was functional.

“Great,” said Luke—the guy really would have made a great teacher—, “now we can walk around a bit and look at the sights. I’ll take you to a few places I used to visit.”

As they walked away from the entry point, buildings began to appear on the horizon, along with signs and advertisements for places and things both in the real world and the game world. Soon they were surrounded by billboards that flashed and popped up all sorts of

advertising, complete with spinning graphics, fireworks, and grating sound effects.

Dick looked at the vista with distaste. “Kind of a cheesy place, isn’t it?”

“It’s like the real world. Parts are really nice, spectacular even. The entrance is ... well ... sort of like Anaheim before you get to Disneyland.”

Dick looked up at a giant sign featuring the type of images that would occasionally pop up in spam porn come-ons advertising Barry’s House of Babes. “This doesn’t look like Anaheim to me.”

Buildings appeared on the somehow-too-near-horizon. Seedy-looking hotels flanked dance clubs, bars, and assorted storefronts, including one offering residential and commercial real estate, even ongoing businesses, all located in Reality 2 Be. As they got farther from the entrance, he could see more and more other avatars walking and flying about. Most were human or at least humanoid, but he could also see dragons and pixies and dwarves. As they got to the outskirts of the virtual city, a dwarf walked up to the two of them.

“Want to buy a johnson?” the dwarf asked. “Best quality. All sizes available.”

“What the hell?” blurted out Dick.

Luke pointed at the keyboard. “You have to type to talk in-world.”

“Who was talking in-world?” grumbled Dick as he typed: “Huh?”

The dwarf tapped his foot, as if impatient, folding and unfolding his arms. “Hey, buddy! Wanna buy a johnson or not?”

Dick simply looked at Luke. “Okay, let’s try it in the real world. Huh?”

“He’s trying to sell you a penis.”

“He’s ... what?”

“He’s trying to sell you a penis. You noticed yourself the avatar prototypes aren’t anatomically correct. It saves a lot of trouble with parents who may help their kids create an avatar when they sign up for the game. But, just like other ... er ... equipment, they can be acquired in the ... aftermarket.”

“Hello?” The tinny, gruff voice of the dwarf avatar erupted from the speakers to Dick’s computer. “Anybody playing this avatar? Or is this one of the new robotics from North Korea?”

Dick typed. “Yeah. They call me ‘The Swuush.’”

“Gr8. No names. You wanna buy or what?”

“Sure,” Dick keyed. “Show me what you got.” As the unnamed dwarf opened his jacket to reveal a variety of johnsons, Dick turned to Luke. “North Korea? G-R-8?”

“A lotta people in third world countries without much in the way of employment prospects play games for a living. They create zillions of avatars and pre-program most of their activities, trying to make enough money doing virtual manual labor or mugging newbies or somesuch that they can funnel some maypoles to the programmer. In the fighting arenas, they battle each other for prize money or to loot the loser’s body for stuff or just to increase their skill levels so they can sell the avatar on eBay for real cash.”

Dick made his avatar lean down to look at the dwarf’s wares as Luke continued. “G-R-8, as you so parentally put it, is text for ‘great’. I thought you said you had a teenage kid who was computer literate.”

“We don’t text much,” grumbled Dick. “So, should I buy a dick from this guy, or what?”

Luke glanced over at his screen. “Decent quality, but a bit overpriced. Yeah, go ahead. It’s what a fourteen year old Filipino kid would do.”

“But I thought you said this wasn’t his main avatar. If it’s just a throw-away, why would he spend money to make it ... fully equipped?”

Luke’s eyebrows jumped up as he gave Dick a hard stare. “He’s a teenage boy. There’s no way he’s going to spend a significant amount of time in-world without a johnson. He might miss out on a chance to get laid.”

“He’s fourteen,” Dick sputtered. “That can happen here?”

“Welcome to the Internet,” Luke intoned. “Anything can happen, including—no, especially—sex. Of course, it’s more likely a perv pedophile from Denmark is manipulating the controls, than a real, live girl, but kids on the Net don’t think of that.”

“Hello?” grumbled the dwarf over the speakers. “You buying? Or do you just like perusing penises?”

“Sorry,” typed Dick. He manipulated the controls to make his avatar point. “That one.”

“Excellent choice,” intoned the dwarf as it held out the purchase. A chime sounded and an option appeared on Dick’s screen indicating the price, with an on-screen button to push if he wanted to purchase. He pressed the button and watched as his maypole account was debited. Another button popped onto the screen: “Press here to add

professional installation for only one hundred maypoles.” He looked over at Luke.

“I’m not installing it. So if you want it functional, rather than carrying it around in your pocket, I’d get it installed.”

Dick growled. “My outfit’s spandex. I don’t think I even have a pocket.” He grimaced and pressed the option to have his dick installed. He didn’t watch what the dwarf was doing during the thankfully brief installation process.

Luke also made a purchase.

When the dwarf had departed, Luke turned to Dick, “C’mon, I’ll show ...”

Dick interrupted. “If you say ‘I’ll show you mine, if you show me yours,’ this training exercise is over.”

“No worries, mate. And, no, I wasn’t going to show you how to use it.” On-screen, The Dewdster gave a vigorous hip thrust. “Let’s just say it’s more intuitive than walking.”

Dick felt queasy, but said nothing.

“What I was just going to say,” continued Luke, “is that I’ll show you the main mall in town, where avatars come to socialize and buy stuff. Stuff for their avatars and stuff that is shipped to them in the real world. After that, we can head off for Denver.”

Dick grunted assent and The Dewdster took off, flying in a low circle until The Swuush joined him. The sky grew more and more crowded with other avatars as the cityscape whizzed by below them. Most seemed to be flying to or from the point toward which they were headed.

Suddenly, a large, low building came into view. It looked like what Dick imagined the Mall of America would look like from an aerial view, except much larger. That and the fact it was partially collapsed and belching smoke. A large crowd of avatars surrounded the scene of destruction. The majority were working to douse the flames and dig out survivors. Many others, most of them in non-humanoid form, were diving in, scooping loot out of the destroyed stores and rocketing away at high speed.

In the near entrance, Dick could see what looked to be a virtual representation of a Chinese Type 99 main battle tank. A mob of avatars had apparently tipped it over. A few were standing on its side, arms outstretched in victory. Amidst the destruction farther away, Dick could see another similar tank, still maneuvering as gangs of avatars tossed Molotov cocktails and magic fireballs at it.

Luke swore out loud. When Dick looked over, the kid was staring in shock at his own screen, which showed only a slightly different view of the same scene. Suddenly, the kid began to shout. “Pull up! Pull up!”

On Luke’s screen, The Dewdster went from a streaking Superman flying position to standing straight up at a full stop, somehow hovering in the air, a trick Dick knew he would not be able to duplicate. Dick half-expected to hear a screeching sound as his teacher’s avatar skidded to a stop. The Dewdster turned in the air and rocketed away, back toward the entrance to Reality 2 Be. Luke turned to Dick. “Get your avatar out of there now!”

Dick did his best to comply, but had barely gotten underway when Luke finished his own escape and grabbed his controller away from him, manipulating the controls in a mad frenzy until both of their avatars had left the game.

The kid was panting and sweating by the time the computers were both shut down.

“You wanna explain that?” asked Dick.

“No,” replied the kid.

“Not good enough. Try again.”

Luke’s breathing was returning to normal, but the kid was still shaking. “My previous avatar was clearly traced. My team was compromised. Let’s just say that if ... this mission ... doesn’t kill me, I think the Chinese will.” He took a deep breath. “And not just in-world.”

## CHAPTER 20

Dee Tammany sorted through her routine paperwork as she was chauffeured from Philadelphia to an in-the-flesh meeting off-site in New York City. The Subsidiary wasn't foolish enough to locate its central headquarters in a city that was a terrorist's wet dream, but being close to the centers of power in New York and Washington was handy. Drives like this also gave her a chance to catch-up on her more routine administrative responsibilities.

Truth be told, a decent executive assistant could handle much of the drudge work she was doing, but Dee was a bit of a control freak. Besides, it was one of the few relatively relaxing tasks she had at the Subsidiary and a good way to keep in touch with everything going on in the office. Sometimes she even learned an interesting tidbit or two from even the most mundane emails and paperwork.

Her eyes skimmed over Dick Thornby's request for support for the Denver leg of his current assignment. The charter flight was expensive, but she completely understood the necessity. Security at any airport was only as good as the security at the airports sending flights there. If you wanted to get a gun or even something more into the secure area of a facility where the Transportation Safety Administration and Homeland Security were doing a bang-up job, all you had to do was to get it onto a private jet landing there that had taken off from a facility where security sucked, or was compromised.

The Subsidiary, like the CIA and any decent national espionage agency, had a number of corporate subsidiaries which helped out with tasks like these. In this case, Nine-To-Five Business Charters operated charter jet services from a variety of private airports around the country and around the world, including from an airfield in central New Jersey. They could get anything the Subsidiary had access to on a plane and to anyplace it needed to go. It was expensive, but it was worth it. She initialed the request—it was over the agent's discretionary limit, so needed approval—and flipped the page to see if there were any other non-routine items requiring her assent.

"Holy ..." The Subsidiary worked hard to prevent sovereign nations from getting and using this kind of device and now Dick Thornby wanted one? She picked up her phone.



Dick picked up his cell phone. He had been dreading this conversation, but he had put it off for too long. He scrolled to the speed dial marked “ICE” and pressed. In the acronym obsessed world of espionage, ICE usually meant United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement, but post 9/11 the acronym meant only one thing on a cell phone: “In Case of Emergency,” a handy way for anyone finding a dead or injured person with a cell phone to get hold of their emergency contacts or loved ones for medical information or notification.

The phone rang at home, but no one picked up. He didn’t leave a message.

Dick thumbed the button to scroll through and clicked on Seth’s cell phone number. He was going to have to tell his kid, yet again, he was going out of town on business, despite his promises, despite the fact Seth’s mom had left and there were plenty of things to work out, things that needed to be worked out now, before it was too late. He didn’t know exactly what he was going to say, how he was going to explain how his cover job as a wastewater treatment consultant was more important in the grand scheme of things than keeping his own family from disintegrating.

Stopping an epidemic break-out of dysentery in India? Could he sell that? Would Seth get suspicious that there was nothing about it on the news? Did Seth even watch the news or read about world events? Did he get all of his information from website blurbs and The Daily Show on Comedy Central?

He heard the phone attempt to connect, then an annoying beep before a bored voice informed him the “cellular customer was not in service.”

Seth and Brian could be tubing, river rafting someplace remote, out of cell phone range. Or they could simply be in Brian’s basement, playing computer games. At least, that’s what Seth usually claimed was the case when he didn’t pick up on his calls. Cell phone reception was crappy underground.

Of course, the kid could just be screening his calls and turning off his phone when he saw dear old Dad calling. Dick didn’t like that idea, but he knew he deserved it.



He flipped his cell phone shut. Then re-opened it and called home again. This time he let the machine pick up.

“It’s Dad. Uh ... look ... I gotta go out of town for work for just a couple days. Big emergency. I’ll call soon to talk. Hope you’re just tubing with Brian and not getting into any trouble while your mom and I are both out of the house. Take care, Seth.”

He’d try again from Denver, before he went underground and lost reception.



The trip to Denver was quiet. After a bit of compulsive verifying of equipment—Luke checking the two laptops and associated cables, batteries, and other paraphernalia that went with him, even though he had checked it all just before they left the computer lab, and Dick checking the duffel bag waiting at the plane to confirm it contained everything on his list—there didn’t seem to be much to do. Dick mulled over potential approaches to their goal at DIA for a while, then decided to catch some shut-eye during the flight. Luke, he was sure, had bigger, more personal issues, to think about. Still, he hoped the kid would get some sleep, too.

Four hours and twelve minutes later, the corporate jet was circling northwesterly around Denver International Airport so as to be able to land on runway 16R into the moderate southerly winds blowing across the edge of the Front Range. Coming in from the east, north of the airport, the flight path gave the two passengers a good view out the port windows of the dazzling white peaks of the main terminal on the desolate plain east of the suddenly rising peaks of the Rocky Mountains. To the southwest and ahead, to the west, the mountains were spectacular: white-capped at the top, with purple and gray down to the tree-line, below which swaths of dark-hued green predominated. As the plane made a steep bank to turn south toward the landing strip, the airport proper was lost to view and the mountain vistas shifted to the starboard windows. The “Please Fasten Seatbelts” light pinged on.

Luke, lawful good little soldier that he was, immediately moved to buckle his belt, his neck craning in what looked to be uncomfortable ways to still try to catch a glimpse of the mountain vistas. Dick never gave a thought to buckling in. Instead, he reached across his companion’s lap and flipped up the buckle of the belt.

“Hell, kid. We’re going to be in a whole lot more danger than this every single minute after we land. Might as well enjoy the ride ... and the view in the meantime.”

Luke hesitated just a moment, then gave an uncertain smile and stood up, leaning down to the starboard window to watch the mountains as they glided in, descending in a steep, but controlled, path to touchdown.

Once down, Luke stood upright again and looked at Dick. “Where are we disembarking?”

Dick ran his tongue across his teeth. “We’re pulling up to a gate, just like the Reality 2 Be boys do. In this case, Concourse C. A gate for Delta that’s not in use at the moment.”

Luke’s face darkened. “Isn’t that a bit ... I don’t know ... noticeable? Wouldn’t it be stealthier to alight at the corporate jet annex?”

Dick sucked at a piece of food his tongue had found between two teeth. “Maybe. But we can’t take a chance of having to carry our “equipment” through security. That’s the whole point of the charter, to get this crap into the secure areas of the airport.”

“That’s expensive, isn’t it?”

“Saving the world always is, kid. Besides, it ain’t our money. It’s not even our tax money at work, at least not directly.”

The two men walked up the jetway into Concourse C. Once they entered, Dick couldn’t help but glance down as he walked past the other gates, looking for odd things embedded in the floor.

Luke apparently noticed the direction of Dick’s gaze. “Carpet by the gates, so you won’t find anything here. Besides, the weird stuff in the floor is pretty much all in Concourse B. And most of the art is in the main terminal, on the other side of security.”

“What do you think that means?”

“Just another data-point for the conspiracy freaks to obsess over,” replied Luke. “So where do we go from here? Do we sneak into the tramway tunnels and try to find the staircase down?”

“Not a chance.”

“Why not?”

Dick shook his head. “Think about it, kid. There might be access from there, but who knows for sure? The one thing we do know is that people enter this secret facility every day. Employees, overseers, executives from Reality 2 Be ... whatever. What I am pretty sure of is that all those people aren’t crawling around tramway tunnels opening

secret doorways while thousands of passengers zip by on trams heading out to their gates.”

“Luggage handling area?” offered Luke. The kid was clearly guessing.

“Again, perhaps, but not likely. Too many laborers around—they can’t all be in on the secret. Besides, it’s grimy and the access is clearly controlled by the TSA boys and girls. I don’t see a parade of corporate suits wandering in there on a regular basis without being noticed by a lot of people.”

Luke’s hands twitched up in a gesture of defeat. “Where then?”

“First off, I would put the entrance on the level above the main passenger paths and gates.”

Luke looked up, as Dick continued. “Yep. I would have people go up to go down. It’s counterintuitive and there are less people on that level to notice you. Besides, where can someone go dressed in normal business attire, that has controlled access, but not secure access, and where no one will give it a second thought if they don’t come back out the door for an extended length of time?”

Luke opened his mouth, but said nothing.

“That’s right,” said Dick, clapping his companion on the back. “Airline lounges. Restricted to frequent fliers and first class passengers, but accessible to even the lowly upon payment of an exorbitant daily fee. They’re mostly on the upper levels at DIA. Access is restricted, but not secure, and passengers sometimes go in for hours and hours at a time and no one gives it a second thought.”

Luke closed his mouth. “That actually makes sense.”

Dick smiled. “A whole lot more sense than alien lizardmen lurking in the tramway tunnels.” He headed toward the nearest lounge. “And, it comes with free drinks and a buffet of fruits and cheeses. We can grab a snack and a soft drink while we reconnoiter.” He turned back to motion Luke to come along. “Trust me, that never happened during reconnaissance missions when I was a Ranger.”

## CHAPTER 21

Luke had always thought field agents were all rough and tumble mates. You certainly got that impression, at least in comparison to your own life, when you sat in the communications center at the Subsidiary monitoring live feed of infiltrations and fire fights or watching footage of a once busy port facility in New Zealand going up in flames. Certainly, Dick Thornby's talk about car chase evasive maneuvers and his knock-about, impromptu invasion of Reality 2 Be's corporate offices in New Hampshire did nothing to disabuse Luke of such notion. On the other hand, the willingness of the guy to listen to Luke's ideas, to discuss what he was doing and why, and to put himself into the mind-set of the bad guys showed more intellectual analysis, introspection, and, frankly, patience than Luke expected from a field operative who had a reputation for blowing things up.

"Do your best to look bored and travel-weary," whispered Dick to him as Luke pressed the button to call the handicap access elevator to go to the upper level of Concourse C to check out their first airline club lounge. "We can't just go in and poke about, then move on to the next place. It could attract suspicion. We're going to have to hang about each place for at least an hour, seeing who comes and goes, 'accidentally' trying locked doors in an effort to find the 'men's room,' and the like." Luke could see Dick checking out the elevator mechanism through a small window in the doorway as the box descended to pick them up.

"Hydraulic," grunted Dick. "Slow and dependable. The kind of elevator that can't really fall and so doesn't frighten people with disabilities. Not a design that is useful for more than a couple floors, so not relevant to our investigation."

The door slid open at a ponderously slow pace as a deep voice intoned. "Door opening. Access to club lounges, first aid station, and lost and found." Dick hefted in his duffel and pressed the button for the floor above.

"What about checking out the first aid station and lost and found?" asked Luke. He wanted to be thorough.

"Nah. Can't imagine dozens of people wandering into those places every single day without the janitors or somebody getting suspicious. If there's a chapel in one of the concourses, though, that could be

worth checking out. Some people are very regular about their religious devotions, so recurrent entry wouldn't be suspicious, but then again, neither would an irregular volume of strangers—some staying for considerable lengths of time." The elevator continued its agonizingly slow climb. "Not a top candidate though. Most public chapels are just one big room, so if you go in and someone follows and doesn't see you, that's pretty obvious. Not like an airline lounge, where they have phone booths and Internet cubicles and conference rooms which would quickly put you legitimately out-of-sight to someone following"

The doors slid open and Dick picked up his bag to exit the elevator. "But I like the fact you're thinking, kid."

They approached the lounge and Dick reached into a pocket, pulling out a wallet and plucking a premium-level airline frequent flier card out of it. Dick grinned. "One of the perks of the job."

"Lots of frequent flier miles from your mission travels?" whispered Luke, confused. With all the different aliases and airlines these guys used, he didn't see how they could rack up significant miles in anybody's program. Consolidating multiple accounts would be a definite security breach.

Dick snorted. "Nah. The guys down in 'Identification and Documentation' can whip up a forged one of these, complete with a magnetic code strip, in a matter of minutes." He moved toward the entrance.

Luke halted. "Wait a minute," he hissed after his currently jovial companion. "I don't have one."

Dick looked over his shoulder and motioned Luke forward, waiting until he caught up to speak in a low voice. "You're my traveling companion. I get you a day pass. It'll explain why you're so clueless and awestruck by everything in the lounge and why I have to show you around and whisper and point at things." The middle-aged spy gave Luke a once over. "Clueless and bewildered you can do. Always use a cover that plays to your strengths."

And then they were in the door and standing at the entrance desk, where Dick's elite status quickly got Luke a complimentary day pass, not to mention a flute of champagne even before he had gotten to one of the comfy seats in the lounge. Dick wandered about the place a bit, pretending to show off its features to Luke, but Luke could see his mentor studying the wear patterns on the carpet, listening for the sound of elevator equipment behind locked maintenance doors, and the like. Luke did his best to play along.

Dick was right. Luke could do clueless without even trying.

They stayed just over an hour. They snacked, watched the other passengers, used the restroom facilities, and pretended to read the newspaper. Luke even checked his personal email, while Dick made one of his frequent, unsuccessful attempts to get his son on the phone. Whether it was aggravation with himself, his son, or the cell phone industry, Dick seemed to Luke to be increasingly on edge as time passed. Luke humored his partner by pretending not to notice. Finally, the old guy just stood up and motioned to Luke. "Time to go."

They departed and repeated the routine at another, smaller lounge. After striking out at all the Concourse C frequent flier lounges, they used the staircase back to the main level and then took the tram to Concourse B.

The largest and busiest of the gate hubs, Concourse B housed almost nothing but facilities for United Airlines. Dick seemed to be taking a pretty relaxed approach to surveillance here, although they did take a few moments to ogle some of the items embedded in the floor on the main gate level. Brass dinosaurs. Marble wings. Weird words—sometimes difficult to see, much less read, as the thundering masses rushed for their connecting flights.

Their stay in the frequent flier lounge was shorter than the stay on Concourse C.

"Not a good candidate location," explained Dick after they left. "Too busy. The staffing is too homogenous, too."

"Too homogenous?"

"Everybody in the concourse works for the same airline. Strangers would be noticed more. Employees would talk to each other more about anything that struck them as odd." They headed for the tram to Concourse A. "Look sharp for the next concourse, though," advised Dick. "That's a likely scenario."

"Not homogenous?"

"Now you got it," replied Dick with a wry smile. "Eight, ten different airlines, including several international carriers, so nobody knows everybody else and nobody raises any suspicion, even if they don't speak much English. A good mix of big companies with big planes and small companies with small planes, where the pilots carry your luggage and take your ticket, too. Easily accessible to the main terminal by causeway without too much walking. Right near the Airport Office Building, so office types won't look out of place—they could simply be buying incredibly over-priced fast food for lunch."

“So why did we start with Concourse C, if Concourse A is a more likely location?”

“Because we’re thorough.” Dick grunted and readjusted his bag from one hand to the other. “And ‘cause we got off the plane there and I don’t want to schlep this bag back and forth any farther than I have to.”

Luke felt suddenly guilty. He only had a backpack with a couple laptops. Who knew how much hardware Dick had in his bag? “Sorry. I should have offered to carry it.”

Dick looked up at him, his head tilted down. “Nah. Control freak. Remember?”

Luke shrugged. “We probably could have gotten a gate at Concourse A. A couple of the carriers here have been cutting back their flights lately.”

Dick shook his head. “More obvious. Anyone looking for trouble coming will be looking at the gates here, or more likely the walkway over from the main terminal. We’re sneaking in the back door.”

Luke was impressed. Dick always was thinking more steps ahead than Luke could ever imagine. He wanted to try to catch up to his partner’s preparations.

“How deep?” Luke asked.

“Huh?”

“How deep do you think the secret facility is? A mile down, maybe?”

Dick gave him a queer look and motioned him to follow over to a bench, where the two of them could sit as people passed by. He dropped his bag with a thud and plopped down onto the bench, turning to Luke as the kid shouldered off his backpack and sat down next to him.

“Think about it, kid. Think about how you said the construction was hidden. A shaft a mile deep takes a real long time to tunnel out and it can’t be disguised as an optic fiber gangway. Getting people in and out of a tunnel that deep would take forever. You couldn’t for a minute fool visiting outsiders into thinking they were just in a reservations computer center or something like that. Not to mention the ventilation problems. You know how hot the ambient bedrock is a mile underground?”

Luke had no idea. There was lots of mining in Australia and some of his school chums had gone to work for BHP or Rio Tinto, both big mining concerns with interests in the outback, but those were mostly

gigantic surface mining operations—strip mines they called them in the States. He shrugged. “I don’t know. Caves are generally cooler than surface temperatures aren’t they?”

Dick rolled his eyes. “Caves, at least caves people visit, are generally relatively near the surface and wet—evaporation cools. The pressure a mile down is enormous and pressure creates heat. The rock that far underground has gotta be a hundred, maybe a hundred twenty degrees, Fahrenheit.”

“Oh.”

“You’re the tech guy,” continued Dick. “Tell me how deep you would need to go to protect electronic and computer equipment from EMP?”

“Electromagnetic pulse?” blurted out Luke, a bit louder than he intended. A passing mother pushing a stroller with a sleeping baby gave him a severe look. He lowered his voice to a whisper. “EMP hardened facilities, that’s something you Yanks and the Russkies and the other superpowers worry about in protecting nuclear weapons and command and control facilities. You know, missile silos in Kansas and secure undisclosed locations for the Vice President to scurry off to in the event of a crisis.” Luke lowered his voice even farther. “You only worry about EMP if somebody’s nuking somebody.”

Dick rocked his head to one side. “Humor me. You know the science, the math. How deep do you have to go to protect a server farm? Assuming you can toss in a shitload of concrete and even steel or lead shielding during construction.”

Luke ran some calculations in his head. “I don’t know. Sixty, maybe a hundred feet. You’d have to make sure the pulse didn’t propagate straight down through your access shafts.”

“So you’d go six, ten stories down, say from a terminal concourse, then lateral out to a location buried under tons of concrete and reinforced steel, say under a runway. Sound like a construction project you’ve heard of?”

Luke whistled. “Very impressive.”

“Don’t look at me, kid. You figured it out. You just didn’t think through what it meant, at least not all of what it meant.”

“So there’s more going on here than plans for the Kestrel 84 and the secret server farm for Reality 2 Be?”

Dick touched his nose with his index finger and then pointed at Luke. “Bingo.” The older man stood and picked up his bag to continue on to the escalator down to the tram.



Luke hurried to follow him. “But what?” he whispered urgently. “What’s going on?”

“I have a few ideas,” answered Dick, “but I’d like to see what conclusions you come to when you’ve thought about it and ... when we’ve seen the facility. Ponder on it in the meantime.” He winked. “That’s what you’re good at, kid.”

Just before they went down to the tram, Dick pulled out his cell phone, obviously trying yet again to reach his son, apparently to no avail. The worried father shook his head as he folded the phone shut and dropped it back into a pocket.

“I wonder what that kid is up to.”



One moment, Hawk was just getting his bearings. The next moment, they were upon him, knives flashing, scoring a few superficial slashes on his upper arms and shoulders before he could even respond. He put up his arms in a standard defensive posture, protecting his face and chest, his vital areas, from the onslaught. At the same time, a hidden switchblade in his sleeve snicked out, ready for use to go on the offensive.

Passersby gaped at the brazen assault in the middle of a crowded street, but no one immediately stepped forward to help, although Hawk caught the brief flash of at least one state-of-the-art cell phone being brought up abruptly to an onlooker’s face. He prayed they were dialing 9-1-1 and not just recording the event for You-Tube.

That’s when Hawk realized his combat stance was completely ineffective. There were no slashing blows to parry, no inside thrusts to draw a counterattack. The assailants weren’t out to kill. Their knife slashes were all directed to his back, to the straps holding on to his pack—the pack carrying their package for the exchange.

Thieves!

He tried to turn in place, to present his front, his own knife, to the assailants, but with a last, forceful tug, the pack was pulled free and they fled into the sky.

Hawk dropped his knife and unslung his weapon. It would be like shooting ducks from a blind. Blast away and then go recover what fell. If only he had a Labrador Retriever.

The thieves were making good time, flying higher into the air as they made distance laterally, but they were fools. They flew in a straight line.

He sighted the heavy assault weapon and pulled the trigger on full auto, but somehow his body betrayed him. His shoulder refused to tense against the recoil and the first shot threw off his aim. Each new bullet in the rapidly expending clip added to the margin of error, until he was firing a random, uncontrolled spray into the sky as the thieves escaped.

What had happened to him? What had they done to him? Was there something on the blades of the knives?

He had barely formed the thought when blackness came for him and the world disappeared.



Three computer screens glowed in the gloom of Brian's basement. Seth had barely begun to lean back into the soft cushions of the basement couch, setting down the controller in each of his hands, when Brian smacked him on the shoulder with the back of one hand as he set down his own controller with the other.

"What the hell were you doing, dude? That took forever in game time! We might have gotten made. We barely got the pack away."

Seth smiled. "It had to look credible and it did."

"But he was shooting, on full auto. He might have hit us."

"Not much chance of that."

"I saw him, man," barked Brian. "He was aiming right for us."

Seth leaned forward and turned the screen of his computer so it faced Brian. "I set him on auto-defense mode, so he'd fight back. But there was no chance he would stop us. Dude, I transferred almost all of his strength and endurance points to charisma before he was even re-activated in-world. He could barely hold up the gun, much less control the recoil once he pulled the trigger. I had to make it look good or it would have been suspicious."

Brian frowned. "But the first shot, it could have gotten me."

Seth turned the computer back toward himself and powered it down. "But it didn't, did it? Now we can complete our mission and we are totally in the clear."



Matt Lee searched the house in New Jersey where his first target lived. He'd already determined no one was home, so he took his time, sauntering about the house, poking at Sierra Club calendar and notes on the refrigerator to see if he could find any clue about his target's whereabouts.

If not, he'd have to take care of his second target and return here to wait. He frowned. This job was already interfering with his schedule on his project for Pao Fen Smythe. He hoped he wouldn't have to hang around too long waiting for his target to show up.

He was searching the kitchen when he noticed a light blinking on the phone. There was a message. It took only a few moments to access it.

"It's Dad. Uh ... look ... I gotta go out of town for work for just a couple days. Big emergency. I'll call soon to talk. Hope you're just tubing with Brian and not getting into any trouble while your mom and I are both out of the house. Take care, Seth."

Matt smiled as he headed for the door. His targets were together, probably at Brian's. Excellent. One accident killing two close friends was a whole lot more credible than two accidents killing two close friends on the same day.

Thanks, Dad.

Maybe this wouldn't take so much time after all.

## CHAPTER 22

Game time.

Dick and Luke made their way to the second level of Concourse A, where it linked to a walking bridge to the main terminal for those who didn't want to take the tram to the nearest concourse. Once there, Dick walked past the entrance to the Rocky Mountain USO facility without even a second glance. When Luke started to ask about it, the old spy hand merely waved him off: "Not only would a parade of civilians going in and out stick out like a DayGlo Orange vest over camouflage, nobody in their right mind—and the bad guys, they're usually not stupid crazy—would put an entrance into a secret facility in a room filled with guys who have been trained in infiltration and observation techniques and can kill whether or not they're carrying weapons."

Instead, Dick approached the door to one of the frequent flier lounges with Luke trailing close behind. Here, Dick was the expert and the kid was the novice. All of the opening moves were up to Dick.

He flashed an airline card in front of the comely attendant at the desk, then nodded back toward Luke. "The new hire's with me ..." He squinted at the attendant's chest, ostensibly to discern her name, but he lingered on her bosom longer than necessary. "... Taylor." He knew his behavior was crude and that he was married, but there is nothing that says boorish middle manager more than ogling the female help when you're out of the office and won't be slapped with a harassment suit. He played the part well. Finally, he tore his eyes away and refocused on Taylor's pleasant face, sighed and rolled his eyes. "You got a peanut free zone in there? The kid says he's allergic."

"Certainly, Mr. Ferguson," answered Taylor. "Right this way." She got up and headed down a short corridor, away from the buffet table laden with fruit, cookies, and other snacks for waiting passengers. She swung her hips as she walked and he paid close attention to where she was going, his eyes flicking from her hip motion to the surrounding layout of rooms to her hips to the carpet wear patterns and back to her hips again, taking everything in and filing it away for future use.

Taylor didn't appear to notice. She was probably used to, or maybe even liked, the attention of the frequent fliers to her physical appearance. When she arrived at the door to a well-appointed

conference room, she stopped in the doorway, motioning them inside. The smile she dialed up seemed genuine enough to Dick's wandering eyes, but maybe she was good at her job, too. "We save this room for our more sensitive passengers. Please, enjoy your stay."

He resisted the temptation to squeeze past her into the room, instead standing aside until she understood he was waiting for her to head back to her post. He didn't want to overplay his part. He used Taylor's long walk down the corridor as an opportunity to stare in that direction, confirming his earlier observations. Then he went into the conference room and motioned for Luke to follow.

He dropped his duffel onto the floor and plopped down into one of the fancy conference chairs, leaning back and swiveling the ergonomic delight until he could put his feet up onto the conference table.

Luke still stood near the door, a look of bewilderment on his face. "What makes you think I'm allergic to peanuts? I actually do have an allergy ... but it's to cilantro. It makes my face swell up like a puffer and I spend the next day and a half in the WC hurling like ..."

Dick held up a hand, palm forward. "Stop, already. I have no interest in your hurling technique. I made the allergy up so we could score a private conference room in a less public area of the lounge. Peanut allergies are so bad in some kids these days, they can't even be in the same room with peanut dust—that's why the airlines don't hand out packets of peanuts on planes anymore. But the effect varies by individual; this way we can make you as sensitive as serves our purpose." Dick winked at his colleague. "You're not the only one who can role-play."

"Oh."

"You betcha. And it paid off."

"It did?" replied Luke, looking around wide-eyed.

"Sure," declared Dick. "You saw it, too. Just think it through. What did you see?"

Luke unshouldered his backpack and took a seat. "That you're almost thirty years older than her and a dirty old man."

Dick smiled. "Glad I was convincing, but don't worry about it. It's part of the cover. Besides, most professionals in the biz don't screw around on the job. It's distracting, potentially compromising, and involves leaving DNA evidence behind, which is never a good idea for someone involved in clandestine operations. Besides, you don't want to have to deal with her boyfriend or her husband or her boss or ...

quite frankly ... her once the deed is done.” He paused for a moment, but Luke said nothing. “I meant, did you see anything relating to our reasons for traveling to this fine, mile-high city?”

Luke scrunched up his nose. “Two other conferences rooms right near the entrance to the hallway and a short spur off to the left leading to what was labeled a storeroom—probably for the food and drink—and a service elevator beyond.” He paused for a moment. “They probably bring the food and drink in from the service elevator straight to the store room. It’s conveniently located and leaves all of the deliveries out of sight of most of the travelers hanging around in the main area of the lounge.”

“Undoubtedly, that’s exactly what they do. But did you notice the traffic patterns on the carpet?”

Luke scrunched up his face again. “Showing some wear all the way down the spur, but with a bit of a curve into the storeroom from this end, but not from the elevator end.”

“And what does that tell you?”

Luke frowned. “Not much. I mean, that pattern makes sense, since they go into the storeroom to re-supply the food and drink a lot more often than they run supplies from the elevator to the storeroom.”

“All true,” replied Dick, waiting for just a moment to see if his partner would put together the pieces. When Luke simply sat there, staring at him, he continued. “That same logic says there should be less wear along the straightaway after the storeroom, than before it, but there’s not. A lot of traffic goes all the way down the spur from one direction or the other.”

“So that’s the secret entrance? A service elevator? It’s not even disguised as anything.”

He nodded. “That’s the entrance and, no, they don’t disguise it. That way they can tell the occasional visitor who’s not aware of the real function of the facility that they’re using a service elevator because of maintenance on the main entrance. Hell, they can tell the regular employees the entrance to their workplace is where it is as a simple security measure or, who knows, maybe they have another entrance in the Airport Office Building they run the low level employees through.”

“So what do we do now?”

He could tell the kid was getting nervous, both from his voice and his unnaturally straight posture in the comfy chair. Dick leaned back and looked at his watch before interlacing his fingers behind his head. “We wait. It’s late afternoon. If I’m right, there should be some traffic

down the spur hallway in the next hour or two as the day shift ends. Not huge herds of people, mind you, but clumps of two and three every ten or twelve minutes. They probably tell the employees they allow flexible hours as a perk, but they really just don't want everyone coming and going over the same ten minute span." He closed his eyes. "Once the shift has changed, we'll go down and do our thing. In the meantime, relax and keep your ears open."



"I don't understand. How are we supposed to find our contact?"

Seth looked over at his friend, Brian. Despite his confusion and misgivings, Brian worked his controller feverishly, causing his new avatar to follow close behind Seth's own new avatar as it streaked across the heavens of Reality 2 Be like a ballistic missile. "We'll go back to the circle of stones and just wait. It's our only known contact point. If I were them, I'd go back there and hope to re-initiate the transaction."

Brian shook his head as he continued to supply thrust to his jet-propelled avatar. "But if I was the bad guys, that's a place I would watch. That's a place where I'd even maybe try to trap guys like us by pretending to be the rebels we were supposed to be meeting."

"Maybe," Seth admitted. "But bureaucrats don't always think like gamers. Besides, they don't need to trap us, remember? They already know who the avatars were that were involved in the first attempted exchange. That's why they've sent tanks and helicopters and the friggin' clone army to waste our asses. They don't need to resort to subterfuge to find out which avatars were involved in the first place."

"Maybe," Brian admitted back. "But we still don't have a code phrase to identify the rebels. We can't just use the old one. It's been compromised."

Seth paused for a moment. "So we'll do like they always do in the World War II movies to identify a German spy. You know, baseball teams, sports trivia, and stuff. We'll ask them questions they won't know the answers to if they're bad guys."

Brian's eyebrows tilted in. "I don't know any baseball trivia. That game is just too boring for words." He worked the controls for a minute, before continuing. "NASCAR. We can ask them about NASCAR trivia. Like, Dale Earnhardt, Jr.'s number or something ..."

“I didn’t mean sports trivia literally. They’re Chinese dissidents, not NASCAR fans. But we could ask them about Buddhist philosophy or quotes from the Dalai Lama ... the Red Army guys wouldn’t know that stuff.”

“Yeah, that would work. We’ve got a plan. It’s always good to have a plan.”



Luke finally couldn’t stand it any longer, so he just blurted it out: “So, is there a plan or are we just showing up, guns blazing? A plan would be good. A plan I know about would be even better.”

Dick looked up. “The plan was to go in after the day shift left. I assume you’ve been listening. Groups of people have been going down the hall over the last few hours, just like I predicted.”

“That’s it?”

“We’ll just act like we’re supposed to be there. It usually works.” Dick closed his eyes again.

“Wouldn’t it work better if we were actually supposed to be there?” Luke didn’t know what irked him more, that he was so keyed up about this infiltration of a secret fortress or that Dick was so nonchalant about doing it without a plan.

Dick opened one eye. “You gotta way to do that?”

Luke stood and headed for the conference door. “I’m at least going to try.”

Dick closed his eye again. “Stay away from the nuts or you’ll blow our cover for using the back conference room.”

Luke walked quietly down the hallway, pausing for a moment to look down the spur to the service elevator. Damn, if Dick wasn’t right about the wear patterns on the carpet. He headed on toward the main lobby and reception area, snagging a chilled can of brand name cola as he entered. Taylor still sat at the reception desk near the door. He headed toward her, his heart pounding, unsure of what he would say.

She looked up at him, her smile quickly turning to a look of concern. “Are you alright? You look a mite flushed. You didn’t go by the buffet table with the peanuts did you?”

“Er ... uh ... no.” His mind raced. He had to think of something. He had to do something. Now. It was just like the role-playing games he played in university—to dither was to die. “It’s my boss ...”



“Mr. Ferguson?”

“Yeah, yes, Mr. Ferguson. He wanted to know if our companion from the ... uh ... Honolulu office had arrived to meet us and asked me to check, but ... I’ve ... well, I’ve forgotten his name and didn’t want to tell Mr. Ferguson that, but I don’t know how to check without revealing my ... ignorance.”

“Now, honey, you just let me help you out. I imagine your boss can be a bit of a problem at times.”

“He’s a dick sometimes, alright.”

Taylor consulted a screen, then typed in an entry and looked at the new screen that appeared. “Well, the mid-afternoon flight from Honolulu’s been in a while. And the next one isn’t due for almost two hours.”

Luke craned his neck as if to look at the screen, but dropped his gaze instead to the open day-planner on her desk. Names were listed next to times. All of the names for times already in the past were neatly crossed off with a single line, except one: A Post-It Note next to the unlined entry read “Delayed.”

Luke straightened up and coughed lightly. “Well, I’ll just say there’s no word.” He started to leave, then coughed again. He turned back to Taylor. “If it wouldn’t be too much bother, could you get me a glass and some ice for my soda? They’re too near the buffet table for me not to worry.”

“Sure, honey,” said Taylor as she rose and sashayed toward the table.

Luke reached over and snagged the Post-It Note, wadding it up and dropping it in his pocket in one swift move.

Taylor quickly returned with a glass filled with ice.

“Thanks,” said Luke as he moved back toward the hallway to the conference room. “See you later.”

Taylor glanced at her watch. “Diane will be taking care of you this evening. I’m off in just a bit.”

“Well, enjoy your evening. I bet it will be better than mine,” Luke replied in a cheery tone, before heading back.

When Luke got back to the conference room, Dick opened one eye again.

Luke sat down and poured his soda into the glass of ice. He took a long pull of cool, sparkling caffeine, then looked at his mentor. “Go take a walk for a half-hour. When you come back, tell Diane your

name is Matt Lee. L-E-E. You were delayed, but scheduled to be here. I'll meet you at the service elevator with our stuff.”

Dick sat up in his chair and opened both eyes. “Not bad, kid.”

## CHAPTER 23

A half-hour later, Dick walked back into the airport lounge without luggage. He barely glanced at Diane as he announced: “Matt Lee. I’m expected.”

He looked about the lounge reception area with faux disinterest as Diane checked her day book. “Yes, sir.” She stood up. “Let me show you the way.”

Dick waved her off as he headed for the corridor back to the conference room and the service elevator. “No need. I know the drill.”

The receptionist hesitated for a moment, then sat back down. She punched in an extension and he heard her say. “Mr. Lee has arrived.” Then Dick turned the corner. Luke was waiting in the spur corridor with Dick’s duffel and Luke’s own equipment. A few moments later, the elevator door opened and they stepped inside.

A quick scan of the elevator revealed no obvious cameras, but Dick took no chances. He dropped his duffel on the floor right up against the elevator door, the least likely place for any clandestine surveillance to focus, and bent over it, shielding it from any view from the upper rear of the slowly descending elevator with his body and Luke’s. Dick grumbled, as if to himself, for cover as he opened the bag and picked a few items out. “Damn phone. I gotta get a new phone or a new plan. Every time I leave it on when I fly, the battery wears down while it searches for signal at thirty-five thousand feet and then when I get where I’m going, I have to put in the spare battery and find a place to plug-in and charge the old one.”

It only took Dick a few moments to secure the items he needed to have on his person when the door opened. Sure, he could have loaded up and carried them around the airport while he killed time, strolling the corridors and musing on alternatives for the upcoming penetration. But there was a chance Matt Lee or anyone else “expected” to use the lounge for an entry into the secret realms below would be searched, by hand or otherwise, as he entered the lounge. It was a small worry on a long list of worries about what could happen. Plenty of things could go wrong on their infiltration of the facility beneath Denver International Airport, but a good agent crossed off as many of those worries as possible.

There were other, bigger, worries he could do nothing about. The worst was that he and Luke were going in blind, knowing nothing about the facility, those running it, or what security features it might have other than a fog of protective, but bizarre, conspiracy theories and a secure location with limited access.

He also wasn't overly fond of the fact he was going in impersonating someone who he knew nothing about. Had this Matt Lee been here before? Who did he represent? What was his business? Would he, should he, recognize anyone here by sight? By name? Luke had shown some moxie by coming up with the infiltration approach. Diane's call ahead suggested that his and Luke's next best option, an unheralded trip down the elevator, would have generated a red-flag for security.

Still, he couldn't help but be a bit keyed up about what might happen next, as the elevator slowed and began to settle into place at the bottom of the shaft. He could handle himself, but having a computer geek with next to no operational experience outside of virtual reality as his back-up was worse than no back-up at all. He couldn't trust the kid's instincts, couldn't trust the kid with his life, but he still had to protect him. It was like a federal marshal charged with protecting a mob accountant in the witness protection program dragging the witness along during an off-the-cuff assault on a meeting of Mafia Dons. It could work, but you sure wouldn't do it that way unless you had no choice.

The elevator doors opened into a small anteroom. There was a greeting committee waiting: a junior executive type in a suit flanked by two thugs wearing gray security personnel uniforms and loosely cradling MAC 10s pointed in the general direction of the elevator door. Dick strode purposely forward toward the executive. Not only was it the correct thing to do for his cover, it also immediately compromised the field of fire for the goons. They couldn't fire without risking hitting their boss.

The opening gambit of their infiltration might have been more effective if Luke was a better actor. Instead, Dick heard a muttered "Er ... uh ..." as the kid balked at exiting the elevator. To his credit, however, the kid manned up after a couple seconds and finally followed his lead. Dick rolled his eyes at his underling for the benefit of the junior executive as he extended his hand.

"Matt Lee," he said giving his counterpart a quick, strong, shake. "Don't mind my associate. He's from Australia, a society with a

surprising lack of security consciousness for having sprung from a population of thugs and criminals.”

The junior executive glanced over at Luke before returning his attention to Dick. “Frank Egbert,” responded the executive. “I was not told you were bringing an associate. I shall have to reprimand Diane for her communications oversight.” His eyes narrowed.

“Not her fault,” responded Dick. “My associate, Luke, arrived hours ago and was just sitting around the lounge waiting for me. Didn’t know enough to check in, but then he wouldn’t have been on your list anyway. So he just waited. He does what he’s told. Don’t you, Luke?”

“Er ... y-y-yes sir, Mr. Lee,” stammered Luke while Dick rolled his eyes yet again.

“See?” said Dick. “He’s harmless.” He gave the two thugs a once over. “Not a threat, not like your companions here.” He shrugged. “Search him if you like.”

Egbert smiled. “It is clear he is not accompanying you for security and I have no desire to offend you or anyone from Mr. Smythe’s organization.”

Smythe? Had Pao Fen Smythe sent Matt Lee here for the same reason he and Luke had arrived? To track down the location in Reality 2 Be of the plans for the Kestrel 84? Sometimes it was better to be lucky than good.

The executive paused, giving Dick a long, hard stare. “It’s just that ...”

Dick exploded in laughter and clapped the executive hard on the back. “It’s just that given the location and make-up of Mr. Smythe’s organization, you were expecting a Chinaman! Go ahead, Frank, you can say it.” He looked around exaggeratedly, as he continued to chortle. “There’s no chinks around to offend.” He grabbed Egbert by both arms and looked him straight in his reddened face. “Those dickheads down in communications who set this up didn’t spell my last name with an ‘i’ again, did they? I get that all the time. Their little joke.” He dropped his arms, but still looked Egbert straight in the face. “But it’s Lee, L-E-E, not L-I. Makes me easier to find in the phone book, or it would if I had a listed number and the phone book was in god-damn English.”

Egbert joined in the laughter. “No, no. Your name was spelled correctly. I assumed ...” He stopped. “I was just caught off-guard by you being accompanied by an associate and ...”

“And you got suspicious. That’s okay,” responded Dick, looking back at Luke, who was still looking awkward. “Luke, here. He’s my computer jockey.” Dick waved his hand toward the long, long corridor outside of the elevator anteroom, from which a faint electronic hum emanated. “You don’t think I understand all that electronic, cyber mumbo-jumbo you guys do here, do you? Gotta have my own geek to, you know, interface with the equipment and your geeks.”

Egbert seemed to have regained his composure. “Certainly. Of course.” He started to move toward the exit into the corridor. “Let me take you to a workstation where you ... where Luke ... can access the information you require.” He smiled, clearly reverting into tour guide mode. “I think you’ll find our facilities here quite impressive.”



Crikey!

Luke’s head swam and not just because of the guys with guns who had met the elevator or Dick’s manic improvising as Matt Lee. He was short of breath and not just because of the altitude or the eight minute walk down a long corridor broken only by several right angle turns, the kind of layout used by Iraqis in construction of safe rooms and underground bunkers to prevent shock-wave propagation. It was their destination and its contents which really impressed him.

The room was huge and open. Concrete pillars at regular intervals supported the massive, concrete ceiling cluttered with exposed ventilation ducts, electrical conduit, and regularly-spaced sprinkler heads—not for water, but for a Halon 1301 inert gas fire suppression system. It was the type of extinguishment system used in many corporate computer rooms to put out fires without using water, which would damage and short-out expensive and intricate electronic and computer systems. There was certainly plenty of equipment to protect. The huge room was filled to capacity with top of the line, sophisticated computer gear. There were rows upon rows of blade server configurations, modems, routers, and mainframe storage and back-up units. The footfalls of the group echoed on the hollow flooring system that held the equipment above the true, undoubtedly concrete, floor and allowed power cords, optic fibers, cabling, and more ventilation shafts to service all the equipment without being an

impediment to walking down the narrow alleys between the rows of electronics.

While there were a few techs present, monitoring machines or servicing equipment, computer gear outnumbered the humans by a factor of at least a hundred to one. The minute whines and hums of the various pieces of electronics joined to provide a deep, harmonious thrum throughout the room. Not only could you hear it, but you could feel the vibration with every portion of your body and see it on every surface that wasn't reinforced concrete. This was a massive amount of cyberware, a binary bonanza, a cornucopia of computer electronics sufficient to make every gamer geek in the world climax in orgasmic delight if it were laid out in a centerfold of Consumer Electronics. It was clearly more than needed to power the computing needs of a small country.

It was also clearly much, much more than needed to power the virtual world of Reality 2 Be. Dick was right. More was going on underneath DIA than a clandestine site for Reality 2 Be's server complex. He didn't know what, but his eyes roved over the equipment, assessing it, inventorying it, analyzing its possible uses.

After another tremendously long walk, Egbert finally showed them to a work station along what Luke figured was the westernmost wall of the gigantic server complex. A series of low, modular, cubicle walls blocked off the view of the main, open area. Along with several personal computer towers familiar from any office setting, with corresponding flat-screen monitors and keyboards, there was a horizontal bar with a variety of outlets, jacks, ports, and hook-ups for pretty much any kind of cable or equipment Luke could think of. Several black-mesh, ergonomically-designed chairs with adjustable lumbar support completed the set-up.

It was all Luke could ever wish for.

"Will this be satisfactory?" asked Egbert. He looked at Matt ... Dick.

Dick looked at Luke.

Luke played it cool. "It should be. I need to find ..."

Egbert cut him off. "I don't need to know. I don't want to know what you need to find. I just need to know if you have the tools to do what you need to do."

"I need to have access to the main menu for the Reality 2 Be servers. I need to be able to do a bounded parameter search in-world. Can I do that from there?"

“Yes,” responded Egbert. “But you will need a password.”

Luke had memorized the passwords which Beverly had used in accessing the accounting records back in New Hampshire. “I have the Tech Support codes. Do I need more?”

Egbert hesitated.

“I could call Pao Fen and see if he has more,” volunteered Dick.

Egbert stiffened. “No. Guests are not permitted to make outside calls. Besides, contacting Mr. Smythe will not be necessary. My instructions were to accommodate you in every way, Mr. Lee.” He handed a stiff plastic card to Luke. The card was plain and white, without markings.

“RFID?” asked Luke.

Egbert nodded.

Luke turned to Dick, who had a quizzical look on his face. “It’s got a proximity chip, just like your passport. With the right hook-up, security doors will just unlock and open when you approach, just like in Star Trek.”

“Cute,” replied Dick.

Luke turned to Egbert. “I might need this for awhile.”

Egbert shrugged. “I’m not leaving ‘til you leave,” he said, then sighed.

“What’s the matter?” asked Dick. “Hot date tonight?”

Egbert’s eyes looked heavenward, as if he was imagining a mental picture of a hot date, but he quickly looked back at Dick. “I wish. But, no. It’s just that I’m going into the mountains early in the morning for a little diving. Not to worry, though. I brought my gear along, just in case I got stuck late and had to leave straight from here.”

Mountains? Diving? “You’re going sky diving in mountainous terrain? That’s pretty dicey, isn’t it?” asked Dick.

Egbert grimaced. “No, that would be insane. No way you want to land a chute in a forest, much less in a remote location with few trails and even fewer roads.” His face brightened. “No, I’m going scuba diving, cave diving—well, scuba diving in an old, abandoned mine that’s flooded. You wouldn’t believe how clear the water is. Cold as all get out, but crystal clear.”

“Oh,” interrupted Luke, “of course. That makes more sense.” He said it, but he didn’t mean it. Luke had scuba training, of course—he’d worked the Great Barrier Reef a couple summers to lay up cash for school—and he could see the appeal of looking at coral, tropical fish, and the occasional bikini-clad bimbo in warm, clear water off



some island paradise on vacation. But the notion of taking a limited air supply into a dark, frigid fissure of water deep underground with nowhere to surface in case something went wrong just struck him as adrenaline-junkie stupid.

Dick just smiled. “We’ll try not to make you late.”

Egbert shrugged, then seemed to remember something and grabbed a piece of notepaper from the nearby desktop and scribbled a four digit number.

“PIN?” asked Luke.

Egbert harrumphed. “Extension. Call me when you’re done and I’ll retrieve my card and give you an escort out.” He motioned at the security guards. “Take up stations at either end of the row. Make sure no one bothers Mr. Lee ... or his associate.”

The two thugs did as ordered and Egbert left with them, leaving Luke alone with Dick. Luke gave his buddy a big grin, as he grabbed one of the comfy chairs. “This’ll be easy.”

“Unless Mr. Lee arrives for real. You said he was delayed, not dead.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. ‘Oh.’ Let’s move it along. I don’t want to be delayed or dead.”



Pao Fen was pacing, yet again, in his office. Arms dealing had, of course, always been a stressful occupation. You dealt with unsavory individuals who you knew had access to weapons and a willingness to use them. Trust was always an issue, with buyers, with sellers, and even inside your own organization. In addition, the logistics of transport, the risks of getting caught, and the potentially violent penalties if you failed to perform as expected, all added to the stress. But the higher he had moved up in the organization, the more he had to depend on others to perform as expected. He could live or die with the stress of his own failure to deliver, but to be at risk because of the failures of others was a management attribute that was giving him ulcers.

He could stand it no longer. He picked up his phone and pounded in the numbers for an international call. He practically barked into the phone as soon as his target picked up. “You’ve been in Denver for

some time. Why have you not reported you have secured the files you were sent to retrieve?”

There was a long pause. The cell phone connection on the far end popped and hissed so much, at first Pao Fen thought the call might have been dropped, but finally he heard Matt Lee’s voice.

“I’ve been delayed.”

Pao Fen gripped the handset so tightly it shook. “How long?” He had a schedule to keep with impatient people.

There was another pause. “I’ll be at the facility in the morning, local.”

Pao Fen’s blood pressure rose. “You’re not there? Where the hell are you?”

“That’s not important,” replied Lee, his voice flat and dispassionate even under stress, in the way of all of the best contract killers. “I was delayed. It couldn’t be helped. I’ll be at the facility in the morning.”

Pao Fen was fuming, but there was nothing he could do. He couldn’t get anyone to Denver any faster than morning. If Lee was efficient once he arrived there, Pao Fen’s organization would still make his deadlines. Barely. Of course, there was no way Pao Fen was going to tell this underling that.

“See that you are,” he replied tersely. “People are waiting for you.”

“I called the facility. They know I’m delayed.”

“Those weren’t the people I was referring to.”

“Oh.”

“One last thing, Mr. Lee.”

“Yeah?”

“I’d better not find out this delay has tits.”

## CHAPTER 24

Dick felt as useful as tits on a bull. As Luke worked his magic on the keyboard, Dick just sat in a spare chair at the work station, idly twirling back and forth. He'd already given this place a good hard look, identifying the locations of the few doors leading away from the massive room and checking out where the few individuals or clumps of people working the night shift were located, in case the information should prove useful later. Now he had nothing to do for minutes or hours until Luke was able to find the Kestrel 84 plans on Reality 2 Be's servers.

On missions past, he would often spend such time reminiscing about good times with Melanie: trips to the Caribbean back when Seth was just a baby; snuggling in front of the fireplace when the power went out one winter when he was still on the police force in Chicago; laughing while watching Seth play with the new puppy sixteen years ago this Christmas; making love in his dorm the first time. It was a pleasant way to spend the hours of waiting that unfortunately filled the life of any covert operative.

But he couldn't do that anymore. Not since Melanie left. The pain was too great. Thinking about it, about her, would be torture—hours of torture. He had to avoid that pain, that distraction. Even thinking about thinking about her left him numb and confused.

Dick glanced at Luke, his fingers dancing, his countenance infused with concentration and energy, yet somehow simultaneously serene. It was the look of someone in love with their work, someone alive and enjoying life, even though it would soon be over. Luke was no dummy. Dick knew Luke understood on an intellectual level, even if not on an emotional level yet, that he was doomed, that the end of this mission meant the end of his life. He had probably even guessed by this point his demise would be at Dick's hand.

Jesus, these minutes or hours until Luke located the missing file were going to be damn depressing.

Fortunately for the mission and Dick's mental health, it only took minutes.

"Got it!" exclaimed Luke.

"Already?" blurted Dick, infected by Luke's excitement. "Are you sure?"

Luke swiveled one of the flat screens to face him. “Once you have access to the oversight menu hosting the main world grid, all you have to do is a parameter delineated file search and it identifies all avatars possessing any file of the appropriate characteristics. See?” Luke pointed to an entry on the screen.

The coded gobbledy-gook on that particular line of the screen looked no different to Dick’s middle-aged, non-tech-savvy eyes than any other line of gobbledy-gook on the page. “Of course,” he intoned in a flat, dry monotone, “it’s right there in black and glowing sci-fi green. A child could see it.” His tone warmed. “Great job, Luke.”

Always support your partner, even when you’re minutes away from killing him.

Luke flushed. “It’s a rigorous, cohesive, well-constructed piece of programming for something so complex. A lot of game systems are cobbled together out of pieces from different software shops or teams, so they can get the game out quickly. Someone spent a lot of time on this one ... a lot.”

“And the Kestrel 84 plans, they haven’t been copied? They show up in just one place in-world?”

Luke frowned. “It’s impossible to tell for sure they haven’t been copied, before or after they were put into the hands of this avatar, but they definitely only show up one place in-world and ...”

Dick interrupted. “So, you’ve deleted the files and our primary mission is accomplished.” Luke did not respond immediately. “Right?”

Luke shook his head. “It doesn’t work like that. I know this specific avatar has the Kestrel 84 file. We have the exact specs of what was stolen and the file size parameters meet those specs exactly.” His hands worked the keyboard for a moment and another screen popped up. “And we know the avatar carrying the files was created by a New Zealand user. It would take some time, but I could probably track it to the IP number for the Maori kid’s laptop.”

“So delete the file.”

“I can’t do that. When your avatar picks something up, it comes under the protection of your avatar’s own algorithmic security coding. I can’t take away the file from the avatar remotely without knowing that code.”

“But you broke the kid’s password, remember?”

“It’s not the same thing. This is a level of encoding which is not only algorithmically based, it’s assigned randomly when you acquire an

object that is non-standard in the game world. It helps protect stuff from being stolen by ... you know, hackers, like us.”

“Wait a minute. You said people steal stuff in the game all the time.”

Luke sighed. “Avatars steal stuff from other avatars in-world. That’s different.”

Dick was getting perturbed. The kid had probably figured out his fate. Was he just stalling now? “Then what was the point of this trip?”

Luke looked taken aback. “To locate the item in-world. We now know which avatar has the file and where that avatar is. Now all we have to do is go get it.”

“Where? There’s another facility?”

“No,” replied Luke. “In-world. That’s why I created avatars for us. Remember? We have to recover the item in-world.”

“That can be done from places a lot safer than here, can’t it?”

“No, not really,” said Luke, pointing again at a screen of incomprehensible coordinates and other arcane symbols. “I know where the avatar with the file is, but not necessarily where it will be.” He pointed at some digits on the screen. They were changing. “The guy is on the move—pretty slowly at the moment, but that could change. I need to monitor his location from here while we’re both in-world, robbing him.”

“Great.” Dick swiveled his chair so he could access one of the laptops Luke had gotten out from his pack. Luke plugged in the controllers and ramped up the game on both of the laptops he had brought along. When The Swuush appeared on screen, he looked different to Dick—a mishmash of equipment was strapped to the avatar’s torso.

“What the ...” he exclaimed, looking over at Luke.

“I hooked up and logged on during that last half-hour upstairs while you were walking around the terminal waiting for Diane to come on shift.”

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Needed to relax?”

Luke gave a wry smile. “Needed to mug a few newbies for their cash and weapons. We might not be the only ones looking for this avatar, so I figured some firepower would be useful.”

That made sense. “Whaddya get me?”

“Not much. A knife, a couple grenades, and a loaded AK-47.”

“The weapon from hell ...”

Luke looked up. “What?”

“Nothing, kid. Army Ranger thing. All these third world warlords, that’s their bread and butter. Weapon of choice for lowlifes with low budgets and low-intelligence. Any idiot can use an AK-47. And too many of them do.”

“Well, Rambo up, old man. It’s time to go search and destroy.”



They took off flying almost the second they were in-world. The Dewdster kept increasing speed and Dick had to make every effort just to keep up. He paid no attention to where they were headed—supposedly Luke had that all in hand. Besides, they were rapidly so high above the virtual landscape of Reality 2 Be that identifiable landmarks were difficult to discern. Yet they kept going higher.

Dick looked over at Luke. “Are we going to have trouble breathing?”

“Huh?”

“The altitude. Trouble breathing?”

Luke wrinkled his nose. “Hey, I’m from Melbourne and Brisbane by way of Philadelphia. Port towns, every one. I’ve been out of breath since we got to Denver. Mile High City and all that, but I thought they meant in the mountains. We’re in the plains and I’m out of breath.”

“The plains are a mile high. Gradual slope up all the way west from the Mississippi River. The snow-capped peaks you saw when we were coming in for a landing are two, almost three miles above sea level. But I wasn’t talking about that. I meant in the game. Are our avatars going to suffer from oxygen deprivation without special equipment?”

“Nah. Graduated air pressure is not necessary for the operation of a virtual world. Constant pressure works fine. Just another place gravity is ignored. In fact, constant air pressure makes the coefficients for wind vectors easier to apply “

Dick looked back at his screen. The two avatars were still jetting upward at increasing speed. “Doesn’t look like friction is figured in either or we would be glowing by now.”

“It’s a world. It’s not the real world.”

“So we could fly to the moon?”

That caused Luke to chuckle. “Probably not. There’s undoubtedly a cap on altitude. No sense wasting computer power on a bunch of empty space.”

“Now you sound like that guy from *Contact*.”

Luke shrugged. “There’s a guy from Oxford. He supposedly calculated there’s a twenty percent chance the ‘real’ world is just one big computer simulation.”

Dick laughed. “That’s me, kid. Protecting the world from all enemies ...,” he nodded toward the screen, “... real or imagined.”



It didn’t take Matt Lee long to find Brian’s house. It was relatively close by and the late evening hour meant there was little traffic. Even in the dark, with the twisty-turny streets that so bedeviled American subdivisions, the place was easy to find. Matt could access the Internet on his cell phone and Google Earth was amazingly useful to a would-be stalker. Not only could he find his prey, he could scope out surveillance locations, exit routes, and hiding spots by clicking on the aerial views before he ever even went near the place.

He pulled over to the curb a few doors down from his target and grabbed a random map, pretending to be looking at it for directions. With the broad expanse of the unfolded map blocking the street-side window and part of the windshield, he took out his thermal imaging scope and scanned the house through the passenger-side windshield. The usual hot spots from appliances glowed dull orange, but he could not see anyone inside. He drove to the end of the block and turned, pulling over again and repeating the map routine. This time, he scanned the house from side and back.

The results were no different. He watched for a bit, but there was no change. He would have to wait for someone to arrive or check out the place after it was late enough he was sure not to be interrupted.



Brian and Seth sat in the basement, staring at their laptop screens, which showed nothing but slightly different views of the same circle of huge stones surrounding the grassy, oval field Hawk and Peregrine had visited before. Except now the grassy field was littered with abandoned weapons and camping gear, but strangely, no avatar bodies.

Nothing moved. Not on the grassy field, not in the protective rocks, not in the mountains far on the horizon. The air was clear and blue and empty.

Still they waited.

“It could be hours, days even,” muttered Brian.

“It could be forever,” replied Seth. “We don’t know what happened to the avatars we were supposed to meet.”

“We don’t know what happened to the Chinese dissidents controlling those avatars.”

“Bad things,” admitted Seth. “That’s why it’s important we get the maypoles to the dissidents, if any remain, and get the information from them about what the authorities are really doing in China far away from the big cities where tourists and reporters usually stay. It’s an important mission.”

Brian sighed and leaned back, putting his feet up on the coffee table next to his laptop. “It’s a boring mission.”

Seth looked at his friend. “You asked me what else my dad taught me. Well, here it is. Always finish what you start. Whatever it takes.”

Brian sat up suddenly, pointing to the screen. “What’s that?”

Seth looked down at his own screen. A tiny point was streaking through the sky in the distance. He squinted, but couldn’t make out any more. “I dunno. Maybe it’s a bird.”

Brian grinned. “Or a plane ...”

Seth caught the reference. “Well, we sure know it’s not Superman.”

“Trademark infringement,” they both said aloud.



Dick could see that Luke kept The Dewdster’s focus fixed straight ahead, upward to infinity. Luke’s screen was a uniform ice blue.

Dick, on the other hand, kept twisting the controls so The Swuush would look around. Maybe it was his Army Ranger training asserting itself. Maybe it was paranoia generated from back when he was on an elite team in the Chicago police force that took on the toughest bad asses in town by any means necessary, then ended up getting pilloried in the press, investigated, and disbanded for their harsh tactics in protecting the good citizens of Chicago. Whatever it was, he couldn’t help it. He had to have The Swuush cover their six. So despite the fact it made his avatar wobble a bit and lose a little distance in following



The Dewdster, he swiveled The Swuush's gaze to look down at the still receding ground and back along their flight path.

The ground was a distant conglomeration of geographic features, like a topographic map, but without the natural curves and flow of a map of the real world. There were mountains and valleys and broad expanses of plain, but the edges were straighter, more angular, than in the real world, like the whole place had been laid out on graph paper before it was built up out of papier-mâché and colored in. Sure, there were curves, even a small oval of boulders in the distance, far, far below, and the buildings and the city borders near the horizon were a disorganized mish-mash of shapes of all sorts and sizes, but it was still unreal. The foreign vista gave Dick an uneasy feeling. Fortunately, when he checked the rear there were no missiles, fighter jets, or johnson-hawking dwarf avatars in close pursuit. As far as he could tell, The Dewdster and The Swuush owned the ionosphere of Reality 2 Be.

Dick turned the Swuush's attention back to where he was going, then glanced over at his companion and his two screens. Luke's attention alternated between the screen showing the clear blue sky of Reality 2 Be and the screen of the computer with an ever-changing array of incomprehensible coordinates and other arcane symbols.

"We're getting close," announced Luke. He squinted at the laptop screen showing the upper atmosphere of Reality 2 Be, then pointed. "See the dots? There's stuff up ahead."

Dick started to lean over to look at Luke's screen, then clapped his palm to his own forehead, before instead staring into his own screen, now showing the same dots in the distance, growing larger by the second. He had expected to only find one object up here, the avatar with the Kestrel 84 plans. Instead, there was a scattering of dots dispersed randomly across his screen. Ambush? It didn't look like the dots were organized in any way. A few were stationary, but most were moving slowly. He might have attributed the movement to the prevailing winds, except there was no uniformity to the movements. Dots—he could see now most of them seemed to be avatars—were moving in different, even opposite directions from one another, changing trajectories only when they collided with each other.

"What the ..." he exclaimed, not for the first time in this realm.

"Slow down," urged Luke, a bit more loudly than their normal verbal exchanges. "We don't want to overshoot." His eyes flicked to

the other computer screen. “Our target is moving at almost a right angle to our flight vector.”

Dick pressed down on the controller hard, cutting speed drastically as they approached the area of randomly floating avatars and other objects and bits of debris. “This looks like the Ninth Ward after Katrina. What the hell is going on here?”

Luke looked over at him. “We’ve obviously reached the altitude limit of Reality 2 Be’s game world. You can’t go any higher than this.”

“Duh,” growled Dick. “I meant what are all these avatars doing here?”

Luke thought a moment, then his countenance brightened. “This is where the zombies go!”

“Huh?” Dick looked at the inventory list at the bottom of his screen. What would kill a zombie in-world?

“Avatars that are no longer being played, but were never actually logged out of the game.” He pointed at an avatar floating by on-screen. “Remember how your avatar would float away if you weren’t careful when you were first learning how to move it? Well, if you just stop playing an avatar, odds are it had some slight inertia when you stopped playing it, or it will eventually get bumped by somebody. If any of the motion is ever upward, even the slightest little bit, you’ll eventually float to the altitude limit for the world and just bump along the ceiling going in the same direction unless you collide with someone else.”

Dick nodded. “Like an astronaut on a spacewalk untethered to his capsule. If he gets shoved, he just floats indefinitely wherever he was pushed.”

Luke’s eyes glanced over at the screen of sci-fi green digits on the other computer. “Until he falls into a gravity-well. But you’re basically right. That’s obviously what happened to the avatar with the Kestrel 84 plans. His player got killed and no one was operating the avatar, so he just floated off to the limit of space up here.”

“Easy pickings, then,” replied Dick with a touch of glee. “Just point me to the right guy and I’ll loot the body.”

Luke’s head swiveled back and forth between the two screens. “There,” he finally declared, pointing at a nearby avatar wearing a large back-pack and still gripping a large, Army-green weapon in his hands. “I should have guessed. This guy has equipment, weapons. Most of the rest of these avatars are obvious newbies. Flashy clothes, minimal gear, not much in the way of weapons. Newbies are much more likely

to simply quit without logging off, thinking their avatar will still be there when and if they ever come back to it.”

“Great,” said Dick as he began to move toward the avatar. “This is just like a lowlife mugging an el-train full of drunks at three in the morning on March eighteenth. Everybody’s so drunk from St. Patty’s Day, they don’t even notice you’re stealing everything, including their shoes, until they wake up the next morning barefoot.”

Suddenly, a deep voice boomed from the tinny speakers of both of their laptops. “Avast there, me hearties. I wouldn’t be doin’ that, if’n I were you. That there salvage, like all in this heavenly realm, is the property of Cap’n Drake Keelhaul Cutter and his band of misbegotten, misbehavin’, misfit cutthroats.”

“Shit,” moaned Luke with despair in his voice.

“What?” shouted Dick as he jabbed at his controller to shift his avatar’s point-of-view.

“Pirates. We’ve got pirates.”

## CHAPTER 25

“Why? Why in God’s name do we have pirates?” growled Dick.

“Cause clowns would be too scary?” replied Luke with a weak grin.

Dick gave him a stern look. Pirates weren’t funny—not in the real world and not here. Even though they were in a game, they didn’t have time for games. “I’m serious. Who are these jokers and why are they here?”

“Think about it,” Luke responded, his words growing more rapid as he continued. “Someone else had to figure out in the course of Reality 2 Be that there were hundreds or thousands of avatars floating around at the altitude limit. Most may not have much equipment, but they have some. A few maypoles, too, probably. And every so often an inactive avatar will have more—lots more.

“Like top secret weapons plans.”

“I doubt they figured on that. Someone just put together a crew to harvest the loot. They simply costumed and accessorized thematically to match their activities. Role-playing, remember?”

The crackly speakers were shaken once again. “Leave now, ye rancid scallywags, or we’ll be blowin’ you from the sky, we will.”

Dick cursed, then barked at Luke. “Get the backpack with the plans and get the hell out of here. I’ll hold ‘em off.”

Luke hesitated.

“Do it!” Dick hissed. “Those plans are the only real thing here. It’s not like I’m actually risking anything to cover you.” Dick worked his controller, twisting his avatar’s body to bring the AK-47 to bear and let off a burst toward the ship to distract their scurvy opponents. Minimal recoil. That was helpful. “Now!”

The floating pirate ship dominated Dick’s laptop screen, but he could see on Luke’s screen that The Dewdster had used his knife to slice the straps on the target avatar’s pack and was rocketing straight down, out of range, before the pirates could recover their swagger. Luke’s attention moved back to the screenful of locational coordinates, no doubt to confirm their information was in the purloined backpack. After a few moments of searching, he turned and gave Dick a big thumbs-up.

There was a “boom” from the laptop speaker, followed by a burst of static. Dick looked back at his screen. The floating pirate ship had

slewed sideways to come broadside to his position and was firing its cannons. The Swuush was buffeted and thrown back by the shockwave of the blast and pushed into the Maori kid's avatar, but the cannon ball missed. Dick wondered idly whether the ball would ever fall to the terrain below, or just bounce along the ceiling for eternity in this world.

He tried to fire The Swuush's AK-47 again, but he had expended the limited ammo. It didn't really matter—all he had to do was to hold off the pirates from chasing after The Dewdster for a few more moments. That's when he noticed the undercarriage grenade launcher on the large weapon the Maori kid's avatar still clasped.

This could be fun.

Dick's limited gaming skill meant that The Swuush was not nearly as quick or proficient as Dick would have been at wresting away the grenade launcher, arming it with an incendiary grenade, and taking aim at the pirate ship. He muttered under his breath at his clumsy slowness.

On the other hand, his enemy had to take the time to prime and load friggin' cannons. He liked his odds.

He aimed at amidships, slightly above the row of cannons, and fired. The grenade shot forward, puncturing the wood about two feet below the main deck and then exploded with a crack that overloaded the computer's crappy sound-system, but was vividly shown in crisp, LCD display as red-streaked, orange flames shot from every cannon station, porthole, crack, and knothole of the pirate ship. The wooden ship bulged outward incongruously before the speaker kicked back in and he could both hear and see the wood begin to splinter. Then a gigantic secondary explosion obliterated the ship and whited-out The Swuush's view, the speaker failing once again as the blast overwhelmed it.

The Swuush's view screen went from white to black and Dick could see from the statistical data at the bottom of the screen The Swuush had made the ultimate sacrifice for the cause. Now he knew what it felt like to be collateral damage.



“Dude,” yelled Brian, sitting up and pointing at the screen of his laptop. “Look at that!”

Seth looked at his own screen. A bright ball of light had blossomed high in the sky, well north of their position in-world. “What is it?”

“I dunno,” replied Brian. “The Death Star exploding in space?”

Seth raised an eyebrow. “Maybe. Maybe it’s just a shooting star. Do they have those in-world?”

Brian shrugged. “I dunno. If it was, we should each make a wish.”

The two boys were silent for a moment.

“What did you wish for?” asked Brian.

Seth felt his face redden slightly. He looked down at the floor, not willing to look his friend in the eye. “I wished that my dad could help us get out of this mess with the exchange. I think the Chinese government—the real Chinese government—is on to what we were doing. We could be in danger. Maybe we should even call somebody.” He looked up at Brian. “What did you wish for?”

Brian gave him a sheepish half smile. “A naked lapdance from The PussyCat Dolls.”

Seth couldn’t help but laugh. “Awesome, dude. Awesome.”



“Dude, that was awesome,” said Luke with a grin as he looked up from the screen.

Dick grinned in response, then quickly reverted back to reality. “Do you have the data? Is it confirmed?”

Luke nodded. “In possession. Confirmed to be the Kestrel 84 plans.”

“How do we destroy, delete—whatever—get rid of them for good?”

Luke was all business now, too. “I logged off from the game. The plans aren’t in-world anymore.” He pointed at his laptop. “That’s the only place they exist now, except for, you know, the computers at the Subsidiary, the Pentagon, and the new defense contractor.”

“Good. Delete ‘em. Wipe the hard-drive, whatever it takes to make sure they don’t leave this room.”

Luke hands darted over the keyboard. Dick did his best to wait patiently through the multiple maneuvers. Finally, Luke looked up. “Deleted, fragged, reformatted, wiped, and cleaned in every way I can think of.”

Dick nodded. Give me the memory chip or whatever used to have the info on it.”

Luke rolled his eyes, but did as he was told. While Luke opened up the laptop to retrieve the components, Dick opened up his duffel and retrieved a geologist’s hammer and a well-cushioned Thermos of liquid.

When Luke handed Dick the vital innards of the computer, Dick dropped down to the floor and located a stout, metal brace for the subflooring. Using his body and the duffel bag to surround the cyberware and keep the pieces from scattering, he methodically smashed the components to bits, gathered up the debris and dropped the residue into the jar of liquid.

The jar hissed and gave off a nose-wrinkling odor.

“Sulfuric acid,” murmured Dick to Luke, who was looking on with a bemused look of incredulity. “We like to be sure.”

“Nuke it from orbit, then,” replied Luke.

“Huh?” replied Dick, obviously missing yet again some pop culture reference.

“It’s the only way to be sure.”

Now Dick remembered. *Aliens*. But he didn’t smile. Luke didn’t know how right he was.

“What about back-ups when the avatar was in-world?”

Luke turned back to the cubicle’s computer and typed furiously for a few minutes. “I can’t find any indication the system’s been backed-up offsite since before the file date.”

Luke’s answer didn’t track, not in Dick’s mind. “Isn’t that unusual? Don’t most businesses back-up their files everyday?”

Luke didn’t look concerned. “Business data, sure. The quantities are limited and the need for recreating data environments in case of disaster is high. But this is a game world. Most players back-up their avatar on their own computer if they’re that hyper about losing items or levels or whatever—though our Maori kid hadn’t bothered, at least not on the laptop. But backing up the whole world everyday would be expensive and bothersome.” He consulted a screen. “They only drop the system to back-up once a month according to their automatic task scheduling system.”

Luke stopped typing and waved his right hand at the massive room of equipment just beyond their oversized cubicle. “Besides, would you back-up if you had a set-up like this? It’s perfect. Concrete walls, ceiling, and supports. Arid climate, so no risk of flooding. A complex-

wide Halon 1301 bromotrifluoromethane fire-suppressant system—which is odd, but extremely effective at protecting your data ...”

“What’s odd about the Halon system?” Dick hated anomalies. All spies did. They usually meant something, something important.

“Well, it’s an inert gas. It suppresses the fire by basically displacing all of the oxygen in the room, which is great for putting out an electrical fire in a big hurry, but you gotta get your personnel out of the way, too, cause it displaces the oxygen people need to breathe to live. You usually see this kind of thing in smaller spaces, with a big red panic button near the door. In case of fire, the personnel head for the exit and the last one out hits the button to shut the exit and release the gas.”

Dick scanned the parts of the room he could see from the cubicle once more. There were no large red buttons near the few doors from the room. Hell, there weren’t any glowing “Exit” signs. He guessed that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration never inspected this place. They probably didn’t have minimum wage and EEOC posters tacked up in the lunch room either, assuming they allowed their employees to eat lunch.

Dick looked back at Luke. “Maybe there’s a control room or a large exit we can’t see from here.”

Luke scrunched up his nose. “Nah.” He pointed up at the sprinkler head that would release the Halon 1301 in the event needed. “Heat activated sprinkler heads. They’ll go off on their own if the need arises. If you hear an alarm, I’d run like hell for the elevator.”

Dick let the information soak in. It could be useful.

Luke waited patiently while Dick thought. The kid’s composure impressed him. Luke knew, he had to know, what came next. Luke wasn’t leaving this room alive, once their mission was complete. He had compromised the Subsidiary with his clandestine activities on agency equipment to aid Chinese dissidents and neither the Chinese nor the Subsidiary could tolerate that. Neither espionage organization, for its own reasons, would let a loose-end like Luke live.

They had to be sure.



## CHAPTER 26

Finally, it was sufficiently late for Matt to proceed. He took one last scan, then drove away. Two right turns later, Matt pulled into the next block over, parked opposite the back of the house, and grabbed a small gym bag with essential supplies. It didn't take much gear to kill two teenaged kids, even if he did have to make it look like an accident.

A quick walk around the block and he approached the recently sodded, two-story colonial from the front. He strode up to the door, waving as he approached as if to someone inside, and opened the screen door. The lock was simple enough and his lock picking skills good enough, that a passerby would have merely thought he was shifting the gym bag from one hand to the next before turning the knob and breezing in through the door as if he belonged there.

He shut the door quickly, but quietly, then simply stood for a moment, letting his eyes adjust to the dim gloom inside as he listened. He heard muffled noise from a television or something, coming from below. He reached into his bag and pulled out his thermal imaging equipment once more, doing a quick three-sixty before focusing it on the floor below him. Two individuals glowed yellow/orange/red down in the basement, next to two red spots that were undoubtedly computers. His targets, no doubt.

Not one to leave anything to chance, not when the Chinese government was calling the shots, he quickly returned the thermal imaging device to his gym bag, and groped at the other items in the bag. A few seconds later he pulled out a piece of heavy, flexible cable with optics fitted on both ends. Moving with feline grace toward the kitchen at the back of the house, he quickly located a door underneath the stairs up to the second level. Basement access, he was sure. Tract houses were all about functionality and ease of construction—he expected no imagination whatsoever in the layout.

After creeping to the door, he listened for a moment to the now-somewhat-more distinct sounds of two guys talking while tinny computer-game music cycled endlessly in the background. No surprises so far. He flexed the cable, then snaked it under the door, angling the optics of the far end down and to the left, so it would look down the stairs which tracked beneath the house's other stairway.

Sure enough, two young men were chatting while their computers sat ignored in front of them. Matt caught a few of the words. They seemed to be discussing whether they should call someone ... maybe the authorities ... and whether they were going to get into trouble.

The answer to the first question was “too late” and the answer to the second was “more than they could possibly believe.”

Matt left his perch near the door for a few moments and moved over to the wall phone in the kitchen. Donning a pair of leather gloves, he lifted the receiver and quickly tapped out the number for time and temperature. Once he heard the mechanized voice beginning its spiel, he switch-hooked and got a dial-tone on the second line used for call waiting and conferencing functions, then called time and temperature again. In a few seconds, he heard the familiar information begin on the second line, too. Then, he simply set the receiver down on a stack of clean kitchen towels, muffling the polite and repetitive sound as the requested information was updated and announced on both lines every ten seconds.

A phone line in use can't be used to call the authorities or anyone else. And the great thing was, time and temperature would never hang up on you and free the line. He would never have thought of the technique, but he had cashiered an executive once who called time and temperature late every afternoon and just let it run, so he would make sure to leave in time to catch the express train home. Matt had made sure the guy missed the train and caught an express ride to hell, instead. But through it all, the garroting, the brief clean-up, and the lengthier search of the guy's office for the purloined goods Matt's client had sought to recover, Matt had left the phone service running. The constant reminder of passing time was really quite a productivity motivator.

He wasn't worried about the boys' cell phones. No matter what the television commercials say, American cell phones are notoriously useless in a concrete-construction basement that doesn't walk-out to a sloping backyard. If his victims had any final thoughts about “more bars in more places,” he hoped they were pleasant memories of drinking at a wide variety of beachfront dives during spring break, because cursing out your cellular provider was an awful waste of your last few moments of life.

Having eliminated the ability of his targets to call for help, Matt set about the task of eliminating their ability to physically escape while he “accidentally” killed them. Scooping a few pennies off the laminate

counter-top in the kitchen, he went back to the basement door and inspected it. The house was old enough that the door was not the flimsy particleboard crap one would usually get nowadays as an interior door. It was solid wood, with a deadbolt so it could be locked from the downstairs side.

He gently tested the door. Yep, the boys had locked it—no doubt to prevent any interruption when they progressed from gaming to soft-core porn DVDs later on. This would do nicely.

Gauging the gap between the door and the frame near the dead-bolt, he slid two pennies into the gap, then held them in place with his left hand while he used his right hand to push one more penny between the other two, forcing it all the way in until the three pennies were wedged hard between the door and the jamb. The force of the pennies would press the dead-bolt firm against its metal housing, making it nigh impossible to unbolt the lock. The guys were now trapped in the basement. As he left, he would drop a log from the living room fireplace into each of the two narrow window wells, thereby negating the alternate escape route mandated by state building code.

Below the boys still argued, clearly clueless he was above, dooming them to a short life and a hellish death.

An amateur would probably douse the pilot for the stove, turn on the gas, and leave, figuring the boys would die in the inevitable resulting explosion. The problem with gas explosions, however, was that they were good at killing people in the kitchen or in a nearby room on the same level from concussive force, but the explosion was so forceful that it didn't necessarily start a fire. Worse yet, it was so noticeable that the fire department would be on the scene fast.

No, Matt preferred a good, old-fashioned conflagration.

The trick here was that he needed it to look accidental, but expand quickly, and with white hot intensity, especially downstairs. He poked around the pantry and the kitchen sink, even the garage, gathering up all of the flammable household chemicals he could find: paint, pesticides, performance boosters for the car, whatever. Accelerants were usually a tip-off of arson, especially when they were poured all over the place. But you could make even accelerants look accidental.

Grabbing a cardboard box with a flimsy, folded bottom, he block-printed "HAZARDOUS RECLYCLING" on the side, and placed it near one of the hot air registers on the floor along the side of the stairway halfway between the kitchen and the front door. Then he

reached for a glass vial of acid from his gym bag and dripped a few drops near the bottom edge of each can.

In about five minutes the acid would work its way through the metal at the sealed edges of the cans, allowing the flammable liquid to escape, drain out through the partially open bottom of the cardboard box and seep down the hot air duct and into the floorboards around it, sending accelerants where he needed them most in a credibly accidental way. He doubted any of the cardboard would survive the flames, but if it did, the lettering on the box would be convincing to the arson squad.

All he needed now was a credible point of ignition. He found a candle on the dinette in an alcove in the kitchen and slid it close to the gaily-colored curtains on the alcove's windows. Then he lit the candle and the drapes. The fire would spread quickly—these ersatz colonials built during the explosion of the Jersey suburbs in the seventies and eighties were all wood-frame construction. The accelerants would leak and the fumes would help move the fire quickly in that direction. The fire would surge down, into the basement stairs. And even if his targets braved the flames to get to the door, they would find it impossible to open. The fire would burn the door eventually and the pennies which had prevented it from being unlocked would simply fall to the ground, one more piece of detritus in a devastating house fire scene.

He grabbed two stout logs from the fireplace and went out the back door into the darkness of the quiet night. His shoes got wet as he crossed the soggy new sod to the window well, but he wasn't worried about footprints. The firefighters would trash the landscape in their futile attempt to fight his fire. He gently positioned the logs to block the window well exits and crept between houses to retrieve his vehicle. He left the peaceful neighborhood and took up a position on a nearby hill to confirm his kills before leaving. Nothing useful could be seen in the dark from his perch at first, so he grabbed the thermal imaging scope.

Maybe this wasn't a game, but he didn't want to miss the fun.



Luke watched with growing dread as Dick returned equipment to his duffel bag. This next part wasn't going to be fun. Luke knew what was coming and while he didn't really want to make it any easier, there

was no reason to make it harder on Dick. It wasn't the old guy's fault. It was Luke's fault. He never should have gotten involved with the illicit virtual reality exchanges between Chinese dissidents and the organization that had contacted him to help out with the cause after he had signed a few petitions supporting a free Tibet. He wasn't even a leader in the effort—just another worker bee, just like in the office.

Well, he might not have the guts to be a leader, but he did have the guts to face the consequences of his actions. Best to take it like a man. Best to take it from Dick, rather than from the Chinese assassins who were no doubt looking to eliminate the threat to governmental stability posed by him and the others from the cyber-squad in Reality 2 Be.

“What now?” he asked, as Dick fumbled through his duffel bag.

Dick stopped looking through the duffel and looked up at Luke. The old man tilted his head to one side. “Whaddya mean?”

“What next? What happens next?”

Dick stood up. “We eliminate the facility.”

Luke looked at Dick, dumbfounded. “We got the plans. I guarantee it. There's no need to ‘eliminate the facility,’ whatever the hell that means, to make sure the Kestrel 84 plans are secure.”

Dick simply stood there for a moment. “You can't guarantee there hasn't been an on-site back-up that includes the plans. Besides, you've seen the facility now. You know there's more going on here. Remember what we were talking about before? Why was this facility built, back before Reality 2 Be was even a gleam in some programmer's eye? Why is it this size? Why is it shielded and protected the way it is?”

Shielded? Dick had asked him before about how deep you would have to construct a facility for it to be shielded from EMP. “This was put here to protect it from electromagnetic pulse in the event of a nuclear war? You guys have been watching *Dr. Strangelove* too much. This is part of some effort to overcome the ‘mineshaft gap?’”

Dick gestured expansively at the complex. “This look military to you?” He looked Luke straight in the eye. “Trust me, this is not a government facility. Not our government. Not anybody else's. That kind of thing, the Subsidiary is very, very good at knowing. Somebody, somebody with a shitload of money, built this and built it secretly, and has kept it secret with all the rumor mongering and misdirection, and operates it at great expense and with great difficulty. Why would they do that?”

Luke's mind was a fog. "Why do bad guys do anything? Money and power."

Dick nodded. "Power, that's the key. But money, that's always good in the meantime. And you're right about bad guys being behind it. So put it all together. You've seen the scope of this place. If you were a bad guy with unlimited access to computer power and server farms and routing hook-ups, what could you do with it?"

The mist persisted.

Dick gave him another prompt. "What's the fastest growing area of law enforcement at all levels?"

"Drugs?" offered Luke.

"Old news," grumbled Dick.

A lightbulb came on. "Cybercrime, computer fraud." He looked around again, this time his eyes truly seeing to scope of what was before him. "Porn, digital music and video downloads, Nigerian bank scams, phishing, identity theft, credit card schemes—the local cops don't have jurisdiction to stop most of it and the feds are constantly subpoenaing Internet providers for customer info that all seems to originate in Russia or the Philippines or someplace impossible to track down or squelch."

"Someplace like here," volunteered Dick.

"Here?"

"You're the computer geek. What's the Internet made out of? Who owns it?"

"Nobody owns it. It's ... it's just connections of computers, really. I send a message or ask to access a site and the command goes from my computer into my Internet server provider's routers and servers, which connect up with other routers and servers 'til I get to the one hosting whatever I was trying to access or send a message to."

"And all that routing, that goes through what?"

"All the ISPs and the commercial and university and governmental systems, they're connected to one another through hubs and optic fibers and satellite networks."

"How many?"

"How many what?"

"How many hubs?" asked Dick.

Luke gestured futilely with his hands. "I don't know, at least anymore. A bunch. In the early days of the Internet, they used to say there were seven primary switching hubs. There was one in Atlanta and one in Virginia, near Washington, D.C., and some others. The

word was some of the switching hubs were at undisclosed locations, you know for security reasons, so you couldn't knock out the Internet with just a few targeted attacks."

"Voila," replied Dick, with yet another expansive gesture.

"This is one of the secret hubs of the Internet?" Luke couldn't believe it. Then he gave it just a moment's thought. Yes, he could. "This is one of the secret hubs of the Internet."

"Not quite, I think," said Dick. "This isn't a hub. It's a secret way-station on the Internet—a tumor on the backbone of the World Wide Web. It hijacks the flow of packets of information on the Internet. Monitors them, changes them, whatever, then passes them along. Think about it. They can capture clandestine information on the digital bits that flow through here more easily than the NSA. They get access to every credit card number, social security number, and password that passes their way."

Luke swallowed hard. "That's more information than Facebook! But with no privacy settings or opt outs. And no government control or social outrage to limit what they use it for."

Dick nodded. "They probably also provide servers and hosting for every terrorist organization or group of mafia thugs that needs or wants those to go about their business of crime and terror. Reality 2 Be is most likely just a front for criminal groups to exchange data and money unregulated and unseen by governmental authorities. The gaming and social aspects are just cover for the real reason the virtual world was created. This operation gathers information and makes money now and it sets the bad guys up for a power move in the future."

"In case of nuclear war?" Most of what Dick had said made sense to Luke. This was a great way for bad guys to use the Internet for moneymaking opportunities, even espionage. But he couldn't really buy that the thugs of the world thought there was going to be a nuclear war, even if all the crime bosses had been kids during the Cuban missile crisis.

Dick seemed to understand what Luke was thinking, even if he hadn't said it out loud. "First strike, three-hundred and fifty million dead, that kind of thing, no. But a high altitude burst over the Midwest fries most of the country's electronics with EMP. Suddenly, all the nation's Internet capacity dies, all the info is lost—except for this shielded facility. Now who has power?"

It made sense. This was big, much bigger than the plans for the Kestrel 84. "So, we're going to take out the facility?"

“Yep.”

Luke was dubious. “I think you’re going to need a bigger hammer and a larger volume of acid, not to mention a lot more time, if you’re planning to do that.”

Dick ran his tongue over his teeth. “I was just making sure the smaller, initial mission was complete in case the bigger mission goes bad.”

“So you have the capacity to take out this entire facility in your duffel bag?”

“Yep.”

“Without my help?” Luke scanned the massive complex. “Because I have no clue how to do that.”

“Yep.”

Luke thought for a moment, but nothing came to mind. They weren’t near a body of water, so there was no way to flood the place. The damn sprinklers didn’t even use water and the gas they did use was inert. He shook his head in defeat. “I give up. How are you going to be sure you wipe out this entire facility?”

“You said it yourself.”

“I did?”

“Yep. Nuke it from orbit. That’s what you said. It’s the only way to be sure. That’s what we’re going to do.” He began fumbling about in the duffel yet again.

Luke’s head swam in a daze of confusion. “You’re going to nuke the facility from orbit?” He looked around at the concrete-reinforced facility deep beneath the runways of Denver International Airport. “We talked about this. This place is more shielded than Sadaam Hussein’s bunker. I’m not sure a nuke would take it out, even if you didn’t care about the northeastern quarter of the Denver metro area. Are you crazy?”

Dick looked around the facility, too, including at the guards at either end of their row. “Keep your voice down,” he cautioned. “And, yeah, you’re right about the facility and, whatever you think of the ruthlessness of the Subsidiary, they do give a shit about civilian casualties. That’s why we’re not going to do it from orbit.” He pulled out a bulky case which had taken up a good portion of one end of the duffel bag. “We’re going to do it from here.”

Luke took a half step back from the bulky device, as if that would help. “You brought a nuke? They gave you a nuke? Are you crazy? Are they crazy?”



Dick gave a broad smile. “Yeah, that part took a little persuasion.”



“Are you crazy?”

Dick had expected his equipment request would trigger a call from on high and he knew Dee Tammany would lead with an insult. He had expected her to be pissed and the conversation to be peppered with accusatory questions. He let the first one just hang there for a moment, so she would continue and get them all out of her system. She obliged with a more detailed follow-up: “Are you just a pyromaniac on payroll or are you really stupid enough to think you could get away with requesting a device like this—after the Dunedin debacle, for God’s sake—on a simple cyber-crime mission?”

“I see you’ve gotten my equipment request,” he replied with cool nonchalance.

“You can’t be serious. There is no way in hell you’re getting a nuclear weapon. The fire in Dunedin not big enough for you?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t stay to watch it and it provided damn little light when I was jet skiing across the bay to the Otago Peninsula in the dark.”

“Risks of the trade,” snarled Dee. Dick knew Dee was a non-sense boss, one who didn’t like insolence or surprises. Either one could make her almost as unpleasant as Glenn.

“I only ask for the tools I need to get the mission accomplished,” responded Dick, trying to get the emotional upper-hand by refusing to reply in kind.

“You need a nuke to retrieve the plans for a UAV?”

“No, I need a small nuclear device to create an electromagnetic pulse to save the world from a much greater threat ...”

“And what would that be?” asked Dee. No matter her personal emotions, Dick knew Dee always was willing to listen to a threat assessment. And so he spelled it out—not only what Dee already knew Luke had figured out about the facility, how and where it was constructed, and how it might be kept hidden, but what Dick had extrapolated about what that might mean the bad guys were up to, both now, and in preparation for the future.

His vision of the present and the future calmed her down considerably.

“That’s very convincing, Dick, but I can’t risk blowing up Denver International Airport. Not only would the civilian casualties and the property damage be completely unacceptable, there is no way the Subsidiary would survive. It would either be exposed to the public or shut down by its sponsors. Even if by some miracle that didn’t happen, Internal Audit would go ballistic. I do my best to avoid conversations with Pyotr Nerevsky. He may be polite, but he is unrelenting.”

“Fuck Nerevsky,” replied Dick. “He’s not in the field.” Like all cops, Dick had no tolerance for the organization’s Internal Affairs division, even if the Subsidiary dressed it up with the corporate-sounding Internal Audit moniker and ran it through Catalyst Crisis Consulting’s accounting department. The fact Nerevsky was ex-KGB didn’t help Dick’s opinion of IA either.

“Besides, look carefully at the request. It’s for an NE 417. It’s not a conventional nuclear weapon, it’s a neutron device—reduced blast and fireball effect and enhanced EMP and radiation pulse.”

“Leaving the airport buildings standing doesn’t really matter if the radiation kills everyone in the airport and for miles around. Why not just call in a Lightning Team?”

The Lightning Teams were the Subsidiary’s heavy-duty firepower squads. At a moment’s notice, they could swoop down and lay waste to everything in sight if needed. They were only used in desperate situations when agents were in trouble or more subtle approaches to solving a really big crisis had failed. They cleaned-up problems with a thundering rate of automatic weapons fire, leaving no witnesses behind. Often, the resultant carnage was later attributed to a failed coup attempt or gang warfare. Dick liked the Lightning Team guys, but they weren’t right for the job. He couldn’t be assured he could get them in and he couldn’t be sure their means would accomplish what needed to be done.

“Hell, Dee, the Lightning boys would be more conspicuous than the nuke,” Dick replied with a chuckle. “You’re caught up in semantics of this thing being a nuclear weapon, rather than thinking about the technical specs of the device, itself. The NE 417’s not even a conventional neutron bomb. Even though it blows up, you shouldn’t really think of it as a bomb at all. It’s a device the Americans developed that generates a concentrated electromagnetic pulse by using a small amount of fissile material. It blows itself apart before it can reach the kinds of blast and temperature you would see in even a small-yield,

regular nuclear weapon. The shockwave is strong enough to kill people and destroy delicate equipment in the immediate vicinity, but it's insufficient to cause more than a tremor to reinforced concrete. It's the perfect device for what we need to accomplish here if I'm right. The spherical blast will be constrained by the walls of the reinforced facility, causing the shockwave to propagate laterally where unconstrained. It'll do some damage on the level of the blast, but probably not even enough to destroy all the equipment. It depends on how big the facility is. The EMP will range farther, within the shielded confines."

Dee paused. That was a good sign. "If all you need is EMP, why not use an explosively pumped flux compression generator? They're small and just as easy to carry as an NE 417. And they create EMP and nothing but EMP."

"Their radius is pretty limited and I do want more than just pulse—I need the radiation and limited shockwave, too. I don't want these guys to be able to return to the scene of the crime, repair some equipment, and be back in operation again in a week or a month or even a year. The point of using the NE 417 is that between blast, EMP, and radiation, the entire facility will be rendered ineffective, short-term and long-term, but the device won't hurt things up above. You know we won't get a second chance at this—it'll be much better protected the next time around. The EMP will wipe out the bits and bytes of clandestine information and criminal Internet activity throughout. I don't mind a small shock wave destroying some or all of the equipment, but I really need to leave a residual radioactive charge which will make the place unuseable going forward."

He heard Dee swear under her breath. "Shockwave? Radiation? Any way you cut it, this device is nuclear. This is different from blowing up a warehouse—seriously different—and I wasn't happy about that. What about the people in the airport? The planes in the midst of landing?"

"The shielding should work as well to hold in EMP as it will to hold it out. It should also shield for radiation. I already told you the blast won't be big enough to collapse a hardened facility, just take out some of the equipment and bad guys inside. Even if the place is smaller than I'm guessing and the shock wave bounces between the concrete walls until everything inside is practically vaporized, the space itself should maintain integrity. A little puff of dust through the ventilation ducts to the outside. That's all. Minimal risk."

Dee paused again. He knew he had her. “Late night, just to be careful.”

“Of course, Dee. Just what I had in mind. You know I’m always careful.”

## CHAPTER 27

Luke shook his head. “You go tubing and you wind up setting off a nuke beneath Denver International Airport. Who would have thought?”

“What?”

Luke waved him off. “Yeah, I know, an EMP generator, not a real nuke. Still who would have thought?”

“Not that.” Dick narrowed his focus on Luke with an intensity at least an order of magnitude greater than Luke had ever experienced from the guy before and, let’s face it, they had already been through a lot. “Tubing ... What did you mean by that?”

Luke relaxed. “Tubing, that’s what they call playing in Reality 2 Be. If you’re in-world in Reality 2 Be, you’re ‘2 being,’ so the kids, they all call it ‘tubing.’”

Dick gave him an ashen stare.

Luke couldn’t help but comment. “Dude, if you could see yourself you would be totally R-O-F-L-M-A-O.” Luke didn’t usually use, and certainly didn’t spell out, IM abbreviations in verbal conversation, but he couldn’t help himself from tweaking Dick just a bit more about the old guy’s lack of knowledge about the Internet.

“What?”

“Rolling on floor laughing my ass off. OMG—that’s ‘Oh My God’ in the real world—if you’re going to tube, dude, you’ve got to learn some IM lingo.”

“That’s what Seth, my kid, said he was going to do with his friend, before I left Jersey. ‘Tubing.’” Dick’s face hardened. “Seth is involved in Reality 2 Be—the virtual world of choice for spies, thieves, and evil overlords.”

“It’s a game world. That’s its cover. I’m sure there’re lots of people playing it who have absolutely no idea what else it’s being used for.”

“But why didn’t I ever notice?”

“POTS,” replied Luke with a shrug.

Dick’s brow wrinkled. “What’s drugs got to do with this?” His face grew hard. “My kid isn’t on drugs.”

“Parents are always the last to know.” Luke tilted his head to one side and raised his eyebrows. “How can you be sure?”

Dick's expression softened and he looked at the floor. "I ... well, I tested his hair. The test claims to be able to show residual signs of drug use for months, back even further if the kid's hair is long."

"Very trusting. But I wasn't talking about drugs. Reality 2 Be has a P-O-T-S button." When Dick looked back up and just stared at him, he continued. "It stands for 'Parents-Over-the-Shoulder.' Sometimes people call them 'panic buttons.' If you wander by when Seth doesn't want you to see what he is doing on-screen, he pushes the POTS button and the screen flips over to something benign and vaguely educational, like a random Wikipedia listing or a breaking news feed."

"Great," Dick moaned. "Just G-R-8."

"Kids spend more time online than their parents realize. It sucks up all their concentration and they don't realize how long they stay on. It's a tremendous time-sink."

"Maybe that's why I haven't been able to contact him. Could I do that in-world?"

"Even if you know his avatar's name, it would be a task," replied Luke. Suddenly he had a thought. "Although we could use the oversight search feature, just like we did for the Kestrel 84 Plans. Do you know his avatar's name?"

Dick frowned. "No, but I know his real name and his credit card number—he's on one of my accounts. Can that get through?"

Luke shrugged. "Probably. But are you sure you want to stop in the middle of all this to, like, phone home?"

"It'll take me a few minutes to set the NE 417—you know, the EMP device—so why not? Besides, I've been a bit twitchy about not being able to reach the kid for some time."

Luke sat down at the cubicle terminal once more. "Might as well. I've got nowhere to go."



"There's nowhere to go," wailed Brian as he tried to force open the second, narrow, window in his basement. "There's something blocking the way in this window well, too."

"Can you break the glass?" yelled Seth in response. This was bad. This was very, very bad. Seth needed his friend to hold it together long enough for them to get out of the situation. But, unlike the game world, it only took seconds for panic to arise in the real world. Less

than a minute had passed since he had leaped up as fire flowed down the wall on one side of the basement stairs. “The opening may be a bit smaller, but we can still crawl out through the hole left by the broken window,” directed Seth, trying desperately to keep his own voice calm as acrid smoke billowed across the basement ceiling.

“The pane’s made out of Plexiglas,” cried Brian. “After those burglaries last year, Dad had ‘em installed. Said the neighborhood was going to hell.”

Seth knew they would both be going to hell and getting pre-heated on the way there if they didn’t get out of here soon. “Try to break it anyway,” he instructed. “Find a hammer or something heavy. If you can make a hole, you might be able to move whatever’s blocking the window.” He coughed in the increasingly smoky air. “We might be able to call for help. We might be able to get some air.” He knew the influx of fresh air might accelerate the fire, but he also remembered that more people died of smoke inhalation than actually burned to death in house fires.

During the whole frantic conversation with Brian, Seth had been hitting redial on 9-1-1 on his cell phone, but still had no signal. The landline down in the basement was blocked, blathering on about time and temperature and he couldn’t seem to do anything to disconnect it and get a dial tone. If the fire wasn’t enough, he had a really bad feeling about the recording on the phone line, not to mention the blocked window well.

This was arson. This was murder.

And he couldn’t help but think that it was all a result of their escapades in Reality 2 Be—that the Chinese government had caught up with the squad and that somewhere Shrike and Pigeon were in similarly desperate straits. Or already dead. Seth had led his squad of virtual commandos into a real-world ambush that would kill them all.

Brian continued to flail at the window well, coughing and screaming incoherently. It was up to Seth to save them. What should he do? What would his dad do? He couldn’t crash through the walls, not in a basement, so his dad’s fatherly wisdom was to no avail. But he knew his dad had more knowledge up his sleeve than he had ever overtly revealed—not just because he used to be an Army Ranger or a cop, but because Seth knew his dad was a spy.

Seth had stumbled across the information quite by accident several years ago when his dad had left some briefing materials out, thinking Seth was not home yet. Ever since then, Seth had paid careful

attention to what his dad was really doing and saying when he said he was working. Seth listened in, glass to the wall, from his own bedroom when his dad was on the phone—really on the computer—in private. Seth also tucked a webcam in his dad’s study to pick up the screen shot from his laptop when he received his missions. He knew, for example, that most recently his dad had been sent to New Zealand to foil a Hong Kong arms dealer selling weapons to terrorists. It sickened him; the residents of Hong Kong had more freedom than the billion residents of the rest of China and they used their limited freedom to engage in crime and profiteering.

Of course, Seth had never said anything, would never say anything, to compromise his dad’s position. But the knowledge of his dad’s secret life had given Seth a new appreciation for his dad’s abilities. It explained why his dad was so kick-ass at Lazer Tag, for one thing. It also explained much better than sewerage catastrophes ever could why his dad took off all the time on so-called business emergencies. It was no wonder his dad was stressed, not that his dad’s absences didn’t still piss Seth off.

Of course, living up to his dad’s cloak and dagger example was why Seth would soon be dead, even though what he was doing was so much more noble and innocent than trafficking in arms or assassinating dictators or any of that other serious shit that real spies did. Seth and Brian and the rest of their virtual squad, they didn’t do any of that. Yet here he was, about to be burned alive for the crime of helping people tell the truth about their oppressors.

Of course, his dad’s cloak and dagger example was also why Seth would do anything it took ... anything ... to get Brian and him out of their dire situation. That’s what his dad had always said when accepting a new assignment. He would do whatever needed to be done to accomplish the mission.

All this flashed through Seth’s mind in an instant while he looked at the staircase, the far wall already engulfed in flames, the carpeting on the treads starting to flare up, emitting who knows what kind of noxious gases. “I’m going out the stairs,” he shouted back to Brian. “I’ll let you know if we can get out that way.” Then he gulped in a deep breath of hot, smoky air and held it burning in his lungs as he lunged for the hellish firestorm blocking their only exit.

Seth’s left side was seared with heat as he bolted up the stairs, three at a time. Flames surged and boiled on the left wall, but the right wall was still cool and relatively unaffected by the fire. That the fire had



not yet spread there was the only thing that gave Seth hope they could escape out the basement door. He grabbed at the door handle at the top of the stairs without thinking and scorched his left hand severely as he grabbed the red-hot metal. His concentration overwhelmed his instinct, however, and he did not flinch back. He took the pain and twisted the knob. It turned, but the door held firm.

The deadbolt. Seth slid his burned hand up the wood until he found the latch and twisted it. It held firm, neither unlocking, nor turning, no matter how hard he tried. Still holding his breath, Seth pushed on the door, but again nothing happened. He put some weight into it, shoving his right shoulder into the door he could no longer see because of the black smoke gathered at the top of the stairs. It wouldn't budge. This exit had been blocked, too.

Seth was at the limit of his endurance. Severe pain surged up his legs. Tongues of flame grilled his body. He pinched his eyes shut from the acrid smoke and heat and desperately tried to keep his equilibrium despite the disorientation of the conflagration and the wooziness brought by severe oxygen deprivation. If he collapsed here, he would never get up again.

He had to retreat. He could hold his breath no longer. Stale air exploded out of his mouth as Seth turned and dove back down the stairway in a desperate attempt to reach relatively clear, fresh air before his lungs involuntarily expanded to take in a deep breath of hot, poisonous gases. He hit the bottom of the stairs in a controlled tumble and rolled instinctively away from the flames, toward the back of the couch.

Almost immediately, Brian was at his side, patting out the flames that had sprung up on the left shoulder of his "Free Tibet" t-shirt and covering Seth's face and mouth with a cool, wet towel. Adrenaline speeded his recovery.

"Diet Dr. Pepper?" Seth said as he pulled the brown-liquid soaked towel off his eyes and across his nose.

Brian's eyes flicked to the empty two liter jug on the floor. "It was the handiest liquid available," he said with a grim smile. Gallows humor.

As Brian helped Seth stand, Seth caught the glow of the laptop screens on the other side of the couch. They were still showing the same vistas from Reality 2 Be they had shown for the last several hours.

"Dude," he shouted, pointing at the screen. "Call for help on the computer. The WiFi is still operating."

Brian looked over at the screens. “I don’t think the local cops or firemen even have a website,” he responded as he began to dash around the couch toward his laptop.

Seth attempted to vault the couch to get at his own computer, but fell. He was still dizzy, dazed by the lack of clear air. “IM and email ... message anyone ... everyone you know and tell them to call 9-1-1,” he instructed. He shook his head to clear the cobwebs and began to hobble unsteadily around his end of the couch, bouncing off the edge of the Naugahyde recliner. He glanced at his watch as he plopped down onto the cushions. It was late, but not that late for a gamer. “Someone’s got to still be online.”



“I think I found him,” reported Luke, as Dick finished arming the nuclear EMP device. “But it’s weird.”

Dick kept his eyes on his work. The timing component was a bitch to set with his pudgy fingers. “What’s weird?”

“The only avatar he has in-world at the moment is a newbie.” He typed in a few additional keystrokes. “And it’s just sitting in one place, not moving. I thought you said he played all the time.”

Dick glanced up. “Maybe his old one died. Maybe he’s on a bathroom break. Who the hell cares? Can I talk to him or what?”

Luke gave Dick a hard look, but Dick just broke contact and turned back to his task. “You know,” said Luke with an edge to his voice, “you’re pretty crabby when you’re on a mission.”

Dick didn’t respond. Luke’s statement rung true, but what of it? Arming nuclear weapons and being instructed to gack your partner at the end of the mission tended to make a guy tense. “Just type in what I tell you to say,” he finally said as he continued to dial in the timing data.

Luke sighed. “You’ve got to be where he is to talk. You can’t shout across the entire Reality 2 Be universe.”

Dick grunted without looking up. “So get me there or ... you there, I guess. Whatever. Where’s he at?”

A glance showed that Luke was booting up The Dewdster to insert him back in-world. In a matter of moments, the avatar was streaking through the sky in a ballistic arc. Dick finished with the timing mechanism and, after a quick glance down the aisle for the row of

cubicles to make sure their guards were still standing their posts, disinterested in their activities, he turned his attention back to the screen of Luke's laptop.

The avatar had reached the apogee of its flight and was descending in a smooth, flat arc toward a point in an area of mountainous wilderness in the Reality 2 Be universe.

Suddenly, Luke's movements became jerky and agitated. All the color drained from his face. "Shit!" he exclaimed, more loudly than Dick really liked. "Shit. Shit. Shit."

"What?" replied Dick. "And keep your voice down."

"Your kid's avatar is just sitting and waiting in that ring of boulders. There's another avatar there, too." His fingers typed madly on the keyboard for the cubicle computer. "Another newbie." The circle of boulders grew more prominent on the laptop screen as The Swuush approached. "Damn. Damn. Damn." The oversight menu popped onto the cubicle screen.

"So," whispered Dick, with growing irritation. "What's the problem with that?"

Luke stopped muttering at the screen and turned to look at Dick. "That's where the team I was on made its last contact with the Chinese dissidents."

"Coincidence?" asked Dick, knowing it wasn't true. A vision of Seth in his green "Free Tibet" t-shirt flashed into his mind.

"No," replied Luke in a flat voice. He pointed to the screen for the cubicle's computer, sci-fi green letters glowing steadily. "He's got the same amount of maypoles we were carrying for the exchange. I think your kid was my squad leader."

Dick felt like he had taken a 9mm round in the center of his chest body armor. The shock was massive and it was hard to breathe. "He didn't ... he isn't involved in anything seriously bad, is he?" In his mind's eye, he saw that old Christmas tree teetering as Seth tugged on it, wavering toward the tipping point and the inevitable crash and mess that would follow because Dick hadn't been paying attention. He blinked away the memory and looked over at his companion. His voice caught, but he choked out the words. "Tell me I didn't raise a terrorist."

Luke gave a wry smile. "Your kid's not a terrorist. He didn't do anything I didn't do. He wasn't involved in anything evil—not like the shit Pao Fen Smythe and the Maori guys were doing. He was just being naively idealistic, like me, helping oppressed people. At least, that's

what we thought. But that doesn't mean that the Chinese and ..." Luke swallowed hard, "and ... others don't want me and him dead."

The pieces of the puzzle slammed into place in Dick's mind. He knew now why Luke's face had gone deathly pale. "He's just a kid," Dick blurted out. "The Subsidiary wouldn't ... couldn't ..." Even though he had been tasked to eliminate Luke for compromising the agency with his extra-curricular espionage and it was clear Luke had figured it out, he somehow couldn't bring himself to say the words out loud. He couldn't say "The Subsidiary won't kill him like they're having me kill you." Instead, he simply said: "He's got nothing to do with the agency."

Still, he saw from Luke's face that the computer geek got his meaning. "Fuck the agency," spat Luke with bitterness. "The squad's been compromised by the Chinese government. They could be after him right now."

Dick lunged at the keyboard for the laptop. He had to warn Seth. He had to save his son from the fate that faced Luke if he ever left the complex beneath DIA alive. He toggled on the IM switch for in-world communications and began punching at the keys with his pudgy fingers. The same pudgy fingers that moments before had been setting the NE 417 to wipe-out a virtual world in an attempt to save the real world, were now jabbing at the keyboard, trying desperately to save his son, his family—the only world Dick cared about at this moment.

Luke had scrambled out of Dick's way as he had lunged for the keyboard, but a lanky hand snaked its way to the corner of the keyboard as Dick began typing. "All caps means shouting in-world," he said simply and pressed the button down as Dick continued to type.



Brian was already typing out a plea to call 9-1-1 to every group email list he had, when Seth leaned forward to do the same. As he did, he saw an unfamiliar avatar come jetting into the circle of stones in Reality 2 Be. He was about to ignore it—contact or no, he had no time for Chinese dissidents right now—when the IM function came on.

*seth itS DAD YOU'RE IN DANGER*

What the hell? Dad? Could it really be his dad? Or was it a trick to distract him while the fire blazed away?

*Prove it*

The screen cursor flashed a few moments while Seth waited, Brian typing furiously at his side.

*YOUR MOM LEFT YOURE TUBEING WTH BRIAAN*

Holy crap, it was his dad. His hands flew over the keyboard.

*Trapped in brian's house by fire. CALL 911 helpo us!!! Doorr blocked*

*GO THRU WALLL*

*Cant Dont type, call*

*FREND CALLING NOT OUTSID WALL, INTEREOR BTWN STUDS*

*Basemnt. Stairway door wont break*

*WALL AT TOP OF STAIRS NOW*

Why hadn't he thought of it? The wall, the cool right wall at the top of the stairway. It was nothing but drywall. He glanced over at Brian, who was sending yet another bevy of messages. Seth grabbed the Diet Dr. Pepper soaked towel, as he headed to the ever more-fiery stairway.

"Soak a shirt or something and follow me. We're going through the right-hand wall at the top of the stairs." Seth saw Brian grab another open bottle of soda pop and empty it over his head. Then Seth saw nothing but smoke and flame as he rushed toward the stairway inferno that was now their only hope.

Gulping in a huge breath of foul air, Seth leapt into the flaming staircase, leaping up as many steps as he could at a time, his eyes shut tight against the flames and the smoke and the heat, until he sensed he was high enough. Then, without slowing down, he crashed hard to his right into the wall near the top of the stairs.

He felt the drywall crack and give. Seth braced his left foot on the flaming, carpeted tread of the stairs and thrust into the wall again, ramming his right knee painfully up into the crack at the same time. He broke through, but the ragged edge of the drywall against his throbbing knee revealed the hole was much too small. He gritted his teeth against the horrific, fiery pain now licking its way up his legs from his melting, blazing shoes. He knew he only had one more chance to succeed.

Seth expelled the air burning to escape his lungs with a guttural roar as he rammed his body against the weakened wall with all of his remaining strength. The plasterboard gave with a sharp crack and he fell forward into the smoke-filled, but cooler, dining room on the first floor of Brian's house. He could see and feel the fire consuming the

kitchen through the walk-through pantry to his left. He could also sense his friend coming up from behind.

“Go, to the right, over me!” he croaked and felt Brian’s athletic shoes scramble over his thighs and butt, then leap for the relative safety of the dining room. “Don’t stop. Window!” he yelled hoarsely as he tried desperately to bring his legs—his jeans now fully ablaze he knew—underneath him to join his friend.

“C’mon!” he heard Brian yell. Then he heard a crash of glass as Brian took his advice and leapt through the bay window of the dining room. As Seth looked to see if his friend had been hurt by the breaking glass as he escaped, he caught view of the automatic sprinkling system giving the fresh sod a refreshing overnight watering.

So close.

Seth longed for the cool wetness of the grass as he continued to struggle to stand, to escape, to survive ... to make his dad proud. Then a wave of night air surged into the house through the open window and the hellfire consuming him roared in approval, rushing forward to devour the fresh source of oxygen and everything else in its path.

A siren in the distance wailed in response.

Then he heard no more.

## CHAPTER 28

Luke hung up the phone. “The fire department is on their way.”

Dick stared at the laptop screen in an apparent daze. The two avatars on screen were motionless, as if dead. The IM chat box was still, the last entry simply reading: “SON?”

“He’s not answering,” Dick whispered to the universe. “He’s not answering.”

Luke had kept one eye on the ongoing dialogue as he had placed the call to 9-1-1. He had been relieved to get an outside line, even more relieved when directory assistance had quickly put him through to the fire department in the Jersey suburb that Dick had told him during his frantic exchanges on IM was home. He put his hands on top of Dick’s on the keyboard. “He followed your advice. It was good advice.”

“I should have been there. I should have been at home. Then he would be safe at home ... not trapped by a fire because he was staying with a friend.”

“He’s not online anymore because he took your advice. He left to escape. He might be safe.”

Dick’s eyes did not move from the screen.

Luke eased the laptop away, called up a new screen and began to type furiously. “I’m letting HQ know about Seth and the fire. Maybe they can help.”

He saw Dick’s mouth try to form words, but nothing came out.

“Don’t worry. It’s a dead drop IM account the techies use to ask each other to cover when they take a long lunch. It’s secure.”

Dick remained unresponsive, motionless.

Luke’s eyes caught movement. Egbert was talking to the guard at one end of the aisle. Damn. The outside call. He thought he had heard a click on the line. Egbert clearly knew something was amiss.

Luke grabbed Dick by the shoulders and turned him so they were staring at each other straight in the face.

“We’ve been made.” Luke flicked his eyes to the EMP device. “Is that armed and running?”

Dick nodded dully, but his eyes seemed to be coming back to life.

Luke shook his mentor lightly. “The guards are coming. What do we do? What do we do?”



It was like waking up back in the Army Rangers to the sound of a mortar round exploding sixty feet away. The fog lifted quickly, dissipated by adrenaline and gentle shaking. In a matter of seconds, Dick was in full combat mode.

He quickly untangled himself from Luke's well-meaning grasp and checked the guards at either end of their cubicle corridor. There was no time, almost no time at all.

He reached into his belt at the small of his back and came out with a 9mm handgun. As Luke's eyes widened in terror, Dick leaned out of the cubicle and snapped off two shots, dropping the guard to the north and causing Egbert to dive awkwardly for cover nearby. Then Dick spun and did the same thing in the opposite direction. The guard there had already brought his weapon up and managed to squeeze off a poorly-aimed burst before joining his companion in the hereafter. The burst made a thundering racket and scored chips into the concrete wall close by, but caused no damage to Dick or Luke. It did, however, trigger a cacophony of screams and shouts from the scattered personnel that remained in the cavernous computer center during night shift.

This was bad. If Egbert got to a phone, the exits would be secured and reinforcements would flood the area. Sure, the EMP would probably go off before the bad guys could get to it. The explosion would destroy the facility, completing Dick's task to eliminate Luke for him and killing off a bunch of bad guys in the bargain. But Dick hadn't been planning on getting caught in the blast. The plan had been to live through the mission. He prayed he still had something to live for.

His eyes darted about, desperate for anything which might spark an idea how to get out of this particular basement fireball. His situation wasn't so different from Seth's; it was just entirely of his own making.

His gaze fell upon the sprinkler system. He grabbed a piece of paper out of his pocket and shoved it at his still stunned partner. The paper had four digits printed on it.

"What?" muttered Luke.

"It's Egbert's extension. Call it. If it goes to machine, hang up and call it again. Keep doing that 'til I tell you to stop."



Luke looked dumbfounded, but Dick saw him move to obey. Luke was a good kid, despite all the trouble he had caused. Hell, even Dick had been idealistic when he was younger.

Dick reached into the duffel bag and pulled out several flares. He popped the cap on one and used it to strike the end. An intense reddish flame sputtered to life with a hiss, producing a billowing stream of white smoke.

“Flares? You brought flares?” murmured Luke.

“I thought we might have to go somewhere in the dark,” growled Dick, as he leapt onto the desktop of the cubicle. He held the lit end of the flare up to the heat sensor near the sprinkler head directly above.

It took only a few seconds for the heat sensor to melt in the red flame. The sprinkler valve released, triggering a chain reaction down the line and across the cavernous room. A heavy, white gas began to pour from the sprinkler heads as an ear-splitting alarm began to sound. While still atop the desk, Dick hurled the sparking flare as far as he could toward an area where he could see no people. He struck another flare and dropped it on the other side of the cubicle wall from where they sat into a pile of paper print-outs. He knew the fire wouldn’t cause major damage—the Halon 1301 would see to that—but he had to make sure the gas kept coming. That meant he had to engage in a little pyromania. He lit the last of his flares and looked about at what he had wrought.

Smoke was curling up from the cubicle next door and from the area where he had thrown the first flare. Gas was gushing down from sprinkler heads across the facility. Alarm bells rang and lights flashed near the main exit. Despite the deafening noise of the alarm, he heard urgent shouts of panic.

He scanned the room for enemies. Every person he saw was bolting in apocalyptic abandon for the main exit.

He looked down to see Luke looking up at him, eyes wide with fright and confusion, the handset for the desk phone still in his hand. Luke’s finger poised over the redial button on the keyboard of the deskset phone.

“Tell me when it pauses between rings,” Dick shouted.

Luke’s mouth fell open, but he made no immediate response. Finally, Dick’s words seemed to register on his face. Luke put the handset hard against his ear as he pressed the redial button on the deskset. “Pause,” he yelled back at Dick. “Pause ... pause ... pause.”

Dick strained his ears in every direction between Luke's rhythmic yells of "pause." There! The sound was faint against the clamor of the alarm, but Dick was sure of the cadence, sure of his destination.

He leapt off the desk into the swirl of heavy, fire squelching, gas, now more than knee-deep on the floor. He abandoned his knapsack and the NE 417 EMP mechanism, which was hidden by the dense, swirling Halon 1301. "Follow me!" he yelled and took off at a full run down the corridor, almost tripping on the dead guard at the end, who was hidden by the ever-increasing amounts of bromotrifluoromethane cascading down. Every sprinkler head in the room continued to spew forth white, heavy gas in an effort to extinguish both the minor fires Dick had set and, coincidentally, every oxygen-breathing creature left inside the secret world beneath DIA.

Dick paused for a moment during his flight to finish off his act of arson. Using his last flare, he torched another paper-strewn desktop, along with the fabric covering of the cubicle wall. Both fires were still above the level of the fire squelching Halon, for now. They would keep the flow of gas coming.

He took off again. As he did, he could hear Luke running and stumbling along behind him.

"Where are we going?" his friend shouted. "The exit's the other way."

Dick did not slow down. There was no time. The Halon was accumulating faster than he had guessed it would. "Egbert's office," he tossed back over his shoulder. "I located it by the ringing phone."

The two ran in silence for a few seconds, their fast passage setting off little whorls in the heavy gas to either side as they passed, tiny tornadoes of oxygen-depriving death.

Finally, Dick heard Luke gasp. "Fine. Why?"

Dick arrived at the larger, higher walled, cubicle from which he had heard the phone ringing less than a minute before. "In here."

He immediately began searching, glancing up as Luke turned into the cubicle, gasping from the run and coughing from the swirls of gas which billowed up in front of him as he turned the corner and halted.

"I'm betting our lives Egbert didn't leave his mine diving gear in the trunk of his car." He tore open cabinets and a narrow coat closet in a desperate attempt to find the equipment.

A glance at Luke showed Dick that the kid understood not only what was at stake, but also what he was looking for. As possible hiding places became more and more scarce, the lanky kid dove into the

cloying, white gas underneath the desk. Almost fifteen seconds passed before Luke reappeared, dragging a heavy red bag. Dick took it from him as the kid gasped for fresh air, pulling himself up by pushing off the desktop to get at the slightly clearer air above.

Dick grabbed at the bag, ripping the zipper open so fast it gave a high-pitched whine. He reached in and pulled out the scuba gear—a regulator, mask, and two bulky canisters of compressed oxygen. He searched the pockets and zippered pouches of the bag frantically.

Luke, now standing atop the desk and breathing heavily, but without coughing, looked down at him. “What are you looking for? You’ve got everything you need. Oxygen. Mask. Regulator.”

The gas crept over the level of the desktop, tendrils twirling around pencil holders and reaching into the crevices of the desktop keyboard as Dick kept searching the bag. “A spare regulator ...” he replied as his search ended unsuccessfully. He looked up at the lanky Australian computer geek. A smart, good, well-meaning kid, who had gotten in over his head and who, in just a few more minutes, would literally be in over his head, breathing an inert gas that would starve him of life.

Not his son, but somebody’s son.

“We’ll just have to share ...” Dick offered as his hands worked quickly and efficiently to turn on the oxygen and set up the regulator. “You know, buddy breathing. Not optimal, but it’ll do.”

Luke gave a gentle, sighing huff. “We both know I’m dead anyway. Here, from the gas or the bad guys ... or you. Outside from the Chinese.” The kid looked up and scanned the immense room. “The main exit’s shut, but there seems to be a door on the south wall, about a hundred yards down. Trail your hand against the concrete wall and you can’t miss it.”

Dick filed away the information, but still hesitated. This wasn’t how it was supposed to be. This wasn’t how saving the world was supposed to feel.

“Go,” urged Luke. “Oxygen deprivation isn’t a bad way to go, not compared to what my other alternatives might be outside. Save yourself. Save the world again another day. *Go find your son.*”

With that, Dick pulled down the facemask, inserted the mouthpiece of the regulator and dashed for the cubicle entrance. The gas was even deeper in the corridors, where it could disperse without having to seep around corners. In seconds, Dick was immersed in a milky fog, unable to see Luke, unable to see ahead, unable to see what the future might bring.

He trailed his right hand along the concrete wall and stumbled through the haze of frightening emotions and deadly gas engulfing him from all sides. He trusted his partner to get him to safety.

He came to a door, groped blindly for the handle until he found it, then twisted and pushed. He leapt through the opening into the unknown.



“How the hell did he get out of there?”

Matt saw one of his targets crash through the dining room window into the cool spray of the sprinkler watering the front lawn. He knew what that would mean and immediately threw down the thermal imaging scope before the sensors were overloaded and the screen blanked out. He saw the fireball caused by the sudden rush of air into the superheated colonial without any electronic enhancement, but it was still better than the any of the slow-mo, multiple camera angle renditions you always saw in action flicks. A few seconds later he felt, more than heard, the shock wave from the fireball moving through the silence of the wee hours. The unconfined fire was now bright against the night sky, destructive and chaotic against the ordered sameness of the suburban subdivision. Matt loved the look and feel and sound and taste and smell of an inferno; it brought him joy. Even more important, it brought death to the enemies of his people—an act of war that would never be known as such. Instead, it would be investigated by the local fire inspector and catalogued as an unfortunate combination of stupidity and decorative candles.

Made in China, no doubt.

The fierce flames consuming the wooden structure made it clear to Matt that the second target, whichever one that was, was probably not coming out of the inferno alive, but he could see the first one still moving weakly on the grass.

He might survive. Worse yet, he might talk. Neither was acceptable.

Matt started up his vehicle and rushed to help. A passerby—a good Samaritan, they called them here—might check for breathing and give resuscitation, pinching the nose closed to force the air into the victim’s lungs, but not actually blowing in the mouth when he covered it with his own. Or he might lean a bit too hard on damaged lungs or break

a few ribs when attempting to give CPR. Even with an ambulance and paramedics on the way, this could still look like an accident and he could still fade into the night, mission accomplished, and return to Denver on the first flight out to complete Pao Fen's little cyber-location task.

Matt would complete his task—on the lawn, in the ambulance en route to the emergency room, in the hospital if he had to, although he preferred to avoid those warehouses of disease, decay, and death. From his experience, they were crueler to the victims, even the survivors, than he would ever be, at least without good reason.

He would succeed. The price for failure was too high.

He pitied his counterpart—the assassin assigned to take out the other two members of this anti-Chinese cell. One of his counterpart's targets was missing. Maybe the target would reappear, but there was some chance the target had rabbited, fading into the mists. In that case, the assassin dared not return to the General—to China—until he found and eliminated the target, even though the target might never be found, dead or alive.

## CHAPTER 29

Dick slipped through the heavy, steel door and pressed it shut behind him. It wasn't that he feared being followed. With the Halon 1301 filling the enormous facility and the NE 417 within ten minutes of detonation, no one still inside that room would ever be seen by anyone again. He did, however, want to block the Halon 1301 from filling the dimly lit corridor which stretched in front of him and he didn't want to be backlit in case there were guards up ahead. Besides, one more piece of metal between him and the blast and radiation of the NE 417 was a good thing as the seconds counted down. He might get delayed.

Dick didn't know with any precision where the tunnel went, but he could guess: A long flat area underneath the western runway, then a shift to the east and a gradual slope to the terminal and some other hidden entrance or exit to the facility. He didn't pause to consider it further. He took off at a jog, ditching the scuba gear noisily as he went. A small fluorescent fixture every fifty feet or so provided the only illumination. Aside from those fixtures and the conduits supplying them and larger conduits providing electrical, fiber optic, and cable feeds to the facility, there was nothing to see in the corridor. The floor, walls, and ceiling were all featureless gray concrete, although the concrete on the floor had been brushed to provide better traction.

Dick used the traction to increase his speed. Not only was a nuclear blast chasing him from behind, but there would undoubtedly be increased security at the exits. An alarm had been sounded. Somewhere Egbert would be reporting in to someone.

And there would be consequences.

Just as he figured, the corridor did make a hard left turn. Dick didn't bother to slow down and peek around the corner. If there was anyone there, they would have heard him coming and would probably be expecting him to do just that. Of course, they didn't know what was about to happen in what was now nine minutes. Being cautious was more likely to get him killed than being reckless—at least at this distance from ground zero.

No one waited around the corner. Instead, the corridor stretched for hundreds of yards ahead before the next turn. The slope angled upward as he had suspected. His escape route was as featureless and regular as the way he had already come, so Dick did his best to increase

his speed yet again, despite the slope. There were no hidey-holes or side tunnels to conceal an ambush, so speed was definitely his friend. Besides, not only was he running for his own life, he was desperate, desperate to get to where he could find out what had happened to Seth. Did he even have a son anymore? Did Dick, himself, even have a life worth going back to, worth saving, anymore?

He ran and turned and ran again in heedless flight. Another corner, then another. His legs and his lungs burned by the time he could see the end of the corridor. Fucking altitude. He didn't care about the pain, but it's hard to hear when you're gulping for breath. And hearing is important when you're in the dark and your night vision is screwed up by a bright light every fifty feet.

Despite his handicaps, Dick saw a flash of light past the open exit of the tunnel and heard a rumble each time it appeared.

The underground tramway. The corridor came out somewhere in the tunnels for the underground tramway. For just a moment, Dick could literally see the light at the end of the tunnel. He could see, hear, and taste the future—escape from the bowels of DIA and a life for him back in New Jersey with Seth ... and Melanie if she would have him back.

And then there was a burst of automatic weapons fire—a MAC 10 by the sound of it—from the end of the corridor. He saw the muzzle flash near the corner of the exit, but no silhouette of the shooter. The guy was firing blind, based on the sounds of Dick's footfalls echoing off the concrete.

In same split second he perceived the situation, Dick's training began to implement a response, without Dick ever having to consciously think it through. Dick cried out in a sharp yelp, then dove for the floor, his echoing footfalls ceasing in a jumbled thump and clatter. As soon as he was prone, he brought his weapon to bear, sighting on the edge of the exit where he had seen the muzzle flash.

The mope of a guard fell for it. You just can't get good lackeys these days. Sure enough, the shooter not only looked around the corner to see the consequences of his random burst, he stepped out from behind his cover.

Dick squeezed the trigger of his weapon and the guard's brain matter exploded out the back of his head—not that the guy had made much use of it when it was still intact. Dick was back on his feet and running almost before the guard's limp body hit the concrete floor.

Six minutes to go.

The gunfire would probably attract attention, especially since everybody who knew anything about the underground complex was undoubtedly already on alert. Dick encountered no other guards in his rush for the exit, but there was a strong electronic hum in the air as he got to the end of the corridor.

He didn't slow to investigate, but did notice the edge of the corridor entrance was metal, not concrete, on all four sides. As he rushed through the humming framework, he felt a tug on his weapon and his Micro-Emmusive sunglasses flew out of his pocket and adhered to the frame. When a quick look around what was obviously a maintenance bay for the tramway revealed no immediate targets, he reached back and snagged his sunglasses back from the ceiling edge of the framework.

Cute. A running electromagnet at the corridor entrance to the underground complex would not only spook any casual interlopers, it would also scramble any electrical devices they had brought along to document the existence of the facility their conspiracy theories commanded must exist. Digital cameras, electronic recorders, even communication devices would be wiped or scrambled by the strong field. A field that strong could even induce nausea and disorientation if you stayed in it too long. Dick doubted his sunglasses would ever work properly again.

His glance back also revealed a few other things that would simultaneously discourage entrance to the corridor and fuel the conspiracy buffs. The wall surrounding the corridor was adorned with various symbols. Dick didn't recognize them all, but they ranged from the standardized biohazard and radiation hazard warning symbols to the kinds of things you always saw in bad slasher movies about Satanic cults. Pentagrams, evil eyes, that kind of crap. There were also a few symbols in writing that was alien to Dick and undoubtedly meant to look alien to anybody else.

He started to smile—it was a nice piece of handiwork, even if it was done by bad guys—then he remembered the time. Five minutes, maybe? Four?

He looked down at his watch, but it had been fried by the electromagnet.

Damn.

He quickly scanned the maintenance bay. Aside from the angled tunnel connecting the tracks of the bay with the main tramway run, a small staircase of six concrete steps led to a landing with a metal door.



He grabbed the metal piping that served as a railing to the concrete stairway and vaulted up to the landing, twisting the knob and pulling open the door in a fluid movement. A faint, sharp smell greeted him as he looked in to see a workroom lined with spare parts, worktables, power equipment, and tool boxes. Another, linoleum-tread staircase led upward at a right angle from the far end.

Dick scooted between the workbenches and started to turn the corner to take the stairs up when he suddenly saw booted feet at the top end of the stairs coming down. Muffled shouts of “Hurry!” and “Intruder!” convinced him this was not the late night janitorial crew. He gave a thought to blasting his way out, but that could take awhile—certainly longer than four minutes—if there were reinforcements up above. Besides, someone might also come up on him from behind during the firefight. He didn’t want to get trapped.

Instead, Dick darted back through the workroom, his eyes flicking over the equipment for any assistance it might give. There were plenty of screwdrivers if he needed a makeshift weapon for hand-to-hand combat, a wheel assembly he could pull off the table to slow the way of someone following him, some brake pads that might have enough asbestos in them to give someone mesothelioma thirty years from now, and a lathe that would undoubtedly be featured prominently if this was a fight scene in a spy movie, but nothing that was of any real practical assistance in his situation.

Then he saw it, next to the lathe, near the door where he had first entered the room—the source of the sharp scent he had smelled when he first came in and which he had automatically attributed to another attempt to discourage visitors. A rectangular stainless steel container, festooned with warnings of the hazards of skin contact, held benzene, used for cleaning grease and grime off metal parts and workmen’s hands—OSHA might require the warning labels, but nobody made the workers read them or obey.

In violation of everything OSHA stood for, Dick dumped the benzene on the floor and, after opening the door to the maintenance bay to make sure he had an exit, reached into his pocket and flicked his lighter, touching it to the near edge of the clear pool of liquid and pocketing it again as he exited the workroom to a whoosh of flame.

Sure, he could have tossed the lighter onto the vaporizing benzene to light the flame, but you never knew when a lighter would come in handy, even if you didn’t smoke. This one had already saved his butt today and he wasn’t home free yet.



Even though it was late, Dee was still awake. Thornby and Calloway had been out of contact now for hours and hours. Although she knew all of the reasons why that might be necessary, she still couldn't help but worry. It wasn't that she fretted for her agents' lives. She had given the termination order on Calloway herself and Dick knew the risks of his profession. Besides, he was a bit of a jerk—too reckless, too focused, and too fond of heavy weaponry. Useful in certain situations, to be sure, but not someone who would ever advance above his current station at the Subsidiary.

She wasn't worried about Dick's life or his prospects for a career path. But she did worry about the life and prospects of the Subsidiary. She cared about its missions and she worried about the collateral damage those missions might cause. It wasn't that she was squeamish about civilian casualties. If she was, she never would have been put in a position of authority at the Subsidiary. She understood sacrifice for the greater good.

Everybody knows, for instance, that when you build a major bridge or a dam it's more than likely three or four people will get killed in the process. Accidents happen. But the project still goes forward, because the benefit is worth the cost. Global security is worth a much, much higher cost than some damn infrastructure improvement and it is a price she and the Subsidiary were willing to pay.

No, Dee worried about collateral damage only because deaths raised the profile of a mission. That, in turn, risked exposing the Subsidiary. Exposure of the Subsidiary was the only cost she was not willing to pay. The world needed the Subsidiary too much.

Since she was up anyway, she sat at the kitchen table at her apartment, sipping herbal tea and catching up on electronic paperwork via her secure laptop. A chime indicated one of the national representatives was trying to contact her. She quit sorting email and entered the virtual meeting area.

It was the Chinese representative. She wasn't in the mood for this. "Greetings," she said by way of acknowledgment.

"Traitor Luke Calloway has disappeared," shouted the Chinese representative, the new accent program on the voice modulation kicking in so heavily she could barely make out what the representative

was saying—if this program were ever used in the corporate world the ethnic minorities would have a ipso facto case establishing a racist work environment.

“That is an operational matter and none of your concern, representative,” she replied sourly. “Besides, I thought you wanted Mr. Calloway to disappear.”

“Our need to interrogate Mr. Calloway concerning his traitorous duplicity is our concern. While we do not interfere with the Subsidiary’s operations, we have a right to protect our sovereignty.”

“If you aren’t interfering with the Subsidiary operations, how could you possibly know Mr. Calloway is missing?”

The Chinese representative ignored her question. “I am sending an agent from ... I am sending an agent to interrogate Mr. Calloway. He will be on the next flight, connecting through Denver.”

It would be an unlikely coincidence, but she couldn’t let it happen. This “agent” could blow the operation if he ran into Calloway at DIA, assuming Thornby didn’t blow the place up. “Have your agent take the connecting flight through San Francisco, representative,” Dee replied. “While a few hours later, it is a much more pleasant journey and I assure you Mr. Calloway will not be available for interrogation earlier,” like, she thought, in my lifetime ... or his.

As soon as she finished, she sent an email to the Computer Services Department at HQ. “Remove the accent subroutine from the voice modulation program immediately. Deirdre Tammany, Director of the Subsidiary.”



Dick quickly wiped off his weapon and tossed it back into the angled tunnel to the maintenance bay. His ammo was low and he probably wouldn’t need the gun anymore. Getting caught by the TSA or airport security with a weapon was a bigger concern at this point than the possibility of needing to shoot his way out.

Dick ran into the empty tramway tunnel, ignoring the pinwheels and other artistic gewgaws that were among the bizarre artistic clues which brought him to this place. All he had to do was to run to one of the stations and he would escape, at least if his calculations of damage to the airport facility from the underground blast were accurate. As Dick began to race down the relatively well-lit tunnel,

though, a nearby pinwheel began to slowly turn. When he turned to look at it, he could feel a brush of wind on his cheek. A tram was headed toward him, the air being pushed by it causing the pinwheel art to perform for the airport patrons.

With two minutes to go, he couldn't wait for the tram to pass. He needed to make a run for it. Despite the oxygen-deprived altitude of the Mile High City, breathing wisps of bromotrifluoromethane, running almost a mile uphill, and engaging in a few fire fights along the way, Dick ran for his life.

Maybe it was his life flashing before his eyes as the moments ticked down to the nuclear blast below. Maybe it was the emotional baggage of Melanie leaving and his last, maybe the last, conversation with his son, Seth. Maybe it was a hallucinogenic combination of the benzene from the workshop mixing with the adrenaline coursing through his veins, but as he ran, Dick pictured a day years ago when he had sat with Seth, back before his first day of kindergarten. He had tried to teach the kid to read, so he would get a head start on school, on life. The words flashed before him.

Look.

See Dick run.

Run, Dick, run.

Then a light fell upon the page he was envisioning and he knew it was the tram behind, catching up to him. A station loomed ahead, but it was blocked by a wall of windows and automatically triggered doors. There was a space beneath the raised concrete walkway on the other side of the tunnel, if he could make it in time, but it would be hard to dive into its narrow concrete confines without leaving part of his body hanging out into the tramway tunnel. If he was lucky, the driver would see him in time to brake just enough so he wouldn't be crushed by the tram—though that also meant he would likely be herded up by airport security or worse. Before he had even finished the thought, Dick angled toward the opposite side of the tunnel and tensed for the awkward dive.

That's when he remembered. After all his trips through DIA, all the rides on the tramway, looking out at the bizarre art in the tunnel, sitting on the ledge at the front or the rear of the car, so you didn't have to stand with the crowd near the doors, all these last moments running for his life in front of the tram, he only now remembered. DIA trams have no drivers and no conductors. They also have a sensing system which slows the tram if anyone is in the passage in

front of it. He stopped pushing through the pain and glanced back at the tram, slowing behind him.

He dropped down to a walk. It slowed further.

He stopped, for just a second. It jerked to a halt.

A lone passenger in the front car stared out at him in confusion, but no one was radioing ahead to the authorities.

One minute.

He loped to the station, found an emergency button to open the doors, pushed himself up to the station platform and headed for the escalator, taking the steps two at a time as it moved.

When he arrived at the exit from the tramway into the main terminal of the airport, he noticed the blue and white metal airplane/birds that hung over the exit quiver as the NE 417 detonated beneath the western runway.

Most people in the airport would barely notice, but he knew the control tower would feel the vibration and the EMP would undoubtedly leak through a few conduits, blowing lights or circuits too near the epicenter of the blast.

All flights would be delayed. He headed for the exit and caught a cab to take him to Jefferson County Airport. He bummed a cell phone from the cabby and called in to HQ to request a charter flight and to report mission accomplished, details to follow.

Then he called Seth's cell phone.

No one answered.



The Lightning Team's black, specially modified Bell ARH-70 helicopter lifted off the roof of Catalyst Crisis Consulting's headquarters in Philadelphia less than two minutes after Glenn Swynton issued the emergency scramble call. Jake Martzen knew Swynton loved to press the team's buttons with constant drills, but this was a bizarre one: go to a house fire in suburban New Jersey only a few minute's flight time away and take "appropriate" action. It didn't make sense. They weren't a search and rescue squad; they were an assault and clean-up team. You only called in a Lightning Team when things were massively screwed up and, then, only if you weren't too worried about what the body count would be to make things right.

As the copter tilted far forward to accelerate to its maximum speed of more than 160 knots per hour, three more instructions from Swynton popped up on the heads-up view-screen on Jake's helmet: "This is not a drill. Save occupants. Remain unseen."

What the hell? How was he supposed to do that?



The house fire was an easy-to-find target destination. The copter whispered in on the ultrasonic rotation of its flexible, sound-dampening rotor blades, hovering over the yard next door to the fire for only a few moments while Jake's four-man squad rappelled to the ground in the fierce wash of the rotors and ran in low crouches toward the blaze. Then the copter gained height and banked away in the direction of the agreed rendezvous point—a schoolyard less than two blocks away.

Jake knew the squad didn't have much time. Even with the slower response time the village's volunteer fire department would have compared to a professional company, the hose-jockeys would be on their way soon. He'd heard the long, low wail of the departmental siren calling the volunteers to the station as the squad had flown in. Now that siren call had stopped, which meant the trucks were loading and about to roll. He was also worried about neighbors gathering to watch the blaze. With a late night fire, nearby residents might not notice the blaze until the village's fire trucks were roaring down the street, but you could never tell—their transport was stealthy compared to the average helicopter, but it wasn't completely silent and it did kick up a fair tempest flying just above the treetops.

In accordance with their quickly compiled deployment plan, squad members Peters and Mazerbaum kept their eyes peeled outward, looking for trouble or witnesses. Every thirty seconds, they reported status. "Clear one," whispered Peters over the headset, quickly followed by Mazerbaum's low "Clear two." Jake and his second-in-command, Cortez, moved into the front yard of the target house at speed, assessing the situation as sprinklers frittered away precious water on new sod while the house blazed nearby.

One body, a teenage boy, lay sprawled on the wet sod. Jake squatted and placed his fingers on the boy's neck, turning the boy's head away from himself as he did so, assuring he would not be seen if the boy

gained consciousness while Jake checked for signs of life. The kid was not only alive, but his pulse was strong. No doubt the kid had simply passed out due to smoke inhalation.

As Jake scanned toward the house, taking in the broken dining room window through which the teen in the yard had undoubtedly escaped, he saw another figure, this one amidst the flames of the dining room, near some broken plaster board. While the dining room table had protected the body from flaming debris, the body wasn't moving.

“Clear one,” cackled his headset. “Clear two.”

He heard the sirens of the fire trucks leaving the station.

Damn. There was no time.

Jake slung his weapon and grabbed a large piece of muddy sod with each arm and leapt toward the broken window. “Follow me in with a sprinkler,” he yelled as he threw himself through the opening into the hellish conflagration. He flung the dining room table to one side with a hard elbow thrust and threw the two heavy, water-laden strips of Kentucky Bluegrass on top of the motionless body, ignoring the hiss of steam as they landed on the victim's burning jeans.

“Clear one.”

“Clear two.”

A moment later Cortez was with him. Thankfully, Jake's second had followed instructions, grabbing a functioning sprinkler head and ripping it out of the soft mud. The flexible piping feeding the water to the sprinkler head had enough slack that it followed along for about ten or twelve feet before catching, bringing the cooling spray of municipal water into the dining room proper. Cortez angled the sprinkler head to provide as much coverage as possible for the now sod-strewn victim. Jake didn't know if the kid in the house was alive or dead, but there was no time to do more.

“Clear one.”

“Clear two.”

With a few brief hand-signals, Jake motioned for Cortez to follow and the two Lightning Team members exited the house. Elsewhere, the fire was blossoming, but in the dining room, the flames were dying down. It was one hell of a half-assed rescue, but all Jake could do, given their parameters.

As the squad hustled toward the rendezvous point, Jake squatted for a second time near the boy outside, gripping the teenager's right hand around the flexible tubing of the sprinkler system and quickly

smearing the kid's clothes with mud from another loose piece of sod, which Jake then left in a clump at the boy's feet. If the victim inside made it, the kid would be hailed as a fast-thinking hero, even if he professed not to remember anything.

Jake was okay with that. The world needed heroes. It didn't matter who got the credit.

"Clear forward," reported Peters.

Jake unslung his automatic rifle and faded into the darkness to follow the squad, content for the briefest instant that the team had completed their mission within parameters. But, he heard no confirming rejoinder from Mazerbaum for agonizing seconds.

"Vehicle inbound, rear," hissed Mazerbaum, watching out for Jake even as he and the rest of the squad hurried away down the street.

Jake froze as a car screeched to a halt in front of the flaming residence. Without even thinking, Jake sank into the shadows to watch this interloper as the rest of the squad rushed toward the school yard. Something was not right.

"Orders?" asked Cortez from up the street.

"Keep moving," ordered Jake. He would handle this alone, whatever it was.

Jake's eyes narrowed as he assessed the situation, noting that the car's headlights were out and that it bore car rental agency plates. A fit-looking Chinese man leapt from the car and rushed toward the teenager laying in the soggy, sod-strewn yard. When Jake saw the man quickly glance in either direction, then place his hands over the unconscious teenager's mouth and nose, Jake didn't hesitate.

In a blur of motion, Jake brought his weapon to bear. A split-second and a rifle-crack later, the Chinese interloper was thrown away from the body as a bullet slammed into the side of his head and exited the other side. Jake followed his bullet a heartbeat later, policing his brass with a quick grab and streaking toward the fallen man before the blood spatter of the kill even began to soak into the mud and grass. God, he hoped this guy wasn't just some random passing tourist who didn't know how to check for a pulse.

Expletives his momma would never know flew from Jake's lips as he snatched up the interloper's body, using a fireman's carry to hump it as quickly as he could to the waiting rental car. He opened the passenger door—there was no time to look for the trunk release—and dumped the body unceremoniously inside, head first in a jumbled heap. He shoved a trailing limb in and slammed the door, skidding



across the hood to the driver's side, wrenching open the door and clambering in. Fortunately the guy—the assassin?—had left the car running. Jake jinked the car into gear, flicked on the lights, and floored the accelerator, slowing only for a moment as he saw the fire engines turn down the street coming toward him.

“Get the hell out of here,” he barked over his headset to the squad. “I’ve secured my own ride and will meet you back at the barn.”

What the hell had just happened? And why?

Porch lights flicked on as Jake continued out of the subdivision with his unexpected, grim cargo. He drove with deliberate precision toward Philadelphia, obeying the speed limits and making sure to use his turn signals. Traffic stops could be a bitch when you’re driving a stolen car with a dead body leaking blood onto the center console.



Once at Jeffco Airport, Dick retrieved secure communications equipment from Nine-to-Five Business Charters, the Subsidiary's in-house air charter service. Before reporting on his mission, he insisted Glenn Swynton check on what had happened to Seth. By the time Dick finished briefing Dee Tammany on the details of his DIA incursion, including Luke's sacrifice, Glenn came back with a report. Dick listened intently to Glenn's recitation of details, but the whole thing made no sense to his weary mind.

Somehow a Lightning Team had beaten the fire department to the house, intercepting and killing a Chinese assassin, and dousing the flames long enough for the volunteer fire department to save the day, all apparently without being seen. Seth was alive, with smoke inhalation, as well as third degree burns over forty percent of his body. He was stable and in the midst of being airlifted to a Philadelphia trauma center. Brian had made it out of the house with fewer burns than Seth, but had also suffered severe smoke inhalation.

“A Chinese assassin?” Dick yelled. “You knew a Chinese assassin was after my kid and didn't tell me?” Damn lucky Glenn Swynton was on the other end of an encrypted cross-country phone line, because Dick would've killed him on the spot had he been on the jet, then dumped the body over the North Dakota badlands.

“We had no idea,” Dee interjected. “We still have no idea why.”

The Subsidiary had apparently not connected Seth and Brian to Luke's surreptitious activity. Had the Chinese? Or was this some kind of payback from some adversary from some unknown prior mission? "Then why'd you send a Lightning Team?" asked Dick, shaking his head to waken any remaining neurons.

"Mr. Calloway informed us your kid was in trouble," replied Glenn with a sniff. "We run training drills all the time. The helicopter was just sitting on top of the roof anyway."

Dee interrupted. "We take care of our own."

For a moment, Dick almost felt a touch of kinship with both Glenn and Dee, but then Glenn reverted to his usual heartless bastard motif by launching into a review of the cover story for the DIA incident. At this point, though, Dick was barely listening. He simply hung up and closed his eyes as the world slid beneath him.

He tried, as usual during long flights, to bring up happy memories of home and family, but once again they would not come. They might never return again. His wife had left him. His son was near dead, scarred for life, and Dick would probably never know for sure if it was because of him, because of what he did for a living.

The unspoken rule among spies is that you don't go after family members. But, of course, some spies—and even more bad guys—don't always play by the rules.

Dick leaned back heavily in the comfy leather seat of the charter plane, completely overwhelmed. He was dead tired—physically, mentally, and emotionally drained. He had hit the wall.

The words floated in front of his eyes, unbidden: *GO THRU WALLL*

He fingered his wedding ring as his eyes filled with tears. He had to call ... no, he had to see ... Melanie to tell her what had happened, to explain everything, to reveal he had lied to her. He knew it might be the last time he would ever see her. Deep in his soul he feared there was no coming back for them, no future after what he had allowed to happen. Still, he clung to the hope that it was not too late, that the horrific events of the day might somehow bring them together, that they could heal as Seth healed, that they could be a team once more, that Melanie would smile her dimpled smile once again ... at him.

He sent her a text message that he had to talk to her face to face ... at the house ... today. As he waited for her reply, he vowed he would never lie to her again, no matter what the Subsidiary wanted. You don't lie to your team. He would tell her everything, then take her to the

hospital. Seth needed her ... he needed her. He didn't think she would make him ask for help, but he would ask for her forgiveness, ask for her help ... whatever it took.

When his flight landed, he headed for home one last time.

He always did what had to be done.

He had been forced once too often by his job to go it alone. Things were about to change.

## EPILOGUE

If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, it still makes a sound. And if a secret underground facility is surreptitiously destroyed by a covert espionage agency using a nuclear-powered EMP device in the dead of night, it still gets noticed.

Seismic graphing equipment at The University of Colorado-Boulder registered a shockwave. Late night airport workers heard a faint rumble as the liquid in their coffee cups vibrated. The sprinklers in the maintenance bay for DIA's tram were triggered by a fire in the shop. Some runway lights blinked out, mostly along the western edge of the airport. Homeland Security's radiation sensors tripped momentarily and then reset. The ancient VCR in the DIA employee lounge started blinking "12:00."

Safety protocols kicked in. Flights were held up during the wee hours—inconveniencing few passengers, but delaying overnight cargo shipping. Pagers were beeped and on-call workers dragged out of bed. Airport authorities made sure everything was safe before flights recommenced the next day.

The Subsidiary was the unseen participant in getting things going again fast at DIA, as well as in explaining the "minor incident." Utilizing its spidery web of contacts in law enforcement, academia, government, and public relations, Glenn Swynnton's plausible cover story quickly took hold.

A natural gas explosion in the gangways for electrical and communications conduits had caused the tremor at DIA. The Subsidiary's contacts consistently referred to the minor blast as the "Burp," a catchy, trivializing term that caught on in a jiffy with airport employees and press, alike. While the Burp had caused little damage, it had released a pocket of radon gas, tripping the Homeland Security radiation sensors, but quickly dispersing in the open air.

Radon gas, as the population of western states well knows, is a naturally occurring radioactive gas found in certain geologic formations. The gas seeps into basements in sufficient quantities it can be readily detected by radiation sensors. Detection is important, because the radiation from the odorless, invisible gas can cause the same scary types of medical maladies caused by other, better known, sources of radiation. Out west, even residential housing often contains

ventilation systems in underground areas to prevent radon accumulation, along with the cancers and other sickness it can cause over the long-term.

After a few days, the news cycle moved on from DIA to other stories. The Burp disappeared from public view, even in the local press. Soon it was forgotten by most of the world, replaced by similarly fleeting stories concerning the latest celebrity gossip, the bankruptcy of a small gaming company called “Reality 2 Be,” and the gruesome details of the riverbank discovery of the bloated body of a thirty-one year old wife and mother most likely murdered when her jackass of a husband spied a younger, prettier woman with low self-esteem to control and belittle.

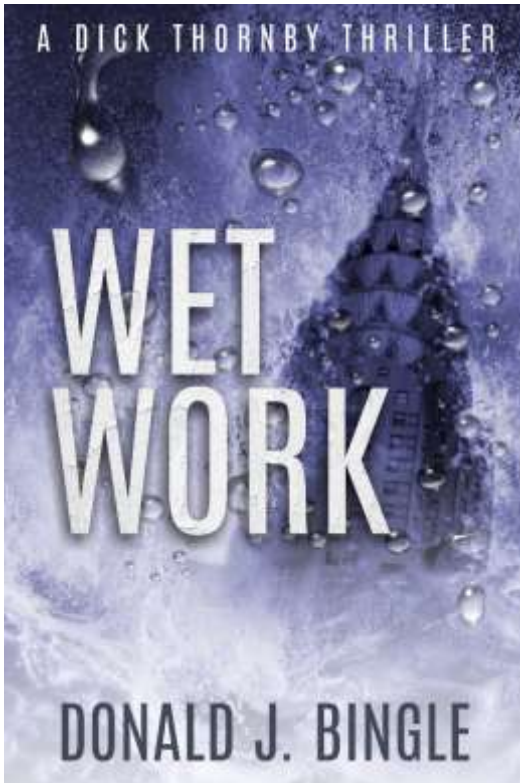
On the World Wide Web, the stories were somewhat different. Chatrooms were atwitter with technical discussions about minor disruptions and hardware glitches along the myriad pathways of the Internet—events all tracking to the time of the Burp. Spam filters filled with scams attempting to scare recipients into purchasing overpriced and ineffective radon detection and ventilation systems. And a coterie of websites by various fringe conspiracy enthusiasts attempted to reveal the truth about a massive explosion that had taken place in a warren of secret, underground tunnels and facilities beneath Denver International Airport.

Some of the websites revealed how the Gates of Hell were opened to allow demon lizardmen to gather their army for the coming Armageddon. Others reported on the matter/anti-matter explosion that resulted from the sabotage by slave laborers of alien technology situated in the hollow veins beneath the surface of the earth. And a few whispered about the nuclear destruction by a secret international espionage agency of a massive, EMP-shielded, computer facility run by international criminals and terrorists who were raking in billions through theft and manipulation of data sent over the Internet and setting themselves up for ultimate world domination.

Of course, no one believed any of it.

**THE END**

Dick Thornby returns in [Wet Work](#).



## AFTERWORD / ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Just in case you were wondering ... Yes, there are virtual and gaming worlds in which players spend substantial amounts of real money to buy imaginary things. In some such worlds the imaginary currency is exchangeable into U.S. dollars at a fixed exchange rate. Those mechanisms, and the ability of players to chat and exchange information, currency, and items through their avatars, are of real concern to police, financial, military, and security organizations.

Yes, there really are strange, unexplained words and items embedded in the floor of Concourse B at Denver International Airport, as well as some bizarre art elsewhere in and around the terminal. And, yes, there really are a variety of websites filled with a plethora of conspiracy theories associated with the airport, the airport's construction, and the meaning behind various pieces of artwork. I've changed some of the details here and there, but not the overall tone of what's contained on many such sites and their multitude of links, where you can find entire listings of the various underground fortresses in the United States and the sinister aliens, monsters, and fringe groups occupying them. Other sites, even respectable newspapers, have run articles on the DIA conspiracy theories, sometimes debunking them in some detail.

Yes, I know that some of the details about where things are at Denver International Airport are not correct. For one thing, there is a lot less use made of the second floor of all three concourses than is indicated in the book. No doubt, some critics who don't read this far will denounce me for not having bothered to go to the airport or for not bothering to research my novel.

The thing is, though, I am not a true believer of any of the DIA conspiracy theories, even though the art is the art and the statistics that I cited about amount of earth moved and cabling installed are from DIA's own information. The art and the conspiracy theories are useful real-world items to work into a piece of fiction, not pieces of a puzzle on which to base a non-fiction exposé. Accordingly, I do not really want to encourage too much investigation by fans of the book. Noticing the mentioned items next time you are at DIA is fine, but I discourage airport visitors from attempting to follow the trail, like the artistic clues in a Dan Brown novel, snapping pictures and interrupting

mundane passengers and airport personnel. Thus, I changed things up a bit in ways that were helpful to my pacing and plot, but which do not conform to reality.

Please keep in mind that Denver International Airport is a secure environment and a working business. It is clear to me that airport personnel are already tired of being asked about the artwork. Do not bother them or anyone else at the airport if you go to look at any of the clues referenced in this novel or on many of the myriad conspiracy websites. Do not venture into secure areas or make yourself a nuisance. If you do, please do not blame me or my novel. Computerized research I've done for this book and my other books (*GREENSWORD* and *Forced Conversion*) and short stories has probably already attracted the attention of the NSA or other authorities—I really don't need the additional visibility with people who carry guns and own black helicopters.

My thanks for the many friends and fellow writers who have supported and encouraged me with this project and/or read all or some of the text and offered suggestions, including: Joni Holderman, John Helfers, Jean Rabe, Beth Vaughan, Feroze Mohammed, Tim Waggoner, Kerrie Hughes, Mike Stackpole, Marc Tassin, Dewey and Cheryl Frech, Steve Saus, Kathleen Tennant, Rick Holinger and the rest of the St. Charles Writers Group, The GenCon Writers Symposium, Linn Prentis, Bruce Steinberg, Tim White, Stephen D. Sullivan, and my family, including especially my wife, Linda, who puts up with my constant complaints about how bad the spies are in most popular movies and television shows.

Please go to my website at [www.donaldjbingle.com](http://www.donaldjbingle.com) to find out more about my writing or follow me on Facebook, Twitter, and Goodreads @donaldjbingle to hear my latest announcements. If you liked this book, please post a review and tell your friends, neighbors, social networking pals, and twitter buddies, as well as random passersby. If you didn't like this book, please just keep it to yourself—after all, you don't know who could be listening.

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St. Charles, Illinois

P.S. This version of *Net Impact* is a re-release with a spiffy new cover, published in connection with a Kickstarter for *Wet Work*, the



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# **WET WORK**

**Dick Thornby Thriller #2**

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**For Randall Lemon and Steve Glimpse,  
top gamers and Top Secret spies,  
for generations to come.**

## PROLOGUE

Jerry hated his wife's car. He loved the hybrid's gas mileage, and he didn't mind saving the planet for future generations, but he was six foot two and husky. Squeezing behind the wheel practically let him steer with his beer belly.

Worse yet, his claustrophobia was heightened by a smoke-belching stream of growling Mack trucks hemming him in as they hauled gravel down the double black diamond sloped street plummeting to the intersection at the entrance to the Joliet bridge. The rusting, Erector Set style span crossed both the shallows of the Des Plaines River and, on the near side, the darker, deeper Sanitary & Ship Canal. With traffic moving, Jerry felt like he was running with the bulls at Pamplona as powerful behemoths thundered about him. When stopped for a red light, like now, he felt like a surfer caught in the break as he paddled out, praying a monstrous wave wouldn't crash down from above and pulverize him.

So Jerry kept his eyes glued to the rear view mirror ... just in case.

Today his watchful paranoia paid off. A fully-loaded dump truck crested the hill with the momentum of a tsunami, threatening to obliterate him like one of the splattered moths littering his windshield.

Damn.

Jerry manhandled the wheel hard left as he checked for oncoming traffic, then punched the accelerator to escape being rear-ended to death.

The subcompact whined like an overstressed golf cart, inching to the left until the gas motor kicked in, then trembled into stuttering acceleration. Jerry stared at the mirror, watching as gravel flew off the looming truck's payload and skittered across the roof of its cab. The unshaven driver inside braked hard, his eyes wide, a lit cigarette falling out of his surprised mouth, as his body lurched forward from the attempted emergency stop.

It was going to be close, closer than Jerry's morning shave with the quadruple blade razor the kids got him for Father's Day.

Jerry wasn't a religious guy, so no prayers whispered forth as he watched his ignominious death approaching, his grim reaper laying black rubber on the pavement and churning out white smoke as worn tires tried to overcome the momentum of tons of loose, shifting rock. Instead, a stream of invectives flowed from Jerry's lips as he imagined the huge tires of the gargantuan machine rolling atop his wife's mouse of a car and stomping it down, greasy, bloody, and flat. He was going to die a stupid, needless, painful death simply because his wife traded days for the neighborhood carpool to school.

He hoped she would feel guilty about it at his funeral.

Closed casket, of course.

But, then ... then the crappy automatic transmission shifted up. Jerry leaned forward instinctively, as if that could possibly save him. As he swerved farther into the open lane on the left, the truck driver jinked right toward the curb and the empty sidewalk, each action incrementally slowing the rate at which the gap between the vehicles was shrinking.

Maybe, just maybe ...

Suddenly, the hybrid farted forward, as if it had just seen what was about to happen via its reverse view camera. Jerry kept his foot on the floor—he didn't want to take any chances. He couldn't do the math to figure the angles and vectors, but his big, fat gut told him he was going to make it. His pursed lips turned up into a tight smile. But when he looked ahead he saw a lumbering garbage truck turning into the oncoming lane from Canal Street, which fronted the dark, murky waters of the commercial canal.

Jerry had snatched his life from the jaws of defeat only to thrust it into the jaws of a Browning-Ferris Industries garbage truck. He kept the steering wheel hard to the left, hoping to jump the opposite curb to the far sidewalk. With any luck he could stop before he reached the corner and t-boned the big, green machine with “BFI” blazoned on its side. He twitched his foot up and to the left, then stomped down on the brake as hard as he had flattened the accelerator only moments, yet an eternity, before.

Nothing happened.

Nothing fucking happened.

His foot ground the pedal against the floor, but the brakes did not engage. He searched frantically for the center-mounted emergency brake with his right hand as he gripped the wheel tight with his left, his eyes wide and forward, scrutinizing this new terror. Jerry’s fingers grazed the emergency handle for a millisecond before the bump from bouncing over the curb flung them up and off, grasping at air. He jerked the wheel to the right now, straightening the car to avoid hitting the brick building flanking the sidewalk. At the same time, his foot stabbed repeatedly at the brake pedal. He gritted his teeth, bracing for the BFI, the Big Fucking Impact, to come. But somehow his lizard brain took over and he whipped the steering wheel back left again just at the correct moment, at the very edge of the corner.

The shitty car careened to the side, miraculously clearing the back of the garbage hauler by a whisker, avoiding the BFI.

There was a wondrous moment of sweet, sweet bliss before his still accelerating midget auto-coffin crossed the narrow breadth of Canal Street and rocketed up and off the grassy embankment. The toy car sailed into the air, defying gravity in glorious flight before arcing down and plunging into the stabbing cold, foul black waters of the Sanitary & Ship Canal. The windshield shattered upon impact, water enveloping him in a torrent as he sank deeper and deeper.

Fuck.

The only things he feared more than enclosed spaces were drowning and hypothermia.

Oh boy, a threesome; just not the kind he’d always craved.



The tiny car settled rear down from the weight of the batteries as Jerry—still trapped by the cold shock of the water, the heavy pressure of the deep, and an auto-tightened seatbelt—struggled for freedom. As the last wisps of faded gray-green light abandoned him, he watched in mounting terror as the air in the car rushed past him from behind, bubbling out through the broken windshield, seeking a sunny, warm freedom he would never know.

As his consciousness faded to match the cold black of the muddy bottom of the canal, one last thought flittered through his fading neurons.

He really, really hated his wife's car.

## CHAPTER 1

Dick Thornby stepped off the pathway in Singapore's Jurong Bird Park and eased into the foliage near the hundred foot tall waterfall dominating the spacious confines of the African Aviary. He tugged at his cap, making sure it nestled low against his aviator-style sunglasses, then eased off his backpack, accessing a pocket and slipping on a pair of latex surgical gloves. He was taking a chance by sneaking into a prohibited area to find cover, but he figured waterfall maintenance was generally handled when the park was closed. A pair of scenic overlooks atop the falls normally provided tourists a panoramic view of the four acre aviary, as well as his chosen perch. But he'd dropped a couple of clapboard signs indicating the pathways to those lookouts were closed for maintenance, guaranteeing his privacy.

That the waterfall was one of the most picturesque and most photographed features in the sanctuary didn't help his tactical situation. But between his camouflaged clothing and his "act like you belong wherever you go" movements, he didn't think gawking tourists would raise any issue. A suppressor threaded onto the end of the rifle barrel would minimize any flash when the time came to take his shot, as well as lessening the rifle's normally booming report.

Escaping after the fact would be good, too, and taking up a position in the enormous bird sanctuary literally as far from the park entrance as one could get was tactically suspect. On the other hand, there was no denying the top of the falls was the best spot to pick off his target during a scheduled meet with a local thug seeking to up the quality and the quantity of his gang's armaments.

He was willing to take some risks to pop Pao Fen Smythe—the Hong Kong arms merchant who had indirectly caused the death of his last partner and been the moving force behind his son's crippling third-degree burns. Yeah, he'd risk a lot to take out Pao Fen Smythe.

He crouched low as he crested the top of the falls and crept into the ornamental plants covering the plumbing and water filter access. Finding an acceptable perch, he settled in and scanned for optimal sightlines for a clean, clear shot. No sense pulling out his disassembled

MSG90A1 yet. He had more than an hour to go and he could assemble the weapon in less than thirteen seconds, even with surgical gloves on. No one but amateurs and movie thugs poked a barrel out of cover before the actual hit. Besides, many of the birders carried binoculars with prodigious magnification, though they were unnecessary in a park where the birds were enclosed in aviaries ... even one where the netting was more than a hundred and twenty feet above the ground. The African Aviary was so massive there was actually a station for the park's monorail system inside the netting. Of course, they'd closed the Panorail, as they called it, back in 2012. Apparently monorails weren't the transport of the future Walt Disney had thought they'd be.

Dick relaxed into surveillance mode as a small flock of Hildebrandt and Purple Glossy Starlings fluttered past, along with a pair of Whydahs. Birding was a good hobby for a spy. It reinforced skills needed for clandestine ops. Things like catching a flitter of movement out of the corner of your eye and being able to focus quickly on a precise spot to confirm the target location. Guys were better at detecting motion because the photoreceptors in their retinas boasted a higher proportion of rods to cones. Rods only required a few photons to fire, so they triggered in lousy light or from minimal movement. On the other hand, women were better at discerning color because their retinas included a higher proportion of cones, which triggered off of varying wave-lengths of light.

Spies trained to maximize both abilities. Dick could tell whether a distant avian sported a yellow eye ring like the Superb Starling poised nearby, its wings iridescent in the sunlight, or whether the Livingstone's Turaco perched on the feeder well below him had a red beak (yes) or yellow spots on its black toes (no). He could also identify the make of a rifle pointing down from a rooftop by its profile and identify a Chinese assassin in Tiananmen Square when everyone else in the open, crowded location was wearing practically the same damn thing. You could tell women had no power in Communist China; they all wore identical drab olive pantsuits.

But Dick hadn't come to Jurong Bird Park to beef up his birding skills or test his eyesight. He'd come to kill. And that was okay with him, at least in this instance. He didn't ordinarily enjoy this aspect of his

life as an agent for the Subsidiary, the worldwide clandestine organization devoted to keeping the planet safe when governments couldn't—or couldn't be trusted to—do the job themselves. It's just that he was, as HR recruiters always said, overqualified for the position. He was more than a trained killer. He was a trained spy—intelligent, resourceful, stealthy, clever, decisive, and skilled in surveillance, tracking, improvisation, and a hundred other disciplines used in the real world of espionage.

He hadn't used most of those skills in months, though, not since Denver International Airport. Luke Calloway, Dick's last partner, had died at DIA, helping Dick thwart one of Pao Fen's schemes. After narrowly escaping the DIA encounter himself, Dick had rushed home to New Jersey to find his college-aged kid, Seth, had been the target of an assassination attempt by way of arson. Seth made it out alive, barely, but suffered third-degree burns.

Retaliation was waiting in the wings.

Pao Fen Smythe was late, but that didn't worry Dick. Type-A personalities always tended to show up late for meetings. It was a way of demonstrating dominance, the whole “my-time-is-more-important-than-you-so-I'm-arriving-late-so-you-have-to-wait” macho bullshit. Big time arms dealers like Pao Fen also generally had bodyguards who, no doubt, would check the place out before the big guy entered the aviary.

Yep. Just as expected, two Chinese thugs arrived. Both had bulges under their jackets that weren't dancing pecs. They separated to scan both sides of the pathway as they made their way around the circuit in opposite directions. Tourists traveling as a group wouldn't do that. Of course, the fact they never looked up and their eyes never paused at the bird feeders or swarms of Carmine Bee-eaters or strutting Guinea Fowls made it crystal they didn't give a crap about birds.

Dick watched them as his thoughts drifted home. He blamed himself for his son's burns. Not just because Seth might have been safe if Dick had been home. No, Dick was at fault because Matt Lee, Pao Fen's favorite hitman, had set the fire. That meant Pao Fen had crossed the line between professional adversary and personal nemesis. And anybody who crossed that line shouldn't be surprised if Dick was willing to cross a few lines to retaliate.

He'd wanted his vengeance hot, but he couldn't rush things. Seth needed care and so did Dick's marriage. He couldn't devote his full time to his lethal quest and still pay Seth and Melanie both the attention they needed—they deserved. The powers-that-be at the Subsidiary weren't stupid, either. They knew Dick had a few things to work through and had limited him to local, low-level jobs for the most part since Denver. Lucky for him, one of those local jobs had involved a stateside arms dealer. That, in turn, led to information about Pao Fen's penchant for conducting his Singapore meetings at Jurong Bird Park. From there, it had been relatively easy to set up a fake meet for a specific date. He begged a few days off because of Seth's recovery and related "family issues," then booked a flight on his own dime and his own time to take care of business.

Dick crouched a tad lower behind the foliage, making sure to tilt his head so his sunglasses didn't glint toward the pathways. He hadn't provided any description of the mythical buyer Pao Fen was supposed to encounter when he'd set up this fictional rendezvous, so there was no way these guys would wave off their boss because his counterpart had yet to arrive. Instead, Dick had instructed Pao Fen to wait for his fellow gun aficionado to approach and identify himself by using the pass phrase "Excuse me, do you happen to have a piece of gum?" Given Singapore's draconian regulations about chewing gum in public, he had little worry someone would ask the question by accident. At the same time, the phrase was innocuous enough not to sound artificial.

Dick reached back and assembled his weapon, screwing a flash suppressor onto the threaded end of the muzzle.

He suspected the Subsidiary knew he was here, had tagged his international travel. Hell, they probably even knew why he was coming to Singapore. But the Subsidiary was a practical organization, not an idealistic one. They probably wouldn't mind if Pao Fen Smythe disappeared, as long as it didn't have any repercussions for them. They'd let this little frolic and lethal detour slide.

That didn't mean the Subsidiary would back him if his vendetta went sideways. The organization's first priority was to protect itself. Unilateral action was always risky. He could end up doing hard, long time in leg irons, breaking rocks in the hot sun by day and fighting off

assaults by prisoners or guards at night. Asian prisons were anything but pleasant; choking down cockroaches was the best source of protein in most work camps. Yep, getting caught would suck, and he already had enough suckage in his life.

A few minutes after the Chinese mooks finished their woefully inadequate walk-through, Pao Fen sauntered into the aviary, wearing his usual Panama hat. At least the arms dealer's low-life muscle followed two steps behind their leader, so Dick didn't have to worry someone would pull a Timothy McCarthy and fling his body in front of his target like the Secret Service agent who leaped in front of President Reagan while Hinckley was unloading his Röhm RG-14 revolver. Most people didn't realize Hinckley never directly hit the President with any of his six shots. The crazed wannabe assassin had just gotten dumb-luck fortunate; the President had been hit with a glancing ricochet off the Presidential limousine.

Dick was a much better shot than Hinckley. Hell, he was a much better shot than Oswald, who missed with at least one bullet, too. That was important, because he wasn't just going to let loose with a spray of automatic fire until the clip was empty. He didn't take those kinds of risks with innocent civilians about, especially kids. He hadn't been a fan of collateral damage before he joined the Subsidiary, and he was even less of a fan of it now. No, this had to be clean and precise.

Dick steadied the barrel against a faux boulder, took aim at Pao Fen's center of mass, exhaled, and squeezed the trigger. The 7.62 round slammed into the target's chest at supersonic speed, exploding out of Pao Fen's back, spraying his goons with blood as Pao flew back. His Panama hat tumbled off as he fell. Dick followed the body through his scope, having anticipated the likely trajectory of his target when struck. He quickly zeroed in on Pao Fen's shocked, still face staring straight up into the air, which was already beginning to fill with hundreds of startled, squawking birds of African origin. Dick ignored the tumult below and above and centered his second shot. Another slow squeeze and Pao Fen's head exploded, further showering the bodyguards with blood, brains, and bone, sending them scurrying back toward the aviary entrance as their wide eyes searched for a target at which to return fire.

## CHAPTER 2

Dick scrambled sideways, thrusting his left hand holding the MSG90A1 into the midst of the nearby waterfall and letting go. The sniper rifle disappeared into the spray and plummeted into the splash pool without a noticeable sound. It would be recovered, but not quickly. He hated wasting a good weapon, but it was hard to blend in with a crowd while carrying an unconcealed rifle, and he wasn't about to take even a few seconds to disassemble it. It was time he flew this coop.

He crouched low as he made his getaway. As he did, he stripped off his latex gloves, pocketing them as he headed to the nearest closed observation lookout, then ran along the walkway. He knew Security would not be on-site yet, and Pao Fen's troops had exited the field, so he wasn't too concerned about being identified by anyone with the ability and sworn duty to stop him. Soon he was back down to the level of the main pathways, joining the throng of startled tourists hastily exiting from the scene of the shooting. He slowed to match their speed and did his best to mimic their expressions of troubled panic. Thankfully, at five foot ten, he didn't tower over the crowd, even in height-challenged Asia. It helped, too, that Jurong attracted a large audience of Western tourists.

Of course, Pao Fen's guys and/or Singapore police—trained observers—could be waiting outside of the African Aviary, ready to corral, interrogate, arrest, or kill an escaping gunman. Dick needed another exit. He could cut the mesh enclosing the aviary and flee out the back of the park, but he'd discarded that idea when he'd first planned the hit. It wasn't just that the birder in him hated the notion of flocks of African birds escaping into the wilds of Southeast Asia, it simply wasn't practical. The mesh was built to be tough. Cutting it would be slow. Besides, the back of the park wasn't where he wanted to be; he couldn't blend in there. Instead, he stuck with the crowd thundering across the suspension bridge along the main path. Unlike the rest of the horde, however, he turned off at the Panorail station platform.

If he were in a James Bond movie, he would jump onto the top of a conveniently passing Panorail and somehow cling to the smooth roof as

the train traveled considerably in excess of its rated high-end speed. Then he would simply stand, strip off his camouflage windbreaker to reveal a perfectly pressed tuxedo, and hop into a waiting Aston Martin. But he wasn't James Bond, the Panorail had stopped running in 2012, and he was definitely getting too old for that kind of shit.

All that, however, didn't mean the Panorail system wasn't useful. Cars might no longer hug the monorail as it swooped along giving panoramic views of all of the key aviary habitats, but the park had never torn down the elevated platform for the system. Instead it loomed above the exhibits in this section of the park, like the closed expressways in San Francisco pending repairs after partial collapse in the last big quake. Up here he could walk or run as fast as he wanted, with no tourists to get in his way and no adversaries to slow him.

He took off at a lope along the concrete path atop the flat, wide, magnetic, center rail, running clockwise, the shorter route to the main entrance. He breezed past Swan Lake, Pelican Cove, and the kid's area across from Flamingo Lake. It was almost too easy, but then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw someone pointing at him from one of the pedestrian pathways below. He ducked and swerved instinctively, adding a burst of speed as he focused in on the figure.

Damn, no luck at all. It was a local cop, now twisting to talk into his shoulder-mounted radio while he simultaneously struggled to unstrap and pull his sidearm.

The last thing Dick wanted was a firefight with anyone, but there was absolutely no way he would return fire on a policeman, especially in the midst of a throng of tourists and grade schoolers on field trips. The cop was just doing his job; he didn't deserve to die. He had a life and a family, no doubt. Mercenary thugs probably had families, too, but their career choices made them legit targets for spies like him. Offing them was a public service any day of the week.

Dick's tactical planning let him literally sidestep the nascent moral dilemma between capture and killing an innocent; he had other options. The Panorail system had, by this point, dipped close to ground level as it neared the main station. Dick kicked his run up a gear, then simply stepped off the monorail track as soon as he reached vegetative cover near the restrooms across from the wetlands display.



He ducked into the men's room for a moment to reverse his jacket, switch caps, and splash cold water against his face to ruddy up his cheeks. During the pit stop, he also flushed his used latex gloves down the crapper after slashing them to ensure trapped pockets of air wouldn't make them bob back up and clog the pipes or surface in the bowl later. His cover in wastewater treatment had taught him a few things.

Hope may spring eternal, but some shit simply floats.

Less than fifteen seconds after entering, Dick exited the facilities a changed man, a relaxed man.

A few minutes later, Dick was in the midst of what had become a mass exodus from the park as news and rumors about the shooting had spread via text, cell phone, and the panicked stampede of African Aviary patrons. He did his best to look irritated at having his day at the park ruined as he joined the exit queue to get his hand stamped for re-entry. Then he headed with the rest of the throng of disgruntled sightseers to the parking lot and joined the bus stop crowd.

He transferred twice and rode for more than an hour to get to his hotel near the airport. As he played bored commuter on the surprisingly tidy bus, he read the rules posted above the back exit door. No spitting, no smoking, no chewing gum, no jaywalking, no roller boarding, no music, no singing, no talking loudly, no eating, no drinking, and no pets. Fortunately for Dick, the sign didn't say "No revenge killing international terrorist scum who endangered your kid's life and ended your partner's," so he relaxed and enjoyed the ride.

Finally, he arrived at his hotel, checked out, and booked a seat on the next international terminal shuttle. Then he strolled into the dim, over-air-conditioned hotel bar to wait, hitting the john before sidling onto a barstool and seeking refreshment after a job well done. He ordered a non-alcoholic beer, getting a bottle of Asahi Dry Zero. Passable as beer, he guessed, but like drinking grape juice for communion.

More jolting was the price. Fifteen Singapore dollars. It was like dropping a ten spot at an eight-year-old's lemonade stand. The bartender, a kid who looked to be of mixed Asian descent, apparently noticed his eyebrows darting up when he saw the tab. "Not much demand at a bar for the alcohol-free stuff. I mean, what's the point?"

“Well,” drawled Dick, “for one thing, the taste is sufficiently bland, you nurse it slowly, so you don’t have to keep getting up to pee.”

The bartender smirked.

“You laugh,” Dick continued, “but having seen both the drink prices and unsanitary conditions in your restroom, drinking a lot here doesn’t seem like a good idea.”

The bartender’s smirk morphed into a scowl and he stalked off to the other end of the bar to chat up a couple of German *fräuleins*. Hormones trump logic, Dick guessed, even in a dank, frigid, overpriced bar like this.

Nothing to do but kill time until his flight, now that the real killing was done. Since this was an off-the-books excursion, there would be no reports to file, no debriefing, and no need to check in with his bosses at the Subsidiary.

He did make one call, however, using a cheap, prepaid phone he’d picked up for the trip. As expected this time of night in the United States, the call went straight to voicemail: “Hey, Melanie. Just checking in, as promised. I’m still in Singapore, but heading back home, landing in Newark mid-morning day after tomorrow, your time. I’ll stop at the hospital to see Seth on my way to the house, roughly thirty hours from now. Take care ... love you, babe.”

He always felt awkward about calling home to check in. It wasn’t just that it felt childish and emasculating ... he could live with that to save his marriage. But the operative in him knew it was bad spycraft ... damn bad spycraft ... he and Melanie might someday regret.

Still, he did what he had to do. And right now, he had to do this.

He sighed. Maybe he should just get out of the business now that this score was settled. It would certainly simplify reconciling with Melanie. It was a tough decision. He liked making a difference in the world, and he was getting too old for a major career-change at this point ... assuming the Subsidiary would even allow that.

Maybe something in franchising? Shave ice, perhaps? He’d stopped over in Hawaii a few times on missions and had always been impressed by the smooth, snowy texture of true shave ice and the vibrant, fruity syrups poured on top. New Jersey had nothing like that. It could catch on.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts, but instead spied a couple in the back booth, nuzzling like a pair of Black-Masked Lovebirds he'd seen cuddling and cleaning one another in apparent romantic bliss at the Bird Park.

No, his chances of making a go out of a shave ice business in Jersey were the same as his chances of ever getting that cozy, that innocent and playful, with Melanie again—a snowcone's chance in hell.

## CHAPTER 3

Glenn Swynton arrived at the Philadelphia headquarters of the Subsidiary with the dawn. His summer-weight bespoke suit was a light charcoal with micro-thin, pale gray pinstripes. The double-breasted cut highlighted his impeccable fashion sense and subtly accentuated his trim physique. A rose and burgundy silk tie knotted tightly flat against the stark, starched white of his tailored shirt complemented the polished garnets on the cufflinks fixing the French cuffs peeking out from the crisply defined sleeves of his jacket.

He knew some ... probably most ... of his colleagues at the Subsidiary found his meticulous attention to detail in his appearance a tad compulsive, even prissy. Certainly, his fastidious fashion-sense was one of the many subtle things that distanced his relationship with his putative boss, Deirdre Tammany, Director of the Subsidiary. Of course, no one, including Dee—as she so colonially insisted being called—had any complaint about his parallel level of attention to detail in his work. His clothes fetish, as he had heard one wag refer to it, was not an affectation or a quirk; it was a physical manifestation of his complete and utter devotion to make certain beyond doubt that everything everywhere he could control was proper and orderly and correct in every way. Far from a character flaw, it was outward evidence of an orderly and precise character.

He took the wood paneled private lift for Catalyst Crisis Consulting's executive level to the top floor and stepped out into the clean, modern offices. As befitted the Subsidiary's cover as a high-end consulting agency, the equipment was top-end and the decorating a mixture of rich hardwoods and Italian marbles. The furnishings were sufficiently opulent to make the Chief Executive Officer of a Fortune 500 company comfortable, but not so extravagant so as to make the Chief Financial Officer of such a company worry the firm's services were overpriced.

Fixing a heavily-steeped spot of tea and honey with quick, efficient motions as he read the overnight intelligence reports, Glenn separated the wheat from the chaff and compiled the morning summary to be

electronically transmitted for Dee to read during her short, chauffeured ride to HQ in a few hours.

The morning brief had been getting briefer in the past few months. He was concerned by the trend. It wasn't that he worried about his job security or wished there was more murder, mayhem, and strife perpetuated by evildoers in the world. There would always be enough to keep the Subsidiary busy. His concerns were, as befitted his function as the Operational Liaison of the Subsidiary, more operational.

Assuming the amount of evil and chaos in the world was either at a steady state or, more likely, increasing over time, a thin morning executive summary signified one of several things, all of them bad from an operational perspective.

First, and perhaps worst, the relative paucity of chatter could portend something really big was in the works—a sort of quiet before the storm. The bad guys knew that despite disposable cell phones and algorithmic-scrambling of signals, sophisticated anti-terrorist services were monitoring them. They, of course, couldn't be sure of what was and was not monitored, what was actually deciphered, and what communications actually made their way to someone's attention, rather than being lost in a mound of other data. Even if they did, they couldn't know whether that someone had the smarts to put the pieces together and the personal or bureaucratic clout to get the powers-that-be to pay attention. No, the safest thing when a really big event was imminent was to simply shut up—a silence that might speak volumes about an impending doom, but did little to identify the time, place, mechanism, or actors involved.

Second, intelligence gathering and analysis might simply be falling down on the job. Monitoring and deciphering techniques could be losing the technical battle—it was certainly more difficult to intercept a signal and decode it than it was to send an encrypted communication. Even worse, techniques like jamming, euphemisms to thwart key-word analysis, and utilizing the expanding scope and depth of the internet, which made every amateur YouTube video a potential mass-communication medium for spies, sleepers, and assorted evil minions, meant the good guys didn't always even know what to capture and decode, especially now that virtual worlds and online games could be used to pass information. The difficulty in keeping up with rapid change

in means of secure electronic communication was why on-the-ground, human intelligence sources remained valuable. A lack of briefing material could simply mean the mix of human versus electronic intelligence was askew.

Third, the lack of information about new, large-scale threats could signify evil was simply becoming more widespread and more decentralized as the world simultaneously became more homogenized in its technology and fractionalized in its radicalism. Espionage had never been quite as spy-versus-spy simple as the ops-jockeys from the Cold War era liked to think, but the complexity of the world was definitely in the midst of a massive upswing. Not only, sad to say, did the sun set on the British Empire, but it set on an ever-increasing patchwork of countries, provinces, territories, and tribal enclaves. Every such sovereign power was beset by secessionist movements for every patch of land large enough to hold a rioting crowd and for every group of people who felt they or their distant ancestors had been downtrodden at one point or another in history.

And all that was before factoring in the gangs, criminal organizations, drug dealers, and religious cultists, who simply wanted what they wanted and thought they were divinely entitled to take it. Worse yet, you could never ignore the anarchists, who didn't even seem to know what they wanted besides anarchy, but were determined to create that by any means, often manipulating others to do their chaotic bidding. With the proliferation of communications, arms, and agendas, the world was more chaotic and less stable than ever. These under-the-radar threats were likely less than cataclysmic, but no one knew for certain. Small cabals were unknown, diverse, and difficult to penetrate with field assets.

Glenn picked a half-dozen mid-level reports which normally would not have made the cut and tossed them into the executive summary, just for flavor. Dee needed to know the world was not becoming all rainbows and kittens. Glenn had plenty of threats to the stability and peace of the world from which to pick.

Lots and lots of chaff, but little wheat. Yet the grain silo could still explode.

Thinking of explosions reminded Glenn he needed to have a chat with Dee about Dick Thornby. If Thornby's current side-trip to Singapore didn't work out the operative's obvious vengeance issues, the man would be of limited utility to the Subsidiary going forward. Not only did the organization not have enough pure "wet work" to justify keeping him on for that alone, it was unwise to retain someone who could not be relied upon to keep his cool in dangerous situations. Sure, the fellow had always been quick with an incendiary device, but Dick's operational decisions before the DIA caper had always been made with cool detachment. Since then, not so much. If Thornby couldn't or wouldn't get back into the operational groove, the Subsidiary was likely to have one more piece of wet work to perform, and Thornby would be at the bloody, wet end of the stick.

#

Dick steered his aging Oldsmobile into the hospital lot and parked in an empty section well away from the entrance. It wasn't that he worried about getting a ding from someone opening their door in the adjacent spot—the powerful barge had enough scratches and dents that he never worried about someone trying to boost his ride—he just liked the car to be in the open, where it could be maneuvered in any direction if needed to make a quick exit. Given a choice, a good operative parked where no one could lurk, hidden by nearby vehicles, to ambush him or surreptitiously rig the car for explosives. Dick practiced good spycraft even when he was not on a mission.

He also figured it was nicer to the docs and nurses to leave spaces closer in for them to use. And he certainly didn't want to grab a spot someone in a real emergency might need.

Melanie, of course, had her own car, a Subaru. Seth had a scooter. The time had come, though, for Seth to get his own car. The kid was old enough to really need it and, God knows, Dick owed him at least a car for what he had put the kid through.

Dick added a bit of a jaunt to his step as he headed toward the hospital entrance. Maybe he'd tell Seth about upgrading his transportation today. They could go shopping as soon as the kid was released, or at least as soon as the physical therapy reached a point

where he could safely drive. Seth probably expected to inherit the Oldsmobile someday when Dick got a new car, but there was no way Dick was going to let his big old boat go. Not only was it virtually thief-proof and nicely non-descript for surveillance and local missions, it had a trunk so big you could fit two bodies and a shovel inside without a sweat.

Dick knew that for a fact.

Dick waved at Helen and Ornell at the third floor nurses' station and made his way down the hall to the burn unit. He heard a murmur of voices as he approached Seth's room and saw Melanie exit, facing away from him as she waved goodbye to Seth. He skidded to a stop to prevent a collision just as she turned and stepped toward him without looking.

"Oh," she said, obviously startled by his proximity. "It's you." A tone of irritation crept into her voice. "How long have you been lurking out here?" She glanced at her watch—the watch he had given her for their tenth anniversary. "You said you would be here earlier." Her lip twitched. "Or were you hoping to avoid me?"

Dick decided against telling her about his long series of connecting flights, a journey fueled by bitter, burnt coffee delivered in Styrofoam cups in the coach section of off-brand, discount airlines. Instead, he shrugged. "Had to stop for coffee so I didn't fall asleep while I was driving."

Her brow wrinkled and her eyes narrowed. "So, you really were in Singapore for work this week."

He pressed his lips together and stepped back against the drab green wall of the hallway. He glanced up and down the corridor as he gently pulled her toward him so they wouldn't be overheard by the nearby staff or, more importantly, Seth. He lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper. "Look, that was the deal. I've told you who I work for and what I do, at least in broad strokes, even though sharing such information is forbidden and dangerous. I can't and I won't tell you the details about precisely what I do or what the missions are about. But I promised to always call and let you know where I am."

She said nothing, as if waiting for him to go on. He turned his head and looked past her as he continued, staring down the empty hallway at the shining linoleum. "Even that much is risky, for both of us, but I want



to save our marriage. I want you to know I trust you and I want you to trust me.”

He shifted his gaze back to her face—beautiful to him, but tight with stress. He cursed himself for every worry line he had caused her. “I was in Singapore on a mission, though, as I told you, my cover story for any nosey neighbors was that I was in Uzbekistan working on a wastewater treatment facility. Now I’m here, like I promised.” He avoided her slit-eyed glare by looking down as he finished talking and realized he was fidgeting with his hands, like a teenager at prom trying to screw up the courage to ask a girl to dance when there was no one on the floor yet. He dropped his hands to his sides and stared straight into her eyes. “Look, Melanie. I still have to lie to you about plenty of things, but I told you I would always let you know where I was, and I will. I love you. I love Seth. I won’t lie about those things.”

The wrinkles on Melanie’s brow softened. “Sorry, Dick. It’s just hard, you know ... taking it all in and ... Seth acts so brave, but the doctors say he still has a lot of pain ... and he’s missed almost the whole year at school ... and now the summer session’s about to start and he’s going to miss his only chance to catch up ...”

He pulled her into his arms and held her tight, rocking gently in the embrace. “I know, babe. I know. But Seth, he’s strong, stronger than you know. He’ll be up and around soon, you’ll see.”

She pulled back from the embrace and looked at him, a tight smile competing with the unshed tears glistening in her eyes, refusing to fall. “You think?”

“Yeah, babe. I think.” He smiled and her smile broadened in return. “I’ve been thinking about something else, too. When Seth gets out of the hospital, I’ve been thinking we could get him a car of his own, cuz, you know, he’s growing up ...” Dick hesitated for just a moment as a flicker of concern flashed on Melanie’s face. “... and it’s way safer than a scooter.”

The look of concern faded. “That would be good,” she said. She nodded toward the door. “Why don’t you tell him during your visit?” Now it was Melanie who gazed past Dick’s shoulder, her eyes unfocused as she looked down the hallway. “He’s having a rough day.”

Dick nodded and stepped into Seth's room. "Hey there, champ," he boomed.

## CHAPTER 4

Dee scanned the morning intelligence summary and stifled a snarl. The day had started out so well. Being an off-day for her regular exercise routine, she had slept in late after getting to bed at a reasonable hour for a change. She'd even gotten a bit of downtime during the evening, when Mitzi, her live-in house-sitter, free-spirit, and confidante, had pulled her away from reviewing personnel files to relax. Mitzi had insisted on introducing her via DVD to the first few episodes of a television horror series about brothers who secretly fight supernatural monsters in an effort to save the world from evil.

Despite the parallels to her own life as a never-ending struggle against evil, Dee had found the series entertaining. It didn't hurt that the guys were hunky and the monster of the week got defeated by the end of the hour—escapist fantasy on both scores there. She was a little surprised when Mitzi told her it had been on for twelve years already (adding, with a squeal, that the guys were even hunkier in season twelve). Dee had a tremendous impact on the real world, but she didn't really live in it herself. Mitzi was her only connection to pop culture and the day-to-day lives of regular folks—mundanes, she remembered Mitzi calling them. Dee's life was anything but mundane.

She flipped through the intelligence report a second time. All the usual hotspots were included: terrorist training camps in Yemen; tribal genocide in Africa; cyber-hacking of the energy grid by the Chinese (though the Chinese representative on the ten-nation oversight board for the Subsidiary strenuously denied his countrymen did anything of the sort); funneling of North Korean fissile material to radicals in Iran; and on and on.

But scattered between the stubborn troubles that beset the world on a grand scale were reports of more minor, but notably more bizarre, incidents. For example, animal rights activists had apparently stopped setting ablaze the vacation homes of meatpacking executives and had instead started disinterring recently deceased relatives of the same group of corporate villains, dropping the sometimes bloated and decomposing

bodies on their doorsteps with signs saying things like “It’s just meat. Why do you care?”

And, in the Philippines, the cadre of hackers who had long bedeviled modern society by creating viruses, Trojan horses, and data worms, were apparently shifting to infiltrating the software systems built into modern automobiles. Most such hacks scrambled the navigational GPS systems, not only sending clueless drivers astray, but rerouting vehicles to limited-capacity side streets and construction zones to deliberately snarl traffic. But in at least two instances, the hackers hijacked the auto-updating features of onboard computers monitoring things like tire pressure, fluid levels, and engine timing, reprogramming major operating components, introducing in one slew of recent cases a nine-second delay between pressing on the brakes and the brakes engaging. Nine seconds was a long time to wait when attempting to stop a car at speed, assuming your driving capabilities weren’t as fast and furious as Vin Diesel’s.

There were more odd reports. All flashy stuff to be sure, and some of it deadly and dangerous. But Dee didn’t know what the Subsidiary could do about any of it. Small groups of true believers in a cause were notoriously difficult to locate and infiltrate. And anarchists—Dee counted hackers among their number—were worse. They didn’t have enough organization to form groups that could be infiltrated; they just liked to cause mayhem to prove they could.

She was about to ask for Glenn Swynton to come explain his report, when he arrived at her doorway unbidden with a sly smile and arched eyebrow. She wasn’t in the mood for either.

She scowled, holding up the sheaf of papers comprising the morning’s briefing and shaking it. “This is supposed to be a summary of critical intelligence information ...” she snapped. She dropped the document onto her desk, “... not an issue of *World Weekly Weird*.”

Glenn showed no visible reaction to her criticism. Not only was the man always on duty and always impeccably groomed and dressed, he was nigh unto unflappable. A part of her desperately wanted to see him “flapped,” whatever that might mean.

Glenn simply looked languidly toward the report on her desk. “We may spend a lot of time worrying about the distribution of centrifuge

parts as they relate to potential uranium enrichment in the Middle East, but the ‘average Joe,’ as you Yanks would so colorfully call him, worries more about whether his brakes are going to go out or his putrefied mother-in-law is going to show up on his doorstep.” He blinked slowly, as if deliberately. “People need structure in their lives. These mid-level irritants are on the rise, and no one seems to be doing anything about them.”

“Well, I’m not committing the resources of the Subsidiary to chasing after random grave robbers.” Dee’s thoughts flashed back to Mitzi’s supernatural television show; those guys seemed to dig up a lot of graves to salt and burn the bones. She prayed there wasn’t a connection. “Someone else will just have to handle that. And as for hackers, I’m not sure what we could do, short of vaporizing every island with functioning WiFi in the Philippines archipelago. I doubt our international oversight board would go for that.”

Glenn did not respond. He simply stood there, irritatingly placid. She still didn’t know how to flap him.

“Fine,” she growled. “Pick a few of these ‘irritants’ that look like they might actually be solvable and assign a couple of the newer, low-level agents and a few of the burnouts we haven’t retired yet to see what they might be able to do about them ... without nuking any countries out of existence.”

“Done and done,” replied Glenn. Dee didn’t know if that meant he would do it or he had already done it without waiting for her permission. She decided not to ask. But she also noticed that Glenn hadn’t moved.

“Something else?”

“Since we are talking about both nuclear weapons and employee burnouts, I thought I should tell you that, although Thornby obviously didn’t report it, we do have confirmation Pao Fen Smythe was killed in Singapore.”

“Is Thornby okay?”

“He’s alive and functioning, if that’s what you mean. His low-level insubordination continues to grow and he’s yet to have a single pleasant interaction with the staff since Denver.” He paused. “I’ve also scanned the transcripts of his communications with HQ from the field.”

“And?”

Glenn sniffed. “Less formal and less precise than I’d like. He also swears more than he used to.”

“Swearing’s a classic indicator of stress,” said Dee. “I wouldn’t worry about a few extra f-bombs when he’s calling in a SitRep. Thornby’s stressed. He has good reason to be stressed.”

Glenn’s eyes narrowed. “Stress is part of the job; it’s always been part of the job. Less-than-professional language isn’t just an indicator of stress; it’s also a classic indicator of not giving a flying fig about your job.”

Dee gazed out the window at the plaza far below. Agents were expendable for the greater good, and not just while a mission was in progress. Yet she wanted to save Thornby if she could, even if he was rough and gruff and much too enamored with explosives. She looked back at Glenn. “He just had a few things to work out. Now that he’s eliminated Pao Fen Smythe, let’s give him a little bit more time to get back in sync.”

“I thought you would say that,” replied Glenn, a bit too smugly for Dee’s taste.

Even though it was unclear whether Thornby’s son, Seth, had been targeted at Pao Fen Smythe’s order, rather than on the order of someone else seeking retaliation for Seth’s own online activities assisting Chinese dissidents, Dee had let Thornby redeem his own self-image by taking Smythe out of the picture. Of course, letting him do it was Glenn’s idea in the first place, but that didn’t chafe. She wasn’t such a controlling boss that she surrounded herself with yes-men and sycophants. No, she hired clever, competent people and took good, smart ideas when she got them, whatever the source.

“Let’s work him into something simple. Something investigative, rather than action-oriented.”

“Easy, enough,” replied Glenn, “but he needs to have a new partner. He’ll never integrate himself back with the staff if he keeps doing solo work.”

“Good idea,” Dee replied. “Tell him his prior experience is critical for the task and he needs to share it with whoever you assign to him.”

She sat at her desk, consulting her calendar for her next appointment. She noticed again, however, that Glenn was still standing at the door.

“What?”

“Shouldn’t a highly-trained agent be able to see through that? If he can’t, maybe we should be letting him go.”

“Maybe he will see through it, but he’ll do the job anyway. Don’t underestimate the power of deceit. It’s what makes the world go round. When you lie, just try to make the lie something the recipient wants to believe anyway.”

Glenn put the toe of his right shoe behind his left, his usual indicator of an impending military-style spin and departure. “From your lips to my ears; words of wisdom, as always, Dee.” His face betrayed no smirk to Dee’s eyes as he spun and exited the room.

“Nice suit,” called out Dee lightly as Glenn strode down the hall. “Nice work, too.”

#

Taren Sykes finished skimming the after-action report detailing the results of his Filipino-outsourced hacking prank and tossed the file folder into the bin for shredding. Not as many deaths as he had expected, but the survivors were doing a great job of sowing panic across a wide swath of humanity—setting the worldwide news apparatus abuzz with their lurid tales of desperation and panic as their vehicles stopped obeying their operators and ... well ... failed to stop until they hit something solid or, in one case, submarined into a ship canal. No, a sanitary and ship canal, whatever that was. It sounded like a delightfully grisly and disgusting way to die.

Reporters speculated as to what might be the reasons behind the hacking attack—assuming without any evidence there had to be a logical motive. Stock manipulation, revenge, a fog of cover for one particular murder ... blah, blah, blah. Who benefits? Who reaps a windfall from the event? Did the manufacturer cut corners? Had a virus infected vehicles worldwide? A cacophony of choruses calculating the course of causation, instead of focusing on the serene beauty of pure chaos. Unexpected, dangerous things happening to innocent, random people, all for amusement. It’s not that he minded benefitting from even

his lesser endeavors of malicious mayhem—money is money—but anarchy was its own reward.

Did they learn nothing from the onslaught of computer viruses, worms, and Trojan horses that emanated from disaffected youth, particularly in third world countries, over the past decades? Hackers slaved away for hours to create pranks, software-devouring worms, hard-drive erasing viruses, and worse ... and for what? They never saw their victims, never benefitted from their labor, other than in their delight in knowing they had inflicted pain to their victims ... perhaps thousands or millions of victims. They wreaked havoc for the sheer delight of making others frustrated, miserable, and afraid.

Did no one in power ever give any thought to what chaos and suffering could be wrought by a genius with more than a little time, money, and power on his hands? After all, power corrupts. Brains and money just grease the skids for a wild ride.



## CHAPTER 5

Dick still felt the jetlag from his trip back from halfway across the world. It didn't help that he was also withdrawing cold turkey from the toxic brew of chemicals associated with the mission. Not just the caffeine load necessitated by having to stay awake, the lactic acid from the exertion of the past several days, and the adrenaline from the hit itself, but from his post-hit mindset. This wasn't like his normal wet work for the Subsidiary; this was personal. He'd gotten his revenge, but his mind had been fixed on that topic too long, putting him on edge, heightening his senses and his reactions as he sought to make his revenge reality. Now his emotions, his mindset, even his brain chemistry had altered. Serotonin levels and who knows what else were out of whack. The soup in which his brain simmered was so different that his thoughts were sluggish, his nerves frazzled.

Maybe he should eat some chocolate, the darker the better. That's what women did when they had trouble coping; at least, that's what Melanie had done when they were still together. Given all of his absences over the years—and the lies the Subsidiary had made him tell about those times—he should have invested Seth's college fund in stock of Godiva.

Fuck.

Now he was depressed on top of everything else.

At least the drive to the Philadelphia headquarters of the Subsidiary, which looked down on the “clothespin” sculpture on Centre Square downtown, required neither effort nor imagination. The route to the Subsidiary's front organization, Catalyst Crisis Consulting, LLC, was engrained muscle-memory by this point in his career. He wished he could have called in sick, but explaining why he needed to recover from his time off would have been an awkward and unnecessary lie.

He was fairly certain his boss, Glenn Swynton, knew exactly where he'd been and what he'd done during the past few days. Hell, for all he knew, Dee Tammany, head of the whole damn Subsidiary, was also in the know. But it was both good tradecraft and good manners to pretend

it all never happened, that he'd just spent some extra time with his sick kid.

Best case, he was going to get sent out on another job, a sanctioned job, before he was fully recovered from the after-effects of his personal vendetta. Worse case, they were calling him in to can his ass face-to-face because of his little side job, or maybe because they found out he'd been telling Melanie where his missions took him. Worst case, the firing was going to be literal and they wanted to off him at HQ. At HQ there was no chance of third-party witnesses and no chance of any pesky law-enforcement using their cute spray bottles of Luminol and chic little UV flashlights to track down the minimal blood spatter from two shots in the back of the head.

If so, well, at least he'd gotten to see his kid first and tell him he was getting a car. That, and they'd let him whack Pao Fen; he knew they could have stopped him if they'd wanted. Hell, the powers that be at the Subsidiary could do a shitload of things if they really wanted. Fortunately, they were the good guys. He ... he was one of the good guys.

#

Dick arrived a few minutes early, but reception sent him straight through to Director Tammany's office as if he was late. Not a good sign.

He strode through her office door, stopping at a well-practiced parade rest about eight feet from her desk. Whatever was going to happen, he was going to hold his head high. He'd only done what he needed to do; he wasn't about to apologize for anything. At least not to Dee Tammany. He'd done nothing but apologize to Melanie ever since Denver, but his wife still hadn't come back to their marriage, though she was at least talking to him.

Glenn Swynton was already in Dee's office. Dick had expected that. Dee was seated at her desk, with Glenn hovering nearby to her left. A striking woman sat on the couch along the wall to Dee's right. Mid-twenties, pixie-cut brunette, physically-fit, with a lithe build and enough toned and tanned leg showing he knew she'd be only a couple inches shorter than he if she stood, but she didn't. She just sat there, giving him a hard stare, her lips tight, her face giving no hint of emotion.

He didn't worry the mystery woman was there to kill him. They wouldn't create a mess in Dee's office. No, if he was going to disappear, he'd simply be sent down to human resources to update his insurance forms or to accounting for a chat with Pyotr Nerevsky in Internal Audit and never be heard of again. He hoped, at least, that if he did disappear forever, someone would tip off the geeks in the IT department he'd gotten vengeance on Pao Fen, not only for what Matt Lee did to Seth, but for Luke Calloway's death beneath the runways of DIA.

He didn't ask who the woman was. Espionage was all about need to know. If he needed to know, they'd tell him. Hell, they'd introduce him if *she* needed to know him, though he would bet Seth's car fund she'd already read his complete dossier before the meeting. He'd also bet Glenn had remarked on how thick the dossier was when he'd handed it to her to review.

"I trust you had a pleasant time off?" asked Dee by way of greeting.

"Spend a lot of time with your son?" chimed in Glenn before Dick could respond.

Dick smiled. "You can always trust me to enjoy time off," he replied, tilting his head toward Dee. He swiveled his face minutely toward Glenn. "My visits were extremely fulfilling. Thank you for asking."

Both Dee and Glenn were much too professional and, frankly, serious to smirk, but he noticed a twinkle in Dee's eye as she nodded toward the mystery Amazon. "I'd like you to meet Acacia Zyreb, newly transferred from our Eastern European Field Office in Prague."

The woman on the couch stood, striding toward him with her hand outstretched. "You may call me 'Ace,' Agent Thornby." Her accent was pure American, revealing no trace of her Eastern European origins. "I'm looking forward to working with you."

Dick forced a chuckle, "Well, at least you can lie with a straight face, so you're either a natural or you've been at this game longer than I would have guessed from your looks."

Glenn cleared his throat in typically British fashion: all condescension, no phlegm. "This is not a game, Thornby, and, if it was, you would not be winning at the moment. I suggest you dispense with any more attempts at witty banter and pay close attention."

God, he hated working for people younger than him, especially bureaucrats in suits, but he let his irritation slide. It wasn't difficult—a lifetime as an Army Ranger, then Chicago cop, gave him plenty of practice. Besides, the fact they were introducing him to a new partner meant he wasn't being fired, figuratively or literally, and that brightened his mood more than he'd thought it would have only minutes ago. Dick did his best to look serious, even stern, as he turned back toward Swynton. "You have my full attention, sir."

"That remains to be seen," grumbled Swynton. "Both your focus and your attitude have been lacking since ..." Swynton's eyes flicked toward Zyreb ... "the unfortunate death of your last partner. The question of concern here today is whether you are able and willing to go forward on a new project with a new partner ... and no more special requests for explosives."

Dick wanted to say he preferred to work alone and the damn explosives he had requested for DIA had saved everyone's ass, because God knows both were the truth. He also wanted to say Glenn was the one who had insisted Luke not survive the DIA mission, even if Dick had to do it himself. He knew, too, that Luke hadn't been a true partner in the typical sense, because he'd never been trained as an operative. He was just a bright computer geek whose expertise had been needed on a mission. Dick had been tasked to take Luke along against the better judgment of both of them. But he didn't say any of that.

Spies know when to shut up, even when they're not being tortured.

"I'm here to do what you tell me," he said with no edge to his voice.

"I'm glad to hear that." Swynton inclined his head toward Dee. "We both are."

"What's the job?"

"We don't need to take up the Director's time with details about a minor investigative matter," said Swynton.

"I just wanted to make sure you were amenable to moving forward with Agent Zyreb," said the Director. "Please keep us informed as to Seth's recovery, too."

"Will do, ma'am."

With that, Swynton ushered Dick and Ace out the door to a nearby conference room with glass walls looking over the document replication

cubicles ... the forgery division. With the door closed, it was soundproof, though not exactly private. Much better, though, than a windowless room in Internal Audit by Dick's way of thinking.

Just like that night at DIA, maybe there was light at the end of the tunnel. Maybe things were getting better. He could do low-level investigative work, train the newbie from the Czech Republic, and have an almost regular life ... a life with his kid and his wife, if she'd have him.

Maybe, for a change, it wouldn't be up to him to save the world.

#

"Not exactly saving the world, here," Ace complained as she flopped down into an ergonomic chair after Swynton left at the end of their situational briefing. "Investigating random acts of chaos and suspicious chatter ... Bullocks! Like that's high priority."

Ace swiveled her chair to the left and looked over the table at her new partner. Fit, in a middle-aged, stocky kind of way, but not exactly Ryan Reynolds to her Blake Lively. She couldn't help but wonder who he'd killed—or not killed—to get assigned to break her in as a U.S.-based operative for the Subsidiary. Thornby ignored her as he casually leafed through the manila file folder of key word intercepts Swynton had dropped on the table during their briefing.

"Yo," she mock-shouted. "Ricky-Rick-Richard! I'm the newbie here, so I expect some low-level shit drudgework. Who'd you piss off to get stuck with it?"

Thornby's eyes darted up from the file to meet hers. "That's need to know," he growled. "And it's Dick. Unless we're undercover, it's always Dick."

Ace snorted. "If you're handling things under covers, it's probably dick then, too."

Dick rolled his eyes and shook his head minutely. "Heard 'em all, Ace. So you just go ahead and get all the penis jokes and double entendres out of your system while we're still in the office. As to who I ticked off, let's just say that you'll be doing any necessary interfacing with the computer jockeys here at HQ. My last partner was one of

them—not a field agent. But we still might need their support on this op.”

“Op?” Ace snorted again. “This is barely a book report. A bunch of anarchist groups—there’s an oxymoron—hack into the computer chips in various car models and insert a virus that turns off the brakes. Then the same suspects chat about ‘great crack’ and a ‘south side rift’ preceding some big ‘east coast action.’ That’s got the Subsidiary’s oversight board all frowny-faced and concerned? Bullocks! I could work that entire vocabulary into a Facebook invitation to a rave. Yet prissy pants, the Subsidiary’s Worldwide Director of Operations, assigns two agents to it? Based on that standard of actionable intelligence, I’m surprised we’re not looking for secret underground bases established by ancient aliens. I mean, it’s on The History Channel, for God’s sake. It must be reliable information.”

She noticed the Dickster closed his eyes for a few seconds before responding. Anger management technique?

“Look, Ace. I don’t know if this is a meaningful assignment or not and, if it is, how it might fit into the bigger picture. That’s need to know, too.” He set down the folder and glared at her. “Maybe I got drudge work to do with you because I’m being punished for something I did on my last mission. Maybe I got the task because I’m between partners and somebody has to make sure you don’t shit yourself the first time an op goes sideways. Maybe somebody knew you make great ‘dick’ jokes. Or maybe somebody thinks I have some experience relevant to this task and you could learn a few things. I don’t care. I don’t need to know and neither do you. I just do the job I’m given.”

Now it was Ace’s turn to close her eyes and shake her head. *Sakra!* Why were middle-aged guys always so cranky? Maybe because they feared their declining years more than they feared death? She shook off the philosophizing and focused on her own situation. She supposed she should try to make a good impression, even on a partner who was well past his “best used by” date. This case might only be a minor stepping stone, but she was determined to have a real impact on world events. After all, isn’t that what spies do?

She opened her eyes. “Relax, big guy. I’m just trying to fit in with you crazy Americans.”

Her alleged mentor shrugged. “You got the accent down, at least. I can’t make out half of what the office cleaning lady says, even when she’s speaking English and not Polish.”

She reverted to a low class Czech accent. “De Czech peoples, dey are no Pollacks, *kokot*. Dey, cultured, edjicated peoples.” She switched back to Americanized English—a flat, Midwestern R-drawl according to her instructors at the Defense Language Institute. Let him think she was a natural. “Lots of Hollywood movies and TV. Why do you Yanks always think foreigners can’t do at least as good an American accent as you can do a Scottish, French, or Pakistani accent?”

She paused for a beat. Better to shift the subject away from her for now. “You got any ideas from looking at the chatter as to where to start this mission?”

“One thought—maybe the real reason I got assigned to this particular piece of intel.”

“What’s that?” Ace asked.

“This phrase ‘south side rift,’ it could be referring to the south side of Chicago. I was a cop there once upon a time. And Joliet, the epicenter of brake failures, is just thirty or forty miles southwest of the city.”

“Really? South side necessarily means Chicago? Why not the south side of Boston or New York or L.A.?”

Dick smiled. “Idiomatic English ... well, American. Every big metro area has its own nickname. In L.A., the south side is called South Central. You know that if you’re from the area. Just like you would know where ‘The Inland Empire’ is. In Boston, you’re a Southie, not a south-sider. In New York, it goes by borough, and so on. The south side of Chicago is the poor, tough side of town, where gangs are strongest. This could be about cocaine trafficking, maybe referencing some influx from a new East Coast supplier or rival. It’s a place to start.”

“So it’s off to the Chicago metro area?”

Dick laughed. “Chicagoland. They call the area Chicagoland.”

Ace furrowed her brow. “Chicagoland? Sounds like a theme park.”

Dick shrugged as he stood. “Have the quartermaster’s office make the travel arrangements and meet me at the airport.” He started to go. “Oh, and bring a jacket.”

“It’s June,” she replied. “Isn’t it warm in Chicago during the summer?”

“Sure,” replied Dick. “But ChiTown is right next to the world’s biggest air conditioner.”

“Huh?”

Dick smiled. “That’s what they call Lake Michigan: The World’s Biggest Air Conditioner.”

Great. Now the cranky guy was making sport of her.

*Kurva to hovno.* Fuck that shit.

At least she knew the important American idioms.



## CHAPTER 6

She'd flown through O'Hare International Airport before, of course. You could barely fly around the U.S. these days without hitting Chicago, Denver, Atlanta, or Dallas-Ft. Worth. America probably had as much acreage dedicated to international airports as the Czech Republic had acreage. Just the United terminal—one of four main terminals at the airport according to the in-flight magazine, despite the International Terminal being designated Terminal 5—was so big they had enough room to tuck a dinosaur skeleton between a bank of TSA inspection stations and a juice bar. Working here was a whole new world.

Her big ox of a companion trudged down the busy airport corridor without looking at the gates, overpriced vendors, or other passersby—his eyes focused forward, with an odd occasional glance at the polished floor. She decided it was best to remain quiet and take his lead.

That was the smart approach, but of course it couldn't last. Once they were out of the secure zone, he ignored the baggage claim area, turning sharply toward the rental car kiosks.

“Hold up,” she said. “I need to grab my bag.”

She saw him roll his eyes at her. “Jeez” he sighed. “You checked a bag?” He shook his head. “The first rule of all business trips, whether you're a lawyer, a sales rep, or wastewater treatment consultant, is you never check a bag. It slows you down when your flight arrives, makes you late getting to wherever you're going.”

She forced a tight smile. “Point taken. But I still need to pick up my bag.”

She found Carousel Nine and waited twelve agonizing minutes before it belched a warning alarm and coughed up her bag. At least Dick didn't tap his foot the entire time they were waiting, although he did check his phone more than once. Finally, she was ready and they headed off toward the rental counters at a brisk pace.

She was confused when he led her past the kiosks for the brand name companies to the dingy desk of a rent-a-wreck vendor, but she said nothing. Not at the counter; not even during the ridiculously long, slow

shuttle ride. Eventually, they arrived at an off-airport rental lot which sported fewer cars than her favorite teenage make-out spot overlooking the Vitava River back home.

“Great selection,” she grouched.

Dick-boy threw an irritated glance her way. “I don’t care if they’ve got fewer cars than Jay Leno’s third auxiliary garage, as long as they have the one I need.”

She bit back a reply as long as she could, but that wasn’t long. When Dick used the key fob to pop the trunk of an aging Lincoln Continental that looked like it had been bought second-hand from a liquidating limo company, she spoke her mind.

“Need for what? A demolition derby?” She gritted her teeth, attempting to calm herself, but gave up. Screw anger management. “Why the bullocks are we driving this piece of crap? Does the Quartermaster’s office hate you? Or were you hoping to get lucky in the big back seat?”

Dick sniffed. “Quartermaster probably does hate me. But, more important, he knows me. Large, decent power, and none of the bullshit modern accoutrements.”

She wrinkled her brow at him. “We talking about you now or your preferences for a car?”

“Neither,” growled Dick. “I regard small talk a modern accoutrement.”

*Sakra!* Her partner got it right when he insisted on being called Dick. “Fine,” she exhaled with a huff. “Let’s stick to business. Where to? Medical Examiner’s office in Joliet? Impound lot to look at the vehicle that went into the canal?”

Dick snorted, wrinkling his forehead and looking at her as if she’d suggested an impromptu game of tag. “No,” he snapped, then paused. She could almost see him counting to ten, which had to be difficult since he wasn’t using his fingers. Finally, he continued. “You tell me, Ace. What’s that going to accomplish? We know the guy drowned. That was in the briefing. We also know the onboard computer in his car was tampered with by hackers. Hell, thanks to the nerds back at the office, we know the hack originated in the Philippines and who did the work, even if we can only identify him by his online handle. Unlike cops, we

don't have to gather evidence and bullshit confirmations for a future prosecution. We just need to find out what's going to happen and stop it. That means interviewing a few sources about those 'south side' and 'crack' references. I still have a few contacts down that way from back in the day."

"So, what am I supposed to do?" she bristled back at him. "Take copious notes during the interviews?" She flicked a few buttons of her blouse open. "Play a drugged out crack whore?"

Dick shook his head and clambered into the car. "My contacts, they know me as a cop. They're CIs, confidential informants. They'll just assume you're my partner or a trainee on a ride along. And they'd be right."

She glared at him for a moment, got a few essentials out of her luggage, then slammed the trunk shut and got in the car, biting back a retort.

He looked over at her. "Buckle your seatbelt."

"Bad driver?" she spat out, without turning to look at him.

"Nah," Dick chuckled. "It's the law. First rule of being a spy. Always obey the law when you can. It simplifies your life."

#

Fourteen hours later, Ace couldn't make up her mind if Dick was just a lousy mentor or an epically ineffective investigator. They'd cruised Dick's rent-a-tank all over the streets and alleyways of the south side and chatted up half a dozen CIs, all to no avail. Dick didn't even let her join in the questioning, so she had nothing to do but stare out at what pulp detective novels would refer to as the "mean streets" of the inner city and try to assuage her growling stomach with a roll of Mentos she'd gotten at the airport in Philly.

The streets of the inner city, she realized, weren't so much "mean" as they were "depressing." Lower middle class row houses, identical except for the color of their aluminum awnings and the style of their after-added detached garages facing the back alley, gave way to run down, three-story walk-ups, identical except for the color of their graffiti tags and the style of their after-added protective window bars. At

least in the bad neighborhoods in Europe the buildings were old enough to have some architectural details to class up the poverty.

She had to give the big guy credit for one thing; he was an equal-opportunity employer when it came to CIs: black; Hispanic; Vietnamese; and a strung-out Aryan with a shaved head and copious prison tats who reminded her of an asshole from a mission back home. But it didn't matter who Dick talked to, the conversation was the same.

“Long time, no see.”

“Yeah, I was working counter-terrorism for a few years, but now I'm back on Narcotics.”

“Who'd you piss off to get shoved back to Vice?”

“None of your fucking business.”

“Hey, at least they partnered you up with some bad kitty trim for the prostitution stings.”

“Shut the hell up before I shut you up. Look, I heard there's some big south side rift about crack. What's that all about?”

“Ain't no south side rift 'bout nothing. Where'd you hear that shit? This some kind of test? Cause I know better than to make shit up for you, man.”

“Yeah, it was a test. You passed. Now what about some big east coast action coming up?”

“East coast action? What you been smoking? Everything sold on the streets these days is south-of-the-border shit, exceptin' the meth from Arkansas. No one be messin' with no cartels and live to talk to the likes of you.”

*Kecás kraviny!* Bullshit. A complete waste of time. Their only break was to stuff down dinner. Dick insisted they go to a local place for Italian beef, calling it “Chicago's best, but least known, food delicacy.” The sandwiches were soggy and messy, but the ultra-thin-sliced, spicy beef was excellent. Dick ordered his in a combo with Italian sausage. Of course, she'd never encountered this combo during her trips to Italy when she was working out of the Prague office, but the fact the food wasn't any more Italian than pizza didn't mean it wasn't delicious.

After chowing down in the car and tossing the trash into the back seat, they returned to cruising the streets for more dealers, hustlers, and informants. Fun times.

About two a.m., she made a point of no longer covering her mouth during her increasingly frequent yawns. Nothing. So she started looking at her watch every three minutes. Nothing. Finally, she took off her watch and tapped it, as if to see if it was still running.

Dick curled a lip at her and growled, “Just one more stop.”

He parked the car in the loading zone for a bodega tucked underneath the elevated train tracks and clambered out, heading toward a tall punk wearing flashy high-top sneakers, dark pants, and a Bulls pullover hoodie. The punk loitered about thirty feet away, where an alley intersected Cottage Grove Avenue. Ace took her time getting out of the car. She already knew what Dick was going to say; she could guess what the punk was going to say. She wasn't in any hurry to listen to the latest encore performance.

Just as Ace was about to hip-check her door shut, she heard an angry voice.

“Don't touch me, you motherfucking pig. I know what Chicago cops do when you get hold of a brother. Lemuel, he still walks with a limp.”

“C'mon, Kenan, you know I had nothing to do with that ...”

As Ace looked up, she saw the punk reach into the pocket of his hoodie and pull out what looked like a weapon.

“GUN!” she shouted, diving back into the car through the still open door and snatching up her purse. She looked back up to see her partner grappling with the punk. A Glock 17, nine millimeter, was in the kid's left hand. Dick grabbed the kid's gun hand, forcing it straight up. The two guys pawed and punched at one another with their off-hands. Ace pulled her own weapon out of her purse. She also preferred the fourth generation Austrian-made Glockes, but found the Glock 26 a better fit for her hand and an easier concealed carry.

She crouched by the right front fender and aimed over the huge expanse of the hood, but had no clear shot as the two men struggled. Dick appeared to have the strength advantage, but the punk had reach and height. Dick could keep the gun pointed away, but he couldn't wrest it from his attacker's hand.

Suddenly, Kenan kned Dick in the privates. Dick involuntarily doubled-over, losing his grip on Kenan's gun hand. The kid pushed off and back, then swung the automatic pistol toward Dick.

Bullocks!

Ace had no choice. Her aim tracked the bad guy as he pushed off her partner. She fired four times at his center of mass, standing and moving toward him as he stumbled back from the impact. When he didn't immediately go down, she fired another four shots in an identical grouping. He collapsed to the sidewalk. She rushed forward, her gun still held out, her left hand bracing her right, ready to fire again. She still had seven rounds left in the standard fifteen-round magazine.

She didn't need them. The dead kid's gun clattered out of his hand as he fell backward, the hood of his sweatshirt shielding his dead eyes from her view. Dick kicked the gun away and looked at her with a blank, dumbfounded expression.

"What?" she snapped, still holding her gun on the perp. "I had to do it. He was about to shoot you."

Dick held his hands out and to the side, palms toward her. "I got no problem with that, honey," he proclaimed. "I just wanna know where you got the gun."

She smiled. "I never leave home without it." She lowered her weapon and looked Dick in the eyes. "Rule number one, partner. Always check a piece of hard-sided luggage when you travel, so when you get attacked in a strange city you've got something to pull out besides your dick. What do you generally carry? Italian sausage?"

Dick laughed. "You read my file. You know I have a penchant for explosives." The wail of a siren in the distance interrupted their survivors' revelry. "Police your brass. We need to get out of here. The cops have surveillance equipment that tracks the sound of gunfire. Even in this neighborhood, there'll be a CPD response soon."

She knew he was right. Even as a former Chicago cop, Dick was a spy just like her. They both understood getting the local constabulary involved in a mission for the Subsidiary was not going to do either of them any good.

In less than a minute, they were back in the car, leaving the scene of the crime.

Dick steered through a few alleys and side streets before entering onto a main thoroughfare. It wasn't long before he popped their behemoth onto the Skyway and headed for Indiana. The orange sodium

vapor streetlights ended abruptly at the border, leaving Ace with a sweeping panoramic vista of the stark white lights emanating from power plants, oil refineries, and dark factories dotting the blackness south and east.

*Sakra!* Where was he going now? “Fleeing the jurisdiction?” she asked.

Dick’s eyes flicked toward her for the briefest moment. “It never hurts,” he muttered. “Plus, there’s a riverboat casino just across the border.”

Ace looked at the industrial wasteland fading into the blackness, now that the orange glow of Chicago was in the rear view. “What river?”

Dick laughed. “None. There’s no river. They just float the casino in a man-made pond of water so they can call it a riverboat. Early on, the Coast Guard made ‘em carry lifejackets and everything, even though the boat can only probably sink about eight inches before it hits the bottom of the cement pond, but I heard they finally nixed that piece of foolishness.”

“Why do casinos have to be on riverboats here? The ones in Atlantic City and Vegas aren’t.”

“Midwestern politics. Part Puritan morality play, part machine-style patronage, and an even bigger part big money corruption, all papered over with a historical reference to riverboat gambling back at the turn of the century.”

“You mean when I was in primary school?”

Dick’s brow furrowed and his upper lip quivered as if he was about to snarl. “The century before that.”

A brown sign indicated a casino at the next exit. Dick nudged the right blinker on and faded toward the deceleration ramp.

“And why,” Ace continued, “are we looking for a casino? Surviving a shootout making you feel lucky?”

Dick smiled. “Now you’re asking a good tradecraft question.” He looked over at her, but she remained silent. “The casino hotels are decent, clean, and safe compared to the neighborhood rent-by-the-hour flophouses. Reasonably anonymous, too.”

She nodded. It made sense. “One more question. Do you snore?”

Dick snorted. “You’ll never know. Two rooms, connecting, but separate.” He took his left hand off the steering wheel and held it up, fingers splayed. “A good spy would have noticed the wedding band in the first ten seconds after meeting me and known I was a married man.”

Ace shrugged. “Maybe you’re sentimental; maybe you wear it for cover. A good spy knows enough to read a personnel dossier from cover-to-cover before she takes an assignment. Married, yes. Happily? Recent events don’t seem to bear that out.”

Dick pulled into the lot for the hotel-casino complex and parked in the midst of a sea of empty spaces. He turned off the engine, then looked at her. “Thanks for saving my ass. And, thanks for the offer, but a really good spy knows when to shut the hell up.”

“What offer? I was imagining the same room, Dickie, not some dickie from a stout, hairy co-worker old enough to be my ...”

Dick glared at her.

“... uncle.”

#

Ace listened at the door for a moment before she knocked, but heard nothing. Hotels might have thin walls, but they spent money for solid metal-core doors. They saved on lawsuits by preventing sexual assaults and didn’t show dents and damage from room service and housekeeping carts banging into them on a constant basis.

Dick was stuffing a piece of bacon in his maw as he opened the door. A room service cart was parked by the bed. Local morning news blared from the TV. His lip curled when he saw her.

“What the hell?” he growled by way of greeting. “What’s your hurry? Drug dealers aren’t exactly morning people, you know. They stay up kinda late.”

She smiled. Obviously, her mentor had not checked in with the office yet. Too busy chowing down on smoked slices of hog fat. “The computer geeks at the Subsidiary apparently stay up late, too. They intercepted another transmission from one of the people connected with the hackers behind the sabotaged brakes, once again mentioning ‘great crack’ on the ‘south side.’”



Dick wandered back to the room service tray and snatched another piece of bacon, dipping one end in an open packet of honey sitting next to the crusts from his toast. “So?” he mumbled with his mouth full. “Nothing new there.”

She nodded. “Yeah, but the person on the other end of the transmission answered with ‘Man, those tourists at Waikiki are going to shit when they see that wave.’”

Dick stopped cold, his right hand three-quarters of the way to his open mouth. As he paused, the honey slid down the greasy bacon, oozing onto his fingers. “So, ‘south side’ means the south side of Oahu, where Waikiki is located?” He chomped down on the slice of bacon and chewed it slowly. “That could make sense, I guess.”

“Could? It blows away your south side of Chicago theory. After all, islands have beaches and beaches have waves ... and tourists. Tourists who apparently are going to shit ‘when they see that wave,’ whatever that means.”

“Wave? They’re sure the guy talking didn’t say ‘rave?’ It’s not the designer drug of choice for partiers, but I can see a coke-fueled bash as a way to announce a new syndicate is taking over the drug trade in the tourist hotspots.”

Ace shook her head. “Crystal clear, digital sound. Uploaded it and listened to it myself.”

Dick made a face as if the honey he had just eaten had gone bad, except, of course, honey never goes bad. “Wave.” He interrupted his sour scowl to lick off his fingers. “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means,” Ace replied. “We’re going to Hawaii.” She nodded toward his carry-on suitcase. “Grab your gear. The Quartermaster’s booked us on a flight to the islands. It leaves in just over two hours and my cell says we’re more than an hour from O’Hare. Given the speed of that damn shuttle, I’m not sure we’ll make the flight.”

Dick finished sucking honey off the fingers of his right hand while he grabbed his toiletries and stuffed them in the case.

An hour and twenty-three minutes later, Dick steered the big car into the “Departures” lane at O’Hare.

“You missed the turn-off for the rental place,” Ace noted as she looked up from her phone.

“Screw that,” growled Dick. “We’ll just leave the car in front of the terminal with the keys in the ignition. I’ll call from the gate and tell the rental place that if they want it, they should come pick it up.”

“*Ježíší!*” exclaimed Ace, “won’t that spark an incident? I mean, a parked vacant car could be viewed as a bomb threat. They might close the airport while they check it out.”

Dick shook his head. “Nah. Happens all the time. You don’t think movie stars and billionaires actually return their rental cars to the off-site lots, do you? Rich, famous people do this kind of crap all the time. Security will deal.” He shrugged. “If it makes you feel better, I’ll pop the trunk when we get out. That way they can see it’s not loaded with explosives.”

They rushed through the terminal, using counterfeit Mileage Plus cards to access the short line for TSA inspection. As promised, Dick used the brief wait to call the car rental agency with his Subsidiary-provided cell. So Ace was surprised when she saw him whispering on a cell phone on the other side of Security. It wasn’t that she was spying on him. She was just killing time while she made her way through security behind a bearded man who slowed up the line with a bulky laptop and what he called a CPAP machine, whatever the hell that was.

She marched up to him as he huddled over his phone at a recharging station, his back to the hallway. “C’mon, lover,” she called out as she reached out to tug on his arm. “Don’t want to miss our flight to paradise.”

Dick whirled on her with so much speed she was astonished.

“Don’t do that,” he seethed.

“Touch your arm?”

“Interrupt my phone calls.”

*Sakra!* “Reporting in to Glenn with a transfer request already?”

“Maintaining my cover,” he hissed. “Some of us aren’t single and carefree. Some of us have family ... responsibilities. Some of us have to lie to our families to maintain cover.”

She gave him a hard stare. “You’re right. Some of us don’t have families.” She turned and headed for the gate without looking back.

Less than an hour later, Dick was winging his way to paradise with a woman other than his wife. Life as a spy was complicated ... and risky.

He hoped Ace hadn't noticed he'd been using a non-secure cell phone—the burner he'd picked up in Singapore—at the airport. That was his mistake and he wasn't forgiving of sloppiness on the job. He'd disabled and dumped the burner the first chance he got afterward, just to make sure that particular fuckup couldn't happen again.

Jesus. He prayed Melanie hadn't overheard Ace or, if she did, she understood it was all part of his cover. His marital relationship was complicated enough without unwarranted suspicions of infidelity. Calling in to Melanie when on assignment, which he promised her he'd do, might be reassuring for her, but it led to a lot of awkward conversations—conversations he had avoided when he'd pretended to be overworked fixing wastewater treatment systems in some third-world country with non-existent cell phone coverage. He loved his job with the Subsidiary, but he loved his wife even more. Sure, Ace was smart, athletic, and sexy—all useful things in the world of espionage. Still, he wished Melanie was flying to Hawaii with him, a lazy, relaxed, one-dimple smile on her beautiful face. Their marriage needed a little aloha.

Not that his relationships at work were any better. Glenn and Dee were on the edge of firing his ass, the entire computer department was so hostile he'd terminated his online banking access just to make sure his meager savings didn't disappear into the fog of the World Wide Interwebs, and his new partner pointedly ignored him as she passed his row, heading to her own seat farther back in the plane, though their physical separation was probably just a result of having booked the flight at the last minute.

Making a difference in the world had certainly made a difference in his world ... and not for the better.

## CHAPTER 7

Thank God and United Airlines for in-flight WiFi. Instead of wasting time on sleep, snack boxes, and second-run second-rate film entertainment, Dick had hours to surf the web, investigating. The Subsidiary had all sorts of high tech surveillance, NSA-level intercepts, satellite imagery, and on-the-ground assets in all sorts of obscure and dangerous places. But from the discomfort of his coach seat in an over-packed flying tin can, Dick had the power of the internet. And even though he was no tech wizard like his former partner, Luke, he had two fingers and Google.

That was all it took.

The flight landed in Honolulu just after sunset, but the airport was still bustling. Dick waited at the top of the jet way for his partner, who seemed surprisingly keyed up for having just come off a twelve-hour flight, counting the forty-one minute layover dash at LAX.

She didn't even bother to stop when she got to him. Instead, she brushed past, calling out over her shoulder. "C'mon. If we hurry, we can pick up my luggage and still make the last flight to the Big Island."

He quickstepped to catch up. "We're not going to the Big Island." He caught her by the arm. She turned and looked at his hand on her elbow, her eyebrows rising, but said nothing. "At least not yet," he continued, letting go. "We need to do some investigating here."

She huffed at him. "You waste your flight time by sleeping?" Before he could deny it, she continued. "I didn't. I spent my time researching. This "great crack" thing, I think it has to do with the Big Island ..."

He held up his right hand, motioning her to stop. "That's all well and good, but Waikiki is on Oahu. We're here at the moment and we might as well make good use of our time and get some information on what this 'big wave' at *Waikiki* might be. Maybe it's a tidal wave—a tsunami. That's as big as a wave can get. The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center's in Ewa Beach, just on the other side of Pearl Harbor from the airport. I think we might get better information about big waves there than hooking up with some surfer dudes on the Big Island."

“The Big Island isn’t known for surfing. That would be the North Shore ...”

“So, you don’t think getting some detailed *scientific* information about big waves is relevant to our investigation?”

“I wasn’t suggesting ...”

“Good,” he interrupted. “Then, it’s settled. We’ll pick up your bag, pick up the rental car, and drive to the hotel the Quartermaster booked for us, then go to the Tsunami Center first thing in the morning.”

“What are we going to do all evening? Hold hands and stare at the ocean from the terrace of our room, then douse the lights and pound on the headboard for ... a few minutes ... to maintain our cover?”

He shook his head. “Two-bedroom suite. Given the age difference, we’ll be posing as a divorced dad taking a vacation with his daughter.”

Ace shrugged. “More credible, I guess. That way we can argue incessantly without anyone being suspicious.”

“And,” added Dick, “you can spend all of your time staring at your cell phone, while I do all the talking.”

She pursed her lips, as if pouting. “Yes, Daddy.”

He spun around and marched off toward baggage claim.

#

Ace woke to the smell of salt air and the delightful caress of light tropical breezes. A dawn chorus of birdcalls sang to her from outside her open balcony door. This was what she had fantasized about as a teenager in Prague. Warmth, beauty, freedom—an escape from a cold, gray life and a cold, gray future. Sure, there was danger and work, too, even here in paradise, but she preferred to think of those things as exciting and fulfilling—a job description few in her circumstances could ever hope to achieve.

She savored the luxury of the morning for a few moments, then grabbed her cell to find a text from the Dickster: “Meete me at brkfst buffey.”

Either dear old Dad was a crappy speller or he had fat thumbs and little experience texting. She’d bet on the latter.

The message was only a few minutes old; the buzzing of her cell had probably been what woke her. She didn’t rush her shower or morning

routine, putting on a pair of tan linen slacks and a loose, flowered top. She knew her “dad” would appreciate the extra time at the all-you-can-eat bacon buffet.

She tucked her weapon into her purse, perched her special Subsidiary-issue sunglasses on the top of her head, and sauntered downstairs to the open-air courtyard restaurant. Sure enough, Dick was sitting with his back to her along the black, lava rock wall at one side of the dining veranda, with a mound of bacon, eggs, and toasted English muffins on his plate and a half-dozen opened plastic honey containers littering the table. A pair of Leica binoculars and a floppy white hat sat on the right side of the table within arm’s reach.

She approached from behind, giving him a friendly shoulder squeeze as she veered off and seated herself in the empty chair to his left. “Good morning, D ...”

A booming voice in a thick Brooklyn accent interrupted her from the center of the veranda. “Hey, Dick. Dick Thornby. Great to see ya.” She turned to see a wiry, mustachioed, Hispanic wearing shorts and a Polo shirt striding toward the table. *Ježíší*, had Dick already been setting up meetings before breakfast?

By the startled look in Dick’s wide eyes as he looked up, she guessed not.

“Edwaldo,” Dick called out in a soft voice in response. “Didn’t expect to see you here.”

Edwaldo reached the table, simultaneously grasping Dick’s outstretched hand as he leered down Ace’s loose top. “Obviously not,” he replied, innuendo oozing from every syllable.

“Uh, yeah. Edwaldo, this is my ... uh ...”

“Daughter,” Ace interjected. “Acacia.”

“Oh,” replied Edwaldo, his eyes jolting up to her face from her cleavage. He turned his face toward Dick. “I ... uh ... didn’t know you had a daughter. Only a son ... Seth. Right?” He glanced around the restaurant. “Are Seth and Melanie over at the buffet?”

“Uh ... no,” replied Dick, his face flushing. “It’s just me and ... uh ... Acacia. Right, honey?”

Her partner’s discomfiture delighted her, but Ace knew this was a dangerous situation, not just an awkward moment. Running into

someone you knew from real life was a horror story for anyone in their line of work, whether working undercover narcotics in a biker gang or black ops in a third world nation. Unfortunately, Disney World was probably the only place that rivaled Hawaii in terms of high risk of running into someone you knew far from home. And she could tell that New York Eddie, here, wasn't buying that Dickie-Boy had an adult daughter who didn't bother to wear a bra to breakfast with her dad. So she did the only thing she could.

"Yes, Daddy," she cooed with a wink at Dick. "It's just the two of us, all alone in that great big hotel room." She leaned forward, giving them both a good look down her loose blouse. "Should I go back up to the room, Daddy, and wait for you while you talk with your friend?" She got up from her chair.

"Uh ... sure, Acacia. Why don't you finish getting ready for our ... sightseeing tour ... while Edwaldo and I catch up."

She cast her eyes down. "Yes, Daddy. Whatever you say, Daddy."

She walked a few steps away from the table, then turned back to the two men. "You can bring your friend up to the room if you want, Daddy. I'll be a good girl. Promise." She winked and sashayed away, swaying her hips so suggestively a hula dancer would have blushed.

#

Dick exchanged pleasantries with Edwaldo for only five or ten minutes before he made his excuses and headed up to Ace's room ... without inviting his friend. He didn't really pay any attention to the conversation. Instead, his mind was awlirl running alternative scenarios on how he could explain all of this to Melanie without her demanding a divorce, interrupted only by running alternative scenarios on how he could get Glenn Swynton to replace his newest partner in the middle of an operation. He counted to ten ... then twenty ... before he pounded on her door.

Ace opened the door mid-pound. "You didn't bring your friend," she said, making a pouty face and speaking in the little girl voice she'd used with Edwaldo. "Was I a bad girl, Daddy?"

"What the hell was that?" he growled as he pushed into the room, kicking the door shut with a resounding slam behind him. "Maybe this

is all fun and games to you. But I've not only got a career to worry about, I have a life and a family. I thought you understood that."

Ace's pout dropped away in an instant and transformed into a stern expression. "I do understand that. Bullocks! That's why I just saved your bacon, as you Americans put it. Something you, of all people, should appreciate both literally and figuratively."

"What?" Dick bellowed. "You think you did me some kind of favor there? If my wife finds out ..."

She cut him off. "*Sakra!* That's just it, Dickie. Your wife isn't going to find out anything. My little scene made sure of that."

WTF? "Explain that. How does your play-acting the set-up for a soft core porn flick mean Edwaldo won't go blabbing to my wife?"

"Because you're not the only one."

Dick closed his eyes and shook his head hard, trying to rattle some semblance of sense loose. "The only what?"

Ace looked heavenward for a beat before staring him straight in the eye. "The only dick in the world. Most guys are dicks ... or at least they think with their dicks."

Dick grimaced. "Is that your 'go-to' advice for dealing with people who recognize you when you are on the job?"

Ace laughed. "Never happened. Never going to happen. My chances of running into anyone from the state-run orphanage in Prague is essentially zero ... and I don't have a life before the Subsidiary other than that."

Dick arched an eyebrow. "Wouldn't know. You got to see my dossier; they didn't show me yours."

"Too thin to bother, probably."

"More likely Glenn Swynton's passive-aggressive way of telling me where I rank in the grand scheme of things. After all this is over, he's more likely to ask you about my job performance on this mission than quiz me about yours."

He stared out the window a few seconds before Ace broke the silence. "Still, not much to see in the file. I was recruited straight out of school. Not that many missions since training finished."

"Enough to get you promoted to HQ, so somebody was impressed. And, trust me, I can see why the Subsidiary might prefer operatives



without, you know, family entanglements. Hiring orphans before they marry ... or shack up ... fits that profile. But, how's that kind recruitment work? I mean, I got approached privately when I was a cop, but I can't imagine guys in trench coats approaching high school girls in the park would work out so well."

She offered up a wan smile. "The orphanage has an employment festival in the spring for the kids who are aging out. It's held a few weeks before school finishes."

"I doubt the Subsidiary has a booth with pamphlets about the exciting life of being an international spy."

Ace looked out the window, focusing on the palm trees near the beach as she answered. "The recruiting officers, they sit in various classrooms to do interviews, one after the other. There are sign up sheets which describe the different companies hiring."

"Are there a lot of those?"

"No, of course not. A few factories and maybe a half-dozen companies supposedly looking for secretarial staff or retail clerks."

"Supposedly?"

"Many of them are fronts for pimps or porn producers. Even the real companies that recruit at the orphanage are the kinds of places that have handsy bosses who expect you to sit on their lap while they give dictation. Like I said, most guys are dicks."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Of course, the Subsidiary wasn't exactly what it purported to be either. They pretended to be recruiting entry-level security personnel for a big, international hotel chain opening a new location downtown. I liked the idea of having a gun and getting an outside chance for a little travel, so I signed up." She turned back to look at him. "That's how I ended up here with you, saving your cover and your marriage."

Dick frowned. "Yeah. I'm still not convinced about that last part."

"Think about it. So Edwaldo thinks you've got piece of ass half your age on the side. So what? You think that's gonna make him run to your wife? Not on your life. Especially if he thinks there's any hope ... the slimmest, slightest, flimsiest chance in the world that he's gonna someday, somewhere, somehow get in on the action and tap that hot little Lolita fetish himself? Not a chance. If you don't see him lounging

at the pool leering at the teeny-boppers when we head out to our appointment, it's because he's wanking off in his hotel room and dialing up pay-per-view threesomes."

Dick pressed his lips together. She had a point. He'd never been that close with Edwaldo, but the guy had never seemed to be the sanctimonious type. And, Edwaldo had only ever met Melanie a few times quite a few years back. Would he even recognize her if he saw her out shopping?

Ace continued. "Where do you know this guy from?"

Dick let out a long exhale. "Chicago. He transferred in from the NYPD. We were cops in the same precinct."

"Worst case, he intimates to your old pals in Chicago you're a stud. It's not like he's gonna run into your wife at Walmart or something. The chances are astronomical."

Dick closed his eyes a moment as his blood pressure settled down. "Odds were against me running into him here."

"One unlikely, unpleasant event is a coincidence," Ace replied, her voice becoming softer, more chipper. "Two unlikely, unpleasant events ... is a global conspiracy of evil we're sworn to stop."

He threw her a half-hearted smile. "Yeah. Best be getting back to that."

She bit her lip. "Too bad," she murmured.

"Too bad we've got to get back to work?"

"Too bad you didn't bring him back to the room," she replied, her eyebrows crooking up. "That would have absolutely guaranteed he'd never tell your wife."

He gave her a sidelong glance. "You mean ..."

She smiled. "I'm like you, Dick. Younger, smarter, better looking, and more physically adept, but like you, I do what needs doing."

"But ... but ..."

She fixed her eyes on him. "It's just sex. *Žádné velké věc*. No big deal. Did you think hotel security guard was the only 'interview' I signed up for? Did you think infiltrating gangs in the Czech Republic for the Subsidiary was all piercings and pickpocketing tourists? You Yanks make such a huge deal about sex, especially the older generation,

but that's on you. Tab A into Slot B and lots of screwing—it's really not any more complicated than assembling furniture from Ikea.”

Dick's mind suddenly flashed on the Beatles song *Norwegian Wood*, and the lyrics the way he'd always interpreted them. *Isn't it good, knowing she would*. Knowing Ace would was not only need-to-know information he didn't need to know, it was something he preferred *not* to know. He didn't need another layer of complexity in his life, thank you. It was already falling apart and he couldn't make any more sense of it than the poorly translated instructions that came with the computer desk he'd assembled for Seth a bunch of Christmas Eves ago. Everything he was trying to put back together in his life should come with the standard Ikea advisory: *Some assembly required*.

When he tuned back in, Ace was still jabbering about the wonders of on-the-job sex. “After all, it's safer and smarter than hooking up with locals. Besides, who wants to go for days, maybe weeks, at a time without fucking?”

“You don't need me for that,” Dick replied. He pointed at his cell phone. “Phone sex. It works.” He started to turn away, but then twisted back. “Use the speakerphone setting if you need both hands free.”

She glared at him for a few seconds, then suddenly Ace was all business, gathering up her things and heading for the door. “Yes, Daddy. Now, are you ready to go talk with some scientists about killer waves? Or do you need to go wank off first?”

Damn. He hated working with a fucking partner.

No. Amend that.

Fuck. He hated working with a damn partner.

## CHAPTER 8

The drive to the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center was blissfully short and quiet. Even though the temperature was in the mid-80s, Dick didn't bother with the air conditioner. The open windows brought fond memories of driving to Patterson Lake in his old beater, with Melanie slid over next to him on the bench seat. Besides, the trade winds off the water provided a touch of coolness even when stopped at an intersection.

The car was a five-year-old white Cadillac, the best the Quartermaster could do on Oahu to match Dick's somewhat antiquated and eclectic taste in rentals. Beefy and powerful, though not much trunk space compared to the old Caddies. It would do; they probably wouldn't be on the island long and he didn't anticipate any car chases. Of course, he hadn't anticipated the fiasco at breakfast. Being a spy was unpredictable.

The PTWC was located in a generally residential neighborhood just a couple of blocks off of Ewa Beach. The low-slung, tropical style building sat behind a chain link fence on a mossy-looking grassy expanse.

"Not very impressive," noted Ace as they approached a few miles per hour below the posted speed limit. "Not very secure, either. I'd hate to have to defend this place."

Dick shrugged. "It's a bunch of geeks and a much bigger bunch of computers. I don't think they need to worry about being a target in the event of the zombie apocalypse."

She threw a half-smile his way. "That's why I'll survive the zombie apocalypse and you won't, boss."

"Let's stick to the cover. Call me 'Dad.'"

She opened her mouth to reply, but he cut her off.

"'Dad.' Got it? Not 'Daddy.' No more screwing around."

"Yes, sir ... er ... Dad."

Dick drove past their target to get the full lay of the land before turning around and approaching from the east. "I called ahead this morning and told them I was a freelance reporter for *The Des Moines*

*Register* on vacation with my daughter, but looking to get some background information for a feature on tsunamis. Let's us ask a lot of questions without raising too much suspicion."

Ace's nose wrinkled. "Seems pretty suspicious to me. Why the hell would anyone in Iowa give a damn about tsunamis? And what if they check the newspaper's website and don't find your name?"

"Iowa's smack dab in the middle of flyover country, where the people aren't completely jaded and cynical like they are on both coasts. Iowans care about everybody and everything. As for them checking the website, that's why I said I was freelance. Of course I wouldn't show up on the site."

"So, what am I supposed to do? Wait in the car?"

Dick eased the big car into a parking spot shaded by a tall coconut palm. "Not at all. You're hanging with Dad while he works during vacation because ... you're a dutiful daughter and, I don't know, you feel obligated 'cause I paid for the trip, 'cause you're buried in student loans. You tagging along makes my visit and my questions seem that much more mundane. Toss in some questions of your own, if you want."

"Fine, but I still think this is a waste of time. We should be on the Big Island investigating the Great ..."

Dick held up his right hand, motioning her to stop. "Yeah, yeah. We're here now, so listen and learn. Okay?"

Ace gave him a slit-eyed look.

Jesus. Daughters were even more of a pain in the ass than sons.

#

Ace played her part as Dick checked in with the receptionist, smiling and nodding when introduced, and letting her dad take point. The interior of the facility was the same dingy white as the exterior of the building, but with the people providing a colorful accent. Not only was there a surprisingly varied assortment of colors and races among the staff, but almost everyone was wearing casual, comfortable clothing. Younger members of the staff tended toward board shorts topped with a brightly festive T-shirt; older employees gravitated toward khaki slacks offset by wildly patterned, button-down aloha shirts. If this was normal

day-to-day attire, casual Friday must mean swimsuits and beach cover-ups.

The facility manager, Dr. Akiro Hansebi, had just enough graying at the temples to look distinguished despite wearing sockless penny loafers to complete his island ensemble. He spoke in the clipped, precise tones typical of Japanese businessmen, but with no trace of an accent. Although he denied Dick's request to use a cell phone to record the visit—citing government policy—Hansebi seemed happy to show them around, maintaining an energetic description of the various computers, seismographs, and relay gear, finishing up in the main control room.

Hansebi gestured toward the wall opposite the door, dominated by a lighted map of the Pacific basin, with rows of computer screens with assorted feeds—pictures, graphs, scrolling data—beneath and on either side. “Here's where everything comes together: seismic reports about tremors and quakes, tidal and weather inputs, data re volcanic eruptions and magma swelling on volcanic slopes, and tsunami buoy data from throughout the basin.”

Dick looked up from the pad on which he was half-heartedly scratching notes; Ace assumed that, like her, he had set his sunglasses to record both audio and video. “Seems like kind of a boring gig. Just waiting around for something to happen, so you can analyze it and maybe, just maybe, send out an evacuation order.”

Their guide wrinkled his brow. Ace thought he might be offended by Dick's remark, but his quick reply showed no hint of irritation. “Not at all. Plenty is going on all the time. We are a constant source of information for both civil defense authorities and scientists in dozens of countries. Much of the information gathered here is disseminated in real-time even while it is being analyzed and run through our computer simulations to determine whether it warrants a tsunami alert.”

“What do you mean,” Ace asked, “by ‘disseminated in real-time?’ You mean you just give out all of this data to anyone anywhere?”

Hansebi tilted his head toward her. “Exactly. The entire reason for the Center is to facilitate communication of information that may save lives. You can, for instance, follow a Twitter feed which will alert you about earthquakes anywhere in the world. Of course, if you don't filter it by area of geographic interest or delimit it by magnitude, your phone

just buzzes at you constantly. Earth's crust is much more dynamic than most people realize. And even smaller events which are of insufficient energy or displacement to cause noticeable tsunami effects in any significant portion of the Pacific basin can have local effects important to shipping, fishing fleets, or to local populations. Earthquakes and seaquakes which do not cause destructive waves or building degradation can still impact power grids, whether by downed lines or, perhaps, triggering the scrambling and shut down of power generation facilities under safety protocols."

Dick spoke back up. "Isn't some of that kind of ... I don't know ... peripheral to your main task? I'm not sure the average taxpayer wants to be spending money so some guy in a village in Vanuatu knows whether a tiny tremor has upset the morning fishing routines."

Hansebi threw an eyebrow shrug and a tight smile toward Dick. "The information has to be gathered for our purposes in any event; not sharing useful bits of that information with others would seem to be the bigger waste. Besides, such reports not only generate a significant amount of goodwill with our neighbors while training our staff and inculcating them into a regular routine of rapid, accurate analysis and quick dissemination, but, more importantly, they ensure that everyone who should be paying attention to our reports in the event of a time-sensitive alert is accustomed to monitoring them on a priority basis."

"Why's that so important?" asked Dick. "I seem to recall that after some big earthquake a few years back in Chile or Peru ... someplace down in South America ... the tsunami wave didn't get to Hawaii for six or eight hours. CNN ran the same six clips from stock footage for hours before anything happened and, even then, it was pretty much a non-event."

Another tight smile. "Well, Mr. Thornby, think about what you said for a few moments. When you flew here on your connecting flight from L.A. or San Francisco or whatever, you were flying at almost five hundred miles per hour, and it took you about five hours to get here. Hawaii is a very remote place—the most remote place in the Pacific basin. Yet a seismic event thousands of miles away, even farther from here than L.A., caused a modest wave to arrive here six or so hours later. That means the shock wave was transmitted through the ocean at

the speed of a jetliner and was strong enough to push water along an extremely broad front with impressive force. When Krakatoa erupted in Indonesia in 1883, there was an admittedly small, but measurable, impact on the sea level in London, in an entirely different ocean, a day later. But things were much quicker and much more devastating for those nearby. Tsunamis in Java and Sumatra were well over a hundred feet high, killing thousands within minutes after the explosion which destroyed the island—almost all from the impact of water, not lava or gases.”

Dick mouthed an “Ohhhh ...” as he nodded at the doc. Ace wasn’t sure if he was acting or was truly as clueless as he appeared. “So that’s why you have the warning center out here in Hawaii, because you’ll get hours and hours of warning before a tsunami can take you offline.”

Hansebi’s brow furrowed. “Well, that certainly is an advantage for tsunamis generated by volcanic activity or landslides along the tectonic plates which circle the Pacific Ocean—the Ring of Fire. Of course, due to a thin spot on the crust of the Pacific Plate, the Hawaiian Islands are right on top of—and, in fact, were created by, a volcanic hotspot, which spews out magma which builds up and collapses to form these volcanic islands. So, while we would generally have hours of warning for a tsunami generated by activity along the Ring of Fire, a sizeable earthquake or explosive volcanic eruption here in the islands—most likely on the Big Island of Hawaii—could generate a sizeable tsunami which could come to shore here on Oahu in a half an hour, give or take.”

“Jesus,” muttered Dick.

Ace couldn’t restrain herself. “So ... if something cracked off of the Big Island, all the tourists on Waikiki might see a huge wave rushing toward them only minutes later?”

The doc swallowed hard. “Well, yes, in theory. The actual dynamics of a tsunami are complex. Where and how a wave hits is not only affected by the size and precise location of the generating event, but by the topography of the sea floor, coral breaks, and the outline of the shore. The highest waves are often generated by narrowing bays with open access to deep water.”



Ace tipped her head down and glared at him. “Like a deep harbor for ocean-going vessels, like battleships and aircraft carriers.”

Hansebi looked at the floor. “Yes.”

“Then why the hell is the warning center practically next door to Pearl Harbor, a block and a half from the beach, and only a couple feet higher?”

“Well, uh, that’s really not a very likely scenario ...”

A burly native-Hawaiian tech looked up from a nearby screen. “The short answer is that we’re just an offshoot of the weather service facilities which were here first.” Hansebi shot the tech a stern look, but he either didn’t notice or didn’t care. “Keaweaweulu Maleko,” he said, proffering a meaty hand. You can call me ‘Ulu.’”

Ace took it and tried to give it a single shake, but it barely moved. “You can call me ‘Ace.’” She let go of his hand. “What’s the long answer?”

“The long answer?”

“What’s the real reason the Center is sitting on a beach instead of sitting up ...” She gestured toward the back of the building.

“*Mauka?*” Ulu asked. “That means ‘towards the mountains.’”

“Yeah,” said Ace. “Why isn’t the center *mauka?*”

Hansebi’s stern look deepened. “This topic is not really within Ulu’s area of special expertise,” he interjected. “I’m sure he needs to get back to his monitoring.”

Ulu’s lip quivered, but he stifled the snarl that was forming. He angled his head deferentially toward Hansebi and turned back to his station, muttering under his breath. “*Haoles* are stupid.”

Ace glanced at Hansebi. Their guide had turned and headed out the door with Dick. He apparently hadn’t heard Ulu’s remark. She started to go with them, then interrupted Hansebi’s latest tour patter. “Restroom?”

Hansebi nodded down the hall in the opposite direction they were headed. “Second door on the left.”

“Go ahead,” Ace said with a smile. “I’ll catch up.”

“Sure,” said Dick. She mentally gave the big guy credit for the assist. He obviously knew she didn’t need to hit the loo. Large bladder capacity was practically the only genetic trait required to be a spy.

The two men continued down the hall. Ace headed to the restroom, opening the door and watching as the guys turned the corner at the end of the hall, then scooted quickly back to the control room, rapping once on the door to get Ulu's attention.

He scowled. "I'm not supposed to open the door for non-employees."  
"I forgot something."

He got up and opened the door, scanning the floor on the way.  
"What? You lose an earring or something?"

Ace stepped inside and shut the door behind her. "No, I forgot to ask why *haoles* are stupid."

"That's a lengthy conversation," grunted Ulu, dropping back into his chair and throwing a quick glance at his terminal.

"Let's start with the basics. Who are *haoles*?"

Ulu barked out a laugh. "Non-natives."

"Foreigners?"

"Non-Hawaiians. White people mostly. Loud, obnoxious, hyperactive, rich people, especially."

"So, what particular aspect of *haole* stupidity triggered your comment as we were leaving?"

Ulu snorted. "Their propensity for building houses, businesses, and governmental buildings on the shore, so they can be near the ocean ... so they can see the ocean." He shook his head. "You're on a friggin' island, brah. You go outta your house, you're going to see the friggin' ocean. It's right there, man."

Ace shrugged. The information was less useful than she'd hoped.  
"Tastes differ, I guess. You pay your money, you make your choice."

"But, it's a stupid choice. *Mauka*, the climate is cooler, so you don't need no air conditioning. And there's more rain, so you can grow your own food. And the breezes are cleaner and cooler and the heat and the salt spray doesn't destroy all your electronics. You know how often we have to replace cable connections and circuits on all this stuff?" He shook his head. "And, your question was on point. Uphill is way safer in the event of an ... event. A decent-sized tsunami would take out this place in an instant."

"I dunno," replied Ace. She knocked on the interior wall next to the door. "Cement's pretty tough stuff."

“Sure, it’ll stand up to a hurricane, though the wide eaves mean the roof would lift right off in a big blow, but wind’s nothing ... *nothing* ... compared to the power of surging water. Even something the size of the Ritter Island tsunami or the Sri Lankan surge would take out this place. If ... when ... Alika Three happens, there’ll be nothing left of *haole* civilization here. Just bruddahs hanging out *mauka*.”

*Kurva!* She had to watch her time. She held out her hand. “Give me your number. I’d like to call you later.”

Instead of handing her a card, he grabbed a felt-tip pen and wrote seven digits on her palm, like they were in fucking school. “What’s the area code?”

“Eight-oh-eight,” he replied. “Everything in the islands is area code eight-oh-eight.” He chuckled. “You’re a *haole*, but I could look past that ...”

She looked at his massive bulk and had a fleeting image of being crushed having sex with the local. She smiled at him. Let him think what he wanted. “Only if I get to ride out the waves on top ...”

## CHAPTER 9

Dick raised his eyebrows as Ace rounded the corner to the lobby, where he stood conversing with Hansebi, who he'd managed to position so the doctor wouldn't see Ace as she approached.

Hansebi was talking: "While the decades-long eruption of Kilauea on the Big Island, principally through the Pu'u 'Ō'ō vent and in the Halema'uma'u Crater, generates a regular stream of small to modest tremors, the flow of lava is not likely to cause a tsunami of any sort. Tsunamis are generated by sizeable shifts of rock within or into waters, causing a massive displacement of water volume. A constant lava flow releases pressure from the magma chamber on a regular basis. It's only when pressure of both magma and sulfuric or steam gases builds rapidly ... or at least more rapidly than it can be released through flows and steam vents ... that explosive events can occur, like Mount St. Helens or Krakatoa. Such explosions can dislodge considerable volumes of earth and rock, which can be very dangerous in a marine environment."

Ace strolled up. "So, is that what happened in Alika one and two? Big explosion because of pressure build up?"

"Alika ... what?" stammered Dick. He looked back and forth between her and Hansebi, shrugging his shoulders. "Seems my daughter prepared better for this interview than I did." He readied his pen and pad for more notetaking. "What's an Alika?"

"And," Ace interjected, "how overdue is Alika three?"

Hansebi frowned, as if the subject was somehow distasteful. "Alika one and two are distant historical events. Alika one occurred approximately two hundred forty thousand years ago and Alika two about one hundred twenty thousand years ago."

Ace let out a low whistle. "Which suggests Alika three is due anytime ..."

Hansebi waved away her concern. "These things are not that precise. There are innumerable variables. This isn't Old Faithful we're talking about. It's a complex system of magma chambers, rift zones, steam vents, lava tubes, and tectonic movement."

Dick tried his best to run some interference. “Yeah, sure, doc. We’re talking about geologic time here. We understand that. But a whiff of danger can get people to read an article they might otherwise just skim past. Maybe, just maybe, that means they might learn something in the process ... or not gripe about governmental expenditures on science.” He motioned with his pad, showing the doc he was ready to take notes. “So, were these Alika things big blow-offs after a period of building pressure?”

Hansebi seemed to settle down, though his expression remained hard. “Not at all. The Alika occurrences were subsidence events.”

Dick scrunched up his face.

The doc apparently noticed his confusion. “Landslides. Massive landslides.”

“Uh-huh ...” murmured Dick.

“You understand,” continued Hansebi, “that the Hawaiian Island chain is formed by volcanic magma coming out of a hot spot on the ocean floor?”

“Sure,” interjected Ace. “Everybody knows that. The Earth’s crust is moving over the hotspot at a slow speed and each island was formed when it was over the hot spot. The older ones, like Kauai and Oahu are ancient and more worn down.”

Hansebi nodded. “Exactly. The oldest, Niihau, is practically a flat, desolate plateau at this point.” His face softened as he continued his lecture. “What people forget is that the volcanoes are immensely tall—not just tall enough above sea level that there is snow on top of Mauna Kea at times, but *hugely* tall from their base on the sea floor. Measured from top to base, they are taller than Mount Everest is above its base and, accordingly, much, much greater in total volume. Only a small percentage of the actual volume pokes out from the surface of the sea.”

That made sense when Dick thought it through.

“The other thing,” the doc continued, “is that the volcanoes are actually quite steep, so there is a significant amount of natural subsidence which occurs on a regular basis. Some of that occurs in a constant, regular stream, but it is often punctuated by larger events on an irregular and unpredictable basis.”

He noticed Ace nodding as the doc spoke. “Oh, I get it. So, it’s like when the kids at the beach try to make a sand tower and the sand keeps sliding down hill and collapsing when it reaches a certain height.”

“Yes,” replied the doctor. “But more like a mud castle, where the dirt may initially adhere, but clumps off as it dries and heavier, wetter mud is placed above it.”

“So,” asked Dick, “these Alika earthquakes shook some of the volcanic deposits loose?”

Hansebi tipped his head. “More like gravity finally overcame the adherence of the initial deposit and a landslide started which was so massive it mimicked an earthquake.”

Ace’s face was grim. “How massive are we talking about?”

“More than a hundred times the volume of earth displaced by the Mount St. Helens collapse.”

“Fuck ...” whispered Ace. Dick threw her a stern look. “Pardon my language, D-d-dad, but ... holy shit.”

The doctor held out his hands, palms down, in a calming gesture. “Don’t get too excited. It’s very, very unlikely to occur within any of our lifetimes.”

“Sure,” said Dick. “But, just to be thorough. What kind of tsunamis did these Alika events cause?”

Hansebi returned to a professorial tone. “Scientists have gone about looking at that in two ways. Some have analyzed the debris fields in the ocean containing the detritus from these landslides, calculating how much power it would take to move boulders of various sizes the distances involved and calculating the volume of water displaced. Others have looked at evidence of coral debris on Lanai and Oahu, trying to calculate the height of the waves by measuring how high such debris occurs and how many miles inland. This latter method has some detractors, as some believe the older islands are, in fact, rising as the crust beneath them rises in counterbalance to the sinking of the mantle below the Big Island as it grows and gets heavier over time.”

“Sounds complicated,” replied Dick. “Do the two theories differ much in their conclusions?”

“Not really,” answered Hansebi. “And recent studies on the Kohala uplands on the northwest side of the Big Island, which everyone agrees

is slowly sinking, indicates the tsunami was somewhere between twelve hundred and sixteen hundred feet high when it hit Kohala a few minutes later, and at least seven hundred feet high when it swept over Lanai shortly thereafter.”

“Wow,” muttered Dick.

“*Sakra!*” echoed Ace. Dick saw her wince a half-second later when she obviously realized she’d broken character. She quickly tried to recover. “How big of an explosion or earthquake would you need to trigger something like that before, you know, it would naturally occur.” She shrugged. “Say, along the Great Crack.”

Dick watched as Hansebi stared for a few moments at Ace, as if calculating the chances she wanted a do-it-yourself primer. His face became stern as he squinted at her. ‘Please tell me you’re not one of those?’”

“One of what?” Ace asked, her voice saccharin sweet.

“Disaster porn junkies. Conspiracy nuts. End-of-the-world whackos.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” replied Ace. “Why would worrying about stuff that might happen make you a whacko?”

“Yeah,” gruffed Dick. “Don’t call my daughter a whacko.”

Hansebi sighed, then closed his eyes a moment before dialing up a tight smile and continuing. “I’m sure you ... both of you ... are well intentioned and that ...” He nodded toward Dick. “... your article is not intended to be sensational or gratuitously alarming. However, there are certain fringe elements, especially within the end-of-the-world prepper movement, who like to panic others with predictions of imminent disaster of, well, Biblical proportions. I’m not sure if it’s because it makes them feel important or they’re just trying to sell more freeze-dried, long shelf-life foodstuffs.”

“MREs,” mused Dick. “Yeah. Only the prospect of starvation could prompt a civilian to stockpile meals-ready-to-eat.”

Ace interjected, practically twitchy with impatience. “What’s all this got to do with the Great Crack? I mean, as I understand it, there’s ... well ... a big crack running across the south end of the Big Island. Doesn’t that suggest that hunk of land is going to ... well ... crack off and slide into the ocean creating a splash that will engulf Maui and

Lanai and wash this cinderblock beachside warning center over the Pali Lookout?”

Hansebi fluttered a hand in Ace’s direction. “The Great Crack, as it is called, is a mere thirteen kilometers long. Eight miles as the crow flies in, er, Iowa. While it is an impressive sight, given it is up to fifty feet wide and almost sixty-five deep in some places, I’d hardly call it evidence the entire south side of the Big Island is sliding into the ocean.”

Ace pressed. “But if it did, that would be bad.”

The scientist failed to take the bait. “The Great Crack is not an omen. It’s probably not even a subsidence crack. It’s more likely a result of crustal dilation as the result of lava flows and incursions.”

“But what if it widened suddenly?” Ace asked. Dick almost found himself shaking his head. She was like a teenager with a smartphone. She just couldn’t let go.

Hansebi wrinkled his nose. “Certainly I’ve seen no credible scientific evidence it is widening or about to burst at the seams. Although there was lava flow from the crack in the early 1800s, neither the 1868 nor the 1975 quakes—magnitude 7.9 and 7.2—caused any lateral slippage.”

“What about a bomb?”

The doctor looked heavenward, but apparently was too polite to count to ten out loud. “I think, Miss, you should let your father do the fact-gathering for his own story. ISIS is not sending over swarthy men with backpacks to detonate as they leap into the Great Crack. Besides, if they had explosives of sufficient size to *chance* causing a tsunami here, why would they set them off where there are so few people? Why wouldn’t they just set them off in a major metropolitan area?” He tapped his foot. “Don’t believe everything you see on the SyFy Channel. Or the Discovery Channel either. And don’t get me started on A&E and History. It’s shameful what educational television has devolved into.”

The trio stepped to one side as a bevy of scientists passed by discussing lunch plans. Dick was just about to wind things up by thanking the doc when Ace dragged them back into conversation. “And a big earthquake is the only thing that could dislodge a huge landslide on the Big Island?”



Jesus. It's like she couldn't shut up. Time for Dad to intervene. "I think we've taken up enough of ..."

"Well, there was the silent earthquake on the Big Island back in 2000," mused Hansebi.

"What the hell is a silent earthquake?" Dick blurted. Jeez, he hoped it wasn't as deadly as a silent heart attack.

"Well, silent is probably a misnomer, since noise is not a reliable indicator of earthquake intensity. Aseismic is probably a better term. The November 2000 event was exceptionally slow-moving, lasting almost thirty-six hours, but causing almost no noticeable shaking and registering a mere 5.7, but moved a prodigious slab of material."

"How'd it do that?" interjected Ace.

Hansebi shrugged. "The most high-profile theory is that it *slid* due to an extremely high-volume of water which percolated down almost three miles into the fault systems below Kiluea on the heels of a torrential deluge of almost three *feet* of rain slightly more than a week earlier. The influx of the water into the quite porous lava rock not only added significantly to the weight of the angled layers of old flow, but lubricated them like oil ... or the flow of an air hockey game." The doctor nodded. "Quite impressive."

Now they were getting somewhere. "How far?" asked Dick.

"Hmm?"

"How far did the lava slide?" Dick clarified.

"Almost nine centimeters," declared their host.

"Is that all?" Ace replied with a dejected whine.

Dick threw her a quizzical look.

"Less than four inches."

"Oh," said Dick. "Is that all?"

Hansebi snorted. "Is that all? Moving a half-mile thick slab the size of ... a national park ... or a small state ... four inches without anyone noticing is a most impressive feat." The doctor glanced at his watch. "I really need to check on several projects. I hope this suffices for your article, Mr. Thornby." He bobbed his head. "Nice meeting you ... both of you. Enjoy your stay in the islands." He turned and left, leaving them in the hallway near the lobby.

They were well out of range of being heard, almost to the car, before Dick spoke up. “Well, that was interesting. Educational even. I’d never heard of the whole silent earthquake business.”

Ace sneered at him as she reached for the passenger side door handle. “Four inches? Sorry, Dad, but no matter what they say, girls are never impressed with anything under six inches.”

“Shut up and get in the car.”

## CHAPTER 10

*Kurva!* The car seat was burning hot. Dick, in his khakis, didn't seem to notice. She leaned back on the vertical portion of the seat, which had been more shaded, and propped her sandaled feet up on the dashboard to save her thighs from third-degree burns.

"What next?" asked the Dickster, oblivious to her discomfort.

She gave him a hard look. "What do you mean, 'What next?' We go to the Big Island and check out the Great Crack, like I wanted us to do yesterday."

He backed out of the parking spot, then shifted the car into drive and headed for the exit. He wasn't subtle about giving the behemoth gas, but she didn't mind the breeze coming in the window as he turned out on to the street without bothering to stop at the familiar red sign.

"You heard the doc," he said. "The Great Crack is a bust ... a myth ... a dead-end. What's the point?"

She twisted in her seat, shifting to position her legs out the passenger window. "Just because the first alleged expert we talked to thinks it's a myth, doesn't mean it is. Besides, it certainly doesn't mean the bad guys think it's a myth. Maybe they think it'll work. Or maybe they're not thinking of a tsunami apocalypse, just a smaller event. Something that won't propagate across the ocean—just a smaller slide that will inundate the coastal regions of the islands, themselves. Either way, we still have to take a look. Besides, we've got no other leads, unless you want to start shaking down local hoods, *Hawaii Five-O* style."

"I guess," groused her assigned mentor. "But who would want to drown a bunch of clueless tourists ..."

"*Haoles* ..." she interjected.

"What?"

"*Haoles* are non-natives. Most of the native Hawaiians apparently like higher ground, where it's cooler."

Dick suddenly hit the brake, causing her ass to slide uncomfortably forward as the edge of the window held her feet in place. "What the hell?"

“Exactly,” said Dick as they sat in the middle of the damn residential street. “What the hell. It could be the damn PPIPF.”

“Pfffft,” she groused as she clumsily repositioned herself to a more standard sitting position. “What the hell is that?”

“P-P-I-P-F.” Dick looked at her as if she was an idiot. “The Pan-Pacific Indigenous People’s Front. I thought you said you read my file, including the details about my New Zealand assignment.”

“Oh, sure,” she replied, drawing out the last word. “The one where you blew up a port to recover a laptop. Subtle work that.”

“Shove it up your ass,” growled Dick.

“Dad! Such language!”

“Cute. But if you spent more time reading and less time being cute, you’d know the PPIPF is a violent fringe group that wants to reclaim the whole Pacific basin for the natives and take out as many tourists and colonial interlopers as they can along the way. They’d love a caper which did maximum damage to the tourist economy and took out the houses of rich retirees and vacationing one-percenters.”

“Caper? Seriously? You *are* old.”

“Shut up and switch seats with me.” He grabbed his special Subsidiary-issued aviator sunglasses from out of the pocket of his aloha shirt. “I need to check in with the office and get some leads on local PPIPF members while you drive us back to the hotel.”

#

Almost five hours later, Ace dialed up the magnification on her own shades, a European wrap-around style that, like Dick’s, had all the communications equipment, low-light vision, and other features the Subsidiary techs could fit into the sleek frame. She gazed up at Diamond Head from the lanai of Dick’s hotel room. She’d wanted to lounge by the sparkling clear waters of the spacious hotel pool while he finished quizzing the research division about PPIPF members in the islands, but the big guy was concerned she’d run into his friend from breakfast. No doubt he also thought she was goofing off during the mission by catching some rays; she preferred to think of her touristy activity as reinforcing their cover.

“Looks like a tough climb,” she said as she amped up the power and swept the crest of the extinct volcano. “Not real mountain tough, like the Alps, Himalayas, or Rockies, but more arduous than the hefty-sized PPIPF doughboys you’ve been showing me pictures of would want to tackle for what basically sounds like a natives-R-cool pep rally.” She squinted. “On the other hand, I do see a few people up there, along with some kind of squat building, so there must be a route.”

“There is,” replied Dick, “but not from the outside.”

She lowered her sunglasses and gave him a stare. “How else do you climb a mountain? No snow, so I doubt there’s a ski lift.” She scrunched up her face in thought. “Scenic tramway out of view?”

Dick chuckled. “You’ve got to remember that the mountains here are all volcanic. Diamond Head is just the tallest point on a circular ridge that surrounds an ancient caldera.”

“So you climb up at a lower point on the circular ridge and walk around the circumference?”

This time the old guy snorted. “Better yet. You take a city bus halfway around the outside and follow the road that goes through a tunnel to the flat plateau in the center of the ring, then follow the path at the park that takes you up to the top along the less steep inner slope. There’s a somewhat awkward, steep stairway at one point, but most of the way is easy going. Only a mile or so if I recall correctly.”

“Stairs?” she blurted. “Americans install stairs on their hiking paths?”

“No. Well, at least not in this case. The United States Army did.” He pointed at the mountain—a useless gesture given the distance and the fact both of them were using magnification when they looked at the summit, but she understood his meaning and slid her shades back down to her eyes. “See those squat, boxy features near the top? The Army installed lookouts and pill-boxes—machine gun emplacements—on the crest during World War II, when they were worried about a Japanese invasion of the island. There’s two sets of concrete steps on the steeper parts of the slope connected by a short tunnel, plus a spiral staircase near the top to aid the climb up with packs full of ammo and equipment. There’s even an old cable line partway up to assist hauling larger loads up and down.”

“You mean a zip line?”

Dick shrugged. “Kind of, I guess. Though I doubt they ever used it that way. Didn’t pay much attention to it when I climbed up several years ago during a layover on a return flight from ... well, you know ... an assignment.”

“And that’s where the guys at the Subsidiary who monitor PPIPF communications say the local contingent is congregating tonight?”

“Yeah,” said Dick. “Not normally something that would be on the Subsidiary’s radar. Routine gatherings just don’t rate any concern. After all, lots of separatist and secessionist groups around the world are nothing but talk. But, given what the Maori faction of the PPIPF was up to in New Zealand a while back and my request for info, the reshuffled the deck of monitoring priorities to shake out a lead.”

Ace maxed out the magnification on her sunglasses and studied the pill-boxes. “Still seems like an arduous trek to get to a desolate spot for a clandestine meeting just so they can swap stories about how stupid tourists are.” She dialed back to normal view and looked at her partner as he took off his sunglasses and sat in one of the lanai’s deck chairs.

“I dunno. It’s desolate, but nearby. You can get within a mile or so by public transportation. Summits and headlands are always prominent features to a native population, but this one’s got obvious colonial scars, plus a killer vantage point to look not only at the stars and the ocean, but also the ...” He gestured at the tightly packed beachfront hotels and the throngs along the expanse of Waikiki. “... commercialization of island life by the evil colonialists.”

“Whatever,” Ace replied. “If they want to see what being taken over again and again by imperialist powers is like, they should spend some time in Eastern Europe.” She inclined her head toward her own room. “Guess I’d better go change into long pants and better hiking shoes. I don’t think flip-flops and a beach cover-up are going to cut it, even for a stroll tourists take.”

“Yeah. I figure it’s easiest to head up late this afternoon, when the park at the bottom is still open, then find a spot along the way to take cover until after dark, when the PPIPF members will be gathering.” He glanced at his watch. “Let’s plan to leave here a quarter to four. In the

meantime, I'll make a quick run to pick up some gear I arranged for the Quartermaster to put together for us locally."

"Don't want to have nothing but your dick in your hands when you're the only *haole* at a native gathering? I thought we were just going to listen in, not try to arrest the entire gang."

"I was a Boy Scout ..."

"No shit," Ace drawled. She pursed her lips and gave him a seductive wink. "I'd never have guessed."

Her mentor ignored her faux advances. "... which means I like to be prepared."

"Really?" she said. "I rifled through your wallet when you were in the restroom an hour ago. Didn't find a condom." She winked at him again as she sashayed into the room and headed for the open door connecting their rooms. "So how prepared are you, really?"

#

The hike up the inside of Diamond Head was an easy trek, practically a stroll. When he was in the Rangers, he did five times as much before breakfast on most days. Ace didn't even seem to break a sweat keeping up with him. Finding cover part way up presented no obstacles, either. Waiting, however, was a whole different story. While Dick could handle even the most tedious parts of his missions, he was having a hard time tolerating his new partner's fidgeting.

"Jesus. Sit still," Dick growled as Ace shifted for the third time in five minutes. "Or take a nap. You're worse than a toddler at church." He glanced over at his teammate. "You'd make a crappy assassin."

She stopped moving and seemed to settle in place. "Nah," she whispered. "I'd make a crappy sniper. I've done my share of snuff jobs. I'm just more the seduce-and-stab type." She gave him a once-over. "I could gut stab you twelve times in four seconds and there wouldn't be any visible blood until after I walked away. By the time you hit the ground, I'd be in the next room, asking the valet to retrieve my car." She leaned closer to him. "And it would be a damn fine car ... a fast car ... a sports car. Something appropriate for a spy."

Dick said nothing. One of them, at least, should practice maintaining appropriate protocol for hiding in place.

“Of course, I never wear white, just in case there is an errant spot of blood. Besides, white isn’t appropriate for my usual cover. Something red and flowing; something that doesn’t inhibit my movement ... or my mark.”

Jesus. It was going to be a long, long wait. The park officially closed hours before the bad guys were slated to meet, and most of the natives seemed to operate on island time—a flexible construct that corresponded with good surfing conditions and a relaxed approach to life.

Dick couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a relaxed approach ... to anything.



## CHAPTER 11

Waiting for gang members to assemble was like standing in the kitchen waiting for microwave popcorn to pop. First there was a lone pop, then a long wait for the second, less for the third. Then the pace picked up until a cacophony of pops defied counting before dwindling off into groups of two and three. Eventually, you found yourself counting off seconds between occurrences. Finally, things died down enough, you figured you were done and you'd better get down to business before you waited too long and got burned, missing what you were trying to accomplish. He had mentally ticked off the PPIPF members he'd recognized from the photos supplied earlier by the Subsidiary. All the head honchos had arrived.

Dick double-checked there were no more locals headed up the switchbacks leading to the summit access, then nodded at Ace. The two of them moved out from their cover between the first lookout and the first stairway to finish their climb to the top of Diamond Head. Seventy-four steep concrete steps later, they entered a dim tunnel. The lights installed to assist tourist access were turned off for the night, as the park closed at six, but enough ambient light leaked in to reveal no guard blocked the way. They exited at the bottom right of another concrete staircase with a rest area on the opposite side. Dick eschewed taking the additional hundred or so steps to the bottom level of the gun emplacement and its easily-guarded internal spiral staircase to the lowest level of the Fire Control Station. Instead, he opted to take the gentle slope of the shorter of the two new exit loop trails and creep up a modern metal staircase installed where the trails intersected on the inner slope of the crater. From there, he could assess where their target congregated.

Ace stalked closely behind without saying a word. A nice change of pace, that.

The bunker to the left was empty, as was the walkway to the right and the additional metal stairs to the summit and its flat-roofed, heavily-graffitied, concrete station. He nodded toward the right, and they

sprinted along the summit trail and up the steps to the station. Still no one in sight.

Dick took the lead, motioning for his less stealthy compatriot to follow as he crept along the inside perimeter of the concrete cube, avoiding the well-trod tourist pathway on the other side. He hesitated at the far edge and dropped to his belly to scope out the scene. While the trail railing and a rocky outcropping blocked part of his view, he could make out a circle of gang members sitting along the crest pathway between the summit pillbox and the more camouflaged Fire Control Station lower on the ridge to the west. The setting sun off the coast past Waikiki backlit the conclave, making it nigh impossible to make out individual features on the participants. All he could see were nodding heads, bulging muscles, and extra-husky waistlines. Too much *loco moco*—gravy drowned burger, rice, and eggs—on their island diet; you didn't get a gut like that on poi and pineapple.

Although he'd heard voices as he neared, the conversation had lulled as the sunset approached—all eyes no doubt on the fiery sky streaked by wine dark clouds as the sun still peeked out above the azure waves on the horizon. Tourists on the beach were probably holding their breath, leaning forward in an attempt to catch the vaunted green flash of the perfect tropical sunset. He stayed focused on the mission, elbowing his way forward. It's not that he could see more, but he had some hope of hearing something nearer to the group. He turned his head so he could hear better when conversation flowed once more as the gloaming gave way to twilight.

His dedication to duty paid off. As soon as the sun was down, the conversation resumed. It was like music to his ears. Unfortunately, he didn't know the lyrics to the song.

Damn.

They were speaking Hawaiian. Of course they were speaking Hawaiian. Isn't that what an organization dedicated to wiping out colonial interlopers and imperial taskmasters would do? Sure, the natives had Niihau all to themselves and Hawaiian was the only language spoken there. But the Forbidden Island was a windswept plateau wasteland for the most part; the PPIPF wanted all of the islands for the natives. They funded secessionist efforts, a growing sentiment on

the islands. They also backed the push to allow native access to Kahoolawe, despite the fact the uninhabited island was a fucked up jungle of unexploded ordinance, having been used as target practice by the U.S. Navy for the better part of half a century.

Sure, some of the PPIPF's desires might sound honorable, but even if he couldn't understand what they were saying right now, he knew they were willing to murder and maim thousands of innocent people to accomplish their goals. Violence was their true language, even if the soothing tones of the Hawaiian tongue made it sound pleasant, even melodic.

Still he listened, just in case they switched over to English or even Pidgin, the local patois combining Hawaiian and English dialects into a mishmash of laid-back drawls and clipped phraseology in a sing-song accent. At least, then, he might be able to make out a few words—a date, a name, a place. Not that it would be easy. With only thirteen letters, the local geographic names were a confluence of similar sounding syllables to Dick's ears. Besides, different islands had towns with exactly the same names. Things were not going Dick's way.

If this was a movie, this is where someone would suddenly growl “Speak English! Our beautiful language does not deserve to be sullied by the violence and destruction we are about to rain down on the vile pestilence that has befouled our way of life.” Then everyone would speak in English, repeating the earlier conversation for good measure. Or maybe the bad guys would sneak up and capture them, then reveal their entire nefarious plot before devising some tediously slow and arcane method of killing them that allowed them to escape after the bad guys left. But this was real life. Nobody in the real world would let themselves be captured on the off chance they could gather information, then escape unharmed.

He listened to the unintelligible conversation for a while, but nothing changed. Then he felt a tap on the back of his leg. He kept his combat instincts in check and craned his neck to look behind him. Now that the island was fully dark in the way only a hunk of rock dropped in the middle of the world's biggest ocean can be on a moonless night, he barely could make out the outline of Ace behind him. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his special, Subsidiary tech shades, pressing

the temple to activate low-light mode as he donned them. He could see now that Ace had her wraparounds on, too. He didn't know why. He could hear fine; he didn't need to read lips. Especially not when they were speaking Hawaiian. It's not like they were acting out their sinister plot by using their hands and bodies to speak in hula motions like at all the touristy luaus.

As he stared at her, Ace mouthed the words: "Did you hear that?" I guess he could read lips after all. He furrowed his brow, not that she could probably tell, since he had on shades. He shook his head minutely. "They're leaving," she mouthed. She motioned with her thumb. "We need to go, now!"

He had no idea how she could know that, but there's no point to having a partner if you don't trust them in a tight spot. It did sound like the unintelligible conversation might be winding down. He also heard the sound of shuffling feet and the sumo-like grunts of overweight thugs getting up from the ground.

He nodded and got up with slow, stealthy movements. They could back off up the hill and scramble down the path on the other side of the concrete block at the summit, maybe even get back to their earlier hiding spot while the gang members navigated the choke point at the spiral staircase in the station right below their conclave perch. All they had to do then was wait while the conclave trickled down the path in the dark. Ace was scrambling up, too, but he suddenly realized neither of them was moving fast enough. The group wasn't going down through the darkened spiral staircase. They were taking the other side of the tourist path loop, the exit path he and Ace had come up earlier. Maybe the spiral staircase couldn't bear the heavy load of so many Spam-fed natives at once or maybe the big, bad secessionists were afraid of the dark. It didn't matter; he'd made a mistake assuming which way they would go when they left.

A big mistake.

He felt the footfalls of thundering heavyweights approaching much too close. He and Ace certainly weren't going to make it back to their earlier cover in time. And here, up on the crest, there wasn't any real vegetation to hide them, just the silent silhouettes of concrete machine gun nests from a bygone time. The summit station was just a few yards

away. If they could get behind it, the gang might still pass them by unnoticed.

Ace clearly had the same idea, but instead of trying to dash around the side of the concrete fortification, she jumped lightly atop it. What the ...? Dick had no choice but to follow suit. Ace began rolling along the flat top of the bunker; Dick was doing the same when a dim flashlight suddenly shone on both of them, starting at their feet, but rapidly moving up their torsos.

Dick was about to jump up, ready for fight or flight. Instead, Ace grabbed him, pulling him closer and wrapping her legs around him. "Kiss me!" she hissed, pushing up both their sunglasses, flicking open her blouse, and pressing her face to his as she rolled him over so she was on top.

"What? Huh?" replied Dick as the moving light centered on them.

"Like you mean it," Ace whispered, shoving her tongue in his mouth, preventing any reply, as she grabbed his right hand and shoved it on her breast.

The lead thug kept his light steady as he approached them. "Yo. What you doin' here, brah?"

Dick let Ace's tongue exit his mouth as she sat up, but he kept his paw on her tit. Instinct? Pleasure? Maintaining his cover? Protecting her modesty? He hadn't been so confused about second base since high school ... and his confusion had nothing to do with the infield fly rule. Worse yet, while his mind was confused, his body was responding with gusto. Fortunately, Ace covered Dick's confused silence.

She looked over at the thug *du jour*. "What's it look like, brah? Fucking in fucking paradise."

A low, animalistic growl rose up from the darkness as a throng of fellow locals began to bunch up behind their interrogator like looky-loos at an accident scene. "Looks more like you're disrespecting our sacred ground."

Ace barked out a laugh. "Yeah, like you wouldn't do me on the spot if you had the chance ... tall, dark, and hunky." She pointed a finger at her accuser. "Not that you ever will."

Dick desperately wanted to give her a non-verbal signal to back off, not to escalate the confrontation, but what was he supposed to do?

Squeeze her tit? Somehow, he didn't think that would convey the intended message.

She somehow seemed to read his mind, though. "Besides, that's why we're doing it up here on the top of the bunker ... or whatever the hell you call these things. Seems like your sacred land already got disrespected by war-mongers the better part of a century ago. We're just counteracting the violent mojo with the power of love." She made a classic peace sign with the fingers of the hand she'd pointed at him a few moments before. "Make love, not war. Right, brah?"

There was a moment of silence ... of indecision. Dick dropped his hand to get ready to push up for a fight, but just then one of the stragglers near the back of the approaching group hooted "Nice tits, babe!" and the mob disintegrated into catcalls and whistles. In the midst of the ribald revelry, Dick heard a low voice say "Let it go, brah. I know her. She's cool." Dick recognized the voice of Ulu, the tech from the Tsunami Center. "Besides, we got bigger fish ... you know?"

The throng began to move past them on the tourist path below. A few flashed lights or muttered encouragements as they ogled the dimly-lit make-out scene. Dick relaxed. They were going to make it, after all.

Then another of the flashlight beams flitted over his face. Suddenly, he heard Ulu's voice again, but this time it was much louder.

"What the fuck, *wahine*? Isn't that dude feeling you up your *dad*?"

The foul accusation hung in the air for a moment between heaven and paradise. Then Dick encircled Ace's waist with his arms and rolled toward the opposite edge of the concrete slab.

"Run!" he hissed. "Now."

## CHAPTER 12

Ace didn't hesitate. She leaped from the pillbox toward the fifty-plus metal stairs descending from the summit on the east side. She avoided the bulky bodies of the gang members already blocking the staircase by aiming for the railing on the outside edge of the crater. She hit the rail with the hardened plastic plate in the crook of her hiking boots. Absorbing the shock with her knees, she slid down the railing with practiced ease. If she'd had a skateboard, the trick would have been flashier and her speed greater, but it was impressive enough to be effective, given the shocked looks on the faces of the thugs she slid by. She doubted Dick could match her feat. In fact, she had no clue how her mentor intended to escape the PPIPF members she was rapidly leaving in her wake, but she didn't have time to look—not that she'd be able to see much in the dark.

At least she could fix that last part. She reached up while she was still running along the path to the metal staircase which led to the rest stop along the inner rim of the crater, pulling down her wrap-around shades, still in low-light mode.

Much better. A quick glance showed a herd of beefy guys thundering down the steps behind her, but they had no hope of matching the speed her lithe form and extensive training afforded her. She hit the corner to the metal steps and grabbed the railing to pivot without slowing. As her body jerked up with the sudden change of momentum, she twisted in mid-air and sat on the pipe railing this time, kicking the opposite rail to push off and sliding down the length. The intermittent joints where the railing was affixed to posts would leave a few bruises on her derriere, but gravity was definitely her friend. She continued to outpace her pursuers—enough so she risked a look up and to the west for Dick.

She hoped he was okay. She didn't mind giving the big guy a hard time about ... well, almost everything, but she didn't want to see him beat senseless by a gang of thugs who, at best, thought he was molesting his own daughter and, at worst, knew he'd been spying on their clandestine terrorist planning session.

She might have to go back up and save the asshole. Worse yet, she might have to carry his dead body down the mountain. Dead weight and steep slopes were a bad mix, usually followed by a long fall.

At least she didn't hear any gun fire. At least, not yet.

#

Dick spent half-a-second watching Ace parkour down the railing past a bevy of angry Hawaiians and sprint away. He could never top that move. Hell, he couldn't equal that move. Sure, once upon a time he'd been young and reckless, but he'd never been that nimble, that light on his feet. No, he was a brute force kind of guy and right now a throng of brutes was approaching in force. He jammed his low-light shades back down and scanned both sides of the crest. The tough guys were on the path on three sides of the concrete structure, beginning to scramble up to accost him. He didn't have the speed to outrun them if he leaped over and tried to use the crest path to escape. He could probably clear the group on the path skirting the outside edge of the fortification, but that left him on the towering outer slope of Diamond Head. He knew that to be steep and treacherous. The good news was no one would follow him if he jumped off a cliff. The bad news was that he knew the outer edge of the iconic landmark was the kind of place the authorities occasionally had to use helicopters to rescue people from. He wasn't going to jump off that cliff even if besieged by a lot more than peer pressure.

He turned, focusing his attention on the downslope of the inner crater. Still steep, but not near as scary as the other side. The first of the toughs reached the flat top of the concrete slab and surged toward him, reinforcements clambering up behind. No more time to think. He reacted by instinct, leaping off the pillbox in the direction of the inner slope of the dormant volcano, bending his knees again slightly as he became airborne to absorb the shock of his landing. The hiking boots he'd gotten earlier in the day kept his right ankle from breaking as he hit rough, slanted lava off-kilter, then leaned left and tucked for a roll.

Given the steep slope and rugged terrain, his best hope was that he could maintain a controlled tumble with no sudden stops as he attempted to slow his pace. With at least two alternate routes down the mountain, the beefy locals probably wouldn't mimic his suicidal leap.



At least, he hoped not; if any did, they would likely dislodge debris which would pummel him throughout his descent.

He got lucky. The scrubby brush on the inside of the crater slowed and cushioned his drop. The not-so-controlled tumble was jarring, painful, and awkward, but no bones were broken. He scrambled back to a standing position and assessed his situation. He'd ended up not far from the rest stop at the bottom of the upper set of outside stairs where the halves of the tourist loop met.

He could certainly use a rest stop while he waited for his partner. Sure, she moved fast, but he had covered a much shorter distance as the crow flies.

Screw that; they didn't have crows here. As the magpie flies? More like "as the body plummets."

His luck held. There was Ace, sprinting down the tourist path at a helluva speed. She looked even better running than Pierce Brosnan did in his Bond movies. Of course, he didn't generally run with his shirt half-open.

"*Sakra!*" huffed Ace as she jogged to a stop, her chest heaving from exertion. "How the hell did you beat me here?"

"The bruises will show in the morning," Dick snapped. He jerked his head to the opposite side of the rest area and stairwell. "Through the tunnel and down the path. If we can beat them to the bottom, we can hide and wait for them to leave."

"I vote to just leave. Or did you forget we drove through a tunnel to get inside this crater? I don't like to hide in a place with only one good exit."

"Copy that."

Dick grabbed his partner's arm and scrambled toward the short tunnel leading to the lower set of stairs. As they did, pursuers streamed down the path Ace had come. A separate throng of enemies emerged at the top of the upper stairway, lumbering inexorably toward them from above.

He dropped Ace's arm and rushed into the darkness of the tunnel, relying on instinct and gyroscopic memory to curve just the right amount not to smack into a concrete wall. Ace's steps echoed behind

him, following his lead. Suddenly, he slammed into something softer than concrete, but somehow rock hard all the same.

“Ooof!” exclaimed the pile of muscle blocking his path ... their exit. “What the fuck?”

Dick didn’t hesitate. The park had been closed for hours. This wasn’t a lost tourist; this was an enemy. As he pushed off his adversary with his left arm, he delivered two quick upper cuts to the guy’s gut. Too much muscle and flab for Dick to damage the hulk’s ribs, but he did hear two satisfying grunts as he connected. As his opponent reached out with both hands to grab him, Dick fell back, kicking out and up with his right leg to crush the guy’s balls.

The only people who play fair in a real fight are losers, sometimes known as corpses.

But, just before the anticipated satisfaction of his hiking boot connecting with the soft squishiness of its intended target, Ace collided with Dick’s back, spinning him clockwise. His extended right leg continued upward, unimpeded by muscle or rock. At the same time, Ace’s falling body hit him in the back of his left knee. He buckled, tumbling them both to the floor of the curved tunnel in a jumble of flailing body parts and cursing curse words.

The anonymous jumbo they’d literally run into compounded the confusion and pain of their collision. He collapsed on top of them, his fists tight, and his arms flailing and punching as he came down.

Dick tried to give as good as he got and assumed Ace was doing the same ... if she hadn’t already been reduced to a greasy spot on the tunnel floor by the combined weight of the MMF threesome. For a few moments the pile of mixed martial arts meat writhed and shuddered in a confused collection of jabs, gropes, pinches, bites, scratches, slaps, and hair-pulling—which accomplished nothing except to prove why a light should always be left on during an orgy.

Then Dick felt a series of quick, staccato vibrations and heard six wet shucks. Almost immediately, a hot, coppery gush of wetness flowed over his body as the bulk of the meat pinning him down lost its muscle tone and melted into motionless flab. He felt like the rice at the bottom of a bowl of *loco moco*, though the acrid, salty tang of the gravy in this dish reeked more of Spam—an island favorite—than grass-fed beef.

“Move!” urged Ace, as he felt her attempting to extricate herself, mostly from below and behind him. “The herd of natives is going to stampede through here any second.”

Dick shouldered the dead weight of their opponent to the right side of the tunnel and pushed off the bloody torso to get his own feet back under him. Dick wasn't squeamish, but he had to admit he was happy he couldn't really see what their victim looked like ... or what he and Ace looked like. He twisted counter-clockwise and reached backward, flailing with his left arm until it collided with his partner's forearm. He circled it with his bloody paw and pulled her forward. “C'mon. There's no hiding now. We'd be too easy to track.”

He took off at a lope, exiting through the asshole of the twisty tunnel. He dropped her hand as they emerged from utter blackness into merely enveloping darkness and rushed down the lower set of steps, quickly reaching the tourist path. The low-light setting on his amazingly still intact sunglasses helped some, but not as much as they had before they'd become spattered and smeared with what he hoped was merely blood. He put on a burst of speed once on more gently sloping ground, glancing back to make sure she was still close behind.

“Hurry. We need to outdistance the bastards and hope they didn't leave any more guards along the way.”

“Yeah,” grunted Ace as she ran. “No duh. Great fucking plan. Awesome leadership skills.”

English had to be her third language because sarcasm was definitely in the top two.

Even at full speed, he thought he had enough breath left to shoot her a muttered “Screw you” over his shoulder, but then shots jabbed out of the darkness behind them. He instinctively crouched lower to provide a reduced surface area to the gunmen and hugged the right side of the path, the side with more overhanging vegetation. More shots followed, followed by a lot more shots, the last few tearing through the large leaves of a vine hanging down from one of the upslope trees.

Crap. Someone brought a Mac 10. That put a lot of lead in the air at a time, though at full auto the shooter would need to reload every three or four seconds. The next time he spied a hanging vine, he grabbed it without slowing, twisting it in his grip and hanging on, snapping off a

length and letting it trail behind him as he continued down the path. He stopped abruptly at the next post for the metal-pipe railing.

Ace's eyebrows turned inward as she approached. "What the ..."

Dick waved at her to go past him. "Lookout is just ahead," he panted, "the one with the old winch and cable they used for hauling crap partway up the hill."

Despite Dick's motioning, Ace slowed. "That vine won't stand up to a rusty metal cable for zip-lining."

"You're right." Dick reached down and unbuckled his belt. "But this will." He slipped off his belt and tossed it to her. "Loop it around the cable and buckle it. That way it's easier to hold onto than the loose ends."

Ace nodded as she snagged the belt out of the air. "Then what ..."

"Just to slow them down. Have the belt ready when I get there. I'm grabbing it. You're grabbing onto me."

Ace sped up as Dick tied one end of the vine to a post a few inches off the ground, then strung it to a post a bit ahead on the opposite side, then back to the next post on the inside. It was a crude trap; he wished fervently he had some explosives he could hook up to the vine as a tripwire, but they only needed a few extra seconds if all went as planned. And groups moving in a pack didn't do well at spotting traps.

Once he tied off the end of the vine, he sprinted to the lookout, picking up as much speed as he dared. When he saw the looped belt hanging on the slack cable, he knew they would need all the momentum possible to get their makeshift zip-line moving. Ace looked startled to see him barreling toward the edge of the lookout, but didn't hesitate when he yelled: "Grab on as I pass."

He dove for the loop, thrusting his left arm and shoulder through the makeshift harness and hooked his left hand with his right, the curled fingers of each hand interlocking in a G.I. Joe Kung Fu grip. Given the size of his waistline, Ace couldn't do the same around him when she grabbed on in mid-dash. But she managed to latch on to his right side-pocket with one hand and, after pawing at his crotch for a few moments, thankfully snagged one of his belt loops with her other hand. She tucked her chin into his hip bone and squeezed his left leg and butt for dear life as Dick flung himself off the lookout.

At first, the loop held where it was on the cable and the ungainly package of human cargo swung forward and up as the belt accepted their weight. Then momentum overcame friction and the belt began to slide along the rusty cable. Gravity helped fuel their speed as they fell away from the lookout into the darkness.

Dick didn't really know exactly where they were going and what the hell they were going to do when they got there, but he had the exhilarating feeling they were going to make it.

#

*Sakra! Kurva! Do prdele! Damn fucking fuck! Zmrd! Debil!*

Her partner wasn't just a dick; he was an idiotic bastard.

Ace pressed her face into her mentor's burgeoning middle-aged, ex-athlete's paunch and held tight as he swung out over the black void of the cliff like a pendulum, then suddenly lurched forward and alarmingly fast downward in their flight to escape the PPIPF thugs who were trying to catch them. As she did, a wave of nausea passed through her as speeding air whistled by.

Tonight's escapade proved three things: First, there was even more crime and violence in the islands than the jacked up episodes of the *Hawaii Five-O* television show portrayed. Second, her headmaster had been right in school when he said if her friends all jumped off a cliff, so would she. And, third, as ridiculous as it might sound, there really was a goddamn plan to create a giant, killer tsunami that would scour paradise clean of tourists, soldiers, bureaucrats, and *haoles* of all types.

*Sakra!*

The bumpy, jerky slide down the mountainside also proved one other thing as Dick's belt skidded and caught and slid roughly down the ancient cable. If you are going to risk your life by grabbing on to someone's pants as they rocketed down an ersatz zip line, you'd be a lot better off if they still had their damn belt on. She could feel Dick's pants sliding down his torso in fits and starts with each bump and jerk. No doubt, a new moon would surely rise before they hit the end of the line and she would plummet to her death holding a pair of dirty, bloody cargo pants, while Dick escaped pantsless into the night. What would the crime scene investigators make out of that?

*Ježíši*, she hoped he wasn't going commando.

#

As they plummeted down the cable, Dick felt his pants sliding down his torso. Ace clung to his body, her chin jutting into his kidney, her forearm crushing his nuts, and her dangling legs flailing in an attempt to gain purchase and vice-grip his hiking boots. But he never looked down or let go of his death grip. He knew if he unlocked his hands, he'd only be able to keep his shoulder and arm wedged into the belt for a few seconds. If Ace actually started to drop, he'd make a desperate grab, but he couldn't do that yet.

Besides, his focus was above.

Not on their pursuers. They'd gotten enough of a jump the goon squad probably didn't even know they'd escaped via zip line. No, his full attention was on the belt being ripped apart by the frayed, ancient cable as they tore through the darkness. He could see the belt tearing as bits of leather and stitching flew off it. He could smell the friction burning through the soft leather. He could hear the material ripping in short bursts beneath the high-pitched whine of the descent.

He was about to die a stupid death in paradise with a girl half his age entangled in his pants.

Sorry, Melanie.

Suddenly, he felt the button atop his fly burst open and his pants jerk downward. He let go with his right hand and thrust it down to catch Ace, crooking his left arm tight to his chest as it took all the weight of their purchase on the belt. He instinctively leaned to extend his reach to the maximum, his fingers spread, his arm flailing, fishing for something to grab or something to grab on to him.

Nothing.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

#

Bullocks!

Dick's pants burst open and stripped down his body. Ace plummeted, her hands too caught up in the pants to reach up to snag a hand or a foot or a fucking dick.

*Sakra!*

There was nothing she could do, but bend her knees to absorb the coming impact of sharp, rock hard lava ... if she wasn't impaled by a tree on her way to the ground.

Fuck!

#

A heartbeat later Dick felt a hard tug on his feet as his falling pants got caught up on his hiking boots and Ace's weight jerked down with momentum. He flung his right hand back up in an effort to regain his locking hold on the belt just as a curious thing happened.

They bounced. The release of weight followed by the sudden yank on the line as that weight returned with the added momentum of falling a few feet whipsawed the cable. For an instant, the belt hovered weightless above the cable, not only allowing Dick to regain his Kung Fu grip, but to rotate the belt a quarter turn before it slammed hard back onto the cable. The leather took the shock and the cable started chewing through a fresh spot on the belt as they finished their descent into darkness.

Landing would be a bitch, since Ace hung below him and his feet were hogtied by his trousers and her arms.

On the other hand, he was alive, a tropical breeze was whistling through his boxers beneath the bright stars in paradise, and he was pretty sure they'd figured out who the bad guys were.

All in all, he'd call that a win.

## CHAPTER 13

Ace didn't mind the long, long walk back to their hotel. She was happy to be alive and the hike let her burn off the adrenaline which had coursed through her system during their fight and flight. The edge faded along the way as the threat of imminent danger decreased.

At her suggestion, they avoided the possibly guarded or even blocked tunnel though the crater ridge. Instead, they circled around the volcanic crater to a much shorter portion of the ridge, hiking up and over in a spot with passable vegetative cover, landing in a residential neighborhood. Even if the PPIPF thugs tracked their escape, they'd be unlikely to stage a full-scale assault in a place with security cameras, neighborhood watch signs, a smattering of foot and vehicle traffic, and good police response times. Given their nefarious terrorist plans, keeping a low profile was essential for the bad guys. Getting arrested was not recommended when you were conspiring to commit mass murder.

And, even though Ace and Dick were the good guys in this scenario, they couldn't afford to attract attention either. The local constabulary had no clue the Subsidiary existed; its agents were sworn to keep it secret. And there was the very real chance the Subsidiary wouldn't do anything to save their asses if they got picked up for jaywalking, much less aggravated assault, manslaughter, or even murder.

Maintaining a low profile was essential to their cover, their mission, and their freedom.

Fortunately, the nice thing about running a covert op on a tropical island was that being covered in blood wasn't nearly the problem it would be in other locations. Given the intermittent showers of a mid-Ocean tropical climate, finding a puddled erosion gully while they were still back in the crater let them wash off the most obvious evidence of their knife fight. After that, all they had to do was find a public beach access (there were convenient signs!) and walk into the dark ocean to scrub themselves and their clothes relatively clean. Ace asked Dick whether the blood would attract sharks, but he just laughed, saying he bet she could take one in a close-quarters fight with nothing but her



pocket blade. Walking around in wet clothes didn't seem to be an issue, either. Frankly, their footwear got more stares than their dripping attire. Sandals were the norm here, even at night. That and the fact Dick had to hold his pants up, having left his belt behind at the bottom of the zip line.

"We can grab a pedicab when we get near the zoo in the park," suggested Dick as they left the rocky shore and began their trek back toward the bright lights of Waikiki. "Even if Ulu remembers our names from the Tsunami Center, I doubt they have the connections to sift through all the hotels on Oahu and find out where we are staying before at least midday tomorrow."

"No problem, then," replied Ace. "And now that we have confirmation of the basics of the plot and know who's behind it, there's no reason not to take a flight out first thing in the morning."

Dick stopped walking. "Wait. What? We do?"

Ace stopped a half-step in front of him and turned to talk. "Sure. Weren't you listening up there? They weren't telling ghost stories; they were confirming everything was set up for the big event. Some details would have helped, but it sure sounded like actionable intelligence to me."

Dick's brow furrowed and she noticed his fists clench. "Did it? Sounded like they were speaking Hawaiian to me."

"Yeah. So what?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon. You see, while you may have read my entire file in enough detail to allow you to make snide remarks about the state of my marriage, I didn't get to see your dossier. I didn't know Hawaiian was taught in the public school system in the Czech Republic ... or even the Eastern European field office for the Subsidiary."

"It's not. I don't speak Hawaiian."

Dick glowered at her.

"You had your sunglasses with you. I assumed you did what I did."

"Yeah. Low-light setting. So what?"

"Sure," she replied before she continued on slowly, doing her best to find the right words to explain the situation simply without sounding condescending. "Well, we use the sunglasses for audio communications back to the Subsidiary's offices all the time to check in or request

supplies, so I just opened the feed to the translations division in Philadelphia, turned up the gain, and asked them to relay back the conversation in English in as close to real time as they could muster.”

Dick’s face softened and his posture slumped. “Oh.”

“There was a bit of time delay, of course, which is why I didn’t realize they were wrapping things up until it was almost too late.”

Dick looked away from her. He seemed to be staring into the darkness over the ocean. Finally, he turned back. “That was good work. Smart, even.” He nodded. “Nice job, Ace.”

She smiled. Dick could be gruff, but he was one of the good guys. Most of the macho squad back in the Czech Republic wouldn’t think of telling her she’d done a good job.

She threw him a half-smile. “Well, you did a good job saving our lives by using that zip line.”

He wheeled around in an abrupt motion and grunted. “Fuck you.”

Apparently Dick wasn’t into mutual admiration societies. “What? I can’t say thanks for saving my life?”

He spun back, his contorted face looming above her own. “No, you can’t.”

“Bullocks! I can if I want.”

“Not this time.” His face softened a bit. “Look, if we remain partners, I hope we save each other so many times we lose track, but you can’t thank me for this one.”

She no longer filtered her sarcasm. “And why the hell not?”

He shook his head, as if he couldn’t understand how she could be so clueless. Then, in a low, soft voice, he replied. “Because I let you fall. I felt my pants sliding down and I still let you fall.”

This was a whole different level of macho bullshit than she’d had to deal with back home. This was some kind of tough guy code of honor. Chivalry gone ape shit. She tried her best to give him an out. “Bull. You knew ... subconsciously at the very least ... that your pants would get stuck on your hiking boots.”

He rolled his eyes at her and turned away again, resuming their trek away from the shore.

“You knew,” she repeated, then tried to ease him out of his apparent self-loathing by making a joke. “Thank God bell-bottoms went out of style half a century ago.”

“Hmmpf,” he snorted without looking back. He kept walking. “At last a statement everyone can get behind.”

She let the matter drop and scurried to catch up. They walked in silence for a few minutes before Dick spoke again.

“So, what exactly did these terrorists have to say?”

“I’ll have HQ email you a complete transcript, but basically they were congratulating each other about how everything was in place at the rift for the big quake that would wipe out the coast of the whole island chain. Maybe do some damage on the west coast and Japan, too.”

“Rift?”

“Rift, crack. The translator said it might mean either.”

“And did they say how they were going to accomplish that, given Hansebi, back at the Tsunami Center, says the whole Great Crack thing is crap? After all, they’ve got one of their guys working with him; they must know his expert opinion on the subject.”

She shook her head even though Dick was focused on the path ahead instead of her. “No details. Maybe they simply think he’s wrong; scientists disagree all the time. Besides, Hansebi did say inundating fracture lines with water could cause a sliding displacement rather than a traditional earthquake.”

“I guess. The thing is, it’s not even rainy season right now. Does that mean we’re months away from this operation being put in motion?”

“I don’t think so,” replied Ace. “A partial side conversation at the beginning of the translation had something to do with finishing up laying in supplies for the coming flood. Then someone else said they’d bought all the toilet paper in stock at the local grocer.”

“Everybody talks big about the good ol’ days, but nobody gives up their toilet paper,” muttered Dick.

“Would you?”

“Not my point.” He paused before continuing. “Make sure the Quartermaster has us booked on the first flight to the Big Island in the morning. Now that you’ve gotten your feet wet as my partner, we’ve got to make sure these assholes don’t get everyone’s feet wet.”

## CHAPTER 14

“This is a waste of time,” griped Dick as he drove westward on Highway 11 past the entrance to Hawai’i Volcanoes National Park on the Big Island. He didn’t turn in. “What do you expect to find here? An eight-mile-long line of plastic explosives? Or the world’s longest watering hose?”

“Just keep driving. The instructions on the internet say the turnoff is somewhere between mile markers forty-six and forty-seven, on the *mauka* side of the road. That’s ...”

“I know *mauka* means inland towards the mountains,” Dick responded, an edge to his voice. “Ever watch a weather report here? It’s all leeward, windward, *mauka*, and *makai*. It’s like they don’t even know the compass points.”

Ace sighed. Dick had been grouchy all day. She doubted it was the bruises and bumps of last night’s run in with the PPIPF thugs—those kinds of encounters were a routine part of the job. No, more likely it grated on the big guy’s ego for her to have thought of a simple way to translate the gang’s discussions when he hadn’t. According to what she’d read in his file, Dick was actually a pretty tech savvy guy for someone his age, especially when it came to explosives. His last big mission had a virtual reality company run out of a mammoth tech center. As she understood it, he’d had to navigate in the virtual world of Reality 2 Be, which meant he had to be a bit more cyber-proficient than the AOL and MySpace crowd. She let his latest remark slide. Espionage partnerships were like marriages; you had to let a lot of the little stuff slide if you were going to make them work.

“There it is,” she said as she spied the paved turnout. Big enough for at least four vehicles, it wasn’t hard to spot.

Dick parked and they both grabbed items from the trunk. Ace loaded a small knapsack with two liters of water, some granola bars, a plastic bag with lip balm and sun tan lotion, binoculars, her pistol, and two spare clips of ammo. Dick brought water, rope, binoculars, a 9 mm automatic pistol, six spare clips of ammo, three grenades, a large hunting knife, matches, a foil survival blanket, six Tootsie Rolls, and,

oddly, a book about Hawaiian birds. Both of them donned hats and their Subsidiary-issued shades.

Ace motioned to the other side of Highway 11. “The trail starts over there, behind the gate on the left.”

Dick sauntered across the lightly traveled asphalt road without, she noticed, bothering to look for traffic. She followed. A few moments later, they’d climbed over the gate and were strolling down the road behind it, basically a parallel series of indentations through the tall grass and interspersed rocky terrain of a huge lava field. Dick led the way, his steady gait and longer stride forcing Ace to occasionally quick-time to keep up. Their only stop on the way was as they approached a large stand of red-flowered bushes. Dick stopped, bringing his binoculars up to scan the line of bushes after hauling his bird book out of his backpack. Ace simply hung back, bending to rest with her hands on her knees while Dick looked, first at the bushes, then at the book, then at the bushes, then at the book. Finally, he put the bird book back in his pack, shouldered the pack and started walking again. She jogged to catch up with him.

“Rare native bird nesting in the bushes? I couldn’t see any movement from back where I was.”

“Nope,” replied Dick without slowing or even looking at her. “Saw a flash of red. Thought it might be something interesting for a second, but it was just a Brazilian Cardinal. Rats have wiped out most of the unique native species. They’re all ground nesters and the rats like the eggs. Feral cats don’t help the situation, either.” He glanced up, where a smoky plume of vog—volcanic fog—streamed from the Kilauea Crater not far behind and to the left of them, muting the glare of the sun in the otherwise clear, blue sky. “Wrong time of day, too. Doubt you’d even see many birds at Kipukapuauulu this close to midday.”

“What the hell is Kipuka ... pulu?”

“Kipukapuauulu,” he corrected her with a gruff chuckle. “It’s a kinda redoubt nearby—a patch of scrub and trees that’s gotten missed by all of the lava flows in the last century or three, so it’s got more extensive and developed vegetation. Local birds and critters have taken sanctuary there in the bad times.” He glanced over at her. “There’s a loop walk for birders. Read about it when I was mapping out our course for the day.”

“I see.” She matched his brisk pace with three steps for every two of his. “So, you got into the spy biz to expand your opportunities to engage in your birdwatching fetish.”

Dick shook his head. “Nah. Other way around. Got into birding to cover my spying activities. Handy excuse for traipsing about, stopping at odd intervals to look through high-powered binoculars.”

Ace shrugged. “Whatever. If I wanna stop and stare at a fixed point for a bit, I just hold my cell phone at arm’s length and pretend I’m taking a selfie.”

“Yeah. That would blend in with your demographic better than mine.”

“And,” Ace continued, “If you click the shutter every once in a while, you get a supply of selfies on your phone which look perfectly innocent should anyone ever investigate. Plus, if you occasionally press the button to change which side of the phone is in the frame, you can intersperse a few candid of your surveillance target with none the wiser.”

Dick’s nose twitched. “I can see how that could work.”

They fell into companionable silence as they continued onward, the shrubs diminishing in number and size until finally the road turned along the edge of a newer flow of relatively smooth, black rock. Eventually a man-made cairn of rocks marked a trail which turned out onto the expanse of black lava. Before too long, the lava fell away, plunging into a giant crevasse.

Ace gave a low whistle. “Gotta say, that is one great crack there.” The meandering slash in the lava extended away from them as far as they could see in either direction. “Looks pretty empty, though. No signs of activity by PPIPF bad guys or anybody else.”

Dick began to clamber down the near side. “We have to look, all the same. They’d have to be pretty stupid to do anything here, where tourists and everyone comes to snap vacation shots. We need to reconnoiter a larger sample.”

Once Dick was down and to the side, Ace followed him. “Should we split up? You go *makai* while I go *mauka*?”

Her mentor looked upslope for a few moments, then shook his head. “Seems more likely if this thing is rigged, it’s between here and where it peters out short of the ocean downhill.”

She screwed up her nose and looked at him.

He squinted. “If the plan is to get this crack to break away, so a big chunk of real estate slides into the ocean, you wouldn’t put your explosives too far uphill.” He pursed his lips. “More accurately, you wouldn’t put your explosives *only* uphill from here. Otherwise, you might just cause a jumble of rocks to rumble and tumble downhill, but stop well short of the ocean. You’d want to make sure the chunk nearest the water, but still situated on a steep part of the slope, gives way. That way it has some hope of reaching the shore. After all, tsunamis are all about water displacement.”

“Makes sense.” She stared down the length of the crack extending toward the ocean. “Makes for an uneven, unpleasant hike, though.”

“The very definition of work. So unpleasant, you wouldn’t do it if they didn’t pay you. Fortunately for the Subsidiary, I’m a hard worker.”

“Well, then ...” She tipped her head to the left. “Let’s get to work. I’ll take this side and you take the right.”

“Righto,” said Dick. “Looks like it is going to be a long day.”

#

Hiking the Great Crack was slow going. Searching the Great Crack as you hiked it was downright tedious. They’d been at it for hours, probing holes and voids left by the vagaries of cooling lava, as well as open intersections with lava tubes—tunnels left by fast-moving lava created when the rock on the outer edge of the flow cooled, but the hotter lava inside kept flowing, vacating the straw-like hollow.

Dick gave his partner credit. She kept up with her share of the work and didn’t complain, even though the sharp edges of the lava were wreaking havoc with them both, slicing the soles of their hiking boots and cutting into legs and hands when they misstepped and took even the slightest tumble. In fact, Ace was almost twenty feet farther along on her side than he was when things finally got very interesting.

“Yo! Ace! Mark where you quit looking and come over here. Watch your step ... and not just for sharp rocks. This area might be booby-trapped.”

He thought about making some crack about Boobies—the blue-footed variety could be found on the islands, though generally in lush coastal enclaves than here—but only a birder would get the joke.

Dick remained still while Ace made her way to him without incident. He pointed at an oblong void in the floor of the four-foot diameter lava tube descending away from the right side of the Great Crack.

“See the small, square lump right on the edge of that hole? Anything about it strike you as odd?”

Instead of sliding her glasses down her nose and peering at the spot as he expected her to, Ace reached up to the right stem of her Subsidiary-issued shades, fingering the minute controls.

Dick went on: “It’s duller than the rest of the tunnel wall, which is glassy from the heat of the passing lava. It’s also too regular in shape.”

“Fuck that,” replied Ace. “The surveillance detection setting on my sunglasses says it’s got an electronic signature. Cell phone?”

Dick nodded. “Too clunky to be a newer model, though.”

“2G,” Ace agreed. “If it’s new, it’s a cheap burner.”

“Perfect for a cell phone detonator.” He fished out his flashlight and played it over the area, probing into the void with the beam. “Couple of wires snaking down and out of sight.”

“Yeah, I see them. *Bullocks!* Looks like we found a genuine improvised explosive device, boss.”

“Roger that. That phone’s not tucked down there so somebody can call up the Menehune and chat.”

Ace just gave him an odd stare.

“Mythical little people ...”

“You mean, Leprechauns?”

Dick growled before continuing. “Native Hawaiian spirits who come out at night and build things.” When she just kept staring at him, he shook his head. “Don’t you read the guidebooks and magazines in your hotel room when you’ve got time to kill?”



“How would I keep up with my TV shows if I did that?” She paused for a second. “Just kidding. American TV sucks. I spend my spare time reading your file. Given its size, maybe I should call you Moby Dick.”

Dick flipped her off. “Whatever. I can’t think of any plausible reason for that kind of phone to be where it is that doesn’t end with a big boom.”

Ace’s voice flattened to an all-business tone. “I agree. But it doesn’t make any sense to me. Given the remote, barely accessible location, whatever is in the void can’t be that big. Even if it’s a pretty big bang per cubic centimeter explosive—military grade C-4 or some shit—I can’t see how there could be enough in that spot to do much damage. I mean, not earth-shattering, tsunami-inducing damage.”

She had a point.

Dick studied the spot for a few moments, then looked carefully at the jumble of lava surrounding the opening. The sun assaulted his back as waves of heat rolled up from the black rocks, baking the still air and softening the thick soles of his combat boots. The silence was as oppressive as the heat; Ace was apparently smart enough not to interrupt his thinking.

“I suppose that oblong void could be an intersection with another lava tube which goes down, deeper, and fed into this lava tube. If so, that hole could lead to a sizeable space. Put enough C-4 down deep, as deep as a spelunker might be able to go down such a tributary, and there could be a big-ass explosion deep enough to bounce this portion of the crust just enough to create a momentary loss of friction and start it sliding, especially if it goes off in coordination with a series of similar explosions elsewhere along the crack.” He rubbed his hand along his stubble. “That’s a lot of ‘ifs,’ though.”

“Best not to take chances,” replied his partner. She bent down and studied the lava tube. “No way you’re getting down into the intersecting hole.” Ace exhaled noisily. “I can probably get down there, but you’re going to have to walk me through what to do when I get to the explosives.”

Dick harrumphed. “Screw that. This ain’t the movies.”

“You mean you don’t want me to risk my life?”

He barked out a laugh. “If the job required you to risk your life, I wouldn’t hesitate to risk it. That’s why we do what we do. That’s why we’re here, to risk our lives for the greater good if that’s what the mission requires. But that doesn’t apply here. What I meant ... what I mean in this situation ... is that no one needs to crawl down a hole filled with C-4 to solve this problem. All I have to do is clip the wires connecting the cell phone to whatever is down below. Whoever put this here wasn’t expecting it to be found. And now that I’ve looked closer, it’s clear there’s no booby-traps on the approach and no evidence of disarming countermeasures on the device at all—no mercury switches, no tremor sensors, nothing. Which makes sense when you’re mounting something in an area which gets hundreds of tiny tremors every week. I’ll cut the wires and we’ll take the phone with us. Maybe the numbnut PPIPF bozos left prints or bought the burners in bulk and we can trace how many and who bought ‘em.”

“Oh,” said Ace as a bead of sweat trickled down and caught at the end of her nose. “That’s kinda anti-climactic.”

Dick shrugged. “Not every encounter has to end with a bang.”

Ace smiled. “What? Now you’re giving dating advice? Thanks, Dad.”

## CHAPTER 15

Ace took a photo of the location of the device, allowing her phone to tag the spot with its GPS. Then Dick shouldered past and squatted down near the intersecting lava tube. He leaned on the opposite wall for support and lowered himself until he was stretched out on the floor of the main tube. Then he shimmied forward until he could reach the cell phone. He stretched out and picked up the two wires connected to the phone and gathered up the slack to form a six-inch oval loop above his grip. Taking the hunting knife from his right hip, he held it with the blade up and inserted it into the loop. Ace saw his grip on both the wires and the knife tighten as he pulled up, the keen edge to the blade slicing cleanly through the insulation and wires.

“Oops,” he muttered.

“What?” gasped Ace in response as she straightened from looking over his shoulder and took an instinctual step back toward the mouth of the lava tube.

Dick guffawed. “You are just too easy ...”

Ace scowled. She didn’t need her mentor making her flinch for sport. She did her best not to let her irritation show. “Haven’t had any complaints on that score so far.”

Dick shifted to all fours, then a kneeling position, before standing and turning toward her holding the cell phone by the cut wires. “Here. Drop that in that plastic bag you have without touching the phone. Don’t want to damage any possible prints on the case.”

Ace walked the few short steps to take her out of the lava tube and back to the jumbled “V” of the Great Crack. She dumped out her lip balm and suntan lotion with her free hand and bagged the phone.

Dick followed Ace to the middle of the rift, brushing coarse black sand off the front of his clothing. “I guess we’ve done our dirty work for the day.”

“Yeah, well, all the really dirty work gets done at night.” She looked at the position of the sun, then upslope toward where they’d left their vehicle hours and hours ago. “How many more of those you think are

planted in the crack? If we spend too much more time looking, it's going to be dark by the time we get back to the car."

Dick stretched while he apparently made the same assessment. "Assuming we didn't miss any along the way, my guess is two or three, but it's just a guess."

"So, how do we go forward from here? I mean, it's great we ... you ... found a needle in the haystack, but the odds of finding three more needles in time don't strike me as so favorable." When Dick responded with nothing but a grim look, she continued. "Look, Dick, don't misunderstand what I just said about it getting dark before we're back if we keep at this. I think you know me well enough by now to know I'll do whatever needs to be done to finish the mission. And I know from your file the same is true for you. That's the most consistent through-line in your entire history with the Subsidiary. So if you want to spend all night looking for black phones with black wires in black holes in black rocks, I'm game. After all, I hear once you go black you never go back. It's just ... I don't know if we'll find them all in time ..." She trailed off. *Sakra!* When was her partner going to say something?

Dick rubbed his chin, then stared into the distance for a few moments. "You're right. This is a situation that just needs a shitload of manpower at this point. We've got proof somebody's setting bombs in lava tubes along the Great Crack. If we call this in to HQ, they can use their connections to get Homeland Security or the U.S. Army or even *Hawaii Five-O*, for all I care, to look for more bombs. They don't even need to know why they were planted—Hansebi certainly doesn't think this whole blowing up the Great Crack to create a tsunami plan has any hope of success anyhow. Let the local authorities think it's some psycho loner targeting tourist hikers or a bunch of militia types practicing their bomb-making skills. Let the grunts ferret out the C-4, while we get back on the investigative track. There's still plenty of questions to answer on that front."

"Including what the hell any of this has to do with hacking cars. How's that fit in with the PPIPF's agenda?"

Dick shrugged. "The hack was done in the Philippines. Maybe they're connected with a local PPIPF group there." He pondered for a

moment, then shook his head. “Of course, most hacks originate in the Philippines or Russia, so I’m not sure that really proves much.”

#

Glenn Swynton handed Dee Tamany the latest status report from Thornby and Zyreb, then stood by silently as she skimmed its contents. A minute later, she set the folder down and glowered at him. “Your assessment?”

Glenn didn’t need to think out his response. As Operational Liaison, he not only knew the Director would ask for his assessment, it was his job to guide her on such matters. The fact it was the middle of the night didn’t slow him for a second. “Using local contacts to flood the Great Crack with manpower to find the additional explosive devices is easy. Truckloads of men can be deployed at first light. And our people concur with this Dr. Hansebi that the Great Crack is not a likely focal point for a subsidence event. The explosives, even should they go off, are unlikely to trigger a tsunami. This entire plot has an odd character to it—more flash than substance.”

Dee Tammany got up and paced behind her desk, pausing to stare out at the lights of the city below. “It’s like sugar in the gas tank of a car.”

Glenn was bewildered by her comparison, but he refused to let her know he was flummoxed. “A modest amount of sugar has no effect on the efficacy of an internal combustion engine,” he replied in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Exactly,” agreed the Director. “But people think it does. They think that bit of sugar in the gas tank will caramelize when it gets burned in the pistons, causing the engine to seize. But that’s simply not true.”

Where was she going with this? “The common man believes a great many things which have no basis in reality,” he replied, hoping she would continue to play out the metaphor.

“In fact,” the Director mused, “I’ve heard it said the most destructive thing you can do with sugar and a gas tank is to leave a half-empty bag of sugar on the ground next to a car with the gas cap removed. The owner, thinking someone has tried to ruin his vehicle by sugaring the gas, goes to great lengths to drain and flush the tank, with all the

inconvenience and expense attendant with such process. Yet all they had to do was put on the gas cap and drive away.”

“So,” Glenn responded, “you believe the goal of the PPIPF is to induce panic rather than to rack up a large body-count.” He folded his arms and pondered. “There’s a certain similarity with the hacking of the brakes in the inciting incident for Thornby’s mission. While harrowing, the hacking had limited casualties. Most of the ensuing accidents were minor fender benders. Air bag deployments were effective in preventing loss of life in most of the more serious incidents.”

“Except where the car happened to plunge into a canal.”

Glenn nodded. “True. But the parallel construction breaks down when you analyze the situation more deeply. Taking over control of a moving vehicle causes minimal loss of life, but induces broader public panic, impacting such items as automotive sales figures, insurance premiums, and driving patterns. On the other hand, the detonation of explosives along the Great Crack might induce temporary panic as people worry about an impending tsunami. But if the underlying causality is faulty, that panic rapidly dissipates when no tsunami results from the explosions.” He sighed. “And, of course, none of this explains why the Pan-Pacific Indigenous People’s Front wants to cause apprehension over purchasing and driving modern automobiles, even though communication intercepts suggest the same people are behind both schemes.”

Dee Tammany headed back to her chair and sat. “Agreed. There’s got to be something more to these explosives. At least with Thornby, we’ve got an explosives expert on the case.”

“Indeed.” Glenn unfolded his arms as he shifted from contemplative mode to reporting mode. “On that score, I am pleased to report Thornby and Zyreb seem to be working together without any outward evidence of difficulty. More importantly, Thornby hasn’t blown up any major transportation hubs ... so far.”

## CHAPTER 16

Ace scowled as the sun slowly sank. Dick was at the wheel. After turning around and heading east when they'd gotten back to the car, he had inexplicably turned southeast when Highway 11 intersected with Route 130 in Keaau. She scrolled through screens on her cellphone.

"You know, there's not anyplace much to eat at besides a Subway and a couple of local diners and bars in Pahoia. There's some good reviews on here for Turtle and Moon and Hilo Bay Café back in, you know, Hilo."

Silence.

"Don't know about you, but I don't relish the thought of coming all the way to the middle of the Pacific Ocean for pizza or Mexican food, especially when I just spent the better part of eleven hours hiking over sharp black rocks in the hot sun."

"We're not stopping in Pahoia," grumbled the Dickster.

Ace toggled to the map she'd called up earlier, when her boss had turned off from the main drag. "Nothing south of Pahoia 'til you get to Kalapana. You do know most of that town was wiped out by lava not so many years back, right?"

"I'm sure there's something to eat at Uncle Roberts." He looked over at her. "Job first. Food's a secondary consideration."

"I don't recall having this discussion when you were jonesing for Italian beef back in ... Chicagoland." She looked away from him, out the window at the scrubby juggle struggling to flourish in the endless lava fields. "And who the hell is Uncle Robert? You got contacts here, too?"

"Uncle Robert's dead, but the clerk at the rental place said there's a conclave or gathering of some sort at his bar and grill at the end of the road in Kalapana on Wednesday evenings. Music, arts and crafts vendors, tropical drinks, and crap. Guess what? It's Wednesday evening."

"If I wanna soak up Hawaiian culture, I can book a luau at one of the big hotels." She exhaled with a huff. "What are we going to do at a craft fair? Look for postcards with topless hula dancers?"

"You don't get it ..." Dick groused.

“No,” snapped Ace. “I don’t get it. You’re the boss. You’re supposed to be my mentor. Wanna let me in on why we are driving to the edge of a town covered by lava to party on with a bunch of tourists and local artists? I’m not really into poetry slams.”

Dick drove on a while before responding. “You’re right. I’m supposed to be teaching you the craft, so I need to keep you informed as to who, what, when, where, and, most importantly, why.”

She turned to look at him.

He sucked on a tooth before continuing. “When you were hitting the ladies’ room at the car rental center, I quizzed the clerk about places where the locals hung out and actually mixed with the tourists. You know, in the guise of not wanting to stumble into an area where militant secessionists held sway. He said he’d avoid areas around South Point after dark, but this Kalapana shindig was a good mix of locals—mostly of the friendly persuasion—and artsy fartsy tourists.”

“Yeeaahh ...”

Dick shrugged. “So, I figured it was the only place where we might be able to gather some info on the local PPIPF crowd, but wouldn’t stick out like a sore thumb.”

Ace looked at her thumbs. “Huh?”

Dick shook his head. “Another idiom. Where our presence wouldn’t be obvious and aggravating.”

“Fine,” she replied. “As long as there’s food there, I can work the crowd for info at the same time.”

Dick turned right at the intersection of 130 with 137. Almost immediately, they were in the midst of a conglomeration of parked cars, bamboo booths, and cavorting throngs of people. Dick pointed to a bevy of aloha-shirt clad tourists exiting from a shack that advertised Thai food. “Apparently, they have meat on a stick.”

“That’ll do,” said Ace. “I love me some meat on a stick.”

They got lucky and Dick was able to ditch the car in a spot vacated by a mini-bus that had apparently ferried attendees from a nearby yoga center. The crowd was a mixed bag—along with the yoga practitioners attired in way-too-revealing Lycra, there was a motley assortment of aging hippies, younger neo-hippies in bright, free-flowing fabrics, bearded hipsters in board shorts and too-tight tees, and downscale



tourists wearing baggy shorts and, all too often, white socks with their sandals. The locals, whether native Hawaiian or of Japanese or Filipino ancestry, wore mostly work clothes: worn jeans, faded, loose shirts, and sweat-soaked bandanas. Signs advertised a variety of food and wares, including dirty soap, art prints, kites, kombucha, smoothies, poké, shave ice, mangoes, and beer on tap.

Dick grabbed a couple bottles of Longboard from Uncle's Awa Club while Ace snagged an array of various meats-on-a-stick, scarfing down one even before she returned to the middle of the open area to connect up with Dick after his beer run. Between the crowd noise, the music blaring from various stalls, and the televisions in the open-area tropical sports bar *mauka*, it was difficult to be heard without shouting.

Dick pointed makai, where the edge of the parking area abutted the open lava fields extending south to the coast. A few signs peppered the edge of the expanse, one declaring in white block letters "Hawaii Star Visitor Sanctuary." Another sign explained in much smaller letters how the land beyond was formed by lava flows occurring since 1980 and was part of the "Kingdom of Hawaii." A larger sign to the right advertised eco-trail hikes to the black sand beach where the lava met the ocean.

Dick motioned toward the sign. "Want to hike across the lava before full-on dark?" He glanced around the revelry surrounding them. "My bet is this place probably won't really be hopping for another hour or so."

"Oh, boy," grumbled Ace. "A stroll across sharp, black lava rocks in dimming light. Just what I've been dreaming about all damn day."

Dick's nose twitched. "There's a path."

Ace relented. "Okay, but I'm not looking for bombs as we go."

Dick smiled. "Fair enough."

The lava here was fresher and, thus, more barren. The din of Uncle Robert's party quickly faded as they walked along the desolate flow as twilight gave way to full night. Surprisingly, the lava field was dotted with a smattering of shacks, tents, and even a full-blown house or two, though Ace couldn't imagine how the squatting residents managed to haul water, food, supplies, or lumber, much less biological waste, across

the broken gullies and sharp cracks of the lava field or why they would even want to do such a thing.

Before long the noise of the crowd fell away completely and the darkness deepened until there was nothing but black lava below and black sky above bedazzled with more stars than Ace had ever imagined, featuring a broad, bulging band of glittering light extending at an angle almost from horizon to horizon. She couldn't help but stop to gaze at the spectacle.

“*Sakra!*” she whispered in awe.

“Damn impressive, isn't it?” said Dick. “Most people who grow up anywhere near a big city have never even seen the Milky Way, much less the bright, expansive version you can see from the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Puts things in perspective, I guess.”

Ace responded without looking at Dick. She couldn't draw her eyes away from the heavens. “You mean it makes you feel small and insignificant, like nothing you do here has any real impact on the universe?”

She heard her companion give out a short huff. “Some people see it that way. Me, I think that if ... just possibly, mind you ... if we're the only intelligent life in the big, wide universe of which the Milky Way is only an infinitesimal fraction, then keeping the world safe and its inhabitants as happy and healthy as possible is the most important, most monumental, and most sacred task in the universe.” He paused. “And, I think I'd damn well better not screw it up.”

“*Ty jseš debil!*” She turned to look at him in the dim light. “You are such a fucking idiot! The happiness of the entire universe doesn't rest on your shoulders.” She shook her head violently and looked back to the heavens with a muttered: “Men! Everything's always about you.”

Her accusation hung in the air for a few moments before Dick replied, his voice soft. “Maybe. But I'd rather believe my life matters and try to live up to the calling that implies, than decide nothing I can ever do will make a difference and prove the point by only fulfilling that potential.”

Ace wanted to believe him, to believe her life mattered, that she could make a difference, but so far her life ... and this mission ... seemed trivial in the grand scheme of things. And with the weight of the

darkness enveloping her while the stars above twinkled at her from billions of light years away, feeling important was nigh impossible. Unexpectedly, she noted a light moving steadily across the sky—too high for a plane, too steady for a shooting star.

She pointed, then turned her head toward her companion. “What’s that?”

She saw Dick look over to her, his glance flowing from her shoulder to her fingertip, then beyond to the heavens. Her focus followed his and as she glimpsed the light once more it had already passed where she had pointed, continuing to arc its way steadily across the sky.

Dick harrumphed. “Satellite. International Space Station, maybe. Something artificial in low Earth orbit.”

“Spy satellite?” She glanced back to her companion. “Communications?”

“Maybe a spy satellite. Military or NSA.” He paused. “Not a communications or television satellite. Those are in fixed, geosynchronous orbit ... above the equator, but situated to mostly service the mainland.” He pointed makai, farther along the path they’d been following, but with an eastward shift and at an angle up into the sky. “Thereabouts, somewhere. That’s why all the dishes for satellite TV in the islands point that direction.”

He dropped his arm and shifted his gaze back, obviously tracking the moving light with her. “Haven’t seen a satellite, not with the naked eye, in years, back when I was camping with my dad in the Boundary Waters ... up on the Canadian/Minnesota border.”

Soon, the satellite dropped out of sight below the horizon. Ace stayed silent.

Finally, Dick spoke again. “Let’s head back. Things should be in full swing by now and we need to start asking some subtle questions. I don’t want to make this too late of a night. I need to call my kid in the morning and see if he knows when they’re going to release him from the hospital.”

“You’re a good dad,” Ace said. “I’m sure you were a good son, too. Your dad would be proud of you, taking on the weight of the whole universe and all.”

“Right back at you,” Dick murmured.

“Not so much,” Ace said. She sighed. “Orphaned. Remember? Besides, you’re a much better father figure than he ever was, *Dad*.”

*Sakra!* Why’d she say that? Sure, it was true, but showing vulnerability wasn’t in character. It wasn’t her, at least not the her she had decided to be, to show to the world. She wanted to take it back, to make a joke, but that would only make it worse.

Fortunately, the pop of a rifle shot and the crack of the bullet ricocheting off the lava near their feet broke them both out of their respective reveries.

As another shot rang out, Ace hunched down by instinct, squatting as she turned her head from side to side to see if she could locate the source of the attack. She noted Dick had done the same. He pointed toward a jumble of broken lava perpendicular to the pathway, but slightly *mauka* of their position.

“Up there, I think.”

She trusted his analysis. “What’s the plan? Fight or flight?” She nodded *makai*. “We can move faster than him on the path, make for tougher targets moving fast in the dark.”

Dick shook his head. “Don’t want to get trapped with the ocean to our backs if he follows.” He tilted his head *mauka*, up the path from where they’d come. “If we move back toward Kalapana with speed, we can get past his position and head toward the safety of the crowd at Uncle Robert’s. Given the sound and the pause between shots, I’d bet my life ... and yours, I guess ... that our opponent has a bolt-action rifle shooting full metal jackets, not a semi-automatic with frangible bullets. If we move immediately after his next shot, we have a good chance of making it past his perpendicular position before he can get the next shot off. And we could probably survive a shot, even two, if worse came to ...”

Another shot came from the darkness, but this time Ace caught the flash of the barrel. Dick had been right about the position of their attacker.

“MOVE, NOW!” Dick growled.

Ace ran as fast as she could, knowing Dick would have no trouble keeping up with her. She crouched as she ran, leaning from side to side,

weaving as much as the path and her speed allowed to make their attacker's targeting as difficult as possible.

One more shot was fired during their sprint for safety, but the crack of the ricochet was well wide of their position. When they came into sight of the lights of the Kalapana gathering, Ace slowed to a gentle jog and Dick followed suit. She scanned the partiers for any sign of hostility or weapons, but it was a happy throng. Nobody seemed to be paying them any special attention.

As they passed the signs on the edge of the lava field and stepped onto the level ground of the bustling crowd, she let out an audible sigh of relief. "What the fuck was that?"

She could see Dick scanning the crowd, too. He didn't turn to look at her as he spoke. "Damn if I know. The PPIPF would have better firepower and more guys. Maybe it was just some crazy who lives out on the lava and doesn't like company."

"Yeah," she replied, "but the sign says the lava field is a sanctuary. Some sanctuary."

Dick shrugged. "It's a sanctuary for aliens, not *haoles*. Maybe. Let's head for the car. I don't need the extra trouble tonight. You know?"

"Roger that."

They made their way through the crowd to their rental car. They found the tires slashed and a message scratched into the windshield.

"*Haole* go home!"

"Bullocks!" spat Ace, then turned back toward the crowd and yelled: "If you want us to leave, don't slash the fucking tires!"

Dick merely shook his head and pulled out his cell phone, whether to call a taxi, the rental company, or a tow truck, she didn't care.

"Relax," he said. "It could be worse."

"How's that?" Ace growled.

"They could have disabled the brakes ..." He turned to his cell phone for a minute, then clicked it off. "We got about thirty minutes before we have a ride." He nodded his head back toward the crowd. "At this point, I think we've pretty much lost any chance of subtly questioning the locals. So let's get some more meat on a stick while we wait ... and some shave ice or maybe more beer. I don't have to drive anymore tonight and we deserve a treat."

## CHAPTER 17

Dick sat out on the lanai to his room, overlooking the early morning light on Hilo Bay as he used the hotel's clunky wireless handset and dialed into Seth's room at the hospital. All the cushy, fancy resorts on the Big Island were on the Kona side, from the crowded beach bungalows packed along the main thoroughfare in Kailua to the high-end places on the Kohala Peninsula where the *hoi poloi* frolicked with tamed dolphins, but he had no complaints about the Hilo high rise. The room was spacious, the view fine, and the tropical breezes a pleasant alternative to the miasma of industrial smog in New Jersey when the prevailing winds blew from the direction of the chemical plants.

Seth picked up on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Hey, champ. It's Dad. How's it going? Any word on when the docs will be letting you head home?"

"Doing PT four hours every day now. Two before lunch; two before dinner. Works up an appetite."

"Chow down all you want. All that hospital food is nutritionally balanced, you know. Probably much better for you than normal fare, not that your mom isn't a great cook."

"Tastes like it's nutritionally balanced." He paused. "Speaking of crap, how's work? You gonna be home soon?"

Dick sighed. "Might be longer than I thought. Had a bit of a complication."

"Bummer. Mom's not gonna be happy to hear that."

"Well, nothing's for certain. Let's just keep it between the two of us for now ..."

"Uh ... er ... too late, Dad." Dick heard a voice in the background. "Hang on, Dad. Mom's here and she wants to talk to you."

Uh-oh. Dick thought he'd called early enough Melanie wouldn't be at the hospital yet. Maybe he'd miscalculated the time differential. Daylight Savings Time always confused him.

"Dick?"

"Hey, sweetie. I was hoping I'd catch two birds with one call."

“I’m worried about you.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. Dick could imagine her cupping the mouthpiece of the phone and turning away from Seth’s bed, maybe taking a couple steps to the hallway door. “Are you still in the same place?”

“Sure. Hawaii ... just like I said before. Just like we agreed.” Dick knew Melanie thought of his job as gallivanting away to exciting destinations, rather than dodging bullets while he dealt with criminals and scum. He tried to make the best of the situation. “Look, maybe we should take a trip out here once this job is done and Seth can travel. You know you can hike up to the top of Diamond Head? Great view and all.”

Melanie didn’t sound enthusiastic. “I don’t know. I don’t think Seth will be up to any mountainous hikes for quite a while. Besides, I saw on the news there was a stabbing on the Diamond Head trail just the other day. A local man died. Must be a pretty violent place for it to show up on the national news. That didn’t have anything to do with you, did it?” Now she sounded simultaneously frightened and accusatory.

“Um ... ahh ... you know I can’t talk about what I do. I’m breaching protocol just letting you know where I really am.”

“That’s not an answer. That’s dodging the question.”

Dick took a deep breath. Ahh, maybe this would work. “Look, I’m not even on Oahu. I’m on the Big Island. So no worries, right?”

Melanie’s voice was cold. “You said you were in Honolulu.”

“I called from Honolulu. I said I was in Hawaii.”

Melanie’s flat tone continued. “So you went someplace new and didn’t tell me, like we agreed.”

“It’s not someplace new. It’s Hawaii. The Big Island is literally called Hawaii.”

“It’s a different island.”

“Yeah, but it’s the same state. It’s like I’m in Trenton instead of Newark.”

“No it’s not. You took a plane to get there, didn’t you? You don’t fly to go from Newark to Trenton.”

“Look. I don’t want to fight. When we visit, we’ll go to both Oahu *and* the Big Island. Okay?”

He heard Melanie sigh. “Someplace warm and beautiful would be nice.”

“You bet, sweetie. We’ll come here—the whole family. You’ll like it.” He heard the door to his hotel room open as he finished the call. “Hawaii’s a great place. You’ll love it.”

He turned to see Ace standing in his room, giving him a stern stare. “Who the hell are you talking to?”

Dick clicked off the hotel phone and stepped in from the lanai, but said nothing. When he didn’t immediately reply, Ace continued. “It can’t be your family, because from what I recall from our briefing ... and I recall everything from our briefing ... you’re supposedly in South Korea consulting on a malfunctioning wastewater facility just outside of Seoul.”

Dick ignored her accusations. “How’d you get in my room?”

Ace rolled her eyes. “Please. If I can’t pick a hotel lock with the electronics in my sunglasses in less than thirty seconds, even with my laptop in my off hand, I’m not much of a spy now, am I?”

“Fine,” Dick snapped. “Forget how. Why? What about my privacy?”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, the Subsidiary’s not really big on the whole privacy thing. That’s what comes from having wiretaps, keyhole spy satellites, and codebreakers at your beck and call twenty-four seven.” Her stern stare softened. “Besides, I knocked. You didn’t answer. I was worried our sniper pal from last night followed up on his effort. Thought maybe I might be saving your life.”

“Yeah. Well, thanks, but you weren’t.” Hopefully, Melanie hadn’t heard Ace’s interruption. Hopefully, Ace hadn’t done further damage to his marriage. Hopefully, she wouldn’t tell his superiors about his clandestine call.

He was about to make up some lie about who he was talking to when the ring of a phone cut through the silence between him and his partner. He looked stupidly at the handset still in his hand. It wasn’t ringing. Neither was his Subsidiary cell, still tucked in his pocket. That’s when both he and Ace turned toward the source of the noise. The cell phone in a Ziploc bag on top of the dresser, the phone they had recovered from the Great Crack the day before. The one that was supposed to trigger the explosion in the lava tube ... most likely at the same time as other phones hidden in other spots along the Great Crack were triggering their own blasts.



Shit! It was happening. The PPIPF was trying to trigger a tsunami. Now. Right fucking now.

They both dashed for the door, Dick grabbing the ringing cell on the way. “Take the stairs!” Dick yelled. Together, they plummeted down the emergency exit toward ground level—the exact opposite of what they should be doing if a tsunami was headed their way.

The Secret Service has nothing on the agents of the Subsidiary.

#

Ace led the way down the staircase, her partner lumbering behind her at full speed. She hip-checked the panic bar on the emergency exit, setting off an ear-splitting alarm as they crashed through into a garden area on the side of the main parking lot.

*Sakra!*

They didn’t have a car. They’d left theirs behind in Kalapana for the rental agency to take in and repair or replace. She skidded to a stop, pondering what to do next. Dick slowed, but never stopped, thrusting the PPIPF’s cell phone into her hand as he jaunted toward the currently unmanned valet station near the main entrance to the hotel.

“Call in a tsunami warning to Hansebi, now. I’m jacking us a car.”

She froze for a second in bewilderment. “I have a cell phone,” she called to Dick’s back as he headed away from her.

“Use theirs,” he called back over his shoulder. “Harder to trace. Better for our cover.”

Made sense to her.

It took more than a minute to get patched through to Hansebi. Two agonizing minutes to explain to him that some bad guys just set off a series of explosions along the Great Crack, attempting to trigger a giant tsunami on the south side of the Big Island. She had the feeling he was humoring her, but thought she was, quite literally, a crack-pot, when all of a sudden she heard a sharp intake of breath, then the words “Shit, shit, shit!” before a clattering as if the receiver had been dropped.

Fifteen seconds later, the tsunami sirens along the bayfront in Hilo blared out their warning—a long, continual blast which could have passed for an air raid siren in Europe circa World War II.

Dick pulled up in a white Range Rover, reaching across to throw open the passenger door for her. “Get in!” he barked.

She was barely in the door before he gunned the pricey vehicle forward, without bothering to wait for her to close her door or buckle her seatbelt. *Sakra!* Fortunately, she had good balance and reactions or she would have spilled out onto the asphalt.

“Where are we going in such a hurry? There’s no way we’ll get anywhere near the Great Crack in time to do anything.”

Dick turned his head to look at her, his face a mask of scowling brows and wrinkled puzzlement. “Jesus Christ. Are you kidding? A tsunami may be rolling to shore any second. *Where are we going?* Uphill. We’re going uphill as fast as possible. That’s what you do when the tsunami sirens go off. You get as high as possible as soon as possible, then you assess the situation when you have the luxury of potentially surviving for more than a few minutes.”

“We could have stayed safe high in the hotel and accomplished that.”

“If the wave was small enough. Even then, we might have been trapped there for ... who knows how long?”

She held onto the flip-down hand hold on the ceiling above the passenger side window as Dick made a sharp right out of the parking lot, then gunned the engine to a throaty roar.

“Nice car for a change,” she said between gritted teeth.

Dick grinned like the maniac he surely was. “Thought we might want something a bit more rugged, with decent ground clearance, if we’re going to have to get around in the middle of a disaster area.”

She hung on as Dick made a sharp left and they roared along a wide, flat road. “I don’t know. Hansebi said the Great Crack wouldn’t ... couldn’t ... cause a major tsunami.”

“And, yet, the sirens are blaring. What convinced him? What did he say?”

“I think his exact words were ‘Shit. Shit. Shit.’”

Dick pounded the dash of the car with his fist. “You need a lot of ground clearance to go through that much shit.” He slammed the car *mauka* and they started climbing past a motley assemblage of nice and not-so-nice houses in a residential subdivision on the south side of Hilo.

Ace folded down the visor on the passenger side and flipped open the vanity mirror imbedded in it. The ocean view in the distance behind her was unremarkable, serene and blue beneath the morning sky. But when she tilted the mirror up, shifting her view down, closer to shore, she saw a giant swell of water rising up, not such much crashing into the shore, but inexorably flooding the beach and the rocks.

Next, it overwhelmed the changing facility near the parking lot and the shave ice stand nearby without slowing. It continued forward swallowing the road behind them, engulfing parked cars, snatching up trash bins and vegetation, somehow not diminishing, but still growing higher as it sped toward them. She turned her eyes toward the side view mirror and the devastation looked even worse, crashing in windows, picking up household debris, rolling forward without respite as it gained on them, despite, she read, already being closer than it appeared. *Do prdele!*

“Faster! Faster! Faster!”

Dick floored the car and it charged forward, bottoming out as the road suddenly inclined sharply. But her partner never let up, weaving to miss parked cars as he shot through the schizophrenic subdivision of middle class homes next to cars-on-blocks and chicken coops in the front yard shacks on the east slope of Mauna Loa.

His eyes flashed over to hers; he nodded at the rear view. “Let me know when the coast is clear.”

She nodded back. Given their rate of climb, she suspected they would be safe in seconds, but with all the detritus the thirty-plus foot surge had picked up as it rolled over the shore, she knew the coast wouldn’t be clear for months.

“I think we made it,” she sighed.

Dick didn’t let up on the gas. “The first wave usually isn’t the biggest,” he explained. “It could be the third or the fifth or even later, depending on the series of shocks.”

Ace laughed nervously. “Oh, boy. I don’t know about you, but I could sure use a fifth right now.”

#

Jake Sutter finished his morning exercise routine and sauntered out to the hot tub for a soak, settling in his favorite corner to let the jets knead his back and calves while he enjoyed the view of the Pacific Ocean far below. Morning was the best time to enjoy the panorama from almost twelve hundred feet up on the southwest side of the Big Island thirty miles south of Captain Cook. Suddenly, he felt an unfamiliar tremor and a faint, steady whine. Damn. He should have insisted the seller replace the spa pump when he bought his dream house last year. Getting parts to the middle of the Pacific Ocean was a bitch. And, of course, everything imported to the island—which was pretty much everything besides ti leaves and poi—was damn expensive.

He twisted his body to the controls and turned off the jets.

There. There it was again. But the pumps were off.

Of course. Probably an earthquake. Bigger than usual, but no big deal. The island got them all the time. He was just settling in to continue his soak when movement caught his eye. A faint, curved line seemed to be streaking across the calm sea. Barely discernible in the deep water, but more pronounced in the shallows. He skipped his gaze ahead to one of the few outcroppings of coastal white water he could see from his privileged vantage and was shocked by the size of the wave which pounded across it, fountaining spray higher than he had ever seen before—even when he'd ventured out to anchor the spa cover during the big hurricane last fall.

Holy crap! He was witnessing a tsunami from the comfort of his Jacuzzi.

Life in paradise was a constant wonder.

## CHAPTER 18

Traffic was light as Dick continued uphill, eventually connecting to the wide highway over the saddleback between Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea. Still, he flashed his lights at all traffic headed downhill, just in case they didn't have on their radio and hadn't yet noticed the distant wail of the sirens. As soon as he reached a clear spot above the scrub trees, he jerked the Range Rover into a scenic lookout and stared out across Hilo and the ocean beyond.

"Where's the next wave?" Ace shielded her eyes from the morning sun, scanning the horizon. "I don't see it."

"Tsunamis are hard to see in open ocean. In deep water, they may be only a few inches or feet high." Dick's eyes tracked nearer, at the city of Hilo below. "Besides, looks like the biggest one already hit," he said, pointing toward the center city, the streets awash with debris and churning water, but the most of the buildings were still standing, though the windows in the first several stories were almost all blown out. "The seawall out in the bay apparently took some of the *oomph* out of the surge, but it was still high enough to push out of the official tsunami evacuation area—that puts it at thirty, maybe forty, feet high or so."

Ace snatched up the PPIPF's cell phone from the dash. "I'll check in with Hansebi and get an update."

Dick glanced at his watch. Jesus, more than forty minutes had passed since the bombs had been detonated. He shook his head. "Not a mega-tsunami or anything. Not by a long shot. But, given Hansebi's location, the Tsunami Warning Center is either already underwater or much too busy evacuating to take non-essential calls."

#

Suki stared at the yellow pictographic sign, then pointed at it, elbowing her boyfriend, Takahiro, to pay attention. "I don't think we should go that way. I think the sign means it's dangerous."

The metal sign on the northeastern edge of the sand beach at Hanauma Bay, the most popular amateur snorkeling spot on Oahu,

showed a series of scenes depicting a stick figure on a rocky cliff getting engulfed by a wave easily six times as high, then washed out to sea.

Takahiro glanced at the sign and chortled. “I think the sign is hilarious. Even more hilarious because there isn’t any text to explain the danger. I mean, sure, not everyone reads English, but you’d think they’d give those who are proficient a clue as to what their comic book pictures are supposed to mean.”

Suki frowned. “I think it’s obvious. It means ‘don’t walk along these cliffs or a giant wave could wash you out to sea.’”

Her boyfriend waved his arm toward the expanse of the ocean beyond the entrance of the bay. “Really? It’s super-calm this morning. There’s not even any whitecaps out past the break. Bet you big time nobody ever got washed out to sea from a giant, killer wave hitting this cliff.”

Suki pursed her lips into a pout. “Then why did they put up the sign?”

“That’s easy,” laughed Takahiro. “They don’t want people hiking around the point to the Toilet Bowl.”

She furrowed her brow. “The comfort station is just down the beach the other way.”

“Not the restrooms. The Toilet Bowl. It’s this hole in the rocks about five meters across and not quite as deep. It’s connected to the ocean through a tunnel at the end of a narrowing inlet, so every set of waves tons of water gets pushed through filling it up, then emptying out again only a few seconds later. Awesome! I saw on YouTube how you can stand on the bottom near the tunnel when it’s empty and the water rushes through and knocks you on your feet and throws you towards the sharp rocks on the other side ...”

“Oh my god!”

“... but the water always beats you there and bounces off the opposite face and pushes you back and suddenly you’re, like, floating, then the water all starts to flush out until it’s less than knee deep and it all starts over again.”

“That sounds dangerous.”

Takahiro motioned toward the sign. “So’s walking along the beach, according to this.” He tilted his head down and stared at her. “C’mon. It’ll be fun.”

She couldn’t deny him, not when he was so intense about having fun. “Okay, but I’m not getting in. I’ll just watch you.”

He started out along the path and she quickly followed. “We’ll see. I’m betting once you get there, you’ll want to get wet, too.” He winked at her.

Suki shushed him. “Stop that.” She looked around. “Someone might hear.”

“Who?” he replied, spinning around as they walked. “There’s nobody here. It’s still early for the sun worshippers.” He smiled and skipped along ahead of her a few steps before turning his back to the ocean to smile at her. “A giant wave could wash us to sea and nobody would even notice.”

That’s when she noticed the water had receded from the bay, exposing an intricate series of boulders and coral, trapping fish which flopped about in shallows interspersed with small, deep pools amidst the jumble of jagged rocks and coral. “I think the tide’s gone ...” she said, then faltered as a gigantic bulge of water appeared beyond the bay entrance, careening toward shore faster than anything she could ever have imagined.

“Wave!” she yelled, pointing behind Takahiro toward the sea.

He smiled and waved at her.

“No,” she screamed. “Tsunami!”

The wave crashed through the bay and thundered toward the cliffs, towering above her, above Takahiro, and well above the yellow pictographic sign. A moment later it crashed against the lava rock, throwing Takahiro at her as it rushed to scour the cliffs clean.

#

Carlisle didn’t panic when the Waikiki tsunami sirens blared as he trotted off to recover a guest’s car from the valet parking area. He’d been through the drill before when the big Japanese quake and tsunami had taken out the nuclear power plant, and, before that, when there was a big quake in Chile. Six, eight hours of sirens, bunches of anxious,

pissed-off tourists bitching about being told to stay in their upper floor rooms while the beach access was closed—and, for what? A minor push of water that didn't even come up to the high-tide mark on Waikiki? Big deal. A few boats damaged at a badly configured marina somewhere on the Big Island, but nothing major.

He fetched the guest's vehicle, cranked on the air conditioning, maneuvered the car quickly up the circular drive to the main entrance to the open air lobby, and accepted his tip with a hearty "Aloha!" Then, he quickly sought out the Head Porter to volunteer for beach closure duty. There wouldn't be much in the way of tips at the valet station for the rest of the day and God forbid he be assigned to the third floor lounge, where anxious guests would mill about eating fresh fruit and complaining about their ruined vacations all day.

He shooed away the few early beachcombers and set about his task of folding and storing the dozens and dozens of lounge chairs the hotel had arrayed on the white sand for clientele. Just him and Julio, one of the other bellmen, and an endless series of heavy wooden chairs. Routine, boring, hard work in the hot early sun. He would have soaked a bandana in the cool ocean water and tucked it under his hotel-mandated, logoed ball cap, but the tide was too low for easy access to a clear pool. Instead, he found a shady spot cast by one of the hotel's trademark palms and squatted to catch his breath, looking out over the broader than usual expanse of beach at the calm ocean.

He saw a flicker of white on the ocean, then another. Was that a whale breaching this late in the season? Maybe a pod of dolphins frolicking in the surf? If so, he hoped the guests were watching from the outdoor terrace on the third floor lounge—it would break up their miserable day.

He heard a collective gasp from above and behind and concluded the crowd had seen the frolicking sea life, too. He stood, trying to get a better view, but saw nothing but a line of foaming, surging water rushing toward him. Then he heard the shouts from the third floor veranda.

"Oh, my god!"

"Grab the kids!"

"Holy crap!"



“Run! Run for your life!”

Carlisle ran for the safety of the hotel, but the wave caught him, picked him up and carried him through the open air lobby, and out the main entrance past the valet stand, across the parking area and into the street. The surge slammed him against the front window of the boutique shop across the street, flattening him against it for a moment before the pressure cracked and shattered the glass, impaling him on a large, heavy shard as the water swept past, battering his bleeding body with detritus picked up along its trek: furniture, broken tree limbs, bicycles, newspaper boxes, and people. Then the shard impaling him broke off and he joined the relentless push of water crashing into displays, mannequins, and counters. Heavy, wet racks of designer clothing clutched at him, holding him down under the surface, until his head hit something hard and his shift ended.

#

“Nice work,” growled Glenn Swynton. Dick knew it wasn’t a compliment even before his boss continued on with: “Less flashy than your cockup in Dunedin, but greater devastation.”

Dick gripped his cell tighter, but didn’t rise to the bait. “What’s the damage report?”

Dee Tammany chimed in. “Casualties in the hundreds so far, but they will go higher. The volcanologists say something called the Hilina Slump—basically a big pile of debris in the ocean off the southeast coast of the Big Island—acted as a kind of doorstep, preventing the slide from reaching the size of the Alike events off the southwest side of the island hundreds of thousands of years ago.”

Glenn took over. “Preliminary assessment indicate the tsunami ranged from twelve to forty-five feet high on the coastal areas of the islands—depending on what direction the coast faced, the configuration of the shore and the underwater geology, etcetera, etcetera. How these things propagate is not just a matter of size, but the precise location of the underwater displacement.”

“Yeah,” said Ace. “Hansebi’s people explained all of that to us a few days ago.” She let out a deep breath. “But all of that’s said and done. And, odds are, so are they. I guess that’s not important anymore.”

“More important than you can imagine,” Glenn responded. “Hansebi and his people survived—I guess they take their evacuation drills more seriously than the average resident. They’ve set up a temporary command post someplace high and dry. They’ve done their calculations, sent out warnings to other islands and coasts which might be affected, and reported in to FEMA.”

Dee interrupted. “We ... uh ... listened in.”

“Quite,” continued Glenn. “The interesting part is that they determined the epicenter of the quake giving rise to the displacement and the tsunami. Other locations have confirmed and refined their numbers. The earthquake centered on ...”

Ace finished the sentence for him. “Let me guess. The Great Crack.”

“No,” replied Glenn, with a chill Dick could feel even in the warmth of Hawaii. “West of Hilo, along the main rift line separating Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa.”

Dick’s mind boggled. “That’s where we’re at right now, more or less.” Another thought crossed his mind. “I didn’t do this. I swear. You know I don’t even have any heavy duty explosives on this mission. Besides, the burner cell we recovered from the Great Crack rang. Somebody tried to set off the explosives there.”

“Calm down, Thornby,” interjected Dee. “Nobody’s accusing you of anything. And eye witness accounts and seismic reports do indicate some minor shocks or explosions along the crack at about the same time—maybe a minor contributing factor or, perhaps, just a distraction from the main event.”

Glenn spoke up again. “The rift west of Hilo is reasonably active. A lava flow threatened the outskirts of the city proper as recently as 1985. Perhaps a larger explosive device was detonated there. But, if so, it was a much more sophisticated placement than the lava tube bombs like the one found along the Crack. The math indicates the epicenter was more than fourteen thousand feet underground.”

“Below sea level?” blurted Ace. “They planted the bomb underwater?”

“Islands don’t float,” responded Glenn, his voice as dry as his martinis, no doubt. “Deep in the mountain. Remember, from the seabed

to the peak of Mauna Kea, you're on the largest mountain on the face of the Earth. It dwarfs Everest in total volume."

"Give me the exact coordinates of the epicenter," said Dick. "We'll check it out."

"Precisely our thought," said Dee. "Do be quick about it. We don't know if another shock is about to go off."

Dick copied the coordinates from Glenn and hung up to search Google Earth for how to get to the spot. Unfortunately, his cell began to buzz almost immediately with another call. He glanced at the Caller ID. Shit. It was Melanie. No doubt worried, possibly frantic, but he couldn't take the call. Sure, he could make and take calls from family on his Subsidiary-issued phone—family being able to reach you through what they thought was your work number at Catalyst Crisis Consulting helped maintain the cover story you sold to them. But Melanie wasn't supposed to know he was in Hawaii and he couldn't control what she might say or explain how he was okay despite the tsunami with Ace sitting right next to him. Worse, he was pretty sure Pyotr Nerevsky's goons in Internal Audit listened in—or, at least, recorded—all conversations on the Subsidiary's equipment, which was why he had avoided using it for family calls since Denver. He thumbed the button to decline the call. There'd be hell to pay at home later for doing so, but there'd be hell to pay at work even sooner if he didn't.

I love you, honey, but I just can't talk.

He thumbed the screen, scrolling through the satellite maps of Google Earth until he found the coordinates. The picture showed a scattering of trucks and something that looked like a crane or maybe a drilling rig close by. It was hard to tell; there was no "street view" available. It probably didn't matter anyway. Google Earth images could be years old. It's not like they had up-to-the minute views of any place on the planet when you wanted it. For that you needed to be able to access top secret military spy satellites.

For that you needed the Subsidiary.

They depended on him; he depended on them when need arose.

But right now, he just had to take a drive through paradise in a stolen car with a woman who wasn't his wife.

Work was complicated sometimes.

## CHAPTER 19

Taren Sykes sipped Glenfiddich as he leaned back in his swivel desk chair and watched the repetitive and largely inane news reports of damage roll in from the Hawaiian Island chain. The maximum wave height recorded—forty-nine feet—was a disappointment, but within acceptable parameters. And the congratulatory message from his stooges in the PPIPF left him with a wide smile on his face.

Stage One of his latest project was complete. Chaos sown. Damage done. Paranoia piqued.

On to Stage Two. Mass destruction and chaos, whether it worked or whether it didn't. That was what filled him with joy. Death was a bonus, but chaos was the key.

He mused for a few moments on how long to let the current round of confusion reign. Fear and paranoia took time to travel around the globe. Too soon and the fear would not have a chance to spread and fester. Too late and the fear would begin to fade; logic and order would threaten to take hold.

There was no secret formula; no algorithm for how to time things to achieve maximum pandemonium, just his gut and his years of experience fomenting hysteria around the globe.

He decided and made the call. Satellite phone, of course. No cell phones out there and he'd never trust a radio. Not secure. And he was always very secure when propagating insecurity.

#

*Kurva!* Ace hung on for her life. Dick drove like a crazed maniac at the best of times, but when Dee Tammany, his boss' boss and the head of the whole damn Subsidiary, said to be quick about something, he didn't hesitate. Hell, he didn't even slow for curves, stop signs, or small animals. According to Dick, that mongoose deserved to be splattered into road kill; they ate the eggs of Hawaii's dwindling native bird population, after all.

Fortunately, they didn't need to go back to the coast and all of the attendant flooding, destruction, debris, and chaos of the inundation zone

to get to their intended location. Of course, according to the map on the cell phone Dick had thrust into her hands before spinning the wheel and jinking the Range Rover into gear to rocket off from their overlook above Hilo, the epicenter looked to be in the middle of the jungle ... or tropical rainforest ... whatever they called it here. She was about to tell the big guy he'd need to pull over in a half-mile and hike in when he hit the power brakes hard with both feet.

Her combat senses took hold; in his current mood, she didn't think Dick would brake to avoid hitting a baby carriage, and there was nothing but feral pigs and mongeese ... mongooses ... out here. When she rocked back from her own near collision with the dashboard, she saw her partner pointing at a small sign on the left side of the road, next to an overgrown dirt road into the trees: "Hawaiian Geophysical Drilling Project, University of Hawaii/U.S. Department of Interior." Several sets of muddy, red dirt tire tracks exited the barely-there road, headed downhill.

"Those weren't there when we passed this spot going uphill," said Dick.

Ace felt her eyebrows tilt inward as she stared at her partner. "You remember whether random tire tracks appear on every road you drive?" She tried to parse it out for a moment. "You one of those super-memory people? You know, the ones who remember everything that ever happened to them?" Now Dick's eyebrows were tilting inward as she rattled on. "Quick. What were the major news stories on ... October 13, 2003?"

Dick shook his head, as if she were a mirage he was trying to make disappear. "Who knows and who the hell cares?" He pointed out the windshield. "Look at the big chunks of mud that caked off those tires. I probably would have noticed that, being an attentive driver and all. But, more importantly, those tracks are fresh. Oncoming traffic hasn't crossed over them and spread the mud out. Somebody left here after the tsunami was triggered."

"Okay," Ace replied. "Is that important? I mean, we're kinda close to the epicenter, but what makes you think this is related?"

He nodded toward the sign. “Apparently there’s a drilling project down this dirt path. And the quake started two and a half miles underground ...”

“Oh ... I get it now.” She shook her head. “Fuck.”

Dick shook his head. “No ... frack.”

Ace screwed up her face. She recognized the euphemism, but since when had Dick gotten squeamish about language? I mean, he’d made it abundantly clear he didn’t want to engage in a recreational fuck, but it didn’t mean he couldn’t—didn’t occasionally—use the word. Before she could ask about his odd language choice, though, he’d turned down the road. He piloted the car with his left hand, creeping along at less than five miles per hour, as he simultaneously pulled his gun and checked the clip.

She decided to shut up for now and just follow his lead, but her fingers boogied over the keyboard of her laptop, looking for details on the drilling project. *Ježíši!* Dick was right to be worried. She nudged him and tilted her head toward the laptop screen. “Says here, this is the deepest hole ever drilled on a volcanic island. A press clipping from last year has them bringing up volcanic cores from more than twelve thousand feet down, headed for the Earth’s crust at nineteen thousand feet.”

Dick nodded. “Sounds like we turned off the road at the right place.”

The jungle canopy soon swallowed the road and the vehicle. Ace closed her eyes for a few moments to speed their adjustment to the dim light. She needn’t have rushed. The Range Rover trundled along for almost ten minutes through the foliage before the road opened up into a sizeable clearing along the shore of a small lake. The clearing was filled with a variety of construction trailers, trucks, tanks, and building materials, as well as a large derrick of the style typically depicted in pictures of oil drilling rigs—though, of course, she knew the islands had no gas or oil deposits. Several large hoses snaked from the equipment through an open entrenchment into the lake.

Dick kept the Range Rover moving, circling the site—no doubt to maintain a sheltered position for as long as possible while he confirmed there were no hostiles. They were only about a third of the way around counter-clockwise when Ace saw the first body face down in the grass

and mud near one of the trailers. Then she noticed the blood spatter on the window of the trailer and a blood trail down the steps and past the first body, headed toward the derrick. She followed the trail with her gaze and saw a pair of legs poking out from the knee-high grass. She pivoted her look left and higher and saw more bodies scattered in the grass and on the platform at the bottom of the derrick. None of them held weapons; many looked like they had been shot from behind as they ran for cover.

Dick completed his circuit, driving the Range Rover over a metal plate covering the entrenchment with the tubing running into the lake. He squeezed the vehicle between stacks of metal piping of some kind.

“Nobody home,” said Dick as he rolled the vehicle to a stop and shoved the gear shift into park. She noticed he left the engine running. “Still, weapons out, eyes and ears open while we have a look-see.”

Ace shifted into combat mode, her thoughts flitting from confusion to high alert to being creeped out in a continual loop, as they inspected the bodies—all an hour or so dead—and poked around the equipment and the construction trailers. She stood lookout as Dick ducked inside the main trailer and crashed around for a while, flinging papers and clipboards about during his apparent search for clues. Finally, he came out, a neon pink clipboard in one hand and his automatic pistol still in the other.

“Pretty high body count just to drop a bomb down a hole,” she prompted him. “I mean, I know ski masks must be tough to find in Hawaii, but a bandana and a ball cap and these innocent workers would never have been able to identify the bad guys who surprised them this morning.”

Dick shook his head. “I don’t think they’re innocent—or, at least, uninvolved. This wasn’t an ambush; this was clean-up at the completion of a project.”

The math didn’t make sense to Ace. “You mean all fifteen or so guys drilling the hole knew a bomb was going to be dropped down it? That’s a fucking hell of a thing.”

“No, that’s a hell of a fracking thing.” There he went again.

“You a big Battlestar Galactica fan or something?”

Dick stared at her as if she was deranged. “What? That some computer game or something? My kid, Seth, plays some of those, but not me. And what’s that got to do with the price of tea in China?”

Tea in China? *Kurva!* She hated idioms. “It’s a television show ... or at least it used to be. They say “frak” as a euphemism for “fuck” because ... because Americans love violence, but they don’t allow tits or swear words on television ... unless it’s cable.”

Dick shook his head, as if weary beyond words. “Good to know, I guess. But when I say ‘frack,’ I mean ... well ... frack.” He bounced his head in the direction of the tubing and the lake. “Oil companies force water and chemicals down a depleting or underperforming well to fracture the sedimentary strata holding the oil—especially shales, which break up fairly easily—and then pump out the additional oil and gas released.”

He waved the clipboard toward the derrick. “It’s North America’s answer to dependency on Middle East oil. Or, at least, it used to be. The eco-freaks, they hate the whole process. Say it contaminates the ground water.”

“Good to know, I guess,” Ace mimicked him. “But there’s no oil or gas in Hawaii to drill. Hell, there’s no sedimentary rock. So what’s that got to do with tea in China or bodies scattered about the fracking, fucking jungle?”

“I was getting to that. The environmentalists also say fracking increases the frequency and intensity of earthquakes. Evidence backs that up, big time. And Hansebi, he mentioned that an unusual amount of rainfall penetrated into the island and caused a section of the volcano to slide a few years back. So, I figure the bad guys used the cover of some geophysical drilling program to drill down and then inject a massive amount of water into the hole.” Once again, he bounced his head toward the lake. “Notice the grass ends well short of the shoreline? The lake’s low, really low, and the mud near the shore hasn’t even had enough time to dry and crack. Somebody pumped a shitload of water out of the lake and not so long ago.”

Ace took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment to think it all through. Guess she’d better add common engineering methods to the list of things she needed to know as a spy. Of course, she didn’t have



any expertise on any of this, but what Dick said made sense. “So,” she said, “you think the PPIPF put together a crew to do this, then offed them to cover their tracks when the plan went forward?”

“Nah,” replied Dick. “Some of these guys are native, but not most. Besides, why off your own guys? No, I think the PPIPF guys ... the whole Great Crack thing ... is just a cover for what’s really going on. Hell, the sumo wrestlers in the PPIPF probably think the bombs in the Crack worked as intended. They’re probably taking credit for the whole thing, scaring the tourists and *haoles* from ever coming back to the Kingdom of Hawaii. But the natives, they’re just patsies ... fall guys for whoever is really in charge. And that guy doesn’t want to leave any loose ends. Hence the clean-up squad right on the heels of success.”

“What makes you so sure?”

Dick held up the clipboard. “Regular phone calls overseas. Plus, a note scribbled in the margin: ‘The Great Crested Canary will soon sing.’”

“Obviously a code phrase of some kind,” Ace replied. “Or they have a hard-on for birds, like you.”

Dick said nothing for almost a minute. “I’ve heard of Crested Canaries, for sure. Gloster and Norwich Crested’s have mop-tops, like the haircuts for the Beatles when they first started. And some people refer to Yellow Crested Canaries or even Giant Crested Canaries, especially when they’re bred for color or size. They’re tough to breed because the gene for the crest is dominant, but if you breed two crested birds, it’s fatal to the offspring, so you always have to breed a crested to a non-crested.”

*Sakra!* Why had she ever brought up birding?

Dick continued. “But I’ve never heard of a Great Crested Canary.”

“Like I said, obviously a code phrase,” replied Ace, desperate to get the conversation off of Dick’s birding fetish and back on the business at hand.

“Maybe, but maybe not.”

“Those are the choices,” she snapped. When Dick threw her a sharp look, she softened her tone. “Let’s focus on the phone for now. Give me the number and I’ll get the techs at the Subsidiary to trace it, even though I’d bet money it’s an untraceable burner.”

“Yeah, sure, but I can already tell you for a fact this operation wasn’t reporting in to some high muckety-muck at the PPIPF. The number begins with ’41.”

“So?” Why did she have the feeling Dick was treating this entire discussion like she was still an agent in training, rather than a partner?

“That’s the country code for Switzerland. It’s not only *not* Pan-Pacific, it doesn’t even border on a damn ocean.”

## CHAPTER 20

Long ago, Dick had noticed Glenn Swynton's voice dropped lower and lower in octave the more irritated he became. At this point, Dick figured the man could sing bass for a heavy metal band ... or one of those a cappella groups Dick's kid listened to on YouTube.

"The Quartermaster says you are being both demanding and unreasonable, Agent Thornby. Why am I not surprised?"

"Well, Director of *Operations*, Swynton. I happen to be in the middle of an *operation*. And I, and my youthful and exuberant partner, need transportation as soon as humanly possible to continue that *operation*."

There was a pause Dick guessed was long enough for his boss to both roll his eyes and clench his teeth while he mentally conjured up an image of Dick in front of a firing squad. "Well, *Dick*, due to the lack of success of your efforts in Hawaii, no flights in or out are taking place at the moment. As you might recall, all of the airports are on the coast ... barely above sea level. While I understand most of the runways are high enough to be dry, important infrastructure components were still inundated, debris and pools of water have yet to be cleared, and all commercial flights are on hold both at Hilo International Airport and Kona International."

"Yeah, Glenn, I know. But according to the headlines on my phone's browser, TMZ says Hugh Jackman is already headed back to L.A. He was doing some eco-lodge thing in yurts or something on the Kohala Coast."

Dick heard a deep sigh before Swynton continued, his voice practically vibrating in *basso profundo*. "You're not Hugh Jackman ..."

"You're right," interrupted Dick. "I couldn't take him in a fair fight, not that I'd have any interest in fighting fair if I was up against that hunk of beef. But it means a private jet from Nine to Five Charters can get in and out of Upolu Airport, on the north tip of the Kohala Peninsula. Ninety-six feet above sea level. Not much in the way of infrastructure to damage, even if it got wet in the wave. Quartermaster admits as much, but he won't spring for the ride. What's the use of the

Subsidiary having a false front air charter service if it doesn't use it for its agents when they are on ... an *operation*."

"It's not a taxi service. Besides, your mission is done, complete. A failure, as I recall. Repositioning idle assets is not a top priority when scheduling or budgeting resources."

"We're not idle. Or at least we wouldn't be if you would get us a plane. Have you forgotten about the intercepts talking about some big 'east coast action?'"

"But which east coast? Japan's? Australia's? The east coast of the island you're already on?"

"Not here. This scenario is played out. Now that people are spooked, the smallest tremor will send everyone running for the hills. No, the Big Island was just a warm-up, a test run for something much, much bigger, impacting a much more populous east coast, like the one where your offices are located."

Dick knew Glenn didn't frighten easily, but he imagined the Brit's forehead wrinkling as he recalculated the cost/benefit analysis of the charter given this new variable.

"Fine. I'll tell the Quartermaster to send a charter from the west coast. What's your destination?"

"We'll have that figured out by the time he gets here."

"See that you do or I'll have to turn this over to Internal Audit."

The very last thing Dick needed was to get in the crosshairs of Pyotr Nerevsky and his ilk. Hiding things from the Subsidiary was hard enough when you weren't getting the evil eye of the rat squad; it was nigh unto impossible if they decided to take a good hard look. Almost any response he made would increase the chances of getting their attention. Instead, he simply thumbed off the connection and pocketed his cell phone.

"So," said Ace, "sounds like you got the plane. You got a destination in mind?"

"Yeah," said Dick, "but I wanted to mull it over, then walk through it with you, before I tried to sell it to HQ. Buckle up."

#

Ace stared out the window as Dick headed back uphill, taking the road across the saddle between Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa, the shortest and, fortunately, highest road to get from the Hilo on the southeast side of the Big Island to the west. The western side of the island held the popular tourist beaches of Kailua/Kona, along with the tonier mega-resorts on the northwest, heading toward the Kohala shore. Once away from the outskirts of Hilo, the wide, paved road climbed with few distractions or interruptions. As she rode in silence, waiting for Dick to gather his thoughts and explain his theory to her, she had nothing to do but look out over the largely treeless expanses of jumbled lava. Two plumes of gray smoke from the far side of Mauna Loa mixed together and snaked into the pass, then got sucked westward, plunging into the Kailua/Kona coast and filling it with a miasma of vog.

Finally, after they'd passed the turn-off up to the summit of Mauna Kea, where big telescopes tracked the stars from the deep dark of the mid-Pacific, she couldn't stand the silence any longer. "You ready yet to tell me where we're going and why? Or are you going to continue to be the dick you clearly are?"

Her partner harrumphed, then glanced over to her. "I was waiting til we got someplace with good wireless reception for your laptop."

Ace pulled out her cell phone. "I can create a hot spot for the laptop with my phone or even use the com gear in my glasses if I don't need too much bandwidth."

"Good to know. So, you got any bars on your cell?"

She thumbed her phone and looked at the glowing screen.

"Reception's fine. The phone companies usually do a pretty good job of coverage along major roads." She looked up as Dick overtook a large semi. "Truckers seem to like this road."

Dick shrugged. "Big island, but not many big roads. You can circle the island or go over the middle. This baby's got wider lanes and less tight turns than the belt road."

"So, you need me to call up a navigation app to find Upolu Airport?"

"Nah. Not yet, anyhow." He pulled back into the right lane after having passed the truck. "Just thought I'd try a little experiment. So, what do we know about the perp behind this whole damn mess?"

Ace started to answer, but he cut her off.

“Rhetorical question.” He exhaled and cricked his neck as he drove; she heard it crack. “We know he ... she ... they ... whatever ... likes to cause tsunamis. We also know they’ve talked about some big ‘east coast action’ and used the phrase ‘Great Crested Canary.’”

“Yeah. So?”

“So, I want you to Google the word “canary,” along with the word “tsunami.”

She wrinkled her nose as she opened up her laptop. “That’s your idea of top secret spy research? A Google search?”

“As you may recall from just a few moments ago, I’m not exactly tech savvy. Just do it.”

She wanted to answer back, but held her tongue. Instead, she looked down at the screen and felt her eyes widen and her head jerk back in surprise. She swiped the screen to scroll down. “*Ježiši!* There’s over a hundred thousand hits, including bunches of YouTube videos, with headings like ‘Canary Island Mega-Tsunami’ and ‘Scientists Warn of Massive Tidal Wave from Canary Island Volcano.’” She looked at him, her eyes narrowing. “Did you do a Google search back on the drill site when I wasn’t looking?”

Dick smiled. “Nope.”

Ace shook her head and gestured at her screen. “Then how could you possibly know this shit existed? Forget that, how do bad guys come up with this shit?”

“I tumbled upon it last night when I was Googling the Great Crack conspiracy stuff Hansebi mentioned. There’s a bunch of pirate YouTubes of a program that was originally broadcast years ago on the Discovery Channel—whose mission seems to be scaring the crap out of people at every opportunity.”

“They do love natural disasters.”

“And what you can’t get from science, you can always get from fiction. Nobody talks about it, but the whole time right after 9/11 happened, when all the anchormen were droning on and on about how nobody ever imagined such a thing, I kept thinking, I guess nobody in news ever reads any thrillers. I mean, Tom Clancy dropped a jumbo jet on the Capitol Building during a joint session with the President, for Christ’s sake.”

“You read techno-thrillers? Spy work not exciting enough for you, big boy? You got a Jason Bourne complex?”

Dick fluttered his right hand, apparently waving off her question. “The thing I wonder about is why is it that the United States has set up a panel of science fiction authors to come up with scenarios the government should be worried about, but they pay no attention to the plots of spy thrillers. I mean, isn’t that what Robert Redford did for a living in *Three Days of the Condor*?”

“Is that a movie?”

Dick let out a huff. “Yeah. Of course, it pre-dates *Harry Potter and the ... whatever it was.*”

“*Philosopher’s Stone ... Goblet of Fire ... Order of the Phoenix ...*”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dick growled. “I read thrillers. I also watch a lot of educational channels when I have down time on a mission. National Geographic, Animal Channel, NASA ...”

“Makes you a smart guy, I guess.”

“Not so smart. I think I actually saw the Discovery program on the Canary Islands volcano years ago, back when it first came out. But it was so hyperactive and sensationalist I switched channels and forgot all about it.” He shook his head. “I can’t believe I didn’t make the connection when Hansebi was ranting about conspiracy theories and tsunamis. Getting old, I guess.”

“Not to mention, that was before the ‘Great Crested Canary’ reference at the drilling site.”

“Still ...”

Ace didn’t know what to say. More macho bullshit, more evidence her dickhead partner insisted upon carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. She scrolled back toward the top of the search screen. “Here it is. A link to the show on the Discovery Channel.” She stared at her mentor. “I can’t believe you spend your downtime watching educational programs on television.”

“Why? What do you watch?”

“Talk shows during the day. You know, Oprah, Ellen ... pretty anybody but Maury Povich or Jerry Springer. It doesn’t require much energy, plus I can improve my language skills.”

“Let me guess. Action adventure and police procedural shows at night ... *Criminal Minds*, *Quantico*, etc. ... to improve your spy skills.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Fuck that shit. If it’s bedtime, I just dial up some porn. You know, to ...”

Dick threw her a startled glance and held up a hand. “Stop right there. I get the picture.”

“Oh, you do, do you?”

Her partner turned his full attention back to the road. “You’ve got more than an hour until we get to the airport. Read up on Cumbre Vieja, the volcano on La Palma in the Canary Islands. It’s got a crack along the summit ... you know on a great, crested Canary ... and they say when that breaks off, the massive landslide will take out the whole east coast of the United States. Which, right now, seems kind of important, so get to it. This isn’t down time.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied.

She started to scroll through the items and click on the more substantive links. But she’d only gone through a couple when she noted movement out of the corner of her left eye and looked up to see a military plane take off from a runway on the north side of the road. “I thought you said we had more than an hour to the airport.”

“We do. Upolu’s on the north edge of the Kohala coast.”

She nodded toward a small control tower where the plane had taken off. “And why aren’t we connecting to our flight there? Much higher elevation. Dry as a bone up here.”

“Military base. Bradshaw Army Airfield. Getting Nine-to-Five Charters clearance to land at a military field is much more complicated and much higher profile.” He sighed. “It would be nice if you occasionally assumed I knew what I was doing.”

#

Taren Sykes didn’t bother to duck as he alighted from the helicopter. He knew the machine’s specs, including the flex in the blades and the power of their rotation when idling; he also knew his height and weight with precision. He had nothing to fear and, unlike most of mankind, he didn’t flinch when something merely *appeared* to be dangerous.

He strode across the dedicated helicopter pad and into the nearby communications center, where his foreman, Chad Hanson, waited. The



blue collar roustabout had a soda can in one hand, accompanied by what was clearly a chew of tobacco in his cheek. A practiced squirt of spit connected the two disgusting items mere moments before Chad offered Taren his calloused, stained hand to shake in ritual camaraderie.

Taren didn't bother to take it. "Is everything ready?"

Chad grunted. "Sure. Told you that on the sat-phone. Didn't need to fly your whirlybird all the way out here for that."

"I like to see things firsthand. And you know I don't like streaming confidential information over data lines when it can be avoided. Show me the most recent reports. Now that the final push of the plan is in motion, I don't want to miss the optimal window for consummation."

## CHAPTER 21

Dick took the turn-off toward Waimea when the opportunity arose, continuing toward their destination on high ground, rather than dropping down to the more crowded and, no doubt, devastated coast. Traffic tightened up as the road traveled through Parker Ranch into town. Not surprisingly, the gas stations, hardware stores, and grocery marts in town were all mobbed. The Hawaiian Islands weren't self-sustaining at the best of times—with significant destruction from the tsunami affecting residential, commercial, and agricultural areas, he had no doubt supplies of pretty much everything had plummeted just as demand was skyrocketing due to heightened needs for reconstruction. Good thing he didn't need to gas up to get to their destination.

They stopped at a local diner—no sense beating the plane to the airport. Service was slow and the food mediocre, though the portions were surprisingly hefty. Apparently no one had given the short-order cook the memo about supplies being short going forward. Dick focused on his food; Ace focused on her research. Dick didn't mind. A good spy, like a good soldier, doesn't need chit-chat. He eats, sleeps, and loads his weapon whenever given the opportunity.

The meal completed, they returned to the vehicle and Dick wound his way through the rest of the small town. Finally, he headed out along the ridge road to the Kohala Coast and pulled onto the beltway road. All the while, Ace continued her web surfing, earbuds in, eyes glued to the screen of her laptop. Finally, she looked up and pulled on the white cord until her earbuds fell into her lap.

“Okay, let me make sure I've got this. There's a three-mile-long, up to fifteen foot wide crack on La Palma in the Canary Islands, along the flank of the Cumbre Vieja volcano. If the volcano splits apart at the crack, a chunk of the volcano up to ten miles long and a mile thick could let loose. And if all of this slides six thousand feet down the mountain, picking up speed the whole way on one of the steepest places on Earth, and continues all the way to the sea floor thousands and thousands of feet below sea level—an event which releases, according

to the more sensationalist posts, up to seven thousand megatons—that would create a tsunami more than two thousand feet high locally.”

“That’s what they say.”

“And this tsunami would propagate at the speed of a jet liner to the coasts of Africa, Europe, and eventually the east coast of the United States, Mexico, and South America. Africa gets the worst of it, with at least a three hundred foot inundation, but only eight to ten hours later the entire east coast gets hit with, not just one, but up to twenty waves spaced ten to thirty minutes apart, anywhere from thirty to several hundred feet high.”

Dick nodded. “You can quibble all you want about the size calculations and about how remote the possibility of this type of an event occurring is, but the fact is the geologic evidence shows such collapses have happened before, and tsunamis of that size have hit land with devastating effect.” He wrinkled his nose. “Not just the Alike events Hansebi talked about in Hawaii, but slides at ...”

Ace waved her hand dismissively. “Yeah, yeah, I get all that. But, you know, after reading all this stuff, I can’t help but think this Canary Islands thing is just like the Great Crack.”

Dick tossed her a sideways glance. “Duh. That’s why I told you to look at it. You got a short term memory problem?”

“No. I mean it’s *just like* the Great Crack. You get a bunch of YouTube videos and half-baked, self-published thrillers all hyperactive and breathless about how some chunk of land is going to fall off an island and create a killer mega-tsunami, but when you push through and get to some actual science—you know, PDFs of academic papers and shit, it pretty much all gets debunked. Actual scientific studies say the whole scenario is predicated on a huge chunk of land releasing at great speed all at once, but the historical evidence of prior flank collapses on the sea floor near La Palma suggests they all occurred in smaller sub-units incapable of creating the type of mega-tsunami all the scaremongers talk about.”

“So? Hansebi said the whole Great Crack thing was bunk, too, yet we just had a devastating tsunami which will affect the whole island chain, including everything from real estate prices to the tourist industry, for

years and years to come. And the evidence is that the Aliko events were huge.”

Ace shrugged. “I’m just saying the Canary Island event—even if it happens—might not be as big a deal as the programming guys at the Discovery Channel make out.”

“So what? In some ways it doesn’t matter what actually happens. If all goes according to plan, tens of millions of people die, coastal infrastructure is destroyed on at least four continents, and chaos and misery reigns over a large chunk of the Earth, with disease, starvation, and revolution as byproducts. If things don’t turn out as well as the bad guy’s wet dreams, then fewer people die, less infrastructure is destroyed, and there’s a diminished quantum of chaos, riots, and misery, but there’s still plenty of death and destruction.”

He focused on the road as he ranted, looking for a sign for his turn-off. “Let’s assume whoever is behind this is an anarchist. He doesn’t have a specialized agenda, like the PPIPF. He probably doesn’t even care much whether this works well because he’s an anarchist, not a terrorist. He wants to create confusion, panic, and turmoil.”

“Nothing like threatened disaster to breed panic,” Ace admitted.

“He wants the governments of the world to look incompetent because they couldn’t stop his plan. The partially failed Hawaiian attempt doesn’t hurt him much in terms of those goals. Let’s say he first sets off a landslide of some type, like in Hawaii.”

“I’d say he’s been there and done that.”

“Then he moves on to the next stage, with a much bigger potential for devastation. If a warning is given and is taken seriously, but not much happens, trust in government goes down. If the warning is *not* given, or is given and not taken seriously because the damage wasn’t overwhelming here in Hawaii, *and the plot works*, there is massive disruption to the economic and structural underpinnings of civilized society. Today was a success for our guy—whoever he may be—as part of the total plan. I’d bet money the PPIPF is boasting about how they caused all this by fracturing the Great Crack and that it’s getting a lot of air time.”

Ace closed her laptop and began idly rolling up the cord for her ear buds. “Sure, but today’s event wasn’t really from the Great Crack. It

was from something else—fracking a completely different rift line. The Great Crack was just cover.”

She was beginning to piss Dick off. “What’s your point? You don’t think we should go to the Canary Islands and check out the big crack there? We should just trust that nobody’s trying to break off a giant slab of earth to kill millions of people because someone wrote a *paper* which says it might not be as big a deal as he hopes?”

Ace looked out the window. “No. We go to the Canaries, for sure. We just need to focus on how the Cumbre Vieja crack could be a cover for a more ... dependable ... means of generating a mega-tsunami.”

Dick turned off the main road onto a single lane, paved roadway heading straight for the ocean. “Roger that.”

As Ace’s attention drifted away from her research and their operational conversation, Dick watched her head swivel back and forth, taking in the tall weeds and unadorned, narrow asphalt strip leading them downslope toward the drop-off to the ocean. Finally, she spoke. “You sure we’re on the right road? This doesn’t look like the entrance to an airport.”

“It’s a small, private airport used by the ultra-rich and famous to fly in and out to their private pieces of paradise without having to put up with riff-raff.”

She looked at him and frowned. “So the ultra-rich and famous like six foot tall grassy weeds and no shoulders on a one lane road?”

Dick pursed his lips. “Back in the fifties, when a lot of the national laboratories were established, did you know the United States government planted lots of evergreens around the perimeter of the properties?”

“*Kurva!* Do you know the landscape design practices for government installations in Czechoslovakia forty years before you were born?”

“The thought was that when the trees grew up, they would keep spies with binoculars from looking in at what was going on. Of course, by the time the trees were full grown, the enemy had satellites and Wikileaks working for them.”

“A fascinating bit of trivia I’ll be sure to remember for the rest of my life—assuming I kill myself immediately. Why do I care?”

“Limited access. Not much signage. Tall grass. All impediments to *paparazzi*.”

The air strip didn't have much more to it than the access road. A single runway paralleled the coastline; a chain link fence protected the far side of the strip or, perhaps, the drop-off to the ocean beyond. As they approached, a lone attendant meandered out of a small terminal to the left of where the access road teed into the crushed gravel surrounding the runway. Dick stopped the car and the two of them got out to meet their greeter halfway.

“Aloha,” he muttered, bringing up a clipboard. “You here for the ...” He glanced down at a printout, “... Nine to Five Charters flight?”

“That would be us.”

“Both of you?”

Ace spoke up. “Yeah. Is there a problem with that?”

The attendant nodded toward the car. “Can't park here.”

Before Ace could reply, Dick took charge. “Somebody will be by to pick up the car,” he lied. “Surprised they're not here yet.”

“Yeah, well not a lot is running on schedule today. My name is Vince Sklar. C'mon, you can wait inside, out of the sun. Plane will pull up right to the tarmac on the other side of the building.” He turned and headed back to the terminal, then stopped and twisted his shoulders back toward them. “Oh, gotta do an agricultural screening on your bags, too, so you might as well fetch 'em now.”

“Don't have any luggage,” replied Dick.

Ace piped in. “Lost our luggage in the tsunami. Oceanside resort and all.”

Vince shrugged. “Well, if you can afford a charter flight, I expect you can afford new clothes.”

They entered the empty, but tastefully decorated, terminal. Ace headed straight for the women's restroom, while Vince sauntered toward a counter.

“Speaking of lost items,” I need a phone. Is there a pay telephone I could use here?”

“Nah,” replied Vince. “What with minimal traffic and everyone using their cell phones, the phone company pulled it out a while back.”

Dick frowned, pushing out his lower lip for emphasis. “Need to let someone know I’m headed back and connecting up through the cockpit of the plane is always a hassle.” Dick pulled a twenty out of his pocket. “You don’t think I could borrow ...”

Vince reached into his front pocket and pulled out an Android, handing it to Dick with one hand while he snatched up the twenty with his other. Dick took it and turned away, walking toward the far corner of the mid-sized room as he dialed.

“Don’t forget to give that back,” Vince called after him. “I’m loaning it to you, not selling it.”

Dick flashed him a thumbs up as he put the phone to his ear.

“Hello?” Seth’s voice was sleepy and uncertain. Jeez, it was evening back home already.

“Seth, buddy. It’s Dad. Just checking in from ... uh ... Seoul to see how you were doing.”

“Pretty much the same. Doc says I may get out in a few days—start doing my physical therapy on an out-patient basis. Of course, that’s going to mean a lot of driving for Mom.”

“I’m sure she won’t mind. And, I’ll pick up my share of the back and forth once I get home.”

“So, how’s South Korea?”

“C’mon, Seth. You know all of my business trips are literally to the shittiest places in the world. That’s the job. Besides, you know what the biggest problem is with South Korea? It’s right next to North Korea. I’m told they still squat in the bushes there. Hell, when I’ve got this place humming again, the North may invade just so their shoes aren’t as full of shit as their Supreme Leader.”

Seth chuckled. Damn, it was good to hear his kid laugh again, after all the pain and rehabilitation he had been through. “Hang on a sec, Mom wants to talk to you.”

Uh-oh. “Hey, Melanie. I was about to ask Seth if you were around.”

“Really?” his wife replied, her voice cold. “You didn’t take my call earlier.”

“I’m not always at liberty to take personal calls. Sometimes I am, you know, legitimately busy.”

“Yeah, you seemed to be getting pretty busy the last time we talked.” When Dick didn’t immediately respond, Melanie continued, her tone harsh, but hushed. “And you didn’t call me back for hours. Even now, you called Seth, not me. I was worried. With everything going on, I was worried.”

“Watch what you say,” Dick snapped, his voice sounding angrier to his own ears than he intended. “We can’t have this conversation now, not with Seth in the same room. Nothing is ‘going on’ in Seoul, and Seth doesn’t know where I’m actually calling from.”

Her voice dropped to a whisper, echoing as if she had cupped her hand over her mouth and the receiver. “There were tsunami warnings for the whole Pacific basin.”

“Seoul’s not on the coast and the closest saltwater is west, not east of it. Seth is smart enough to know that.” He let out a sigh and softened his words. “I’m fine, though. Thanks for your concern.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I worry about you ... now more than before, even more than when you were a cop. It’s like you’re in the Army again and deployed in a combat zone.”

“One of the many reasons why the Subsidiary doesn’t want spouses to know what’s really going on. Look, I just wanted to check in. I’m getting on a plane in a few minutes, so I’ll be completely unreachable for a while”

Melanie’s tone perked up, no doubt for Seth’s benefit. “Well, Seth and I are both looking forward to your return.”

“Me, too, but I’m not on my way home yet.”

“Oh?”

“I’m headed to the Canary Islands. I’ll wave from the plane as we go past, assuming we fly that way around the world.”

“A tropical island.” Melanie’s tone was once again flat and louder than he liked. He started to hush her, but she continued. “Work takes you to some nice places.”

Crap. He heard Seth in the background. “Dad’s going to a tropical island?” This was one of the many other reasons the Subsidiary didn’t allow spies to let their spouses know what, where, who, and why they were doing. His mind raced for a way to fix this, but he wasn’t in



control of the situation. Melanie had the phone; he couldn't even lie to his own kid to fix this because Seth couldn't hear him.

He heard Melanie talking, but not into the phone. "Your dad has to stop in Hawaii when he finishes up in Seoul. Apparently the tsunami did a lot of damage to the wastewater treatment infrastructure there."

Nice save. Who knew Melanie could be such a glib and effective liar? For the briefest moment he was pleased. Then he realized what that ability might portend. He lived a lie at work; he hoped she hadn't been living a lie at home.

"Let me know when you can what your schedule will be," she said to Dick.

"Will do," he replied. "Love you."

"Love you, too."

He thumbed up the phone and turned around to see Ace leaning against a counter less than twenty feet away, staring out toward the Pacific and Maui. Fuck. How long had she been there? How much had she heard? Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

He padded toward her, veering to the right a few steps only to hand Vince back his cell phone. "Figured I should call my kid in the hospital while I had a chance, you know."

"Of course," said Ace, without looking at him. "What else could you possibly be doing?"

## CHAPTER 22

Dee Tamany sat at the head of the table in the conference room used for virtual meetings. Glenn Swynton sat next to her, quite literally her right-hand man. The huge screen opposite them added their virtual avatars to the array of avatars of the ten-nation oversight board for the Subsidiary. Those for Brazil, France, Germany, India, Russia, and the United Kingdom were already on-screen. The United States followed. Australia and Japan joined within a few seconds of the appointed time. China logged on exactly two minutes late, a habit which had begun after Thornby's previous mission.

At first, Dee had attributed China's recurring, intentional tardiness as a passive-aggressive rebuke for the Subsidiary's refusal to turn over Luke Calloway to them for interrogation in connection with the Reality 2 Be matter. But as the rude behavior persisted, she saw it for what it truly was ... yet another of their many ways of saying they didn't like meetings run by women, especially strong, confident women like Deirdre Tammany, Director of the Subsidiary. One didn't have to hold a double major in communications and psychology to see the Chinese felt threatened by women in power.

She decided to gently tweak them about their petty behavior. "This meeting is convened, *all* members finally being present." The sophisticated real-time audio synthesizer electronically modulated voice communications during these meetings. Though the representatives all knew who the Subsidiary personnel were, the automatic modulation meant each of the national representatives was anonymous from each of the others—the flag of the appropriate nation (or, in the case of the Subsidiary officials, their title within the organization) glowed to cue who was talking. The flat electronic voices produced by such modulation, however, also meant any sarcasm in Dee's tone was stripped out, which was probably for the best.

Dee continued, without waiting for any response from the others. She liked to control not only the presentation of information at these gatherings, but the flow of discussions. "Although the Pan-Pacific Indigenous People's Front has claimed responsibility for the tsunami

which inundated the coast of the Hawaiian Islands, with its residual ripples affecting low-lying areas along islands and coastlines of the entire Pacific basin, we do not believe that to be true. Even though the PPIPF was clearly behind a series of explosions along a volcanic crack on the Big Island of Hawaii, the tsunami was triggered by movement along a fault line in a completely different rift zone.”

The Japanese flag glowed. “Our scientists interpret the seismic activity similarly, Director. But how do you know the PPIPF didn’t use additional explosives along this other rift line, too? Perhaps they simply want to claim credit without giving away the actual details of action in order to hide such mechanisms against possible future use.”

“While that is, to be sure, a possibility, we have found no evidence of PPIPF personnel or activity at the locus of the disruption to the predicate fault line.”

“Despite that,” interrupted the Australian representative, “both we and our Kiwi friends intend to continue to investigate and interrogate known PPIPF operatives, just to be sure.”

“Agreed,” said the Japanese representative, his avatar giving a curt nod.

China chimed in. “We have already begun rounding up PPIPF thugs, who are, of course, under the corrupting influence of foreign agents.”

Dee knew anyone “rounded up” by the Chinese government would probably never see their compatriots or the Pacific Ocean again—but the internal politics of the nations overseeing the Subsidiary was not within her or the Subsidiary’s purview.

The Stars and Stripes glowed brightly. “That’s all well and good, but if those assholes at the PPIPF aren’t behind this ... this ... act of war on U.S. soil, then we need to know who the hell is. Do your operatives have anyone in custody? Because we’re happy to help with some ... enhanced interrogation techniques if need be.”

Glenn Swynton spoke up. “We handle our own interrogation, sir, as you know. Besides, we have no one in custody right now.”

“No? What the hell kind of sloppy operation are you running down there? You say the PPIPF isn’t behind this. Well, who is?”

“That remains to be seen,” Glenn reported. “The operation on the Big Island left no survivors behind to question, but we are following up on electronic leads.”

“Electronic leads to whom?” demanded the U.S. delegate.

Dee stepped in. “We have no information on who, but we do have a lead as to a possible next action. Our agents are currently *en route* to the Canary Islands on the slim ... let me emphasize that ... *slim* ... possibility whoever is behind this may attempt a similar seismic action on La Palma. They should be landing there any minute.”

“La Palma?” queried the French representative. “*Mon Dieux!* Please tell me you are not suggesting someone is attempting to unleash a tsunami by destabilizing Cumbre Vieja.”

Dee could almost visualize the various aides sitting behind the delegates scrambling on their portable devices to look up “Cumbre Vieja” so their principals could appear informed as the virtual conference call continued.

“That scenario is being investigated as a possible follow-up to the Hawaiian tsunami,” Dee admitted. She had to tread carefully here. Even the overseers of an international spy agency could panic. “But all of our scientific information suggests that, like the Great Crack scenario on Hawaii, popular theories about such an event are over-hyped and the cataclysmic damage scenarios theorized by some are way out of proportion to what might potentially occur, even if the effort was successful.”

The Russian representative spoke. “The Discovery program was quite convincing to the contrary, Director Tammany.”

Uncle Sam broke in. “Somebody gonna tell me what in God’s sake we’re talking about here?” Apparently the U.S. delegate didn’t have a subordinate surfing for information for him during the call.

Glenn spoke up and recited the basics, mentioning the worst case scenarios offered up by reality television and YouTube panic-mongers, but emphasizing the difficulty in triggering any landslide and the unlikelihood of significant waves emanating therefrom. That set off a hubbub of comments of alarm and concern which she let work itself out for several minutes, contenting herself with the show of flags blinking and strobing as the various delegates tried to dominate the conversation.

Finally, the French delegate asked her a direct question. “How many agents have you assigned to preventing this looming disaster?”

“Two,” she replied. The automatic audio modulation did nothing to mask the gasp she heard from the avatar beneath the French flag. “This possibility ... this remote possibility ... was developed during the course of the Hawaiian operation and is being pursued by the same team with, of course, the full support of our team here at headquarters in Philadelphia, with any needed assistance from our various field offices throughout the world.”

The Union Jack glowed bright. “I don’t recall the Subsidiary has any local field office in the Canary Islands ... or anywhere in close proximity, if my memory serves.”

“Your memory serves you well, as always,” replied Dee. “Our closest full field office is ...” She snapped her fingers twice and Glenn turned the screen of his tablet for her to read. “... in Barcelona, Spain. Director of Operations Swynton will be briefing them as soon as this call ends.”

“But ... but ... that is hours away from the scene by helicopter or even private jet,” said the French representative. “Why hasn’t a Lightning Team already been dispatched?”

Glenn spoke up. Since he was Director of Operations, Dee knew it was appropriate for him to do so. “Lightning Teams are not investigative forces. They have neither the training nor the subtlety required to ferret out information without attracting attention, especially in a setting as bucolic and uncrowded as the Canary Islands. Their strong suit is quick, decisive, military action. Their presence ... even their approach ... would be noticed by any capable opponent, driving them underground or, perhaps, accelerating their timetable for whatever nefarious conduct they have in mind. Lightning Teams are used only as a last resort to protect the anonymity and the activity of the Subsidiary in keeping the world safe. They are generally only brought in if requested by the agents in the field in charge of the operation.”

The American flag lit up. “And who might those be?”

Dee answered. “Agents Dick Thornby and Acacia Zyreb.”

“Thornby,” mused the United States delegate. “I don’t usually pay much attention to who’s doing what where, but isn’t he the guy who

was running around under the Denver airport a while ago? The agent who triggered our recent review of the organization's nuclear protocols?"

"And," added Japan, "the man who destroyed the harbor facilities in Dunedin, New Zealand?"

Australia joined in. "Not really fond of ports, is he?"

"He is a very dangerous and impetuous agent," interjected China. "We continue to be mystified why this man has not been eliminated from the Subsidiary. He adds nothing but chaos and destruction to Subsidiary affairs."

"Mr. Thornby's continued employment is an operational matter outside of your concern, representatives. And I am quite certain China is not nearly as mystified as to what Thornby's contributions are or have been as you assert." Dee paused and calmed herself before continuing. "In any event, this Canary Island possibility would not even be the subject of an ongoing investigation if not for Mr. Thornby's instincts, actions, analysis, and persistence. We stand by our man." The sentiment was correct, but she regretted the phrase as soon as she'd said it. Now she'd have Tammy Wynette running through her head for the rest of the day. She'd better ask Mitzi to put on some more contemporary hits when she got home or she'd fall asleep to the country western tune. She had enough cowboys to deal with in real life; she didn't need to dream about them.

"Still," offered up Brazil, traditionally the most reticent of the national representatives, "as a nation with a significant Atlantic coastline—albeit it far distant from La Palma—might it not be best if a Lightning Team was standing a bit closer to your man than in Barcelona?"

Glenn answered without bothering to glance at Dee for permission. "I will look into forward staging possibilities right away, sir."

"We'd best get to it, then," added Dee. "This meeting is concluded." She pressed a button, terminating the feeds. Only after she was sure they were all off did she turn to Glenn Swynton. "Not long ago we were undecided about Thornby's continued utility to the Subsidiary, so we assigned him a low-level nuisance investigation with a new recruit. Now I'm betting both our jobs are riding on him not screwing up."

Glenn sniffed, his lip twitching, but his face conveyed no emotion.  
“It could be worse.”

“How’s that?”

“We could have given him explosives.”

“I wouldn’t count on that,” replied Dee, her voice weary from the stress of the meeting. “He had only minimal explosives in Dunedin and that fire took days to put out.”

## CHAPTER 23

Charter jets are nicer for flying long distances than coach in a commercial jetliner, but twenty-odd hours in the air (plus, stops to refuel) still made for a grueling trek. Sure, it wasn't like spending a year traversing the Oregon Trail, braving dysentery and, well, Indian braves, but you couldn't really stretch your legs, and Dick worried about deep-vein thrombosis when he spent too much time sitting. How people handled desk jobs, he never could understand.

Not surprisingly, the airport on La Palma was on the shore—typical of island airports—but it was larger and much busier than Upolu. The ledge of volcanic rocks holding the single runway jutted out marginally from the east coast of the island, meaning either end of the runway was over water. Oddly, the taxiway and the terminal were both on the ocean side of the runway. Coming in for a landing, Dick saw jets and propeller planes with logos for Condor, AirBerlin, Binter Canarias, and CanaryFly, among others.

The pilot of their Nine-to-Five Charter taxied the private jet to the main terminal and dropped them off without shutting down the engines, then headed away for refueling. They didn't know how long they'd be here; the jet wasn't going to hang around waiting for them. Nine to Five had arranged for them to be pre-cleared by Customs, so there was no need to wait in line with passports in hand and no need to worry about getting the matching weaponry they'd been supplied on board through inspection. And, since the Quartermaster had included backpacks to carry their requested equipment and necessities, it was an easy hike to the main terminal, which featured clean, but modest facilities typical of tourist destinations. Apparently, a lot of Europeans vacationed in the Canary Islands—no doubt due to the year-long temperatures in the 60s and 70s and the abundance of sunshine.

Given the snatches of conversation Dick heard as he passed other passengers, Germans seemed especially predominant among the visitors, although the locals, of course, spoke Spanish.

Fortunately, Dick knew all of the airport vendors likely spoke English, so he would have no trouble picking up the vehicle the pilots



had called ahead to reserve, assuming he could find the right counter. He stopped for a moment next to an array of brightly colored seats for waiting travelers, the bold primary colors (blue, red, purple, and lime green) of the chairs competing for his attention with the directional placards and advertising within the terminal.

Ace didn't stop, instead elbowing him as she passed and nodding ahead and to the left. "Rental cars are down here."

Dick looked where she pointed, but didn't see any obvious sign. "You sure?"

"Vacationed here once for ..." She pursed her lips, then continued, "... what I think you would call 'Spring Break' during my training classes. Trust me, if you grew up in Prague, you'd go someplace sunny every chance you got, too. Italy's nearer, but La Palma is less crowded than most of the Mediterranean playgrounds. Cheaper, too. Cloudier than the rest of the Canaries—I guess because it's the farthest west and gets the moist marine winds before the others. Certainly the west side is cloudier than the east. Fair-skinned northern Europeans don't mind a bit of cloud cover. Especially on the nude beaches."

"I'm glad you have fond memories of your youth ... a couple years back, but I don't really need the tourist pitch," growled Dick.

Ace slitted her eyes. "Fine. Let's just get our four-wheel drive and head out for the Route of the Volcanoes and we can repeat our Hawaiian hike down a volcanic crack full of sharp rocks and occasional explosives."

Dick nodded. "Vehicle, yes." He shook his head. "Hiking *La Grieta*—the crack—no. I don't really see the point."

"We found explosives the last time."

"Sure, superficial devices whose only purpose was to get the PPIPF to take credit for the tsunami, shifting investigatory attention away from the real assholes behind the fracking of the other rift."

"Maybe the same thing's happening here. There's a small group of activists who want the Canary Islands to be entirely free of Spanish control. They don't have much political clout and their history of violence has been pretty minimal, but almost every place has some kind of secessionist movement."

“Maybe,” mused Dick. “Of course, from what I understand, some people say Morocco’s behind the whole secessionist brouhaha for its own purposes.”

“Support from a bigger player like Morocco might mean they actually have the wherewithal to pull off some kind of explosion.”

“Yeah, but what’s the end game?”

Ace frowned at him. “What do you mean? Secessionist movement causes explosion, kills innocent people, gets attention for their cause even though it really doesn’t change anything. *Kurva*. It’s a pretty standard terrorist routine.”

They arrived at the rental desk. “Maybe,” said Dick. “But I think you’re missing a big problem with how that routine would play out here.” He pulled out his wallet and waved for the attention of a clerk. “Think it over. We’ll talk more in the car.”

#

Ace went to the combination gift shop and souvenir stand nearby and snagged a couple of maps, including one with hiking trails just in case they did head out to search *La Grieta* despite her partner’s sudden, maddening reservations. Sure, the long flight made her crabby, but what really infuriated her was the whole “quiz show” routine Dick was constantly pulling, hinting he had already figured things out and goading her until she stumbled upon whatever he wanted her to say, as if that made the analysis correct. She was younger and less experienced, sure, but she wasn’t stupid. And, she had knowledge and skills he didn’t. Dick wasn’t just a dick, he was a dinosaur. And she was the pesky little mammal scurrying around the dinosaur’s massive feet—just staying out of its way long enough for it to go extinct and for her kind to take over the fucking planet.

She finished her shopping and caught back up with the big guy as he strode toward the parking lot for the rental company while twirling a key chain around one finger of his beefy paw. She clambered in the passenger seat as he adjusted the rearview mirrors to his liking.

“Figure it out yet?” he asked.

“*Kurva to hovno*. I’m not going to play ‘tell me what I’m thinking’ with you.”

“Suit yourself, but your analytical skills only get better if you exercise them from time to time.”

She didn't respond. In fact, she made a point of staring out the passenger window as Dick navigated out of the airport and headed south.

“The PPIPF mooks, they wanted a moderate-sized tsunami because, well, they all lived *mauka* and the wave would mostly hurt the *haoles* and tourists they despise. And even if they believed, against the scientific evidence, the Great Crack explosions would result in a tsunami, they were smart enough to know it wouldn't be a big one—not like the Alikī tsunamis.”

“Why's that?”

“Because the volcanic slope on that flank of Mauna Loa's just not as steep as the other sides. Even a big landslide there is only gonna move so fast.”

“So?”

“So, the cracked slope on Cumbre Vieja is much steeper and, according to some of the reports I was reading during the flight from hell, the inferred slope which the debris field of the western slope rests on is even steeper. So, if you presume it gives way—or you take some kind of action to make sure it does—chances are whatever you dislodge makes its way all the way to the ocean floor, which makes a hell of a big splash.”

Her brow knitted. “So, now you agree with Ward & Day's original paper suggesting a mega-tsunami is possible? Even though all of the smart, scientific papers since say they're full of crap?”

“Longshots do win sometimes. You can't look at recent events in U.S. politics and deny that basic truth.” She started to reply, but he just kept on rolling along, like he did at the last stop sign. “But what I'm saying is slightly different. I'm saying that if someone is trying to trigger a collapse at Cumbre Vieja, *they* believe it's going to work and if it does work, it's going to do so big time.”

Realization flooded her mind like an engulfing tsunami. “Which means the waves which hit locally could be two thousand or more feet high, which means almost no place—at least no place regularly

inhabited on the island—will be safe. So the bad guys won't be here when things happen.”

“Bingo,” said Dick. “Not only won't the bad guys be on-island when things go down, no one from here is likely to buy into this plan in order to promote secession or independence or any of that shit, 'cause there won't be anyone or anything of importance left locally if this plan works.”

“That makes sense,” Ace admitted. Why hadn't she figured that out? But now, even when she knew that searching *La Grieta* for explosives was likely a waste of time, she was at a loss as to what was the next step. There was only one way to find out.

She looked over at Dick. “What's the plan?”

Dick shrugged. “We drive up to the top of Cumbre Vieja and check out *La Grieta*.”

“Screw you,” snapped Ace. “Didn't you just go through a long explanation as to why some local terrorist group wouldn't be planting explosives in this crack?”

“Yeah.”

“So why are we going up the volcano?”

Dick scrunched up his nose. “One, we could be wrong. We need to know for sure. Two, we need to see if anyone is drilling volcanic cores there for research, like in Hawaii. Three, it's got a helluva view.”

#

Taren Sykes leaned back against the lush leather of the oversized seat in his private jet. Having finished off his most excellent meal with a dark chocolate mousse drizzled with raspberry compote, he had time for a short nap before he landed in Geneva in just over an hour. He had barely closed his eyes, however, when he sensed someone hovering over him. He arched his right eyebrow, the lid of his right eye following just enough to open sufficiently for him to see Savatini fidgeting and looking back and forth anxiously between his phone and Sykes.

“What?” Sykes murmured.

“There may be an issue.”

“No,” replied Sykes. “There may or may not be a problem. If there’s something you need to report for me to discern that, then we already have an issue.”

Savatini nodded. “We have an issue, sir.”

Sykes sat up and rolled his shoulders after they left the comfort of the soft leather. Both eyes were open now. “What is it?”

Savatini cleared his throat. “As you know, sir, we’ve been monitoring the incoming flights to La ...”

Sykes cut him off with a sharp flick of his right wrist. “If I know something, don’t waste time telling me what I already know.” He sighed. “So, a flight landed on La Palma that triggered the protocols. What was the triggering factor? Military flight? One of my short-selling competitors?”

“No, sir. Flight plan. Although it stopped several times for refueling along the way, the overall flight plan filed shows the private jet left a private airfield on the Big Island of Hawaii and flew to La Palma, a combination of locations which we had flagged for obvious reasons, even though it was deemed unlikely anyone not associated with your enterprise would travel such an itinerary.”

Any remnants of his incipient food coma fell away. “It appears we were ... and by ‘we were’ I mean ‘I was’ ... right to include the flight plan triggers in our protocol.” He often marveled at how much detailed effort went into creating anarchy. “Let me see the particulars.” Savatini turned his phone, holding it while Sykes read the details about departure time, arrival time, and flight path. He closed his eyes while he calculated a few things. “It appears not only was someone investigating our enterprise, but they were on the Big Island in advance of the seismic event *and* managed to secure a private flight out, more or less directly to La Palma, which means they’ve either stumbled onto or deduced the endgame.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Increase security on site.”

“Of course, sir.”

“And have our local intermediary detain these interlopers, if possible. Better yet, eliminate them.”

Savatini paled. “We don’t have any identification on the passengers yet, sir. We’re pulling up airport security video, but that might take some time.”

“So we’ve got nothing?”

“Uh, well, not quite, sir. We know a rental vehicle was reserved by the charter flight company when they landed.”

“That will do. Get me Dian Nordando in the Philippines. I need him to do an encore performance.”

#

Dee stuck her head inside Glenn Swynton’s office. “Any word from Thornby or Zyreb?”

Glenn’s eyes narrowed. “No. Getting Thornby to check in is problematic at the best of times. He prefers to ... what’s the American expression? ... go rogue. I’m afraid Ms. Zyreb may be learning some bad habits from him.”

Dee walked into the office and sat in one of the chairs on the opposite side of the desk from her Director of Operations. “I don’t know about you, but if my job ... and possibly millions of lives and billions of dollars in infrastructure alone ... are on the line, I don’t like sitting around reading reports about mundane things like who Wikileaks is going to out next or how the Russian mob is using Facebook quizzes to ferret out personal information so they can steal the identities of witless users. I want to do something to help stop the big bad.” Mitzi had taught her that last phrase, explaining that fans of popular television shows from *Buffy* to *The Walking Dead* used it to describe the antagonist for season-long plot arcs. It was apt in the real world, too.

Glenn put down the paperwork he had been going through. “I concur. Let’s talk it through. Step one. Who gains by causing a mega-tsunami?”

Dee took a deep breath. “Well, let’s start with who loses. Owners of coastal real estate, for starters.”

“Hard to capitalize on that directly,” mused Glenn. “There are few ways to ‘short’ real estate, especially on a broad, multi-national basis. I suppose in developed markets like the United States and Britain, you might be able to short baskets of mortgage securities, betting they will go down because of increased default rates. But that market is much

smaller and less fluid than it was before the 2008 housing crash, and the baskets don't differentiate based on coastal locations. So it's an imperfect match to boot."

"Someone could just bet on an overall market decline, perhaps leading to an economic crisis."

"True," said Glenn. "But also an imperfect match. No, I think a narrower focus is the right approach. We just need something with more liquidity and a broader array of players than baskets of mortgage securities."

"Insurance company stocks would likely plummet. Sure, there are some big mutuals which don't have shareholders. But any publicly-held company with a large exposure to the residential or commercial real estate markets in any of the affected areas would take a huge hit, even with a moderate-sized tsunami affecting such a broad area."

Glenn started to nod, then stopped and frowned. "But aren't terrorist acts excluded from most coverage?"

"Sure, but who's going to tell the world this is a terrorist act?" She shook her head. "Not me. Not any of the constituent members of the oversight panel. Sure, groups like the PPIPF might claim credit, but what sane government is going to confirm that? It's political suicide, not only because it amounts to telling a devastated citizenry that the government failed to stop terrorists from doing this to them, but because the admission would mean insurance companies don't have to chip in for the reconstruction. Leaders lie, sometimes for the good of their constituents, but dependably when it comes to saving themselves." She reflected on the issue. "Insurance companies should definitely be on the list of affected industries. But with someone this Machiavellian, we need to look deeper."

"Insurance won't cover everything, even if they don't go topsy-turvy. Those damaged by the inundation will bear plenty of expense themselves, plus loss of operating profits during the reconstruction."

She agreed. "Public owners of large port facilities on the Atlantic coast."

"Tourism industries," countered Glenn. "Beach vacations are popular on both sides of the pond."

Realization came over her. “Oh my God! Disney. Disney would take a huge hit.”

Glenn canted his head to one side. “Orlando’s hardly on the coast and Anaheim is high and dry on the opposite side of the country.”

Dee waved off his objection. “You’re forgetting the potential magnitude of the tsunami. The entire state of Florida is nothing but a huge sandbar, for God’s sake. Haven’t you seen the climate change maps? If sea levels go up just a couple hundred feet, Florida is all underwater. A tsunami a couple hundred feet high would wash across the whole peninsula.” Unwanted images of Florida during trips from her youth flashed through her mind. *It’s a Small World After All* started playing in her mind. The manatees would be wiped out. Cape Canaveral would simply be gone. Crap. “The space program would be toast,” she muttered. “All the big aerospace companies would take a hit.”

“True,” said Glenn, unflappable as always. “And not just tech companies. Best add frozen orange juice futures to the list of potential financial manipulations, then.”

“What else?”

“This is a good start and we’ve got an entire research department at our disposal. I’ll get the computer jockeys churning out algorithms to search for industries and companies likely to be affected and how someone could gain a financial advantage from such effects. It will take some time, but we can then move to an investigation of who holds a panoply of positions which would, in aggregate, benefit. It could lead us to a suspect.”

“Let’s hope it’s before the other shoe drops.”

Glenn smiled. “You Americans are so colorful with your idioms, but you really should treat your footwear better.”



## CHAPTER 24

Ace stood near the crater of Cumbre Vieja and did a full circle turn. The island was lush at the lower elevations, with the roads, houses, and infrastructure all crowded near the coast. Above, the jumbled rocks of solidified lava and scrub brush surrounded the pockmarks of volcanic calderas, fumaroles, and vents. In the distance, the deep blue of the Atlantic glistened with diamond flashes under the glare of the sun. It was all beautiful and inspiring and life-affirming and not at all what she wanted to see.

She wanted—no, she and her partner, Dick, *needed*—to see some evidence of what the bad guys were going to do on this “Crested Canary” to cause more than a quarter of the seven hundred plus square kilometer island to crack off and slide rapidly into the ocean. It wasn’t that she wanted the disaster to happen or come close to happening but for their interference; it was that she feared what might result if she and Dick couldn’t tumble onto the exact plan and how the forces of darkness were endeavoring to make it come to fruition.

She dialed up the magnification on her special Subsidiary-supplied sunglasses and did yet another three-sixty, this time at a slower pace. She saw trees, cell phone towers (some disguised as trees), a lighthouse, and—also near the shore—a few construction cranes. Nothing resembled the type of tall drilling derrick they’d encountered on Hawaii.

Dick walked down from higher up, where he had been engaged in a similar routine, with special emphasis on the area around *La Grieta* and the older, but related, Cumbre Nueva fault lines. He headed toward her. “Well, that’s a bust.”

“Thanks for noticing,” she quipped, drawing a scowl.

He didn’t return her banter. “I also checked in with Swynton at the Subsidiary. The cyber-geeks tend to ignore my calls. Anyway, they haven’t been able to track any permits for drilling volcanic cores and there aren’t many water wells drilled on the island. Population is less than a hundred thousand. A bit closer to that if a couple of the bigger cruise ships happen to be in port. Apparently the volcanic rock lets the rain falling on the windward side seep into caves and tunnels and lava

tubes which run through the mountains and deliver fresh water even on the leeward side of the island. Handy for them, I suppose, and interesting to know the entire volcanic substrata is probably soaked with water much of the time. Remember, Hansebi said that can help grease the skids for a low-friction slide of sizeable slabs of rock.”

“Yeah,” she answered, “but that doesn’t get us any closer to what whoever was really behind the Hawaiian tsunami might be doing to get things sliding in the first place. Did you ask about oil drilling operations, too?”

“Nah. Volcanic island. Even Jed Clampett couldn’t find any bubbling crude hereabouts.”

Jed Clampett? Probably some famous oil explorer from Texas. Her partner watched way too much Discovery and History Channel. Add it to the facts she didn’t care if she ever knew. “So, what next?”

Her partner squinted westward. “Still have a few hours of daylight left. Might as well drive around the island. Talk to a few locals. See if we get lucky.”

They trekked to the four-wheel drive vehicle, a boxy jeep-like jalopy with a canvas top, and climbed in. It had been a bone-jarring ride up the Route of the Volcanoes. Ace wasn’t looking forward to the jolts and jars of the trip back down. Dick had a heavy foot on the petrol in her opinion.

True to form, they hadn’t traversed a couple hundred meters downslope when the Dickhead was already cruising faster than she liked, and they hadn’t even gotten to the steep part of the route yet.

“Hey, you wanna slow down, big guy? We don’t even have a firm destination in mind. I don’t need to go nowhere fast.”

Dick turned to look at her with narrowed eyes, failing to watch where he was going longer than made her comfortable. “This isn’t fast.” He grinned and turned to look at the road ahead. Suddenly the vehicle jolted forward. “This is fast.”

Guys were assholes the world around when it came to cars, but American guys were the worst by far.

“Ha, ha,” she growled. “Very funny. Now slow down before you hit a pothole and rip the transmission off this thing.”

She saw Dick immediately take his foot off the gas pedal. The growl of the motor died down in quick response, but the car continued to accelerate because of the slope. Dick was a guy, though, not a psychopath. She saw him shift his foot to the brake pedal and press down. As soon as he did, she saw his upper teeth press onto his lower lip, his mouth forming the classic “F” position before the lower lip slipped forward and his jaw dropped. Anyone who ever watched censored movies on American TV could lip read his expression as he gripped the steering wheel white-knuckled with both beefy hands.

“Fuck!”

Dick’s foot jabbed repeatedly at the brake, but nothing happened. The car kept picking up speed as it rapidly approached the steeper portion of the unimproved roadway leading hikers to the pathways at the south end of the Route of the Volcanoes.

“Pull the emergency brake,” Dick yelled as he suddenly started yanking the wheel left and right in rapid succession, the car caroming from soft shoulder to soft shoulder, sending dirt and gravel flying.

Was he insane?

She grasped the center-mounted lever for the emergency brake on the second attempt and yanked awkwardly upward. There was no resistance; there was no effect. She stared at Dick in horror for a split second before his gaze shifted to the rock-strewn slope plummeting away on both sides of the steep crest roadway. Dick jerked the gear shift, dropping the transmission into a lower gear, causing the transmission to whine like a banshee. Their momentum slowed and her mood shifted just as rapidly. Then they tilted over to the steeper portion of the descent. In no time, they were plunging just as fast as before. To the right, on the wetter west slope, a tangle of bushes gave way to saplings and trees at lower elevations. Dick continued to slalom from side to side of the narrow roadway as his head jerked from side to side. Ace gritted her teeth as a huge pothole loomed.

*Sakra!*

Dick seemed to steer straight into it, twisting the steering wheel hard to the right, so the left front tire hit the far edge of the deep divot sideways. She heard an explosive pop as the left front tire burst. The car shuddered for a moment as the corner dipped, slowing the jalopy

momentarily before it powered out of the hole, headed for the narrow right shoulder and the rocky slope beyond.

*Kurva!*

This time her partner didn't turn the wheel back to the left. Instead, they tilted over the edge and the car picked up even more speed. With the left rim slicing into the shallow volcanic grit, the rear of the vehicle slid faster downslope than the front. Dick once again wrenched the steering wheel hard left. Sharp, heavy volcanic rocks bumped against the bottom, tires, and side of the car.

If she hadn't belted in, Ace was sure she would have been thrown into the roll-bar and canvas top of the four-wheel drive, if not thrown out of the vehicle completely. As it was, she hung on for precious life, pressing herself against the seat back, bracing herself as best she could against the terrors of the inevitable, when the car would flip and roll topsy-turvy until it hit a tree or rock too big to dislodge.

Wham! Bam! It was if Dick was aiming for the largest rocks in their path. The car groaned and metal squealed as parts of the undercarriage—exhaust system, oil pan, rocker panels, transmission—were ripped away during their tumultuous descent. The shrubs and trees were coming up faster ... much faster ... than she liked. Seconds before they hit, Dick grabbed the gear shift again, this time forcefully ramming it into reverse. She heard a grinding sound as the car spasmed, a rapid series of jerks slowing the momentum, then a sudden bang as the transmission, no doubt, dropped off the vehicle.

The four-wheel drive jalopy jolted forward, unimpeded by the friction of the gears for a microsecond just as they got to the tree line. She threw her arms over her face to protect herself from being impaled when a branch thrust through the windshield. She heard the shushing scrape of vegetation envelop the vehicle, then the scraping and snapping of splintering branches, as her body leaned forward from deceleration.

Then, the front of the car seemed to tilt upward and her head nearly bumped into the windshield before the airbags deployed as the jeep slammed to a sudden stop. The airbag thrust her arms hard into her face, which shoved her head into the headrest behind. Then the bag rapidly deflated.

When she lowered her arms and opened her eyes, she saw a miasma of white powder swirling in the air and coating both the car and her. She looked to her left and saw Dick, dusted in white and his face in a fierce expression, like some Kabuki Samurai. His arms were folded over his chest as he gulped in huge breaths of air. His demeanor and his breathing quickly calmed.

Finally, he looked toward her and spoke. “Well, that was interesting.”

*Kurva to hovno!* “Interesting?” She vibrated in rage. “You almost fucking killed us!”

Dick tilted his head to one side. “How’s that? I didn’t make the brakes fail.”

She desperately wanted to get out of the car and stomp away in anger, but a deflated airbag encumbered her movement and her door was pressed against a mass of broken and torn branches. Dick’s door, upslope, looked clear.

“Maybe not,” she muttered as she took out her knife, snicked it open, and started cutting the airbag away. When she finished, she handed the knife for Dick to follow suit with the driver’s airbag as she looked around for a way to exit which didn’t involve cowboying her partner. “But you did your best to flip us. Weaving all over the road, hitting every fucking pothole and rock you could, then sending us over the edge into these ...” She gritted her teeth as she gesticulated at the cracked windows to the front and right. “... fucking trees.”

Dick’s brow creased. “You’re right. I slalomed the car from one side of the road to the other. That’s how skiers slow down. You go more lateral distance for each foot you drop, which means more friction and marginally less speed. The loose gravel on the shoulders lets the wheels furrow in a bit, too, just like loose snow, and impede forward progress. I dropped into low gear to make the tranny absorb some of the kinetic energy. Every pothole I hit hard did the same thing. Forcing the left front tire to blow meant the rim would dig in to the surface for even more friction, as well as lower the undercarriage, making it closer to the uneven ground so it would bottom out more often. Every rock ripping away at the undercarriage meant more friction and less speed. With a bit of luck, we might have broken an axle and stopped at least one wheel

from turning freely altogether. Then, it was just a matter of heading for the softest possible landing. Bushes are better than trees, saplings and scrub trees better than the stout ones. Then I made us hesitate right before impact by cramming the gearshift into reverse. After all, you don't want to stop with too big of a jerk."

She couldn't believe it. This ... this near disaster was just another day at the office for her partner, her supposed mentor.

"No," she said. "You don't want too big of a jerk. You want one that is just right." She shook her head. "Don't try to tell me you were in control the whole time. No one has that much control. That wasn't good driving; that was fucking luck."

She retrieved her knife from Dick and thrust it hard straight up, punching into the canvas above her head and cutting through the thick top. Once she had an opening, she sliced through her seatbelt and stood, clambering out of the car while Dick glowered at her. She trudged up the slope, waving off a few passersby who had started climbing downslope to offer assistance.

"We're not hurt," she yelled. "My dad just thinks he knows how to drive better than he really does."

#

Dick let her get a good head start on the climb back to the road. She needed to vent; she needed to let her anger work its way out of her system. But most of all, she needed to come around to understanding that as a spy, you control as much as you can of any situation and, when things go bad, rely on your training and instincts to control the uncontrollable as best you can. And, if you survive, you always have to believe you survived because of those things. A spy can't believe in luck and function effectively, because when you believe in something, you tend to rely on it.

And he'd rather rely on himself, or even an immature, inexperienced, and impetuous partner, than on luck any day.

Ace was sitting on the side of the road when he eventually made his way up. She had calmed down, but still threw him a nose-twitch and a scowl as he approached.

"Something's bothering me," she said.

“Besides my driving?”

She ignored the jibe. “Why didn’t the emergency brake work? I thought they’re separate from the main brakes—simply mechanical.”

Dick sniffed. “They’re used more for parking than actually stopping vehicles at speed. Tourists forget to fully release them and then try to drive all the time. And rental agencies don’t check ‘em much. Broken cable, probably. Unrelated to the hacking.” He looked up and down the road, surprised no crowd of onlookers had surrounded the damsel in distress. “You chase away the Good Samaritans?”

“Somebody called for a tow truck,” she offered, “though I can’t imagine they have a winch long enough and strong enough to pull that jumbled mess of metal all the way back up here.”

“Not our problem,” replied Dick. “We just need to get someplace we can pick up a new ride.” He dropped down to sit next to her and stared out at the western sky where the sun was dipping in a miasma of orange and purple streaks.

Ace sighed. “That could be a bigger problem than you think. The Good Samaritan said the towing guy told him we weren’t the only ones to lose our brakes in the last hour. Same thing happened to a whole shitload of cars. All rentals, as far as he could tell.”

Dick smiled. “Even better.”

“Better? I just told you there are no cars to be had.”

Dick fluttered his hand at her. “I can hotwire a local car when we get back to civilization, so that’s not a problem. But the fact that a whole fleet of rental cars apparently got hacked—just like the ones back in Illinois—means several things as relates to our mission, all of them good.”

Ace turned her head to look at him. “Lend me your wisdom, Obi-Wan Kenobi.” He would have liked the reference, had there not been the hint of a sneer beneath the words. He shrugged it off.

“One, the fact someone tried to kill us means that, despite us running out of leads an hour ago, the bad guys still think we’re hot on their trail.”

Ace raised one eyebrow.

“Two, the fact they hacked a fleet of rentals to attempt to kill us means they probably don’t know who ... or at least where ... we are, so

we can sit here pleasantly silhouetted against the sunset without worrying too much there's a sniper lining up a shot as we wait for the green flash when the sun goes down."

Ace snorted. "Mythical."

"Snipers?"

"The green flash."

"Maybe," he replied. He let the subject drop, but as the sun got closer to being swallowed up by the distant horizon, he noticed her gaze lingered on the ocean, as if searching, hoping she was wrong.

"Three, the hacking and the tsunami plots are definitely connected."

"Yeah," she admitted. "But that doesn't get us any closer to figuring out how they're going to drop this ..." She patted the ground. "... into the ocean along with a big-ass chunk of the rest of the island."

Dick ran his tongue across his teeth before answering. "True."

Ace shrugged. "Maybe they got a nuke and they'll just drive a truck into the tunnel underneath Cumbre Vieja north of here—the one that connects the east and west sides of the island—and set it off down there. That would probably do the trick."

"I don't think so." When Ace's eyes flicked to him for a second, he continued. "You made the point with your last phrase: 'That would *probably* do the trick.'"

Ace was back to staring at the sun's glare. "What do you mean?"

"Nukes aren't that easy to get. Believe me, I had to fill out forms in triplicate to get even the low-yield neutron EMP device I used ... well, you know where. Dr. No, or whoever is behind this plot, doesn't have the resources or the access to the stockpiles of the Subsidiary's oversight nations who belong to the nuclear club."

"You can't know that. Hell, Putin might give someone like this a decommissioned nuke just to stir the pot. Russia doesn't have an Atlantic coast, after all, but a lot of its enemies do."

"Sure, but as you said, a nuke in the tunnel might not even do the trick. At best, it's a probability, not a guarantee. It might just release a hell of a geyser of lava; it could release pressure, not ramp it up. And, as we know from the various reports debunking the original Discovery program and the Ward & Day analysis, the landslide triggered might not be big enough or fast enough to cause a tsunami, and the mountain



might just dampen the effect of the wave-generating potential of the nuke, itself.”

“Maybe.”

“That’s just it. There’s a lot of maybes.” He sighed. “The point is that if you are a psychopath *and* you manage to score a nuke, you don’t take any chance of wasting it. If I was a bad guy with an atomic bomb and I wanted to cause a shitload of destruction, I’d just detonate it in the middle of ... or just offshore of ... whatever place I hated most. Setting off a nuke in Central Park or New York harbor would screw over America big-time. Not just the death and destruction in New York, but electromagnetic pulse. The EMP fries the electronics of significant parts of the region. If you detonate slightly offshore, you get a bit less direct blast in the populated area, but you get fallout from the water vaporized in the explosion, maybe even a tsunami effect which propagates out to other shores. I’m sure there’s a simulation for that somewhere on YouTube.”

“Maybe he doesn’t hate New York.”

“Washington, London, Rio ... same thing. Whatever gives him a hard-on, he can vape at will, with plenty of chaos, destruction, death, and economic devastation to make even the most wild-eyed anarchist or nihilistic financial manipulator overjoyed. Or put the nuke in a private plane and set it off at altitude above Ohio or Belgium or some shit. The EMP would zap everything within hundreds of miles. Now, that’s anarchy. Why chance wasting a nuke and getting nothing but fireworks at an out-of-the-way tourist destination? Why use it to set up a line of dominoes that may or may not fall when pushed? No, whoever this ...”

Suddenly, she jumped up, pointing at the horizon, just as the last sliver of light disappeared beneath the waves. “What the fuck was that?”

Had she caught the green flash? Had he missed it? He followed her arm, which was pointing a few degrees north of where the sun had set. Backlit by the gloaming, he saw the large ship in outline. Holy crap! The oranges and purples of the darkening sky poked through the superstructure of a massive drilling derrick.

## CHAPTER 25

Ace was content to wait right where they were for a ride down the volcano to civilization, but Dick insisted they start walking down the slope in the dark because ... well, because those are the kinds of things macho spies do, she guessed. Fortunately for her aching calves and her attitude toward her partner, a convoy of tourist jalopies headed downhill stopped for them. That might have had something to do with the fact Ace insisted on walking down the middle of the narrow roadway, forcing them to halt. Her subsequent plea to the driver to give her and her dad a lift after Dad wrecked the car sealed the deal.

Ace settled in, attempting to get in a comfy position so she could nap on the long drive. Dick, on the other hand, seemed keyed up. He sat by a window and stared out at the passing shops and cars as they made their way back up the coast. Ace would also have been content to let the tourist caravan take them all the way to Santa Cruz de La Palma, or at least the airport, but as they trundled along the coast road Dick jumped from his seat and hollered “Here! We need to get off here.”

She had no doubt her mentor needed to get off, but she had no idea why this particular section of mixed commercial and residential buildings along the waterfront was of particular interest. No doubt if she asked, she would get yet another of his teaching lectures. So she said nothing, got up from her seat, and trundled behind her lumbering leader as he exited their handy transport.

Without saying a word, Dick began hiking back along the road, passing three residences, one bed and breakfast with an inviting “vacancy” sign in the window, two bars, and a bodega, before arriving at yet a third bar—this one with a touristy beach theme. He tilted his head toward one of the several surfboards mounted over the doors and windows of the front of the open-air establishment. While the other surfboards were colorfully decorated, this one said “*No Petr6leo en Canarias.*”

Dick looked over his shoulder at her. “I figured somebody here would be able to tell us about the derrick we saw out to sea.”

*Ježíší!* Didn’t the guy ever just relax?

“Just one question before we go in,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“Daughter or date for this encounter? Don’t want to confuse the two. Sure, it’s a resort island, but the population is predominantly Catholic.”

He stared at her for a beat, then glanced into the surf-themed bar and grill. “Date. No offense, but you’re a sucky daughter.”

“Okay, I’ll do my best not to be a sucky date ... although ...”

“Shut up. Just let me do most of the talking.” He walked in, snagging her hand and pulling her gently after him.

Spanish pop music eased out of a quartet of Bose speakers mounted on stripped log support beams. A bar with stools ran along the right side of the shack, perpendicular to the roadway. In the back corner, an old cathode ray tube television set showed a football game between Germany and Spain in progress, but with the sound muted. To the left, a bevy of tables and chairs were arranged haphazardly. Most of the tables were filled with half-empty drinks. Most of the chairs were occupied by tourists, most of them much closer to Ace’s age than that of her “date.”

Dick held up two fingers. “*Cerveza*,” he said, projecting above the noise of the music and the bawdy hubbub of the young, inebriated crowd. He laid a fifty euro note on the bar. “Let’s run a tab.” She watched as the bartender, who was closer to Dick’s age than that of the crowd, pulled a handle marked “Tropical” and filled two frosted mugs. Dick sidled on to a stool and she did the same, grabbing her brew and downing it in one long, long draught. Light, refreshing, with just a hint of lime, but most importantly, cold. Truth told, she would have preferred a Cruzcampo, with its maltier and slightly hoppy flavor, or even a Dorada Especial, but she didn’t think Dick was on a beer-tasting tour. And the most important thing right now wasn’t the quality; it was the sheer cold quantity. She tapped the bar to indicate another and Dick looked over at her with a start; he’d barely slurped the meager foam off the top of his beer.

He said nothing to her, however. Instead, he turned his attention to the barkeep, who was already delivering Ace’s second brew. Dick tapped his finger, as if absentmindedly, on the fifty euro note still on the bar. “I was hoping you could answer a question.”

The bartender's right eyebrow shot up. "I don't sell weed. It hurts the liquor sales."

Dick smiled broadly. "Hah! No, nothing like that." He tilted his head vaguely northward. "When we were watching the sunset a while back, I ... we ... saw a big ship or platform of some type with what looked like it might be an oil derrick on it. What's that all about? I mean, it's a volcanic island, right?"

The bartender scowled. "The idiots in Spain, they pay no attention to the will of the people here. They want oil, they crave oil, so they risk everything ... *everything* ... here in the *Islas Canarias* to satisfy their craving. The fish, the water, the livelihoods of us all, stand in the balance."

"That sounds terrible," agreed Dick. Ace had to admit that, while his interrogation skills were not fancy, Dick knew who to talk to and when to shut up, which was more than half the battle.

"Ahh, we showed them." The bartender jerked his thumb toward the wall behind the bar, which had a photo of a bunch of protesters with signs. "They tried to let the big state petrol company drill east of the islands, in the Cap Juby fields that straddle the maritime border with Morocco, off of Tarfay. But we said, we have wind and sun and geothermal energy. We do not need the black death encircling our happy islands. And, so they have backed down, for now, but we are still on watch."

Ace interrupted. "So, if there is no drilling going on near the islands, why would there be a drilling rig out on the ocean?"

The bartender growled. "Even though no drilling can occur in our waters, the Moroccans, they still risk our homeland with their drilling. And the Mauritians have rigs all over the Chinguetti oil fields well south. Even Western Sahara, as backward as it is, looks to the promise of oil to bring it wealth and power. Perhaps the rig, it is sent to explore the Boujdour Block between here and there. Sadly, many drilling ships and platforms stop in Santa Cruz de Tenerife for supplies or repairs, or simply to wait." His lip curled like that of a snarling dog. "It sickens me that some of my fellow islanders assist these evil projects."

Dick nodded. "I share your feelings, my good man. But, I'm still confused. We saw the derrick on the western horizon, north of the

setting sun. Aren't all of the fields you're talking about east and south, in shallower water?"

"There are those who seek to develop the Agadir Basin, to our north and west. We can do little to stop those outside of our home waters. But, deeper waters require even larger platforms. More likely, the ship you saw simply circles *Carnarias* while it waits for a final destination. It can be cheaper than port fees for such a large structure."

Dick nursed his beer for another hour while Ace downed her second through fourth. Finally, they headed out the door into the night breeze.

"Now what?" she asked as she leaned out into the vacant roadway to look to the east. "I think that B&B still has a vacancy sign in the window."

Dick shook his head. "The Quartermaster's office booked us rooms in Santa Cruz de La Palma. Might as well use 'em. The fewer conversations I have with anyone from Internal Audit, the better, as far as I'm concerned."

"Well, then, we should have called a taxi before we left."

"Nah," said Dick. "We'll need a car in the morning." He strolled along the road, then walked up to a Range Rover Evoque, felt the hood, then went to the driver's side door and started working on the lock.

"So, you're just going to boost a car?" She looked both directions. "What if the owner sees you?"

"He won't. See the decal on the bumper? It's a rental ..."

"A rental? How do we know we can trust the brakes of a rental?"

"Sun's been down a while, but the hood's still warm. This was driven here after our incident this afternoon."

Ace looked up and down the roadway. "Okay, so what if the renter sees you?"

"He won't. I'm pretty sure the tall blond dude in the far left corner speaking German to a local *senorita* is the one who's renting it. Keys were on the table." He pulled the door open and leaned in to finish his work. "And he's way too drunk to drive." He slipped in behind the wheel and the motor turned over with a throaty roar. "So, really, we're doing the guy a solid."

"A solid what?"

Dick sighed. "A favor."

Ace heard the lock click, so opened the passenger door and slid in. The rich leather seats were much nicer than the hot, dirty cloth seats of the tourist jalopy. As they turned out into the road, she closed her eyes for the nap which had been delayed by their stop. She knew Dick was paying attention, as always. Right now, she had a greater need to relax than he had a need for her.

#

Taren stared out over the twinkling lights of Geneva and the darkness of the lake beyond. The scene was serene, but his mind was awchirl with images of the chaos and destruction in the Hawaiian Islands and the lesser damage along the coastal areas of the Pacific Rim. Boats tumbled atop piers, bridges torn apart, debris floating in the water, the lights of emergency vehicles flashing. His eyes lingered on the shots of bodies—some in lines, shrouded by sheets, but others still floating amid the detritus of the tsunami. Some showed signs of having been thrown awkwardly in the surge and battered with flotsam. Others lay face down in the muddy water or hung haphazardly from trees denuded of their leaves.

Good times.

But tomorrow, tomorrow promised great times. With any luck, tomorrow's devastation would so dwarf the events in Hawaii that future historians would only reference the Big Island tsunami in obscure footnotes in scholarly theses.

Better times, at least for him, high and dry and rich beyond measure in safe, scenic Switzerland.

He pressed a button and Savatini entered. "Did Nordando deliver?" asked Taren.

"The disruption occurred as requested," answered Savatini. "We don't know if it eliminated the local threat on La Palma."

Taren took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Elimination would be desirable, but disruption and delay are all we really need. After all, this is a local problem. First thing tomorrow, the Great Crested Canary, she will sing with the dawn chorus and nothing can stop the echoes of her *libretto* once sung. A few minutes later, there will be no opposition, no

investigators, no agents ... no one at all ... in the Canary Islands left to disrupt the New World Disorder.”

## CHAPTER 26

Dick heard a knock and meandered to the hotel door, lazily checking the peephole, then opening it. He turned away and wandered back to the room service cart holding his usual travel breakfast: a three-egg ham and cheese omelet, crispy french fries in lieu of hash browns, wheat toast with butter and honey, orange juice, ice water, a pot of coffee, and a half-dozen extra orders of bacon.

“Asked Swynton to task some satellite surveillance to oil rigs near the island. I’m on hold while he flips through the pics with the analysts. Also asked him to get someone in the Dallas office with drilling expertise to link in.” He picked up a piece of bacon and dipped one end into a single-serving plastic tub of honey. “Wanna bite?”

Ace shook her head. “I can’t believe you’re stuffing yourself with hog fat and honey at this hour. It’s three in the morning. I’ve had all the breakfast I can stomach on less than four hours sleep. Tea, yogurt, and ibuprofen.”

“Suit yourself.” He took a bite of the gooey bacon, but had barely begun to chew when Glenn came back on the line. “Hang on,” he mumbled, quickly masticating the salty, savory, crumble. “Acacia is here. I’m putting you on speaker.” He thumbed the phone.

Glenn’s voice rang out, a bit louder than necessary. “You know that speakerphone is bad protocol, Thornby.”

“Yeah, well repeating everything you say to my partner is damn inefficient, so screw protocol.”

Glenn sighed, somehow imbuing the susurrus with a British accent. “No F-bomb. Nice to know you are back to your normal level of curmudgeonly *insouciance*. Perhaps you should crash into a mountainside of trees more often.”

“Somehow I have the feeling that if I ever crash into a mountainside of trees again, Pyotr Nerevsky and his goons will be behind it.”

The silence which followed confirmed everything Dick had ever suspected about the Subsidiary’s Internal Audit division. Not just that they dealt with ... troublesome ... agents in a permanent way, but that



they listened in to all of the Subsidiary's communications equipment, as well as having most of the offices at HQ in Philadelphia bugged.

Delightful.

Finally, Glenn's voice emanated from the phone once more. "Sorry, did you say something? I was connecting up Agent Collingsworth of the Dallas field office. Chester Collingsworth has an extensive background with operations touching on petroleum producing trouble spots."

"Howdy," Dick drawled the word for the Texas boy's benefit. "So, here's how I figure it. The bad guys, they have this drilling rig circling the island, waiting to pounce. When they want to trigger the Ward & Day landslide scenario, they rush in close, start drilling, and pump in seawater the whole time, attempting, in essence, to frack the Cumbre Nueva fault line, sending the relatively loose debris field from Cumbre Vieja resting on that steep slope sliding down the mountain. Sound right?"

To Dick's surprise, an elite Boston accent emanated from the phone. "No, not in the slightest. I don't mean to be rude, but since you've asked my expert opinion, just let me say this about that. That scenario sounds positively stupid."

Dick glared at the phone.

"Let me explain why."

"Sure thing," drawled Dick, as he shot the screen a middle finger. There were reasons he tended to avoid speaking in FaceTime. "I always like to be told not only why I'm wrong, but why I'm stupid wrong."

Ace snorted. "If I'd only known."

Dick turned and flipped her the bird, too.

"Well, first of all, those rigs and their drilling operations require extensive set up. The notion of a free-floating platform, or even a drilling ship, rushing in and accomplishing anything substantive in terms of drilling in a matter of hours or even days is absurd."

Dick gritted his teeth and thought for a moment. "Sure, under normal circumstances, maybe that's true, given typical testing and safety precautions and all that crap, I can see that. But, given their plan in this case, maybe they've prepped all they need in advance and they don't give a shit about safety because they're pumping water, not oil. So they

cruise in, drop pipe, and start drilling. I mean, nobody engages in foreplay with a Thai hooker, you know? They just drill hard and fast.”

There was a momentary pause before Collingsworth responded. “That’s ... uh ... that’s a colorful analogy.”

Glenn spoke. “Let’s avoid the unprofessional analogies, please.”

“Whatever,” replied Dick. “The point is that since they’re trying to frack a volcano, not pump oil, they don’t have to worry about fires. And since they’re fracking, they don’t have to go super deep. They just prick the rocky core riding at the top of the magma chamber, pump in enough seawater to drown Moby Dick and crack the surface tension holding the magma back. It bursts like a balloon and *voila*, you get the wettest water-balloon fight ever.”

“That’s also quite ... colorful ... but I’m afraid it wouldn’t work. First off, the magma chamber isn’t just barely under the surface of the volcano.”

“That’s right,” Ace chimed in. “Remember, there are those tunnels going through the mountain. We talked about them yesterday. You don’t put in motorways close to the top of a magma chamber.”

“Quite,” added Glenn.

“The lady is most correct,” enunciated Collingsworth. “Second, there is hydrological intrusion into the top of magma chambers all the time. Volcanic rock is quite permeable. Water seeps into the cracks and makes its way deeper and deeper until it gets to the rock which cooled and solidified at the top of the chamber. Those rocks are reasonably solid, but they’re still damnably hot, so the water gets ever so hot, too. Soon, it’s hot enough it gasifies. It turns to steam and, being lighter in its expanded gaseous form, it moves upward and out and away from the top of the mantle, eventually either cooling and condensing back to repeat the cycle or exiting the system through a fumarole, or steam vent.”

“So you can’t do this? Why did the drilling at the Hilo fault work then?”

“The what?”

Dick stuffed his face with bacon while Glenn brought Collingsworth up to speed.

“That sounds like it was a drilling operation which had considerable time to go deep. That’s the key. Pouring water on the top of a superheated volcano just gets you a good sauna. If you want an explosive result from the sudden pressure of steam, it needs to come from beneath, with the steam expanding as it moves up, increasing the pressure of the chamber and forcing magma into the existing fault lines. That kind of drilling takes time.”

Dick scratched his nose. “Okay, so maybe they’ve already got a rig ... or a ship ... close-in to shore already. We haven’t circled the island to look. They may already be drilling someplace.”

Glenn interjected. “Our satellite surveillance shows no rigs or drilling ships within the twenty kilometer—pardon me, the twelve mile—territorial limit.”

Dick slumped down onto the bed, defeated. “Then what? The chatter suggests something is going down here.” He jerked his thumb toward Ace, even though he knew they couldn’t see either of them. “The attempt on both our lives yesterday suggests the bad guys are worried we’re somehow going to stop them, but I don’t know what to do to stop a plan I can’t figure out.”

“Maybe,” suggested Collingsworth, “they’re, as folks down here are fond of saying, all hat and no cattle.”

“Pardon?” sniffed Glenn.

“Maybe they look the part, but don’t have a ranch. Maybe this is all for show. Maybe they are just setting us up to think there’s a plan to create a devastating tsunami so we sound an alarm or caution the world about the possibility of a tsunami. They still could be playing the financial markets in some way.”

Glenn’s voice broke in. “The detractors of the Ward & Day paper and the original show on Discovery have noted the show’s sponsors included insurance conglomerates. Maybe we’ve got the insurance angle backwards. Fears, even unfounded ones, could significantly bolster purchases of catastrophic insurance.” He paused. “It’s a ponder, in any event.”

Dick threw up his hands. “Better than anything I’ve got at this point. If they need to be close in and dig deep for a long time to make the cockamamie landslide-tsunami thing to work, I don’t know how they’re

doing it. I mean, drilling twelve or more miles off shore isn't going to do diddley, from what you're saying."

"I concur," said Glenn. "Straight down from twelve miles offshore is well outside the magma chamber from what our experts are telling me."

"Down's the only direction to go," added Ace.

"More or less," agreed Collingsworth. "Unless ..." His voice trailed off, leaving Dick staring at his phone as if the connection had dropped. Then, Collingsworth voice rang out, louder than ever. "My goodness! Unless it's the Never-Ending Gusher all over again!"

There was a moment of stunned silence before Ace asked what they were all thinking. "I'm almost afraid to ask, but what the hell is the Never-Ending Gusher?"

Collingsworth tone took on a professorial tone; Dick could imagine the fellow teaching at one of the snooty, northeastern Ivy League institutions. "Back ... oh my ... many, many years ago. Late seventies or early eighties, I imagine. After the United States established the Strategic Petroleum Reserve in response to the Arab Oil Embargo, in any event. There was a driller here in Texas, I believe, who had a great deal of confidence that drilling deeper would unlock previously unknown reserves of petroleum, so they drilled down a considerable depth. Seven miles or more—deeper than pretty much anyone else at the time and, lo and behold, they struck a huge gusher, which, of course, they thought vindicated their theory."

"Thrilling," deadpanned Dick.

"Quite," replied Collingsworth, oblivious to Dick's sarcasm. "Now, I don't know exactly how much you know about the typical flow profiles of oil wells ..."

Glenn interjected. "Assume they're clueless."

Dick flipped off the phone again.

"Well, there's a huge spike at the outset, as the pressure from the oil deep—in this case extremely deep—underground finds an escape and tries to equalize with much lower surface pressures. But, as the oil gushes out, the pressure beneath goes down, so the flow rate diminishes. Now, even before the days of fracking, oil companies would often pump down fluids into the cavern holding the oil, so as to attempt to maintain pressure despite the escaping oil. Even then, the flow rate declines, at

first fairly rapidly, but then slower and slower until the well is tapped out.”

Dick wanted to tap out of this conversation, but it was not wise to rush the egghead too much with his boss on the line.

The lecture continued. “But in this instance, the pressure and the flow rate—which were both quite high to start—barely budged. It wavered a tad, both down and, amazingly, up, but didn’t drop off like every other well in history did. This led the experts at the driller to conclude they had tapped onto a reserve so huge that the large amounts of oil coming out were insignificant to the overall volume of crude in the chamber tapped, so there was still plenty to come. Sort of like the miraculous lamp oil which gave rise to Hanukkah, you might say, except lasting much longer than eight days.”

Dick, a Methodist, knew for certain he would never say that.

“Eventually, they figured out that the drill pipe curved when going down and, for most of its length, it wasn’t actually going down at all. Instead, it traveled lateral to the surface—horizontally—for miles and miles and ended up drilling into the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. The driller pumped it out, sold it to the SPR, which pumped it back down into the salt domes or whatever they were using to hold the reserves, where it gushed back up the driller’s rig, only to be sold again in a never-ending cycle.”

“Well, never-ending until the lawyers got involved,” Ace said. “Americans love their lawyers.”

“Quite,” answered Collingsworth.

“Now that you mention it,” said Glenn, “I seem to recall that Iraq accused Kuwait of what they called slant-drilling into the Iraqi’s Rumaila oil field near the border. Same kind of thing, I guess, but perhaps not quite as lateral.”

Dick had chomped down on another piece of honeyfied bacon, but stopped mid-chew. “I get it.” He swallowed. “So, a rig outside the territorial limit could have been drilling for months or more, but if the pipe curved just the right way ...”

“... or they did something to make it curve,” Ace suggested, “like getting a Filipino hacker to adjust the drilling software.”

“... then they may have been drilling into the rock *beneath* the relatively big magma chamber sitting atop the relatively narrow magma tunnel coming up from beneath the earth’s mantle. Sensors could probably tell them when they were close to the chamber or the tunnel just by measuring the heat at the end of the drill.”

“Indeed,” agreed Collingsworth, his professorial tone becoming more excited. “Then, they could suddenly attempt to frack the rock by sending massive quantities of cold seawater or some kind of mud slurry mix, rupturing the crust between the drill and the magma and injecting enormous amounts of water or volatile chemicals. The water or mixture, of course, immediately boils off into steam, with sufficient explosive force to keep the end of the drill pipe clear to expel more water, and creates a huge bubble of highly pressurized vapor within the magma, which moves upward and expands. More and more water keeps coming and the magma is forced up and out in an explosive surge, rupturing the magma chamber cap. Magma enters the existing fault lines at speed, shearing off the detritus on the southwest flank of Cumbre Vieja.”

Even Glenn sounded animated when he chimed in. “When the steam eventually does escape, there could also be a large collapse of water into the ruptured magma chamber creating additional slides or underwater earthquakes.”

“*Ježíší!*” whispered Ace. “The brake job hack isn’t unrelated; it was probably a try-out for the drilling hack. Worse yet, the bad guys might have a plan that works.”

Dick’s brow knitted as he started grabbing his weaponry and equipment. “Not if I have anything to say about it,” he growled. “Ace and I are headed to the southwest coast pronto to commandeer a boat while it’s still dark outside. Glenn, you and Chester and the satellite and analyst guys need to put your heads together while we’re *en route* to find us the target drilling platform to infiltrate so we can stop these assholes before they frack the volcano.” Dick cut off the connection and continued to grab gear.

Ace turned for the door. “Well, if we’re going to get wet, I’m going to need to wear something besides this t-shirt.”

“Yep,” said Dick without looking up. “A Kevlar vest is the clothes tip of the day.”

“I know. Gotta keep the goats in check.”

“Huh?”

“The goats. *Kozy*, which literally means female goats, is Czech slang for tits. Other languages have idioms, too, *pako*.”

## CHAPTER 27

Ace velcroed on her Kevlar vest, but she decided to keep only the plain gray T-shirt on underneath it. The investigation ... the operation ... was about to hit a critical juncture and she was ready to use whatever assets she had to make sure the bad guys didn't succeed. Dark slacks with lots of pockets, and comfortable, but sturdy canvas shoes with rubber soles, completed her ensemble, even though she knew Dick, as a former Ranger, preferred combat boots. She also loaded up every piece of equipment she'd gotten on the plane: the armaments included a new Glock 26 (the Quartermaster knew her preferences), four extra clips of ammo, three knives (one sheathed on her calf), two grenades, a garrote, and brass—actually aluminum—knuckles. Additional equipment included a set of lock picks, pliers with a wire cutter inset, waterproof matches, two flashlights, and a hundred feet of sturdy nylon rope with a collapsible aluminum grappling hook at one end.

By the time they were less than a mile from the hotel, headed up the twisty-turny roadway leading to the tunnels on LP-3 that crossed the island between Risco de La Concepción and El Paso, she'd wished she's swiped the air-sick bag from the plane. Dick was an aggressive driver at the best of times. This was the worst of times—the fate of millions of innocent people might rest in their hands—and Dick wasn't going to let speed limits, curves, hills, hairpin turns, no-passing lanes, or the meager pre-dawn traffic slow his mission a single second. She hung on to the handle above the passenger window and choked down her rising bile as Dick veered, cussed, swerved, and screamed down the road as if the psychopathic denizens of a *Mad Max* movie were on his tail.

After exiting the tunnels, Dick continued on LP-3, taking a sharp right on LP-2 toward Los Llanos and Tazacorte beyond. Once in Tazacorte, he cursed the entire time the highway circled four-fifths of the way around the town before straightening and heading downhill where signage showed the way to the El Puerte de Tazacorte. As marinas went, it wasn't big. Ace worried it was farther north on the island than would be efficient for accessing an oil platform somewhere in the dark sea off the southwest coast of Cumbre Vieja. She perked up,



however, when she saw the marina included several sizeable yachts among the sailboats, cruisers, and fishing boats crowding the marina's dozen piers.

Dick slammed the car to a stop in the parking area on the oceanside of the protected harbor near one of the larger yachts, grabbed his gear and power-walked toward the nearest pier. Ace scrambled to keep up as she saw him trigger the communications equipment in his sunglasses, perched atop his forehead. She linked in via her similarly positioned sunglasses, just as he reported: "Leaving El Puerto de Tazacorte in less than ten. Bearings, distance, and coordinates now."

Glenn's smooth voice responded. "We've identified two possibilities ..."

"Pick one," snarled Dick.

"Both have been operating ..."

"Pick one," repeated Dick as he headed toward the largest yacht on the pier.

Ace heard a sharp exhale over the comm. "RS147DW, bearing two-hundred thirty-two point four degrees southwest. Seventeen point two eight nautical miles. Texting coordinates."

"Roger that," said Dick, then reached up, clearly disconnecting the communications.

"I'm still on," volunteered Ace.

"Thank heavens for you, Ms. Zyreb. Agent Thornby can be ..."

"An asshole?"

"I was going to say abrupt and single-minded, but I believe you have encapsulated his dominant personality trait well."

"Roger that," said Ace. "Tell me what you were going to tell him. I'll try to work it in when he's in a better frame of mind."

"Yes, well the second—basically equally likely—prospect is about four nautical miles south-southeast of the first. We, quite frankly, are guessing which one may be behind the current plot, if, indeed, either of them are. Thus, your task is investigatory only. Find out if RS147DW is a normal operation or appears to be drilling laterally into Cumbre Vieja. I've got a Lightning Team hop-scotching down from Gibraltar right now. Once you've reconnoitered the target and find out what needs to be known, you can call in the Lightning Team while you escape to the

open ocean. If RS147DW is not the target, you can move from it to the secondary location.”

“In the daytime?” *Sakra!* Ace took a deep breath. “That’ll be fun.”

“Glad to hear you enjoy your work, Agent Zyreb. In the meanwhile, we’ll be trying to discern which location, if either, is involved by electronic surveillance and intercepts. Those electronic chaps can be quite effective.”

“I’m sure the ‘ladies’ in IT can be effective, too,” she shot back without thinking who she was talking to. “Er, in any event, do me a favor and don’t let the geek squad know Big Dick is on the case. I get the impression they don’t much like him.”

“Understood. Frankly, I don’t much like him either, but he can be resourceful in tight situations.”

“Roger that. Out.”

She’d slowed during the conversation. Dick was already aboard the yacht, the *Killer App*. She quickstepped to catch up. “Nice ride.”

Dick’s eyebrows turned inward as he looked at her, but he said nothing. Instead, he merely strode down toward the stern and pulled at a nylon rope wrapped to a stanchion there.

“That’s not connected to the pier,” Ace pointed out as she clambered aboard.

“I know,” Dick replied.

“Want me to untie us from the pier?”

“No.” Dick finished unhitching the rope. “We’re not taking the yacht.”

“We’re not?”

“Too big, too easy to spot.” Dick took another step and started clambering down a ladder affixed to the stern. “We’re taking the dinghy.”

Ace followed him and looked down from the stern as Dick stepped off the ladder onto a roughly three meter long, inflated Zodiac boat with mounted outboard engine.

“Hurry up,” commanded her partner. “We’ve got a lot of distance to cover before dawn.”

Ace swung over the side and climbed down the ladder. *Kurva!* At least with a boat that small, it would be easy to heave over the side as

they bounced their way across open ocean to an uncertain future. Life as a spy sure was glamorous.

#

Dick was in operational mode, which meant that although there was really nothing to do during the trip to their target except point the boat and endure the bucking jolts of the ride and the intermittent heaving of his partner, his concentration was focused as he sorted through the tactical permutations of their mission. Despite the fact that he hated to lose even a few minutes on their approach, once the lights of the rig were visible on the horizon, he shifted the Zodiac ever so slightly to pass well north of the platform. By circling back and approaching from the west—the direction much more unexpected for anyone to come from—they were less likely to be spied by the crew, assuming anyone wandered out to see the sunrise. And, they wouldn't be silhouetted by the pre-dawn glow of the eastern horizon. He wasn't too worried the crew would notice the noise of the outboard or pick up the craft on a radar scan. Floating oil rigs were huge behemoths; the bulk of the crew would be as high above the water as residents of a ten or twenty story apartment building were above the street. The Zodiac had a low profile compared to the size of the swells in the open ocean, and the radar and light absorbing black synthetic rubber of the raft blocked most of the flat edges of the outboard motor housing. Sure, the Zodiac was colder and less pleasant than a rigid hull yacht or cruiser, but he'd made the smart operational choice.

After all, that was his job.

Ace looked pale in the dim light. Part of that was no doubt due to urping up her meager early morning breakfast, whether impelled by seasickness or, perhaps, the beers she'd imbibed the night before on an empty stomach. Mostly though, he figured she was also contemplating the coming action in her own way. Dick had been through these kinds of surreptitious reconnaissance missions more times than he could count, and they had ended in firefights more times than his superiors liked. He was battle hardened. He guessed Ace, while tough and smart-alecky, was a bit more apprehensive about what might occur than he was.

Dick didn't fear fighting; he didn't fear death. But, he did fear failure. And there was a lot at stake if the Never-Ending Gusher theory

was actually in play. Of course, they weren't even sure they were on target; between hurling sessions Ace had given him details on their secondary objective should the first not pan out.

Time to find out one way or another.

Dick throttled down the outboard and let the dinghy coast in the last forty feet before being swallowed up by the mammoth cavern formed by the stanchions of the floating rig. He avoided the cluster of piping dropping down from central sections of the platform far above and, instead, circled toward one of the thick pillars holding the superstructure high above the waves. As he suspected, fixed rungs spiraled up the pillar to the top and all the way down to below the water line. He cut the engine entirely, and reached out to catch a rung, then tied the boat to it and stepped off onto the ladder. The lack of ambient light underneath the superstructure and the shift from the sway of the boat to the stability of the stanchion affected his balance slightly, so he flipped down his "sunglasses" on low-light mode. He glanced back at Ace, ready to follow him up the ladder, and tapped at his glasses for her to follow suit.

He climbed as quickly as safety allowed. No one would see them here and he knew Ace would have plenty of time to catch up, if need be, when he stopped to get his bearings and listen for personnel at the lip of the lowest level of the multi-tiered oil drilling platform. Given it was just before dawn, all seemed quiet, except for the hum of equipment and the chug of gas generators. Sure, there'd be a night shift, but they'd happened to infiltrate the rig at an optimal time, well enough into the night for the shift on-duty to be tired, but sufficiently before a change of shift the day-workers probably weren't clamoring for breakfast yet.

Ace caught up while Dick was looking into the door of what appeared to be some kind of utility or generation shed. "Good place to blow up if we want to stop work," Dick mused.

Ace peeked past, looking under his arm, which was outstretched holding the door open. "Yeah, but that's not the drill. We don't know this rig is up to anything nefarious and we don't exactly want a repeat of Deepwater Horizon on our hands by mucking up ... or blowing up ... an actual operating well."

Dick shrugged. “Assuming these guys are the real deal and not some bad guys fracking a volcano, the blow-out preventer down on the ocean floor should save the day if bad things happen up top.”

“*Ježíši!* Your file was right about your hard-on for explosives.”

Dick chuckled. “Yeah, I always thought Eisenhower had it right.”

“The general from the war against the Nazis?”

“Yeah, but I was thinking about his military defense policy when he was President of the United States after the war: ‘A bigger bang for a buck.’”

Ace frowned. “*Kecás kraviny.* You’re making that up.”

“His Secretary of Defense believed building big bombs was a lot cheaper than relying on conventional forces to get your way while keeping the peace.” Dick shrugged. “I told you I watch a lot of educational television.”

“Yeah, well, before we blow something up, how do we make sure this rig is the one that needs blowing up?”

Dick frowned. “Unlikely all the rank and file know what’s really going on. Why would they need to? And, if they did, why in the world would they stay on board knowing they’re about to start a tsunami that will likely kill them and their families back home?”

Ace wrinkled her nose. “Maybe they’re true believers. Maybe their families live inland or on a damn mountain.”

“Unlikely. Deepwater rig workers’ families always live near the coast. Too much hassle to get to and from for visits otherwise. And, I’m not sure there is enough of a cause here for there to be many true believers. Anarchy. What kind of cause is that? Helping some bad guy get rich is even worse. Might be able to persuade or con one or two underlings to stay on, but not a whole crew in-the-know.”

“Fine,” snapped Ace. “You’re right, as always. So, if the rank and file don’t know shit, then how do we get a handle on this?”

“Communications shack, off the heliport straight above us, above the crew quarters, mess, and recreation modules. If the head honcho from Switzerland is making satellite calls, there’ll be a record, *especially* if the communication workers don’t know they’re involved in nefarious activities. It’s standard procedure to log all communications.”

“Can’t the Subsidiary track that remotely?”

“Tough to track and intercept satellite calls unless you control the satellite. No, this is something we have to do by hand.”

Ace smirked. “You should be used to that.”

## CHAPTER 28

Dee walked into Glenn's office and shut the door. She could have made him come to her, but she didn't play those kinds of games.

Glenn looked up from his computer screen and gave her a curt nod in greeting. "Nothing new from communications re which oil rig, if either, is part of the volcano fracking plan."

"What if both rigs are part of the plan, but only one is needed to execute it?"

"Then the Atlantic coast is in deep trouble." His eyes narrowed for a few moments before he continued. "But I don't think such a redundancy is likely. Doubles the cost; doubles the chances of what's really going on being leaked or found out. Doesn't seem like a good bet for either a financial manipulator or an anarchist. Of course, we don't even *know* there is a plan. This could be all smoke, mirrors, manipulation, and speculation."

"Everything points to a plan existing. We're just not sure what we have come up with is it."

"I've pushed the scientists on call. The scenario is fantastic, but feasible."

"Which is why we need to move on to the next question."

Dee guessed Glenn knew what she was about to say, but he was polite enough to play dumb. "Which is?"

"Do we dial up the Subsidiary's oversight board now and recommend that tsunami warnings go out and evacuation procedures commence?"

Glenn folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. "Premature. And, it could precipitate the kinds of panic and financial disruption those behind this entire plot crave without them actually having to successfully accomplish what they seem to threaten."

"True, but it could save a lot of lives."

Glenn leaned forward. "Not necessarily. A tsunami warning without some seismic event to back it up might not be taken seriously by the scientific community or the civil defense authorities. It would be difficult to get it taken seriously without a detailed explanation of how it

could come to be, which could lead to scientific disagreement amongst the experts and confusion within the general public. It could also undercut any subsequent warning if a landslide is triggered which could generate a tsunami, due to confusion with the earlier, discredited warning or simply warning fatigue.”

“I don’t know,” replied Dee, “the Hawaiian event gives any warning more credibility and newsworthiness than it would have had absent that event.”

“Which may have been precisely the reason behind the Hawaiian event. It could have been precipitated not to test the fracking theory, but to spook the authorities and the population into overreacting to an Atlantic threat that, for all we know, may not really exist or may not be achieved even if attempted.” Glenn formed his hands into a steeple. “Plus, we do have agents attempting to foil the scenario. I may not be fond of Agent Thornby and his incendiary ways, but he does tend to get the job done ... whatever the cost.”

“He could fail.” She considered her next words carefully; she didn’t want to risk damaging her working relationship with her Director of Operations. “I know we’ve got plenty of resources backing him up here, but I have to admit to wondering whether we should have committed more agents on the ground.”

“Nobody believed this threat was particularly credible until mere hours ago when Collingsworth postulated the lateral drilling scenario. Even now, it’s all speculation. Besides, all Agent Thornby and Agent Zyreb have to do is identify the target.” Glenn looked at the clock on his desk. “And, at this point a Lightning Team could raid the offending oil platform in just a matter of a couple hours.”

“Assuming we have hours.”

“It’s not like there are a lot of friendly, out of the way places nearby to stage a tactical assault team without drawing attention. I’m not dropping a team down in the middle of the Moroccan desert to just sit around without support until needed. Besides, for all we know, we could have days or weeks. Even assuming everything we’ve theorized is correct, there’s no indication of the timing of the event being triggered.”

Dee sat in one of Glenn’s client chairs. “True, but if it was me, I’d trigger the tsunami or at least instigate the threat of a tsunami within a



reasonably short window after the Hawaiian event, while the markets are still skittish.”

“That makes sense, but let’s assume the worst for a moment and play it out. If a mega-tsunami is triggered, there will be some time to react, unless you’re in the Canary Islands or the west coast of Morocco, Western Sahara, or Mauritania.”

Dee scowled. “And no one cares about lives in Africa. Is that your point?”

A micro-expression of shock danced across Glenn’s face. “Not at all. Those coasts are lightly populated and devoid of significant infrastructure improvements. My point is that even though the tsunami would propagate at considerable speed, major population centers in Europe, Africa, and the Americas would have hours of warning before disaster could strike. After all there are buoys set up to detect tsunamis that tell us one way or another whether an evacuation is warranted. Plus, their readings provide any warning given at that point the credibility it needs to be taken seriously.”

Dee sighed. “Unfortunately, the computer skills demonstrated by the related car hacking event means our perpetrator probably has the ability to counteract the actual readings of tsunami detection buoys, showing one where none exists or eradicating the evidence of a real threat, as the ‘big bad’ decides.” She continued to play Devil’s Advocate. “Besides, if the tsunami was triggered when the most populous areas were asleep, any attempted evacuation would be considerably hampered. Beach dwellers understand what a tsunami siren is and most of them know what to do, but tsunami and hurricane evacuation plans only cover a fairly narrow band of very low-lying ground. With something of this potential magnitude, much of the population could literally sleep through most of the wave propagation time.”

Glenn glanced at his clock again. “Thornby and Zyreb have been on the rig for twenty minutes already. At this point, there’s no significant measure in making this decision until we get some kind of response from them.”

“Let’s make sure we have a keyhole satellite directed on that rig in the meantime. With Thornby, the first communication we might get could be a giant fireball blossoming off the coast of La Palma.”

“Already done, Director.”

Of course it was already done. Glenn was as meticulous about operational details as he was about his attire. It was after midnight, and his tie was still knotted as tightly as he was wound.

#

Ace had worried about how they could successfully maneuver around the oil rig without being seen, but, as always, her partner applied brute force to solve the problem. As soon as they moved up from the utility area to the lowest level of the crew quarters, Dick picked the lock on a room. She heard a brief kerfuffle, then a thump followed seconds later by a second thump. She was about to peek through the half-opened door when Dick grabbed her arm and pulled her in the darkened room. Two crewmen in t-shirts and shorts were on the floor, unconscious. Dick was wriggling the fingers of his left hand, no doubt having used it to knock the occupants senseless.

He stepped to a small built-in closet and snatched out a grimy, orange coverall, then he brushed past her to repeat the process on the opposite side of the room.

He held the smaller of the two onesie uniforms up to her torso. The pants draped over her shoes and onto the floor. It looked like an oversized prison jumpsuit, but with plenty of pockets.

“Yeah, I know you’re not fat, but it leaves plenty of room for the Kevlar and your equipment underneath. You can roll up the sleeves and pants.”

Ace started donning the outfit. “Won’t they notice we’re not someone they know?”

Dick shook his head as he put on the larger outfit. “Rig this size probably has a hundred or a hundred and fifty workers. And they come and go in varying combinations as workers rotate on or off every week or so, not to mention replacements for those who get sick or have vacation. Night shift, heavier manned day shift, plus consultants, vendors, experts, and company brass checking in from time to time, it all adds up to plausible anonymity. Besides, it’s not like people can casually wander on to the work site.”

“Yeah, but most of those aboard aren’t gals, if any,” Ace noted. “Blue collar job, far from wives and girlfriends, I guarantee every hetero guy on this rig can identify the tits and ass of every woman on board from across the room.”

Dick gave her a once over. “Trust me, Ace, with the baggy coveralls, and Kevlar and equipment underneath, you won’t be getting any ...”

She missed the rest as the background whine of miscellaneous equipment suddenly kicked up a notch as another generator or high speed pump joined in. *Ježíší!* How these guys slept in this racket, she had no clue. She pointed at her ear. “What did you say?”

Dick sighed and thrust a logoed ball cap at her. He leaned in and shouted in her ear. “Wear this low and put your sunglasses on. Sun’s up and glaring low off the water. You’ll be fine.”

Dick, of course, was right, not that there were many people in the stairwells leading up from the lowest level of crew quarters to the heli-deck high above them. The sound of chugging, whining equipment was even louder in the stairwell than in the crew quarters, so they had no need to be stealthy. Dick climbed quickly and she did the same, her heart rate elevated because of the situation, not the exercise. When Dick got to the top, he marched across the pad like he belonged there and she followed right behind. He didn’t slow when he reached the communications shed on the opposite side of the platform. He simply opened the door and entered.

Four crewmen were seated at counters of monitoring equipment along two sides of the room. A Scandinavian-looking man in uniform whites was near the middle of the room, talking with a chubby, swarthy man wearing a crumpled suit and tie—probably a consultant or vendor. Her partner didn’t hesitate, walking to the two men in the middle of the room.

“Excuse me,” he said as they looked up at him. “Your presence is required in ...” He threw his right elbow into the solar plexus of the man in whites, while kneeing the pudgy guy with his opposite leg. Both instinctively bent over at the waist, setting them up for two fast uppercuts which flung their heads up and back as their knees buckled and they fell to the floor.

Ace pulled her Glock 26 from an oversized pocket in her orange onesie and leveled it at the techs at the counter, slowly panning the gun back and forth to emphasize the ease and range of coverage.

“Don’t be stupid,” she hissed. “Hands up and away from the controls and nobody will get hurt.”

As the four techs brought their hands away from the keyboards, knobs, buttons, and controls of the panels in front of them, the one farthest from the door brushed his hand over a bright orange button near the edge of the counter. Before she could swing her gun around and decide on the best response, Dick pulled his Glock and shot the tech, a single round entering the back of his head and bursting out the forehead, sending a hot red mist across the counter.

But even her partner’s quick reaction was too late. A harsh buzzing rang out, like the growl of the buzzer on *Jeopardy* magnified a hundred times, followed quickly by what was obviously a prerecorded woman’s voice, repeatedly declaring between continued buzzes: “*Piratas! Piratas! Estaciones de batalla. Se preparan para repeler a los huéspedes.*”

“There was no reason to shoot him,” Ace hissed. “He’d already pressed the button. What’s the point?”

The remaining three techs cowered in terror as Dick strode toward them. “I’m maintaining control of the room,” he barked. “That’s the point.” The alarm continued to cycle. “What’s the *senorita* saying?”

Ace shrugged, then yelled to be heard above the noise of the alarm. “My Spanish is only fair, but they think we’re pirates. We *are* off the coast of Africa. I think they have a pre-packaged drill to repel pirates trying to take over the rig.”

Her partner mumbled. It sounded something like “Pirates. Why the hell did it have to be pirates?” Then he raised his voice. “That gives us some time; they’re probably manning water cannons and looking for people trying to board from a craft underneath the platform. All that *Captain Phillips* shit.”

*Sakra!* There was no way their rubber dinghy was going to be there if they ever got back to it now.

Dick apparently didn’t share her concerns. Maybe because he was too focused on the task at hand. He approached the techs and used the

barrel of his pistol to nudge the one most covered in his departed fellow tech's blood. "Communications logs, now. Start with the sat phones."

When the tech hesitated, Ace spoke up. "He might not understand you."

"Nah," said Dick, "the communications guys always speak English. It's the language of commerce, and money talks." He turned back to the tech. "Right? You can't fool me, so don't think about trying. Just do as you're told and before you know it, we'll be gone."

The tech nodded, then inclined his head toward a desk on the adjoining wall. Dick and the tech got up, walking over in a half-crouch with his hands raised. The tech reached onto a shelf above the desk and pulled out a heavy book with a green cloth covering. A thin bookmark poked out from the top. Still cowering and shaking in fear, he offered the book up to Dick.

Dick grabbed the volume and looked over at Ace. "Position yourself so you can watch both the prisoners and the door," he ordered. She obliged, motioning for the techs to sit on the floor against the wall with the door to the helicopter landing. She glanced furtively over at her mentor, but he was already flipping open the heavy ledger.

Seconds stretched into minutes that seemed like hours.

She jumped when Dick slammed the ledger book down on the desk. "Bingo! Satellite phone calls to several numbers with the Swiss country code. I think one of them's the same as the one we saw in Hawaii." He tore out the relevant sheet from the log book and stuffed it in his pocket.

"You think? Isn't it kind of important to be sure?"

Ace glanced over her shoulder to see Dick glowering at her. "Fine. I'll have Swynton confirm it when we call this in." He reached up to his sunglasses. "Shit." He repeated the motion. "It fucking figures." He took off his shades, tucking them in the front pocket of his orange jumpsuit. "No comm. Try yours."

Ace did, but her luck was no better. "Imagine, crappy reception when you're far out to sea." She scanned the room, her eyes lighting on a microphone sticking up from the communications counter on a bendable arm. She pointed toward it with her off hand. "We are in a communications shack. Use that. Have the Canary Coast Guard or whoever patch you through."

Dick sneered. “Yeah. That ain’t gonna happen. I don’t really need some guy in a naval uniform listening in on both sides of the conversation while I check in with HQ. Besides, we don’t have time for patches and bureaucrats. Sooner or later, somebody’s gonna notice there aren’t any *piratas* down below and come looking up here.”

Her eyes lit on the desk behind Dick. A boxy, black sat phone was half-covered with papers. “Use the phone on the desk.”

He went to pick it up, but as he did she saw him stop, then snatch up one of the papers sitting atop the phone. He spun and glared at the tech who had given him the log book earlier. “Has this been sent?”

The tech covered, his face contorted in fear and confusion.

“This message, was it sent? When?”

The man cringed, but then leaned forward to look at the paper Dick held in his fist. “*Si, En la madrugada.*” The terrified tech closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them. “At dawn.”

“Shit!” Dick wadded up the paper and threw it on the floor, then lunged for the sat phone and started pressing buttons.

Ace snapped her fingers to get the attention of the tech, then pointed at the balled up transmission form. “Open it up and give it to me,” she said, keeping her Glock trained on the tech. He scrambled over to it, unfolded it on the floor, and reached it up to her, clearly trying to stay as far away from her as he could.

Ace glanced down at the form: “Hydrological fracking commenced at dawn. All systems functioning as planned.”

*Kurva to hovno!* The rig had been fracking the volcano since ... when? ... since that extra pump kicked in while they were down in crew quarters?

Suddenly she was dizzy with questions. How long would it take for the flow to reach the end of the drill pipe? Did liquid start pouring out, converting to steam, at the instant the flow was turned on? Was a bubble coursing explosively through the magma chamber already? Had the shockwaves commenced? Was a wave the size of a major skyscraper already forming and sliding toward them?

Her reverie was broken when a burst of gunfire shattered the window of the communications shack facing the helicopter pad.

This day was just not going to get better.

## CHAPTER 29

Glenn's phone rang. "Do you mind?" he asked Dee Tammany. "Not at all."

He lifted the receiver. "Director of Operations."

A tumult of gunshots, shouts, and screams assaulted his ears. He instinctively pulled the receiver away from his ear, then thumbed the button for speaker phone. A crackle of static punctuated by a burst of automatic weapons' fire and men screaming in Spanish flooded the office. He looked at Dee in confusion and she returned the gaze.

Suddenly, they heard a voice shouting in English. "Thornby. This is the rig. Repeat. We are on the correct platform. Confirm receipt." Glenn calmed a little. Of course there was gunplay. No doubt an explosion would follow. This was Thornby after all.

"Message received," he yelled back.

"Get the hell out of there," shouted Dee. "Your job is done. Retreat. Do you hear? Retreat. A Lightning Team will be there in ..." Dee snapped her fingers.

Glenn did his best to tamp down his irritation at her poor manners as he brought the necessary information up on his screen. "Ninety-two minutes."

"Ninety minutes," Dee shouted at the phone

Glenn toggled to a different screen and typed: "RS147DW. GO, GO, GO!"

"Too much time," Thornby shouted back as they heard the sound of more shots and breaking glass. "Fracking commenced at dawn local. We need to shut this down now."

Dee looked over at Glenn. "How long?"

He understood her meaning. His fingers flew across the keyboard. "Dawn in the Canaries was ..." He swallowed hard. "... thirty-six minutes ago." Glenn buzzed for his assistant, who was clearly startled by the noises emanating from the phone. "Get me Collingsworth, NOW!"

"SitRep," Dee barked out at the speakerphone.

“Outnumbered. Outgunned. Will attempt to cut power to pumps or do whatever damage we can.”

“Roger that,” replied Dee. “Keep informed.” Her voice dropped in volume. “Get to it.”

“Godspeed,” added Glenn.

The connection dropped and the room fell into stunned silence.

Suddenly, the phone rang again. Glenn punched at the button.

“Chester Collingsworth reporting, at your service. What do you need?”

#

Dick stuffed the sat phone in his pocket, then looked up and absorbed the chaos of the communications room. The techs had crawled to the best shelter they could find, a closet near the desk. One brave soul had even snagged the legs of the men Dick had knocked out when he first arrived, whether to save them from the bullets and glass flying around them or to use them for cover, Dick couldn't be sure, but he didn't care. Ace was hunkered down behind a support, trading fire with several gunmen who had approached from the same stairwell they had used to get to the helipad. A few bodies strewn across the landing zone demonstrated the crew either took their pirate drills way too seriously or the son-of-a-bitch in charge of this evil enterprise had loaded up the rig with henchmen after the attempt on their lives via brake failure had not gone as planned.

“We need to get downstairs,” Dick shouted, as he moved up to Ace's flank in support.

“You mean the staircase filled with an endless supply of bad guys shooting at us? *Kurva to hovno!* Not going to happen. No way, no how.”

Dick snapped off a shot and the head of the lead shooter from the stairwell snapped back, showering his companions with blood and tissue. “It's a natural choke point. We just take 'em out one by one. How many of 'em can there be?”

Ace ducked as a burst of automatic weapons' fire riddled the flimsy wood siding of the shack and slammed across to the opposite side. “I believe you said upwards of a hundred. Of course, you also said they'd be oil rig workers, not a fucking assault team.”



Dick checked his ammo and his watch. “Somebody must have gotten nervous when we showed up in the Canaries and hired a squad of thugs to protect the rig. You’re right, though. Don’t have the ordinance and sure as hell don’t have the time to take out a squad of mercs one by one as they pop up. We’ve got to shut down that fracking pump, pronto.”

“To hell with that,” answered Ace. “Let the Lightning Team earn their pay for a change.”

Dick shook his head. “Too far out. If we hunker down and conserve our ammo, we might hold out til they get here, but that means the fracking keeps pumping another hour and a half. Hell, if their plan actually works, a fucking wave might knock the Lightning Team’s helicopter out of the sky on its way here.” Dick scanned the platform. “Still got all your equipment?”

Ace fired off a short burst at the stairwell. “Everything but what I’ve shot at the bad guys. What are you thinking?”

“We jump.”

She turned her head and looked at him as if he was crazed. “We jump? Assuming we don’t hit anything on the way down, we survive hitting the water at terminal velocity, and the goons with guns still looking for pirate ships down below don’t pick us off, what’s the plan? Dive down and try to clog up the intake pipe with our quickly drowned, lifeless bodies?”

“Clogging the intake pipe ... Not a bad idea for down the road. But, for now, I was thinking more along the lines of fixing the grappling hook at the edge and running off the platform attached to the line, then swinging back ninety or so feet down and getting a quick detour around the guys on the stairs with guns.”

“*Ježíší!* You are as crazy as your file said.”

Dick shrugged. “You got a better idea?”

She looked out at the helipad. “We’re going to die, you know. They’ll cut us to pieces before we can get even halfway to the edge of the helipad.”

“Not if we keep up a steady stream of suppressing fire.”

“And how are we going to do that? There’s only a hundred feet of rope and one grappling hook. We both need to run at the same time.”

“Yeah,” said Dick. “But I’ve got an idea.”

#

“I’ve got an idea,” said Glenn. “But, we’ve got to move fast.”

“I’m listening.” Dee was wary, but truth told she was fresh out of ideas, and Chester Collingsworth had just spent five minutes depressing the hell out of everyone by emphasizing how every minute the fracking continued increased the risk that a mega-tsunami would soon be surging across the ocean to take millions of innocent lives.

“Take out the whole platform.” Glenn assaulted his keyboard as he continued to talk. “We’ll need the help of one of the oversight nations, but with any luck, we can take out the platform with a cruise missile much quicker than the Lightning Team can arrive.”

“Try the United Kingdom,” said Dee. “The *HMS Queen Elizabeth* carrier group is doing its sea trials in the Atlantic somewhere southwest of Gibraltar. And, being closer to the Canaries than us, your countrymen have a lot at risk. No time to evacuate the coast if things go badly.”

It took two agonizing minutes to get the United Kingdom’s representative from the Subsidiary’s oversight board by secure connection—actually quite speedy, but time was their enemy. Dee Tammany didn’t waste time with formalities or explanations.

“Sir, I need your carrier group southwest of Gibraltar to launch a Tomahawk cruise missile—better yet two or three—at an oil platform off of the Canary Islands.”

“Two or three? You know those things run well over a million euros apiece.”

“Yes, sir. And it’s the best money the Royal Navy will ever spend. Because if they don’t fire in the next few minutes, the white cliffs of Dover could be underwater in less than two hours.”

#

Ace stared at her crazed partner. “Why do I think this is going to be a very, very bad idea?” She’d wanted the adventure of being a spy; she just had hoped for a bit of life expectancy to go with it.

“Get out your rope, deploy the grappling hook, and tie a loop to wrap around me with the free end, one that won’t slip and squeeze the life out of me when the rope stops my momentum.”

“Your momentum? Where does that leave me?” She felt anger rising in her like bile in her throat as she shrugged off the pack one arm at a time and fished it out of her jumpsuit. “Grabbing you as you jump off a cliff wasn’t so much fun last time that I’m looking for an encore. Or am I just supposed to sit around providing covering fire while you save the day?”

“Yeah, but not from here. Not where you’ll get overrun as soon as the bullets run out.” Dick grabbed her pack away from her as she took out the rope, dumping the rest of the contents, then flipping open his knife and cutting out holes on either side of the bottom of the pack. “No, you’ll be strapped to my back, facing the rear, providing covering fire while I make the dash for the edge.”

*Kurva!* It was so crazy it might work. “Might” being the operative word. She readied the grappling hook. “That clinches it. You’re completely mad. I was right before when I said we’re going to die.”

Dick shrugged. “Probably, but we’ve got to try. If we don’t stop this, millions of people could die, all along the Atlantic coastline.”

“Yeah, and if this is as big as the Discovery Channel said, I think the Subsidiary’s going to need a new HQ.”

Dick’s face drained of color.

“They’ll get out,” she continued, assuming she’d read his thoughts. “They’ll have more warning than anyone. They’re probably the safest people on the whole Atlantic ...” Mother of God, she suddenly remembered Dick’s family lived in New Jersey. She felt the blood drain from her face. “Your family will have time to evacuate, too. I’m sure.”

Dick shook his head. “My kid, Seth, he’s in the hospital, the opposite direction from home for any sensible evacuation route. Once this happens, Melanie’s got no hope of getting to him. Traffic would be bad enough, but we’ve done the hurricane evacuation drill a few times ... you know, for Superstorm Sandy and shit. The first thing they do is reverse all the highway lanes so all traffic moves inland.” Her partner reached into his pocket and held the phone in his beefy paw, just staring at it for a few seconds.

“Call,” said Ace, as she continued to work on readying the hook and rope.

“It’s against protocol,” replied Dick, as if in a trance.

“Fuck protocol,” growled Ace. “What good is saving the world if you can’t save your own family?”

One thing about her partner, he was decisive. She hadn’t even finished her sentence when he raised the bulky sat phone and started punching the keypad. She set the rope down a few moments to fire a short burst at the whack-a-mole bad guys in the stairwell to keep them at bay during the call.

She didn’t mean to listen, but she couldn’t help it.

“Melanie, it’s Dick. Listen. *Just listen!* You have to go to the hospital now and get Seth, then head inland and uphill as fast as you can. Don’t stop for anything. Keep moving. Get on I-76 and head towards Harrisburg, the farther west and the higher the better.” He paused.

“Then check him out against medical advice. Fucking kidnap him if you have to, but get him out and head for high ground.”

Dick took the phone away from his mouth, then brought it back up. “One more thing. Whatever happens, you need to know you and Seth came first. Before my job, my mission, the whole damn world. We’re a team; we always will be. Now MOVE!”

#

As soon as Dee got off the line with the United Kingdom, she dialed up the satellite phone Thornby had used to give him the news that he had less than fifteen minutes to get off the oil platform and make as much distance as possible before it was obliterated by two incoming cruise missiles launched by the United Kingdom. This was one explosion she didn’t think he would be that fond of.

As the seconds ticked away while the connection was made, she mentally prepared what she would say, but she was totally unprepared for what happened next.

A busy signal. The sat phone was in use; she had no way to warn her agents they were about to be blown to United Kingdom come.

## CHAPTER 30

Dick divvied up the ammo. There wasn't much left, but he gave the bulk of it to Ace, keeping only a partially empty clip for himself.

"You need to do one thing for me," he said, as Ace checked her weapon and got into the makeshift harness Dick would be strapping to his back before his mad dash across the helipad.

"Yeah, yeah," replied Ace. "I know, 'don't die.' I promise I'll do my best not to die."

"Screw that," said Dick. "I'm prepared to live with you dying. I've had partners die before. Hell, I've made my peace with me dying."

"Then what?"

"Don't you dare die with any bullets left in your gun."

"What?"

"Kill all the sons-of-bitches you can. That's what I'm going to do with what I've got left and I can't bear the thought of any ammo being wasted in the clip of a dead man."

"Dead woman."

"Yeah. That, too."

Ace stood on a chair to help Dick strap her on. Then he picked up the grappling hook and dropped the loop on the other end of the rope across his body, from his left shoulder to his right thigh. He leaned forward, hefted her up and off the chair and let out a blood-curling roar as he bolted for the southwest corner of the helipad.

What the fuck. She'd always wanted to die a hero.

Ace watched as the mouths of the latest bad guys to poke out of the stairwell in the northeast corner of the helipad gaped open, then she fired off a brief burst in their general direction to force them to scatter for cover. She couldn't hit shit, not bouncing along on the back of a beefy, middle-aged spy who was still yelling at the top of his lungs as he lugged her on his back as fast as his stocky linebacker legs could pump. She didn't even bother to gauge the distance to the jump—better not to know. Instead, she just did her best to steady her aim and pop off a few more rounds.

She heard a clang and glimpsed the grappling hook dropping to the side into the tangled superstructure at the edge of the helipad, then she abruptly tilted backward and seemed to float, weightless, as they plummeted to death or glory.

What the hell, she decided to bellow with her burdened beast as they fell off the edge of the world. Her final thought: There be dragons here.

#

Finally, on Dee's fifth attempt, the sat phone rang. She breathed a sigh of relief, but it was not long-lived. The phone rang and rang and rang, but Thornby didn't pick up. What the hell was he doing that he couldn't answer the phone so she could save his life?

#

Dick had always loved the sensation of freefall. And, for a moment, everything fell away. His mission. His job. The problems in his marriage. And then, with a wrenching jerk, the weight of the world returned. Not just his troubles, but a multiple of his body weight and the weight of his lithe partner as the rope tightened, the G-forces slammed into him, and the rope began to arc back toward the oil platform.

He desperately tried to twist himself to face the platform before he slammed against it. But he didn't have the same easy maneuverability as someone sky-diving. Still, at the last moment, he caught sight of a gangway along the edge of the lower platform coming up. He slid the edge of his knife blade out between his body and the nylon rope and began to cut, pushing the blade against the cord with every bit of force he could muster, slicing at it in a mad panic in time with a buzzing pulse from the sat phone in his pocket as the pendulum swung him and Ace inward, under the edge of the helipad toward the superstructure holding the crew quarters.

Just as they were nearing the end of their inward swing, the nylon parted and the two of them plunged toward the gangplank and its railed edging. He forced his legs together and angled them toward the crew quarters as best he could, then bent his knees and gritted his teeth.

This was going to hurt like hell. Thank God he wore good combat boots.

#

Melanie didn't like to drive fast, but Dick had scared the hell out of her. At least the light traffic this late at night meant she could do twenty or thirty miles over the posted speed limit without having to weave around traffic. She didn't worry about being stopped for speeding—not only were the police assigned highway patrol more likely to go after trucks and sport cars, but between Dick having been on the job as a cop and her being able to truthfully say she was rushing to the hospital because of her son, she figured she could talk her way out of a ticket if she had to. Of course, that would take time and she didn't know how much time she had. From the urgency in Dick's voice when he called, she wasn't sure how much time anyone had.

She pressed the accelerator to the floor and punched the button on the radio for the twenty-four hour news station, but all the stories were routine. Apparently no one else knew what she knew, and she didn't even know anything, except that something very, very bad was about to happen very, very soon.

#

Ace slammed against the wall of the utility module as Dick landed hard and did a half-somersault to lessen the shock of the drop. As soon as their roll stopped, Ace took out her knife and sliced through the straps holding her to Dick's back. The configuration of their intertwined bodies was awkward at best and, though they'd literally gotten the drop on their adversaries, she couldn't be sure a bevy of Mac-10 wielding thugs wasn't about to burst out of the stairway or come around the corner any second. She preferred to be ready to dodge, run, and charge as the developing situation warranted, not to be tied to the back of her partner, facing the wrong damn direction for whatever happened next.

Within seconds, she was loose and upright with Dick scrambling to his feet next to her. She flung open the door to the utility module and they both ducked quickly inside. She blocked the door with a loose piece of equipment, while Dick looked at the machinery.

"What the hell are you doing?" she yelled over the incessant whine of rotors.

Dick shot her an angry look. “Trying to figure out what does what, so I know what to turn off.”

“*Kurva to hovno!* Screw that, big guy.” She reached down and grabbed both of the grenades she’d brought along, tossing him one. “I say we just blow the fuckers up.”

Dick responded with a curt nod, then ran to the door on the opposite side and looked through the square pane of glass in the middle. “Coast is clear.” He motioned toward a large tank against the far wall. “You hit the spare fuel; I’ll dump mine in the electronic controls. One or the other should do the trick.”

Ace pulled the pin, but held the handle tight while Dick did the same with his grenade. He glanced out the door again. “Go! Go! Go!”

Ace tossed her grenade over the equipment toward the tank and took off at a run for the door without waiting to see where it landed. About two steps into her dash, Dick lobbed his under the control area and opened the door, stepping back to let her exit at speed. He followed quickly behind, shutting the door. They raced along on open gangway past another, shorter module above which loomed a crane. Ahead and to the left, the tall derrick of the main rig pierced the clear morning sky.

Then a tremendous explosion, followed quickly by a second, lesser explosion threw them up and forward as the utility module pulsed outward, then blew open in a burst of orange and black. The screech of wrenching metal and shouts and screams of dying men called out as Ace was flung down on the gangway and Dick fell atop her legs. She looked back to see Dick already getting up. In the background, the crew quarters listed heavily to the southeast, flame licking at the lower levels. Then the support beam on the southeast corner bent and finally gave way and the multi-level module and the helipad atop it wrenched down, hanging for a few seconds before it plunged into the sea.

Ace smiled—not at the destruction or the certain loss of life that accompanied it—but with the glow of a mission successfully accomplished.

“Uh-oh,” said Dick as he looked in the opposite direction, past her. She stopped smiling.



Dick looked past Ace and scowled at the sight before him. Lights were still on up the derrick on the workover rig and in both of the modules to its right and behind it.

Modules. That was it. Fucking modules.

They'd blown up the utility module for the crew quarters and communications shack. What hadn't fallen into the ocean was burning, thick black smoke roiling off, with secondary explosions shooting orange and yellow flames through the dark soot. But, the power, drilling, and wellbay modules were distinct, discrete entities. They still had power, the pumps still whined, and the fracking probably still continued.

Oh, and they'd used all their grenades. He was patting himself down to confirm the lack of additional explosives when his hand lit upon the brick-like sat phone in his pocket, which was vibrating. He wrenched it out of his pocket and shoved it toward his face, thumbing the controls as he did so.

“What?”

Director Tammany's voice crackled from the tiny speaker. “Agent Thornby. So glad I finally ...”

“I'm busy,” Dick growled. He thrust the phone toward his partner. “Talk to Ace.”

As Ace took the phone, he brushed past her and took a few steps forward, then leaned out to get a better angle on the area below the derrick. Several workers were scrambling about, but none of these crewmen seemed to be carrying guns, so there was still hope they could finish their mission.

Ten seconds later, Ace was at his side. “We need to leave. We're done here and we've got two incoming Tomahawks ten, maybe twelve, minutes out.”

Dick tilted his head toward an enclosed emergency lifeboat off the gangway about thirty feet ahead. “You go. I'm staying here.” He pointed up at the lights on the derrick. “Power's not down over here. They're probably still fracking Cumbre Vieja.”

Ace sighed. “Fuck.” She pursed her lips, then shook her head. “Doesn't matter. We've got orders. Besides, the Tomahawks will vaporize everything in ten minutes anyhow.”

“And in nine minutes, the whole side of the volcano might slide into the sea and the wave generated might swallow up the Tomahawks *en route*, then swallow up my house, my wife, and my kid—my entire life—along with a whole lotta other people’s lives six hours later. Do what you want; I’m stopping that pump before I leave.” He turned and double-timed down the gangway.

He heard Ace swearing behind him in Czech as she followed him toward the wellbay rig.

It was nice to know he wasn’t the only one who did what needed to be done.

#

Ace had to triple-time to keep up with her partner, especially since she stopped for a few seconds along the way at each of the three different lifeboats they passed to grab the top item in the emergency supply kit. She also watched their six, stopping to pick off a crewman armed with an AK-47 who was following their trail at a distance. After that, she stopped looking for trouble from behind. They were both dead in ten minutes anyhow. What was the fucking point?

Dick rushed ahead at full speed, taking the stairway up from the lower level to the next three at a time, yelling “*Salida! Salida!*” the entire time. The old-timer might not know how to say “abandon ship” in Spanish—she sure as hell didn’t—but he remembered the extra word plastered on every “exit” sign on their commercial flights.

Workers were taking Dick’s advice, even if they never heard him. By the time they’d reached the main platform of the wellbay module, all the workers looked to be gone. Ace had seen several of the emergency boats deploy and depart and for good reason. The conflagration on the south side of the massive platform was spreading, just not fast enough to please her partner.

The mud room under the derrick in the workover rig was so loud she could barely think. Drilling pipes came down from the derrick above and disappeared into a large, center gap in the floor, but everything was so solid, so massive, she didn’t see any way to disrupt it. Apparently, Dick didn’t either, because he didn’t slow, instead loping up more stairs to a roof platform directly below the massive derrick. He swung his

head from side to side as he continued his desperate search. Then she saw it stop and followed his gaze. The roof overlooked yet another equipment module from which emanated a loud whine. The doorway, which was swinging in the gusty air high above the ocean read “Compression Room.” The volume of the keening whine ebbed and flowed with the swinging of the door. Ace didn’t know squat about oil drilling, but her guess was the pump for the fracking fluid was in that room.

Dick must have had the same thought because he fired into the room on full auto. Unfortunately, he had less than two seconds of ammo, which seemed to have no effect.

“Shit!” he yelled, flinging the gun away. Ace nudged his arm and handed him one of the flare guns she had retrieved from the lifeboats they had passed. “Try this.”

Dick snatched up the gun and Ace readied one of her own. “Through the open door.” They both aimed at the doorway, where the module door swung erratically on its hinges in the gusting breeze. “NOW!”

Just as they both fired, the wind shifted and the door swung mostly shut. The flares hit the door and ricocheted, sending sparks flying and the red flaming cartridges skittering along the gangway spewing smoke and fire.

“Damn!” yelled Dick.

Ace handed him another flare gun. “Last one.” As Dick readied it, Ace checked the ammo left in her gun. One round left. At least she wasn’t going to die with any ammo left. She aimed at the module door, which was once again banging open and shut. “On my signal,” she hollered, as she again aimed and tried to calculate the rhythm of the irritating door. The door hit the outside wall and started to swing back toward closed.

“Now,” she yelled as she fired. Dick’s flare gun blazed an instant after her own and she watched as her round hit the door at supersonic speed, puncturing it, but nevertheless slamming it back against the wall just as the flare arrived, flying through the open doorway into the room beyond.

They both dropped their weapons.

Three long seconds later, the wail of the machinery cut off as the walls of the Compression Room bulged out. Ace flung herself back and down as a large orange fireball erupted, flattening the module and bathing everything in a roar of flame and destruction, burning her eyelashes off as it thundered past her, before abating into a raging inferno tearing at the sky less than thirty feet away.

#

“We’ve confirmed missiles are launched,” said Glenn. “Five minutes out. Let’s hope they get there in time to stop the tsunami.”

Dee stared out the window. “Let’s hope our agents get off the rig in time.”

Chester Collingsworth’s voice broke in from the speakerphone. “Seismic activity at Cumbre Vieja!”

Dee slammed her hand down on the desk. “Damn. Prepare to begin emergency evacuation protocols.”

#

Melanie ran past Ornell at the third floor nurses’ station, straight into Seth’s room, flicking on the lights as she did. “Seth, wake up. Now.” He opened his eyes as she reached to shake him awake. “We’re leaving now. C’mon. Move.”

He blinked at the bright lights. “Wha ... It’s the middle of ...”

She lowered the pitch of her voice to full-on Mom voice. “NOW, mister.”

“Okay, okay. Just let me get dressed.”

“No time for that.” She pulled him up from the bed, grabbing at the intravenous tubes snaking into his arm and yanking them out. “Move.”

“Oww, Jesus, Mom. I don’t understand.”

Ornell skidded into the room. “What the hell?”

Melanie leaned toward Seth. “Your father says we have to leave here NOW.”

“Holy crap,” said Seth, suddenly shifting into gear. Melanie grabbed his arm as he got up and the two of them rushed for the door, Seth grabbing his cell phone off the bed’s tray table as they left.

“Sorry, Ornell,” yelled Seth as Melanie ran past the startled nurse.

“You can’t leave,” muttered Ornell. “You haven’t been discharged.”

Melanie and Seth ran down the hallway. “Family emergency!”  
Melanie called back as they hit the panic handle for the stairs down to the parking garage.

Melanie wasn’t even sure exactly what was going on; all she knew was she was running for her life. All because her husband was a spy.

## CHAPTER 31

Dick scrambled back up to a standing position as Ace did the same. “Nice move,” he grunted, “pinning the door back with a round. I wouldn’t have thought of that.”

“Let’s not get gushy now,” she replied and pointed to the west. “Lifeboat. We still have five minutes.”

They lunged toward the stairs that would take them to an escape vehicle, two floors down, but before they’d even gone twenty feet, Dick was stopped cold by a blood-curdling scream. Looking back, he saw a man emerge from the burning wreckage of the Compression Room, his uniform aflame, his hair smoking.

“*Ježiši!*” whispered Ace.

“Go,” replied Dick as he turned and took a step toward the human torch. He had seen what burns had done to Seth. He couldn’t let another human being die like that, not if he could help it. “Get the boat ready. We’ll meet you there.”

She grabbed his arm as if to stop him. “He’s dead in four minutes. We’re dead in four minutes. It’s not like we haven’t been killing people here.”

Dick shook her off. “People shooting at us, sure. The rest deserve a chance to get out of here alive, if they can.” He started running toward the screaming man.

“This is macho bullshit nonsense,” she called after him. “You’re not a hero, you know. You’re just a spy.”

“Spies are heroes,” he muttered to himself as he leaped off the roof of the workover rig onto the flaming gangplank outside the burning remains of the Compression Room, tackling the man afire and smothering the flames with his rolling embrace.

#

“*Ježiši! Do prdele! Káča pitomá!* Ace’s anger burned away her pain as she marched to the western edge of the room and did a navy handrail slide down two flights toward the waiting emergency lifeboat. *Ty jseš*

*debil!* Her partner wasn't just an asshole; he was bound and determined to be a flaming asshole. *To jsou žvásty!*

She didn't know how things worked in America, but where she came from, once you finished the job, you stopped working.

She reached the lifeboat, opened it, and unclipped the safety from the lever that would jettison the boat by letting it slide down and drop into the water. She had no doubt plunging into the water from this height, even in a closed boat that probably wouldn't sink if fully flooded, was going to be a bitch, but it was better than waiting on a flaming oil platform for two Tomahawks to obliterate you.

Two fucking minutes.

She looked toward the stairwell and the gangway along the lower level, searching through the swirling gray and black smoke for any sign of her idiot partner, but saw nothing.

To hell with him.

She turned to close the hatch and shove the lever, when she heard a muffled shout. She turned back to see Dick, with a smoldering body draped across his back in a fireman's carry, lumbering toward her.

*Sakra!*

She ran to him and together they managed to shove Dick's unconscious burden into the lifeboat and slam the hatch shut.

Less than one minute.

She strapped in and grabbed the lever, but Dick's strong hand gripped her arm and kept it from pulling down.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Dick pointed through the thick windshield of the lifeboat. Even with the distortion and the swirling smoke, two pinpoints of flame were rapidly rocketing toward the platform.

*Kurva!* What was he waiting for?

The Tomahawks sped toward them impossibly fast. Just as Ace tensed for the impact she knew would end her life, Dick slammed the lever down and the craft slid, then suddenly lurched off the skid, plummeting toward the blue water below, accelerating downward, hitting the surface of the ocean and plunging into its sapphire depths just an instant before two flashes of light from above illuminated the water

around them with a yellow-white glow that dwarfed the light from the morning sky.

A shockwave hit the craft from behind and starboard, sending it yet deeper in a jerky, sideswiping motion, as if buffeted by big surf. A spray of water burst from a seam along the side of the windshield, then another from the door jamb. The flash of light subsided and darkness flooded the cabin. Then, slowly, the pitch of the boat evened out, then tilted upward. The boat gathered speed and the jets of water leaking in lost pressure as the pitch grew more severe and the water around them brightened once more.

The lifeboat popped to the surface, leaping out of the water for a second before crashing heavily back down. Above and around them debris fell from the sky amid flames and smoke, but whatever direction Ace looked, she couldn't see the oil rig any more.

Dick unstrapped from his seatbelt and stood to start up and pilot the boat.

Once they were far enough away they were no longer surrounded by smoke and debris, Dick turned to look at Ace. "Thanks for waiting. When we do up our after-action reports, though, I need you to do me one favor."

Ace harrumphed at her big, old, wet, dirty, burly partner. "Let me guess. You don't want me to tell them you went back to save some random guy."

Dick harrumphed right back at her. "Nah. Who cares about that? I just want you to make it abundantly clear that last explosion ... that wasn't my doing."

#

"Missile strike confirmed," intoned Glenn. "Rig is demolished."

Dee waved him off without looking up. "That part was never in doubt." Her focus was riveted to the speakerphone, as it had been since Collingsworth had reported seismic activity.

Finally, she heard his voice. "Tremors on La Palma peaked at four point three on the Richter scale and appear to be subsiding. A few aftershocks in the two point eight range, all with epicenters approximately two miles below the seabed underneath the southwestern



edge of Cumbre Vieja. A minor slide of loose debris on the southwest flank, but it never made the shore. No tsunami warning warranted.”

“Good news, as far as it goes,” she intoned.

Glenn raised an eyebrow. “That seems a tad pessimistic given the fact the Subsidiary may have saved millions of lives and trillions in infrastructure.”

Dee shrugged. “A good day’s—night’s—work, but the Royal Navy just vaporized almost every possible lead we might have had as to who’s behind this. And, tomorrow is another day.”

#

Melanie drove on in the dark. Seth had peppered her with questions for the first few miles, but had fallen silent as the news radio droned on, repeating the same banal headlines every seven minutes, none of which had anything to do with the Canary Islands, tsunami warnings, or imminent threats to the state of New Jersey. She didn’t know when she would hear from Dick. She didn’t know if she would ever hear from Dick.

Was this what it was going to be like, now that she not only knew he was a spy, but knew where he was? A constant series of questions about what he was doing and whether he was safe, but no answers.

Seth’s cellphone pinged.

“What’s that?” asked Melanie. “Anything important?”

Seth looked at his phone. “Nah, just a routine notice from one of my apps.”

Melanie wobbled her head. “You mean it isn’t a real person? Your apps just contact you on their own?”

“Sure. This one notifies you about earthquakes around the world. Brian had it and it looked kinda cool, so I downloaded it, too. Of course, earthquakes happen *all* the time, so it was pinging like crazy at first. I bumped it up to trigger at four point two now, which is at the lower range for damage, but it still goes off way too often. Just told me there was a quake in the Canary Islands. Big whoop.”

Suddenly, Melanie was awake again. “The Canary Islands? Couldn’t that be dangerous? You know, like the Hawaii quake?”

“Nah,” said Seth. “Not at four point three. Nothing much happens at that size. Nobody dies, that’s for sure.”

She could only hope he was right. She drove through the night, reaching and passing Harrisburg before dawn, then climbing into the Appalachians north and west until she was too tired to go on, the surge of adrenaline from her earlier panicked flight now leaving her tired, irritable, and with a tinge of metallic taste in her mouth.

#

High above the glittering lights of Geneva, Taren Sykes read between the lines as he went through the end-of-quarter after-action reports from the Canary Islands. News sources had consistently reported that an oil rig west of La Palma had exploded due to an accident precipitated by “human error.” While the media reported there were no survivors among the workers, no oil was spilled. Still, local groups in the Canaries opposed to ocean-based drilling were marching both locally and at the headquarters of the Spanish oil company behind such drilling efforts. Good thing he’d shorted the drilling company; he’d at least offset some of his expenses.

Hmmm. Maybe he could purchase the oil rig four miles further south for a good price given their awkward PR situation. After all, just because a plan fails doesn’t mean you don’t fix the mistakes and try again. That’s the problem with most anarchists; they don’t really work at their craft.

He’d think about it. Right now he had to see a man about a bomb.

The world was so fragile. There were so many ways to break it. And he wanted to try them all.

He pressed a button and asked for his car to be brought around, not bothering to wait for any response from his underling. But as he strode toward the door, it opened and a young woman stepped in wearing an evening gown—something red and flowing, with a full skirt and a plunging neckline. Her dark hair was a bob cut and her body lithe and toned; her features seemed vaguely Eastern European.

“I think you’ve gotten lost,” Sykes said, stepping toward her. “The U.N.’s charity fundraiser is five floors below in the reception area for the hosting law firm.”

“Silly me,” she replied. “I just was looking for a place to check my lipstick away from the crowd. Women’s restrooms ... there’s always a line. I just want to look perfect.”

“Let me see,” said Sykes, stepping close and reaching out to lift her chin up and look into her face. Obviously, the fates were with him tonight.

Suddenly, he felt a sharp pain between the bottom two ribs on his left side, followed in quick succession by ten or twelve more in just a few short seconds, the last piercing pain reaching up into the center of his chest cavity. Then everything began to fade as he fell onto the plush, ash-and-charcoal patterned sofa opposite his desk. Oddly, the tony sofa was sporting maroon accents he didn’t remember.

The last thing he saw was the woman in red walking out his office door, motioning for his assistant. “Pardon me, but Mr. Sykes asked for his car to be waiting for me. Is it ready?”

## EPILOGUE

Dick knew that he couldn't complain. Six weeks off after a mission was well above-average, even with the few burns and scrapes he had incurred. Seth was back at home and Melanie somehow understood that making her drive into the mountains in the middle of the night was his way of showing he cared. Her one-dimple smile had even crept onto her face when he had returned to their cozy ... and unflooded ... home.

And even if he could complain, Dick knew he shouldn't, at least not out loud. Not given the source of his summons to the Subsidiary's offices in downtown Philadelphia: Internal Audit.

Instead of heading to the upper floors of the Casualty Crisis Consulting high-rise, he parked his car and headed to the Accounting Department, down in the basement. As always, it was chilly there. If you asked, they said it was because of the cooling needed for the computer servers housed there, but he knew better. The cold made people uncomfortable and that was how Internal Audit liked their guests, even if they were only there to discuss excess charges for rental vehicles and losing track of explosive devices while in the middle of an op. Pyotr Nerevsky's minions were made in his image: cold and unforgiving.

He checked in and was escorted to a windowless, featureless conference room, then left to ponder his situation for a good half hour. He knew this drill, too. Irritate the guest and make them more pliable before any inquiry, no matter how minor.

Finally, the door opened. Dick looked up to see what underling was going to read him the riot act about procedures and expenses this time.

Shit. It was all he could do to stifle an audible gasp when Pyotr Nerevsky entered the room, his balding head glaring under the harsh blue light of the LED fixtures.

"Agent Thornby. I'm here to discuss your phone habits."

"Did I go over my allotted minutes?" asked Dick, doing his best to keep his tone light. "You should really look into those unlimited plans."

"Yes," replied Nerevsky without smiling. "I'll do that. But right now, I'm more interested in the content of your calls, than their duration."

Dick's mind raced. Could Internal Audit know about his calls to Melanie, letting her know where he was? No, that was impossible. He never used his Subsidiary provided cell or his sunglass communication features for those calls. That's why he'd been buying crappy burners, searching out pay phones, and borrowing strangers' cells whenever he had to touch base with family since Denver. Had he messed up? He went back over the calls in his mind, flipping forward from Singapore to Chicago to Hawaii to the Canary Islands. He'd been careful, hadn't he?

Then it hit him. He'd used the room phone at the hotel in Hawaii. No way it was monitored in real time, but his home number would have been on the hotel bill if anyone from Accounting had checked when his work credit card was charged. "Oh, sorry. Checked in with my sick kid using the hotel's phone. Probably a big long-distance surcharge. Not supposed to do that, huh?"

"No," said Nerevsky, his eyes as cold as the metal table in the conference room.

Dick's mind idly meandered into thinking about why the tables in Internal Audit were stainless steel. Easier to clean the blood off?

"Sorry," said Dick. He put his hands on the armrests of his chair to push up and leave. "That it?"

"No."

Dick shrugged and relaxed back into the chair.

"I'm especially interested in your satellite call from the rig on the Canary Islands."

Dick tried not to let his confusion show. Satellite phones were a bitch to monitor; that's why he had needed the communications logs to confirm the rig's connection to the bad guy in Switzerland. Maybe the tech guys in the office had followed up on that lead and also found Melanie's cell number in the sat phone records. "Oh," he said, as casually as possible. "Yeah, called to check on my family using the bad guy's phone, too. Probably made the electronic techs waste time on a false lead. Shouldn't have done that."

"Definitely not."

There was no way even Internal Audit had monitored his conversation with that satellite phone. He just had to play it cool. "Look, just a month or so ago, I was trading gunfire with a bunch of goons on

an oil rig to stop a major disaster. I not only did so, I returned with a phone number for the megalomaniacal madman behind the curtain and with one of his henchmen—who from what I understand hasn't *stopped* talking since he regained consciousness. Apparently he's pretty pissed the helicopter his boss promised would pluck him off the rig at the last minute never showed. Look, I did my job. Are you really telling me your job is to nickel and dime me about what phones I use to check up on my wife and kid while I'm out saving the world?"

Nerevsky gave him a Mona Lisa smile, then folded his hands and leaned forward. "As I said, I'm actually more interested in the content—the precise content—of your calls home than in what phones you use to make them. Exactly what you say and to whom."

Crap! Ace hadn't snitched on him, had she? She could have. She'd certainly heard the satellite call from the drilling rig and she'd probably heard at least parts of one or two of his calls from Hawaii. Maybe that's why he hadn't heard from her since they'd arrived back. She'd sold him out and couldn't bear to talk to him again.

"Like I said. Checking in on my sick kid. You know, 'How are you feeling? What's the doc say about a release date? I care about you.' Shit like that." He decided to test his concerns about Ace, even though he could scarcely believe he had them. "Ace was there. She can confirm."

"Oh, she did, which is why she's been re-assigned back to the Eastern European field office, at least temporarily. Lying to Internal Audit is never appreciated."

"What makes you think she was lying?"

Nerevsky glanced over his left shoulder at a small, dark panel in the corner of the room. "The high resolution cameras covering this room are very good at recording micro-expressions." His beady, ferret eyes zeroed in on Dick once more. "Besides, don't you think catching a Chinese assassin trying to kill your son warrants Internal Audit focusing extra attention on you and your family?" Nerevsky folded his hands together. "For your protection ... and ours."

Damn. That's when Dick remembered that not only did Pyotr Nerevsky have a reputation for not asking questions in interrogations he didn't already know the answers to, but that he had a background in the KGB, an organization that never gave a second thought to tapping every

wire they could find. Ace hadn't sold him out, but he was still busted, even though Internal Audit couldn't possibly have monitored the satellite phone on the oil rig or the switchboard at the hotel in Hawaii or some random guy's cell phone at Upolu airport. They didn't have that reach.

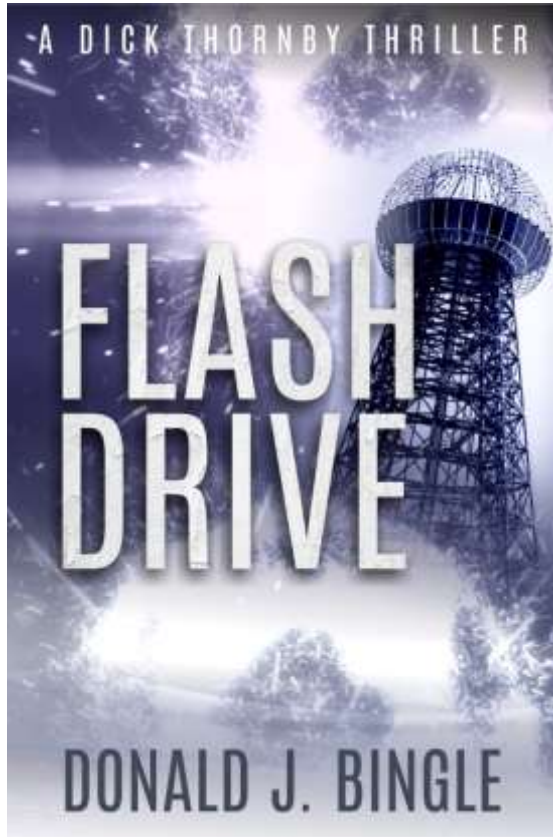
But an asshole like Nerevsky, he would absolutely monitor everything the Subsidiary could reach. Nerevsky knew exactly what Dick had said on all those calls because Internal Audit had bugged every phone Dick regularly called. Not just his home phone, but his wife's phone, his kid's phone, the damn land line in his kid's hospital room, and who knew what else.

Suddenly, it seemed very warm in the conference room. Still, he had no regrets. He'd saved the world. He'd done his job. He'd done his best to keep his marriage alive and save his family. And, he'd even taught the new kid, Ace, a thing or two.

He always did what needed to be done.

**The End**

Dick Thornby returns in [Flash Drive](#).



**Dick Thornby Thriller #3**



## AFTERWORD / ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Like *Net Impact*, much of this book is based on real things rabidly discussed on the internet. Even the most rudimentary search will locate plenty of websites and YouTube videos on mega-tsunamis, including the possibility of tsunamis being triggered in the Hawaiian Islands or by the Cumbre Valeja volcano on La Palma in the Canary Islands. The Ward & Day paper and the television show about how a landslide on La Palma could create a mega-tsunami which would devastate a large swath of the Atlantic coastline exist. And, of course, so do sites debunking such doomsday scenarios. It's also true that fracking has been linked to increased seismic activity and that cars can be hacked, including while on the road. That said, this book is fiction, not science. My job as a thriller writer is simply to link together bits of fact with bits of fiction to give the reader an entertaining experience. If I succeeded, I hope you'll take a few minutes to tell a friend or post a review on your favorite book seller website, social media platform, or review blog.

A number of people helped me with advice, information, comments, or suggestions on the book, the cover, and other aspects of its publication (including my crowdfunding effort on Kickstarter to bankroll its publication), along with much encouragement and support. Thank you all. Special thanks to Christine Redford, Jean Rabe, Lori Swan, Mary Konczyk, Joni Holderman, John Helfers, Richard Lee Byers, Kelly Swails, William Pack, Brent Meske, Juan Villar Padron, Marianne Nowicki, Christine Verstraete, Paul Genesse, Richard Bingle, the St. Charles Writing Group, everyone who read and reviewed *Net Impact* (the first book in the Dick Thornby Thriller series), and especially my wife, Linda, who puts up with my constant complaints about my computer, my interminable struggles with formatting software, and my rants on marketing frustrations.

Thanks to all who supported the *Wet Work* Kickstarter campaign. Listing all of you would have delayed publication, so I'm not doing that here, but please know that each and every one of you have my personal, heartfelt gratitude.

Please go to my website at [www.donaldjbingle.com](http://www.donaldjbingle.com) to find out more about my writing or follow me on Facebook, Twitter, and Goodreads @donaldjbingle to hear my latest announcements. I've begun plotting and research on the next Dick Thornby Thriller, *Flash Drive*. When and whether that book comes out depends entirely on the sales of *Net Impact* and *Wet Work*. Dick's future is in your hands.

Donald J. Bingle  
Writer on Demand ™  
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# **FLASH DRIVE**

**Dick Thornby Thriller #3**

Donald J. Bingle

Cover Design by Juan Villar Padron

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## **Dedication**

To Christine Redford, who has always encouraged my storytelling.

## PROLOGUE

May 28, 1993

*Thwack!* Yet another grasshopper slammed into the glass, splattering yellow-green ichor. The windscreen wiper shoved the smashed insect's shell and one still twitching hind leg into a curving wall of accumulated goo and viscera at the edge of the wiper's reach. Archie stared ahead, peering through the messy windscreen into the black void of the Outback at night. He reckoned the multitude of twinkling stars were outnumbered by the flashes from his headlights glinting off insects fluttering in his path. Still, he held his semi to a constant hundred kilometers per hour on the lonely road seven hours east and north of Perth.

Archie didn't really care if he could see well. The road was reasonably straight and he knew better than to swerve if a 'roo wandered into the big rig's path. But he did need to stay awake. If his ride wandered off the road into open ground, there was no telling what might happen. He could hit a rock, slide into a dry wash, or get caught up by bushy vegetation or soft soil, with no one around to help get his tractor-trailer back on the straight and narrow.

He turned up the heavy metal on the cab's tinny radio and cracked his side window enough for a stream of air, but not so wide as to suck in a torrent of hoppers. For the thousandth time, he wished he'd left the coast earlier so he'd be driving this small stretch from Menzies to Leonora in the arvo, when it was still light out. Sure, it would be warmer and the scenery was pretty damn boring when it could be seen, but at least he would be able to see something besides the flashes of insects in the black through a filter of insect guts. He squinted his eyes and peered into the empty.

A moving slash of intense yellow-white light assaulted his eyes, forcing them fast shut. At the same instant, the radio music dissolved into a mass of crackling static. Archie instinctively hit the air brakes, while simultaneously downshifting as fast as his bulky transmission allowed, even though he had seen—could still see in the scene momentarily imprinted on the back of his retinas—there was nothing in the road ahead. Nor was there anything unusual in the flat salt expanses and mounds of near-constantly dry Lake Ballard to the left—an area which should have been enveloped in blackness this time of night. He opened his eyes, catching a moon-sized streak of yellow-orange light in the sky ahead to his right. At the same time, a long, deep, thunderous, pulsing roar assaulted his ears and rattled the fenders of his slowing rig, like a rolling earthquake triggered by a mining explosion a hundred times stronger than he'd ever experienced.

Meteor strike?

No, the bright streak was still airborne, moving across the distant landscape too slowly for a shooting star by his reckoning, about the speed of a plane. Unlike what he knew about meteors, it also maintained a constant altitude as it progressed, rather than arcing down from the sky and slamming into the ground.

By the time Archie had come to a complete halt in the middle of the god-forsaken roadway and flipped on his hazards, the light had disappeared behind distant hills. But then a sudden horizon-to-horizon burst of blue-white light lasting several seconds emanated from behind

the hills where the light had gone down. He sucked in a breath and waited. Moments later an overwhelming, low rumble thundered across the barren terrain, like a freight train and an earthquake and a gargantuan explosion all rolled into one. Where the blue-white light had flashed, a red, spherical—or, at least, hemispherical—dome pulsed above the horizon.

He flicked off the staticky hiss of the radio, but let the truck idle as he got out to take a clearer—less bug-smear—look at the strange phenomenon. Now the engine's throaty chug was the only thing breaking the silence. Diesel was dear, but he let it run. He worried whatever this was might mess with the electrical system of his engine and he might not be able to start her up again.

Nuke?

He couldn't see a mushroom cloud, but the glowing red ball was much dimmer than the flash, or even the streak of light which preceded it, so he couldn't be sure. Besides, that didn't make a lick of sense. There was nothing out here in the never never worth nuking. Route 49 wandered northwesterly past Leonora; the red orb throbbed to his north but seemed too far east to be near the road. Lake Darlot? No, farther east. Maybe down Bandy way. Nothing between the two fly-specks 'cept maybe a few mines and even fewer sprawling sheep stations.

Maybe that was the point. Nothing there. A perfect place to test nuclear weapons—maybe even nuclear missile systems. But that meant a military presence: facilities, equipment, personnel. And that meant large scale, convoy type movement: Bushmasters, G-Wagons, personnel carriers, and trucks of all sorts. And he hadn't seen or heard of anything like that, not on the roads he traveled and not on the roads—or godforsaken excuses for roads—that the drivers he hung with at the diners and diesel pumps of local truck stops traveled. That meant black helicopters and all that crazy conspiracy shit which went with 'em. He hadn't gone troppo. He didn't subscribe to such nonsense

on a regular basis, but God knows, there was nothin' regular 'bout what was goin' on in the lonely nowhere tonight.

A jet crash? Maybe. Not a likely route, though, even for Qantas.

There wasn't really anything to do ... anything he could check or investigate ... not with the source of the lights beyond the horizon, but he couldn't just drive on. Instead he waited, his rig's hazard lights flashing behind him as he stood on the side of the road, watching something unknown pulse in the distance. An apocalyptic hazard light?

Two hours later, the red orb suddenly winked off and he was alone in the dark with nothing but a strange story, a million stars, and a billion or three 'hoppers, flies, and midges.

He'd barely have enough diesel to make Leonora.

What the hell was that?



## CHAPTER 1

“What the hell is that, Dad?”

Dick Thornby looked up from the wheel of the stopped, but bobbing, SeaRay 400 Express. Seth’s arm was outstretched, his index finger pointing at a white concrete circular structure with red vertical stripes. It connected to another, lower, wider, less colorful concrete structure via an elevated footbridge over the choppy waters of Lake Michigan. There was really no reason for his son to point—more than two miles out from the shore, there really wasn’t much else around to prompt his question.

Before Dick could respond, Seth continued: “It seems awful short to be a lighthouse.”

Dick snorted, causing his wife Melanie to look up at him from the cabin tucked in the front of the speedy power boat, then responded. “That’s because it’s not a lighthouse. It’s a water crib. Two actually. I think the painted one is still active, but the drab one isn’t operational anymore.”

Seth lowered his arm and gazed back at him. “Thanks, Dad. That explains ... absolutely nothing.”

Dick smiled. He didn’t mind his kid’s heavy sarcasm; he was just glad Seth was finally recovered enough from his injuries from more than a year ago that he was able to laugh and tease and even be a wise-ass on occasion. “Well, you’ve got one of the world’s largest cities on one of the world’s largest lakes. Where did you think Chicago—and a bunch of its suburbs—get their drinking water from?”

Seth tilted his head to one side. “I dunno. The Chicago River? Seems a whole lot closer to everything.”

Dick sighed. Although his job as a wastewater treatment consultant for Catalyst Crisis Consulting, LLC was only a cover for his real job as an agent for The Subsidiary, he would have hoped his kid would care enough about municipal water systems and treatment facilities to know at least the rudimentary principals of water supply. Instead, his kid had

figured out Dick was a spy and gotten himself and Dick in a whole lot of trouble by trying to mimic his dad's missions and heroics. But enough of that, the family was on vacation. They were out to have a good time, not ponder regrets and recriminations, and certainly not to start an argument on a small boat—okay, a large, very fast boat—far from shore. Even with room for six, a boat could get pretty chilly if people weren't in a good mood. And Lake Michigan was chilly enough even in midsummer.

"I'll explain while we cruise over and take a look." Dick powered up the Cat 3400 horsepower inboard diesel engines and eased into a long, wide turn toward the structures. "The water cribs pull clean, fresh, lake water from an intake sixty to eighty feet below the surface and send it down a shaft that drops almost two hundred feet, sixty or more feet below the bottom of the lake. Then the water is pumped through tunnels under the lake to and past the shore, where it is treated and inserted into the city's distribution system or piped out to suburban water systems."

Seth made a face. "They tunneled under the lake? That doesn't sound very safe."

"Hmmmph. They tunneled under the lake in the nineteenth century, and again in the mid-thirties ... by hand. Not pleasant. And, no, not safe. I think the older crib was retired because the tunnel to it collapsed a long time ago."

"Like I said," replied Seth. "The Chicago River seems a lot closer and a lot easier."

"The Chicago River is filthy ... or, at least, was filthy. The whole point of reversing the flow of the river ..."

"Say, what? The Chicago River flows backwards?"

"Of course. Don't they teach you anything in school?" Dick regretted that last bit even as he heard himself say it, but Seth didn't take umbrage. He hurried on. "It's why Chicago is a premier city instead of a small-scale port like, well, Toledo." Dick straightened out the boat and headed for the crib at a leisurely pace. "You see, Lake

Michigan is off to the side of the main water flow of the Great Lakes, starting up in Lake Superior and then through Lake Huron, then past Detroit into Lake Erie, which is pretty shallow, and quickly over Niagara Falls into Lake Ontario and out to the ocean via the St. Lawrence Seaway. Lake Michigan is a big cul-de-sac to the side. It takes forever for all the water to circulate out."

Dick gestured at the distant skyline. "So, when Chicago started to develop, all the sewage and pollution flowing into it, including from the Chicago River, just stayed where it was. The south end of the lake was a virtual cesspool. The Army Corp of Engineers, it dredged out the Chicago River and connected it up to the Des Plaines River basin, so water could flow away from Chicago, then eventually down the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico. That's why there's locks between the river and the lake in Chicago. The river and the lake are not at the same level. The lock pumps actually control the flow of water in the river, pumping the pollution from the end of the lake into the river and, eventually, down to the Gulf. These days the effort is supplemented by the Deep Tunnel, a huge system of gigantic pipes, including under the river, that ferries sewage and storm water away from the lake."

Seth feigned a yawn. "There's not going to be a quiz on this later, is there?"

Dick shot him a slit-eyed look. "The point is, smart aleck, that the Army is why Chicago has a beautiful lakefront and clean drinking water." Dick may not have been in the Corps of Engineers, but he had been an Army Ranger and was proud of it.

Seth got his point. "Yay!" he faux-hollered. "Go, Army!"

Melanie made her way on deck from the forward cabin. "That's what the Army was. Go here. Go there. Fight bad guys. Go, go, go." She wrinkled her nose. "Not that the Chicago Police Department ... or the Subsidiary—"

Dick shot her a stern look.

“—er ... Catalyst Crisis Consulting ... are any different.” She fluttered a hand at Dick’s serious countenance. “Not trying to start a fight. Just enjoying some time together for a change.”

Dick throttled back and let the cigarette boat slip forward from momentum now that they were closer. “Looks like they repainted it a couple years back. Maybe did some maintenance.” He adjusted the wheel to make a wide spiral around the concrete structures.

Seth pointed at two yellow signs. “Should we be doing this? It says: ‘Restricted Area.’ And the other one says ‘Violators Will Be Prosecuted.’”

Dick smiled. “I wouldn’t worry too much. There’s nobody there to bother; it’s all mechanized. And it’s not like we’re going to get sucked down by the flow. They just don’t want people tying up or clambering about or ... God forbid ... diving into the water and trying to swim down to see the intake. That would be the kind of stupidity that doesn’t require prosecution.”

“No, duh,” replied Seth. “Evolution in action.”

Melanie’s brow furrowed. “That’s not a very polite phrase, Seth. I seem to recall some questionable decision-making in your past.”

Dick butted in. “And some life-saving decision-making in the end—” As the SeaRay continued its lazy spiral, another boat came into view. Close in to the far side of the smaller, brighter, newer crib, it hadn’t been visible from their initial angle of approach. “Besides, I don’t think anybody’s going to bitch about our distance compared to those guys.”

A few unmanned, but fixed, fishing rods with lines out came into view as more of the low, flat boat was revealed. Seth jerked a thumb toward the craft. “Yeah, they don’t seem so bright. With the strong flow underwater, it’s bound to be one of the worst places to fish out here.”

Dick tilted his head in acknowledgment, but never took his eyes off the mystery boat. “Wouldn’t catch me in a rig like that this far out on a lake this big, either.”

Melanie stepped over to Dick, steadying herself with one arm and shading her eyes with her other to peer at the boat. “What kind of boat

is that? It seems somewhat familiar, but I'm not sure where I've seen something like it before."

The rolling waves showed the stern of the boat for a moment and Dick noted it was angled to form a ramp into the water. Then he looked up and saw the center of the flat craft was jammed with large holding tanks of some sort.

"Jet skis," he murmured.

Seth wheeled around, his head swiveling from side to side.

"Where?"

Dick put up his hand palm out. "No, not in the water." He pointed. "That's a floating fueling station for power boats and jet skis and stuff. They had a smaller one something like it at the marina on Lake Geneva when we went up there for a long weekend years ago. This one is much, much bigger, but same principle. Tanks and pumps on what amounts to a floating pier."

Seth turned back to look at the boat. "Cool. Probably fueling up some equipment on the crib."

Dick nudged the throttle and turned the wheel to tighten their spiral in. "Nah. They're not moored to the crib." That's when he saw the hoses from the tanks draped over the side of the tanker boat facing the crib. "And they seem to be pumping their payload into the water."

Melanie's hand tightened on his arm. "I don't think this is any of our business ..."

Realization slammed home. "Get in the cabin, Melanie. Stay out of sight." He ignored her questioning eyes and called forward to his son. Dick snatched up the radio receiver, its long, curled cord bouncing from the sudden movement. "Seth, call the Coast Guard. Tell them someone is dumping something into the intake at the water crib two and a half miles east of North Avenue Beach." Seth rushed toward him. Dick tossed the handset to him and grabbed the throttle. "Tell them to hurry and to put a bird in the air. And take cover with your mother."

"I don't understand," Seth said. "Gas floats. They can't possibly get enough fuel in the intake sixty feet down to screw with the water." Seth

might be arguing, but he was still doing what he was told. He dropped down into the cabin as Dick slammed the throttle to jolt forward.

“Who the hell knows what they’re pumping and who the hell knows how long the hoses extend under the waterline. They’re fucking terrorists and we’re the only ones close enough to stop them.” He jerked the wheel to make a beeline for the fuel boat. “Ebola, coronavirus, ... prions for mad cow disease if they’re patient terrorists.” He, of course, had once stopped a bad guy dumping neurotoxins in the Glasgow water supply, but that was never made public, so he couldn’t mention it. But he also remembered a couple bulletins which had circulated publicly some months ago to water treatment professionals—he, of course, was on their mailing list for cover reasons. “Some asshole recently engineered cryptosporidium, already present in lake water, to be a lot more virulent. And then there’s that brain eating amoeba that was in the water down by Houston.”

Now that they were fast approaching the fuel boat, he saw three guys who had been lingering near the hoses look up and reach under their jackets.

“Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck!” He glanced down the stairway, where he could see Seth speaking on the handset. “Let your mother finish the call,” he commanded as they rapidly closed the gap to the other boat. He was headed straight for it at speed. “They’ve got guns. You need to take the wheel and steer away from the crib, then make as much distance as possible, in three ... two ... ONE!”

Dick spun the wheel hard to the right, slamming the SeaRay into a sharp turn away from his target as he took two steps and flung himself off the left side of the craft, barely clearing the fuel boat’s low railing and landing on the flat deck. He twisted and crouched as he hit, rolling to his left, toward the stern, as automatic weapons fire ricocheted off the spot he had been on just an instant before. He kept rolling until he put one of the tanks between him and the bad guys with guns, taking only a second to glance right, where, thankfully, he saw the

straightening SeaRay accelerating away from the crib on a beeline for shore.

“Good work, kid,” he muttered as he turned his attention to his adversaries. He yearned to reach for his gun, but there was no point. While he would think long and hard about going weaponless in the field, he wasn’t on a mission. He was on a damn vacation with his wife and kid. And while whipping out a Walther PPK might get a Bond babe all hot and bothered, carrying on vacay wasn’t a smart thing to do when you were trying to work things out with your estranged spouse who was pissed off you’d kept her in the dark about being a spy. If things reached the point of fumbling and grabbing in the dark, he didn’t want her finding his nine-millimeter instead of finding out he was happy to see her.

He flicked a hand out from cover for an instant to draw fire. His opponents obliged. That told Dick two things. One, the tank he was hiding behind and the connected tanks undoubtedly below deck weren’t carrying gasoline or anything else flammable. Henchmen aren’t usually terminally stupid. Two, the sounds of their Mac 10s firing gave him a rough idea of their relative positions, which was crucial.

If you don’t have a gun and you are facing three mooks who do, your first task is to take a gun from the nearest bad guy.

He quietly took off his slip-on boat shoes, then flung them both out in a high arc to the side of the tank where the closest guy was—the side toward the crib. The shoes drew bursts from all three shooters—a bit longer from the closest adversary. While the burst was short, he knew that, combined with the shots already fired, the Mac 10 was empty or nearly so.

The click of an expended magazine falling to the deck followed in quick order.

That’s when Dick charged out from behind cover, roaring as he rushed forward, arms wide. As expected, the shooter had glanced down to snick in fresh ammo, so Dick caught him off-guard. Dick stayed low and tackled his opponent using every bit of the training

he'd gotten when he played football for the Fighting Illini, wrapping his arms around his opponent's mid-section, then heaving upward so the guy fell back. Then he flung his arms wide again just before the thug man hit the deck with a shuddering whomp, grabbing the barrel of the Mac 10 with his left hand and thrusting it down and back so the stock struck the guy's chin. With his right hand, he wrested the weapon away, then leapt up, stomping on his adversary's chest. He fired a couple shots from the just-reloaded gun without aiming, but in the general direction of where he'd last heard the others, just to make them duck for cover. Then, rather than retreating back from where he'd come, he pushed forward to the next cover, listening for his remaining enemies, while eyeing the hoses snaking off the side of the boat and tracking them back to the pumps feeding them.

Once he located the two pumps, he quickly fired two rounds into each. Sure, he might wish he had four more rounds to deal with the bad guys stalking him, but stopping the pumps—stopping the befoulment of the region's water supply—was the top priority. Getting out alive was second place, as always.

After a burst of sparks and a staccato sound of wrenching gears and whining rubber belts, the pumps fell silent. The flat deck rolled with the waves, slick under his now bare feet. He couldn't hear his pursuers, but he knew they were moving toward him with slow, careful steps. Sure, he could play cat and mouse with these bozos, but they had more ammo, better footing, and the luxury of teamwork.

Instead, he'd approach this with the same subtlety he was infamous for at the Subsidiary. He glanced about for the best way to blow the fucking boat out of the water.

He peeked around the edge of his cover and shot a round toward the likely location of his pursuers. He knew he wouldn't hit anything; he just needed to slow them down while he worked the problem.

He couldn't just shoot at the idling motors for the craft. That might damage them—maybe even break them completely like the pumps, but they wouldn't blow up. This wasn't the movies. Liquid gas or, more



likely, diesel, wasn't explosive even though it was flammable. But the fumes were. That meant he needed a lot of fuel on deck where it could start to evaporate. The outgassing liquid would aerosolize sufficiently to become explosive in less than thirty seconds.

He shouldered his gun with the strap the previous user had ignored, pulled out the small pocketknife he always carried, and opened the main blade. Crouching into a runner's starting stance, he burst out from behind cover, dashing toward the stern of the craft. After a few steps, he dove, as if sliding into third base, hooking on to the protruding engine access cover and letting his body slide down the jet ski ramp behind it for protection and concealment. Dick reached around and popped the access while his confused adversaries popped off a few rounds.

The cover slid down the ramp into the water with a *sploosh* as Dick groped exposed parts of the inboard motors like a teen boy getting some under the sweater action in the front seat. Finally, his fingers closed on the Holy Grail. No, not a nipple—a fuel hose. He pulled himself closer and brought his other arm up, wielding his tiny knife and sawing at the end of the hose nearest a coupling.

Cool, pungent liquid shot out onto his hands, but he kept sawing until he could wrest the hose free. Then he grabbed the hose and jerked up as hard as he could to seize whatever slack the line allowed and pointed the spouting end toward the flat deck of the boat. Liquid pulsed out, but not as far as he wanted, so he used a thumb, like on the end of a garden hose, to reduce the opening and increase the pressure, spraying the fuel farther away and speeding its vaporization. Of course, between fumbling with the hose and some of the fuel slipping down the angled jet ski ramp, he was also covering himself in the same incendiary liquid he intended to ignite in short order.

It would be easy to slide down the ramp after igniting the fuel, but there was no guarantee he wouldn't still catch on fire. Besides, he didn't fancy dropping into lake water that was being polluted by God knows what toxin.

No, he'd have to do this the macho bullshit way.

He wedged the still pumping hose so it continued to spurt fuel onto the deck of the rolling boat, then waited ten, maybe fifteen, seconds for the fuel to aerosolize and for the goons with guns to creep closer to the stern. He used the edge of the engine access as a grab point to rapidly pull himself up, letting go as he reached a crouch and shoving one bare foot against the same edge to push off into a dash onto the deck.

Shots immediately rang out from the outboard side of the craft, but he paid them no mind. Instead, he angled inboard as he sprinted across the deck and leapt out over the edge for the water crib. As he pushed off, he twisted in the air and unleashed a burst of fire from his recovered Mac 10 at the rear most tank on the fuel boat. A spark was all it took.

The fume-laden air lit, the bright flash expanding outward in every direction in explosive destruction just like he learned it would from casting fireballs when he played *Dungeons & Dragons*. He only hoped he would save for half-damage.

He might not have made the distance to the crib, except the shock wave from the blast of exploding fuel vapors boosted his leap. That was the good news. The better news was that the fireball from the explosion quickly engulfed the rear and midsection of the fuel station. The best news was that he heard two distinct sets of screams from the far side of the craft followed quickly by splashes.

The bad news? He was propelled forcibly back-first into the circular concrete wall of the water crib with a breathtaking jolt. The only thing that kept the back of his head from cracking like a ripe melon as it snapped back toward the concrete was the taut neck muscles he'd developed during his days playing football. As it was, he banged his head hard enough blackness fluttered at the edge of his vision, but he struggled to maintain consciousness as he slid down the slick, glossy white paint covering the concrete. Fortunately, his shoeless feet caught the narrow concrete ledge along the bottom of the crib, stopping him

from dropping into the contaminated lake water between a burning boat and the concrete superstructure.

Still soaked with fuel, he took no chances, edging away from the nautical conflagration and making his way to a somewhat safer perch.

## CHAPTER 2

Dick didn't worry about what would happen when the Coast Guard and the Chicago Fire Department arrived. He was a former Chicago Police Department detective and, for all the world knew, a current wastewater treatment consultant. He'd leave the prefix "waste" off when he explained what had happened to the local powers-that-be. He knew Catalyst Crisis Consulting would back his play. Given his background and his expertise, his conduct would not result in charges, especially if—no, when—the authorities found out whatever shit the evil sons-of-bitches were trying to slip in everybody's kitchen tap.

Dick was worried the explosive encounter would generate too much attention on him, though. Spies don't like their photos on the news. He'd make sure to say he wanted to remain incognito so his family wasn't put at risk from the terrorists who planned this caper. City personnel would understand and respect that rationale. He just prayed he was picked up off the crib before Eyewitness 7 News got a chopper out to the burning boat in the water next to one of the city's two functioning water cribs.

He also worried Melanie was going to be more than a little pissed. This wasn't exactly the vacation they'd planned.

Truth told, he wasn't even sure it really was a vacation. Oh, sure, he'd told Melanie the brass at Catalyst Crisis Consulting had told him to take a rest and treat his family to an extended vacation on company expense as a reward for his successful mission in the Canary Islands some months back. And both his boss, Glenn Swynton, and his bosses' boss, Dee Tammany, had said just that with straight faces the last time he was at headquarters in Philadelphia. But Dick didn't buy the hard sell. For one thing, Ace Zyreb, his partner on the Canary Islands caper, wasn't vacationing; he had it on good authority she'd been sent to Europe for a piece of wet work. Something smelled fishy to Dick, and it wasn't the cool breeze sweeping over Lake Michigan.

He didn't even think Melanie was buying the all-expenses company-paid vacation story. At this point she knew Catalyst Crisis Consulting was merely a cover organization for the Subsidiary, the post-9/11 international espionage agency run by a consortium of nations to ferret out and quash the kinds of threats to the well-being of the globe which individual nation-states were ill-equipped or, due to political reasons, unwilling to handle. She might not be privy to all of the details of his Canary Island mission, but knowing where he was and having followed his urgent pleas to drive inland to higher ground, she had some inkling of what was going on. Hell, if she'd asked Seth for a bit of help doing Google searches on the internet, the two of them probably had a much better idea of exactly what had happened—or not happened—than the ninety-nine and forty-four one-hundredth's percent of mankind who remained as pure as Ivory Soap in their clueless ignorance.

Most likely, Melanie thought Dick had already been fired and was softening the blow by wasting his severance package on a vacation while he scrambled to find a new job. Maybe a real job in the wastewater treatment industry or a private security gig like many ex-cops. She didn't understand that spies don't get fired, they get terminated. It would never occur to her this "time off" might just be a euphemism for letting an agent who did good work, but had flouted way too many rules, most especially those about keeping his real work secret from his family, get his affairs in order. Letting him spend some quality time with family before disappearing ... dying in a tragic accident ... or simply getting whacked by one of his fellow operatives. Jeez, he hoped Ace wasn't doing that kind of work. They wouldn't be cruel enough to have her whack him, would they?

He thought about it for a moment, his mind replaying the events not that long ago in Denver with Luke Calloway. Of course, they could be—would be—cruel enough to do that. It kept the circle of knowledge about his actions as small as possible to have someone he recently

worked with, someone who he had helped train ... to replace him ... do him in.

Had Ace really gone to Europe?

Of course, he could just be paranoid. Looking over your shoulder as you imagine all of the most horrible possibilities is part of the package of being a spy. Worse yet when the head of your agency's Internal Audit function is former KGB/SVR. He thought back to the end of his conversation with Pyotr Nerevsky, when he'd been summoned to the basement of HQ six weeks into his extended time off. Once the sinister, bald asshole had made clear the Subsidiary was aware of Dick's secrecy transgressions, Dick had been pretty sure he was going to be capped in the windowless conference room with its easy to clean stainless steel furnishings. But he wasn't. Instead of killing, the ferret-eyed fuck had kept talking.

#

*"You're insolent and violent. You seem to enjoy using explosives, even though it might sometimes be smarter to be more discreet. You don't obey the rules because you think your own judgment and your personal code provide better guidance for what needs to happen when bad things go down. You're ruthless and reckless in equal measure, but you always do the job that demands to be done."*

*Dick kept his mouth closed, but ran his tongue over his upper incisors.*

*"If you weren't so successful in completing your missions, you'd be the worst employee in the entire organization."*

*Dick leaned forward in his chair. "I didn't know we were doing my annual performance review today. Is this a three-hundred-sixty degrees process?" He leaned in more and tapped on the cold steel table with the pointing finger of his right hand for emphasis. "Should I have prepared my assessments of my bosses, my peers, my trainees? Do you want my thoughts about the strengths and weaknesses of the IT Department, the Quartermaster, Internal Audit? Do you want to know what I fucking think about you?"*

*Nerevsky sat back, a wry, evil smile flitting across his lips. "Not necessary."*

*"Because you don't give a fuck?"*

*The former KGB stalwart wagged his finger. "Because I already know." He straightened up in his chair. "You're a free thinker. You consider yourself an independent spirit, an amiable, but effective rogue. You don't want to be a smoothly functioning piece of a relentlessly efficient gray machine. You want to be the showy flash that gets noticed and gets results. That's why you're willing to break the rules when necessary and even when unnecessary."*

*"Jeez, Nerevsky, get on with it. This is the longest 'Dear John' letter since the telegraph was developed and people started having to pay by the word."*

*Nerevsky barked out what might pass for a laugh in a speech to a room full of henchmen. "So much attitude; so little understanding. You're not a John and this is not a good-bye. You're a dick. A well-intentioned, hard-working dick, but a dick all the same. Fortunately for you, I'm the kind of man who needs a—"*

*"I'm flattered, but I don't swing that—"*

*Nerevsky slammed his open hands on the table. "Shut up. Shut the fuck up and listen." He took a couple deep breaths. "You know my background. You know my function here in this organization. You know what I can do." His brow wrinkled and his beady black eyes bored into Dick. "Sometimes I have need of agents who are willing to do what needs to be done, whatever it is, and who know when and how to break the rules to get those things done."*

*Nerevsky's forehead relaxed. He even blinked. Dick couldn't say for sure he'd ever seen the guy blink before. "Officially, you'll be on furlough— inactive, but still being paid. Everyone will assume you've been burned, but the Subsidiary has some sympathy for your wife and sick kid. They won't expect to ever hear from you again. What they will expect is that three or eight months from now, there will be an accident and a short obituary in your hometown newspaper. And they will shake their heads and think 'That Thornby guy was okay, but he just didn't know how to play by the rules.' More importantly, they'll think 'I sure don't ever want to piss off Nerevsky in Internal Audit.'" Nerevsky paused. "I know everyone thinks they're*

*indispensable, especially coming off a mission like your last one. But we have other agents. Life at the Subsidiary will continue without your presence much as it has always continued, except with fewer explosions."*

*Dick wished for a glass of water to wet his dry mouth. He asked the obvious question. "And, unofficially?"*

*Nerevsky smiled a wide, thin-lipped grin that revealed just a glimmer of his canines. "You have a pleasant, relaxing life with your family, but when I call, you jump. When I ask, you do. No questions. No excuses." He chuckled. "In the meantime, just keep in shape and keep a low profile."*

#

So much for a low profile.

Dick would have used his special Subsidiary sunglasses and called in to warn his megalomaniacal leash-holder about his latest explosive encounter, but at Nerevsky's insistence he'd turned in all of his high-tech gadgets "for updating" when he'd taken leave from the office. Doing so no doubt furthered the belief among the rank and file he was being retired, if not terminated with extreme prejudice. But Dick also knew it was just another way Nerevsky could make sure all of Dick's communications with the Subsidiary came through Internal Audit rather than Communications or IT. He'd probably never interact with Dee or Glenn again.

Oh, well. He couldn't help it if he had tripped over a mission that needed doing. If that complicated things with Nerevsky, so be it. He worried more about how much it complicated things with his wife and kid.



## CHAPTER 3

Jesus, there's a lot of paperwork in being a Good Samaritan.

Even after the on-site debriefing, the boat ride back to shore, the full debriefing at the CPD, dealing with the Water Commission, and the bevy of calls reconnecting with his family and talking Seth through getting the rented boat back where it belonged, it took more than two hours to write up a statement and get it signed and notarized. The only good part of the ordeal was that Dick managed to sneak out when finished without encountering anyone from the media.

Of course, the interrogation from his wife still loomed before him.

As an ex-football player, ex-Army Ranger, pretend wastewater treatment consultant, and senior agent for a super-secret spy organization, Dick had a lot of expertise. Apparently, none of it extended to understanding women, especially his wife.

As he'd expected, Melanie was waiting for him when he arrived back at their room at the Hyatt Regency Chicago, but not with the foot-tapping, accusatory glare, type of impatience he'd anticipated. Not that she was lounging in a negligee ready to pounce on him and fulfill his every sexual whim, but she did rush to him as he entered with a concerned, even solicitous, look on her always pretty face.

"Are you okay? Did you get shot? Did you get hurt?"

It was as close to a "my hero" moment as Dick had experienced since his football days; cops and Army Rangers aren't gushy no matter how many times you save their lives.

Dick had some bruises and scrapes from the fight and the explosion, but he wasn't about the ruin the mood by admitting not only that he was human, but getting older.

"Got a bit too much sun waiting for my ride. Should have worn a hat." He looked down at his feet, clad in cloth slippers a nurse at the hospital had given him when the Coast Guard insisted on taking him in for a medical check-up on the way to de-briefing. "Lost my shoes in the fight."

Melanie's brow creased. "I can't even begin to imagine how that could happen." She held up a finger before he could respond. "And I don't want to know. I don't need the details." She grabbed hold of his beefy paw and held it to her. "I've never needed ... never ever really wanted ... all the gruesome details about what you do. I just need to know that you're safe and that you trust me."

He leaned into her. "I feel safest when I'm with you." They shared a warm, lingering, contented kiss. When they'd finished, Dick opened his eyes and glanced around the sitting room to the two-bedroom suite. The entire trip was, after all, on the Subsidiary's dime.

Melanie guessed at the question his eyes sought an answer to. "Seth left to take a stroll along the River Walk. Said he wanted to go see the lock where the river meets the lake."

"He's a good kid." Dick didn't know if Seth was genuinely curious to see the workings constructed by the Army Corps of Engineers, just wanted to go for a walk, or was purposely making himself scarce so his mom and dad could have some alone time. Probably a bit of all three, not that Dick was going to hang a sock on the door to the suite to warn the kid away from a too early return.

Melanie pulled him toward the master bedroom. "I just need to know one thing."

"I love you," said Dick. "You know that. You've always known that."

He saw her trademark one-dimpled smile for the first time in a very long time. "But always good to hear." Her smile faltered. "I just need to know that this ... today ... your heroics. That was all just happenstance." She sighed and looked away for an instance. "Not just an accident, I know. It took quick, smart analysis to figure out something was wrong and ... well ... bravery to act so decisively to stop it." She met his eyes. "Nobody could have done that but you."

The signals were coming in so mixed and so fast, Dick wished he'd taken the time to learn semaphore, but before he could say anything, Melanie made her meaning clear.

“I just need to know this wasn’t a mission. You didn’t take me ... your son ... on a mission for the Subsidiary without telling us.”

“God, no, honey,” he rushed to reply. “This was all dumb luck. Seth pointed to the water crib and I just thought it would be fun ... and educational ... to take a look. I had no idea—” He trailed off as he noticed the tears forming in her eyes in relief. He said what he, as clueless as he could be, suddenly knew what she wanted to hear. “I would never bring you on a mission without telling you. Never.”

She hugged him tighter than he’d ever been hugged in his life. What happened next wasn’t half-bad, either.

Suddenly, because of some scum-bag terrorists, his family vacation was going a whole lot better than he’d dreamed.

#

He awoke feeling very good. Refreshed, relaxed, rejuvenated, and reconnected with his wife and son.

Room service breakfast, including four extra orders of bacon, was better than expected, too. His mood held until both Melanie and Seth retreated to their respective rooms to shower and get dressed for a day of shopping and sight-seeing and Dick took a minute to check his texts and emails while he sipped dark coffee and munched on the last of the bacon.

A simple text from an anonymous number harshed his mellow: “We need to talk. PN”

While Dick hadn’t really expected Nerevsky not to find out about his encounter with bad guys on Lake Michigan, he’d fooled himself into believing it might take a while for him to ask for a debriefing. Or maybe, just maybe, he’d hoped the mirthless bald goon would hold off asking for a report until he was back from his trip with the family to Chicago. But, deep down, Dick realized Nerevsky probably knew about the water intake incident even before Dick had been picked up by the Coast Guard, because Internal Audit knew everything about

everybody they made a point of monitoring. Worse, Nerevsky probably thought he'd shown admirable restraint by waiting until the wee hours of the morning before demanding a report.

He let out a sigh. Both showers were running. Probably best to get it over with.

"Call," he texted in reply.

The phone rang within seconds. He thumbed it on.

"Thornby."

"Not exactly maintaining a low profile," said the cold voice he'd come to hate.

"Just doing what I'm trained to do when bad shit is going down."

"Fine work, but I don't want your sudden celebrity to complicate another matter."

Dick let out a long, slow breath. "How soon do you need me?" He glanced at his watch. "It takes a bit longer to get places when I'm making my own arrangements and flying commercial."

"No panic," came the terse reply. "Wrap up family time over the weekend and head home. No doubt the authorities will have a few follow-up items in the meantime, and there's no need to raise any suspicions with them or your family by rushing off."

"You say, I do."

"I'll text with details for a meet Tuesday evening in Philly, but not at the office."

"Understood."

"I've also authorized a deposit as a bonus for fucking over the Lake Michigan terrorists."

"That wasn't work-related—"

"It should have been, except we were caught unawares. That won't happen again."

Somehow Dick knew every person his terrorist opponents knew was suddenly under constant surveillance.

"Sounds like a big op."

“Don’t worry, we’re saving money elsewhere, so it’s all within budget.”

Dick knew Nerevsky didn’t give a shit about budgets. It was the goon’s way of saying somebody’s head was rolling for the intelligence screw-up that had almost allowed terrorists to poison the water supply of a major metropolitan area. Internal Audit was a master at carrot and stick motivation, but they relied so heavily on stick Nerevsky almost couldn’t help but show stick even when he was dangling a carrot.

“Always happy to fuck over the bad guys.”

“That’s what I’m depending on.”

The line went dead.

Dick took a moment to power up his laptop and maneuver the cursor to check his bank balance.

Hot damn.

Maybe Seth could switch over to a four-year college in the fall, after all. He’d have to figure out how to explain the windfall to Melanie, but he’d do so as honestly as possible as soon as he could. Things were going well in his marriage for the first time in a long time. He wasn’t about to screw that up by lying unnecessarily. That’s how things had gone bad in the first place.

“Ready to go, dear?” called Melanie from the master bedroom.

“That’s my job,” answered Dick, “to always be ready for anything.”

## CHAPTER 4

A park bench, maybe a parking garage like Deep Throat, or a booth in a diner serving up Philly cheese-steaks. All would have been acceptable places for a meet in Dick's mind. But the Head of the Subsidiary's Internal Audit division was not a man who was conventional or routine in his methods.

That's why Dick was on Fox Street north of the Allegheny West neighborhood, outside a shitty warehouse with broken windows. The building said Kelly Corner on the side—at least that's what the remaining letters suggested. But, more importantly, for Dick's purposes, a smaller sign at ground level near an entrance confirmed it was the home of Penn Jersey Roller Derby, which included both the Hooligans and the She-Devils. Yep, his ex-KGB handler had invited him to a meet at a roller derby workout session.

The sounds of skates and cursing from inside confirmed the workout was already in progress. They also confirmed what everything he ever knew about KGB spooks suggested, the solidly-built vixens of the She-Devils were the team currently training. Russians loved their vodka, but they also couldn't resist a good catfight between muscle-bound dames.

He let himself in. It wasn't like the place had security. Hell, it didn't even have decent seating for spectators—this was a decidedly low-budget operation even if it was, as one sign proclaimed, a proud member of both the WFTDA (Women's Flat Track Derby Association) and the RDCL (Roller Derby Coalition of Leagues). A placard also declared the She-Devils had won the MADE (Modern Athletic Derby Endeavor) National Championship at the Battle of the Bank in 2014.

Funny, he didn't remember a parade.

He wandered past the flat track laid out on the warehouse floor to the banked track erected in the center of the crappy warehouse space. Pyotr Nerevsky stood at the near turn on the left, watching the circling

bevy of buxom bruisers skate by and making an occasional note in a small, spiral-bound notebook.

As Dick approached, Nerevsky spoke without looking back at him. "I see you found the place without a problem."

"How could there be a problem?" replied Dick with as little enthusiasm as possible. "Is there a man, woman, or small child who doesn't know the home ... track ... of the Penn Jersey Roller Derby?"

"Some prefer the Philly Roller Derby over on Belfield Avenue," responded Nerevsky. "But they only compete on a flat track, which lowers speeds and requires less skill than the banked version."

"Good to know," said Dick. "When I think of skill sports, roller derby is the first thing which pops into my mind."

Nerevsky finally turned and looked down his nose at Dick. Even though the former Russian agent was only a few inches taller and the setting was, to say the least, informal, he still managed to convey cool superiority. "No doubt you prefer the professional athletes of the National Football League or professional wrestling."

"I don't think you invited me here to discuss my preferences in violent sports."

"Not the kind with rules, anyhow." Nerevsky glanced around as he continued. "It's a good place for a meet. Noisy, too noisy for effective electronic surveillance. Not much of a crowd, so a professional tail would stand out."

Dick nodded. "You got that. All amateur tail here."

Nerevsky bristled. "No need to be crude. The skaters here work hard handling difficult tasks with a level of showmanship that is both effective and impressive." His thin lips formed a tight smile. "But I think it is fair to say that no one here is likely to overhear our talk about international events ... or care if they do."

"You're right, of course. So, let's get to it before some rocketing babe flies off the track and body-slams me. I don't want to have to explain broken ribs *and* smeared lipstick to my wife."

"Of course." Nerevsky tilted his head to the side, then ambled toward the nearest warehouse wall. "I almost forgot how important explaining things to your wife is to you."

Dick followed without comment.

Nerevsky turned and leaned back on the warehouse wall when he got to it, staring back at the sweaty gals working out on the track. Dick took up a similar position, as if the thrill of roller derby, or skating wannabe models cross-checking each other, gave him a hard-on. His handler ... actually, if he told himself the truth, his new boss ... launched into the briefing as if giving color commentary on the mayhem on the oval.

"On May 28, 1993, there was a flash and accompanying ground disturbance in the Outback of Western Australia. The flash and seismic signature was in many ways consistent with the detonation of an atomic explosion. That flash was followed up with a pulsing red-orange hemisphere of light visible at great distance at the epi-center of the flash. Local ranchers, peasants, indigenous natives, and transportation jockeys driving at night all witnessed these events, along with various light displays preceding, accompanying, or following in the wake of the flash, along with rumblings compared to an outsized mining explosion. You'll find a more complete report in a manila folder in the trunk of your vehicle when you leave here."

Dick whistled a long, low tone, drawing a dirty look from one of the broads coaching the team. "A possible nuclear test in the middle of fucking nowhere in 1993? I can see why you needed me to get on that right away."

Nerevsky shifted his head almost imperceptibly to glare at Dick. "Incendiary at every opportunity, as always." The man's cold, dark eyes flicked back to watching the flashing elbows and knees on the track. "Official reports determined with certainty the flash was not a nuclear test. No crater. Radiation consistent with the presence of uranium, but uranium ore mines dot the area. None of the nuclear powers of the time appeared to have operations in the vicinity."



“The Israelis, maybe South Africa or Japan, might have wanted to test a small nuke at the time, but keep it under wraps. Maybe a terrorist group with access to fissile materials from a real nuclear power—”

“Not exactly original thinking, Thornby. But, of course, your *forté* is action, not analysis.” The man paused, but Dick knew better than to respond. “In fact, the epi-center of the flash ... explosion ... or whatever was located quite near a half-million-acre sheep station called Banjawarn Station that was in the midst of being purchased by followers of Shoko Asahara.”

Dick forgot the pretense of watching babes skate and fight for a moment, swiveling toward his companion. “The guru at the top of the Aum Shinrikyo cult? The doomsday fanatics who gassed the Tokyo subway in the mid-nineties with sarin?”

Nerevsky kept his eyes forward as he responded in a low, calm voice. “Mind your cover and your volume. Sarin is not a word to be bandied about, even here.” He tipped his head toward a tall, bountifully bosomed skater clambering over the track’s rail. “Zaftig Zelda is majoring in business and minoring in international affairs at the local community college.”

“Sorry,” Dick muttered as he resumed his stance eyeballing the rolling parade of female flesh. “I should have noticed she has a brand-new pair of roller skates and you’ve got a brand-new key.”

“The press and the various conspiracy theorists and paranoid fantabulists that always flock to these things like ... well, like a moth to a nuclear flame ... jumped all over the Aum Shinrikyo connection. Their property had some small uranium deposits on it, which, according to the real estate broker who showed them the station, they tested before agreeing to buy.”

“Okayyyyy. But you don’t build a nuke with a small deposit of naturally occurring uranium ore. You need purification, centrifuges, blah ... blah—”

“You don’t say.”

Dick thought back to his last several missions. "You're right. It doesn't take much to get those guys going, even if the science doesn't really work out."

"They just need something sinister to latch on to. In this case, it was a small number of sheep dead by way of sarin gas."

"Bloated, wooly corpses and a mention of chemical weaponry is enough to make one's blood run cold."

"Thank you."

"Thank you?"

"I got the idea from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. You know, when the military types were trying to keep Richard Dreyfus away from Devil's Tower?"

Dick's mouth fell open. He would have closed it to maintain his cover as a roller derby enthusiast, but he expected most of the spectating clientele drooled during workouts. "Whaddya mean, you got the idea?"

Nerevsky's shoulder twitched, as if he was too subtle ... too cool ... to shrug. "The KGB ... well the Federal Security Service by then ... was most interested in keeping a lid on possible tests of clandestine nuclear weaponry. Russia did not have control of all of the former Soviet Union's deterrent forces after the latter's collapse."

Jesus. Had a top ex-KGB/SVR operative just admitted to Dick there were missing Soviet nukes floating around then? Now?

Nerevsky continued. "The first cover story, that there had been a meteor strike, was neither compelling enough for the conspiracy buffs, nor consistent enough with the eyewitness accounts to satisfy the press and official inquiries. As always, the usual UFO crazies spouted their usual crazy theories, but nobody takes them seriously. They cry 'wolf' every time a mylar birthday balloon reflects a bit of light."

"So, you ... you, personally ... just made up a story about Aum Shinrikyo."

"Along with their other outlandish beliefs, the cult was fond of Nostradamus, so making up a grandiose story after the fact to fit

random bits of unrelated information seemed to be fair play. I used some convenient tidbits of information, a bit of poison, and the bloat-inducing impact of the hot Outback sun on woolly carcasses to point away from what really happened.”

“Which was what?”

Nerevsky sighed. “That’s the problem. I don’t know. Almost three decades later and no one really knows what happened that night in the wilderness. After I covered up the incident, I tried to find out what was really going on, but my superiors thwarted my efforts.”

“Boxing you out? Covering their asses? Couldn’t care less? Or, just being cheap?”

“Hard to know their motivation for icing my efforts without knowing what happened.”

Dick laughed out loud. “And you want me to find out? That’s the mission? That’s the job? Pick up a cold trail in the middle of nowhere by interviewing surviving geriatric witnesses whose accounts have been so messed up by re-telling and misinformation that any resemblance they might have to the truth would be entirely coincidental?” He folded his arms across his chest. “You’re more obsessed with something that could be no more than a freak electrical storm than the UFO nerds are every time there’s ball lightning.”

Nerevsky’s face hardened. “This is a standard briefing. In accordance with the usual protocol, you get background information, then you get the current situation, and the assigned mission parameters.”

Dick stopped smiling. “Yes, sir.”

“There was another incident in the same general area a week ago.”

“Didn’t hear about it in the news. Of course, I’ve been on vacation.”

“You didn’t hear about it in the news because, one, American news organizations don’t give a crap about what happens elsewhere unless an American is involved. Two, nobody cares about what happens in Australia if it doesn’t involve Lara Bingle or Hugh Jackman with their shirts off. And, three, I know how to do my fucking job. And, if that

means suppressing local reports of strange lights in the sky, bright flashes, rumbling explosions, and domes of pulsing red lights, I suppress the fucking reports. Just like you, I do whatever it takes to do my job.”

The rant was inconsistent with the cold, detached demeanor the head of Internal Audit was known for, but Dick didn’t think it was phony. That meant Nerevsky really thought the strange flashes in the godforsaken countryside of Western Australia were real and somehow important. It also meant there were probably a few more suspicious deaths in Australia than average in the past week.

“Understood. Mission parameters?”

“You need to go to Western Australia with your family and find out what is really going on.”

## CHAPTER 5

“Whaddya mean I’m supposed to go to Western Australia *with my family* and find out what is really going on?”

“What part of my *orders* do you not understand?”

Dick wanted to spit out a few choice expletives at Nerevsky, but he swallowed them. “I mean, *I’m* the agent. *I’m* the operative. *I’m* the goddamn spy.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Not my wife. Not my kid. Me.”

Nerevsky stayed silent.

Dick couldn’t. “How’d you like it if the Subsidiary ... or the fucking KGB ... sent your wife and your kids out to do your dirty work?”

“I don’t have a wife or kids—”

“Color me shocked—”

“—anymore.”

Logically, Dick knew both the KGB and, later, the SVR were ruthless organizations which had few qualms about using whatever methods needed to control and motivate their personnel, and that life was tough in the Soviet Union even without that. There were a million different ways in which an ex-Russian operative might have lost his wife and kids—their cars were crap in crashes, for one thing—but he didn’t want to ask. Not only would it be awkward, but he didn’t really want to temper his loathing of Pyotr Nerevsky by anything approaching sympathy. Nerevsky was a cold, heartless bastard and Dick didn’t want to think family tragedy had forged that steel; he preferred to think the guy was such an institutional prick he had sent his own family out to the Gulag in Siberia so they wouldn’t distract him from his patriotic duty.

Dick fluttered his hand to dismiss the topic. “Doesn’t matter. It’s stupid to take family on an op. Terminally stupid. They’re a distraction. Keeping them safe is an even bigger distraction. Their presence could give the bad guys leverage. And, they’re not trained agents. They don’t know what to do and say. They don’t know how to lie.”

“That last part isn’t your strong suit, either, Thornby. That’s why you got in trouble at the Subsidiary. That’s why you’re here. That’s why you have to do whatever I want you to do.”

“Whaddya going to do? Off me at the roller derby?”

That last remark drew a smirk. “No. But understand this. If I ‘off’ you, you won’t be the only casualty.”

Dick felt his face flush with anger, but Nerevsky held up a hand to shut him up before he erupted.

“Think it through. You insist upon telling your wife where you are at all times. Your family knows who you work for and what you do. And, it’s not like you’re being sent to take out a hardened facility or assassinate a rising political figure. You’re being asked to check out what most people think is a meteor or lightning storm or friendly UFO. Your family going along supports that cover. Besides, they don’t have to be with you every single second during your actual investigation. They can sun themselves poolside, take in the local sights, surf the waves, and eat prawns and drink a few beers like any sensible family would while dear old UFO-obsessed dad chases strange lights in the sky. I hear Swan Lager and Emu are popular local brews; they should give them a try. There are no ‘cover’ names to remember—I send you out under your own identities as if on a further, extended vacation. To bolster your UFO credentials, I’ve even arranged for you to make a stop in England on the way there. You can check out the site of the Rendlesham Forest incident. Kind of a pilgrimage for anyone serious about UFOlogy.”

“I dunno,” Dick temporized.

“I wasn’t giving you a choice.”

“Trust me,” said Dick. “I understand that part. You can order me around and I have to dance when you wobble the puppet strings, but you don’t understand something.”

Nerevsky arched one brow, but said nothing.

"I dunno if I can sell this to the wife. Seth—hell, he'd go along in a minute. But Melanie doesn't push easy. And Seth coming along makes that an even bigger push than it already is."

"Not my problem."

"Sure, it is. If I have a problem, you have a problem. That's how handling an agent works."

Nerevsky chuckled. "You know nothing about handling agents. Look, I don't care about your relationship with your wife. I don't care if you convince her, force her, or lie to her. I'm not Glenn Swynton. I'm not going to hold your fucking hand. But I'm not Dee Tammany, either. I'm not going to give you shit about blowing things up if they need to be blown up. You pride yourself on doing what needs to be done. Well, I'm the guy telling you this needs to be done." He squinted his beady, dead eyes at Dick. "Go get it done."

#

Business class.

Nerevsky might be a world class dick, but he didn't skimp, at least not with counterfeit mileage points.

Seth stowed their carry-on luggage in the overhead bins and settled into the window seat in the row behind them. Melanie took the window seat in their row, with Dick in the aisle seat. Sure, it was a routine flight on what was supposed to be vacation, but he always liked to be able to move quickly and take action without clambering over someone in the event of trouble. Being able to easily access the contortionist boxes that passed as restrooms on a commercial airliner didn't hurt either. If having a kid about to start college didn't make him feel old enough, having to pee more often did the trick. It wasn't fair. Jason Bourne only went into restrooms because the abundance of porcelain gave him something to smash bad guys' faces into.

Melanie settled into her seat, but even though Dick was pretty sure she'd never flown anything but coach before, she didn't look happy. Not quite a scowl—not full-fledged pissed—but not happy.

Dick snatched the small blue pillow he'd stuffed into the seat pocket in front of him and held it out to her. "Want a spare pillow? Might as well get some good sleep on the way to merry olde England."

"I don't know why I let you talk me into this."

"What? A European vacation? Gladys, down the street, was practically drooling with envy when you gave her a key so she could water the plants."

She flashed a faux smile at him. "You know what I mean."

Dick glanced around. "Look, I know you're not that interested in Rendlesham—the whole UFO side of the trip. But you and Seth can see the sights. See the Crown Jewels and the Tower of London. Visit a local pub—Seth's legal to drink in England, you know."

"Teaching my kid to drink beer—"

"—warm beer."

"—is not exactly a point in favor of this ... this ... expedition. You know what I mean."

Sure, Dick was on a mission probably no one in the world cared about except his surprisingly obsessed ex-KGB boss, and he was in a situation where the chances anyone listening would give a damn what he said was infinitesimal, but he didn't, he wouldn't, break character. Not even if he was playing himself, albeit himself in somewhat fictionalized circumstances.

"Look," he said, "I know you're Scully to my Fox Mulder." He fluttered his hand upward. "You don't think there's anybody out there. Or, if there is, that they would bother coming to this insignificant, watery planet to play hide and seek with some hairless apes living on the rocky, dry parts of the planet. And, that's okay."

Melanie's facial expression slid from unhappy to very unhappy, tending toward aggravated.



“But, for me, it’s like being an armchair detective or putting together a jigsaw puzzle upside down. It’s engaging, even fun.”

To his surprise, Melanie played along. “So, what’s the big puzzle about Rendlesham?”

“Well, these security guards at the East Gate of this RAF base there see some lights descending into the forest east of the base and, thinking it might be a downed aircraft, they go investigate. They see strange lights in the woods and hear weird sounds. The next day, they investigate more and find some depressions in a clearing and some broken branches and shit.

“Compelling,” replied Melanie, her tone droll. “And when did this happen?”

“Late on Christmas in nineteen eighty. Well, three in the morning afterwards—Boxing Day.”

“Isn’t the British military known for drinking heavily on Christmas? Isn’t that why Washington crossed the Delaware? To surprise them when they were drunk?”

“That was Hessians,” said Dick.

“Hessians?”

“Hired mercenaries from what is now Germany. The British hired them to fight the American revolutionaries. Besides, I think that happened on Christmas Eve.”

“Goodness knows a bunch of young soldiers on holiday would never go on a three-day bender. Is that it?”

“Well, one of the higher ups, he checks it out another day later and finds radiation levels in excess of customary background levels. Then there’s more flashing lights in the woods and stuff.”

“Flashing?”

“Periodic.”

“Like Morse Code?”

“No. Every five seconds.” Dick hesitated before continuing. “At the same periodicity as the lighthouse five miles away.”

Melanie snorted.

"Wait, there's more."

"There always is."

"They also saw hovering lights in the sky at a distance."

"Hovering. In the distance. You mean, like stars?"

"Brighter than the average star."

"Like a planet? Or maybe the North Star?"

Dick smiled. "You're a great skeptic."

Melanie smiled. "The most unbelievable part of all this is that it turned into a cornerstone of UFO belief. Doesn't seem to be that much there ... there."

"Probably wouldn't have been as much interest, except the one higher up at the base, he sent a memo to the brass, which has since gone public. He also made a mini-cassette recording in real time when they were out in the woods investigating."

"Uh-huh. Just don't start making mashed potato sculptures of Devil's Tower."

Dick said nothing. Apparently, his wife and his boss had the same taste in movies.

Melanie patted his arm on their shared armrest. "Well, you have a nice time wandering through the woods listening to scratchy audio from the disco era."

"I think disco stopped being great in the late seventies."

"Wrong," said Melanie, with a smirk. "Disco was never great. It was just popular."

Dick knew better than to argue about something he didn't give a damn about. He scrunched up his nose. "You and Seth just concentrate on having a great time in London while I make the side-trip up to Rendlesham. Then we'll be off to the beaches of Australia in just a few days. This gives you guys a great chance to travel you wouldn't have had otherwise."

Melanie's light expression evaporated. "This trip isn't a great chance at anything. Don't oversell."

Dick's heart sank. "I know it's not the vacation you always dreamed about. Just think of it like any other business trip where the family comes along. You do the tourist thing; I do my thing. It beats sitting at home in New Jersey wondering what I'm up to, doesn't it?"

Melanie's expression softened, almost imperceptibly. Dick pressed his advantage by repeating the selling point—okay, the white lie—he'd used to convince his wife to go along with Nerevsky's family spy fun scheme. "Seth deserves something special—so do you. Treat it as quality family time. An opportunity not to be missed, you know, with Seth headed to college in a few months now that I got that special bonus from work for this project."

He had, after all, gotten a bonus. He didn't need to tell Melanie it was for thwarting the Lake Michigan sleazebags. He told her it was for bringing her and Seth along to vacation while he did a simple historical investigation for work using a phony interest in ancient aliens as cover. Seth was enthusiastic about college, and Melanie was laser-focused on higher education for her only child. So was Dick.

Dick also thought it would be good for his son to have a dad ... and a mom ... and a life. So, he lied.

He felt guilty about it, but not too guilty. After all, this whole, stupid mission was probably the lamest and least dangerous thing he'd done since high school. Wandering around, asking people about lights they saw in the sky years and years ago. Asking silly questions. No, *probing* questions.

He smiled at his own joke.

What could possibly go wrong?

#

Yuri Lemarov looked at the thin communications file and leaned back in his desk chair, his lips forming a sour pucker as he contemplated the situation. "So, it begins, Pyotr. You think of yourself as an Arctic Owl, sitting cold and motionless, seeing and hearing

everything, ready to swoop down without a whisper of sound, and snatch up what you desire. But you are no true predator. You are a mouse, hiding in the shadows, feeding on crumbs and larvae, scurrying away should a true predator come your way. True, you have aspirations ... no ... more like naked ambitions. You wish to be more. But you are still a mouse, a mouse studying to be a rat. A starving mouse too hungry not to take the bait.”

## CHAPTER 6

People think the life of a spy is never boring. They're wrong. Espionage is almost always snooze-worthy. It's just that the long run-on sessions of sitting in a car on stake-out or hiding motionless in a tree waiting for a convoy of black Suburbans carrying an assassination target, are punctuated with bursts of unspeakable violence and underlined by bold-faced stress. Worse yet, there are few markers—no real clues of what is to come—between the endless hours of internal introspection amidst unchanging, bland scenery and the sudden onset of staccato bursts of action, blood, and dropping bodies.

Dick expected—no, he knew—his late evening stroll along the Rendlesham Forest Trail was just an exercise to cement his cover for his probably equally pointless Australian expedition, but he tried to make the best of it. Forestry England had made a pleasant family park out of the place, with a triangular metal placard at the beginning of the broad, level path. The signage referenced the incident and suggested kids look for strange symbols along the route, which they could decode with the help of the “Alien Leaflet” available in the nearby Forest Office. According to his map, a variety of other, longer, hiking and biking trails wound through the woods which surrounded the old RAF airstrip on three sides. But with light fading as the sun set, almost all the hikers and bikers were packing up and leaving the pay-and-park lot at the edge of the woods.

He'd picked up an LED flashlight—torches, they called them here—on the drive up. He grabbed it and headed west without yet turning it on. A right, left, and a right brought him to the East Gate of Woodbridge Airfield, where the security guards who instigated the whole UFO search had been stationed. Yep, looking at a rusty chain-link gate is what passed for tourism for the aliens-please-abduct-me crowd. Barbed wire along the top, but the fence wouldn't even slow down anyone seriously trying to breach the airstrip's security.

He took a few photos in low-light mode with his phone—it's what his cover personality would do—then turned east, skirting the side of the airfield and, after a quick jog to the left, continued east into the forest. Darkness fell as he meandered along, but he kept his flashlight off. The path was wide and clear of debris; there was no reason to ruin the moody ambience of the place. Besides, always best to keep your night vision tuned when you were looking for aliens creeping along in the woods out to get you. Another minor jog to the left, then eastward again to the edge of an open field and a quick loop back into the woods to the supposed landing site of the alien craft. Originally, three wooden posts had marked where the slightly radioactive indentations in the ground had been found, but the site was now graced with an artist's rendition of a black alien craft, complete with bizarre markings on the side of the shiny, squat object.

He stretched out his arm to take a selfie with the craft in the background—it would be a crappy, dim shot in the now almost complete darkness, but he had to go through the motions of building his cover. It's not that anyone was here to see him—to gauge his compliance with the histrionics of Nerevsky's background set-up—but it was important for him to feel like the character he was portraying on a mission, and that meant doing things to establish the character in his own mindset.

He dialed up a smile and hit the button on his phone to snap the picture.

A blinding white light assaulted his eyes.

Crap! He must have accidentally thumbed on the auto-flash setting before he took the shot. Well, his night vision was worthless for at least a half-hour now. He blinked to clear the after-image of the flash, then closed his eyes completely to speed their readjustment to darkness as much as possible. When doing so, he realized that the amorphous blob of color burned into his retina actually showed a shadowy outline of his extended arm ... and the phone.

What the hell?

The light hadn't come from the flash; it had come from *behind* the phone.

He pocketed his phone with one hand and brought his flashlight up with the other simultaneously. Probably some kids playing tricks in the dark—the same kind of punks who flew drones into the airspace at Gatwick Airport in London a few years back, disrupting air traffic for days. But Dick didn't like anyone getting the drop on him, no matter what his cover was. Instincts kicked in; adrenaline coursed through his arteries. He held up the flashlight to the side and slightly forward of his face and flicked it on, then did a slow, steady sweep from right to left into the woods.

Nothing.

Then his subconscious mind finished the geometric calculations his high-school-self had told him he'd never need. The bright light hadn't come from the woods; it had come from the sky. Higher than the trees, on his left, in the direction of the open field. He pivoted left, and raised his gaze, automatically shining the light uselessly into the night sky.

At the same time, he heard ... almost felt through the soles of his feet ... a deep bass thrum just above subsonic range. Impossible to source, but there was a slight rhythmic pulse to it.

What the fuck? The map he'd picked up from the Forestry Service didn't say anything about an ersatz UFO experience at the sculpture site.

He didn't see anything as he scanned the sky, but then he realized that, itself, was a clue—a big, fat, scary clue. It was full-on dark now, but he didn't see stars where he was looking. He spun about, keeping his eyes to the sky. There were stars aplenty to the north, west, and south, but a blob of black blocked the stars in a patch to the east-southeast above the open field. He trained his flashlight at the edge of blackness and, just for a microsecond, a glint of light reflected off something flat, shiny, and edged hovering silently in the sky above the field.

No. Not silently. The thrum notched up ever so slightly.

Abruptly, five red lights burst out of the black hole, arcing into the atmosphere, dripping sparks.

Flares?

Before he could answer his own question, he heard a faint *zuzzing* sound, like a zipper being zipped too fast ... or ... rope rushing through rappelling gear.

Shit.

At the same time, thin lines of green laser light cut through the night, shifting left, right, up, down. Multiple sources, crisscrossing one another as they bounced through the area, dodging trees, snaking down paths, all converging on him. He heard several soft thumps and then bright white light exploded all around him, searing new, confusing images on his retinas.

A sudden wind whipped up, buffeting him from all sides and pelting him with dirt and debris. He knew what was coming next.

He felt himself being lifted up. Soon he would be on the strange, silent, black craft in the sky.

Fucking Lightning Teams. Somebody was having way too much fun at his expense.

Somebody? No, fucking Nerevsky. He couldn't just call for an update, he'd sent a fucking Lightning Team in their whisper-quiet black Bell ARH-70 helicopter to snatch him up for a status report.

Before his vision cleared, he felt a canvas bag slide over his head. Jesus, these guys were taking this much, much too seriously. He didn't blame the Lightning Team crew. They just did what they were told. Besides, he had a soft spot for the guys since they'd saved Seth by rushing him to a hospital after Pao Fen Smythe had sent a hitter after him. But he'd have a few choice words for the Head of Internal Audit when he saw him.

He started picking his swear words carefully in preparation.

#



After way too much travel and too much rough handling, Dick was slammed into a metal chair and the canvas hood yanked away from his face. Bright lights again blinded him, but he worked to focus on the dark blob nearest his face, his lips forming invectives, ready to spew forth the instant he confirmed his ex-KGB target.

Instead, his blinking eyes made out the bland face of Glenn Swynnton, the guy who oversaw operations at the Subsidiary. Another blob coalesced into Dee Tammany, the Director of the entire damn Subsidiary. He was looking at his boss and his boss's boss from back in the days when he was in the Subsidiary's relatively good graces.

"What the fuck?"

Glenn flashed a forced smile. "Good evening to you, too, Agent Thornby."

"We needed to talk," added Dee Tammany, who was standing behind Glenn and leaning in over his shoulder, her face wrinkled in apparent concern for Dick's well-being.

"And," picked up Glenn, "we figured UFO abduction would make a good story should Nerevsky question you."

Tammany stood up straight and took a step to the side. "Whether chemical or bio-response activated, Internal Audit's methods of discerning truth versus fiction are impressive. But if you tell him the details of your ... abduction ... he will simply be impressed you are integrating your character personality so effectively."

A million thoughts raced through Dick's mind, but one stood out. "So, you're not working with Nerevsky." He stated it as fact. "You know he's running a black op without sanction, an op using me ..." He hesitated before continuing. "... and my family."

Glenn sniffed, as if the adrenaline and sweat his own operation had caused was offensive to his gentlemanly sensibilities. "That's the dead giveaway the op is unsanctioned. We would never involve your family. Frankly, your family is much too involved with your activities for the Subsidiary for our taste already."

“That’s why we still keep tabs on you,” volunteered Dee. “On all of you.” She fixed him with a steely glare. “That’s how we tripped onto Nerevsky’s frolic and detour.”

Glenn took over. “We had a high-altitude surveillance drone track him to your meeting in Philadelphia, hoping to listen in on the briefing. But, of course, our Kestrel couldn’t follow you into the building, and the roller derby practice bollixed up any effort to listen in through vibrations on the glass panes in the structure with its high-gain microphone.”

“Tell us everything,” said Dee, grabbing a spare chair and sitting next to Glenn. “Everything.”

Dick had been through a lot of interrogations during his career: Psych Ops interrogation resistance training in the Rangers; lying to dirt-bags and drug dealers when undercover while in the Chicago Police Department; even fibbing to Melanie about where he’d been when he’d gone on missions before she found out he was a spy. There was no comparison; this was his favorite interrogation of all time.

They softened the lights, asked questions, and sought clarifications in pleasant, even voices, let him take bathroom breaks, and avoided any semblance of threats of physical violence. All that, and they let him rat out the man he most despised in the world: Pyotr Nerevsky.

Fuck you, Pyotr. This one’s for you and all your goons in Internal Audit.

It occurred to Dick that this all could be a test, that Nerevsky had asked—more likely forced—Glenn and Dee to do his bidding and find out whether Dick was loyal to him. But Dick didn’t think so. He never knew anyone to push Dee around—at least nobody outside of the Subsidiary’s oversight board of national representatives. And Glenn, well Glenn couldn’t help but sneer in that barely effable British way when unhappy, and Glenn seemed perfectly happy to hear every unkind thing Dick had to say about his dealings with Internal Audit. Of course, it could be he was just happy to have a chance to pick up a few new bespoke suits while in England, but Dick didn’t think so.

So, he told them everything.

When he was done, Dee and Glenn didn't even take a moment to confer before putting his new mission on the table.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Thornby," said Dee. "We want you to continue with your mission for Nerevsky, but we want you to report to us not only what you find, but what he asks you to do."

Glenn smiled. "We want you to be our inside man."

"You want me to do something kinky like that," said Dick, "you'll have to at least buy me dinner first."

Glenn got up and went over to a side table, picked up something, and came back, tossing it into Dick's lap. "Have a snacky doo."

Dick looked at the bag; it was a packet of Walker's Crisps—what Dick would call potato chips—but the label said they were "English Roast Beef and Yorkshire Pudding Flavoured."

"You must think I'm a pretty cheap date."

"You're not a date," responded Glenn. "You're just here to—"

As Glenn trailed off, Dick finished the thought. "—get fucked."

"Not at all," broke in Dee. "Maintaining operational control over the entire organization is a critical task for any covert agency. We think ... most particularly, the Russian representative of our oversight board has hinted he thinks ... Pyotr Nerevsky needs special scrutiny. Nerevsky's recently taken a number of odd actions for reasons unknown. We need a double agent within his operation to find out what is going on and why. That's where you come in."

Ahh. Spying on another spy for your own spy agency. It was so meta, Dick couldn't help but laugh. "Sign me up. Just promise me if you stick it to Nerevsky at the end of all this, I get to watch him go down."

Dee chuckled. "Well, we're not about to slow down taking him out when the time comes just so we can assemble a live studio audience, but we'll do our best to let you experience as much of what happens as is feasible—"

“—and operationally prudent given our security parameters,” added Glenn.

Dick snorted. “Spoken like a true Director of Operations.”

“We are what we are,” replied Glenn.

Dick said nothing, but he agreed. Glenn understood how Dick operated and certainly had good reason to expect his cooperation. And Dick had no illusions about what he was ... who he was as an agent, a husband, a father, and a partner, not necessarily in that order.

And, at the moment, he was a double agent searching for hot clues and ancient aliens in a mystery more than a quarter century cold.

Truth was stranger than fiction.

“Just one more thing,” said Dick to Dee.

“I’m not giving you weapons of mass destruction,” replied Dee, “no matter how much you say you need them.”

Dick flashed a quick, wry smile. “Yes, it’s related to Denver, but no, not that. I just need some information for my trip to Australia I wasn’t about to ask Nerevsky for.”

## CHAPTER 7

The sun had risen by the time Dick got back to the hotel in the center of London where Melanie and Seth were sleeping after a long day seeing the sights, including the Tower of London. Melanie woke as Dick climbed into bed.

"Hello," she said as she squinted at the bright light trying to penetrate the thick hotel curtains. "You're hours and hours later than you said you'd be. If you knew anybody in London, I might worry you were having an affair." She took a deep breath. "Of course, for all I know, you know scores of people in London."

"True," Dick said, then leaned forward to give her a kiss on the forehead. "But, in order to have an affair, I'd need to be dashing, debonair, and know how to engage in witty banter." He wrapped his arms around her. "Seems like a lot of work when I've got the perfect woman waiting in bed for me right here."

Melanie actually blushed at that, but continued on, her tone still light. "And yet, you were out all night. Get lost in the woods?"

There was no point to hiding what had happened from her. She was part of the team for this mission. Well, for Nerevsky's mission, anyway.

She was silent as he explained. When he finished, he simply asked "Well?"

Melanie pursed her lips a few seconds before responding. "I'm not sure I like being in the middle between feuding factions of a behemoth organization filled with operatives and weapons that could kill all of us at any moment."

"You could think of it that way," Dick replied. "Or, you could focus on the fact this intra-agency rivalry means we have twice as many people watching over us at each and every moment."

She pursed her lips again, and then a twinkle came into her eye. "If someone ... multiple someones ... is watching us at each and every moment, then let's give them something to look at."

For the first time in his life as a spy, Dick felt like he was actually in one of those fade-to-black moments in the always suggestive, but ultimately PG-13 rated, Bond films. Except in this case, the morning sun was streaming in along the edges of the drapes and Dick could see ... and enjoy ... *everything*.

#

The rest of Dick's stay in England was operationally uneventful. He strolled around parks and cathedrals, visited various squares, circuses, and houses of parliament, and doffed a few warm beers at pubs featuring huge bars made of polished, weathered wood and very little in the way of ambient light. The family even caught a showing of Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, which was nearing seventy years in a continuous run—more than forty of those years at The St. Martin's Theatre. The best part was Dick didn't even try to cipher out the whodunnit. For once, figuring out who the bad guy was and stopping them wasn't his job. He relished his night off.

Once they'd all boarded the plane for Perth, though, his mind reverted to work mode. Remarkably enough, Qantas flew the Kangaroo Route non-stop from Heathrow to Perth using a Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner. Departing at 6:55 p.m. local time, Dick would have sixteen hours and forty-five minutes traveling at eighty-five percent of the speed of sound to wonder whether any of the other two-hundred-plus passengers was tailing him for Nerevsky ... or for Swynton and Tammany.

He wondered, but he didn't pace up and down the aisles trying to figure it out or anything. It wouldn't do to look like he thought he was being tailed for one thing. For the other, it would be inconsistent with his cover. With windows sixty-five percent bigger than standard airline fare and the plane cruising above forty thousand feet, a real UFO-ologist would take the window seat and stare into the skies, most especially during the dark hours over water or unpopulated areas

when everyone else in the plane (possibly including the pilots) was getting some shut-eye in the hopes of making the long flight tolerable before arriving in Perth at one in the afternoon on the next day.

This time Dick decided it was best to stay more in character for the seating arrangements, giving Melanie the aisle seat and easy access to the restroom for the long flight despite his normal operational protocol. Seth settled into the row behind them and had his earphones on before their plane, which their flight attendant Annie had gleefully pointed out was named the *Quokka* after a small wallaby that frequents Rottnest Island off the coast near Perth, took off. No doubt the kid was binge-watching something or online on one of his video games. Dick didn't really try to regulate his kid's computer usage—he was practically an adult at this point—just as long as he didn't engage in any more espionage on the now resurrected remnants of Reality 2 Be, the criminal-ridden virtual reality world Dick had taken out in Denver several missions back.

Dick did his best to quiet his mind—about family, about work, about little green men—but he was a responsible guy. And with great responsibility comes a great amount of apprehension about one's lack of power to control anything the universe or your job wanted to throw at you.

After take-off, Dick joined Melanie in having a nice glass of Australian wine and let the alcohol join the drone of the plane and the darkening skies in dampening his concerns, or at least making them seem as though they were half a world away—which, of course, they were. It's just that they were getting closer every single minute.

#

Dick finally drifted off to sleep, just about the same time the aircraft re-entered the light of day and most of the rest of the passengers started to wake and fumble about for restrooms and fresh orange juice. He missed breakfast service altogether, but discovered when he woke that

Melanie had saved her bacon and a small packet of honey for him to snack on. This trip might be a complete waste of time for everybody in the Subsidiary, but if it got Dick and Melanie back into the groove of marital bliss, it was a godsend to him.

It was a good thing Dick started out in a good mood, because international travel was never the glamorous delight portrayed in fiction, especially when you were traveling with your family on a long trip with a substantial amount of luggage. Thank God, Seth was grown up and could schlep his own stuff—taking a baby or a toddler on an extended flight was probably one of the featured tortures in some circle of hell. But still, after most of a day and night in the air, they had to get their passports hand-scanned because the automatic Smartgate system was down, trudge to baggage claim, wait for bags, haul them off the carousel while a throng of impatient passengers stood in their way, then trek to the back of the hall and stand in line, awaiting their turn for a bored Border Force officer to either wave them toward the exit or play twenty questions with them in a mumbled, yet delightfully accented, monotone.

Having gone through this same routine more times than he could count—and a whole lot more times than Melanie knew about—Dick shuffled along on auto-pilot, barely paying attention to the routine questions. The inspector finished up, murmured: “Have a nice stay Downunder,” as he handed Melanie and Seth their paperwork, but held back Dick’s.

“Is there a problem?” asked Dick, suddenly alert.

“Not at all, sir,” replied the inspector. “You’ve just been randomly selected for supplemental screening.”

Supplemental screening sounded to Dick a lot like some bureaucrat’s euphemism for cavity search, but he kept his cool. He turned to look at Melanie, whose eyes had gone wide, and inclined his head toward the exit. “You go ahead to the currency exchange in the main terminal and get some cash—including small bills ... or coins or



whatever ... for tips. I'll be just a couple minutes behind." He turned back toward the inspector. "Right?"

The bland, bored man gave him a bland, bored smile. "Tipping is not customary in Australia. In any event, supplemental screening is generally completed in less than ten minutes barring any complicating factors."

Dick didn't know what complicating factors meant. Customs guys like the Australian Border Force were usually looking for people with balloons of drugs up their ass or down their throat, non-native reptiles hidden in their pants, or fellow terrorists on their speed-dial. Dick was clean of anything like that. He didn't even have a weapon—not that he needed one to deal with most one-on-one or even one-on-three encounters. But alarms were going off in his head all the same. Border Force would never separate just one person from a party traveling together for supplemental screening. Contraband could be hidden anywhere in the group's effects, for one thing.

No, nothing about this situation was normal.

Still, he trudged along behind the Border Force agent who had come to fetch him to the private screening room, waving at his clearly distraught wife and bewildered son as they shuffled reluctantly toward the exit from customs into the main terminal.

As soon as they were out-of-sight, the escorting agent opened a door into a small interview room with white walls, a white plastic table, and three white plastic chairs. Too soft to be intimidating to Dick, though the fact his quick survey located no security cameras to record his supplemental screening was less than reassuring. That his escort dropped him in the room, then left Dick alone, also made his spy-senses tingle.

After about five minutes, the door to his private room opened and a small, rabbity man entered carrying a cord-handled shopping bag with the image of a stylized multi-color kangaroo leaping in front of a large, yellow sun.

“Greetings, Mr. Thornby, from your *friends* at Quartermasters, a *subsidiary* of Perth Tourism Centre.” The bloke actually winked at him. Jesus. He’d heard a tourist on the flight remark that Australia was a half-century behind the United States in terms of attitude and atmosphere, but he’d always known Australia’s espionage agents to be both modern and competent. This guy’s spycraft was neither; it was on par with *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* ... no, make that *Get Smart*. Certainly, he had to be a plant of some sort, but Dick didn’t know if he was some out-of-work actor freelancing in response to a last-minute casting call put out by Nerevsky or just a newbie shoved into position in a hurry by Glenn Swynnton’s local, obviously less demanding, equivalent.

Dick played dumb. It wasn’t difficult. “I’m just waiting here for ‘supplemental screening.’”

“Of course, you are.”

Ye Gads! The twit winked again, then reached into the shopping bag.

“Well, here in Western Australian, supplemental screening just means having special, extra strength sunscreen to protect you from the harmful ultra-violet rays of the sun.” He screwed off the top of a plastic tube of HyperBlok 85 and held the open end out toward Dick’s face. Dick saw the green sheen and smelled the unmistakable aroma of almonds which identified the contents as Nobel 808, a form of plastic explosive common during World War II, but long since overtaken by Semtex, Demex, PVV-5A, and Seismoplast 1, among others. Given all the mining done in Western Australia, they must have RDX, the explosive agent in C-4, coming out the wazoo, yet this guy was giving him Nobel 808 and winking while he did it. Dick wanted to ask why, but he didn’t think this guy would know ... or tell him if he did.

“The cap is a detonator. Simply use a piece of the bag’s handle as a fuse and light it.” The contact waved one hand at the tourist board bag. “The rest of the contents, including a new pair of aviator sunglasses, are ... self-explanatory. Compliments of the *Subsidiary*.”

Jeez, the guy was about as subtle as a West Hollywood hooker. Dick expected the guy to flash his boobs any second.

"Understood," Dick intoned. "Thanks."

"Do you have anything for us?"

That was a dangerous question to ask a double-agent, especially when the double-agent didn't have any idea which faction had sent this clueless clerk. Fortunately, in this particular case, the answer was the same for both sides. "Not a thing," said Dick. "What do you expect? I just fucking got here."

A minute later, Dick had donned his Subsidiary-issued sunglasses and was striding with the tourist bag toward the terminal lobby currency exchange, where Melanie stood looking anxious, while Seth inspected the personages adorning the colorful and partially transparent currency.

"Any trouble?" asked Melanie, her voice low, but her distress visible from a mile ... er ... one point six kilometers ... away.

"Nah," replied Dick. "Routine."

She pointed at his bag. "What's that?"

"Welcoming gifts."

Before he could stop her, Melanie reached out with one hand and peeked inside the bag, where a 9 mm laid on top of other gadgetry. She gasped.

Dick put his arm around her. "Apparently they think that because Australia was populated with British criminals as a penal colony back at the end of the eighteenth century, it's still a dangerous place."

## CHAPTER 8

Plenty of taxis in the queue, so it didn't take long to load up and head for the hotel, even with the family luggage far exceeding Dick's normal travel style. Still, he got chilled while helping the driver play Tetris with the assortment of suitcases which needed to fit in a trunk significantly smaller than the one in his Oldsmobile back home. The breeze and the light mist being blown in despite the overhang above the cab stand didn't help.

He clambered in the front seat of the Swan Taxi with the driver and turned to talk to Seth and Melanie in the passenger compartment. "Might be a bit nippy for surf lessons today. Maybe better to rest up, shake off the jet lag, and get the lay of the land at the hotel."

Seth snorted. "You don't think I'm actually going to take surf lessons while I'm here, do you?"

Dick's eyes darted side to side, as if he might find something to suggest why his kid wouldn't want to surf in Australia. "Uh ... okay ... so maybe lessons aren't your thing. Self-taught can be cool, too."

Melanie chimed in, maternal concern obvious in her tone. "I'm sure you can do it if you try. It's just like the balance exercises the physical therapist used to have you do."

"Sure, but—"

Melanie kept going. "And you don't need to be embarrassed about the burn scars on your legs, you know. Long board shorts are in style these days—"

"Besides," added Dick, "all the scars show is that you were a hero during a fire."

Seth flushed. "I tell most people they're from a shark attack." He let out a sigh. "Just kidding. And I don't care about my scars. That's not why I'm not going surfing." Seth waved his hand at the spattering of droplets on the passenger window. "Didn't you guys look up the average temperature for Perth before you packed? Not only are we in

the midst of rainy season, we'll be lucky if it breaks seventy degrees while we're here. Nighttime lows could go into the forties."

Melanie frowned. "I thought Australia was hot. You know, deserts and tropical rainforests."

Seth rolled his eyes. "Parts of it are, but the place ... the continent ... is huge. And the farther down south you go, the closer you are to Antarctica. And while it might be summer back home, it's the middle of winter here." He sat back and looked out the rain-spattered window. "I don't think you're going to need any sunscreen while you're here."

Dick pictured the tube of Nobel 808 in his goody bag. He certainly hoped Seth was right.

#

They took their time getting settled into their suite at the resort. As it turned out, surfing wasn't really an option in any event. The Crown Metropol Perth was located on the Swan River, not on the ocean. It was, however, within passable distance of the local zoo, as well as Kings Park and Botanic Garden. But then, of course, Perth wasn't really oceanside altogether. The beaches in Fremantle were as far from city center as their hotel was from where they just landed at Perth Airport.

Still, it was a nice resort. Large pool outside, but indoor swimming and a hot tub, too. Well-appointed, modern, and spacious, with some nice architectural touches — though the sheets of white sail furled high in the spacious enclosed lobby reminded Dick just a bit too much of Denver International Airport. And, with more than twenty restaurants within a half-kilometer, Dick was sure Seth and Melanie would have a pleasant time while he was engaged on his irksome tasks and toilsome responsibilities.

For tonight, they decided to dine at the Bistro Guillame on site. Nice view and excellent ambience, though most of the patrons seemed to be more interested in making eyes at each other. Apparently, the Bistro

was a popular place for proposals, anniversary dinners, and romantic trysts, which would have been fine for Dick and Melanie, but made them feel a trifle out of place with Seth as a third wheel. Melanie had the twice baked cheese soufflé as an appetizer, followed by barramundi with caper and raisin beurre noisette and shaved cauliflower for her main course. Both Seth and Dick opted for a main course of Rangers Valley sirloin, accompanied by crispy kipfler potatoes, watercress salad and béarnaise sauce. Seth tried out the escargot for an appetizer, while Dick stuck with tried and true onion soup. Melanie picked different wines by the glass for the adults, while Seth limited himself to water. They shared desserts, including profiteroles with vanilla bean ice cream and warm chocolate sauce, a lemon tart, and vanilla bean crème brûlée with rhubarb. Service was attentive without being fussy.

The bill caused Dick to blanch for a moment—even though he knew the Subsidiary was picking up the tab—before he realized everything was in Australian dollars. Once he did the math, he was content. The rest of the patrons had it right; this was a great place for special occasions and vacations, but not an everyday kind of restaurant unless you didn't have to worry about money.

The family walked to a promenade in the hotel overlooking the river, along with views of the city and the ocean to the west. He stood with his arm around Melanie as the sun set. The colors were spectacular enough Seth even looked up from his phone, but Dick was too keyed up to let the deepening tones of mauve and orange comfort him. He was going through the paces of being on a family vacation, albeit one with a side helping of UFO fetish, but he couldn't help but focus on the mission and any danger it might entail.

Dick didn't know if this entire escapade was a fool's errand or a cake walk, but it certainly didn't have the feel of a regular mission. There was no discernible bad guy to target, no list of witnesses to interrogate, no insidious plot to thwart, nothing to blow up, and nobody to capture, maim, kill, or kidnap. He had next to no support services since the mission was off the books, but he still had not one, but two, sets of

overseers second-guessing every move he would make, plus a family to keep safe while he dragged them from place to place. He'd worked hard over the years to compartmentalize everything—keeping work and family separate and turning his emotions on and off as necessary. But the compartments he had thought were so strong were really just nooks in a house of cards. That house was falling, and the contents were all spilling out in a jumble. He always did what had to be done, but right now he didn't have a clue what that was.

Still, Melanie felt and smelled good nestled under his arm, her bright eyes reflecting the pastel glory of the sunset as she smiled her infamous one-dimpled smile.

For tonight, that was enough.

#

Literally half a world away, Pyotr Nerevsky adjusted the shade in his chauffeured car to block out the glare from the rising sun. Ignoring his Subsidiary-issued phone, he reached into an inside pocket of his suit jacket to retrieve his second phone—his “black” phone. Though it didn't have all the features of his official device, it was far from a cheap burner. In fact, the encryption and security features were probably even better than the one he was supposed to use, especially the algorithms designed to prevent tracking, tracing, and tapping by the IT dweebs at the Subsidiary. He'd acquired it from a contact in the MSS. China's Ministry of State Security might not be the best at inventing, but they stole tech on a scale nobody else in the espionage business could come close to matching. They not only seized hardware and software on a routine basis, they placed agents in every university, tech company, Silicon Valley startup, and black hat hacker collective in the world. If it existed, they had it. If it was on some drawing board somewhere, they were monitoring progress and downloading the specifications as they were developed. So many people, so much effort,

just so he could reach out and touch someone whenever, wherever he wanted.

He texted Thornby a time and place for a virtual meet. Time to get moving. He needed to know if current events had any connection to that mysterious flash a quarter century ago.



## CHAPTER 9

Seth navigated through the streets and alleyways of Shangrilyfe, his fingers nudging the controller with a rush of taps, twists, and bumps. When he introduced the Shangrilyfe virtual reality platform to his dad, who, despite what he said, paid more attention to his online habits since the Reality 2 Be fiasco, his dad had marveled at how quickly Seth could maneuver online. Seth had responded that teenagers have quicker reflexes, rather than point out it was really just a matter of practice. Of course, unlike touch-typing or sending or receiving Morse Code, practicing online was fun, not work.

This particular foray, however, was all business. No time to shop or play games today; he had plans in real life. But he did want to stay in touch with his friends back in the states, even though they were twelve hours behind.

Shangrilyfe was a vivid, photorealistic world of saturated color and hyper-sharp visual detail, but ultimately a less sophisticated virtual reality than Reality 2 Be. At least as Reality 2 Be had been back when Seth frequented it both with his gaming pals and with a squad that was helping Chinese freedom fighters. In Shangrilyfe, there was lots to see, but less to actually do. Not just fewer games, but a less internationally diverse user-base, at least at this point in its development and expansion. That was okay; getting mixed up with international espionage via Reality 2 Be had taught Seth some very painful lessons. He didn't do that stuff anymore. He didn't even use bizarre monikers for his online avatar.

Here in Shangrilyfe, he was just Seth3D. His best friend, Brian, was just Netsurfer; there were way too many Brians on the system by the time they joined. They didn't do anything sinister; mostly they just chatted. Yeah, they could have just as easily texted, but it was more pleasant to chat with their avatars sitting on an ersatz beach watching the sparkling waves crash methodically on shore.

Netsurfer was already waiting at the beach, a virtual blanket spread out on the ersatz sand a bit closer than necessary to a couple of hot girls virtually sunning themselves. Seth swiveled Seth3D's head to bump up the volume on the girls' conversation ... about some romantic reality show or another. Of course, virtual reality being ... well, whatever you wanted it to be ... the eye-candy could actually be a couple of grandmothers connecting from their respective retirement homes, but that was okay. The view was the view. Shangrilyfe's three-dimensional rendering was one of its strong points. And, of course, there were no scars in Shangrilyfe, not unless you wanted them. Both Seth's and Brian's avatars were free of those in virtual reality.

"What did you do on vacay today?" asked Netsurfer. "Hit any topless beaches?"

Seth3D shook his head. Seth wanted to roll his eyes, but if the avatars could do that, Seth hadn't figured out how to make his perform the maneuver. "First off, it's too cold here for anyone to be running around topless. Second, my day — your tomorrow — is just starting."

"Oh, yeah. Any big plans? Or are you stuck with the 'rents?"

"Dad's doing some stuff on his UFO quest. Hoping he'll let me tag along." Seth actually didn't give a damn about ancient aliens crap, but he and his mom knew that was part of his dad's cover and his mission, and Seth was more than a little interested in that. Not only was it exciting to possibly see his dad in action for longer than it took to jump out of a boat, but helping with an actual covert operation for a secret organization beat the hell out of shopping for t-shirts and petting kangaroos at some billabong.

"When did he get into that stuff? Always seemed ... I dunno ... boring and business-like when I ran into him at your place or whatever."

"Not exactly sure," replied Seth3D — better to be vague than have to remember the specifics of a lie. "He travels a lot for work. Flies a lot, too. I think that kind of stuff gets more coverage on the news overseas than back home. That probably provoked his curiosity about flying

saucers. I think the U.S. military finds UFOs all kind of embarrassing 'cause they can't explain 'em, so they downplay everything."

"Yeah, a lot of the YouTube things I've seen about strange lights in the sky seem to be foreign. Not sure why."

"Less blanketed by radar, less military, so not as easy to debunk, I guess."

"Maybe, but that doesn't explain why they have more video. The U.S. has a bajillion cell phones in people's hands."

Seth3D laughed. "Yeah, but everyone's looking down at them, not up in the sky. More light pollution in America, too, so harder to see the night sky. Besides, a lot of the foreign YouTube videos on UFOs are from dash cams. They're just not a big thing in the states."

Netsurfer craned his neck to ogle the side-boob on display next door for a moment. "Not sure why dashcams are popular elsewhere."

"Apparently people make a living in third-world countries by leaping in front of cars, especially nice cars, then jumping up and rolling across the hood. Then they claim to be more injured than they are and ask for cash to settle the matter. The dash cams show what really happened—at least that's what I've read. So, if you are worried about accident scammers, you set up a camera to record the view out your front window at all times. If something freaky happens, like a real accident or a shooting star or a ghost or whatever, you've got footage to download to the net."

"Easier to get an editing app and make crap up, I'd think."

"Maybe," replied Seth3D. "Supposedly experts can tell the difference."

"Yeah, I guess." Netsurfer frowned and Seth manipulated his avatar's controls to see that the beach bimbos had gotten up and sashayed away. "Hard to say why anyone believes anything on the internet in the first place."

"People believe what they wanna believe."

"That's a little simple, don't you think?" replied Netsurfer.

“Dude, you just ogled some virtual hotties for, like, most of our conversation, even though they could be someone, something completely different in real life. Hell, they could be part of the beach background programming or some add-on programmed by a kid in Sri Lanka with too much time on his hands. It’s like the bimbo in the red dress in *The Matrix*, a subprogram set up to distract you from ... I dunno ... a flicker in the wave generator when it resets to repeat or something. Yeah. People believe what they wanna believe.”

As if to make Seth’s point, his screen flashed bright white for a second, then coalesced back into focus, but with a reddish tint which faded out before the full color palette flickered back into existence.

“What the hell was that?” exclaimed Netsurfer.

“You saw that, too?”

“Yeah. The whole simulation was wiped out by a white flash. What do you think it was?”

“Well, I don’t think it was paparazzi.” Seth scanned the screen looking for anything out of place, but saw nothing.

Netsurfer answered while Seth was still looking. “You think Shangrilyfe doesn’t have avatars with flash cameras?”

“No. They say almost anything from real life can be simulated in Shangrilyfe ... if you have the bucks to spend for rendering and programming. I just don’t think a paparazzo would snap a clandestine photo of the two of us on the beach ... and the cleavage cousins have already left.”

“I dunno,” replied Netsurfer. “The six-pack on my avatar looks pretty awesome in my humble opinion.”

“Maybe, but it would be more accurate if your avatar had a six-pack *in* its abdomen, assuming you’re still hiding beer in the crawlspace where your dad can’t find it.”

“Shhh! Not so loud.”

“Not to worry,” said Seth3D, “since you’re keeping your stash of weed somewhere separate.” Seth studied the screen a bit more, but saw

nothing out of place. Finally, he spoke again. “Probably just a hardware glitch.”

“Maybe a power surge?”

“Or a reboot of a software subroutine which interacts with the main user interface.”

They talked a while longer, but Seth had accomplished what he came to do. Chat with his best friend, but, more importantly, support his dad’s cover. He was going to help with this mission whether his dad wanted him to or not.

#

“I don’t need my wife or ... for God’s sake ... my kid to come along on this part of the trip,” growled Dick at his computer. The avatar of a Saudi Arabian sheik stared back at him from the screen.

“No,” replied the sheik in an Arabic accent which did not entirely hide the subtle influences on syntax and sentence structure Dick associated with a Russian accent—or, at least, the clipped Russian accent of Pyotr Nerevsky. “What you need is to, one, do as you’re told, and, two, place a bet so our presence here doesn’t look suspicious.” The voice chat feature of the website was staticky and prone to random increases and decreases in volume, but apparently met the ex-KGB officer’s standards of security encryption ... or, perhaps, was sufficiently crappy and obscure no respectable security apparatus would bother to monitor it.

Dick glanced at the upper left of the screen, where a betting board listed odds and names for the next race. He’d gotten a text from his nemesis to meet at this virtual betting site for, of all things, camel races. But not just camel races—camel races where the camels were ridden by robot jockeys. Apparently the rich and super-rich residents of Dubai and Qatar and Bahrain had poured petro-dollars into developing camel riding robots to replace slave children as jockeys in high-stakes camel races, as well as to maintain more direct control of their desert mounts.

The “camel jockeys” apparently did not trust actual camel jockeys to ride fair. The rein-holding and whip-wielding robots, however, could be controlled by remotes wielded by owners and trainers playing with joysticks in a traffic jam of high-end SUVs careening along next to the track during a race.

Dick temporized while he reviewed the odds. “I guess it’s good they don’t use kids for this anymore, but I don’t understand why they dress the robots in racing silks.”

“The camels prefer the illusion of human riders. They also spray human scent and cologne on the silks to maintain the pretense,” answered the faux sheik. “Would you want an inhuman, unfeeling automaton riding you?”

Dick did have an inhuman, unfeeling automaton riding him—one by the name of Nerevsky—so he decided the question was rhetorical and let it slide.

“Come, come. Make a decision. It is almost post time.”

Dick placed a small wager on the favorite while the sheik being controlled by Pyotr placed several bets, including a significant bet on a high-odds exacta. Dick didn’t know why the Head of the Subsidiary’s Internal Audit Division had a hard-on for bizarre games. Dick, who played college football, understood the attraction of sports, but he didn’t ... couldn’t ever ... understand the attraction of robot jockey camel races.

“Your betting, like you, lacks imagination,” noted the sheik. “I’ve explained how the family supports your cover as a tourist interested in strange atmospheric phenomena. And I explained that their participation incentivizes you to perform. Of course, it also provides you with additional manpower for anything that may come up—manpower which is not otherwise available for this mission for reasons of which you are aware. This is not a matter for debate.”

“But—”

“But nothing. Everybody spies. Everybody lies. Everybody goes. Now shut up and watch the race. Maybe a few more. It’s a delightful sport, once you learn all the ins and outs.”

Dick shut up. He knew about ins and outs. He was on the outs at work. And, with Nerevsky forbidding him from letting Melanie and Seth hang at the hotel while he investigated strange historical phenomena closer to ground zero, he was about to be on the outs with Melanie, too.

## CHAPTER 10

“Think of it as an adventure,” said Dick as he turned onto Route 94 and headed east past the airport and out of Perth.

“Yeah, Mom. It’s not just a job, it’s an adventure,” Seth chimed in.

Dick could have lived without the smart-alecky reference to the Army slogan, but right now he was all about family harmony. Besides, he didn’t think Seth was grouching at him; the kid had seemed absolutely thrilled when told the whole family was headed into the Outback to interview people about strange lights in the sky. Melanie? Well, not so much.

“I looked at the map,” said Melanie. “I’m not sure why we couldn’t fly there. The concierge said it was a seven hour plus trip.”

Dick glanced left toward the passenger seat in the large rental car. The steering wheel being on the right side didn’t bother him. Neither did driving on the wrong side of the road, but he did tense up a bit every time he saw a traffic circle—a roundabout—coming up. It wasn’t that he didn’t have plenty of experience driving on the opposite side of the road as a seasoned international traveler, or that he didn’t know what to do. It was just one of those things about being outside the United States—like getting served reasonably sized portions at restaurants—that always felt wrong. Melanie was staring out the window as the last vestiges of the city’s suburbs gave way to long since harvested wheatfields as they progressed east.

“Flying is faster, sure, but we need a car—”

“I’m sure you can rent a car in Kalgoorlie—”

“—and, well, it’s not just an adventure. It’s a job ... a mission, to be precise. Flying limits what you can take and announces where you’re going. That’s just bad spycraft. Take this car.” He continued the thought with an unspoken Henny Youngman “Please.” He tapped out a rimshot on the steering wheel as he pondered which of his automotive criticisms he wanted to pass on to his family. He didn’t have the luxury of the Subsidiary’s Quartermaster arranging his trip, so



the late model SUV was lighter and smaller and painted with a brighter, primary color than Dick would have preferred. It also would be too slow in a chase. He kept all that to himself, as he continued with: "I went out of my way to rent it from a place that doesn't have GPS tracking of their vehicles, just in case someone tries to track exactly where we're going."

"I thought today's outing was just historical research," said Melanie with a slight edge to her tone. "Why would anyone want to track us?"

"I don't think they would," Dick rushed to say, "but it's always good to maintain professional operational practices. It doesn't hurt to expect the unexpected." Before Melanie could respond, Dick swiveled his head to look at Seth in the back seat.

"Speaking of expecting the unexpected, Champ, what's the guide book say about touristy spots along the way?"

Seth grabbed a guide book from the seat next to him as Dick returned his attention to the Great Eastern Highway—a paved road which stretched ahead to the horizon.

"There's a cool rock formation called "The Wave," because it kind of curls and looms over you ... but it's well off the main road to the south and I'm not sure we want to make the trip longer."

"I'm sure," muttered Melanie.

"Yeah, that's a hard pass from the front seat, Champ. What else you got?"

"Some places where you can get panoramic views from granite outcroppings or check out the pipeline paralleling the road. Get this, it's a water pipeline for bringing water from Perth to the gold mining districts around Kalgoorlie. Seems like it might be a place which would warrant a quick stop given your ... you know ... professional water treatment cover."

"Wastewater treatment ... but, yeah. What else?"

"Several national parks, but that's not for a while. Mostly woods and fields for the time being."

"Well, we'll make good time, then," said Dick.

“Once we get to Kalgoorlie, there’s the Super Pit, this gargantuan strip mine where they dig and haul out gold ore.”

“Some huge trucks in that kind of operation,” mused Dick. When Seth was a kid, Dick had taught him the names of all sorts of construction equipment. Somehow the prospect of watching trucks with tires taller than their house back in New Jersey gave him a warm family feeling. “Anything else?”

Seth turned a page. “There’s a brothel museum.”

Dick glanced over at Melanie. “That’s a hard pass from the front seat again.”

They drove for more than fifty miles without further comment. Melanie gazed out the window, while Seth had his nose buried in the guidebook. Finally, Seth spoke again.

“Wow! Did you know Australia has more than thirty creatures that can kill or paralyze you if you don’t get immediate medical care? There’s blue-ringed octopuses and salt-water crocodiles and funnel web spiders and all sorts of snakes—”

“Delightful,” mumbled Melanie.

“It’s a big place,” cautioned Dick. “I’m sure it’s not that bad here, where we are. After all, we’re not going in the ocean, so you don’t have to worry about sharks or jellyfish or octopuses, or poisonous fish. And I think the funnel web spiders and a lot of the snakes are just in the eastern rainforest, so those don’t count.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Seth sounded disappointed. “But the Inland Taipan lives in the arid interior. It has a neurotoxin that paralyzes and kills in forty-five minutes. And the Mainland Tiger Snake is found throughout southern Australia. On the spider side, the Red-backed Spider originated in Western Australia, but it mainly hangs out where there are lights and people.”

“So, we’ll watch out for snakes and spiders when we’re walking and shake out our shoes before putting them on,” Dick said. “Doesn’t sound too bad.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Dick heard a page turning, then a few miles ... okay, kilometers ... of silence passed, before Seth spoke up again.

"Hey, they also have this nettle plant called a gympie-gympie that has a neurotoxin on its almost invisible, hairlike spikes so excruciating people commit suicide ... like even years later ... because they can't stand the pain anymore."

"And it's found where?"

"Mostly rainforests in Queensland."

"Then nothing for us to worry about." Dick took a deep breath. "I think it's great you're interested in the local flora and fauna and ... well ... goodness knows the scenery and the drive aren't all that compelling. Just try not to scare your mom too much. Okay?"

"Yeah. I just want to be as helpful as I can to, you know, your job and all."

Dick grinned a tight smile. "I appreciate that, even though I wish you didn't have to come along on this part of the trip at all. But, don't worry. We're just going to be talking to some old-timers about stuff which happened a quarter century ago and some other locals about more recent history. We won't be chased by goons with guns across the desert while we forage for food and water. Most of my work is just research and waiting around to see something or somebody."

Melanie suddenly pointed at the side of the road. "Camels."

Dick flashed back to his last meeting with Nerevsky as he turned to see where she was pointing. "Camels?"

No camels. No camel jockeys, human or robotic. Just an animal crossing type warning sign. Three actually. One for kangaroos. One for some large rodent like creature that reminded Dick of something out of *The Princess Bride*. And one for what was clearly a camel—the one-humped variety. Apparently, they all frequently crossed the road, presumably not together, over the next ninety-six kilometers.

Okay. Well, now that they were well east of the coast, the land was flat and trees were getting sparser. If a kangaroo or a camel or a rodent of unusual size approached the road, Dick figured he'd see it coming.

After all, he was always on the lookout for trouble. And bacon. Dick liked his bacon.

“Any good roadhouses for food coming up soon?”

#

They arrived in Kalgoorlie later than Dick had hoped. Driving the Great Eastern Highway wasn't like cruising through Montana on an interstate, except for the long stretches of emptiness. Huge tractor-trailers lumbered up even minor grades with maddening slowness at times, frustrating the flow of traffic around them. Things slowed even more after they left Route 94 at Coolgardie—which Seth informed them was the original location of Kalgoorlie before people moved forty miles east-northeast to get closer to the gold—to take the even more rustic Route 49 into town. Of course, truth told, Dick kept his speed more in check with his family in the car, both for their safety and to preclude any complaints from Melanie about his driving. Just another reason to hate Nerevsky for making him bring everyone along on this investigation.

Given the time and the lackluster roadhouse food hours and hours ago, the evening consisted of nothing more than finding a decent hotel and an acceptable meal. Seth was disappointed not to see any sights (and, Dick guessed, not to see any espionage action), but Dick promised him tomorrow would be more exciting. He certainly hoped it would not be *that* much more exciting, of course, but part of parenting was managing expectations even when you had no idea what to expect.

## CHAPTER 11

They began the day with shopping and sight-seeing. Not only did Dick need to keep his family happy, he needed to maintain his tourist cover and ease them into helping him out on his fact-finding mission. They started at a place that sold clothes and camping gear, as well as the usual assortment of trinkets and postcards. Plus, they had rocks—mostly chunks of opalized rocks too low-grade to be worth much, but some sparkly quartz and glittery feldspar, too. Melanie wandered over to take a look at the opals while Dick and Seth perused the hats.

Seth tried one on. “How come Aussie hats always have one side of the brim tucked up?”

Dick knew the answer, but he turned the question back on his son. “What do you think?”

Seth took off the hat and held it at arm’s-length. “I dunno. I’d say it was maybe so you could leave the brim down on the side that faces the sun ... you know, to shade your face ... and put it up on the other side for better distance vision. You know, like pirate eye patches, which they’d switch from one side to the other.”

Dick didn’t know and he couldn’t imagine. “Huh?”

Seth wagged a hand. “Well, not because of where the sun is. But a pirate captain goes from up on deck, where it’s sunny, to down in the hold, where it’s dark all the time. So, they wear a patch up on deck so one eye is always kept dark—that way when they go below, they can flip up the patch and their night vision is unimpaired from the get-go.”

“Interesting. I didn’t know that.” Truth was, Dick hadn’t thought about pirates much in his adult life, except for that one incident in Reality 2 Be.

“Obviously,” Seth continued, “this isn’t *quite* the same.” He turned the hat back and forth as he looked at it, then frowned. “And that doesn’t explain why only one side has a snap to tuck up the brim. Not both sides.”

Before Dick could respond, a clerk strode up—happy, no doubt to have an early morning customer looking at something higher-end than postcards. “That’s because these hats mimic our Army hats. One side is tucked up so the brim doesn’t get in the way when the soldiers are shouldering arms during drill. Started back in the 1890s.”

Dick dialed up a broad smile. “Funny, you don’t look that old.”

The clerk chuckled. “Only sixty, though the sun and wind weathers you right fast ‘ere in the Goldfields. And, I’ve been here nigh on thirty years.”

Exactly the opening Dick needed. “So, that means you were here back in ‘93 when there was the big flash up north and all the weird lights in the sky.”

The shopkeeper sighed almost imperceptibly, but Dick purposely ignored the conversational signal, pushing on with enthusiasm like any true believer would. “What did you see? What do you think it was? A missile? A nuclear test?” He paused for effect. “Aliens?”

“Didn’t see dingo scat,” the clerk replied. “All that was out woop woop ... out in the middle of the Outback, a hard day’s trek from hereabouts. And I was sleeping ... stuffed from working flat out the whole day b’fore.”

“Ah,” said Dick.

“Too bad,” added Seth. “Heard it was pretty pyro—”

“Oh, the town was all abuzz about it in the aftermath. Some drongos thought it was a nuclear test, especially after all that hoo-ha came out about the Jap cult people killing sheep with sarin up at Banjawarn Station.” He sniffed. “Not me. Like those Asian hippie cult freaks could cobble a nuke out of sheep shit and low-grade uranium ore. Nah. More likely just a shooting star or a mine explosion or ball lightning. Couldn’t be a meteor impact. No crater. Couldn’t be a nuke. No radiation to speak of.”

Seth interrupted. “That doesn’t rule out a UFO.” Dick was proud of the kid for helping with the mission task, stupid as that mission might be.

“That always sounded a bit iffy to me. Half those hoons driving road trains that night were more’n likely stuffed themselves. Or they had a slab of Swan—”

Seth interrupted again. “You eat swans here?”

The man looked at Dick’s son as if he were an idiot. “What? No, we don’t snack on fookin’ swan. It’s behr—”

Seth grimaced. “You eat bear?”

The man huffed. “Not bear ... behr.” The words sounded identical, but Dick knew what the guy was saying. “B ... E ... R. Behr,” the man continued. “Most truckers keep a slab ... that’s a carton, four times what you Yanks call a six-pack ... in an igloo in the back of the cab for a trek that hearty. Those half-arsed witnesses were likely half-pissed or more.”

With the local slang, Dick didn’t understand everything the guy was talking about, but looking at the guy’s belly, he figured there was good reason why they had slabs instead of six-packs in these parts. In any event, Dick got the gist of the tale. Besides, the clerk wasn’t a first-person witness. This convo was all just background and cover maintenance.

Seth seemed satisfied, too, though he went ahead and purchased a hat. Dick didn’t know if Seth really wanted one or he just had a natural instinct for ponying up for information on the job. Since this was all on Nerevsky’s tab, he didn’t really care, either.

Outside the store, an elderly, gap-toothed Aboriginal man sitting on a makeshift bench in front of the store’s window spoke up as they exited. “You want tales of times past, you need to talk to the people of times past.”

Dick studied the old man. A dirty handkerchief on the ground by his feet had a few coins scattered on it. Dick stopped. “You can tell me about the past?”

“I can tell you of the Dreamtime, when the land was formed and the People came to be.”

“Much as I’d like to hear that story, my interest is not so far into the past.” Dick glanced up toward the sky before continuing. He dropped a local ten-spot into the handkerchief. “I’d like to hear about the lights in the sky.”

The man grinned, his tongue peeking out between his missing front teeth. “Half of half of a century ago, a bright light trailed high in the sky from over the horizon in the southern waters, then across the land. Deep in the desert, at the edge of the world, it stopped, and there was a flash of bright white, brighter than the day, and a rolling thunder bellowed out of the sky and shook the earth beneath the feet of the People. A spirit orb the size of a small mountain glowed north of here, the color of the setting sun before a storm at sea. Lightning flashed around the edges and a deep, low sound thrummed at the edge of hearing. Many, many of the People saw. Dingoes howled, cattle lowed and turned their backs to the unnatural light—a red moon upon the surface of the earth—and birds flew away in terror. Eventually, the pulsing light went dark and the earth once more was at peace.”

The old man closed his eyes and leaned back against the window of the store. “That is my story.”

“Is it true?” Dick asked in a soft, warm tone.

“As true as you want it to be,” came the response. “Like many of the People, I have seen the min-min lights on many nights, guiding my journey.”

“The min-min lights?”

“Bright lights that hover in the sky during sojourns in the bush.”

“And have you and others told this story to those asking questions?”

The man opened his eyes. “Many times.”

“And did they pay you?”

“Of course. Old men like me, we have nothing to sell but stories. The People have a hard life. Men like you, they pay for stories. We tell stories men like you want to hear. We get along.”



Dick dropped another ten into the dirty handkerchief. "You tell the story well."

"I have had much practice."

"May you practice many more times."

As he finished his conversation, he looked over and saw Melanie approach a pudgy woman in bright clothing coming out of a beauty salon two storefronts down. The woman held up her hands in front of her, her fingers splayed, obviously admiring her fresh manicure.

Melanie held out her hand. "Hi. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

The woman looked Melanie up and down, a sour look on her face, and did not take her hand, whether from hostility or to protect wet fingernail polish, Dick didn't know.

The woman's upper lip twitched. "I don't give money to strangers and I don't sign petitions."

"Very wise," replied Melanie with a smile. "I don't do those things either. I'm just asking some of the local experts about whether they saw the lights in the sky and the bright flash that occurred back in 1993. I thought if you lived around here then you might remember from when you were a small child."

Dick thought the "small child" reference might be laying it on a bit too thick. The woman, whose coifed hair had an unmistakable artificiality in its shade of auburn, was well out of college back in those days.

"Oh, you mean the space debris?" said the woman.

Melanie obviously knew what she was doing. "Space debris?"

"Oh, yes," said the woman. "The so-called 'superpowers,' they always aim their crashing space junk our way, where nobody important might get hurt. When SkyLab fell from orbit, they said it would fall in the ocean. But then it 'missed' and left debris strewn all over a huge area down by Esperance along the coast south of here, back in 1979 ... er ... so I'm told."

"How terrible," replied Melanie. "But this was later, in 1993. What would have fallen then?"

"God only knows," said the woman, who then looked around conspiratorially, as if someone might be watching. Dick quickly averted his gaze and pretended to study a store window before her search got to where he was standing. "The Yanks and the commies, they have all sorts of military spy stations up in the sky, watching us. Watching everything we do." She lowered her voice and Dick could barely hear, but he thought she continued with "I never use the outdoor shower. You know, in case those pervert commie spies are watching."

"I see," said Melanie. "I mean, I understand. But, how does that explain the bright flash of light after the fireball of debris streaked across the sky?"

Dick turned his head back to watch the scene continue.

"Well," said the woman with a huff. "All those space stations are nuclear-powered, you know. When it hit, the nuke went off."

"A nuclear power reactor isn't the same thing as a nuclear bomb," replied Melanie.

"Of course, it is—"

Dick strode toward his wife. "There you are, honey. Time to get back on the road. Lots to see."

They left off making inquiries at that location, but he and Seth and Melanie repeated the basic formula as they traveled around town stopping at roadhouses, restaurants, tourist traps, and even a couple of retirement villages looking for people to chat with about lights in the sky, both in 1993 and more recently.

And, while the rest of the day was mind-numbingly the same, the theories for the lights in the sky varied considerably. Lightning. Ball lightning. Meteor impact. Cache of mining explosives. Minor earthquake followed by escaping methane from an underground pocket set off by an illegal campfire. Black helicopters with spotlights followed by flares illuminating special forces training missions. Secret nuclear testing by the Japanese ... the British ... the Russians ... the

South Africans ... the aliens ... or the mole people or the lizard people or Aum Shinrikyo. Yadda, yadda, yadda.

Seth even got into a discussion with a retired miner about whether it was simply a rare sighting of the Southern Lights ... the South Pole equivalent of the Aurora Borealis.

"They dance in the sky most often down in Tasmania," said the leathery-faced local. "But you get a big enough magnetic pulse and they light up the sky all about southwestern Oz. Damn dark out here, so they shine bright and colorful."

"Sure," said Seth. "I understand that. But the Aurora Australis would be in the southern sky ... not up north where these lights were reported."

"You callin' me a liar?"

"Not at all. I just—"

"I hauled ore for more'n twenty years. Don't be tellin' me I don't know which way from sideways." He stomped away. "Damn Yanks!"

Despite the old-timer's damnation, Dick and the rest of the family pushed on, pressing local raconteurs, tourist huskers, and meandering Alzheimer's patients about the events around the Banjawarn incident in 1993. Young, old, Black, white, and various mixes of races and nationalities. They asked everyone. Over the course of the day, their questioning became honed and routine. And the answers became repetitive. Almost all were secondhand or worse, which was not helpful. Sometimes Dick could tell which people reciting the details of the 1993 events had read the same reports or news sources. Actual eyewitnesses either were sparse or not talking.

Those who experienced recent events had varied stories. In most of those, the light traveling across the sky—which had occurred farther west, closer to Perth and the rest of Australia's coastal civilization—was not described as a pulsing orb, but as a flaming light from which small sparks or flames would drop off and down. While that spectacle was associated with a thundering, roaring, or locomotive sound before the large, concussive explosion at the end, the end explosion was not

accompanied by a bright flash of light, nor a pulsing orange-red hemisphere or mushroom cloud. That much seemed consistent, but there were also a lot of tangential threads to sort out.

Asking about “lights in the sky” seemed to bring out the storyteller in people. Enough so that Dick thought some of them were just making things up for sport or, worse, to fuck with him. The younger witnesses were also much more likely to grab for their cell phones when questioned Not to film them, but to show off something they’d seen or heard about. These folks eagerly shared YouTube clips of objects in the sky over the suburbs of Perth that could have been anything from Mylar balloons to windblown trash bags to untethered kites and weather research flights.

One fellow pulled up a site about the Marree Man, a five-kilometer long geoglyph of an Aboriginal warrior “rivaling the Nazca lines” more than two thousand kilometers to the east. Dick tuned out when the fan mentioned that, although originally discovered in 1998, locals had recently restored the drawing after the image became difficult to view, even from the air. In Dick’s mind, using road-graders to “restore” the drawing was evidence it was not only of recent origin, but likely created in the first place simply to boost local tourism.

Another enthusiastic teenager pulled up a website speculating about the Cervantes/Badgingarra Triangle Mystery and strange impact sites north of Perth, on the way to Geraldton. Interesting ... until a five-minute Google Earth search by Seth showed the strange shadows and markings looked to be nothing but a turbine wind farm not so far off a well-traveled roadway. Dick’s guess was the original satellite photos which sparked interest were taken when the hulking three-bladed behemoths were in the initial stages of construction.

Between stops, Dick also asked Seth to do some online searches about the “min-min lights” the Aboriginal storyteller early in the day had mentioned.

“Says here that the Aboriginal stories go back prior to European settlement and that they’re blobs of light that seem to hover and bob in

the air, sometimes moving along with people. Some of the Aborigines believe them to be spirits of their ancestors, but modern research says they're more likely an example of *Fata Morgana*."

Melanie turned toward Seth in the back seat. "What's the legend of King Arthur have to do with Australia?"

"Uh," replied Seth. "Wrong Morgana, Mom. The *Fata Morgana* is a kind of optical illusion, a mirage created by an inversion—a layer of warm air sitting in the upper atmosphere above cold ground air. The inversion creates a refraction and reflection that can cause an image from far away, beyond the horizon, to appear to be hovering in the sky. It's how sailors can sometimes see cliffs or cities or other ships hovering in the air far out to sea, nowhere near where those things actually are."

"I guess that makes sense," said Melanie, "but nobody reported seeing anything like that."

"True," replied Dick, "but think about how that kind of optical illusion would work if it happened out in the middle of a lot of empty ground in the black of night. A single source of light—a campfire, a mine complex, or even a brightly lit residence—might be the only light source for miles and miles. So, if the conditions are right for a *Fata Morgana* to occur, there might not be anything to see except a single blob of light in the black sky, like a mirage, always out of reach in the distance no matter how fast or what direction you travel."

"Oh." Melanie leaned back into her car seat. "It sure feels like we're chasing a mirage, that's for sure."

They kept at it, but learned nothing new. In short, despite having rented a four-wheel drive SUV for the trip out to Kalgoorlie, the entire day was spent spinning their wheels.

"Well, that was a complete bust," complained Seth as he plopped into the back seat after yet another frustrating stop quizzing store clerks. Dick agreed, but it also made him think of one more stop they should make as evening fell and they headed back to the hotel.

Ostensibly, Dick pulled into the sprawling roadhouse and truck stop complex to fuel up and replenish their stock of emergency water, as

well as grab a few tasty snacks and sugary beverages to stave off crankiness until they got dinner. He put Seth in charge of the fueling and Melanie in charge of the supply run while he wandered toward the portion of the lot where the semis, B Doubles, and road trains parked so the drivers could catch some shut eye ... and spend some quality time with the lot ladies who prowled between the behemoth semis looking for an invitation to join the operator in the cab (more accurately the bunk perched behind the cab of most cross-country tractors) for a fee. With evening falling, the big trucks were lumbering to life. The big truckers and their fuckers were doing the same.

Dick avoided the shady ladies—they spent too much time staring at the ceiling of a cab—and concentrated on catching a trucker ambling in to breakfast from his rig. Those were the guys who spent hours ... nights ... at a time staring at the starry sky as they rolled across the continent in the relative cool of the night.

He kept a folded twenty-dollar bill in his right hand and held it out as a grizzled specimen slammed the door of his cab and clambered down into Dick's path.

"Looking for some information."

The trucker looked at him hard, but did not reach for the bill. "Haven't seen your daughter ... or your sheila ..."

"Not looking for a girl."

"Then, you're in the wrong part of the lot." He inclined his head toward a darker section, nearer to the back of the building. "Boys and the like be back there."

"Not looking for a guy."

He tilted his head to the north. "Plenty of sheep round about Menzies and Leonora."

"Not looking to wet my whistle at all. Interested in some information about lights in the sky."

"That so? You guv'mint?"

"Nah. Just an open-minded researcher."

“Hah!” barked the trucker, his leathery face wrinkling even deeper at the corners of his mouth. “Open-minded. Bull crap. You’re one of them believers in E.T. and ancient aliens and all that stuff and nonsense.”

“Maybe. Just wanna know if you’ve ever seen anything.” He straightened out his already extended right arm, bouncing the twenty a couple times as he did. “Willing to pay; eager to listen.”

The man sucked on a tooth, then reached out and snatched the twenty from Dick’s hand. “Sure. Told my story to the cops for naught. Might as well run my mouth to you for scratch.”

“Start with when.”

“The big brouhaha, that was back in early winter of ‘93, north of here a piece. Everybody haulin’ that night saw it. Light traveling from south to north, mayhaps angled a bit to the east. Blue-white light, not trailin’ sparks or nothing. Not fallin’, either, mind you. Tracking along more or less parallel to the ground, pulsing a bit as she flew, but moving at a steady rate. Eventually, lost out of sight behind the hills at the north-northeast horizon, but still showing a glow from behind the hills. Then, all sudden, there’s a flash of bright white light like you never seen before. Brighter than the sun on a cloudless summer day. Seared into the retinas. Had to stop my road train on account of losing my night vision. Once the flash had subsided and the darkness imprinted on the back of my eyeballs finally started to fade, I looked back north, where the bright light had been, but holdin’ my hand so to shield my eyeballs if need arises. Big ol’ dome of red peeking out above the northerly hills and looks to be a terrifyin’ ginormous cloud above. You know —” The man looked about, as if the word he was searching for might be on the side of one of the massive vehicles surrounding them. “—you know ... a ... shiitake cloud—”

“You mean a mushroom cloud?”

“Yessir, that’s the moniker. A mushroom cloud, hanging over it like death on a stick.”

“Like a nuclear explosion.”

"Yes and no."

Dick frowned. "What's that mean?"

"Same kinda shape like you see in the pictures of tests and crap, but narrower, with a lot more lightning in the cloud than in a regular nuke cloud."

"You've seen a mushroom cloud from a nuclear explosion in person?"

"Nah, but plenty on the news. Telly ran a documentary on the Maralinga tests here in the WA by the Brits, from back in the mid-fifties. My gramps, he was in the indoctrinee force sent to witness the Red Beard test during Operation Buffalo. Gave him the cancer later in life, it did." He spat on the ground. "Big blow and radioactive fallout in the middle of our fuckin' country, and what did we get outta it? A big nothin'. That's politicians for ya." He spit again.

"So, you don't think the light in ninety-three was a nuclear explosion?"

"That's what the investigation later decided, not like I trust the guvmint to tell sheep shit from paydirt. But it don't make no sense whatso' it would be an A-bomb. They don't test those things by flyin' missiles from somewhere in the sea betwixt here and Antarctica over half a continent and droppin' them on a sheep station run by a bunch of Jap terrorists. Testing's a military operation, like my gramps took part in. They use towers and bunkers and shit. And what I saw soarin' through the heavens weren't no rocket exhaust, it was a pulsing orb of light. And a nuke, it don't put up no red-glowin' sphere like some damn forcefield in the movies. It goes boom and rolls out in all directions."

"So, a UFO?"

The old-timer guffawed. "That's my choice? A nuke explosion by a rag-tag group of subway sarin terrorists what barely showed up in-country before it happened or a bunch of big-eyed cattle mutilators come to play Star fucking Wars 'cause they didn't want us to live long and prosper?"



Dick spread his hands, palm up. "Then, what?"

"Energy weapons. Tesla energy weapons. Testing whether they could induce earthquakes from a distance."

Dick furrowed his brow. "Say again?"

"Hellfire, boy. You come Downunder talking about lights in the sky and you haven't read Harry Mason's Bright Skies treatise?"

"Uh ... I guess not."

"Always thought you ancient aliens chasers were bonkers. Proof's in the pudding and so's your head." The man fluttered one hand at him and turned to be on his way. "Yanks. Too stupid to believe, but big believers in stupid things." He started to walk, then turned back. "Just so you know, yes, a dingo did eat her baby."

What the fuck? "Whose baby?" Dick yelled after the departing trucker.

The man shook his head, but kept walking. "Meryl Streep's, you uncultured bogan."

Dick stared after the man for a moment, then hustled back to the SUV, where Seth was helping Melanie load up a case of water and several bags of other consumables.

Like the open land of Western Australia, there was an endless supply of unanswered questions. Questions which had no answers. Just plenty of driving, plenty of interviews, and plenty of online research ahead, all with his family in tow. Ahh, the glamorous life of an international spy.

#

Less research than he'd thought.

When he'd asked Seth to search for the references he'd just gotten from the trucker, Melanie had interrupted to explain that Meryl Streep had played the lead in a movie about an Australian woman who was accused of killing and burying her baby during a camping trip to Ayers Rock—or Uluru as it was now called in adherence to its historic

Aboriginal name. She maintained her innocence through a widely-publicized trial, claiming a wild dog—a dingo—had carried off her baby. Seth chimed in to let Dick know that *Dingoes Ate My Baby* was also the name of the fictional band one of the characters on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* played in.

Dick didn't think either reference was relevant to the mission.

More importantly, though, Seth made short work of finding Harry Mason's *Bright Skies* treatise online. The fact Dick's laptop had an internalized satellite connection to the internet had proved invaluable in doing so, however, even this close to what passed for civilization in Western Australia. Mason was a surveyor for the gold mineralization industry who had taken up investigating the supposed nuclear explosion at Banjawarn sheep station in 1993 as his life's calling. Seth volunteered to read the report aloud as they headed in for the day, but it was quickly apparent it was too long and rambling for Dick to parse while driving.

"So," said Melanie as they headed for the hotel, "this is what you do?"

Dick shrugged. "Sometimes. I do end up asking a lot of questions while I pretend to be somebody I'm not. But, no, not really. This mission is bizarre, almost comical. I've been sent off to gather evidence of something that's already been investigated to death by everyone from the *New York Times* and the U.S. Senate to the Australian government and a bunch of locals who like to spin theories on the internet. Usually I'm doing something very specific for a very specific reason. Here, I'm casting about randomly with no particular goal in sight—at least not one the powers-that-be have bothered to tell me."

"An *Expedition Unknown*."

"Huh?"

Seth spoke up. "It's a TV show on basic cable. This guy—"

"Josh Gates," volunteered Melanie.

"—yeah, Gates. He goes around the world looking for lost things or strange puzzles to solve. Everything from the tomb of Genghis Khan to

pirate treasure and lost Incan cities and all that crap. Oh, and aliens and Bigfoot, too. Mom watches it a lot.”

Melanie blushed. “Well, he’s very —”

“Handsome?” asked Seth.

“—personable,” replied Melanie with a glare at her only son. “And even though he rarely really finds anything important, he’s very enthusiastic about the history and the puzzle and the hunt.”

Dick smiled. He was glad Melanie found their bizarre hunt for information in Australia a pleasant puzzle. He didn’t even mind she apparently found the host of a cable television show “personable.” He just liked her to be happy. She seemed happy today and he didn’t mind she found some joy when he was away from her, off saving the world or sitting around waiting for something to happen.

“Maybe we’ll try to find an episode on the TV back at the hotel after dinner,” said Dick.

“That seems unlikely,” mused Melanie.

“Duh, guys,” said Seth from the backseat. “You don’t need to scroll through channels and try to ... I don’t know ... set up your VHS recorder blinking twelve o’clock to see a show anymore.” He thumped Dick’s laptop. “You’ve got high-bandwidth streaming. You can watch anything you want online at any time.”

“Oh,” said Melanie.

“Oh, yeah,” agreed Dick. “Headed back to the CBD.”

“Huh?” said Seth.

“Central Business District, where our hotel is. Aussie slang. I can learn new things from people other than my very clever son, you know.”

## CHAPTER 12

Seth turned around in his seat to grab a bottle of water as they headed back into the CBD of Kalgoorlie. The car behind them was familiar; he was sure he'd seen it at their first stop in the morning. And, now, here it was, hours later, still going where they were going.

"I think someone's following us."

"Good eye," replied his dad. His mom angled her head to try to get a look via the passenger side mirror, but his dad's head never wavered.

"You already knew," said Seth. It wasn't a question, but it wasn't really a complaint. It was simply a matter of fact.

"Pegged that particular dusty silver sedan a couple of hours ago. Showed up too many times as we moved from one location to another quizzing the locals. From time to time they trade off with a gray panel van with a small machine repair shop logo on it, so they're at least making an effort not to be noticed. Still, hard to follow someone in such a small town with just two vehicles without being made. If we were on a long trip, having the same car in the rear view for a half-hour wouldn't be too unusual, but when you're just tooling around town, hard to imagine someone else has the same itinerary."

Seth slumped down in his seat. "I don't even remember seeing a gray van."

"Don't beat yourself up. I'm a trained professional. You're—"

"An amateur?"

"—still in training. Besides, it's not like you were assigned to watch for tails and failed. You picked up on something by sheer instinct and good situational awareness."

Seth decided his dad was being sincere, not patronizing, so he took the compliment. Then another thought popped into his head.

"So, are we going to try to lose them?"

His mom turned to his dad, her eyes wide. "Are we going to get involved in a car chase?"

His dad reached over and patted his mom's hand. "Nah. What's the point? We're headed back to the hotel. They probably already know where we're staying. And it would let them know we know they're tailing us."

His mom's face softened, but she still stared at his dad while he drove the last couple of blocks toward the hotel. "But ... but who are they?"

"Excellent question. Since they started following us long before our inquiries could have attracted enough attention to warrant a response by some ... cabal ... covering up for any close encounters of the third kind, my guess is a couple of low-level guys at the closest office of Catalyst Crisis Consulting were tasked with keeping an eye on me and rendering any required assistance."

His mom's brow furrowed. "That sounds odd."

"At the very least," Seth added, "it sounds suspicious and redundant."

"Suspicious and redundant!" His dad chortled. "Welcome to the world of international espionage, where the paranoia is only exceeded by the expenditure of effort. If this entire mission to track down what happened a quarter century ago and how it relates to recent events doesn't say 'paranoid' and 'too much time and resources on hand' to you, nothing will."

They arrived at the hotel, but instead of pulling into the self-park garage for guests, his dad pulled up to the valet. "Keep it in sight," he said as he got out and flipped the keys to the bored valet. "I didn't take the rental insurance and I don't want it to get dinged up."

No, Seth thought, you don't want anyone messing with the car or installing a tracker on it. His dad might not think so, but Seth knew how to think like a spy.

#

Dick was pissed. Not just because persons unknown were shadowing his family as they toiled about Western Australia, but because he'd just lied to his wife and kid about it. Whoever was following his movements wasn't sent by the Subsidiary or their cover organization Catalyst Crisis Consultants. Glenn and Dee were keeping knowledge of his actions on a tight rein to make sure Nerevsky didn't find out they were aware of his off-the-books op. And if Nerevsky had the spare manpower to follow him around the boondock wilderness of Australia, he wouldn't have needed Dick to do his bidding in the first place.

That meant somebody else actually cared enough about what Dick was doing here to expend effort and manpower to keep tabs on it. That what he was doing wasn't just placating Nerevsky's paranoid conspiracy theories was mind-boggling and more than a little worrying. Seth was a bright, capable kid, and Melanie had the kind of stoic strength and will all good mothers have, even if they don't necessarily give themselves credit for it. But that didn't mean he wanted them to do-si-do with bad guys—even with low-level spooks who were probably under strict instructions not to engage. Still, he didn't know what their instructions were, and he couldn't begin to fathom who might be giving them.

Best to get them out of the picture as best he could without drawing Nerevsky's ire. He was going to have to do precisely what every fan of horror movies and every player of *Dungeons & Dragons* always said never to do. It was time to split the party.

He'd deal with that in the morning. In the meantime, they had a nice dinner at the hotel and Seth streamed an *Expedition Unknown* episode about the Japanese "Atlantis" on Dick's computer, hooking it into the hotel room television screen for convenient group viewing. Dick didn't really care about whether the underwater features were natural or man-made, but he did think the host had balls to plummet down the hot metal conveyer roller slide he found along the way. At least, he used to have balls before the slide pummeled them.

He begged off when the rest of the family went to bed. Not only did he want to stay awake for a bit, just to make sure their tail from earlier wasn't going to bother them overnight, but he had some reading to do. He called up the tab on his computer which Seth had found earlier in the day and started digesting the long, long Bright Skies posting.

Like a lot of internet conspiracy theories, the six-part Bright Skies treatise was a mix of detailed points of information which aligned with the author's worldview of the situation and a lot of conjecture. The basics were consistent with what Nerevsky had told him and what the later U.S. Senate investigation had established. Lights on the 28th of May in 1993, rumbling sounds associated with it, an earthquake (in an earthquake stable area) measuring three point nine on the Richter scale with an epicenter near (but not at) Banjawarn sheep station, a half-million-acre ranch in a semi-desert region dotted with mulga bushes, scrub, gum trees, and spinifex grass amidst the sand and rock. It gave detailed reports from various groups about the ground shaking with the explosion, the apparent distance traveled by the light arcing parallel to the surface of the land for more than two hundred fifty kilometers—one hundred and fifty miles—and other fireball events at other times in Western Australia. No big crater to indicate a meteor impact or a nuclear detonation.

That made sense. You can't hide a big impact crater. Sure, there were lots of small craters in the WA, like on the moon, which parts of the WA resembled. The reason was simple. Because there was little in the Outback to disturb a crater once made, they persisted for decades, maybe centuries. That's why, Dick knew, Western Australia was a great place to search for meteorite fragments. Not only did the dark sky make even small meteors visible for great distances, there wasn't much to hide the detritus they left behind. The oldest crater ever found on Earth—a two-billion-year-old, forty-mile wide scar known as the Yarrabubba impact structure—was, Dick found out during one of his tangential internet searches, located in Western Australia.

He stopped musing and went back to reading.

The treatise also contained considerable detail about the notion that the Aum Shinrikyo sect, which had just purchased the Banjawarn sheep station before the event, was involved in some manner. Dick discounted much of this information—Nerevsky had basically admitted that the sarin-poisoned sheep found on the ranch had been a Russian cover story, and Dick doubted the doomsday sect ever had access to nukes, even though they apparently tried hard to get one or more. But the treatise didn't really rely on the sect's access to nuclear weapons to explain their involvement. Instead, it made much about the nature and the use of probes and equipment to test the uranium ore at the station by Aum Shinrikyo personnel handling the land purchase. Supposedly, this was somehow connected to Aum Shinrikyo's potential involvement with energy and earthquake generating weapons, designs for which the Russians were supposedly developing with the Japanese at the time. Proof? A lot of contact between the Russians and Japanese members of the cult and the remarkable fact that Shoko Asahara, the founder of Aum Shinrikyo, predicted an earthquake in Kobe Japan nine days before it occurred in January of 1995.

Of course, like most internet conspiracy theories, the later parts of the treatise were less detailed and more speculative, attempting to connect the Banjawarn incident to myriad catastrophes. Everything from a freak storm and explosion in Mansfield, United Kingdom in 1987 to the destruction of Flight 800 off New York City in July 1996, and the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995. It even mentioned a high-density energy slug shot into space from Western Australia as warding off an alien craft in 1991, as documented by a Space Shuttle video. It all struck Dick as farfetched and paranoid, but he knew from his own experience there were at least some small grains of truth hidden in many of the internet's wacky and/or paranoid conspiracy theories. And, he noted that the speculation about Tesla designed energy weapons, remote earthquake



inducers, and the like had a Russian connection ... and so did Pyotr Nerevsky.

## CHAPTER 13

Dick dipped the end of an impressively thick piece of bacon into a glob of honey, then bit off a chunk. Like many Aussie buffet breakfasts, the hotel dining room had stations for guests from various locales. Dick had hit up the American station, with bacon, an omelet post, and waffles with syrup, chocolate nibs, and whipped cream. Melanie had picked up some oatmeal there, then headed over to the Asian station for fruit and various things Dick couldn't identify. Seth got a little bit of everything from everywhere. That's what kids do, he knew; they experiment. Dick, on the other hand, already knew what he liked and he liked what was familiar.

"New plan for the day," he announced as the waiter walked away after refreshing his cup of coffee.

"Don't tell me you're canceling the tour of the Super Pit," complained Seth, who then lowered his voice and continued. "You said it was a good way to maintain our visibility as, you know, tourists."

"I already got tickets from the concierge," added Melanie.

"No, no," replied Dick. "That's still on ... but just for you guys. Look, the best way to get this research done is for you both to maintain our —" He tilted his head toward Seth, "— tourist profile and finish making inquiries about the more UFO sightings in Western Australia. In the meantime, I'll pop up north to Banjawarn Station. You know, do the whole pilgrimage for an obsessed fan of UFO phenomena, then come back and meet you here."

It was a stretch, but Dick guessed he could persuade Nerevsky that as long as the family was helping with the mission, they didn't necessarily have to be in the same place with each other each and every moment. Besides, he also thought that given the manpower shortage yesterday's botched surveillance implied, he could pull the team monitoring them up north to keep tabs on him, leaving Melanie and Seth out of danger. Well, except for the short list of killer Aussie animals Seth had identified as actually being local to where they were.

He doubted Melanie would go anywhere near anyplace a respectable snake would hang out—that just left Red-backed Spiders, if he recollected correctly. And Melanie wasn't afraid of spiders. She was a strong woman. She had to be to put up with him.

Seth typed something into his phone. "Banjarn Station, that's quite a distance. No way you can pop up there and be back here tonight."

"Not by car," Dick replied. "Not even by air if I'm going to have time to do anything while I'm there. I'll stay overnight and get back tomorrow afternoon. I'm leaving the car for you to use. You can drop me off at the local airfield. I've arranged for a light plane and a local bush pilot to take me." He turned to his wife. "The concierge is quite helpful." Of course, he'd used the concierge. If he was going to draw surveillance off of his family, he had to make sure they had time to make their own arrangements to follow him through the skies.

Melanie frowned. "I don't like the idea of you flying in one of those little planes."

Dick chuckled. "Then thank goodness you don't know how many times I've done it ... and how many times I've jumped out of them."

Melanie pressed her lips together, then sighed. "Sometimes I think I liked it better when I thought you were a wastewater treatment consultant."

Dick reached out and covered her hand with his. "Sometimes I think you never really believed that I was." He patted her hand. "What is undeniably true, however, is they are both shitty jobs." Shitty jobs that keep a lot of people from dying.

#

After his family dropped him off at Kalgoorlie-Boulder Airport, Dick checked in at the Goldfield Tours and Outback and Back Services counter. A fit-looking man in his early fifties with a graying, curling beard and hair to match checked his identification, charged his credit

card, and motioned for Dick to follow. Instead of handing him off to someone else or taking him to a gate, the fellow simply headed past a Pilatus PC-12 sporting the logo of the Royal Flying Doctor Service toward a Cessna 172. He opened the door and motioned Dick inside, then followed and took the pilot's seat. He began going through his pre-flight checklist as he spoke.

"Connal Westerton, at your service. Next stop, Banjawarn Airport at Lake Darlot, Western Australia." He looked at Dick. "No bags, no camera equipment, so—"

Dick held up his cell phone.

"—no *sophisticated* camera equipment, so am I correct in assuming you are looking for a direct flight with panoramic vistas *en route*?"

Dick wrinkled his nose. "Happy to see any sights along the way, but you can skip the broad vistas. Prefer to be low enough to see anything interesting on the ground, but not so low you have to dodge anything along the way. Got you for an overnighter there and back, so I may ask you to deviate a bit along the way if something catches my eye."

The pilot nodded. "I'll slip over the Super Pit on the way out. Can't really miss a hole that awesome and gargantuan, even if I tried. Then head north, paralleling Route 49 on the east side til we get to Lake Marmion. Most interesting sight along the way. Will crossover to Lake Ballard as the road jogs east and show that off a bit, before tacking to the north-northeast past Leonora. Eventually, the main road will wander northwest and we'll leave it behind and head straight in to Banjawarn." He smiled. "All, of course, subject to any detours you care to take, as long as they're within conservative flight range parameters." He waved vaguely to the north. "Bad place to run out of fuel."

Dick hmmmfed. "Worse place to run out of water, I imagine."

Connal shook his head. "Not when you're in a plane."

Within a few minutes, the flight check procedures were history, all the appropriate switches had been toggled, and the Cessna had lurched into the blindingly blue sky. Almost immediately, they were over the Super Pit. Dick gazed out at the massive strip-mining operation in awe.

“The Fimiston Open Pit is one of the largest open-cut gold mining operations in the world,” intoned Connal, on auto-pilot in terms of tour guide mode, even though he was handling all the controls manually. “Three point five kilometers long, one point six kilometers wide, and six hundred meters deep. More than fifteen million tonnes of ore are extracted annually, broken up by regular blasting and long-reach drills to probe and collapse underground voids, whether natural or resulting from shaft and tunnel mining in olden days.” He gestured at the series of switchbacks climbing from the depths of the pit to ground level. The road was already dotted with scads of trucks climbing out with ore and heading back empty. “Trucks make their thirty to forty-minute roundtrip trek to and from the pit twenty-four-seven each and every day of the year, excepting World Cup Finals. A typical truck will consume eight million dollars Aussie in fuel and three million in tyres over the course of their expected lifespan, hauling two hundred and sixty tonnes of ore to the mill on each trip.”

Dick wished he could be playing tourist with Seth today in the Super Pit instead of, well, playing tourist in some macabre pilgrimage to the site of a Japanese cult’s practice yard for a terrorist attack, but that was the job. Someone had to do it.

The Cessna banked only slightly as they headed north out of Kalgoorlie into the desolate, lonely wilds of the Outback. The view was expansive, even impressive, but desolate beyond belief. Horizon to horizon of reddish earth, brownish-tinged scrub, and scattered rocks and outcroppings. The few roads and trails looked artificial, as if imposed on a Martian landscape where they didn’t truly belong. The rhythmic thrum of the Cessna subtly reminded Dick he was not part of the ecology of the land, but a mere observer in a contrivance which was as foreign to this place as the prisoners plunked down on the coast when the continent was colonized by the British.

The farther they got from Kalgoorlie, the fewer human impositions Dick saw. Some smaller scale mining operations, windmills, metal water troughs, and ramshackle farmhouses associated with sheep

stations, but damn few sheep per acre, especially compared to the flocks he'd seen grazing contentedly on the green-soaked hills of New Zealand when he was there. Still, he searched the vista with the patience and systematic shifts of focus of someone who'd once had to look for enemies or for squad members in need of rescue during combat operations. At first, every sighting of a bounding kangaroo or slinking dingo distracted him from his quest, but before long he'd trained his mind to ignore the wildlife and focus for something different ... something else.

He kept at it, but broke the conversational silence without looking at Connal.

"Ever seen anything strange?"

"Saw a two-headed snake at a reptile sanctuary when I was a wee lad, but I 'spect that's not what you're asking."

"Yeah. Not what I had in mind." Dick tilted his head forward.

"Weird things in the desert. Odd lights in the sky."

"The mines, near everybody from the Fimiston Pit to the small time scrabblers, blast on a regular basis. So, you get sudden plumes of dust snaking up into the sky ... some of 'em two-headed. Seen yahoos—tourists most likely—driving off-road at night, shining spotlights and shootin' at critters. The occasional bush fire or dust devil. Some spectacular lightning displays, but mostly in the distance—too dry away from the coast. A couple of meteorites burning green, then white, then red before they burn up or disappear over a ridge or the horizon."

Dick perked up, but kept looking out. "Anything especially odd about the meteorites?"

Connal harumphed. "Beggin' your pardon, you being a person interested in Banjarn Station and all, but nothing like glowing red hemispheres of light or inexplicable flashes or mushroom clouds." There was a pause. "I do encounter drones from time to time, especially after notable meteorite events, whether one I've seen personal or heard were reported via the telly or hanger chit-chat."

"Drones?"

“Yep. Figure they’re mostly from the DFN.”

“What’s that? Military?”

Connal chuckled loud enough to be heard over the pulsing engine thrum. “Not hardly. The Desert Fireball Network, part of the Global Fireball Observatory effort.”

“There’s a Global Fireball Observatory effort?”

“Oh, yeah. Started here, as I recall. They’ve got operations all around the globe now, but mainly where there are people with computers and ... well ... too much bloody time on their hands. They put up cameras which take long-exposure shots of the sky at night every thirty, forty seconds, then feed the information into a data dump and the computers analyze it and spit out any indications of anomalies, so people can see ‘em and track ‘em. Some of the science blokes, they try to figure where the meteor came from. But at least in the WA, most of the regulars are more interested in where the meteorites land. They send out drones to try to find chunks of rock what fell from the sky. Prolly well below any airspace I’d like to share, but you never know. Just in case, I keep an eye out when they’re buzzing around like crows over a fresh dingo kill.”

Dick sat up straight and finally glanced over at his companion. This could save him a lot of time. “So, there’s an organization that can give me truckloads of information about the night sky over this area?” That would be incredibly useful.

“Ahhh, nah. Not to say they don’t have terabytes and terabytes of information. But they put up their cameras close to home, which means the coastal areas back toward Perth and north from there, or the populated areas east and southeast. Not to say wankers aren’t out and about hereabouts looking for meteorite fragments, either by foot or using drones, but they don’t have further guidance from the DFN cameras once they get way out here.”

Dick’s posture slipped back into a hunch and he refocused his attention on the ground flowing beneath the Cessna.

Time passed as monotonously as the ground beneath the droning plane.

Then a glint off to the right ... east ... caught his eye. He pointed. "Can we swing around there? Just short of that trail skirting the edge of the gray ridge."

"As they say on the brothel tour: 'Your dollar. Your desire.'" Connal eased the small plane into a shallow clockwise curve, dipping the starboard wing in the process. "You'll have to guide me as we get closer, so keep your eye fixed on the spot you want a better view of and I'll do my best to keep it on your side of the plane as we come around."

While the glint of sun on metal had disappeared as their angle to the spot changed, Dick had no trouble maintaining the position. A short spur ran from the trail at the bottom of the ridge, poking out at a right angle and ending maybe a klick westward. The end of the spur was where he'd seen the glint, in an indistinct jumble of reddish-brown protuberances at the bottom of a minor hillock. Probably just a flat face of shiny quartz or a bit of glass detritus in some rocks—God knows people littered wherever they went—but the detour was a break from the unrelenting, dusty nothingness which extended as far and wide as he could see in every direction. He pointed out the front windscreen as the Cessna straightened and approached the spot.

"See the darkish clump, right there? Is that just a pile of rocks or something man-made?"

Connal raised his left hand up and shielded his eyes. "Man-made, I'd venture, but sanded in by the drifts caused by that bump-out next to it. Don't recall seeing it before. Might have been completely covered by and by, but recent winds shifted the sands."

"What do you think it was?"

"Hard to see. Harder to say. Hoist for an old mine shaft. Wind generator for a well-water pump." The shape of the protuberance became clearer as they got closer. "Looks angular at the base. Might have been taller, but the top got knocked over by wind or rusting out. Path suggests it was maintained at some point, but not regular and not



for a while. If you look close, you can see a rectangular outline around it—maybe fenced at some point, not like a fence would stop anybody ... or anything ... out here what wanted to take a closer look-see.” Connal set the plane at a light bank, circling the point.

“It’s not a ... navigational ... thingy?” asked Dick, his mind unable to come up with the real words he meant to say.

“A navigational thingy? That a technical term?”

Dick flushed. “Had some neighbors over for a barbecue in New Jersey, years back. They’d been on a road trip to the western United States, crossing the prairie along where the covered wagons took the Oregon Trail to the northwest. Kept seeing these small, squat, low buildings with what looked to be a steeple in the center. No windows. No markings. Surrounded by a square of chain-link. They were just sitting there out in the middle of the prairie or poking up from a cornfield or whatever. No real road to ‘em. Just an overgrown path. Started calling them Children of the Corn Shrines. Asked around, but nobody seemed to know what they were until finally a real estate agent told them they were some kind of radar or some shit used to track planes at cruising altitude. You know, when they weren’t near an airport or landing or taking off.”

“I dunno. Maybe some old VOR stations or somesuch.”

“VOR?”

“VHF Omnidirectional Range. It was used for navigational before—” He tapped a small screen in the dash. “—GPS became commonplace. Had a steeple-like tower atop a squat receiver. Nobody needed on site to run it.”

Dick jerked his thumb toward the unknown clump on the ground. “Could this be that?”

“Not likely. Aside from mine surveying and sightseeing trips, not much in the way of flights hereabouts. None justifying ground station navigation out woop woop ... ah ... beyond the black stump.”

“Out where?”

Connal screwed up his face. "Out, you know, in the never never ... ah ... the middle of nowhere, I guess you would say. All same same, just different phraseology." He seemed to regain his composure. "What do you want to do? We're most of the way to where we're going and, far as we can tell from the air, there's nothing there, mate."

Dick frowned. "Can you give me a GPS location? I'll drive out and see for myself while I'm on the ground."

"Your dollar. Your desire."

## CHAPTER 14

Dick left Connal behind, seeing to refueling his aircraft for return, as he bounced out of Banjawarn Airport in the location's only rental, an aging Range Rover. His plan was simple. Complete his pilgrimage, then take a detour to the location of their mysterious "find" in the desert, which he had tagged with the name "The Steeple of Woop Woop" in his mind. He'd do the stop at Banjawarn Station first, then head into the never never. He didn't know how long either stop would take, so he brought enough water and other simple supplies to allow him to sleep in the vehicle, if necessary.

Banjawarn Station wasn't much to look at, but then nothing on the dusty ride out to it was exactly bursting with color or beauty, either. A star picket fence, weathered, but newer than most any he'd seen since the airport, paralleled the road as he approached the entrance to the fabled station. Still, it took some time to get there—the Aussie equivalent of a ranch was composed of half a million acres—the same size as the Ponderosa if he remembered correctly from the reruns his mom liked to watch when folding laundry. A bevy of trucks even more weathered than the fence huddled near the main entrance. Out here, you might not fix a piece of equipment that shuddered to a halt, but you never got rid of anything which conceivably could provide parts to fix something else. It's not that the station owners in the Outback were poor—though neither the global economy nor global warming were helping their prospects—but it was just too far and too much trouble to get something new when something old and worn-out would do.

He pulled into Banjawarn Station and simply turned off the ignition. There was no need to go to the door of the farmhouse or the entrance to the shearing barn or anywhere else. The noise of his vehicle carried over the dirt and spinifex grasses which dominated the landscape. The dust billowing up from the wake of the Range Rover still wafted lazily upward in the long line of his approach. Decades after the fact, now owned by people who weren't at the Station at the time of Aum

Shinrikyo's ownership, Dick didn't really expect any new information. He was just doing what he needed to do and happy to take any data that came his way without pushing.

Nigh unto ten minutes passed before a wrinkled woman in a faded sundress appeared at the door to the house. She pushed open the screen, shadowed her eyes with her hand and squinted toward Dick, then turned her head to face back into the house. "Just another weirdo," she hollered, before turning back and striding out toward him. The screen door slammed and bounced twice before settling in place behind her.

"Got nothin' for you, mister," she called out as she got close. "All that fireball nonsense is unadulterated bullshit. Saw nothin' then; got nothin' for you now. Just mindin' my cattle, my sheep, my dogs, and my own damn business. Suggest you do the same."

"Don't care about any of that," replied Dick through the open window of the Range Rover. "But I've got a hundred local if you give me permission to take a couple pictures."

"No one wants a picture of me," said the woman.

"I doubt that," replied Dick with an easy smile, "but I don't need you in the picture in any case. Just want a picture or three of the ranch ... er ... station."

Her brow furrowed. "You a reporter? Don't need no more retrospectives on the Aum Shinrikyo or flashes or earthquakes or glowing red lights or uranium ore ... or dead sheep. Long as the water flows, my sheep do just fine."

"I'm not a reporter." That much was true, but he couldn't exactly tell her he was a spy. He paused. "I'm on what you might think of as an old-fashioned scavenger hunt, excepting I don't have to collect things so much as prove I've been to various places."

She approached the vehicle, but stayed at arm's length. She reached out her hand. "Money up front." Dick reached into his wallet and took out the necessary currency. He folded it and held it out to her. When she took it, he reached for the door handle.

“Stay in the car,” she barked out, before calming her tone. “No need for professional quality shots if this really is for a scavenger hunt.”

Dick withdrew his hand from the door handle and held them up, as if she were a rookie cop who might get spooked and do something stupid and deadly. “Fair enough. I do have one question, though, while I’m taking my shots.”

“Of course, you do.”

“Answer or not. Up to you.”

She took a deep breath. “Ask your question. Not like you weirdos ever ask anything not asked and answered a hundred times before.”

Dick held up his phone and snapped three quick pictures of the entrance and the buildings and vehicles nearby, then lowered it and looked the woman in the eye. “Seen any Russians up this way?”

She started and then squinted hard at him. Obviously, this was not a question asked and answered a hundred times.

“Back then, when we acquired the place after the Aum Shinrikyo skedaddled, or recently?”

“Ever.”

She tilted her head and squinted some more. It seemed like she was studying him, but the squinting might be due to the bright sunlight for all Dick knew.

Finally, she seemed to make up her mind about something. “Yes. Then and now. The Aum Shinrikyo, you know, had more Russians as members than Japanese, back in the day. Heard tell there were groups of them around about, back before the Station got raided. In the cleanup and aftermath, likewise. Still see some, usually two, three guys traveling together, from time to time. Folks say they ask about uranium ore and mining concessions and the like, but it’s not like the Russkies don’t have plenty of that shit without coming way out here to dig up a bunch of low-grade dirt.”

“So why do you think they’re here?”

“Dunno, really. Used to think maybe Aum Shinrikyo, they hid something the Russians are looking for. You know, like a treasure hunt.

But that kind of quest gets old and tired pretty quick. Nowadays, I just figure they're headed for a ridge where they can monitor the ULF broadcasts from Exmouth." She tilted her head to the west-northwest. "Or, maybe, the Jindalee Radar Network." She tilted her head east-southeast. "Eighty or so clicks the other way." She arched an eyebrow at him. "Why do you think they're here?"

Dick jinked the Range Rover into reverse. "I haven't a fucking clue." He waved, then backed up. He cut the wheel sharp to the right and drove out the entrance and back into the dusty embrace of the never never.

#

"Sometimes," said Netsurfer as they watched the waves and the bikini-clad beach bunnies, "I think Shangrilyfe is better than real life."

Seth3D laughed. "You're just saying that because hot women don't lounge around your basement in New Jersey, even though it's way nicer than the one in your old house."

"There's that, but it's not just the babes. I mean, think about it, in Shangrilyfe you don't need to work or sleep or take care of yourself. You don't even need to shower."

"Not true, dude. I've been gaming with you in your basement before and I can personally attest to the fact you need to take more showers."

"You know what I ... Hey, look at that!"

Seth looked up at the screen as a particularly fine female specimen walked out of the ocean in a wet white T-shirt.

"That. That right there. That never happens in New Jersey." Netsurfer's tone was almost wistful.

"That. That right there is why you need to take a shower ... a cold shower ... IRL."

"Nuh-uh," replied Netsurfer. "Games are real life. Your mind experiences reality as a series of electronic and chemical stimuli which input to your brain. Places like Shangrilyfe, they're getting better and

better at creating the same types of stimuli. As the tech gets better, the distinction between virtual reality and physical reality will blur, then fade and eventually disappear.”

Seth3D snorted. “While you lay on the couch in your basement, putrefying in your own sweat, wasting away from lack of nutrition, hooked up with wires and electrodes like Neo’s cocoon in *The Matrix*.”

“Not at all, dude. There are already interfaces that let people play rudimentary games with their minds, that let paraplegics use robotic arms with their minds, that let blind people see with their minds, that—”

“—that let pervs like you jerk off with their minds.”

“Look,” said Netsurfer, “if you add all that cutting-edge interface tech to the computing power behind a virtual reality like Shangrilyfe and layer in a bit of augmented reality tech, the day will come when you can go about the real world and it will look and feel and taste and sound and smell like a virtual reality world. Music will play in your mind and all of the chicks will be hot—”

“—and all of the dicks will be big.”

Netsurfer sputtered. Seth guessed Brian had let a big swallow of soda go down the wrong tube while they chatted online.

“And what’s wrong with that?”

Seth3D shrugged his shoulders. “Nothing, I guess. And, once that happens and enough time passes, people might even forget they’re in an augmented reality. They could think they’re actually IRL.”

“So?”

“I dunno. Seems kind of sad somehow. Some serious dudes, you know, science guys, could be trying to figure out the nature of the universe never even knowing it was fake.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“And every glitch and random bug would cause wonder and confusion and grand searches for an explanation when ... well, when it was nothing but a random power surge or a cosmic ray hitting an optic cable or a cockroach in the circuitry.”

“Yeech. No talking about cockroaches in Shangrilyfe. The place is bug-free as far as I can tell.”

They fell into companionable silence for a while.

Finally, Seth3D broke the silence. “You know what my dad says he dislikes the most about the internet?”

“That’s a tough call,” responded Netsurfer. “It’s a close race between (a) it’s got too much porn on it, and (b) you spend too much time on it. Of course, the two are related.”

Seth3D laughed. “No, that would be why your *mom* dislikes the internet.”

“True dat.”

“Nah. He says all the usual stuff about how all the world’s knowledge is on the internet, but people spend time looking at cat pictures, scrolling through click-bait, and arguing with strangers. But the absolutely most disappointing thing is that here, for the first time, you have the means to interact with everyone without anyone knowing if you’re young or old, white or Black or Asian, straight or gay, male or female or other, fat or thin, beautiful or mutt ugly—a means of eliminating all superficial bases for discrimination—but, instead, people use it to bully, demean, and harass each other about the same old prejudices. He just wishes the internet had lived up to its promise.”

“I guess,” said Netsurfer, “but your dad does know the internet is just a bunch of connections between people, right? It’s just a tool for people.”

“Yeah. So?”

“So, people are dicks. The internet just allows them to demonstrate their basic dickishness more efficiently.”

“That’s deep,” said Seth3D.

“That’s just the facts of life.”

Seth3D stood. “On that sad note, I guess I’d better book. Going on a tour of a giant gold mining pit. They’ve got these humongous excavators and trucks as tall as four-story buildings.”

“Awesome,” replied Netsurfer. “Your dad taking you?”



"Nah, he's running some errands. Mom is going along."

"Bummer."

"It's okay. Mom likes the vacationy parts of vacation."

"Still," said Netsurfer. "Women just don't get monster trucks. I mean, they've got great equipment, but they just don't appreciate great equipment."

"Shut up, dude. You're talking about my mom."

## CHAPTER 15

Even with GPS coordinates and an off-road capable vehicle, it took Dick more than three and a half hours to find the drifted-in equipment he and Connal had spotted from the air shortly before landing at Banjawarn Airport. Every single outcropping from the edge of the ridgeline got his hopes up, but the GPS didn't lie. Despite some misgivings, he ventured farther and farther from what passed as a main road ... which meant a single lane rutted dirt track ... out in the never never. Finally, late in the afternoon, he edged the Range Rover around yet another spur jetting out from the ridge and found the jumbled outcropping of dirt and half-buried equipment he'd seen from the air, a rectangle of weathered chain link guarding it on all sides, but so buried by dirt and sand he could step across it at will.

Though the fence was so short as to be an afterthought, the scale of the equipment itself was much larger than he'd expected. The view from the air had been at a safe distance and, with no known objects to scale against, had appeared relatively tiny from such vantage. Up close the fallen main tower looked to be at least eighty feet plus, though most of it was obscured by dirt. The only portion really exposed was parts of two sides of the tower's superstructure, which was comprised of an open, but surprisingly dense, tangle of Erector Set style riveted steel girders and braces. The tower narrowed at a regular angle from the base toward the top, then, based on the much wider knob of dirt bulging out, appeared to end in some kind of bulbous round top. A spherical shield protecting radar components? Dick had no way to know without a lot of digging.

Fortunately, he'd thought to make sure the Range Rover carried a shovel. It wasn't surprising it did; including a scat shovel to cover your shit when camping was basic equipment for a responsible outdoorsman. A smaller head and shorter handle than he might have liked for moving a substantial amount of dirt, but it and a lot of sweat would do the job.

Dick got to it. He always did what needed to be done.

He made good headway at uncovering the buried portions of most of one corner of the tower before the sun disappeared over the ridge line and he decided to quit for the day. A good choice, since it got real dark and surprisingly cold fast out woop woop. Cold air on sweat-damp clothing wasn't pleasant. Dick retreated to the supple leather seats of the Range Rover to rest, drink more than a liter of water, and chow down on his food supplies.

At some point he dozed off.

He woke in a state of hyper awareness, his senses in overdrive, his mind racing to figure out what had jolted him from his slumber. Without even looking at the time, he knew it was late, that he'd been asleep for hours. Not only was there a gummy crustiness at the corners of his eyes, but the dark of the Outback was stark and velvety black with pincushion pricks of light scattered liberally across the sky.

He turned first left, then right, as far as he was able, gazing out through the windows at the blackness, able to discern the behemoth tower he'd been digging out and the dirt and rubble enshrouding it only by the lack of diamond pinpricks in an uneven configuration at the lower portions of his field of view.

New moon. Pitch dark.

Excellent time for an invasion.

Only when he relaxed straining his eyes to see into the void did he notice an almost subsonic thrum vibrating through his bones. Earthquake? Or was something approaching? Something big?

He fumbled for the door handle and jerked it, bailing out of the car as he swore at the courtesy light flashing on in the passenger compartment as the door opened. So much for surprising whoever or whatever might be out there.

He stayed low, doing a somersault roll as he leapt from the passenger seat, using one arm to swat the door back shut as he went by. He came to a halt in a crouch, then slowly pivoted three hundred

and sixty degrees until he had peered into the starry abyss in all directions.

Still nothing, but the thrum was louder, more prominent outside the relatively airtight confines and rubber tire cushioned comfort of the vehicle. He felt it in the soles of his feet, but he also felt it in the air, a buffeting fluctuation in pressure from some source unknown. The hairs on his arms, already standing from the leap from the body-heat warmth of the SUV to the stark cool of the desert night, pulsed with the sluggish, steady beat. He even felt it on the top of his head, a staccato drumbeat from somewhere out of sight, hitting the entire area from some unseen height.

Fuck! That's when he thought to look up, not for something, but for nothing, for a void in the glitter that was the southern sky. For the fucking, whisper quiet black helicopter that had bedeviled him at Rendlesham Forest. For the assholes from the Subsidiary's Lightning Team, coming to swoop him up for another damn report. For the next smug Subsidiary representative who was looking for a report, but was really looking to get punched in the teeth. Rinse and repeat.

But, when he looked up, he didn't see anything and he didn't see nothing. He saw the full panoply of stars studding the sky unobstructed by clouds or helicopters or ...

*FLASH!*

A bright whiteness blinded him, leaving nothing but a forked, jagged afterimage on his retinas.

*BOOM!* A thunderclap instantaneously deafened him and threw him down onto the hardscabble earth. He instinctively flattened himself upon the ground as his mind reeled with adrenaline and questions.

*FLASH! BOOM!*

Again, he was assaulted. He closed his eyes tight and put his hands over his ears to protect his fragile eardrums. Then it came again and again and again.

*FLASH! BOOM! FLASH! BOOM! FLASH! BOOM!*

Though measured in milliseconds, the delay between the flashes and the booms seemed to somehow be decreasing as if whoever was pounding him with flash grenades was getting closer, or whatever pissed-off cousin of Thor atop the ridge tossing lightning bolts was zeroing in on their aim.

Lying flat on the ground helped protect him, but it wouldn't save him from a direct hit. He tensed, then waited for the next strike.

*FLASH, BOOM!*

The strike and the thunderclap melded into one as Dick leapt up and, in a low crouch, sprinted for the black void that represented the wider portion of the downed metal latticework of the strange tower ... The Steeple of Woop Woop. He held his arms out—one high to protect his head, one low to protect his knees and shins—until he felt the cool metal of one of the steel crossbeams. He stopped and felt about until he found one of the larger voids in the gridwork, where a piece had twisted and broken in the fall. He slitted his eyes, then held for the next flash, using it to sear an afterimage of the pattern of steel and open area on his retinas.

*FLASHBOOM!*

With his retinal map he contorted his body and stepped, twisting and ducking, into the void between metal pieces. Once inside, he angled to the left where the tower narrowed and quickly wriggled as far up and into the partially sand-entombed structure as possible, praying one of the Inland Taipans Seth had warned them about wasn't curled up in the dark, waiting to strike. Even aside from unwanted encounters with deadly wildlife, part of Dick's mind screamed that this retreat was about as smart as swinging a nine-iron on a golf course during a thunderstorm. But the other part of him hoped that between the grounding capabilities of the enshrouding sand and the lattice work of metal now completely surrounding him, he was effectively protected from the bolts of searing electricity as if in a Faraday Cage. He remembered seeing some old black and white documentary with some guy sitting safely as high voltage electricity zapped and crackled across

the surface of a protective cage of metal lattice. He also knew a small Faraday Cage pocket protected his Subsidiary cell phone from disruption or surveillance when he was carrying it, but not using it, on a mission.

*FLASHBOOM! FLASH, BOOM! FLASH! BOOM!*

*FLASH!*

*BOOM!*

As suddenly as it started, it stopped. Still, he wasn't stupid. He waited for ten minutes to be sure. Then he crawled through the utter blackness of his entombing structure toward fresher, cooler air, and the star-sparkled expanse of the Outback night.

All was quiet on the Western Australian front. A faint odor of ozone lingered in the clean, cold air, but whatever it was, it was over. Whatever had attacked him was gone.

What the hell?

He drained the lizard, made his way back to the Range Rover, and fell into a sleep punctuated with dreams of lights in the sky, big-eyed, gray aliens, and uncomfortable probes.

He woke at dawn finding he'd shifted into an awkward sleeping position atop the gear shift. Embarrassing, but less embarrassing than telling someone you were abducted by aliens. He'd leave this particular detail out of his reports to both Swynton and Nerevsky.

#

Come morning, the only evidence of the previous night's events, other than his own dreams, were several glassy spots on the ground, where bolts of electricity from the sky had fused the sandy soil into crystalline form. He pocketed a few pieces for later study, ate a couple of granola bars, swigged some water, then got back to digging.

By noon, he'd reached the end of the steeple-like superstructure and began shoveling dirt away from the rounded device atop it. He'd expected some kind of white plastic dome or curved, solid sheets, like

protected many radar antennae. Instead, he found that, after a relatively narrow collar of shiny metal extending maybe one-fifth of the way up from the bottom, the spherical top to the tower was also an open grid of metal parts. This material, however, was narrower and more fragile, almost electrical in its look. It definitely wasn't structural; it wasn't supporting anything or holding things together. Instead, it looked as if an outer mesh-like surface comprising the entire middle and top portion of the slightly flattened globe perhaps collected energy. A more conical series of electrical parts perhaps conveyed such power through an open circle at the top to the sky.

He took a rest from his hard labors and tried to envision the entire setup in his mind's eye. The Erector Set Steeple of Woop Woop standing tall, holding a gleaming disco ball high above the bleak landscape of the Outback, soaking in ... what? Energy? From where? Radiation from the uranium ore common in these parts? Solar power?

Then, what? Neither the topography, whether from above or the ground, suggested any kind of cabling or wires for transmission to or from the site. Did the power somehow collected get transmitted into the sky? Perhaps to a geosynchronous satellite array? Or was the device merely passing along what it received to the next apparatus in an entire series, like the Beacons of Gondor in *Lord of the Rings*? If so, what was it signaling? Who was it warning?

And, then, in a flash as bright as those of the night before, it came to him. He'd seen this kind of tower before. Not at a military base when he was in the Army Rangers. Not in a communications array he'd infiltrated while on a mission for the Subsidiary. Not even on a drilling platform far out to sea. No, in a documentary long, long ago about Nikola Tesla.

Wireless electricity or generating dynamos or who knows what, but this ... this tower ... was something out of the discarded electrical engineering schemes of Tesla.

Long seconds after that flash of insight came a rumbling, grumbling roar of a throaty boom as Dick also recollected that somewhere in the

lengthy ramblings of Harry Mason's Bright Skies report about the Banjawarn Station incident was a long, dissembling discussion of Tesla energy weapons, earthquake generators, Tesla fireballs, orange-red Tesla shields, and Magnifying Energy Transmitters.

Truth told, he'd skimmed through those parts pretty quickly because ... well, because it was late at night and he typically didn't give too much credence to internet conspiracy theories. And, it was highly speculative and even more fantastic. But he should have known better; he should have paid closer attention. If his work in Denver had taught him anything, it was that even the most outlandish internet conspiracy theories can have some small, core kernel of truth. And if the Canary Islands had taught him anything, it was that bad guys will do monstrously outlandish and unbelievable things.

He had a lot of re-reading to do.

But, for now, he had to make sure to get back to Banjawarn in plenty of time for his pick-up back to Kalgoorlie and his family. After last night, he thought they might be in a whole lot more danger than when he believed Nerevsky was a nut-job with a fetish. Okay, Nerevsky was a nut-job with a fetish—at least for bizarre sports—but he also might be on to something the Russians or maybe others had been covering up out woop woop. And, just maybe, Dick should give a big fucking woop woop about whatever that was.



## CHAPTER 16

Seth and Melanie were waiting for Dick at Kalgoorlie-Boulder Airport. Melanie greeted Dick with a kiss which lingered long enough for Seth to suggest they “get a room.” For his part, Seth practically bubbled over with excitement about the tour they’d taken the day before at the Super Pit. Facts and statistics poured out of him so quickly Dick had no real opportunity to digest them; he was just happy his kid had enjoyed at least part of this misbegotten adventure.

“What about you, Dad? Anything cool happen up at Banjawarn Station? Any new leads?”

Dick ran his tongue over his front teeth while he contemplated how much to say.

“Banjawarn Station was pretty much the boring place I expected it to be. I don’t think they really appreciate tourists or ... researchers ... bothering them.” He paused. “Did have to take cover from a pretty intense lightning storm overnight out at a ridge line I was camping below.”

“That’s funny,” said Melanie. “No lightning here. No rain. No thunder. Didn’t see or hear a thing. Nothing.”

Dick waved her off. “No reason for you to have. Banjawarn Station’s over four hundred kilometers ... two hundred fifty miles ... away from here. Sure, you can get huge lines of thunderstorms associated with a weather front, but you won’t see hide nor hair of a lightning strike more than thirty or so miles away.”

“Er ... not true, Dad,” said Seth. “At least, not necessarily true.”

“Really? You become an expert on lightning storms at some point?”

Seth wrinkled his nose. “Not really. It’s just that Mom and me, well we, you know, kept asking people we met while you were gone about lights in the sky and shit ... er ... stuff ... and one guy suggested the whole thing could have been a lightning strike with associated ball lightning or ignited methane gas escaping from an old mine opening.”

Dick wrinkled his nose as he tossed his bag into the back of the SUV and headed for the driver's side door, then corrected himself and headed to the opposite side of the vehicle to the actual driver's side door. "Yeah. Heard some of that earlier from others. Sounds like a bit of a stretch to me."

Seth jumped into the back seat. "It did to me, too. So, I did some checking online once we got back to the hotel last night—I guess just about the same time you were taking cover from the storm up north—and I found out there's actually a recently documented case of a single megaflash of lightning in South America that covered four hundred and forty miles and lasted almost seventeen seconds. And there have been ones in Oklahoma that have been two to three hundred miles end to end."

Dick started the SUV. "Really?"

"Oh, my," said Melanie as she buckled in.

"Yeah. Of course, those kinds of strikes are only associated with what they call mesoscale convective systems. Really huge storms with a lot of energy and moisture in them, which affect a huge area all at one time."

Dick pulled out onto the road for the short drive to the hotel. "So, not what you have here in the arid environment of Western Australia, either last night or way back in 1993."

"Exactomundo," agreed Seth.

If one of his old partners at the Subsidiary had had this colloquy with him, Dick would have grouched that they had wasted his time, but he realized that was not the correct response. Not just that Seth was his kid and Dick wanted to treat him better than someone from work, but that Seth had gone above and beyond the call of duty. He and Melanie had kept interviewing in his absence, furthering both their cover and his research, and Seth had taken a bit of new information obtained, researched it on his own time, and debunked it as a possibility, but still presented it to Dick so he wasn't left out of the analytical equation.

Dick glanced to the back seat. “Good work. You’re a whiz with that computer, Seth.”

“Thanks,” replied Seth, blushing. “I figure if you have the entire knowledge of the civilized world in your hands, you ought to use it for something besides playing games and arguing with strangers.”

It was a fine, warm, bonding family moment for a few precious seconds, then Melanie spoke up.

“Or looking at porn—”

They drove in silence for several minutes.

Maybe it was the lack of conversation that heightened Dick’s concentration on the road in front of him and the traffic behind, but his adrenaline surged when he noticed the same dusty, silver sedan he’d seen following them a couple days back. He kept an eye on it, watching more intently when it turned off and, sure enough, was quickly replaced in his rearview mirror by a gray van.

The good news was that whoever was tailing him and his family obviously hadn’t managed to install a tracking device on the SUV or they wouldn’t need to be following so close. The bad news was he still didn’t know who they were.

Ultimately, Dick decided he didn’t give a shit, at least not right now. They could follow him to the hotel, just like the other night, and he’d check in to see if anyone from the Subsidiary was keeping an eye on them. He didn’t really think so, but he needed to eliminate that possibility before he began speculating on who was keeping tabs on this mission and why.

Unfortunately, his pursuers had something else in mind.

As Dick was cutting through a traffic-free side street on the way to the hotel, the silver sedan entered the block from the opposite end, then accelerated rapidly toward them. Less than eight car lengths ahead, the driver—a white male with beady eyes—cut the wheel sharply and the car slid sideways, blocking their path. At the same moment, Dick heard the pop of shots being fired from the van now closing in from behind.

Fuck!

“Get down! And stay there,” barked Dick as his mind raced through alternative courses of action. If he was on his own, especially in his own car, Dick just would have plowed through the obstacle in front, trading fire with the would-be killers. But he wasn’t going to crash head-first into anything with his wife in the front seat and his kid in back.

He wrenched the wheel hard to the left into the exit for a drive-thru bank deposit and ATM lane, blaring his horn to ward off anyone who might be turning into the lane from the opposite side of the cash-dispensing machines. He purposely clipped the back of the freestanding ATM one lane left with the passenger side mirror, which prompted a scream of terror from Melanie as the mirror tore off. Hopefully, it also triggered a tamper alarm which would draw the local cops to the area, thinking a robbery was in progress.

Unfortunately, he didn’t have time to wait around for the Australian mounties or whatever they were called to come to the rescue. The gray van pursued them into the bank drive-thru and so did the gunfire. Short bursts; probably a MAC 10 from the sound of it. Not the weapon of a sniper, but plenty effective, and being wielded by someone smart enough not to fire bursts in full-auto mode. Their SUV thundered out of the entrance to the bank’s parking lot onto a somewhat busier thoroughfare, drawing a horn blast because Dick had straightened out the vehicle on the wrong side of the street. Melanie gasped, but Dick didn’t have time to reassure her.

“Stay down!” he barked.

He swerved into the correct lane and kept his eyes as much on the center rearview mirror as on the street ahead. He was still accelerating, one thumb pressing down to keep the horn blaring at all times. It cleared traffic, warned off pedestrians, and, hopefully, would draw the attention of any approaching patrol cars.

To his irritation, he saw no sign of Kalgoorlie’s constabulary—no doubt checking out the historic brothel tourist district—but he did see the gray van lumbering onto the roadway behind him. A quick glance to the left as he sped through a four-way stop revealed the silver sedan

racing parallel to his path, no doubt trying to cut him off, if not at the pass, then at an intersection two or three blocks ahead. He couldn't let that happen. If the cops wouldn't come to him, he'd have to go to them.

"Seth! I need directions to the nearest police station. Now!"

He felt a bit odd following the instruction always given to women driving alone if they think they are being followed by a predator or if an unmarked vehicle with a single Mars light is trying to get them to stop on a lonely piece of road. Still, only idiots would roll their pursuit and gunfight into the parking lot of a police station.

"Why?" shouted Seth.

"I need a place where the bad guys won't follow."

"Gotcha."

Dick glanced back and saw Seth poke his head up and look out the window.

"Stay down!"

Seth ducked. "Turn right and keep going straight."

Dick didn't know how the hell the kid could get a bead on the nearest police station in less time than it would take Dick to access an app on his phone, but you either trust your partners in the field or you die. He took his foot off the gas, jinked the wheel hard to the right, skidding around the corner at speed, then floored it again.

"How far?"

"What?" replied Seth.

"How far to the police station? Which side of the street?"

"No police station. When the road Ts, turn right again and head through the gate into the Super Pit."

"We need protection!"

"Guard station. Plus, trucks roll twenty-four-seven, so we know people will be around."

Dick gritted his teeth. The kid meant well and he got points for making a fast decision, but rent-a-cops weren't likely to scare off the bad guys, even if they were packing and he doubted they would be. Still, he'd back Seth's play. It was better than careening through

Kalgoorlie waiting to see if a zinging bullet or a high-speed crash would wound or kill his family.

Sure enough, the street ended at T-intersection with a broader road near the edge of the massive gold mining pit. Dick eased some extra speed out of the long gentle curves of the road, then spied the guard shack at the entrance. He'd hoped for a cement block redoubt, but it was a simple wooden affair, with no real cover, even if he managed to somehow get his family inside with the confused guards before the gray van closed on them.

Instead, he flew though, busting the gate, and sending one guard leaping, while another grabbed for a phone. At least now he knew the police would soon be on the way. Of course, he had no exit and didn't relish the thought of racing down the hairpin turns passing behemoth haul trucks blind as they lumbered up and down the hill in a constant cycle of replenishment. He cast about for some alternative before the road into the depths was his only option.

Seth poked his head up again, but before Dick could yell at the kid, Seth pointed to one side. "Pull into the boneyard. Maybe we can hide the car."

Dick looked where his kid was pointing. The boneyard was a sizeable lot to one side of the road with room for parking while tourists ogled cast offs from the Super Pit's history of mining. Big haul trucks with tires twelve feet tall, shovelers, graders, and the like, all abandoned in one spot to accommodate tourist photos and kids on holiday. Dick had no real choice. He pulled in, accelerated toward the spot holding the largest of the gargantuan cast-offs and braked hard, spinning the steering wheel and skidding through loose gravel to a stop with the passenger doors away from the pursuing van and close to the gigantic equipment.

"Out! Out! Out!" If Dick had learned nothing else in the military, he had learned any order was made more urgent by repeating it three times in rapid succession. Seth quickly bailed out of the back seat, slammed the door behind him, and crouched behind the car. Dick

arched over Melanie's huddled form and grabbed the door handle, wrenching her door open and half-shoving her out as he awkwardly straddled the center console so he could follow her out her side of the vehicle.

Dick turned to Seth. "Is the kangaroo of many colors bag in the back?" Dick had left his complimentary gift bag of spy equipment behind when he went to Banjawarn Station, not wanting to have to deal with the hassle of explosives and unregistered firearms just in case either Kalgoorlie-Boulder Airport or, much less likely, Banjawarn Airport had any scanning or security equipment checks.

"Y-yeah, I think so."

Dick re-opened the back door and slid in, grabbing the tourist bag, and sliding back out as he reached in and grabbed the pistol he'd been provided. Melanie cowered, stunned and shaking, by the front wheel well. Seth crouched to one side, hugging her protectively. Dick searched for options, looking past them toward a giant shovel and an ore truck beyond. There was more of a gap between the shovel and the front of their vehicle than he liked, but he saw no other alternatives. They'd have to move fast.

Dick pointed. "Get behind that ore shovel, now!" he ordered. "Go! Go! Go!"

Seth half-lifted Melanie and urged her forward, both of them keeping low. Dick crouched at the side of the car, near where he'd sheared off the passenger sideview mirror, and extended his weapon with both arms over the hood of the car, loosing one valuable round of ammunition at the windshield of the rapidly approaching gray van to provide at least some minimal cover for his family's dash for the protection of the massive shovel. As he followed close behind, Dick caught a glimpse of the silver sedan entering the boneyard, too.

If these assholes had any smarts or training, they'd be flanking them from opposite sides within minutes. Dick rested his back against the hot metal of the shovel for a few moments to put together a tactical plan.

“Shouldn’t we have stayed with the car?” asked Seth, his arm still around his mother, who had the pale appearance of someone going into shock. “We had cover on all sides and the chance to drive away if we got a break.”

Dick kept thinking while he responded to what his guidance counselor in high school would have called a “teachable moment.”

“A regular vehicle provides concealment, not cover. The bullet for a typical street weapon will penetrate through the sheet metal body and back out the other side, unless it hits the engine block or maybe the housing for the automatic windows. Best cover you can get aside from the engine is the wheel wells. Differential, axles, and brakes are all relatively solid.” He rapped on the metal he was leaning against with the butt of his gun. “This stuff is super heavy duty. It’ll stop anything.” Dick tilted his head toward the old tires farther down the line of dusty, unused equipment. “Fuck, the tires are thick and resilient enough, they’d probably stop what these bozos have.”

He focused in on the series of discarded gargantuan tires. “In fact ... take your mother and sneak down to those tires leaning up against one another. Stash her laying down in one and you take cover in the one behind her, then stay down. With all the commotion we’ve caused, the cavalry’s bound to be arriving soon in a hell of a big hurry. We just have to stay alive until they get here.” Dick knew Seth couldn’t run as fast as before his burn injuries—he wasn’t that long out of Physical Therapy—but Seth could still run as fast as Melanie, and that would be enough for this situation.

Seth gave a curt nod and grabbed his mom’s elbow, urging her to go with him. Melanie looked at Dick, her eyes pleading with him to join them.

“Go!” said Dick. “Go with Seth, now. Go! Go! Go!”

Dick twisted back to the edge of the shovel and peeked out, his weapon ready to draw attention and provide cover if needed, but the yokels in pursuit hadn’t yet gotten out of their respective vehicles. He turned back toward the retreating forms of his wife and son.



“Remember,” he called after them. “Tourists. We’re just tourists. We don’t know who these guys are or why they are after us.”

That last part was true, truer than Dick wanted it to be, but it could be handy in case anyone demanded a polygraph over this bizarre incident.

Dick didn’t really want to start a gun fight. Not only was he outgunned, but explaining to the local constabulary why he had a weapon, and where he got it, would complicate his life. But he clenched it tight; better a complicated life for him than no life at all for his wife and his son.

Still, if he wasn’t going to provide covering fire, he had to do something to distract their pursuers. He poked his head around the corner of the shovel edge, then ducked back. He smiled when he heard several rounds pound into the other side of the heavy slab of metal. They’d seen him; they were hoping to pin him down.

He couldn’t let them do that. And, he couldn’t chance they’d find and capture his family as a way to leverage him. He dithered for a few more seconds, giving Melanie and Seth precious time to hide, then made a decision. If these guys were after him, if they thought he had something they wanted, they’d pursue him. He turned, planting one foot against the solid edge of the shovel he was behind and tensed, as if setting for wind sprints in football training camp. Then he exploded out from behind his cover in a mad dash back for the SUV his family had abandoned. He threw himself inside, contorting himself into a low, awkward position behind the wheel, started the vehicle, and punched down on the accelerator.

He jammed the gear shift into drive so hard his hand twinged.

The SUV bolted forward and Dick spun the wheel hard to the left without bothering to look through the windshield. The vehicle spun, spraying gravel like shrapnel in a wide arc as it did, hopefully causing the bad guys to duck for cover. Then he straightened the wheel and adjusted his position so he could see the road. He left the parking lot for the boneyard by darting out the side and onto a roadway which, he

prayed, would lead to the pit. After all, the tour buses got from here to there somehow and there weren't a lot of choices for which way to go.

He continued to pick up speed on a short straightaway, then curved left, T-ing onto a broader roadway wide enough to let two of the massive ore haulers pass one another with room to spare. He turned left, the direction of the massive pit, without stopping. He didn't want to end up in a maze of ore crushing equipment and potential dead ends. As he turned, he looked out the window and confirmed that both the silver sedan and the gray van were in hot pursuit. He wasn't sure what would happen next, but at least Melanie and Seth were away from the action and that was enough to give him a charge of bravado.

"Catch me if you can, fuckers!" he yelled, even though he knew they couldn't hear him. He floored the accelerator and raced down a sloping broad gravel roadway. Sooner than he expected, the roadway disappeared from view and he realized the first of many hairpin turns was fast upon him. He braked, jerked the wheel abruptly, then tapped on the accelerator again and took the first hairpin in a sliding drift that made him feel like he was in an action movie. Of course, the looming rear end of a behemoth ore truck, its tires three times as tall as his SUV almost ended the flick in the first reel. With no time to stop, he instead committed to a blind pass of the truck. He flew by the empty ore truck, drawing a thunderous horn blast as he did. Once well past the monster truck, he glanced into the rearview mirror, expecting the trucker to be flipping him off, but instead the worker had a radio handset up to his mouth, no doubt cautioning his fellows against the madman speeding into the pits of hell.

Dick slowed somewhat, vowing to be better prepared for the next turn. Control wasn't a problem. The road was well-graded, with long patches of dry gravel alternating with gravel which had been wet with spray to keep dust down. He took the second turn at a more controlled pace and again accelerated into the next straightaway sloped downward. Another glance back revealed that his pursuers were one level up on the roadway and trying to make up some distance on him.

Dick wasn't sure what he would do when the slalom course ended at the bottom of the pit. For now, he just needed to keep ahead and lead his adversaries farther from his family. The police had to be on their way by now, though there was no telling what their tactical approach might be.

Another massive truck loomed ahead. He moved over to pass, but a heavily laden ore transport was lumbering uphill too close to allow him to pass easily before it cleared. He braked and bided his time at what seemed like a crawl, his eyes flicking to the rearview mirror every few seconds. His pursuers were not slowed by traffic at the moment and gaining.

He couldn't wait. He rammed his foot down on the gas and jerked the car into the oncoming lane, fishtailing on a section of drier gravel as he pulled out. Fortunately for him, it seemed as if the oncoming truck had slowed, whether due to the grade or his presence, Dick had no clue. He accelerated directly toward the towering impediment, praying the empty truck he was passing would slow to give him room—and allow him a chance to avoid a head-on crash into an obstacle his puny SUV wouldn't even dent.

Probably should have buckled in when he was escaping the boneyard, but there was no time to correct that oversight now.

The truck to his side was his friend, slowing just enough that Dick was able to jerk the wheel and avoid the head-on collision, but still clear the massive tires of the truck he was passing—tires which would have easily crushed his vehicle if they had caught his bumper.

Unfortunately, his rapid switch back to his own lane was quickly propelling him off the wide road. In a moment, he would be sailing right out there, attempting to fly over the Super Pit as he had just a couple days before, but without wings this time.

He stomped on the brakes and spun the wheel again until the car pointed away from the void, then took his foot off the pedal just for a microsecond to boost his traction and popped his foot onto the gas.

Once headed in more or less the right direction, he was forced to again slam on the brake pedal to maintain control.

The SUV slid to the inside edge of the wide gravel road and bumped against the rock wall at the edge, crumpling the fender and jolting it to a halt. He braced for the potential impact of the truck headed downslope, but it didn't come.

That's when he noticed the two ginormous trucks had stopped abreast one another, blocking the road. A few moments later, he heard flying gravel as the vehicles pursuing him slid to a stop on the other side of the trucks. The fast-thinking and safety conscious teamsters of Fimiston Super Pit had prevented the pursuit from continuing.

Dick got out of his vehicle on the driver's side, which had the good fortune of being away from the rumbling ore carriers. He dropped his gun into a small depression on the side of the road and shoved some dirt over it with his foot so he wouldn't be caught with it should the police quite reasonably decide to search him and his vehicle when they arrived.

Just as he finished, he heard someone shouting. He moved to the center of the road and sighted between the two ore haulers blocking the road. A head poked out of the window of the silver sedan. He yelled toward Dick, his Russian accent thick and broad. "Ve are leaving, Mr. Thornby, but ve will be around. Just forget you ever saw the equipment and ve won't have to come back and finish the job."

With that, both the silver sedan and the gray van sprayed gravel as they spun around and high-tailed it back uphill.

Dick heard sirens approaching, but based on the pitch and volume, he doubted they would arrive before the bad guys got back up the hill, unless, of course, more vehicles conspired to block their way.

A Black man wearing a hard hat leaned out of the giant, idling truck facing Dick. "Stay where you are, bloke. The authorities are on the way and you don't want to make us stop you." The throaty idle of the behemoth ore carrier thundered up to a deafening roar to punctuate the demand.

Dick got the point. He nodded in an exaggerated fashion, then smiled and waved, to show he understood and would comply.

He doubted the workers would stop the men with guns fleeing uphill, but, like most of this mission, what happened next on that score was out of his control. He opened the passenger door to his vehicle and sat, his legs hanging out the open door, and considered his next move. His brow furrowed.

Forget he ever saw “the equipment?” People saw this equipment every single day. It was on a tour. The tour operator probably spewed out all sorts of facts and figures about it just like Connal had on the plane. It didn’t make sense.

No, not this equipment. The Tesla coil in the desert.

Fuck, maybe there was something to this mission after all and he had accidentally stumbled upon it.

The sirens got closer. The chase, the defensive escape maneuvers, even the efforts to draw attention from the police, could all be explained as the instincts of a former cop and former Army Ranger. Why somebody would actually be after him was a harder thing to explain.

Fortunately, he didn’t have to.

After the Western Australia Police Force arrived and retrieved him, his SUV, and his family, they were taken to the police station and placed in an interrogation room.

Seth started to ask him a question, but Dick shushed him. Even a mediocre cop in a small town knew enough to separate suspects for interviewing. No doubt they were being monitored to see if they’d talk amongst themselves before things got down to business. Best to just stay silent until they were asked for answers—he didn’t even dare tell his family why they should stay quiet, but after that initial shushing, they did. His wife and his kid knew he was a spy. They knew not only that he would lie, but that he ... and they ... would need to lie to the police to escape scrutiny because they, like him, were on a mission.

They were a family of spies.

Finally, an officer ... Police Rangers they called them here ... came in and handed him his license, which he had surrendered at the Super Pit.

"Got to admit, mate. We had a bit of a go trying to figure out why two vehicles worth of armed blokes would be chasing a family on holiday with such vigor." He inclined his head at the license as Dick was returning it to his wallet. "Then we ran your name through our databases. Took a bit o' time, hooking up with both Interpol and the Yanks, but, of course, that's when we found out you were the "Hero of Lake Michigan" and all." He motioned to Seth and Melanie. "The whole lot of you, thwarting terrorists trying to poison the water supply and whatnot. No surprise you needed a holiday after that. And no surprise some bad elements have a grudge out for you." He smiled at Dick. "At least that's how we got it figured. That what happened?"

The detective's interrogation technique left a lot, a *whole lot*, to be desired, but Dick didn't imagine he got much chance to practice protecting the streets of Kalgoorlie. And Dick knew better than to look a gift-horse in the mouth. No, he would simply ride this horse to freedom.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Didn't have any time to *think* at all, detective. Just tried to get away with my family as best I could."

"Well, you did a fine job of it, by my reckoning. Drive pretty well for a Yank, from what I hear, too. Remarkable job." He reached out a hand to Dick. "I ... well, if you don't mind ... I just want to shake your hand, sir. I just want to shake your hand."

#

Yuri Lemarov flicked on the phone at the first chirp.

"G'day," said an Aussie-accented voice.

"Report," demanded Yuri.

"Message delivered. All very dramatic. Squealing tires, flying gravel, shots fired, cowering family members."

"And you and your men, all in the clear?"

“No wuckas, mate.”

“And was the source of the message clear?”

“Da,” came the response with a light chuckle. “It couldn’t have been more obvious if I had asked for the location of the ‘nuclear wessels.’”

Yuri didn’t get the reference, but it didn’t matter. The Aussie’s faux Russian accent was so thick it sounded cartoonish to Yuri’s ears, but the Subsidiary’s American operative, like most Americans, was by all reports action-oriented and less than sophisticated when it came to the nuances of Mother Russia.

The next set of wheels in his complex machine could be set in motion.

## CHAPTER 17

It was late by the time the family got back to the hotel and Dick finished giving them a version of events from his trip up north which had been sanitized for their protection. Seth and Melanie settled into bed almost right after, but Dick had things to do.

He called up Harry Mason's Bright Skies report and started reading. He skimmed past the sections of the document which dealt with the political affiliations of various Australian officials in relation to the Aum Shinrikyo movement. Figuring out whether the Japanese, the Russians, the North Koreans, or others were involved in some vast decades-long conspiracy to develop electromagnetic displacement weaponry didn't really matter ... unless there actually was tangible evidence of EMD weapons capable of generating earthquakes at a distance on command and/or force field shields or pulse energy weapons. Harry certainly seemed to believe that such weaponry existed. He also suggested it had been tested and utilized repeatedly. In theory, the entire Banjawarn Station incident could be seen as a multifaceted test of Tesla Fireballs (basically slugs of infolded electromagnetic energy). Supposedly, slugs of energy plasma could be sent through the atmosphere and triggered to detonate by a second, faster-moving, slug of scalar-induced energy. This same kind of energy could be used to create a Tesla Shield, a hemispheric force field preventing anything from passing through.

The report recited numerous other incidents that had occurred in Western Australia in addition to the Banjawarn Bang. These included an October 1994 succession of plasma spheres witnessed by a great number of people. The spheres supposedly traveled from west to east across an area near Tom Price, a town east of the Naval Communication Station in Exmouth (on the northwestern coast of Australia, well to the north and west of Banjawarn) in Western Australia. There was also an incident in the skies above Perth in May of



1995, and another in Victoria exactly two years later, all allegedly headed more or less to or from Exmouth.

The examples of tests recited in the report were not limited to Western Australia. The most notable of these tests other than the Banjawarn Bang incident seemed to be the earthquake in Kobe, Japan, on January 17, 1995, which was publicly predicted nine days earlier by Aum Shinrikyo's leader to be imminent (by action of a foreign interest) and suggested after the fact by Aum Shinrikyo's science minister to have been activated by electromagnetic power.

There was more ... a lot more. The rambling report had some interesting observations about the locations of various places of interest along a great circle route. Starting at Exmouth, which uses an array of thirteen radio towers in a star-shaped configuration to communicate by very low/ultra-low frequency radio waves with submarines at sea, the route traced through Hong Kong to Kobe, Japan. From there, it bisected a supposed transmission station in Kamchatka, Russia, then traveled across the Arctic to Cutler, Maine (also a VLF/ULF transmission facility), and on past the gigantic radio telescope in Arecibo, Puerto Rico. Finally, it continued through Argentina and past several Antarctic research stations, then through Western Australia back to Exmouth.

The report also contained casual speculation about everything from the disappearance of Australian Prime Minister Harold E. Holt (allegedly while swimming in the ocean, although the body was never found) in 1967 to the disappearance of Flight 007 over the alleged Kamchatka base, and other even more far-fetched theories.

The more disparate incidents the treatise mentioned, the more fantastic it all sounded. While Mason no doubt thought he was offering more and more corroborating details, the added UFO sightings and speculation had the opposite effect on Dick. If one or more of the incidents could be debunked or explained, it tainted the entire thesis in his mind.

Still, Dick didn't know for sure what to believe and what to discount. Certainly, his natural skepticism and his prior experience

with his Denver mission suggested he not believe everything he read on the internet, especially when it involved suggestions of massive underground facilities with restricted access. Still, he knew that many wild speculations had some connection with reality. He couldn't simply dismiss Harry Mason or his rambling report without knowing more.

#

Melanie laid awake on the soft mattress in the Kalgoorlie hotel. Dick had left the door ajar to the sitting room in their suite, but the light he was using to read at the desk did not bother her. She wasn't awake because of light pollution or Dick's sometimes overwhelming work ethic or even because of leftover adrenaline from the chase and gunfight earlier in the evening. No, she was consumed with the mission and a need to get more involved and to be more helpful in getting the mission done. It wasn't that she had any loyalty to Dick's employer, Catalyst Crisis Consulting, the front covering for the Subsidiary. The Subsidiary had almost wrecked her marriage and put her husband's life at risk more times, she was sure, than she would ever know. And it certainly wasn't because she thought this mission—this bizarre amalgam of UFOs and conspiracy theories and real people with real guns and real ammunition—really had anything to do with saving the world.

No, it was because, whether she liked it or not, she—and Seth—had become enmeshed in Dick's world of espionage and intrigue. She could tell herself she was an unwitting pawn, an unwilling participant, who deserved to be kept out of all the intrigue and danger and mystery of an international spy agency. She could tell herself all of this was Nerevsky's fault, even though she had never met the man who was making Dick and Seth and her jump to his puppeteer's dance, but that wasn't really true. She knew she had insinuated herself into Dick's secret life when he admitted to her what he really did for a living when

she had insisted he always tell her where he was. She had inserted herself into the spy game. And, when Dick called, at the risk of his mission and his livelihood and maybe even his life, and demanded she pull Seth out of the hospital and flee inland and uphill during his Canary Island mission, that communication had tipped off the powers-that-be of her complicity, of her involvement. From that moment forward, she was a player in a game she didn't know the rules of and had never imagined.

The problem with playing a game you don't understand, though, is that not only can you never hope to win, you don't even have a clue as to what may happen next and you can't protect yourself ... or your family ... from any move any other player might make.

That's not the kind of position any woman, especially a wife and mother, ever wants to be in.

Today was proof of where that could lead: panic and possible death at the hands of unknown killers for reasons beyond her comprehension.

To hell with that. She'd pulled Seth out of the hospital against medical advice to save him from some impending disaster during Dick's Canary Island mission. She'd been strong and decisive and determined. She'd taken action. For too much of this mission—particularly today—she'd been passive and afraid and unhelpful. That stopped here.

Sure, she wanted to protect Seth; for one thing, she worried he found his dad's spy games a bit too exciting for his own good. And, she wanted to support Dick, who she realized with more certainty than she'd felt in years she was going to stay with through thick and thin. But she also wanted to fulfill her own destiny.

If she was going to be the wife of a spy ... no, if she was going to be a goddamn spy ... she needed to heave to and do her job. No matter how hard, no matter how thankless, no matter how incomprehensible, and no matter that no one was actually paying her to do it. That's what

mothers do; they do the work without a paycheck or a thank you and they save the goddamn world every damn day.

She got up and wandered to the door to the sitting room to tell Dick of her new commitment.

When she poked her head around the door to tell her husband everything she'd just decided about him and her and their life together, he was, of course, on the computer, chatting with another woman in the middle of the night.

## CHAPTER 18

Ace Zyreb didn't interrupt as Dick set forth his request for assistance. It wasn't that she didn't want to know how he was or what the big lug was up to or where he actually was in the real world, but when your partner—or, at least, your ex-partner—from a prior mission contacts you and asks for help, you get down to business and quick. You don't know how much time he has, how much danger he ... or the mission or the world ... might be in. You just listen and agree to do whatever you can. Maybe even a few things you shouldn't do.

She was surprised when Dick contacted her, almost as surprised as he was that her sojourn in Eastern Europe was over and she was back in the United States. She wasn't surprised he knew how to get in touch outside of Subsidiary channels. Anyone who has ever had a partner in the spy business exchanged backchannel ways to connect if need arose. But she found it odd that he had instructed her to meet him online on Shangrilyfe. Using virtual and game worlds for clandestine chatting was, of course, now a standard way to try to avoid the massive data collection surveillance of espionage aggregators like Palantir and I2, but Dick had specifically directed they chat in the gardens of an online version of the Byodo-In Temple. Given the big guy's Type A personality and surly reputation, she didn't think he came to the place regularly to meditate. More likely the recurring deep thrums of the Temple's gong disrupted certain eavesdropping algorithms.

Whatever. Dick had saved her life more than once and, though almost no one knew it, millions of people along the Atlantic coast in Europe and America owed him their lives. So, when he said jump, she'd at least hop online for a chat.

"You know," she said, "when I heard you got called into Internal Audit, I wasn't so sure I'd see you again."

She heard Dick take a deep breath. "I'm ... I'm not sure you will."

Her brow furrowed, but of course Dick couldn't see her—just her avatar. "I figured you must still be their go-to guy after I heard about

you breaking up that terrorist group attacking the water supply in Chicago.” She paused. “Of course, the fact that it was in the papers probably was a bit higher profile than Glenn Swynton would have liked.”

“I wasn’t on the job in Chicago. Just the right guy at the right place at the right time.”

“Sure, sure. Need to know and all that.”

“What I need to know right now is some information about Nikola Tesla,” said Dick. Apparently, the minimal pleasantries were over.

“*Kurva!* Is that all? You can find plenty on Wikipedia. Or, you know, you could go to an actual fucking library.”

“I’ve cruised the online info, but I need more about his sketchier inventions ... his Death Ray and his Electro-Magnetic Displacement device ... his so-called remote earthquake generator.”

“And is there some reason you don’t get the research gerbils at Catalyst Crisis Consulting to do this for you?”

“I’m ... well, I’m not exactly on an official mission at the moment.”

Ace thought a few moments, then let out a long sigh. “You’re not freelancing for somebody else, are you? I know I owe you, but I don’t want to get involved with someone who is working outside of the Subsidiary.”

“No, no,” Dick replied. “Nothing outside the Subsidiary. Just not something official. A quiet project for the powers-that-be.”

“*Kecáš kraviný!* That sounds like bullshit to me, but I’ll let it slip—”

“Let it slide.”

“Slip, slide. Don’t correct the idioms of someone willing to help you out.” A sudden thought popped into her head. “*Ježiši!* I’m not the only person left at work who is willing to help you out, am I?”

“Of course not,” replied Dick, a bit too glibly for her taste. “Given your geographic background—”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m assigned to the Philadelphia headquarters again, not to Eastern Europe.”

“Either place could have worked for this project. Wardencllyffe, the location of his laboratory, is just over in Shoreham, New York. It’s practically in the neighborhood.”

“You Americans have very large neighborhoods.”

“I just thought with you being Czech and Tesla—”

“What? You thought I’d have special insights on Tesla because I’m Czech? Tesla was a Serbian, born in what is now Croatia and educated in the Austrian-fucking-Empire!” She let out a huff. “Do they even teach that Eastern Europe exists to American students? Could you ... even you, Dick ... find the Czech Republic on a map if your life depended on it?”

“Sure. No problem.”

“Because you’re such a student of history and current geo-political affairs?”

A few seconds passed. “Probably not. It’s just that—”

“—that you’re willing to lie to me to get me to do research errands for you?”

Dick chuckled. “There’s that. But, no, probably because there’s not much I wouldn’t do if my life depended on it. Or my wife’s life ... or my kid’s ... or yours—”

“—or some random henchman who’s on fire on an oil rig about to be blown to bits.”

She could almost hear Dick smile. “That? That’s what you got out of our mission together? You’ll do anything not to feel special won’t you?”

She said nothing. Finally, he continued.

“Yeah. You’re right. That’s just how I roll. When it comes to saving people who can be saved, everyone is equal.”

“But,” she replied, “some are more equal than others. Ha! *Animal House!*”

“*Animal Farm*, actually. More obscure and of considerably less impact on American youth, I’m afraid. I’m surprised it’s on the reading lists in the Czech Republic.”

“We kicked the Russians out a long time ago, Dick. Read some fucking history about Eastern Europe when the mission is over and we’ll call it even.”

“An odd request. But, sure. We’ll call it even.”

#

Dick looked up from the laptop when done and was surprised to see Melanie leaning on the door frame to the bedroom with one hand hanging onto the top of the partially open door.

He blushed. Not because he was caught having a call with another woman, but as a spy he should have had enough situational awareness not to have been caught unawares by someone listening in on his end.

“I ... uh ... I was just asking my old partner to do a bit of background research for me.”

“No problem,” replied Melanie. “I ... well, I know I’ve not been as useful to you on this mission as I should have been.”

Dick waved her off. “You were fine. You got Seth and you to cover when push came to shove. You’re not trained for combat. Everybody is shocked when they first experience combat. They think they’ve seen it and experienced it and know what to expect from the movies or TV or first-person-shooter video games and all that crap, but they’re wrong. You either have to be trained to deal with violence or ... or ... well, you’re a sociopath. Then violence doesn’t affect you because you have no empathy and no soul.” He softened and lowered his voice. “I love that you have empathy and a soul. You’re my soulmate.”

“Forever and always.”

“And if we can get through this mission in one piece, let’s concentrate on that and let the world take care of itself.”

She smiled. One dimple formed. “The world doesn’t seem to do a very good job of that without your help.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, then looked and she was still there, beautiful as ever. “It doesn’t do a very good job with my help, either.”



It was almost dawn, but there was time for the scene to fade to black before the sun rose again, creating shadows where danger could hide.

## CHAPTER 19

Checking in with Glenn Swynton and, by proxy, Dee Tammany at the Subsidiary was relatively straightforward. Dick avoided the usual protocols and equipment to make sure Internal Audit wasn't a party to—or even aware of—the communication. But the procedures he received after his Rendlesham Forest incident were neither complicated, nor dangerous to implement. He reported everything, no holds barred and no shading his concerns, even if the lightning incident in the desert made him sound a bit paranoid. Glenn and Dee took it all in without comment, assured him he was doing a great job which they truly appreciated, and confirmed that nobody at the Subsidiary—at least nobody sanctioned—was following him, shooting at him and his family, or bedeviling him with lightning bolts beyond the black stump in the never never.

Reporting in to Pyotr Nerevsky at Internal Audit was considerably more complicated and, frankly, bizarre. Since his alleged mission was off the books, he couldn't just use the usual Subsidiary protocols here, either. And, since he didn't know if who in Internal Audit beside Nerevsky was in the loop on his little side trip to the Outback, he couldn't communicate with anyone else there, not even to leave a callback message. Nerevsky, of course, had established procedures to initiate and consummate contact. These involved calling a message service from a pay phone, which was itself a bit of a trick to find in Kalgoorlie, then waiting for a call back with instructions on when and where to meet. To Dick's surprise, he wasn't instructed to head to a local cyber cafe, so they could meet online. Instead, the big guy wanted to meet in person, back in Perth.

Though he always felt like he needed a shower after dealing one-on-one with Nerevsky in person, Dick was glad enough to tell his family to pack up for the journey back to their hotel in Perth. It's not that being in the big city made it any less likely he or his loved ones would get shot by whoever was trying to thwart this bizarre mission, but at least they

would be in a metro area with decent health care facilities if bad things happened.

A day later, Dick left Melanie and Seth at the hotel in Perth while he headed off for his meet up with his boss and nemesis. Given the time differential and long flight undoubtedly involved, Dick figured maybe Nerevsky would be tired and subdued, maybe even a bit cranky. But, no. His shadowy puppet-master was positively hyper. It wasn't because he was happy to see Dick, though. It was because his team was winning.

According to the antiquated electric scoreboard in the gymnasium Nerevsky set for the meet, Brisbane A was beating Perth 17-7 on what looked to be a volleyball court. But, of course, it wasn't volleyball. First off, there were four guys on a side. Second, none of them were particularly tall, but then the net wasn't that high either. Most of the players looked to Dick to be of Hmong or Filipino ancestry. And there wasn't a volleyball in sight.

Just as Dick caught Nerevsky's eye and headed to the retractable bleachers on one side of the gym, someone blew on a shrill whistle and an odd yellow ball the size of an extra-large grapefruit flew over the net, which Dick now confirmed was definitely set lower than typical for volleyball. The ball looked like it was made of wide strips of something—bamboo? cane? plastic?—woven together, with gaps revealing a hollow interior. Dick stopped walking long enough to watch a point, discovering that while the back and forth looked a lot like volleyball in terms of sets and slams, the players apparently weren't allowed to touch the ball with their hands or arms. Just their feet, chest, and head. Maybe their butts, too. Dick didn't watch long enough to find out and he wasn't about to ask. Instead he made his way over to Nerevsky, who was pumping his fist in a rolling motion like he was at a rodeo disco.

"Watch much sepak takraw?" asked Nerevsky without looking at him.

Dick sat an arm's-length from the head of Internal Audit.

“Oh, sure,” Dick drawled. “I’ve got it set up to record every single time there’s a match on ESPN. It’s absolutely takrawesome.”

Nerevsky glanced at him for just a moment before redirecting his attention to the game. “You’re lying. You probably don’t even know the rules of the game.”

“My job is all about lying. That’s literally what I get paid to do.” He looked up at the scoreboard, which now read 20-7 in favor of Brisbane A. “Match point coming up.”

Nerevsky’s eyes squinted. “You’re guessing the matches are the same as volleyball, a much inferior sport which, like basketball, relies too heavily on genetic freaks of nature, rather than training and skill.”

“Yes, I am. Yes, it does.” Dick watched the baffling sport spectacle for a few seconds, until match point scored. Only a few of the scattered spectators cheered for the visiting team, but Nerevsky was one of them. When he stopped, Dick continued. “But, then, you’re relying too heavily on my patience and good will. I don’t like being kept in the dark and I don’t like being followed. I certainly don’t like being shot at. But way past that, I won’t put up with my family being shot at by goons when I don’t even know why anyone gives a good goddamn about what the fuck went on decades ago out woop woop—”

“Out where?”

“—the desert, the Outback, beyond the black stump, the middle of fucking nowhere.”

Dick told Nerevsky the whole story—except for the parts about Glenn and Dee and Ace—starting with the interviews in Kalgoorlie and being tailed there, then continuing with the trip up to Banjawarn Station, the desert lightning, and the running gun battle on his return.

“*Gavno!*” muttered Nerevsky.

Dick didn’t know what the word meant literally, but he’d been around enough pissed off people in his work to know when someone was swearing because they were pissed off.

“Exactly,” he replied. “So, what the fuck is going on and who the hell is shooting at me?”

Nerevsky leaned toward him and lowered his voice to almost a whisper. "The KGB ... now the SVR ... must have gotten wind of my ... er ... our ... extracurricular activities."

Dick scrunched up his face. "The KGB. The SVR. You *are* the fucking KGB and SVR. At least, from all I understand, you used to be. Why would they fuck with someone working for you?"

Nerevsky pressed his lips together before responding. "You think my former ... employer ... is happy I am working for the Subsidiary? You think they don't worry that I may have provided sensitive information to those who may not have mother Russia's best interests at heart at all times? You think the SVR, they can't hold a grudge over past grievances ... past mistakes?"

Dick shook his head and spoke slowly and deliberately, in a smooth, soft monotone. "Not at all. I believe the SVR, like the KGB before it, is full of ruthless sons-of-bitches who care about nothing and nobody but themselves and wouldn't give a second thought to endangering women and children if it could help keep some batshit awful thing they did in the past covered up for an extra thirty seconds." He caught Nerevsky's eye and held it. "And that's the God's honest truth."

"I like you better when you lie," replied Nerevsky.

"And I like you better when you're not putting my family in harm's way for reasons I don't know or understand. So, just tell me this, Nerevsky. What's the secret they are trying to make sure doesn't get out? What the fuck happened at Banjawarn Station in 1993?"

Nerevsky sat silent, staring off into the corner of the gymnasium while warm-ups for the next match began. Finally, he turned to Dick.

"Don't you understand? I don't know. I've never known. Don't you remember your mission briefing? That's what you're supposed to tell me."

"Like you wouldn't lie in a mission briefing ... whether for sport or in order to not impact my 'objectivity.' It makes no fucking sense that you don't know. You were *there*. You made up the damn cover story about Aum Shinrikyo testing sarin gas on sheep. You said so yourself.

You can't make up a credible cover story without some clue what the actual facts are. So, I'll ask again. What were you covering up?"

"They didn't tell me. Believe it. Don't believe it. That's of no concern to me. But, that's the truth. You have to understand, this all happened not that long after the fall of the Soviet Union. The KGB was dissolved and the SVR and the GRU were jockeying for position. Everyone was jockeying for position in Russia, including Aum Shinrikyo. The politicians asked me to concoct a cover story, in particular a story which would implicate Aum Shinrikyo. That was relatively easy to do as the sect was in the process of purchasing the gargantuan sheep station nearby. I did what I was told. They seemed satisfied, even if the public still had questions. But they never told me what really happened and when I asked, things began to go quite badly for me."

"What do you mean? How?"

"The details are not important. Just understand there are reasons why, when the Subsidiary was formed after 9-11, I was open to their overtures to head up their Internal Audit function." He let out a long breath. "Nobody ever thinks about anyone else's career path but their own."

"Not good enough," said Dick. "I'm looking at my kid's career path, my wife's goddamn life expectancy. I need more information."

Nerevsky turned away. "I've said too much, much more than I should have already. My troubles in the past are none of your concern. Finding out what happened in Western Australia in 1993 and what may be happening again now *are* your concern. I'll see if there is anything I can do to eliminate or, at least, confuse the Russian opposition you have faced, but I make no promises. You must proceed with haste."

"And, where exactly should I proceed to in haste?" He waved his arm at the court below, where play was about to commence again. "Should I subscribe to *Obscure Sports Daily* and figure out the next bullshit place to meet on your fantasy fan tour and hope it's got some

connection to this case? Cause my leads so far have given me nothing but a little electronic woopy-do out woop woop.”

Nerevsky sat motionless, as if he hadn't heard Dick at all. The match started. Dick just waited as several points played out, watching Nerevsky's eyes follow the action of the ball or whatever the fuck they called the round thing in this stupid sport. Eventually, his contact spoke.

“The Russians must have been involved in what happened or they wouldn't care so much about covering it up, especially not something which occurred before the fall of the Soviet Union. They excuse many things by saying they occurred in Soviet times, but not this. That means it must be big and it must somehow still be ongoing or have present or future repercussions.” He sighed. “I've tried to follow the leads my speculations have conjured up on this for years and come up with nothing. You must follow your thoughts, not mine, if there is any hope the results will differ.”

“So that's it? You've got nothing else for me?”

Nerevsky smiled. “I'll send you a subscription to *Obscure Sports Daily* for Christmas. You really should check out Bandy. It's like hockey, but with a ball and an iced field the size of a football pitch with eleven men on each side. Or, maybe Kabaddi, from Bangladesh. It's a tackle version of a combination of the American kids' games of tag and Red Rover, but the person running must hold their breath until they score or are tackled.”

Dick left without saying anything else. He was on his own. Sure, he might get more information from Nerevsky at some point. But he wasn't holding his breath, especially not until he scored or was tackled.

## CHAPTER 20

Ace wasn't impressed when she arrived at The Tesla Science Center at Wardencllyffe in Shoreham, New York. The large parking lot next to the dingy, red brick building was nearly empty. And the bright, modern signs touting the exhibits inside and the restorations to come once fundraising was completed struck her as a bit flashy and desperate. Still, the picture of the new statue of Nikola Tesla to come from Serbia, and the plaque indicating the site had been put on the National Register of Historic Places, looked nice—at least fresher than the rest of the place.

She doubted there was anything she could find out here she didn't already know from surfing the internet about Tesla, but you could never tell. That was the whole point of field research. Of course, the whole "mission" was undefined and pointless. But then, her life had been undefined and pointless before she joined the Subsidiary. At least here she was trying to ... to what? ... save the world? No, just doing some drudge work to help her former partner work his way out of a bad spot with someone at work with more sway than he had.

She went inside. For a place that was all about a guy who wanted to light the world with wireless electricity, it was more poorly lit than she expected. It was also clear that plenty of restoration work was still going on inside the structure. She skipped past the photos of kids' entries for the best model of the lab made out of Lego blocks and looked for some substantive signage. After a few moments, an older gentleman with a balding head, a white moustache, and a belly that hung over his belt line like a head of foam trying to escape a glass of cold draft beer, came through a doorway and approached her.

"Walter Riordan," said the man brandishing a yellowed smile and offering a meaty hand to shake. "But you can call me Walt. I'm your guide to all things Tesla here at Wardencllyffe." He looked her up and down, slowing at the usual places, but at least not leering. "What can I tell you that you want to know?"



Well, at least he was direct.

Ace could be direct; in fact, she preferred it. "I'm interested in hearing about Tesla Towers and the various electromagnetic weapons and energy shields Tesla worked on while he was here."

Walt's mouth gaped open. "Really?"

She narrowed her eyes and gave him an icy stare. "Why? Is that a problem?"

"Oh, no ... no ... not at all. It's just that you're not the ... ah ... usual demographic for those interested in supposed death rays and earthquake generators and force shields and all that."

Now it was Ace's turn to say: "Really? What is the demographic for questions about secret weapons?"

"Older, male—" said Walt. He gestured at himself with an open-handed wave with his right hand down the front and side of his body. "Quite frankly, someone who looks a lot like me. Some ex-military, but more often retired guys from skilled blue-collar jobs. Plumbers, electricians, and the like. Factory workers who watch a lot of history shows and documentaries now that they've got too much time on their hands and never learned how to golf."

"You're describing my grandfather exactly," Ace lied. "He doesn't get around so well anymore, so he asked me to stop by and ask a few questions." She tilted her head toward the ceiling for a second. "Too bad they tore down the Tesla Tower so long ago. My grandpa's really interested in them. Guess that's just all ancient history now."

"Certainly, the one that was here is long gone, but there is another one."

"Oh?"

"Down in Milford, Texas. Just built in 2017."

"Whatever for?"

"Supposedly they're doing research on Zenneck Surface Waves."

"What the hell is that?"

Walt smiled condescendingly at her. "Your grandpa will know. It's the scientific mechanism behind wireless transmission of electricity."

"Oh," said Ace. "So, not a weapon, then?"

"Damned if I know." Walt grinned. "Most new inventions, they can have a military component to 'em if you look at 'em hard enough that way."

"And, did people look at Tesla's inventions that way?"

"Well, not Tesla. At least not offensively. Tesla was against war, so the energy devices he was looking into were defensively oriented. He wanted ways to prevent enemy planes from getting close to a city, for instance, by zapping them out of the air. The Japanese supposedly looked into that in their so-called Ku-Go project. Killed a couple rabbits from across a field, but not much else. Didn't work out that they or anyone else could shoot planes down at a distance, but the Brits and others used some of those same ideas as key components in developing radar, which is very effective as a defensive device giving warning of approaching aircraft."

"And the supposed earthquake machine?"

Walt waved a hand dismissively. "There's folks who think the Russians stole the technology. Chit chat on the web about a Tesla scalar howitzer constructed by the Soviets at the Sary Shagan Missile Range in what is now Kazakhstan back in the day ... oh, maybe forty years or so ago. Same kind of story with the remote earthquake generator: the Russians have it and did something with it, but no hard proof."

"Couldn't someone just look at the plans nowadays and tell if they would work? I mean, science has progressed a lot since Tesla's day, hasn't it?"

"Maybe," mused Walt, "but nobody knows for sure what happened to the plans for that device, if they ever existed. The FBI raided his last hotel room, but claim there was nothing of value there. Some cable TV guys got the notion the plans might have been hidden here."

Ace gestured around her. "In this space?"

Walt tilted his head downward. "In tunnels underneath. Tesla supposedly had tunnels underneath Wardencliff so his tower could 'grab hold' of the earth to infuse waves of energy. These reality TV

sleuths searched for the tunnels with ground penetrating radar and interviewed some old timers who claimed to have explored them years ago, but nothing ever came of it. Just like Geraldo exploring Al Capone's hidden vault."

Ace had no idea what he was talking about, but it didn't seem like it was about Tesla, so she let it slip ... er, slide. "So, were there tunnels? Are there tunnels?"

Walt scratched his chin. "Seems likely there were underground tunnels for wiring or whatnot, but I can't imagine anything still being down there, if anything important ever was."

"Too bad," said Ace. "That would be interesting."

#

A crisp knock, then an underling came into the room.

"Nerevsky's traveled to Perth," he reported, holding out a sheet of paper.

Yuri took the paper and scanned the itinerary. "So smart, yet so dumb. He demonstrates his eagerness with every move. He is cautious enough to send a proxy to do the investigation he has so long dreamed of pursuing, yet he foolishly flies into the country for a personal report."

"So it appears," said his assistant. "What could explain such behavior?"

Yuri swiveled his chair and squinted at the gray light streaming through the cheap Venetian blinds on the office window. He could have a nicer office, but like most of his contemporaries in the SVR, he preferred to divert spare office funds to pay for a better apartment for his mistress. "His power at the Subsidiary is perhaps less than we thought, and his confidence in his own cleverness perhaps greater than it should be. He obviously decided an in-person report was less of a risk than the risk the Subsidiary would intercept any electronic communications. In his paranoia, he fears the risks he best

understands—electronic surveillance—and underestimates the risks associated with an adversary which he does not understand at all. As always, we are one step ahead in both instances. Remind me to thank Tsing Tse at the MSS for selling Nerevsky that phone.”

“Yes, comrade. Excellent.” The minion dipped his head briefly and exited the office.

“Satisfactory,” murmured Yuri. “Satisfactory for now.”

#

“*Sakra!*” For once, Ace was glad to be an orphan. If she did this kind of thing for a work partner—a *former* partner—what kind of lengths would she go to for family? Maybe Dick had thought this would be a simple expedition. Go to Wardencllyffe and take the tour, chat up the local experts about Tesla’s military experiments and equipment and stumble upon some obscure piece of information which would suddenly reveal some insight into the history of a man who had already been studied and revered and belittled and discussed for a century.

Yeah, like that’s how investigation works.

Except the big-bellied old man on the tour of the museum at the site of the former laboratory did make an offhand reference to tunnels Tesla had workers dig beneath Wardencllyffe. That deserved a look.

A bit of online research and some poking about at the local library in Shoreham revealed nothing more than speculation and conspiracy theories. But, of course, the historians and speculators who had looked into the possibility of tunnels didn’t think like spies. They certainly didn’t think about how spies might operate if they needed to do so clandestinely, which, of course, is how any foreign agents interested in Tesla’s work back at the time would have had to operate.

Dick had sent her a link to Harry Mason’s Bright Skies postings. If he was to be believed, the Russians and Japanese were the most interested parties in any potential experimentation or development of

Tesla's earthquake generator or a force shield capable of dropping planes from the sky and keeping an invader out of territory protected by a shimmering dome. Russian or Japanese spies would have had a keen interest in accessing the Wardencllyffe Tower tunnels during or after the laboratory's operations.

Ace left the library and located the local tax assessor's office. After studying some plat maps for an aerial view of the region, with markings setting forth the real estate parcel numbers for the assortment of residential properties abutting the edge of Wardencllyffe's property (historically broader than the museum's current property), Ace had a long list of property parcels to look into. Hours of tedious cross-checking later gave her what she needed just before the office closed for the day: a nearby property which had been owned by someone with a Russian surname and later sold to a Japanese corporation after World War II.

Which is how she found herself in the dark of night breaking into the basement of a poorly-maintained bungalow in Shoreham, New York. Once she wriggled inside the pitch black cellar, she used both surgically-gloved hands to feel along the cement wall on the side of the room nearest Wardencllyffe. Her nimble hands slid quickly over the smooth, cool surface, until one finger caught the edge of a shallow groove. She repositioned herself and focused her tactile exploration on that groove, confirming a section of bricks in a broad area with a curved top, undoubtedly blocking off a room or exit or tunnel which breached the foundation of the old house.

She imagined Dick would have grabbed a hunk of C-4 from his backpack and blown up the brick wall, continuing into the black maw it revealed even before the dust settled.

Ace was a bit smarter than that.

First things first.

The air was stale, but not musty. The place was probably used, just not that often. She left the site of the wall and, flicking on a mini-flashlight, located the stairs up to the house, ascending with slow, sure

movements. After listening at the top of the stairs and testing the door handle, she turned off her light and opened the door and stepped through. All was dark and quiet in the living room. The kitchen was neat in the soft shimmer of a nightlight. A faint smell of pizza lingered in the air.

She snuck down the hall and peered in the doorways on either side. In the first, the screen of a desktop PC glowed along with a nightlight in what looked to be a home office. In the second, an overweight, balding man in a t-shirt and boxer shorts sprawled on his stomach, snoring atop the covers on a double bed, yet another dim nightlight in a wall outlet giving enough light she clicked off her beam. She moved quickly and quietly to the far side of the bed, nearest his face. Reaching into her pocket, she removed what appeared from its label to be a canister of pepper spray, clicked the nozzle counterclockwise, pointed it at the sleeping man and, keeping it at arm's distance, pressed down on the nozzle. A translucent fog emanated from the tip of the nozzle, engulfing the man's nose and mouth just as he inhaled for his next rumbling snort. The cloud of fog stopped expanding as it was sucked into the subject's prodigious, quivering nose.

Ace froze in place, ready to spray again if needed, until two, three, then four breaths passed. The already relaxed features of the man seemed to soften further in the dim light, and his snore became looser before disappearing entirely. Now, he wasn't just asleep, he was out and would remain out for at least eight hours.

She hoped he didn't have an early appointment the next morning.

Once she was certain there was no one else in the house to hear her, she went back downstairs, wrapped a dish towel around a short-handled sledge hammer she found on the tool bench and assaulted the brick wall. It wasn't long before there was a hole big enough for her lithe, wiry body to slip through. There was no reason to make the hole bigger—that would just mean more repair work when she returned.

Once in the tunnel, she took her flashlight in hand and made her way along the straight and narrow confines stretching before her. The

tunnel was merely packed earth at first, but after about fifty feet broke through the terminus of a better constructed tunnel. This tunnel was walled in brick, forming an archway about a foot above her head in the center. Metal pipes and cables were affixed about two feet off the floor on both sides before exiting into the ceiling where the walled tunnel ended.

She made good time, counting her paces and running the necessary arithmetic to know she was closing in on where the bulbous-headed, one-hundred-ninety-seven-foot-tall Tesla Tower had originally stood behind the laboratory. Eventually, the tunnel ended short of that location in a pile of fallen bricks and packed and collapsed earth.

No secret stash of papers. No electrical equipment. No corpses of guards or assassins. No schematics of a death ray or an earthquake generator or a force field generator or anything like that. Of course not; things like that only happened in the movies.

But what she had found was enough. Confirmation, at least in her mind, that the Russians and probably the Japanese had been monitoring what was going on at Wardencllyffe decades upon decades before she was born and had gotten access to whatever might have been in the tunnels before or after Tesla died.

*Kurva!* Maybe Harry Mason had been onto something.

*Do prdele!* Maybe Dick Thornby was onto something.

Knowing Dick, how long would it be before something big blew up?

She was just turning to trudge back to her exit when a flicker of movement near the bottom of the rubble pile blocking the tunnel caught her eye. She turned back and bent down, bringing the flashlight to bear with her right hand. As the shadows shifted with the change of direction in the source of light, she again caught a glimpse of something white against the blackness in what appeared to be a gap or hole in the loose dirt at the bottom of the debris pile. She reached toward the hole with her left hand as she centered the soft-edged gap in the rocks and dirt with the beam from her flashlight. Just as she got

her hand to the edge of the hole, she heard a hiss and the white against black shifted again, this time more rapidly.

What the fuck? Her mind raced, trying to figure out if there were any venomous snakes in New York. She didn't know, but instinctively froze in place, her arm outstretched, her hand halfway in the entrance to something's lair.

Suddenly, something wet splashed against her hand and arm as an overpowering stench assaulted her.

*Sakra!*

The stink and her instinct drove her away from the source of the scent, her eyes watering, her lungs constricting, as if a tear gas canister had popped off in the enclosed space. What kind of beast was this? There was nothing in the Czech Republic, nothing she knew of in all of Europe, which could spray such a foul, burning liquid to defend its turf.

She ran without real thought, but the path was clear and there were no spurs or intersections to navigate or slow her flight. After a minute or two, she realized there was no sense to her rush. Whatever had attacked her was far behind and not pursuing her. The still shockingly powerful smell assaulting her nose and eyes was from the oily residue on her hand and arm.

Then it came to her. A skunk. It must have been a skunk. The stench it sprayed wasn't what she imagined from the cartoons she'd watched at the orphanage.

She slowed to a fast-paced trudge, retracing her steps to the hole where the tunnel from the suburban basement accessed the subterranean passage. A minute later she was back in the basement and at a utility sink near the washer and dryer, doing her best to scrub the stinky, oily residue off her arm with running water and a squeeze bottle of bargain dishwashing detergent.

She'd originally planned to replace the brick, so as to cover her break-in from immediate discover, but the "tidy up" plan was no longer viable. The entire basement reeked. She needed to get out before



the potent chemical weapon of the black and white beast woke the lightly drugged occupant upstairs. The most she could do was hope the sink would dry out before anyone investigated and the tumult of bricks would be mistaken for a natural collapse, perhaps due to the foul-smelling beast trying to get inside the basement.

She left, disgusted by her own smell. She dared not stop until she was back home, cursing up a storm as she brought her malodorous self into her apartment and soaked in a tub filled with suds and a dollop of chlorine bleach.

Sometimes being a good partner stunk. Being a good partner to Dick Thornby stunk like the chemical plant in Kralupy-nad-Vltavou outside of Prague after it exploded.

*Kurva!*

## CHAPTER 21

Dee's intercom buzzed. She put down the report she'd been reading on the latest tactics of cybercriminals and pressed the reply button.

"Who?"

Her assistant replied. "Anatoly Kremarsky."

What could he want? "Remind him the next meeting of the International Oversight Board is the day after tomorrow and I can chat with him then, or beforehand, if need be."

"He said it's not about Board business and that it's urgent."

"Very well. Tell Glenn to step in and listen." Dee took her hand off the reply button and picked up the receiver for the desk-set phone, clicking the flashing button to take the call.

"*Zdravstvujte!*" said Dee by way of greeting with all the faux enthusiasm she could muster.

"*Zdravstvujte!*" came the reply, but with a thick Russian accent and very little enthusiasm. "I'm afraid this contact is not social."

"None of my contacts here are, Anatoly. What seems to be the problem?"

"My government has asked me to lodge a protest with you concerning a current operation."

"I see." Dee slowly let out her breath and arched an eyebrow as Glenn Swynnton entered her office and stood by the door. She pressed the button to put the call on speaker. "That sounds quite serious. If you could just give me the designation of the mission you are protesting, I'll call it up on my screen so I have the operational details and most recent reports while we chat."

"There is no mission designation."

"Ahh, you didn't bother to look up the designation before calling," Dee scolded. "Location? Agent? Objective? I can ask one of my people to do a cross-search while you brief me."

"There is no point to these administrative questions," snapped Anatoly. "The mission is not official. It has no designation."

She caught Glenn's eye. He replied with a knowing nod. Nerevsky and Thornby, no doubt. She wasn't, however, about to admit that to Anatoly Kremarsky.

"I don't know whatever you mean, Anatoly. I run a tight shop here. You know that. I'm not off gadding about on personal vendettas and implementing secret agendas."

"That may ... or may not ... be, Dee. But my sources tell me you have someone running amok."

"Running amok?" She replied with mock indignation. "I didn't even realize it was the season for Pon Farr."

"For what?"

Dee smiled. It had been a long, long time since she watched television—especially old re-runs—with any regularity, but there was nothing like a dated pop-culture reference to confuse foreign emissaries.

Glenn nodded knowingly as Dee continued the conversation. "Never mind, Anatoly. A minor witticism for which it appears you have neither the cultural background nor the patience."

"You need to take this seriously, Director Tammany."

"My apologies, Anatoly. I will take this very seriously once you actually tell me what you want. I can't stop, start, or investigate anything until I know what the problem is."

"I think you know what I'm referring to. I'm ... I'm not at liberty to say more."

She felt like tweaking him with Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me death!" quote, but she knew better than to prod a Russian bear too much. "Then I'm not sure what I can do about an alleged mission in an unknown location with an unknown objective."

She paused, but the line remained silent. She decided to throw her counterpart a bone.

"Perhaps I should ask our Internal Audit Division to look into whether someone is conducting unsanctioned activities."

“NO! Er, I mean ... no, I don’t think that would be productive ... uh ... until I can get you more definitive information. But rest assured I will. And, if I find out with certainty you or your personnel are running off-the-books operations targeting Russian interests, there will be consequences. Serious consequences.”

The line clicked, but Dee made certain to kill the line on her end before saying anything. Once the light went off on the phone, she again arched an eyebrow at Glenn.

“Did you hear that? *Serious* consequences.”

Glenn walked over to her desk. “Are there any other kind?”

“They obviously know Nerevsky’s up to something, but don’t want to admit how they know that or exactly what it is he’s up to and why that upsets them.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Of course, we also know Nerevsky’s up to *something*. But we can’t admit that, and I *don’t* know exactly what he’s up to and why that would upset them.”

“Precisely.”

“No,” said Dee. “Nothing about this situation is precise in any way.”

#

“That’s pretty vague and speculative,” said Dick. Once again, he and Ace were connecting via Shangrilyfe.

“*Zavři hubu!* What the hell do you expect? That with no resources or backup, I’m going to be able to solve in only a couple of days the question of whether there really was something to the conspiracy theories about Tesla having some kind of secret earthquake weapon? And just by visiting a damn museum? You need to temper your expectations with a little reality, big guy.”

Dick tried to gather his thoughts into some kind of apology, but Ace didn’t wait long enough for him to even get an “I’m sorry” out.

“Look, Dick, my logic about the tunnel being evidence of Russian spying may be speculative, but it is sound. And the Japanese connection when the house was sold firms the pudding even more. The whole situation smells almost as much as —”

“I’ll pay to clean your clothes.”

*“To je pěkná píčovina!”*

Dick sighed. “I don’t know what that means.”

“That means ‘That’s some nice bullshit!’ I stripped off my clothes and dumped them in the trash before I went into my apartment.”

Dick suspected she meant that literally.

“You can, however, pay for steam cleaning the upholstery in my fucking car.”

“Sure, sure. No problem.”

“Look, I can’t say there’s a smoking gun about the Tesla thing, but there is enough to give some credence to the speculation in Harry Mason’s postings saying the Russians and the Japanese may have been experimenting with Tesla devices back then. And, if those experiments created whatever the hell happened in Australia back in the day, it sure seems like there’s enough credibility to the existence of the machinery to mean they’d still be pushing the boundaries as to what the device can do today ... and keeping the whole thing a secret.”

Dick took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. “Yeah, that makes sense. That also means the whole great circle theory connecting the Exmouth facility to an outpost in Antarctica to locations in Japan and Russia and Maine bears some looking into, too.”

“Probably, but I don’t see any way for you to find some cover which would allow you to saunter into the Amundsen-Scott base in the middle of winter in the Southern Hemisphere. And trying a HALO drop so you could try to infiltrate a place like that in the dark and the cold would be the stupidest thing you’ve ever done. And that’s saying a lot.”

“Actually, I’ve been looking at the maps and reading up on the various Antarctic bases. I think the Russian bases at Mirny and Vostok

line up just as well and are more likely. Hell, Mirny supposedly does seismological work.”

“Doesn’t matter what base you pick. This time of year, your dick would break off if you tried to take a leak outside. And before you suggest I wouldn’t have that problem, let me remind you I don’t have your layer of insulating fat.”

“Honey-dipped bacon does have some advantages.”

“Look, I can take a road trip to Maine if you want, but I’ll need some time to arrange to do so without the powers-that-be knowing I’m up to something.”

“Yeah. And I don’t want to take advantage ... at least, not yet. Exmouth is nearby—”

“It is?”

“Okay, twelve hundred kilometers away. That’s nearby by Australian standards. Let me check out things there, first. If I need you to go to Maine, I’ll let you know. In the meantime, get your car detailed and send me the bill.”

“Already done. Cost me two hundred dollars. Two nineteen with tax. *Sakra!* You pay a lot of sales tax here.”

“It’s the land of the free, not the land where everything is free.”

“*Zavři hubu! To je pěkná píčovina!*”

“Yeah. Well, I owe you.”

“I know. We just talked about that. Two nineteen. Remember?”

## CHAPTER 22

Dick checked a few more websites, then turned off the laptop and left the hotel room. He found Melanie and Seth having a light meal at a table near the windows at the hotel's Atrium restaurant.

"Relax and enjoy the day. We check out in the morning."

"Home?" asked Melanie. Dick didn't think she was hinting; she just didn't know what came next.

"Nah. You never go home until the ... task ... is finished. Headed up to Exmouth, way up north on the coast."

Melanie took the news in stride. "What's up there?"

"According to the tourist website, it's the gateway to the Ningaloo Reef. Dolphins, turtles, manta rays, a lot of whale sharks, and, this time of year, humpback whales. Great snorkeling and the clearest turquoise water anywhere in the world."

A slight crease appeared on Melanie's forehead. "I thought you said we were staying out of the ocean."

Dick smiled. "Yeah, sure. They have glass-bottom boat tours for those who don't want to get wet."

Seth turned to his mom. "I'm sure the organized snorkel tours are safe and well-managed. It's not like they're going to just leave when the time is up without checking to see if everyone is aboard." Seth shifted his eyes to Dick and gave him a wink. "Not like you'd get abandoned in *open water* or anything."

Dick caught the reference, but didn't wink back. The last thing Melanie needed to know was that the *Open Water* shark movie was based on an actual incident which occurred in Australia. Sometimes it's better for a mother not to know of all the possible dangers of the real world—hell, the entire *raison d'être* of the Subsidiary was to discern threats to the smooth functioning of the world and eliminate them before the public ever realized they existed.

Melanie apparently missed the subtext altogether. "Somehow I don't think you're headed up to Exmouth for the whale sharks."

Dick had to be careful—talking in a public place was not nearly as safe as most people thought. Parabolic microphones, listening devices, and even lipreaders all were well-used in Dick's line of work. He maintained his cover. "Some pretty interesting UFO sightings up that way." He reached over and took a few french fries off of Melanie's plate. "Some people think they're attracted by the ultra-low frequency antennae and transmission system. It's used to communicate with submarines when they're still deep underwater. Only the long wave lengths of ultra-low frequencies can penetrate deep into the ocean."

"Oh, yeah," said Seth. "I think I saw something about it on TV once. It's this huge pentagram or something. You can see it from space!"

Melanie did not seem to share Seth's excitement. "How far away is this place?"

Dick tilted his head as he ran the numbers through his brain. "About seven hundred fifty miles."

"That's a long drive," replied Melanie.

"Too long," agreed Dick. "Even the tourist board admits it's a two-day haul from here."

Melanie sighed. "I'll pick up a book to read from the gift shop this afternoon."

"Sure, but I've already checked into flights." He lowered his voice. "Lots of lonely stretches of road. Don't want any more car trouble on this vacation. Off-season, so planes aren't very full. We'll pick which flight we want to take at the last minute." It wouldn't hurt making the gun-toting yahoos on their tail scramble to keep up with them and leave their weapons behind if they wanted to keep Dick and his family in sight.

There was just one more thing he needed to do before he left Perth.

#

The suburban house was small by American standards, but well-kept. The flowerbed was bright and weed-free. He glanced at his watch



and then over at the driveway leading to the two-car garage. A bright blue compact SUV was parked in front of the double door. No surprise, it wasn't yet sunset, but late enough that the occupants, Mr. and Mrs. Calloway, would likely be home from work or errands, relaxing at the end of their day.

He took a deep breath and walked up the sidewalk to the front door.

This was going to be hard, but he had to do it. He'd promised himself he would as soon as he'd found out he was headed to Perth.

A shiny brass knocker gleamed in the low sunlight. Dick lifted it and rapped once. Then stood in a relaxed, parade rest stance, waiting for someone to answer. It wasn't long before a wiry man in a short-sleeved, plaid, button-down shirt and khakis opened the door part way. He was about Dick's age, more or less.

"I'm sorry, but we don't encourage solicitors," said the man, his manner polite, but firm.

"That's fine, Mr. Calloway," Dick pronounced the name Aussie style, with a long i sound at the end, rather than a long a sound, the way Luke had always done. "I'm Richard Thornby, sir, from Catalyst Crisis Consulting. I ... uh ..." Damn, this was harder than he'd thought it would be. "I ... well, I worked with your son."

The man's head swiveled away from the door. "Katherine. There's a man here who worked with Luke." He turned back to Dick and opened the door wider, then spoke in a quiet, urgent voice. "It's been so long. Have they found the body?"

Jesus. He should have anticipated that question. When a Subsidiary operative dies in a secret underground facility which is rendered impassable due to lingering radiation, it's impossible to recover the body, so a cover story had to be invented. Of course, they'd ask about it. "No, no," said Dick. "I'm just vacationing in town with my family and wanted to drop by and pay my respects."

He'd felt guilty about Luke's death. Both the fact of it and the manner of it. Perhaps it was a mistake to have come by ... a selfish mistake. He never intended to bring back their pain. But he was

committed now. He'd do what he'd come to do, what his conscience told him had to be done.

Mr. Calloway ... Mark as he insisted being called ... led him into the living room. A tall thin woman, her blond hair graying around the temples, came in from the kitchen, her eyes already moist. "You worked regularly with Luke?" she asked, then bit her lower lip as she sat on the couch. Her husband joined her, leaving Dick the easy chair across the coffee table from the two of them.

"This is Katherine, my wife," said Mark. "Luke's mother," he added unnecessarily.

Dick dipped his head in greeting as he sat down and answered Katherine's question. "Not regularly, but on one big project ... uh ... near the end."

Katherine folded her hands together, probably, Dick guessed, to keep them from shaking. Mark put his arm around her shoulders. She took a deep breath. "Were you with him at the end?"

Yes. Damn it, Dick had been with him at the end, but he wasn't sure what to say.

"On the boat," Mark added. "Such a surprise. He was always a strong swimmer. Made the swim team at university in Melbourne."

Of course, the Subsidiary had to have a reason why Luke's body had never been recovered. Dick remembered the cover story now. An outing with a few people from work, sailing. Luke had dived into the cold Atlantic Ocean and never surfaced. The working theory of the Coast Guard was the shock of the cold water had caused a massive heart attack, causing him to expel his air and sink into the depths without surfacing.

"I was there," Dick said, staying as close to the truth as he dared. "But I didn't see him die."

"Were you the one piloting the boat?" asked Katherine.

Dick shook his head. "We were both in the same boat, but I sure wasn't the one driving it." Deep down, Dick knew Luke's death wasn't his fault, but that didn't stop the guilt. "I ... I just wanted to tell you

something you already know, but needs to be said. Your son was smart and clever and hard-working and, well, just about as good a guy as could be. Certainly, as good as I have ever known. And he helped more people in his job and his life than you realize.”

An hour later, Dick was back in the rental car. He drove a few blocks away and pulled over. He parked and let the tears he’d been holding back flow. Twenty minutes later, he headed back to his family and to his mission.

He’d done what he came here to do, for Luke’s parents, and for himself.

## CHAPTER 23

Seth was right. The communications array at North West Cape near Exmouth was fucking huge. Although the commercial flight into the Exmouth Aerodrome south of town was a fair distance from the facility north of town, Dick couldn't help but see the sharply geometric hexagonal shape of the tall antennae array at the tip of the peninsula as the plane banked slightly to line up for its landing. The tall antennae of Area A, as it was called, was a mere four miles from the buildings of the main base, which was called the Naval Communication Station, Harold E. Holt, or "NCSHEH" in military jargon. What was harder to see, but Dick knew was there from his perusal of satellite maps courtesy of Google Earth, was a similar hexagonal-shaped facility thirty-some miles south of the taller, flashier array. Known as Area B, it was the receiver which corresponded to the better-known transmission capabilities of the station.

The plane landed, and before long Dick had rented another oversized, dark-colored vehicle and booked them into the finest local accommodations Exmouth had to offer. While Melanie unpacked, Dick fired up the laptop and started pecking at the keyboard.

"Here," said Seth, nudging Dick on the shoulder. "Let me do the data entry. My keyboard skills are faster than yours."

Dick acquiesced, sliding out of the straight-backed desk chair and relinquishing it to Seth while he paced behind.

"What else do we know about the facility at Exmouth?"

Seth's fingers skittered across the keyboard. A Wikipedia page flashed onto the screen. "Started out as a U.S. base in the sixties. Increasing resistance from the locals starting in the seventies through to the nineties, mostly protests about having a U.S.-run base on Australian soil. Slowly transitioned to a jointly-run base, with most U.S. Navy personnel leaving in 1993. The Space Surveillance Telescope was just recently transitioned from White Sands Missile Base in New Mexico to Exmouth."

"That's good. Any self-respecting UFO fanatic would find the Space Surveillance Telescope interesting stuff." He stopped pacing and looked at Seth. "Anything else like that?"

Seth scrolled down the page. "In 2008, two Qantas flights had to make emergency landings after a series of automatic pitch down maneuvers in commercial craft traveling nearby." Seth clicked to a new page. "Twelve people had serious injuries, including fractures, lacerations, and spinal injuries, with another hundred and seven with minor injuries."

Seth clicked again and again, pages flashing by too quickly for Dick to focus on them, much less gain any useful information. "Some people think the signals from the Exmouth transmitter interfered with the automatic guidance system."

"That's good, that's good," muttered Dick as he paced again, but then noticed Melanie's eyebrows raised in alarm. "I mean, that could be useful for our ... my ... purposes."

Seth was still surfing the net. "No big surprise. There have been UFO sightings that people associate with the Exmouth facility."

"That's really useful," said Dick. "Given my cover, that gives me a plausible explanation for being on the grounds of the facility if I'm caught."

"Excuse me?" said Melanie in what Seth always called her mom voice. "Are you saying you're about to break into a secure military installation in a foreign country?"

Dick stopped pacing and stepped over to Melanie, putting what he hoped was a comforting hand on her shoulder. "It is the kind of thing I do in my job, but don't worry. I'm very good at what I do."

"You'll have to be more than good," said Melanie. "Did you notice the countryside when we were landing? It's practically all open ground. There's no place to hide. The guards will see you for sure."

Dick knew she was right, but he didn't want to admit it when he knew he had to go forward anyway. Suddenly, a thought hit him. He smiled and said, "Not if they're looking someplace else."

He turned to his son. "Seth, can you post things on social media without anyone knowing it's you?"

"People do it all the time."

"I didn't ask if it could be done. I asked if you could do it."

"Sure, I guess. It's not that hard."

"Don't guess. Be sure. I don't want superficial anonymity. I want the kind of phantom posting which can stand up to some scrutiny, but still remain anonymous." Another thought popped into his mind and he snapped his fingers. "Even better. If it is looked at hard by someone with reasonable skill, can you make it look like it came from a Russian bot or trolling firm?"

"Yeah. Back when Brian and I were on Reality 2 Be..." Seth's face reddened and his words faltered. Dick guessed it was because while both Seth and Melanie knew Dick was a spy, Seth likely wasn't sure how much his mother knew about his clandestine activities on Reality 2 Be before the fire which had injured him so severely.

Dick came to the rescue. "Your mom knows everything." It was a lie, but he'd deal with Melanie later.

"Okay. That's good ... good to know." Seth took a breath. "So, Brian was pretty into the whole anonymization thing. You know, phantom servers, bouncing the signal around the world. Encryption. That kind of stuff. I can do what you want. Faster, though, if I can get his help."

"Get his help," said Dick.

"He owes you," added Melanie. "You saved his life."

Seth reddened again. "I did my part, but Dad, Dad saved us both."

Dick shook his head. "If not for me, you wouldn't have needed saving." He knew Seth thought that his own clandestine activities on Reality 2 Be had been the sole cause of the fire. Maybe he was right. But Dick had never really believed it. He thought Pao Fen Smythe was the puppet-master for all that had happened. That was why Dick had gone to Jurong Bird Sanctuary in Singapore to settle the score. But Seth didn't know that. Dick would rather live with his own guilt, than live

with any condemnation that might come from his family if they knew the truth.

In some ways, Dick was a coward.

Just a coward with a strong sense of duty.

He smiled at Seth. "Here's what I need you and Brian to do."

#

Dick had hoped to act as soon as he got to Exmouth, before anyone could possibly have tailed his family here, but an operation like this required substantial planning. If he'd been alone, he might have just winged it, but his family was in the crosshairs, too. He wanted ... no, he *needed* ... to minimize risk and give them some cover in case everything went wrong. After all, this was a quasi-military operation. There were always SNAFUs. Things always went wrong ... or "arse up" as the Aussies liked to say. Of course, the Brits used "tits up" to mean the same damn thing, which made for some convoluted anatomy.

In the meantime, he'd familiarized himself with the Exmouth installations as best he could, both Area A and Area B. His main focus was on Area B, but Area A got a lot more attention on the internet. The fact that the antennae of Area A were not only arrayed in a star-pattern easy to associate with witchcraft was a draw. And since the center tower was, for a long time, the tallest structure in the Southern Hemisphere, it got more than a few looks. Of course, the close to four hundred kilometers of copper wiring in a huge mat underground beneath the towers pulled in lots of attention from the Tesla fanatics and conspiracy freaks of all sorts. The fact that Harold Holt, the Australian Prime Minister after whom the base was named, disappeared mysteriously in a swimming incident three months after the facility was commissioned, made things even more interesting from a conspiracy theory perspective.

During his research, Dick also learned for the first time that a group of Australian demonstrators had occupied the base briefly in 1974. A

few people were arrested and a couple songs were written about it, including *Omega Doodle*. Dick had no doubt it was a dandy. But the historical tidbit did give him an idea of a few more organizations Seth and Brian might add to their surreptitious contact list.

The day after tomorrow was Saturday. That would be when his plan came together. More importantly, Saturday night was the night. The new moon had already come and gone, but it looked to be overcast—as dark as he could hope for under the circumstances. He prayed it would be dark enough and that, if it wasn't, his cover would hold.

#

The nice thing about Brian being on the other side of the world was that once they'd set up their anonymous identities for posting to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tik-Tok, and all of the smaller, but up and coming, social media platforms, at least one of the two of them were awake at all times to keep the flow of misinformation going. For something to go viral on social media, you couldn't just post it and forget it, you needed to keep posting, then sharing, retweeting, liking, tweaking, modifying, commenting, mocking, and generally stirring the pot. You needed constant views and attention. Friendly was fine, but controversial was even better. To accomplish that, they used additional fake accounts to post angry comments about their own stories and pics, hoping to fan the flames and get more attention. And they tailored several different approaches to appeal to different groups: UFO enthusiasts; Tesla fans; conspiracy buffs; Australian nationalists; environmental purists; anarchists; anti-military peaceniks, and the save-the-whales crowd. Time was short; they needed all the bodies and attention they could get.



## CHAPTER 24

The unmistakable thud of a small explosion nearby woke Ace from a deep sleep. Instincts kicking in even before she opened her sleep-filled eyes, she rolled off her bed away from the window, snatching up the Glock 26 she kept under the extra pillow reserved for guests. She pointed the Glock at the open bedroom door as she opened her eyes to ... well ... nothing out of place. The dim early morning light permeating her olive-green curtains revealed nothing but the spartan, if a bit messy, surroundings of her apartment ... of her life.

A wavering of the light outside caught her attention and she used her free hand to vault over the double bed and land softly on the beige shag carpeting next to the window. She positioned herself along the wall and peeked through the crack at an oblique angle without giving her position away by touching the drapes, like pretend spies and amateur actors playing cops always did on American TV.

*Ježiši!* Her car was engulfed in red and orange flames, oily black smoke roiling into the bright blue sky. Two neighbors already stood in the condo complex's parking lot watching the conflagration. More stood on the pathetically narrow balconies outside the living room of their pathetically small pieces of the American dream. No one seemed excited or particularly concerned about the firebombing; certainly no one seemed out of place.

A distant siren confirmed somebody had already dialed 911.

Ace pulled on a T-shirt and slipped into a pair of sitting-around-the-condo shorts and ambled out to the combo living-room/kitchen, then out the front door and down a flight of stairs to the parking lot.

Mornings not being a high crime time period for suburban New Jersey, a police car with a pair of local peace officers was rolling up, with a large, noisy, fire truck right behind it. An ambulance followed, then pulled over away from the activity, waiting for potential customers, no doubt.

The fire crew was efficient, but there was no hope there would be anything salvageable of her vehicle. As she was watching the firemen work, she noticed a folded piece of white paper on the ground next to the door she'd come out. Before reaching down, she looked around without swiveling her head to see if anyone was watching her. Unfortunately, the local law enforcement yokels had stopped staring about the area with stupid expressions on their faces and zeroed in on her. She just left the paper alone and, instead, made eye contact with the approaching cops. She immediately dubbed the older, more intelligent-looking one "Dutiful" and his younger, more dimwitted-looking companion "Clueless."

"That your vehicle?" asked Dutiful as he tilted his head toward the smoking hunk of metal now hissing out billowy clouds of white steam.

"What's left of it," replied Ace.

Clueless squinted his eyes at her. "Pardon me, but you don't seem that upset." Clueless had a thick Jersey accent, but with clear enunciation.

Ace also noted a tinge of accusation in his voice, but she knew better than to ramp up his testosterone by making a snide remark. Instead, she simply shrugged and waved a hand at her torso. "Woke me up. Haven't had my coffee. I'll get more pissed once I'm awake and dealing with my insurance agent."

"Name?" asked Dutiful as he took out a notepad.

"Acacia Zyreb."

"Employer?"

"Catalyst Crisis Consulting. They're in Philly. It's a consulting firm with offices all over the world. We do work for big companies that ... well ... need advice on how to get bigger, mostly."

"Occupation?"

"Abstracter."

Clueless interrupted. "That mean you paint rectangles and blotches for your company's offices?"

"No. It means I read documents and summarize them for the consultants and analysts, so they can be more efficient in finding the information they need to give advice."

"Any idea why someone would torch your car?" asked Dutiful.

Ace spread open her hands. "It's summertime in America. I assume some local team won or lost a game of some sort last night. People celebrate with violence. Drunk people especially."

"Uh-huh," said Dutiful.

"Any reason why these drunks would target your car?"

Ace made a point of rolling her eyes in an exaggerated fashion. "Who the fuck knows what motivates drunk yahoos to do anything but shovel Cheetos in their mouths, washed down by cheap beer?" She flashed an insincere grin. "Maybe they wanted me to come outside in the cool air without a bra on."

Clueless's stare immediately dropped to tit level. Dutiful proved the experience of his extra years on the job by looking elsewhere. Unfortunately, since his eyes had been dropping to chest height, he covered by quickly looking all the way down to the stoop.

He bent down and picked up the piece of paper. "What's this?"

He opened it so they could all see it. In block letters, it read: "STOP ASKING QUESTIONS OR NEXT TIME TOPSY WON'T BE THE ONE FRIED."

Clueless pulled his gaze away from the note and her tits, looking her straight in the eyes. "Who the hell is Topsy?"

Ace didn't need to act. "I have no idea."

"Sure, sure. Like you don't know," said Clueless.

Dutiful also looked up from the note. "Is Topsy what you call your car?"

Ace started. "People name their cars?"

Clueless gave her a slit-eyed look and straightened his posture, she guessed so he could look more intimidating without actually doing body-builder poses. "A lot of people in America do." He tilted his head

and looked her up and down. "I'm noting a slight accent. You from overseas? You come from some place far away?"

She gave Clueless a slit-eyed look back. "What you noticed was a lack of a local accent. You from this town? You ever been some place far away?"

Dutiful intervened. "Just answer the question, please, ma'am."

Ace bristled, but complied. "I'm from the Czech Republic."

"Czechoslovakia?" asked Clueless.

She gave him the stare the nuns used to give her when she said something stupid. "Is Brooklyn the same as New York City?"

"Nah. It's just part of it."

"Bingo. Except, you know, history."

Clueless flushed red, but Dutiful de-escalated the encounter. "I think we have the basics. A detective will contact you for a full report in the next day or two." He pointed at the wet, scorched remains of her car. "You might want to take a few pictures for your insurance company before the tow truck comes to haul the burned-out husk away. It can speed up the process."

"Thank you, officer," Ace said.

Dutiful touched the brim of his hat, then elbowed Clueless, who was steaming as much as her car. Then they both turned and left ... with the note, of course.

#

Yuri Lemarov used all of his patience not to tap his foot while his underling got around to reporting.

"Car torched. Message successfully delivered. No witnesses."

"Sounds adequate. I'm more impressed we found out about her snooping than I am that we can set a car on fire in suburban New Jersey."

"I told you it was worthwhile to keep tabs on Wardencllyffe."

"Indeed, you did," said Yuri. "But I don't recall authorizing any budget for surveillance, and I didn't know we had a source inside the museum."

"Uh, you didn't and we don't," agreed the underling with more enthusiasm than Yuri thought necessary.

"Then, how?"

"Kind of hard to miss the news story," replied the man. He held out his phone, on which there was a story titled: *Skunk Spray Blows Down Basement Wall in Shoreham*.

"Ahh, the internet is a wonderful thing, sometimes."

"After that, it was just basic follow-up. It didn't take much work to figure out a woman who works for Catalyst Crisis Consulting was snooping around town the same day."

"Perfect. Just the kind of interaction that suits our purposes."

#

Once the smoke had cleared and the Centerpoint Condo Complex had gone back to its dreary normal, Ace checked in with Dick via ShangriLyfe.

"A thousand," she said by way of greeting.

"A thousand what?"

"That two nineteen you owe me is now a thousand—actually one thousand two-hundred and nineteen."

"Jesus! Your car detailing place is stealing you blind. I hope for that price they got the skunk smell out completely."

"Doesn't smell like skunk at all anymore. Now it smells like firebombed metal and plastic, with a side of gasoline."

"What?"

Ace explained the morning's events. Dick remained quiet throughout, until she got to the part about what the note said.

"Do you call your car Topsy?"

"*Ježiši!* Do people here really name their cars? It's just a hunk of metal; it's not your identity."

"For some people, it is. Or, you know, it's a term of endearment for someone ... or something ... you spend a lot of time with."

"Ahh. That explains it. I had heard guys in America liked to name their penises ... probably for the same reason."

"Yeah ... uh ... no ... uh ... I wouldn't know," Dick stammered.

"Don't worry, big guy," Ace replied. "I know you didn't name your penis." She paused for a beat. "Obviously, it named you, *Dick*."

"Ha, ha. Hilarious," snarled Dick. "Can we get back to the note?"

"I don't know a Topsy," replied Ace. "Certainly don't know one which has anything to do with Tesla or this case ... whatever it is."

Dick snapped his fingers. "But I do. Topsy is the elephant that Thomas Edison electrocuted."

"Thomas Edison electrocuted an elephant?"

"He did. He was trying to prove alternating current was dangerous during the current wars with Tesla. You know AC versus DC."

"I do, but you probably shouldn't talk that way if your wife might come into the room."

Dick sighed. "I have to teach you the most basic idioms, yet that one you know."

"Didn't you get the memo? The youth of the world are inordinately fascinated with sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll." Ace's fingers skittered over her keyboard. "Actually, it seems like you're the one who doesn't know the real facts about AC/DC. According to Wikipedia, that slur on Edison is a myth. Topsy's electrocution occurred ten years after the current wars and Edison wasn't even there."

"Doesn't matter. Whoever torched your car and left the note obviously wanted to reference Tesla in an obscure way so you'd get the point without anyone else being the wiser."

"Okay, but how would they know I was helping you?" Ace furrowed her brow in thought before answering her own question.

"You think there's a spy at the Subsidiary?"

Dick laughed. "There's nothing but spies at the Subsidiary, but this doesn't sound like Nerevsky or Swynnton or Tammany. This smacks of the Russians. They must be keeping a *very* close eye on Wardencllyffe."

"But why?" asked Ace. "There's nothing there."

"Not that we know of. Maybe that's the point."

"I could check out the tower in Texas."

"Nah," said Dick. "Manpower is limited and I've decided I'd rather have you check out the facility in Cutler, Maine, after all."

"Makes sense," said Ace, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Have the Eastern European infiltrate a base in the United States and the American 'Hero of Lake Michigan' sneak into a base on foreign soil."

"Yeah, well, I'm already here. Besides, I don't need you to infiltrate Cutler, just monitor its transmissions from someplace safe, but nearby."

"Can do, but there's no reason to go nearby. The whole point of super low frequency transmissions is that they go a long way and permeate into the ocean deeper than the higher frequencies."

"Then set up at home ... or at the office for all I care. Just get what you can on the transmissions from Cutler."

"Can do, but you know they're all super-encrypted, don't you?"

"Don't give a good goddamn about what they say. Just let me know number and duration."

"Sure thing. That's all women care about, right?"

"Fuck you," replied Dick.

"So, I'm guessing Melanie isn't listening in at the moment. Want to know what I'm wearing?"

"No," said Dick. "But I'm guessing it's not khakis, like Jake from State Farm."

The connection terminated.

What the fuck? Sometimes Americans made no sense at all to Ace.

## CHAPTER 25

Dick had to admit he was impressed with what Seth and Brian had cobbled together in short order. The crowds gathered in the open terrain near the Yardie Creek Road entrance to the Exmouth facility weren't huge, to be sure, but there were a lot of people for a dusty, backwater location in a dusty, backwater country. The diversity of activists was even more impressive. UFO and alien enthusiasts circulated, some accusing the base personnel of covering up evidence of, or even contact with, flying saucers, faster than light technology, and ominous Grays. The new arrival of the Space Surveillance Telescope was a lightning rod for those who already suspected the giant antennae array was communicating with a "mother ship" hiding behind the moon (or even inside the "artificially created and hollow" moon, which ominously rings like a bell when struck by meteors). Anti-military and local nationalists decried the use of the base by a warmongering foreign power (the United States) to communicate with submarines carrying nuclear weapons. The GreensWord types joined forces with the Peaceniks for Whales to decry the impact of the low-frequency signals emanating from the base on cetaceans around the world. Portions of the local tourist industry most integrated with viewings of the majestic and docile whale sharks joined in, even though whale sharks are actually fish, not mammals.

According to Seth, a second crowd at least twice the size, mostly skewed toward the oceanic environmental types, was also gathered on the other side of the base nearest the ocean at the main entrance right off Bundegi Beach.

A few professional anarchists even roamed through the crowd risking heat stroke in their black jeans, black hoodies, and black motorcycle helmets, as they clutched their black umbrellas and burner cell phones looking for whatever chaos they might take advantage of. Dick wasn't happy they'd joined the protesters, but demonstrations were like college parties. Once you invited a bunch of people, you had



no control over how many friends of friends of friends got the invite and showed up ... and who might crash the bash even though they weren't wanted. Dick handed one of them a placard reading "Dismantle Tesla's Death Ray Towers" to brandish, knowing the rowdy youth had no fucking clue what it meant and didn't really give a shit about what he was protesting anyway.

Dick also spied a television news crew from Perth circulating through the crowd, taking video and interviewing the most vocal and outrageously dressed protesters. Many of those in attendance had their cell phones—including phones on selfie-sticks Dick thought had long ago gone out of fashion—up and panning the crowd. Some were no doubt just recording their own fun, but most, according to Seth, were streaming the protest over Facebook or some blog or site or podcast Dick didn't understand anything about. People—not just these people, but people all over the world—seemed to have way too much time on their hands. At least, in this instance, the Subsidiary could make some use out of the modern generation's penchant for navel-gazing and 24/7 protesting.

Dick grabbed up a homemade placard reading "Storm Exmouth, Australia's Area 51!" and made sure to be seen thrusting it up and down while adding his voice to the chants and shouting of the crowd. It went against his nature as a spy to engage in activity he knew was being recorded, certainly by both protest participants and plants the base's security forces had undoubtedly sent to the demonstrations to gather intelligence. But he wanted to add to both the size of the crowd and the enthusiasm and provocative nature of their protests. That's why Seth and Melanie were also attending the protests. This unruly tumult was a key piece of his tactical plan and his cover story if caught later tonight.

He circulated through the crowd, encouraging everyone he interacted with, whatever flavor of craziness they lapped up, with loud exhortations to stay the course and party all night. He even mentioned the location of piles of scrub and driftwood Melanie and Seth had

helped him gather the previous day for use in bonfires after dark. Then, he leaned in with *sotto voce* exhortations to storm the main base at Area A from both southwest and east in the wee hours of the night when the “fascist war-mongering foreign imperialists and their indoctrinated military lackey stormtroopers” were least likely to be alert and able to resist an uprising and takeover of the “murderous, alien facility.” If the reaction was at all favorable, he’d add a knowing wink and say, after looking conspiratorially over each of his shoulders, “they can’t stop us all and they’re too afraid of publicity to actually shoot anyone.”

He repeated the process over at Bundegi Beach, where Melanie was stationed with a group of Mothers Against Atrocities and Monstrosities, rousing the rabble in her own, quiet, homespun way. By late afternoon, Dick left the demonstrators to their own devices for a few hours and went back to their hotel in Exmouth.

Once there, he checked in with Ace via Shangrilyfe. She was in a mood, but not a chatty one.

“*Ježiši!* I’ve barely gotten set up! There’s not enough data for even the most basic pattern recognition software to make sense of anything. All I know is there are a lot more broadcasts than I would have expected.”

“You had expectations?”

“These facilities are for official communications for submarines under deep cover. They’re not providing WiFi for lonely sailors scrolling through Match dot com. Yeah, I didn’t think there would be much traffic.”

“Huh,” said Dick.

“Well said,” replied Ace.

“I’ll have to ponder on that. Talk to you tomorrow, when I know more, if there’s more to know.”

He signed off and hit the bed to catch a few hours of sleep, putting up the “Do Not Disturb” placard on the outside door handle. He wanted to make sure he was fully awake and alert for his planned evening expedition.

Normally, Dick had no problem falling to sleep for a few hours before even the most dangerous missions, but this time he tossed and turned on the uncomfortable hotel mattress for almost a half hour before forcing himself into a fitful slumber. Of course, on all of his previous missions, whether in the Army Rangers, the Chicago Police Department, or the Subsidiary, he actually had some useful intelligence and knew exactly what he was doing and why. Here he really had no fucking clue what was going on, who he was really up against, and what needed to be done to save the world or at least accomplish his mission.

It wasn't just that, though. Usually Dick had only himself to worry about, and he had a hefty dose of confidence he could handle himself in almost any situation. The few instances in his past he'd had the most difficulty with had involved others. Fellow agents like Ace, fellow Subsidiary employees like Luke, and innocent civilians who he'd avoided turning into civilian casualties, but who had not escaped run-ins with him unscathed. But this time, Seth and Melanie were literally out there on the front line, marching around with signs, antagonizing people with bullets and canisters of tear gas and heavy wooden batons.

Sometimes his job sucked. This was definitely one of those times.

Sometimes the people you worked with ... or more especially *for* ... were evil assholes who didn't deserve the power they had. Pyotr Nerevsky was definitely one of those evil assholes.

Whatever happened, Dick made a vow Nerevsky would pay for what Dick's family had to go through on this godforsaken road trip out woop woop and back again.

#

"Report," demanded Yuri. "What is Thornby up to now?"

The underling dropped a small sheaf of papers onto Yuri's functional desk. "He is in Exmouth, participating in a demonstration

outside of the facility for low frequency transmissions to submarines and—”

“No doubt a diversion of some sort.”

“Yes, comrade.”

“We can’t let him infiltrate the facility.”

“Er ... of course. But what is there for him to find?”

Yuri glared at the aide. “That is none of your concern. Your job is simply to do as I tell you.”

“Yes, comrade.”

“Take him tonight.”

The aide gave Yuri a curt head bob. “Of course. As you command.”

“Take care of the other one, too.”

“Another abduction?”

“No. His part in this performance is complete. Time for him to take his bows.”

#

Nothing much scared Pyotr Nerevsky. You didn’t last long in the KGB, the SVR, or the Subsidiary if you were a coward. And, of course, a significant piece of his work in the Internal Audit Division was making sure the headstrong and sometimes reckless agents didn’t do things which went too far—too stupid, too expensive, too destructive, or too high profile. And to do that job, he had to cultivate a cold, calculating, and, quite frankly, violent reputation in order to be sufficiently intimidating to do his job.

Still, he wasn’t an idiot. He didn’t take foolish risks. He knew his move to the Subsidiary was viewed with considerable suspicion and apprehension by the ruling powers back in Mother Russia. If they even suspected what he was up to by proxy through Dick Thornby, they would be even less pleased. Consequently, he avoided travel to Russia. The state intelligence operations were much too pervasive to give him comfort that he would remain incognito there. On the other hand,

things were much more relaxed in Kazakhstan—or, at least, much more disorganized and inefficient.

So, while Pyotr wouldn't think of going to Russia to take in a game of bandy, stopping by Almaty in the former Soviet republic for a little spectator sport was, by his assessment, not a problem. The Russians certainly had some close ties to the country—including a launch site for the Russian space program and, of particular interest to Pyotr, the Sary Shagan Missile Range. The Russians had supposedly tested a Tesla scalar interferometer energized by Moray generators at the range years ago, but now it was abandoned.

Kazakhstan had an independent streak, too, though. It sent engineers to assist the United States in Iraq, participated in UN peacekeeping missions in Libya and Haiti, and had a number of joint economic projects with China. Most notably, it provided humanitarian aid to the Ukraine during its struggles with “Russian freedom fighters.”

Most importantly to Pyotr, though, Kazakhstan had a surprisingly strong commitment to traditional winter sports for a hot, predominately Muslim county. It had even put a bid in for the 2022 Winter Olympics. When it lost out to Beijing, Pyotr lost any hope bandy would become an official Olympic sport. Still, the Asian Bandy Federation was headquartered in Almaty, and this was his best chance of catching some good games outside of Russia in the near term.

As usual, he arrived at the field well before the game, interested in watching the pre-game warm-up and assessing the ice conditions. The crowd was pretty thin, but Pyotr headed into the thick of it at center ice, near enough to hear the banter from the players as they practiced and prepared. Sometimes you could pick up information during warm-ups which could prove useful when betting on a game. Pyotr always bet on the games he watched, not because of a compulsive need for money, but because it always made things more exciting when you had something to win or lose. And, if you're going to bet, you need to

gather enough information to bet smart. So, he worked his way through the throng of people to get closer to the action.

That was the final mistake in the series of miscalculations which had led him from a dusty field in Western Australia almost thirty years ago to a frigid conference room in the bowels of Catalyst Crisis Consulting's Philadelphia headquarters for the Subsidiary, then to Perth and on to Almaday.

He felt the stabbing jab in his lower back—sudden, sharp, and swift. He might have dismissed it as a muscle cramp were it not for the radiating warmth spreading from that point within his body and the sensation of warm, trickling liquid on his skin emanating downward from that same location.

He wasn't stupid. He knew the methods Russia liked to employ for their wet work. He knew he was already dead. Cesium, poison, or maybe something more esoteric these days. It didn't matter. He would die and quickly. There was only one thing he could do and that was to identify his attacker. He whirled around, searching for someone moving with steady, deliberate speed away from him. Most likely with an umbrella or a cane—something the assailant could use to hide a blade or a needle from casual search. He caught sight of a dark, shadowy figure headed for the nearest exit, but Pyotr's eyesight was already fogging. Dark crept in around the edges. He shivered from cold, though he was not really that close to the ice.

He'd always known he would die this way, but he had hoped he would end his idealistic quest, that he would know what actually happened near Banjawarn Station in Western Australia before he died. He should have known better. Spy agencies are where ideals go to die—where everything and everybody is shaded in gray and the ledgers of life and death are all calculated with cold, practical precision. His life had been cold and gray. His office at the Subsidiary had been the same. Now his death would be cold and gray, too.

With his final, labored breath, he hung on to only one spark. Dick Thornby was on the case and that foul-mouthed, pyromaniacal grunt

was as obstinate as they came. He'd been sent on a mission and he would do whatever it took to get the job done.

#

Dick rolled out of the bed in the dark and dressed without turning on the light. He'd made a point of showing his face earlier in the day, but now it was night, when all the real action happened. Everything from this point forward would be shrouded in secrecy. What he was doing now wasn't a peaceful protest, it was clandestine covert action against a sovereign power—actually two, both of which were members of the Subsidiary's International Oversight board. On top of that, there were other forces at work with unknown operatives, unknown agendas, unknown capabilities, and unknown allies, whether terrestrial or alien. Dick could get captured and thrown into a hole so deep and so dark he would never see the light of day again, no matter how long or hard he screamed.

Yep, just another day at the office.

## CHAPTER 26

Dick didn't take the rental car. Cars meant lights and traffic cameras and easy surveillance and tracking. No, the rest of the mission would be on foot. And, he wanted to only bring things a protester would carry when infiltrating a base to find evidence of a UFO cover up. These days, that meant a cell phone with the camera app open, a plastic bottle of water, and a small cloth protest banner. He grabbed the kangaroo tourist bag and dropped the items in with his tube of sun-block, then rolled it up and tucked it into the back of his jeans. Having it along made it look like he'd come straight from one of the groups protesting all day in the sun. So did having his aviator-style Subsidiary-issued sunglasses—and they were more than useful day or night.

He, of course, had never retrieved the gun he'd dropped and covered over along the shoulder of the wide gravel roadway of Fimiston Super Pit, but that didn't bother him. Guns were a big bugaboo in Australia—there's no way a tourist would be packing.

Fortunately, this wasn't Patton force-marching troops to Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge. It was a quick stroll around the outskirts of the Exmouth Golf Club to the beach. Dick wore the shade of dark clothing favored by the anarchists he'd encountered earlier in the day, but without the ridiculous and stifling hoodie, so it was relatively easy to stick to the shadows and avoid two sets of teens obviously too young to have their own apartment or car, but old enough to want to chance creating their own clueless kids.

In no time, he was on an irregular path to the beach. Once there, he headed north as the waves lapped and surged rhythmically onto the pebble-studded sand. He donned his aviator sunglasses and switched them to night vision mode. No sense twisting an ankle in the dark.

It didn't take long for Dick to reach Area B. He would have gotten more steps in on his workout routine if he'd actually been on vacation and played eighteen holes at the Exmouth Golf Club, rather than pretending to be on vacation and skirting it to access a foreign military



facility. He reached the point where the perimeter of Area B was closest to the ocean and passed it, continuing along the beach. That was probably the spot most watched, if indeed anyone was watching anything along the perimeter of Area B during the wee hours tonight. With any luck, the thin security force for the Holt base was concentrated on Area A, watching the bonfires and protesters gathered on either side of the base for any sign the noisy frolickers actually intended to follow through on their boasts of storming and occupying the place.

With a little bit of luck, some yahoos emboldened by too many pints of local brew would charge the fence and attract every bit of attention the beleaguered guards had to give.

Not much farther along the beach, Dick spotted the gully he'd spied on the satellite photos of the base kindly supplied by Google Earth to the denizens of the World Wide Web. Though North West Cape—the peninsula which jutted out into the Ningaloo Reef and on which both Exmouth and the ponderously named Naval Communication Station Harold E. Holt sat—was all arid and caked sand, the shallow wash provided drainage from Area B to the ocean when storms raged through. He crouched and made his way up the small incline from the beach to the perimeter fence.

Just as he'd hoped, the gully had washed away some of the dirt under the chain-link, providing dirty, but relatively easy, access inside the perimeter fence without cutting or scaling it. Dick used his gloved hands to scoop out enough additional loose sand and small stones to allow even his stocky girth to wriggle through until he was on the inside, officially committing a felony and breaking the national security laws of Australia and maybe the United States.

He stayed flat on the ground for at least a minute to make sure his intrusion was so far undetected, then stood in a low crouch and crept toward the center of Area B, still using the wide, shallow drainage gully for whatever minimal concealment it provided. Scrubby bushes were especially prevalent along the gully close to the outer perimeter of

the facility. That helped, but Dick knew from the aerial photos the vegetation thinned more and more as one moved further from the perimeter fence. The central area, housing the only sizeable buildings in Area B, had an entirely cleared area in a roughly two-hundred-meter radius around the complex. There would be no hiding there, other than darkness and inattention.

He moved as quick as he dared, praying most or all of Area B's regular security personnel had been re-assigned to watch the protesters congregating around—and threatening to breach—Area A. Or, if not, hopefully the remaining guards had monitors tuned to both Areas and the higher level of flashy activity there would catch the eye rather than a subtle flutter of black-on-black skulking about Area B.

He checked the luminous dial on his watch. Some poor third world woman probably was fighting cancer because she licked her brush tip when applying the luminous paint, but it was a damn convenient thing to have during black ops. Nine minutes.

In less than ten minutes, Seth and Melanie would lead their respective throngs of ragtag protesters in rousing renditions of protest songs from the last occupation of the base. Seth would belt out *We Don't Want No Yankee Bases* with the group at the Yardie Creek Road entrance to Area A *a cappella*. Melanie would orchestrate *Omega Doodle* with the accompaniment of a dozen plastic kazoos from the partying protesters near the beach. Short of rigging explosions, it was the best Dick could do to maximize distractions at Area A at the moment he wanted to breach the building in Area B.

Dick reached the edge of the open area, took off his aviator sunglasses and tucked them into his front pocket. With light from the buildings, they were a hindrance now. He waited a few moments to let his eyes adjust to the ambient light. Then he took a few deep breaths and sprinted across the open ground at full speed toward the secondary fence surrounding the main building. He leapt up, half-somersaulting, and using his gloved hands and flexed arms to push up and off one of the metal posts while in the air, like a ninety-pound pre-

pubescent Russian gymnast. He guessed the fence was electrified, but he hadn't the time to check and as long as he wasn't grounded when he touched it, even if not gloved, he should be safe. These guys might be using secret Tesla technology to threaten the world, but they didn't know squat about the best way to protect a building from a sophisticated, determined intruder.

He landed on his feet, letting his knees collapse, as he dove forward into a roll to absorb the momentum from his run and jump. He came up into a crouch below the level of the building windows and waited for a few beats to see if his approach had raised any alarm.

All was quiet. All seemed safe.

He didn't really know what he was looking for, so there was no obvious plan for how and where to infiltrate the building. His best guess was that if someone really was doing something secret and bizarre here (other than sending and receiving highly encoded military messages to nuclear-armed submarines on deep station patrols), they were most likely doing it someplace underground, where fewer people went and nobody could look in from outside. Accordingly, when he turned to the side and raised up to look in the corner of the nearest window, his first priority was to find the nearest stairwell.

No luck from his first vantage point, so he crept along the outer wall of the building a little more toward the center of the facility and checked again. Nothing. On his third attempt, he finally found what he was looking for. Next up, he needed to find an emergency fire exit near the stairwell. He'd surreptitiously accessed enough buildings in the course of his career that popping an emergency exit without tripping the simple circuit-breaker alarm system was not a problem, even in the dark in a country where people drove on the wrong side of the road and liked to watch kangaroos box instead of people.

He found a door and got to work.

Maybe circumventing the alarm took more of his attention than he thought, because he didn't see the two black-clothed thugs who

ambushed him from either side as he was working the door until it was almost too late.

As they converged, he ducked and put his left hand flat on the concrete pad near the door, giving him a contact point that allowed him to lash out with both legs at once. Unfortunately, he only made grazing contact with his right leg on one assailant and nothing but air with his left. He attempted to spin counterclockwise with his legs still extended in hopes of clipping the two thugs behind their knees, but they avoided his legs by jumping atop him in his awkward, crouched position. He was forced to move his contact hand to avoid a sprain ... or worse ... from the sudden additional weight.

He fell to the hard cement and attempted to roll away from the building, where he had more room to maneuver and possibly escape his opponents, but it was too late. He was trapped, with one arm folded beneath him and his legs flailing ineffectively. One arm against two opponents was a losing proposition, even if he could really see what was going on. But his viewpoint was from a partially blocked position and the shadows from the building and spilling lights made a mish-mash of glaring angles of light and dark.

Still, he tried to fight back more effectively — there was no point to being stealthy and quiet once you were found out by the guards of a military facility. But he never got a real chance to either use his professional-grade street-fighting skills or his ersatz amateur UFO-ologist and protester protestations about use of force. Instead, Dick felt a sting in his neck and the shadows enveloping him somehow managed to fade to an even deeper black.

Between Dick's stocky build and his healthy adrenal response to fight or flight situations, whatever they'd dosed him with was on the ragged edge of insufficiency. The black filling his vision lifted for short moments of ... not really lucidity, but more like foggy, trippy, translucency. He heard a *boom* and felt himself being half-carried, half-dragged, his feet forming furrows in soft, then wet sand. Later, he half-

woke to a bobbing motion with the smell of moist salt permeating the dusty, stuffy confines of the bag over his head.

What the fuck? He was being taken out to sea. Those hadn't been guards from the facility. Someone else was taking him god-knows-where.

Not good. Not good at all.

As he faded into oblivion once more, he comforted himself with one thought. At least Melanie and Seth weren't with him when he was taken. At least his wife and his son were safe, singing protest songs around a campfire with the salt of the earth. Gullible, groovy peaceniks and idealists, but well-intentioned people.

#

Seth didn't actually know the words to *We Don't Want No Yankee Bases*, but he followed along as best he could, though he always dropped out at the word "Yankee" out of respect for his country—the country his dad fought in the Army to serve and the country which, despite all of its faults, still remained a bastion of freedom and ingenuity and success. He stared into the bonfire, wishing not only that this distraction meant his dad would succeed on his mission, but that the world could be an even better place.

He glanced around the bonfire at the earnest, smiling faces. Certainly, many people wanted to make a better world, just like he did. Of course, he knew from his experience with Chinese dissidents on Reality 2 Be and what he knew of his dad's work with the Subsidiary, there were a lot of different paths to that same purpose.

He shook himself out of his reverie to turn and scan the crowd away from the bonfire, just to make sure nobody was doing anything stupid. Back when his activism in the *Free Tibet!* Movement had been revealed, his dad, a former cop after all, had given him one rule to keep in mind whenever involved in a protest march. *Pay attention to and police your fellow protesters, because if you allow criminal elements to take over your*

*protest and commit felonies, not only will you undercut whatever your message was supposed to be, but some scared or poorly trained or injured guard will use deadly force to protect himself or his fellow officers.* Keeping tabs on a diverse, spread-out crowd was harder to do than Seth liked. He couldn't just keep an eye out for people brandishing rocks and Molotov cocktails. These days frozen water bottles were the weapon of choice for rioters. Still, he had to try. As someone who sought a better world, Seth wanted to propose solutions, not cause more problems.

Unfortunately, staring at the bonfire had screwed up his night vision and all he could see in the distance was blackness punctuated by the blinking red lights of the antennae and the harsh security lights of the central compound of Area A. He closed his eyes to speed their adjustment to the dark and counted silently to thirty as yet another protest song started. Finally, he opened his eyes and caught a flicker of shadowy movement to the north and slightly east of his position, where the westernmost antenna jutted out of the flat desert high into the night sky. A couple individuals wearing black clothing and black motorcycle helmets were scrambling over the perimeter fencing. As they moved into the shadow of dim light nearest the tower, he saw them place something at its base, then run to the fence and scramble over, drop down, and run away at full tilt.

A moment later, a bright white flash burst at the base of the towering antenna and a lonely *boom* thundered across the vast emptiness of Exmouth peninsula.

The protest song fell off raggedly into stunned silence.

Then there was the unmistakable creak of twisting metal as the westernmost tower of the NCSHEH faltered and sagged as its base disintegrated. A sudden *snap* and the *twing* of a failed cable sailed across the air as the antenna leaned to one side, then gained momentum and fell to the earth with a wrenching, groaning, rumble.

An alarm started blaring at the central complex.

Fucking anarchists. They ruin everything.

Seth didn't wait for the men with automatic weapons who were no doubt pouring out of the central complex of the station to arrive.

"Run!" he shouted. "Everybody leave now! Move!"

The problem with protesting at a remote location on a narrow peninsula in an undeveloped part of the country was there was only one road out. If they didn't make it to Murat Road and south, at least into the town of Exmouth, the whole lot of them would be taken into custody and imprisoned for the acts of the anarchist fringe, who were already roaring past the group on their motorcycles.

If the security guards were smart, they weren't headed to the site of the explosion or even to the intersection where he and the other protesters were singing their songs, they were headed to block off Murat Road at this very moment.

What a total cluster.

As he jumped into a car with another protester, he hoped his mom was okay and was on her way back to town, too.

As for his dad ... well, he had the distraction he needed.

#

The first thing Melanie thought when she heard the explosion was that Dick was in trouble. Deep, deep trouble. But even as she whirled toward the sound of the boom, she realized she was turning northwest and Dick was to the south, southwest, far from the site of the explosion.

Her next thought, even more horrifying, was that there was an explosion where Seth was monitoring the gaggle of other protesters. But then she saw the light on the westernmost antenna wink out as it fell and she realized the explosion must have taken place there, away from the intersection where the main protest group was encamped.

She grabbed her cell phone to call Seth, to tell him to run, to get back to town, but she realized he was smart enough to figure that out for himself and the only thing that might slow him down was calling her

to tell her to do the same. She stifled her maternal instincts and let her nascent espionage instincts come to the fore.

Time to get the hell out of Dodge ... or, at least, Bundegi Beach. She accepted the hurried invitation of another demonstrator and waded out to a small speedboat just off the beach. Boats were slower than a car on open road, but a lot more difficult to roadblock. Soon, she was staring through the salt spray as the boat skittered south, toward Area B, where Dick was supposedly in the midst of his infiltration.

A sudden lurch of the speeding boat almost propelled her overboard, but she grabbed the gunwale in time, hanging on white-knuckled as her face dipped downward, hovering over the foamy water streaming past with the boat at top speed. She arched her back to regain her balance, then turned to look at the pilot, who was extending a raised middle finger at a larger boat, retreating into the darkness.

"What was that?" she asked as she wiped salt spray from her face.

"Bloody wankers! Partiers cruising full-on without running lights. Who the bloody hell does that?"

Melanie looked to the west. The lights of Exmouth twinkled to the southwest. They were just abreast of Area B. She looked astern, but could no longer make out the speeding boat which had made them swerve. All she could see was the white froth of its wake, dissolving from foam into a glassy black sheen on the dark water.

She silently prayed with all the fervor she could muster that the culprits who had already disappeared from view were idiotic partiers ... bloody wankers ... and not something or someone much, much worse.



## CHAPTER 27

Later still, much later by his estimation, Dick crawled from the depths of unconsciousness toward reality.

Reality sucked.

He didn't know where he was or even when it was, but the humidity was higher here and he felt the purring vibration of a powerful, but finely tuned motor. Then his neck was pricked a second time. Once again, a curtain of blackness fell over his vision, but this time in the blackness a blue-ringed octopus cavorted with giant Portuguese Man-o'-War jellyfish, stinging him again and again and again.

The next time he awoke, dappled flashes of bright sunshine flitted over the outside of the black bag amid the sound of buzzing insects, intermittent muttered curses, and animal sounds, including a Kookaburra. He knew it from his experience as a birdwatcher to be a Blue-Winged Kookaburra, not the Laughing Kookaburra used in so many old Tarzan and similar movies as a substitute for monkey howls. Dick could tell the difference between jungle sounds and tropical rainforest sounds, and this was the latter.

There was no rainforest near Exmouth, just sand and scrub and whale sharks surfing the turquoise ocean. And the Blue-Winged Kookaburra's range didn't extend that far south of the northern coastal shores of Australia, especially not in the western part of the country.

He was somewhere north and east of Exmouth, given the sounds.

But exactly where the hell was he?

More importantly, why was he being taken far away from Exmouth ... and his family?

#

Thank God Seth was already at the hotel and packing up the car by the time Melanie arrived. She grabbed him in the parking lot and

hugged him to herself before he could make the typical teen protest against public displays of maternal affection. But her elation was short-lived.

“Is your father here?” she asked. Even she could hear the near panic in her tone. She took a deep breath—she had to hold it together for Seth.

“No, he’s not. And he said not to wait if this kind of thing happened. He said to leave and not wait.”

Melanie managed a tight smile. “I think his words were: ‘If things go south, go south—as soon and as fast as you can. I’ll meet you back in Perth. Maintain cover.’”

Seth nodded as he headed back to the room. “Just one more suitcase and we’re loaded.” He tossed her his room key. “Check us out.”

She caught the key. “It’s awfully early. The sun isn’t even up.”

Seth stood at the open hotel room door for a moment, then shrugged. “If anyone asks, we’re getting an early start on the day. Tourists do that all the time.”

In less than ten minutes, they were headed south, out of town. Perth was more than twelve hours away, but Melanie wasn’t planning on making any stops along the way. Seth explained what had happened at the westernmost antenna, but after exchanging information about their respective escapes, they fell into silence. About an hour later, Seth fell asleep in the passenger seat and she let him sleep for as long as he wanted. Despite being up all night, she didn’t need him to help keep her awake as she drove. Her mind was a whirl of thoughts, fears, and emotions.

Was Dick all right?

Where was he?

When would he meet them?

What should they do to maintain cover in the meantime?

When Seth finally awoke, he didn’t ask what time it was or where they were or when he could stop for a bio break. He had only one question.

“If someone asks us about Dad, what do we say?”

“I thought about that while you were asleep. We stay as close to the truth as we can, but we maintain his cover.”

“But, how do we—”

“We tell them we came here to vacation while your father checked out UFO sightings and he simply went out by himself into the dark with the hope of completing his quest, with plans to meet up with us again back in Perth.”

Seth bit his lip, then looked into the distance. “But what if some time goes by and Dad doesn’t meet us in Perth?”

Melanie didn’t hesitate. She’d thought this through. “We tell them the truth. We don’t know where your father is. For all we know, he was abducted by aliens.”

Seth wrinkled his nose. “Aliens?”

“Definitely,” said Melanie. “All of the locals we’ve met have been much too nice to have abducted your father. So, it must have been foreigners ... aliens.”

#

Dick heard low, muffled voices, probably from outside or maybe another room nearby. He couldn’t make out the words, but he was pretty sure they weren’t speaking English. Not locals, then. He chuckled to himself. He’d hit the UFO buff vacation trifecta: seeing weird lights in the sky at Rendlesham Forest; stumbling upon a strange artifact uncovered by winds in the remote desert near Banjawarn Station; and being abducted by aliens in the wee hours of the night. If Nerevsky ... or Dee Tammany ... fired his ass after this bizarre, botched caper, at least he could self-publish a UFO conspiracy book. Hell, he might be able to get a show on the History Channel. There were stupider shows on television, he told himself. He could be a reality television success. And, he’d been in worse binds than this, he told himself. He could still eke out a mission success.

He heard a chair scrape across the floor in the other room and the door to the room he was in opened. “Ve haf a few questions,” said a gruff voice, the accent unmistakably Russian. “You vill provide answers. Da?”

Of course, he’d have to survive a round or six of torture before he could eke out that mission success.

#

Actually, the torture turned out not to be so bad.

Of course, torture is one of those things ... like holiday fruitcake or infomercials ... which is always painful. A perfect world wouldn’t include any such things. But the guy with the Boris Badenov accent didn’t really ask him any questions; he just tuned him up a bit. Unusual, but not unheard of. The bizarre thing was the guy seemed to have a fetish for tidiness, cleaning the bloody spot on Dick’s face where the skin had stretched too tight when hit and had split open. He even put the bloody paper towel into a ZipLoc bag, rather than set it down on the nearby table.

It took all kinds. Even brutal psychopaths could have their fetishes and fears. Maybe the guy was germophobic. Dick’s best guess was that this guy was just the warm-up for the main act. Not really here to do the main interrogation, but just to let him know that his captors meant business, that he could really be hurt by someone willing and able to inflict pain if answers weren’t forthcoming once the real interrogation began.

And, by the time the initial pummeling was over, Dick was pretty sure as to what his game plan was going to be during the main session.

He was going to talk.

Oh, he wasn’t going to tell them about Glenn and Dee and operational details about the Subsidiary or its agents, but it was clear these goons—ape-like relatives of the Russians who had chased his family into the Super Pit—already knew he was looking into some

connection between UFOs and Tesla and he was doing it at the behest of Pyotr Nerevsky. At this point, Nerevsky had already put his family in danger for no good reason. He had no loyalty to the Head of Internal Audit; they could fry the son-of-a-bitch for all he cared.

Of course, that plan went out the window of the windowless hole he was being kept in. They'd taken the bag off his head while they were tuning him up. Not a good sign, since it meant he could I.D. everyone in the room if needed, so they weren't planning on letting him leave. One silver lining to the dark cloud that was his life was that after beating him up, they untied his ropes and let him roam free in his squalid hell-hole. Sure, that meant they probably intended to keep him for a long time and didn't really need the stench associated with letting him soil himself again and again, but it also meant he could scope out the location to plan an escape. The smattering of sunlight creeping in from the cracks around the door, the only relief from the solid cement block construction, didn't really help much on that score.

Fortunately, they'd searched him and let him keep his empty water bottle, sunscreen—suggesting he might use it to supplement his diet—and his protest sign. They'd also left him an old coffee can in which he could relieve himself, even though with the trickle of water they gave him and the amount he was sweating off in this hole, there wasn't much liquid in his body left to pee. They'd destroyed his phone, of course. Unfortunately, they'd also taken ... or somewhere along the route he'd lost ... his best resource, his Subsidiary issue aviator glasses. Not only couldn't he use the Subsidiary's tech marvel to signal for help, he couldn't even use the night vision mode to scour the place for potential tools to help him escape. He'd have to make do with what he had.

That wasn't much. There were few places to look and fewer things to find. Some miscellaneous trash—foil from cooking something from over an open fire, trashed remains from a broken flashlight, a plastic cup, and a few nudie magazines. Still, he cataloged the surroundings, both animate and inanimate, and steeled himself for what was to come.

Then, he waited. Typical spy work.

## CHAPTER 28

At first Seth did his best to keep up the cover story and to help his mom do the same. They walked along the riverfront, had lunch at trendy cafés and dinner at high-end restaurants—touristy things to mask the fact they were marking time until his dad, an international spy, could make his way back to Perth after infiltrating a highly classified military installation.

For the first few days, there was also plenty of coverage of the “terrorist incident” in Exmouth in the local press, including both the daily *The West Australian* newspaper and the local television stations. Reporters had, of course, also covered the protest he and Brian had created out of thin ... hot ... air, so there were plenty of shots, both still and video, of crowd members brandishing signs and shouting slogans. Not having dressed as a druid or an alien or a *Crocodile Dundee* wannabe, none of the pictures featured Seth or his mom, but he still found several with one or another of them somewhere in the background. Given that they’d registered at the Exmouth hotel under their real names and had beat a hasty retreat after things went bad, he guessed any competent police force or national security apparatus would know exactly who they were and where they were now.

By the third day, Seth simply stayed in the hotel room watching television and playing games on his laptop while his mom alternately paced and stared out the window. In their own separate ways, they were both waiting for the same thing, for the knock at the door which would bring the authorities into their lives. Their return flight wasn’t until the middle of the next week, and there wasn’t any other plan for what to do except wait for his dad to return and tell them what to do.

Still, Seth looked up the number for Catalyst Crisis Consulting’s nearest office, in Sydney, only four thousand kilometers—about twenty-five hundred not-so-comforting miles—away. He, of course, knew the number of his dad’s office in Philly by heart, but Philly was a

long, long way away, so he memorized the Sydney number, too. Just in case.

Days passed, each one longer than the one before.

Finally, there was a knock at the door. His mom merely started in shock, then stared at the door as if it were a wild beast come to devour her. Seth strode past her, yelling a faux cheery “Coming!” as he approached the door, hoping perhaps to forestall a battering ram followed by a flash-bang and a swarm of shock troops or whatever Australia’s equivalent of SWAT was, as the powers-that-be came for them.

When he opened the door, though, he did a double-take. There was a somewhat familiar man wearing what looked like an ultra-expensive three-piece suit.

The man made no movement toward the door, but simply held out a well-manicured hand. “Glenn Swynton, Catalyst Crisis Consulting. May I come in?”

His mom looked almost as shocked as Seth felt, but she recovered more quickly. “Yes. Yes, Mr. Swynton. I ... well, I believe we’ve met.”

“We have,” said Swynton, as he took Seth’s hand, gave it a firm shake, then dropped it. Seth took a step back and Swynton glided into the room, moving to his mom with both grace and urgency. He took her hand, too, but instead of shaking it, he held it and placed his other hand alongside it, the way politicians always do when they’re trying to appear comforting. “I believe it was at the family holiday gathering three years past.”

Up until now, Seth had never thought about the fact that Catalyst Crisis Consulting held holiday parties and hosted clients at corporate boxes at football and baseball games just like any other big consulting firm. From the look of astonishment on his mom’s face, he figured she’d never thought of it, either, and was just now realizing that everybody she’d ever met from his dad’s workplace was really a spy.

“Yes. Yes, I think you’re right,” his mom said, then waved Swynton toward the sofa to sit.



Seth watched as the man did just that, with a practiced micro-tug of each pant leg so the fabric didn't stretch over his knees as they bent. Then his mom sat and looked up at Seth expectantly. Seth hurried over and settled on the other end of the couch.

Swynton closed his eyes for a second, then pursed his lips together before speaking. "I've come with news about your husband ..." He turned his gaze to Seth. "... your father."

Seth had been little when his dad was an Army Ranger and still somewhat young when his dad was a Chicago cop. But he knew what all families of those who put their life on the line feared, the knock on the door by someone too formal, too high-ranked to be there for a social call, the knock that was inevitably and irretrievably followed by the words "I regret to inform you ..."

Seth's stomach dropped as all the color drained out of his mother's face.

"I regret to inform you that your loved one is missing and presumed dead."

His mom's face flashed an instant of relief at the first part of the statement, then fell quickly to anguish. She closed her eyes and he could see her struggling to control her emotions.

"Missing? Just missing?"

"Yes," said Swynton, "but presumed dead."

Contrasting emotions continued to flicker over his mom's face and flutter through his own mind.

"But just presumed?"

Swynton took a deep breath. "I don't want to extinguish any spark of hope, but I do not want to kindle that faint spark, either. We do not make presumptions lightly in ... ah ... our consulting business. We base our assessment on facts and evidence. In Richard's case, we grew concerned when he suddenly disappeared. Our concern grew as time passed without any communication from him or any sighting of him by our electronic and human surveillance sources. Then, a week went by with no contact. In addition, it was disturbing his disappearance

coincided with a sizeable explosion, particularly because forensic analysis shows such explosion to have been the result of the use of Nobel 808.”

“I’m sorry,” said his mom. “I don’t know what that is.”

“It’s an unusual type of plastic explosive.”

“So?” interrupted Seth.

Swynton let out a deep breath. “Your father was given a tube of Nobel 808 when he arrived in country.”

“Still,” said Seth, “that hardly seems—”

“I hadn’t finished,” said Swynton, cutting him off, dashing his hopes. “A tech found some blood on one of the supports for the destroyed antenna at Exmouth. The DNA analysis has come back and it is a positive match for ... well, for Richard Thornby.”

There were other words, but Seth never heard them. A white haze of static buzzed in his mind. It made no sense. Dad wasn’t at the tower; he’d said the whole point of the demonstrations near Area A was so he could access Area B. Could he have set the explosives earlier, perhaps, to provide a more pressing distraction for the security forces?

But when Seth’s vision and his mind finally cleared enough to ask more questions, he saw Swynton, now sitting next to his mother, holding her as she cried, her tears streaming down her face onto the fabric on the shoulder of the man’s suit, and he knew this was not the time for questions or false hope. It was time for him to step up and take over providing the comfort his mother needed.

A half hour later, Swynton left with a promise of whatever assistance they needed, both in departing Australia and in dealing with matters back home in Philadelphia. It occurred to Seth that Swynton must have done this kind of thing before, that this kind of notification, and the compassion and support that came with it, was part of the job of someone who worked as some kind of manager or director or whatever at a spy agency. Swynton had enough practice to know how to do a terrible, terrible job well. That said more about the dangers of being a spy than anything else Seth could think of.

And yet, when he wasn't thinking about missing his dad or comforting his mom, Seth was thinking that he wanted to pick up the torch his dad had dropped when things went bad at Exmouth. Seth decided right there and then. He wanted to work at Catalyst Crisis Consulting. He wanted to be an agent for the Subsidiary. He wanted to be a spy.

Just like dad.

#

More than a week passed in dull monotony. Unrelenting heat. Buzzing insects. Some half-hearted punching by the practice squad. Instead of wasting his energy and risking internal injuries with displays of bravado, Dick did his best to avoid provoking his captors. He also pretended to be weaker and groggier than he truly was to both subtly encourage them to let down their guard, and perhaps entice them to treat him better lest he die in their care. He was also performing a second balancing act. While healing and resting up to be ready for an escape attempt, he had to make sure not to wait too long. The lack of food and water would eventually weaken him too much to make any escape impractical.

One day was the same as the next. Eventually there was the sound of a speedboat approaching, then voices and a bit of commotion outside the narrow confines of his world. Finally, the door squealed open and a short, slightly stout man with graying hair and a sallow complexion scarred by childhood acne walked into the place like he was in charge.

He apparently was, because the thug who had tuned Dick up ambled into a kind of parade rest stance and looked at the floor. Personally, Dick didn't see what was so intimidating about the bureaucrat who'd arrived. He didn't even carry, at least nothing but a folded newspaper. Dick recognized it as *The Western Australian*, the largest circulation daily — well, six days a week — newspaper published

in Perth. Dick focused on the paper. The headline read: *Explosion at Exmouth* above a large picture of the mangled remains of one of Area A's large antennae. Smaller pictures beneath showed wide shots of the protests Dick had recruited Seth and Brian to orchestrate.

Shit. Things had gone bad at Exmouth. Very, very bad.

"Oh," said the bureaucrat, "I see you've noticed the headline. But, of course, I doubt that is any surprise to you, Mr. Thornby, given your ... fondness ... for explosions."

Shit. Shit. Shit. Dick didn't need to talk when the torture started. This guy knew way too much already.

"Lots of speculation in the article about violent protesters, professional provocateurs—Would that be you, perhaps?—and international terrorists. Yackety-yack. What passes for news and analysis these days. Wrong on the facts and clueless about the actual reasons behind what's going on right under their noses."

Dick stayed silent. The more this mook talked, the more likely he'd pick up some useful information.

"So, here's what's going to happen. I'm going to ask you some questions. Maybe a few; maybe many. You're going to answer, at least most of them. After all, you actually might not know the answers to a few. As familiar as I am with Pyotr Nerevsky's *modus operandi*, I know he keeps his operatives in the dark about many, many things, and I don't want to blame you for his training, with which I am intimately familiar."

"And what do I get out of this? A fast death rather than a slow death? Less motivating than you might think."

"Nothing so ... ephemeral. No, should you be less cooperative than I think you should be, Otik here will use you as a sparring partner, but with no gloves and no punching back. He didn't make the Russian Olympic team, but he does know how to break ribs with alacrity. Very painful from what I hear."

"He might make the next team. He's been practicing at least once a day since I got here."

The bureaucrat chuckled. "That wasn't practicing. That was warming up. If he'd been practicing, you'd be wincing every time you took a breath and there'd be a hollow whistle when you spoke."

"Yeah. But then you take the chance I fall unconscious ... or die ... and you get no information at all."

"A keen observation. After all, I didn't come all the way to Yilgalong Creek to watch you die. Direct violence can be unpredictable, which is why I prefer other motivational methods." The man glanced down at the folded newspaper he was still holding. "The demonstrations and explosions in Exmouth caused quite a stir. Both the police and Australia's national security apparatus are involved in finding those responsible, and emotions are running high."

"I suppose they are."

"All that puts your wife and your son at considerable risk."

Dick grit his teeth, but said nothing.

"No doubt," continued the bureaucrat, "you provided them with instructions on where to go and what to do if things went wrong, but you had no real idea how wrong they would go, how much pressure there would be to find them."

"Assuming you're right," growled Dick, "I don't think your incompetent local goons could do much of a job finding and protecting them."

His interrogator pursed his lips and grinned. "You have a point. But, you see, we don't have to find them. Been there, done that, as you Americans are so fond of saying. And I wouldn't really say we're protecting them." He wagged his head. "No. More accurately, you're protecting them ... at least so far ... from us. From me. That's the real story. Otik is just here for ... training."

Fuck! This asshole from Nerevsky's past might be lying, but Dick couldn't assume that. Dick wasn't a traitor. He wasn't a turncoat and he wasn't a wimp. But he was a husband and a father, one who loved his family. It was a good thing he'd already decided to talk ... at least

about some things ... because he dared not stay silent with their lives in the balance.

“Message delivered. Ask your questions.”

The bureaucrat snapped his fingers and a couple of guards brought in a wooden chair for him to sit on.

“Did Pyotr Nerevsky task you with investigating the Banjawarn Bang to find out what really happened back in 1993?”

“Duh,” replied Dick. “You already know that.”

“Do you believe the Aum Shinrikyo detonated a nuclear weapon there?”

Dick snorted. “I don’t even think the remnants of Aum Shinrikyo believe that.”

“And what do you think happened there?”

“Hard to say. My inclination is to say some sort of natural phenomenon, but then, if that was the case, types like you wouldn’t care. So, something more sinister, more bizarre. Some of the UFO buffs seem to think that an alien spaceship landed and the world made first contact with the Grays or lizard men from Mars or some shit like that.”

“That’s a bit far-fetched, don’t you think?”

Dick shrugged. “Too much in character for my cover, maybe.”

“Any other theories?”

“You’ve seen the chatter amongst the conspiracy crowd on the internet, no doubt. From all I understand, you Russians are all over the internet.”

“Hmm-hmm. And how did you end up in Exmouth? What’s the connection?”

“Not quite clear,” replied Dick. “Your goons nabbed me before I could finish my facility tour. Some potential connection with energy weapons.”

The man’s lips puckered for a moment before he spoke. “What types of energy weapons?”

"You're still asking me questions I know you know the answers to," Dick replied. "The type connected with old Tesla research. Death rays, energy shields, earthquake generators."

"Why would you say I know that?"

"Because I owe somebody a thousand bucks for a new car."

"Sounds like a bargain. Who would that be?"

Dick shook his head. "Off limits. Not going there. Either you already know and this banter is just filler you're using to build *rapport* or you don't know and I sure as hell am not going to tell you."

The bureaucrat inclined his head toward Otik and the thug stepped forward and jabbed Dick once in the upper ribcage. It hurt like a son-of-a-bitch, but Dick didn't feel anything pop or crack.

The bureaucrat inspected his nails. "You're right, of course, but non-compliance does have a cost."

Otik stepped back and Dick's interrogator continued. "What's the connection between Exmouth and Banjawarn Station?"

Dick took a breath and winced, but only for show. Let Otik's handler think his pet thug had over-performed. "Don't you guys read the conspiracy sites on the internet? I heard you like that kind of shit."

"Which sites in particular are you referring to?"

"Harry Mason's stuff, mostly. 'Bright Skies,' he called it. You know, earthquake generators, great circle routes, Russian bases in Antarctica, Exmouth, Cutler, Arecibo, electro-magnetic weather control. Yada, yada, yada."

"Ahh. Some fine reading there, although Arecibo's last purported attempt to control the weather seems to have gone rather spectacularly awry." Again, his inquisitor puckered his lips during a brief pause. "But let's get down to serious business. What do you know about Exmouth that I couldn't find on the World Wide Web?"

Dick hesitated before responding, taking a breath and providing another faux wince to buy time for thought. The true answer was he didn't know jack, but he didn't think this guy was going to buy that. He decided to bluff with the only bit of information he had which,

based on what Ace had told him about Cutler, Maine, might be true, but without revealing his source.

"I know," he said, "there are a whole lot more ultra-low frequency transmissions from Exmouth than make any possible sense if all it is doing is communicating with submarines in deepwater stations."

The bureaucrat started, but quickly tried to pass it off as a laugh. "Really? And who do you think Exmouth is in constant communication with?"

How the fuck did he know? Aside from submarine communications and the occasional self-destruct order to certain drone models, Dick had no clue what ULF communications might be used for. For all Dick knew, the constant stream of transmissions was nothing but meaningless filler, sent so that anyone monitoring the unbreakable code wouldn't know when real communications were actually occurring—kind of the flipside of terrorist groups getting quiet just before an operation. But he wasn't about to say that, just in case it might be true. Dick was just making shit up at this point, doing his best to keep the questions coming in the hopes of learning something from them, just in case he ever got out of this place. He played to his cover. "UFOs? Black Triangle Motherships? Aliens?"

"Aliens."

"They brought that Space Surveillance Telescope in recently. Maybe it helps direct the signal."

"Exmouth's been operational a long time," said the bureaucrat. "The Space Surveillance Telescope is a quite recent addition."

"Fine," said Dick. "Maybe the lizard men from outer space are busily infiltrating society and keep in contact with their leadership through ultra-low frequency communications."

"Is that so?"

Dick had thought his wild speculation would draw a chuckle from his captor, but the bureaucrat's eyes did not twinkle in amusement. They were dead cold.

"It's a theory."



“And, what? There are thousands of ‘lizard people’ as you call them roaming around the planet undetected?”

What the fuck did this guy want? A plotline for a SyFy movie? “Not at all,” answered Dick. “They take human form. They take over the bodies of human hosts.”

“And what happens to the minds of those humans?”

“I don’t know,” said Dick. “They scream in terror, trying to get out?”

The bureaucrat smiled. “Not really. I’m told it’s pretty boring, unless, of course, there’s something that happened before the assimilation that was truly terrifying.”

What the fuck?

“Did you ever consider that when someone does something illogical and say their ‘lizard brain’ made them do it, they might be telling the truth?”

“Eat shit and die,” said Dick.

That made the man laugh out loud. “We’re done here.” The bureaucrat got up from his chair and turned to leave. He looked down at his hand, still holding the folded newspaper as if he’d forgotten he had it. “The lizard people part was a nice touch. But, of course, alien life could be no larger than a bacterium, a parasite which attaches to the brain and is capable of receiving ULF transmissions. Less visually exciting for cinematic purposes, but still quite effective at controlling the thoughts and deeds of the host body.”

Dick rolled his eyes. “*To je pěkná píčovina!*”

His interrogator’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t know what that means.”

“No, you don’t,” replied Dick. “But, then, I don’t know what you might understand because I don’t really know who I’m talking to, do I?” This entire interrogation was bullshit and Dick was getting tired of it. “Who am I talking to? Russian SVR? GRU? Or are you just a meat puppet for some parasite that just needs a good dose of penicillin to clear out?”

“Someday you’ll know. The world will know, but not yet. Which reminds me—” He tapped the newspaper. “Interesting top story, but that isn’t really why I brought you the paper. Headlines can be so sensational, but it’s the human-interest stories which really inspire the average reader to keep subscribing. Entertainment gossip, helping homeless kittens, and the local police and emergency blotter. Have you checked your horoscope lately?”

He dropped the paper on the ground and turned to Otik. “No more workouts. His body needs to heal before he is ... suitable ... for what comes next.” With that, he left the cement block prison with Otik and the rest of the guards. Apparently, the interrogation was over.

What in the world ... or out of the world ... was going on?

## CHAPTER 29

Dick didn't really believe alien lizard men or alien space bacteria existed and he was going to be used to host one. Russians loved to lie. They loved to fuck with people. They probably took *Men in Black* and *The Andromeda Strain* way too seriously. But he did believe the Russians might use him to host a whole ... well ... host of unsavory things. Tracking or surveillance chips, lethal contagious diseases, debilitating jungle parasites, or who knows what.

Time had come for Dick to make his move.

His ace in the hole in terms of escape was the tube of sunscreen—actually Nobel 808 plastic explosive—and the detonating fuse handles of the kangaroo shopping bag still in his possession. Unfortunately, the fuse required a flame to light it and Otik hadn't offered him any cigarettes and matches so he could bask in the afterglow after their last one-on-one session. He'd simply taken away the chair. An electrical outlet might have helped, but the cement block building was not wired for electricity, and he hadn't even heard the cough of a generator the whole time he'd been at this humid, sweltering camp from hell.

He found a piece of glass from the broken flashlight and spent a few minutes seeing if he could somehow use it to concentrate the sunlight filtering in through one of the cracks in the door, but the slivers of light were thin and at a poor angle to be useful for much of anything. Besides, the small piece of glass was almost flat—not the best for focusing light, even if held at an oblique angle. Instead, he used the small piece of glass as a miniature platform to hold bits of lint recovered from his pockets off of the floor in the sunlight, so as to dry out the meager tinder he had should he discover a way to produce a flame.

Then he went back over his tiny aggregation of supplies once more and sat on the floor to think. Even though he didn't relish rushing through parts unknown in the dark, it was probably best to wait until

the middle of the night when most of the guards would be asleep, drunk, or slow to respond.

He picked up the newspaper both to pass the time and to see what the bureaucrat's reference to his horoscope might mean, if he wasn't just pulling his leg like he'd been with the whole alien lizard men nonsense.

That's when he saw it. Not his horoscope, but on the same page along with the weather forecast, the tide chart and the phases of the moon, and the police blotter: *Two Dead in Auto Crash* read the headline. He almost passed it by, but then a name caught his eye ... his name, but not him.

*Emergency crews recovered the bodies of two American tourists, Melanie Thornby and her son, Seth Thornby, from the twisted wreckage of a rental automobile which apparently went off the road along the Northwest Coastal Highway several kilometers south of Manilya. Responders speculate the driver may have fallen asleep during the long drive from points northwest en route to Perth. A third person, Mr. Richard Thornby, husband and father, respectively, to the deceased, was believed to be traveling with them, but his body was not found in the wreckage. It is unclear at this time whether he may have been thrown from the crash or was traveling to Perth separately.*

Dick was a calm person. You had to be in his line of work. But he felt his blood pressure rising as he read the article. It continued to rise after he'd flung the paper down. His head throbbed and he could feel the blood vessels in his neck throbbing.

That fucking bureaucrat. He'd known this. He'd not only known this, but Dick had no doubt, no doubt whatsoever, that he'd done this.

He had to die.

Dick couldn't wait for the cover of darkness. He needed to escape now, before the man who killed his family left this godforsaken camp, apparently along the Yilgalong Creek, to Moscow or Vladivostok or the United fucking Nations to spin his lies and kill other innocents. Nerevsky, he had to die, too. But that was for later, when his vengeance would be cold. Right now, his vengeance was white fucking hot. He

had to find a way to trigger the Nobel 808 in his sunscreen tube before his head exploded a thousand-fold from sheer anger.

He took a deep, cleansing breath, then let it out through his mouth. He counted to ten, then twenty, then a hundred and forty-fucking-seven before the ragged stars around the edges of his vision stopped pulsing in time with his carotid artery.

He wasn't McGyver, but he had gotten survival training back in the Rangers. He focused all his training, all his anger, to the task at hand. And this time, while sorting through the remains of the trashed flashlight, his mind seized upon the single Double-A battery which powered the pocket device. Of course, he didn't know if it had any charge left, but if it did ...

He bolted toward the corner of his prison where he'd found a bit of aluminum foil from a fire-cooked food item. He flattened out an inch-wide piece about the length from the tip of his little finger to the tip of his thumb when he did the traditional Hawaiian shaka sign. No, he didn't want to hang loose, but he did want to try to create a useable electric circuit.

He kept the third of the flattened aluminum foil on either end as is, but painstakingly tore away the foil from the middle third so it left only about a sixteenth of an inch of foil on one edge. He set that aside for a moment. He pulled the cord fuse off of one of the tourist bag's handles and took out the tube of Nobel 808, squeezing out a line of it along the corner of the back wall and righthand wall of the shelter, along with a few cross-hatches along the mortar crevices of the cement blocks it crossed, then emptied what was left of the tube in a glob about halfway up the corner stripe. He pushed the cap of the tube upside down into the explosive and used the small plastic hook in the recess of the top to attach the fuse. He then dropped the open tube back into the now one-handed tourist bag, along with his long-empty plastic water bottle, the nudie magazines, and, after quietly ripping off a strip from the bottom of the last page, the newspaper his tormentor had brought along.

He retrieved the sunshine-dried lint from near the door and placed it in the dirty plastic cup he'd found, set it aside for the moment and recovered his can of piss and watery shit from the other back corner of the room. He dumped the foul liquid out in a disgusting, thin sheet inside the door so anyone rushing through would lose their footing and, after they fell, hopefully their lunch.

He recovered his plastic cup and shredded up the strip of newspaper he pulled from the back page, arranging it in a nest shape around the dry lint. He grabbed up his one-handled bag and his aluminum strip, along with the Double A battery, and huddled in the back corner where the fuse and the Nobel 808 stood ready. He creased the aluminum lightly in the middle, so the wide edges were pulled somewhat closer to one another and the thin filament formed an angular V shape. Holding the tourist bag awkwardly so he could use the opposite walls of it as insulators to keep from grounding whatever meager charge the battery might produce, he edged the point of the V close to the lint in his plastic cup and placed the hopefully charged battery between the two wide ends of the aluminum foil.

The battery still carried a charge because the thin filament connecting the two ends of the battery quickly glowed with heat. He touched it to the lint and shredded paper until they browned then briefly flamed. He dropped his foil device and quickly pushed more shredded paper toward the almost imperceptible fire he'd created. The flame sprung up, and he held the now burning paper fire in the plastic cup toward the end of the fuse hanging from the detonator tube cap he'd shoved into the jellified plastic explosive. The fuse lit and Dick scuttled to the left wall of the shelter, near the front of the hut. He squatted down to provide as little profile to the shock wave as possible and threw his arms up to cover his head and chest, as best he could, using his thumbs to press down on his ears in hopes of saving his eardrums from the sound of the coming blast.

*B-B-BOOOOOOOOOOMMMMMM!*

The blast wave slammed Dick against the left wall, knocking him from his crouch into a sprawl, and his ears rang. The Nobel 808 did exactly what the inventor of the Peace Prize had intended explosives to do when he was out making his fortune. The cement blocks in the back, right corner of the room were either pulverized or hurled into the rainforest outside.

Dick didn't bolt for the sudden hole in the door. Instead, he got to his feet and stood against the front wall, behind where the door would open when guards rushed inside.

Even through the ringing in his ears, he quickly heard the snap of the lock, then the door pushed open. Otik rushed in, followed quickly by a regular guard with an AR-15, their hands waving away the cement dust hanging in the air from the explosion. The guard slipped on the wet, shit-strewn floor and collided with Otik, sending both of them down in a tangled, disgusting heap, the AR-15 clattering to the floor.

Dick stepped from behind the door and snatched up the assault rifle, which he noted had been converted to full auto (illegal in the U.S. and way beyond illegal in Australia), and fired two rounds at close range. Blood and brains and flecks of bone joined the piss and shit on the floor. Dick took a quick look out the open door to see the rest of the guards grabbing guns and heading his way. Avoiding the mess on the floor, Dick sprinted to the hole blasted in the back of the structure, snatching up the kangaroo tourist bag by the remaining handle as he did so.

Once outside, he blustered straightaway into the undergrowth of the rainforest, praying he hadn't been taken far enough east to have to worry about the invisible nettles of the gypie-gypie plant and its painful neurotoxins. He doubted he'd been taken as far as Queensland, but he wouldn't put it past these fucks to plant the stuff outside of their hidden rainforest prison. It didn't matter. Speed was critical right now—he'd chance whatever pain might come.

He crashed forward at full speed, making no effort to mask his movement, then, when he came to a small creek with a relatively clear

access, turned and sprinted upstream thirty yards or so before turning back into the rainforest, headed back toward the camp. This time, however, he moved stealthily along a track parallel to his lumbering escape route, found a stout tree, and pulled himself up twenty feet into the canopy. Here he could see the camp not far away and the clear path he'd made in the underbrush blundering away from his prison. True to their mediocre training, the remaining five guards appeared at the gaping hole in the cement block and discovered the path. Within seconds, they headed for it, forming a single file as they did.

As was his training when facing more than a trio of opponents, his mind automatically assigned names to his targets to ease his combat processing. Lined up as they were, circling past his vantage, they became planets: Mercury; Venus; Mars; Jupiter; and Saturn. He skipped over Earth—his job was to save his own planet, not shoot it.

Once they were on the path, Dick raised his purloined weapon, aiming to pick them off from his elevated vantage point. The plan was to move from back to front, so as to not alert those in the front of the line of death as to exactly what was going on.

*Pop.* Saturn dropped with barely a rustle.

One down, four to go. Just like he'd learned from Gary Cooper in *Sergeant York*.

*Pop.* "Ahhh!" Jupiter thudded to the ground noisily.

Damn! Why couldn't the bad guys all go down quietly?

"What the fuck?" muttered Mars, the next guy in line. He twisted away as Dick was lining up the shot. A broad leaf blocked sight of the target's head. Dick held for a beat, waiting for his sightline to clear.

"Sniper!" yelled Mars as he turned back to the rest of the team.

"Light it—"

*Pop.* Dick sentenced him before he could finish his sentence. Three down, but the two still up weren't going to be so easy. Both Venus and Mercury started firing on full auto into the vegetation that surrounded them, shredding leaves, bushes, saplings, vines, and any semblance of a controlled response. Flecks of green, yellow, and brown ballooned into



the air at speed, then floated down, first in front, but quickly on all sides of the beleaguered and bewildered bad guys, who snicked in fresh magazines as fast as they could empty them.

Dick would have been in trouble if he'd been hiding at ground level. Dumb luck has saved many a bad situation. But the stupid sons-of-bitches had no clue he was above them.

*Pop. "Aiiiiieeee!"* As Venus went down, he maintained a death grip on his weapon, his finger clenching the trigger of the AR-15. A thundering line of fire arced up and left into the trees. Dick jerked back, trying to gain what little cover he could while the bullets tore through vegetation as the path of destruction headed for his perch. There was nothing he could do but wait for the end ... or at least for the wound which would curse him to die slowly where his body would never be found.

Thankfully, the magazine ran out before the arc of devastation reached Dick's private perch or his private parts.

Mercury, the lone survivor, finished his magazine and reached to grab another, but found none. He turned, Dick supposed to loot Venus or, more likely, Jupiter for fresh ammo, but instead hauled off, running full speed back toward the camp.

Cowardice wouldn't save him from Dick.

*Pop. Pop. Pop. Crash, rustle, thud.*

What could he say? Mercury had been running, with partial concealment.

Dick waited for a few moments to make sure the planets were all down and that the bureaucrat—who Dick's combat mind suddenly and fittingly named Uranus—wasn't coming to see how capturing the escaped prisoner was going.

No one else appeared. He listened, but it was hard to tell whether his ears were still ringing from the explosion or there were just so many insects buzzing he couldn't really hear well.

After a couple minutes, though, he heard the chuffing fart of an outboard motor. Uranus was getting away!

Dick dropped from his perch and double-timed it back to the camp and past the hut. He saw a dock along the edge of a lazy river surrounded by green rainforest. He dashed out on the wooden structure and saw a boat speeding downstream, the short, pudgy bureaucratic asshole he now knew as Uranus at the wheel.

Dick dropped to one knee, steadied the barrel of the AR-15 on one of the wooden supports for the dock and took aim. He didn't have a scope, but the channel was relatively straight here. He didn't need to lead his target.

*Pop.*

Aim. Exhale.

*Pop.*

Aim. Exhale.

*Pop.*

Aim. Exhale. Wait.

*Pop.*

The figure on the boat slumped over the wheel, slamming into the throttle. The boat engine screamed as the boat sped up, fleeing like the devil at a slight angle toward the far side of the main channel, while the Yilgalong River took a leisurely curve the other direction as it widened. A few moments later, the boat slammed at speed into a log near the far shore, flipping it and its limp contents into the maze of trees and vines and plants along the shore.

The screaming engine whined into an even higher crescendo, then sputtered and stopped.

The planets were aligned. The bad guys were all dead and he was free. Not easy to accomplish, but somehow still too easy for his comfort.

Still, he was lost in space, alone in the fucking never never, beyond more black stumps than he could count. He didn't know where he was, in which direction civilization or rescue might be, or how long he'd have to survive before seeing another human being, not that he would be particularly good company at the moment. But, still, getting

somewhere with a phone or a radio or a fucking ultra-low frequency transmitter was what needed to be done right now. And Dick always did what needed to be done.

Sometimes it really sucked to be a spy, even when you were good at your job.

## CHAPTER 30

The speedboat—the only boat about as far as Dick could see—was totally wrecked and the only radio Dick found in the camp had been smashed when something fell on it, presumably during the Nobel 808 blast. He had no choice but to walk to freedom. He didn't relish the journey, not only because he didn't know where he was, where he should be going, or how to get there, but because it all seemed so pointless now. The mission was a bust, a mishmash of theories and maybes and who the fuck cares. His family was gone, whether killed by accident or intent. The bad guys he knew of were all dead.

What did he have to live for? Work? The people at work used and manipulated him, most especially Nerevsky.

Nerevsky.

Nerevsky was a reason to live. More accurately, killing Nerevsky was a reason to live, at least long enough to perform that one last task. For himself, for his family, for the whole damn world.

He gathered up his tourist bag, filled his water bottle, grabbed a bag of crisps and the half six-pack of Emu beers he found poking about the camp, and snatched up a nine-millimeter automatic pistol and two spare magazines. From the lack of supplies he found, he could only conclude the bad guys had never unloaded things from the boat or there was a cache hidden someplace he couldn't quickly find. He didn't want to tarry too long; he didn't know if a supply boat or reinforcements were on the way or would be sent if regular contact was lost. There was probably more to forage, but he didn't want to carry too much on what might be a long walk.

Given the abundant foliage, he didn't think he'd die of thirst.

He headed downstream along the bank of the wide, slow-moving water of the creek. Almost everyone in Australia lived near the coast, so his odds were better downstream. You could also see—and be seen—better at distance over open water, if he got to the shore. And, should the terrain become drier and hotter as he walked, ocean breezes

would be good. Being able to dip in the ocean to cool off was also a potential lifesaver.

It didn't take long for him to reach the coast. Of course, the coast at the mouth of the creek was a tangle of water and brush and marshy bog, no doubt infested with snakes and salt-water crocs, but there was no choice but to continue toward civilization. On the assumption he was still in Australia—he doubted Yilgalong Creek was an Indonesian name—he concluded he was somewhere along the northwestern coast of the island continent. So, when he hit the coast, he turned left, in the direction the setting sun confirmed was westerly. From his recollection of the maps of Australia he'd seen, there was nothing sizeable for thousands of miles along the coast to the east. He hoped by heading west, he was headed back toward someplace where he might find help.

He didn't want to stop in an untenable place for sleep once dark fell, so he found a spot with a lonely tree on a relatively flat, dry patch of beach sand as the sun began to kiss the fiery horizon and prepared to settle in for the night. There was a small island, maybe a kilometer offshore, but it was rocky and showed no signs of habitation, so it meant nothing to him. He sipped some water, then carried the beer cans down to the ocean and settled them in a rocky crevice in a nearby tidal pool to cool. He sat in the soft sand to ease his weary muscles and pass some time resting before having a cool beer as a foamy nightcap. He'd climb up the stout tree and sleep in the crook of a branch to keep clear of critters later, when he was ready to sleep.

Somehow, though, this walkabout felt too relaxed, too comfortable for a hike for survival. He pulled the newspaper out of his bag and turned to the back page, figuring to use the last light to remind himself of what had happened, to stoke his rage for the travails he knew would be ahead.

He started at the top of the page and quickly scanned down, past the boxes for the weather and the tide reports and found the story about his family. He read it three times before starting to fold the paper to put

it back into his bag. That's when his eyes lit upon the tide report, right next to a small graphic about the phase of the moon.

That wasn't right. That couldn't be right.

He flipped over the newspaper and confirmed the date on the front page, then flipped it again and found the same date in smaller print running along the top of the back page. Then he stared at the graphic again and the small print indicating the time of high and low tides, moonrise and moonset, sunrise and sunset. True, the moon wasn't up in the sky yet and he wasn't sure exactly what day it now was—he'd been unconscious part of the time—but he did know what day he attempted to infiltrate Area B and what date the paper purported to be from—a few days after the Exmouth debacle. But the moon phase was all wrong. Every Army Ranger who goes on a nighttime raid knows when the moon will rise and how much light is it likely to shed on his operation. He closed his eyes and felt the texture of the paper, all the time thinking back to how it felt reading the paper between slices of honey-soaked bacon at the hotel back in Perth.

Too smooth. Too expensive. The newspaper he had in his hands was a fake. No doubt the bureaucrat had brought it with himself from Mother Russia, straight from the forgery department of the SVR. The forgers at the Subsidiary faked things all the time. Why should the capabilities of the SVR be any different?

How much of what he read in the newspaper was true? How much was a lie? The forgers could have lifted stories and pages—maybe even most of the layout—for the faked paper from the internet. But something about how things fit together for the back-page layout, where they wanted to place a fake story about Dick's family had led them to replace the moon and tide chart with something from another date, one weeks out of sync with reality.

Uranus, the bureaucrat who talked to him, had for some reason wanted to torture him, to break him, with something besides physical torture. To get what? Not more about Dick's mission—he knew plenty about that already and Dick hadn't been shy about telling him what he

knew. No, either he wanted what he knew Dick wouldn't give—operational details about the Subsidiary and its agents—or he was just a sick bastard who liked to make people suffer.

No. There was one other choice. The Russian didn't want to get information from Dick; he wanted to give information to Dick, without seeming to do so, then fire him up enough to make him attempt some kind of escape.

Before Dick knew it, darkness surrounded him and stars sparkled in a blanket of wonder across the sky, crowding into a blur to form the Milky Way. It was a miracle to behold, but it was completely outdone by the true miracle of Dick's day. His family was alive. He had a reason to go on. Not just to survive this trudge out woop woop through the sucking shores beyond the black stump, but to live a full and happy life once more.

He closed his eyes for a moment and let his anger flow into the warm sand beneath him as the cool salt air from the shore flowed into his nostrils and into his lungs, as if replenishing his soul. He basked in the feeling for a few minutes, then decided it was time to really celebrate. He opened his eyes and walked back toward the water, where he'd left the beers to cool. The starlight did little to light his path, but when he searched the darkness for the glint of the edge of the tidal pool, he saw something else, something wonderful.

A pinpoint of light bobbing up and down on the gentle swells of the ocean. A boat. This was no *Fata Morgana*. He saw a boat. Always hard to judge distance over water. Harder still to do so in the black of night. But then he remembered the rocky island he'd seen offshore before the sun set. The boat had to be in the channel between the shore and the island. He was a quarter, maybe half, a mile from rescue.

He took a few steps forward and his toes hit a cool, wet rock. He reached down into the tidal pool, fumbled in the water for a moment and pulled out a cold beer. He shot-gunned it for energy, then angled off onto the sandier part of the beach and strode into the ocean and

began swimming toward the small boat sheltering in the lee of the rocky island for the night.

He swam for freedom. Sure, there could be salt-water crocs, man-eating sharks, stinging jellyfish, and deadly blue octopuses, but he'd chance it. At least they didn't have AR-15s. Besides, he didn't fucking care about the risks.

Now that he knew he had one, he swam for his life.

#

Less than a day later, Dick was finally able to call Melanie and tell her where he was, just like he'd promised her he'd always do. After a long pause, both Melanie and Dick blurted out the same thing at the same time: "I thought you were dead."

It was a long call, full of laughter and tears and explanations, but by the end of it, not only had Dick and Melanie assured each other they were alive and well, Dick knew for certain for the first time in a long, long time that their marriage was, too.

Melanie would forgive him for being dead, eventually.



## EPILOGUE

"Nice to see you alive," said Dee by way of greeting as Dick walked into her office.

Glenn Swynton was already there, relaxing comfortably in one of Dee's client chairs in yet another crisply-pressed bespoke suit, the silver cuff-links on his French cuffs setting off the silver and charcoal swirls in his double Windsor knotted silk tie. Dick didn't care enough about fashion to know how many suits Glenn had in his rotation, but he couldn't remember ever seeing him wear the same tie twice. Glenn was to ties as Imelda Marcos was to shoes. The unbidden thought made Dick glance at Glenn's shoes. Polished to a sheen, of course, with the sole of the one visible because of Glenn's crossed legs pristine and unscuffed. Jesus, the Subsidiary must pay the guy a lot. Of course, given that the Director of Operations was always at the office, Dick supposed the fellow didn't have much to spend money on besides his attire.

Ace was there, too, dressed in a sapphire cocktail dress which showed a lot of leg and even more skin in other places where Dick was smart enough not to let his gaze linger.

"Nice to be alive," Dick finally thought to reply. "Would have preferred it if you hadn't told my family I was dead."

Glenn flushed red and opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. Dee looked oddly pleased at his discomfort, as if she'd been waiting a long time to see it happen. Finally, Glenn replied, his tone bordering on defensive. "I did say 'presumed dead.' The DNA on the blood found at the explosion site was damning."

"Obviously they planted blood spatter they got from me afterwards, when I was in captivity. Whether at the site or at the lab, doesn't really matter."

"Yes," said Glenn, "but they obviously didn't know about the Nobel 808 or they wouldn't have let you keep it, so why did that match up?"

"Could be coincidence," murmured Ace.

“More likely,” said Dick, “they knew I’d gotten some when I arrived in country, but didn’t know I had it with me disguised as sunscreen. Maybe through a leak in Nerevsky’s channels or maybe because they just know the local spooks still use the old-fashioned stuff.”

Dee waved her hand in dismissal. “I don’t care why we *thought* you were dead, so much as what it means.”

“You don’t get why I’m alive?”

“Don’t be obtuse,” Glenn interjected, his voice as smooth as the fabric of his tie. “You’re a trained agent of the Subsidiary. Of course, you’re alive. That’s your job. That’s what you’re supposed to do—once the mission is accomplished, naturally.”

“And you always do what needs to be done,” added Ace.

“Yes, yes,” said Dee, “but I don’t get the point of the entire operation: what was going on in Western Australia in 1993; what Nerevsky was ordered to cover up; why he sent you on this mission; what’s going on there now; why they captured you, but didn’t kill you; and what it means in terms of Russia’s current weapon capabilities.” She stared out her window for a moment. “My job—the Subsidiary’s job—is to know these things. I’m not naive enough to think the member nations of our international oversight board don’t hide things from us. That’s what countries do. Trust is not the dominant trait of successful nation-states, especially superpowers. But I do expect there to be some basic, or at least superficial, rationality in their course of conduct over the decades.”

“I had a long flight to think about that and good WiFi access onboard for a good part of it,” said Dick. “I can’t say anything for certain, but I do have a few ideas. Ideas which are logical enough to me that I’m not going to lie awake trying to suss it all out in more detail.”

“Do tell,” said Glenn.

Dick closed his eyes for a moment to gather his thoughts. “Where do you want me to start?”

"I thought you knew how to do a debriefing, big guy," said Ace. "Don't you ever do anything by the book? Start at the beginning. What happened in 1993?"

Dick shrugged. "Don't know. Don't care. Probably doesn't matter."

Ace shook her head. "That's helpful."

Dick closed his eyes again, this time so no one would see them roll. "Look, my best guess is the historical incident was probably a meteor skimming the atmosphere of the planet. You've got a bright trail of light and a big boom, but no impact crater of any kind, so nothing ... or, at least, nothing sizeable or with any oomph behind it ... hit the ground. That kind of thing happens. Take the Tunguska incident."

"Ahh," said Glenn.

"Okay," said Dee.

"*Jdi do prdele!*" spat Ace. "What's that?"

"There was a big explosion in Siberia in 1908. I mean, really big. Nuclear weapon big, but, you know, *not*, because it's 1908 and there are no nuclear weapons. Knocked down almost a hundred million trees over close to a thousand square miles of forest."

"Actually," interjected Glenn. "I think your figures are at the high side of the actual ranges calculated."

Dee shot her Director of Operations a sharp look. "Don't interrupt and don't argue with Agent Thornby about the size of explosions. We all know his expertise in that arena."

"Whatever," said Dick. "The Russians had something similar occur in February of 2013 above Chelyabinsk. Some meteors, they don't hit the earth, but they don't exactly miss, either. They hit the atmosphere and heat up and explode from the friction. The one in Siberia in 1908 was maybe three to five miles up. Put out close to thirty megatons of energy, with the burst triggering a ground shock—like an airburst of a nuclear weapon—which would have measured maybe a five point zero on the Richter scale. Chelyabinsk was supposedly four point two."

Dick rubbed his chin. "The Banjawarn Bang was maybe three point six or three point nine on the Richter scale and not so much damage—

not that there are many sizeable trees out woop woop ... er, in the Outback ... to knock over. Still, the explosion there was probably smaller."

"But that doesn't explain the red dome glow afterwards, does it?" asked Ace.

"It probably does. Back in the late fifties, the U.S. conducted some nuclear tests in the upper atmosphere. Operation Hardtack, they called it. The blasts all created the same kind of ionization associated with aurora effects, though more in the reddish range. At a distance, the red glow expanded in a sphere which lingered for a good long while and was witnessed by those at a distance at ground level as a reddish dome or hemisphere on the horizon."

Dee swiveled her chair to stare out the window again. "That's a good explanation of the 1993 event, but it doesn't explain why the Russians would order Nerevsky to come up with a cover story about Banjawarn rather than just explain what they thought really happened."

"Doesn't it? Look, even though the Russians probably had the best leg up on what really happened in Western Australia back in 1993, because they know more about the Tunguska incident than pretty much anybody, they weren't expecting it. And, initial reports were that it might have been a nuclear test. One which, by pure happenstance, occurred near a big piece of property where Aum Shinrikyo had been testing for uranium not long before. We may not know a lot about what Aum Shinrikyo may have been up to back then, but I do think the evidence is pretty good that the Russians were involved with the Japanese cult. Maybe they worried that Aum Shinrikyo members had actually gotten hold of a nuclear device—maybe that they'd bought or stolen an old Soviet weapon. Or maybe the Russians really were working with or without the Japs on some wackadoodle Tesla energy weapon design. If so, that would have been need to know and Nerevsky might not have needed to know."

Glenn frowned. "That's a lot of speculation."

Dick sniffed. "Sure, it is. I don't *know* any of this for rock solid certain. You asked what I think happened. I answered. I do what I'm told. You know what? So does Nerevsky. He goes and provides a cover story about why Aum Shinrikyo is out woop woop. A story that makes them look bad, but doesn't really explain a damn thing. And that's the end of it as far as his involvement is concerned."

"But not as far as the Russians are concerned," said Glenn. "Right?"

"Look, maybe Tesla is the genius everyone said he was. Maybe he created an electromagnetic earthquake device, a force field shield, a death ray, wireless transmission of electricity, and Colonel Sanders' secret recipe of eleven herbs and spices for fried chicken, for all I know. The Russians would dearly love to have all of those things. So would the Japanese, by the way, especially since they're not allowed to have a standing army and rice is pretty bland. But what's the next best thing to all of that?"

The room was silent for a few moments before Ace spoke up. "An international franchise program for Kentucky Fried Chicken?"

"Bingo," said Dick. "That and making the world think you just might have an electromagnetic earthquake device, a force field shield, and a death ray—it's hard to fake wireless transmission of electricity with wires hanging all over the place. The Russians, they remember all of the lessons of World War II, and one of the most memorable lessons was that of Operation Fortitude, most especially that the First United States Army Group under the command of George S. Patton was going to spearhead the Allies landing in Europe at Pas de Calais."

"Instead of Normandy?" asked Ace. Dick suspected the young Czech spy was the only one in the room not familiar with the incident, a nice piece of wartime counter-intelligence.

"Exactly. Except there was no First United States Army Group. FUSAG was a figment of the imagination, a ghost army created on paper with a communication trail designed to make the Germans think it was real. After all, it was commanded by one of the Allies' best four-star Generals."

Dee interrupted. "The Russians played a similar game during the cold war. They included huge ICBMs in their military parades that were much later revealed to be fakes."

Dick began to pace as he warmed up to his explanation. "Of course, they did. And, why not? The United States spent massively to keep ahead of the Soviets in nuclear weapons, never knowing how far ahead they already were. The same principle applies here. Whether or not you have an earthquake-generating weapon, it's good for your adversaries to think you have one. Perhaps it will give them pause if they think you can lay waste to their cities without the need to deliver nuclear weaponry via plane or ballistic missile. At the very least, it may make them waste large portions of their research and development funds trying to catch up. It's simple misdirection. Hell, not long ago the United States Navy publicly filed patents about using extremely high electromagnetic energy fluxes for anti-gravitational devices or some bullshit like that."

"Even though," mused Dee, "the Navy is permitted to file patents confidentially?"

"Exactly," said Dick. "But they file in the open so the world knows the United States wants to close the Death Ray gap."

"True, as far as it goes, Dr. Strangelove," said Glenn. "But, how does what the Russians were doing here correspond to that? This is obtuse, indirect, even confusing in comparison."

After all of the clues and conspiracy theories concerning Denver International Airport and what was really going on there, Dick couldn't fathom how it could be they didn't understand. "The Russians, they understand disinformation at an instinctual level. You don't think they just started manipulating Western elections via the internet from a standing start, do you? Sometimes I think they just fuck with things to find out what fucking with those things will do. Then they apply the lessons they've learned. I also think that over the years they've figured out you can get a lot of leverage out of electronic disinformation if you sprinkle a few actual events in reality to make the fiction look credible."

"I'm not sure what that means," said Dee.

Dick looked at his boss. "You do stuff in the real world which tends to confirm your electronic disinformation, so it all fits together in some whacko worldview way when you spin your conspiracy theories. In this case, post Banjawarn Bang you do a few tangible things to further spread confusion, like spy on groups trying to further Tesla's research or send agents to Western Australia to poke around every so often, just to keep your presence in the area alive. Maybe the mooks you send really spy on the submarine communications or radar defense installations while they are there, but they're not as clandestine as you'd really want them to be. Is that because you *tell* the agents to do a half-assed job? No. That brings too many people into the subterfuge. But maybe you send your newest or clumsiest agents, knowing they'll be noticed, maybe by other intelligence outfits, but certainly by the locals."

"Pretty convoluted," said Ace. "And I've been looking some more on the internet about the Tesla stuff and there's plenty posted, including that the Soviet Union built a scalar interferometer device that would do all the stuff that supposedly happened at Banjawarn Station. Seems too detailed not to have some basis in truth. If the Russians are so omnipresent on the World Wide Web, how's the stuff that gives too much away stay alive?"

Dick chuckled. "I may not be super tech savvy, but one thing I did pick up from my kid is that nobody controls the internet. Once something's posted and shared it is damn near impossible to get rid of it. Besides, if you really want to make sure that something true isn't given the time of day, what better way to do it than leak the information to conspiracy buffs? They may broadcast the hell out of the information, but they taint it with their—"

"Craziness?" volunteered Ace.

"—single-minded fervor," continued Dick.

Glenn spoke up again. "You could be right. Our intelligence on the Russian's disinformation efforts on social media is consistent with your

theories. It's not so much that they back one candidate over another — though God knows countries have been doing that surreptitiously for all of modern history — but that they provide an echo chamber for extremist viewpoints and outlandish conspiracy theories. Their effort is geared not only at distracting the world from more substantive geopolitical events, but at getting people to distrust one another and almost all sources of information. That creates conflict and confrontation, undermining the fabric of free societies. I don't know of an internet conspiracy theory the Russians don't have their bots share and retweet at every opportunity."

"And Harry Mason?" asked Ace. "You think he was a Russian plant?"

Dick snorted. "Not at all. Most likely a true believer and not because he was gullible or stupid, but because he was misled. Like Glenn said, most of the misdirection that occurs, especially on the internet, isn't because someone is making shit up, it's because they are repeating and echoing whatever other people make up or misunderstand or misstate over and over and over again."

He took a deep breath and let it out. "Sadly enough, there's no need to ask people to lie. People lie all the time. They tell interviewers what they think they want to hear. Sometimes because they get paid for the interview, sometimes because they just want the notoriety or attention, sometimes because they are pathological liars, and sometimes because they are batshit crazy. People even remember things that never actually happened; it's called the Mandela Effect. And don't forget, something actually did happen in Western Australia. Aum Shinrikyo really was running around doing cultish things. There was really an earthquake in Kobe, Japan. There are actual military installations in Cutler, Maine, and Exmouth, Australia. And people — non-crazy people and trained observers — do see UFOs all the time. Harry just tried to connect the dots ... or maybe the great circle routes."

"Perhaps," said Glenn, "but what about the more recent sighting of lights in the area?"



“Looked into that,” said Dick. “All of the indications from the Desert Fireball Network are that it was an ordinary meteorite, just flashier than most. Being it was considerably farther west than Kalgoorlie, they got some brief images of it. It’s only real importance in this narrative is that it spooked Nerevsky into ramping up his historical quest.”

“And now?” asked Dee. “What about all the stuff that happened to you? Who was behind that? What’s really going on at Exmouth and out ... woop woop? How’d the Russians even know you were trying to infiltrate Area B?”

“Same old thing, just modernized. The Russians are obviously interested in the area. I, for one, don’t think it’s coincidental that the concrete block shelter where I was held is due south of where the Brits tested atomic weapons in the fifties off Australia’s Montebello Islands. Of course, nothing we know of is happening there now. But whatever the Russians do or don’t have or whatever they are keeping an eye on, they do know Nerevsky desperately wants to know what is going on. Confusion suits their purposes, so they string him along.”

Dick scratched his chin. “Confusion and mistrust always suit their purposes. Whether or not they knew I had any connection to Nerevsky at first, by corollary, they string me along. They send agents to tail me and my family, to chase me, to shoot *at and around* me without actually ever hitting me or anyone in my family, to shout dire warnings at me, and to capture me and feed me exactly the type of bullshit they *think* because of my UFO background or my connection with Pyotr Nerevsky that I’ll believe. They probably didn’t plan on me killing everybody at the camp—certainly not the bureaucrat in charge—but they may have expected, even planned for me to eventually escape so as to spread their lies. Letting me keep most of the shit I was carrying when nabbed was a curious decision otherwise.”

Dick fluttered his hand to preemptively dismiss any discussion about whether he was meant to escape. “As for how they knew where I was to nab me, well, they obviously monitor Exmouth pretty closely, whether it’s a secret Tesla weapon station or not. The social media

regarding the protest couldn't possibly have escaped their attention. Being spies, they probably figured it was a diversion—which it was—and monitored my movements."

Glenn arched an eyebrow. "And the incident at the old, collapsed Tesla Tower the wind uncovered near Banjawarn? That's the one that makes my fingers tingle."

"Was it old? Did it collapse? Did the wind uncover it? Or was it put there to be found, if not by me, by some local mending water pumps or prospecting for ore along the ridge line?"

Ace slitted her eyes as she looked at Dick. "That doesn't explain the lights in the sky, the lightning, the zaps to the tower when you were hiding in it. You sounded pretty convincing when you were telling me about it."

"Massed drone displays like at the last Olympics and Superbowl? Actual dry lightning? A faked tower constructed to discharge electricity collected by a solar array or battery back-up if some silent alarm or invisible tripwire is triggered? Hell, the Russkies could have had an agent on the ridgeline with a plasma rifle for all I know. Prototypes supposedly exist. Unless the powers-that-be want to mount an expedition to dig up the place and see what is actually there and how old it is, I doubt we'll ever know."

Glenn huffed. "As a close observer of the 'powers-that-be' at the Subsidiary, I doubt there would be any interest at all."

Dick's upper lip curled. "Make sure Nerevsky gets that memo." He felt his brow involuntarily furrow. "On second thought. Let me deliver the message in person. I think there may be some postage due."

Dee spoke up. "That won't be necessary. Nerevsky won't ... be getting any memos from anyone ever again." Her brow furrowed. "The Russian representative called to thank me for taking Nerevsky out, so I assume they were actually the ones who did. I think they were more pissed about our recruitment of him than I ever realized. Maybe this was just their excuse for eliminating him while misdirecting us at the same time."

Dick didn't realize he'd clenched his fists until he felt the hands relaxing. "Good. He needed to be taken out, no matter who did it. Better than good. Fucking great." He inclined his head toward Ace. "I owe Acacia a thousand bucks for the deductible on her car. Actually, twelve hundred nineteen, when you include the cleaning. Take it out of Nerevsky's last paycheck."

"Done," said Glenn.

"As is this meeting," quipped Dee.

Dick didn't dawdle in the offices of Catalyst Crisis Consulting after the meeting ended. He headed for the garage and was soon on the highway, headed for home, his mind turning introspective during the monotonous drive.

Unlike his mission on the Canary Islands, nobody back at the Subsidiary would think of this recent cluster as world saving. But they would be wrong. Back at Yilgalong Creek, Dick thought the world had ended, that he had lost his family. And they, in turn, thought they had lost him. But in the end, they'd found each other again. Their world and his world, they'd both been saved. Now he had to make their world together the best it could possibly be.

Dick's family—his wife and his son—needed his time and attention after all they'd gone through both in the throes of the mission and in relation to the false reports of Dick's death.

They needed his love. And Dick always did what needed to be done. That's what a husband and a father does, even when he's a spy.

**The End**

## AFTERWORD / ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Like my other Dick Thornby Thrillers, *Net Impact* and *Wet Work*, this book is based on real things rabidly discussed on the internet. That's a handy thing because this entire book was written during the Covid 19 pandemic, so all of my research had to occur online. I couldn't go to any of these places or even to a physical library. Accordingly, every description of a place, vehicle, weapon, or fact is either based on my personal recollection or on something I read or found online. Those online sources are too numerous to track or mention, but there are some major ones which stand out. Not just standard research tools like Google, Google Earth, and Wikipedia, but also websites about water cribs, boats, airlines, sports and sport teams, hotels, restaurants, weather, tourist information, animals, history, and even swear words in foreign languages. I also reviewed extensive online resources on meteors, UFO sightings, Nikola Tesla, massive pit mining operations, government installations, and weapons, both real and alleged. In each case, I did my best to use information given without appropriating it as my own.

This is also the case with the lengthy Bright Skies report by Harry Mason. If the plot of this book intrigued you, you should definitely check out Bright Skies for yourself. My references to it here are but a brief overview of the voluminous detail contained therein and are intended only to summarize and critique portions thereof and not to catalog or appropriate it, and certainly not to in any way disparage it or Harry Mason. Statements about it herein are simply statements of fictional characters in a fictional version of our world. The same goes for references to Nikola Tesla's purported inventions, Aum Shinrikyo, and what goes on at Exmouth and other government installations. Read up on any or all of those things as much as you like, but please don't take this book or anything in it, including various conspiracy theories, too seriously. This thriller was written to entertain in a way which touches on reality, without necessarily conforming to it.

A number of people helped me with advice, information, comments, blurbs, reviews, or suggestions on the book, the cover, and other aspects of its publication, and offered much encouragement and support. Thank you all. Special thanks to Christine Redford, Jean Rabe, Alyssa Bingle, Wes Nicholson, Steve Wales, Lori Swan, Mary Konczyk, Juan Villar Padron, Raymond Benson, Mel Odom, Steven Paul Leiva, Randall Masteller, everyone who read and reviewed *Net Impact* and/or *Wet Work*, and especially my wife, Linda, without whom my life before, during, and after the pandemic, would be pretty empty.

Thanks to all who supported the *Flash Drive* Kickstarter campaign. Listing all of you would have delayed publication, so I'm not doing that here, but please know that each and every one of you have my personal, heartfelt gratitude.

To find out more about my writing, please go to my website at [www.donaldjbingle.com](http://www.donaldjbingle.com). Subscribe to my newsletter or follow me on Facebook, Twitter, and Goodreads @donaldjbingle to get my latest announcements. And, please, if you like this or any of my books, take a moment to drop a review on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, Goodreads, BookBub, or your favorite blog. Also, suggest your local library carry this and/or my other books. Independent authors need all the help from readers we can get.

Want a free taste of my other work? Flip a few more pages to read the first chapter of *Forced Conversion*, my first novel. Here's what Hugo and Nebula award-winner Robert J. Sawyer had to say about it: "Visceral, bloody -- and one hell of a page turner! Bingle tackles the philosophical issues surrounding uploaded consciousness in a fresh, exciting way. This is the debut of a major novelist -- don't miss it."

Thanks for your support.

Aloha.

Donald J. Bingle  
Writer on Demand™  
St. Charles, Illinois

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Best known as the world's top-ranked player of classic role-playing games for the last fifteen years of the last century, Donald J. Bingle is an oft-published author in the thriller, science fiction, fantasy, horror, steampunk, romance, and comedy genres, with seven published novels (Forced Conversion, GREENSWORD, Net Impact, Frame Shop, The Love-Haight Case Files, Wet Work, and Flash Drive) and more than sixty shorter stories, many in DAW themed anthologies and tie-in anthologies, including stories in Scary Stuff, On Time, Strange Days, On Loss, Mystery!, Robots!, Dragons!, Sidekicks!, Speakeasies and Spiritualists, Time-Traveled Tales, The Crimson Pact, Steampunk'd, Imaginary Friends, Fellowship Fantastic, Zombie Raccoons and Killer Bunnies, Time Twisters, Front Lines, Slipstreams, Gamer Fantastic, Transformers Legends, Search for Magic (Dragonlance), If I Were An Evil Overlord, Blue Kingdoms: Mages & Magic, Civil War Fantastic, Future Americas, All Hell Breaking Loose, The Dimension Next Door, Sol's Children, Historical Hauntings, and Fantasy Gone Wrong. A number of his stories have been collected in his Writer on Demand™ Series, including Tales of Gamers and Gaming, Tales of Humorous Horror, Tales Out of Time, Grim, Fair e-Tales, Tales of an Altered Past Powered by Romance, Horror, and Steam, Not-So-Heroic Fantasy, and Shadow Realities.

Donald J. Bingle is a member of the International Thriller Writers, Horror Writers Association, International Association of Media Tie-In Writers, and Origins Game Fair Library. More on Don and his writing can be found at [www.donaldjbingle.com](http://www.donaldjbingle.com).

Check out this sample of Donald J. Bingle's

# **FORCED CONVERSION**

## **CHAPTER 1**

Derek hated firefights with religious zealots. They never gave up. Even when they faced certain death, they thought that meant they had won, that their reward in heaven was close at hand and even more glorious if they took you with them.

The scene looked peaceful enough: a shallow mountain creek cutting its way through the soil and detritus of a broad valley floor. A scattering of aging Ponderosa pines whispered and swayed lazily in the breeze above, while the buffalo grass baked and dried in the naked glare of the sun.

But the sun and the trees lied when they whispered peace. Violence stalked this place. The bear and mountain lion tracks crisscrossing a bar of silt nearby bore silent witness to the danger. The pleasant gurgle of the creek's bright, flowing water tried, but could not mask the truth of the mountain wilds. Kill-or-be-killed was nature's way.

And today . . . today there would be violence here of a type never shown in the nature vids.

There were at least three mals on the far side of the creek. His enemy was hiding in the more plentiful pines and bushy undergrowth on the north side of the valley. Derek couldn't see them, hadn't seen them even during the coordinated burst of automatic weapon fire that forced him to dive for the dirt several minutes ago, but he knew that they were there. They were spread out along the outside of a U-shaped bend in the coldwater creek. That way they would have a clear shot at anyone fool enough to charge down the loose gravel bank, cross the shin-high water, and attempt to scramble up the opposite side.

Derek wasn't a fool and he certainly wasn't gung-ho enough about this mission, any mission, to charge forward on his own. Instead, he hunkered down behind one of the bigger Ponderosa pines. He gulped for air, breathing in the sweet smell of the sticky sap oozing from where a bullet had scored the trunk only moments before. The sugary scent mixed with the salty tang of his own sweat and the whiff of powder still in the air from his untargeted return fire. His mouth tasted of mud, tinged with metal.

He glanced furtively about for hostiles, then sat with his back to the trunk as he checked his ammunition and waited impatiently for the rest of the squad to move up. They'd heard the gunfire. There was no reason to risk moving back to report.



Still, he counted the seconds and yearned for a radio to call for help.

He'd learned many things in the course of his training: military maneuvers, survival techniques, PsyOps methods. Things he otherwise never would have thought about back home; things Katy would never know or understand; things he would never tell her when he saw her again after his service was complete. But he had never learned why the squad couldn't use a damn radio to communicate on patrol, not even a radio with an encrypted signal. Their vehicle had laser communications gear, but out in the field they used hand motions. So he sat, frozen in place, imagining a hand motion he would love to give whoever had banned the radios, and waited for reinforcement.

He heard the squad before he saw them, which didn't say much for their training, or, more accurately, their leadership. A. K., the hulking squad commander, crashed forward, barely bothering to crouch as he moved quickly through the buffalo grass. Sandoval, slightly pudgy and sweating profusely, trailed diagonally on A. K.'s right, just ahead of Pancek, who moved in the calm, deliberate manner of a professional soldier. Manning, short and wiry, moved quickly and furtively in a mirror position to A. K.'s left, along with Digger, who was older, taller, and considerably more laconic in his movements and his attitude.

Back and center, their resident techno-geek, Wires, crept forward awkwardly with his conversion equipment.

Derek swung his rifle around the side of the trunk and let off a burst into the trees across the creek, both to give the squad some cover and to make sure they knew exactly where he was. The squad would know the sound of his rifle; the ConFoe suppressor rifles made a deep, dull bark—the result of the rubber bullets. The mals used a variety of weaponry—everything from ancient Kalashnikovs to collapsible Uzi submachine pistols, but they all had the sharp yelp and bite of real ammunition made of brass and lead and designed to tear a ragged hole out of your sinew when they hit.

The mal religious fanatics didn't have to play by the rules regarding lethal force. Only the ConFoes were supposed to do that. It's what almost made it an even fight, despite the superior numbers, training, equipment, and transportation of the ConFoes. The Conversion Forces were tasked to locate, capture, orient, persuade, and convert the malcontents, forcibly if necessary. The ConFoes could only use lethal force in defense; the mals used it all the time.

A. K. halted the group's advance in a brief hollow behind a small deadfall. "Bareback," he growled. Pancek, Manning, Sandoval, and Digger simultaneously popped out their ammo magazines and snicked in fresh ones from their belts with

smooth, practiced motions. Wires merely continued his slow, burdened effort to catch up; he didn't even carry a gun.

Derek knew that A. K. had no need to switch; he never used rubber, despite the regulations.

Derek made no move to switch magazines either, but for a different reason. "There's no need for that, A. K.," he hissed back to his squad-mates. "We outnumber 'em."

"To hell with that. Damn mals need to learn to run back to their hidey-holes when A. K. comes to town," the squad leader boasted, louder than he needed to. He obviously didn't care if the mals heard.

"There's only three . . ." Derek argued back.

A. K. fixed him with a steely gaze, the muscles tensing in his jaw. "You only saw three." He looked up toward the shade of the more densely packed trees across the creek. The sunlight dappling through the swaying pine branches was the only thing that moved within his gaze. "They only showed you three." His tanned face crinkled slightly as he took in a long deep breath, then loosed a practiced stream of spittle through his teeth. "I smell one behind every tree."

He motioned, first to Sandoval, then to Manning. The signs were quick and precise and ended with a curt nod. Sandoval moved back and downstream, Manning back and upstream. They would cross the creek a hundred yards on either side of

their advancing leader and attempt to flank the enemy. Derek had less than three minutes to get with the program before all hell broke loose.

Swearing below his breath, he ejected the partially expended magazine of rubber bullets and replaced it with the real thing. He stuck a couple extra magazines into the waistband of his camouflage pants for ready access and counted the grenades hanging off his belt: three stunners on his right, two incendiaries on his left.

Unfortunately, the mals decided not to wait to be flanked. They opened up on Derek with apocalyptic abandon before he could even turn back around toward them and get his bearings. Bursts of automatic fire tore up the ground in arcs to his left and his right, zeroing in on him as steady fire from the front pounded into the soft wood of the Ponderosa pine, chewing through it, sending wood and splinters flying into his neck.

He knew better than to have remained stationary this long after having been spotted by an enemy, especially with his back to them. Now they had fully triangulated their fire on his position. It was only a matter of seconds . . . .

With a bellow, A. K. vaulted over the deadfall and charged forward to the left of Derek's untenable position. In A. K.'s left paw, a gleaming silver machine pistol spat out a stream of fire and death at the position of the left-most attacker. In his right, an

automatic heavy rifle did the same. A. K.'s taut muscles absorbed the recoil of each shot and his shoulders strained to keep the weapons level despite their thundering rate of fire. Even with the dual targeting and his quick movement forward, A. K.'s aim remained remarkably true, pummeling both positions without respite.

More splinters exploded from Derek's tree as A. K. drew even and passed his position, still firing to both sides, his arms outstretched, his chest full and wide toward the center mal, who had been punishing the side of Derek's cover facing the creek.

Pancek and Digger flung themselves wide to either side, each firing in short bursts at the mal nearest them as they gained speed in an effort to rush and jump the creek.

Derek's tree stopped vibrating as the center shooter began to veer his fire toward the charging A. K. It was up to Derek to save the belligerent asshole. He reached down with his right hand to his left side and loosed a grenade, flicking the pin out with his thumb as he had been drilled in boot. He drew his arm back, then flung his arm upward as he twisted around the right side of the tree to fastball the weapon into the thicket directly across the creek.

As the explosion rocked the previously peaceful valley, Derek threw himself toward a large pine to his right, trusting the dust and chaos of the explosion to cover his movement and

staying low to avoid the steady stream of lead that A. K. continued to spew in both directions. The tree he chose was half-undercut by the eroding bank of the creek and leaned out at a forty-five degree angle across the water. If he could clamber atop it and sprint across, he could drop down on the other side before he was re-targeted and capture their center opponent.

Derek attempted to shoulder his weapon to leave his hands free and planted his left foot hard to push up onto the angled pine. As he did, the earth gave way beneath him and his leg dropped into a void until his crotch shockingly halted the fall by colliding with a wide tree root. His rifle slipped off his right shoulder as he spun and jerked painfully downward to his left. Blackness and flashes of light flooded Derek's vision as his plan disintegrated with the eroding earth. He scraped his face on the tree trunk as he fell, wrenching his lower back and twisting his right knee in the process.

Derek gritted his teeth to avoid crying out and struggled to remain conscious. The bank had undercut the old pine more than he had realized and his leg had punched through a layer of dirt between two gnarled roots. His left leg now dangled helplessly below the angled tree without purchase. His gun was out of reach, in the open to his right. Shots rang out on three sides of him, but the tree blocked his view of the firefight raging about him. Mud splattered against his exposed leg as slugs slammed

into the bank. The automatic fire approached him from the left in a stream so thick that he knew his leg would be chewed off when the dum-dum bullets cut through his flesh, leaving his blood to course down into the pristine water of the creek.

He tried to marshal his thoughts and figure out what to do, but the only thing that could permeate the haze of pain was that this was surely an asinine way to die. Even more so, because only mals died at all anymore.

That was the beauty of conversion.

Where was that damn slowpoke, Wires, when you really needed him?

\* \* \* \* \*

Icy slivers of water sliced into Derek's face and splashed across his shoulders and chest. He opened his eyes into utter blackness. His body ached, the pain throbbing outward from his privates and his lower back to his legs, chest, shoulders, arms, and face and somehow out further into infinity, his agony reaching out further than his appendages. His head throbbed in time with the spasms of his back. His tongue was swollen and thick, his lips cracked and crusted with mud and sweat. He tasted blood and grit and bile with the sharp metallic aftertaste that always accompanied a burst of adrenaline.

This wasn't what they promised in the conversion brochures. This isn't what they told people, well mals, during orientation.

Either they'd lied or he had died. Maybe the religious freaks were right about an afterlife, just wrong about what it contained.

He drifted back into blackness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Stinging cold assaulted Derek's face again. This time, when he opened his eyes, the flickering of a small flame broke the blackness. It snapped off as foul smoke and ash assaulted his nostrils. A circular red, white, and gray glow appeared from behind the smoke where the flame had been a moment before.

"If he closes his eyes, splash 'im again, Manning," grumbled the leering visage of A. K. behind his cigar. "He'll either wake up or drown. Either way suits me."

Shapes and shadows came into focus among the trees that blocked and scattered the dim moonlight. Another flame, this a campfire off to his left, crackled and snapped as the pitch of the pine branches boiled and burned.

"I tol' you," said Sandoval's voice somewhere behind Derek. "I tol' you, Wires, that you was wastin' your time setting up the machinery. No way 'ee needs to be converted yet. Poor bastard has to finish 'ees service in the ConFoes, just like the rest of us."

Derek saw Wires, to his far right, unpacking and assembling the scanner in a small clearing. Even in the dark, the techno-geek's hands moved deftly, with quick certainty, snapping components together, toggling nuts onto well-oiled bolts, and



plugging connections in with alacrity. He looked over to Sandoval without pausing at all in his tasks. His voice was soft and emotionless, "Just the same, I will continue. He looks terrible and you know this process takes some time. I'd prefer to be ready in case my services are needed."

Digger squatted next to the crackling campfire, squinting into the flames and breathing in the pungent, piney smoke without coughing as he warmed his leathery hands. "If it's all the same," he drawled, "I'll wait and see. Friggin' bedrock's too close to the surface hereabouts. No use diggin' a hole, less'n you need it."

"I'd try to live if I were you," chuckled Manning, fingering another canteen full of cold water. "Wires ain't ready yet, Digger doesn't want to be bothered to bury you, and A. K. ain't even got around to chewing you out over your lame-ass assault technique."

It came to Derek that he had neither been converted nor had he died. Instead, his life in the squad and his tour of duty in the Conversion Forces continued. Perhaps it was the pain, or even the drugs that Manning had undoubtedly given him in an unsuccessful effort to dull his searing agony into an all-consuming full-body ache, but Derek felt no joy in discovering he was alive. No joy at all.

"What, what about the mals?" he croaked out raggedly, his words slurred and slow, his throat cracking with the effort.

Manning chuckled again. "Two wasted. Me on the one side— A. K. drove him headlong straight into me. It was bee-yoo-ti-ful! Pancek got the one on the other side."

"Hey, man, I keeled him too," interjected Sandoval. "Why do you think he run so slow? Shot him in the ol' rumpola. Come next spring," he continued, gesturing expansively at the clearing about him, "his ass will be grass!"

A. K. stopped sucking on his cigar and smiled thuggishly. "Pegged the bastard in the middle, too, but he got away. Wires was screaming for help so loud I had to come back and take care of you just to shut 'im up." He blew a putrid smoke ring into the thin, clear alpine air. "We'll follow the blood-trail to verify the kill come morning." He stuck the stogie back into his mouth and inhaled deeply. Like most smokers these days, he always fired up the strongest, most loathsome, extra-nicotine laced chubbies he could get his hands on and sucked the smoke deep into his lungs, holding it there as long as possible before exhaling. After all, fouling your lungs really didn't matter anymore.

Which was a good thing, Derek thought, as he pulled the asbestos coated emergency blanket up to his chin to stave off the cold 'til dawn.

\* \* \* \* \*

Derek still felt like crap in the morning, but Manning's drugs had taken hold enough to make him ambulatory. Just barely. He

wouldn't want to jog uphill with a full pack or take on a mal in hand-to-hand, but he could move as fast as Wires could with all his equipment. That meant the squad was back in business.

Getting going wasn't easy, though. Not only was Derek stiff and sore, but his hands were so numb from the drugs he had been given that he actually had to look to see if his fingers were gripping the zipper of his fly when he unzipped to take a morning piss. Even with the powerful drugs, he still winced in pain, then gritted his teeth as he fumbled gingerly at his crotch. His privates were swollen and discolored in ways never intended and not at all amorous. There was blood in his urine and pissing hurt like a son-of-a-bitch.

It was a good thing his equipment was no longer needed for procreation. Like others of the unconverted, he used his recreationally from time to time, but it would be weeks before that would be enjoyable again. Derek zipped up and headed back toward the camp.

Pancek, quiet and reserved as always, greeted Derek on his return with only a brief nod. Pancek's dark brow was furrowed like he had a headache and he had bags under his gray eyes; no doubt he had been on perimeter guard duty most of the night. But Pancek didn't complain. He simply shouldered his pack and kicked dirt into the smoldering remains of the campfire. Then he walked calmly to the stream, stooping to fill his canteen. Finally,

he stood, patiently waiting for the others to be ready to move out, as he screwed the cap back on the ConFoe-issued container.

A. K. came back into the campsite after reconnoitering ahead. “Bleeding like a stuck pig . . .” he sneered, gesturing to a clear trail through the buffalo grass.

“I don’t think their religion allows them to bleed like pigs,” smirked Manning.

“I don’t think peegs are a problem for thees religion, Manning,” replied Sandoval as he hefted his pack and slung his rifle.

“Pigs, cows, chickens . . . all these religious types are wacko. The government offers them heaven . . . whatever heaven they choose, but they’re too stupid to take it,” complained Manning, “which is why, ladies, we have to sleep on the friggin’ ground and haul our sorry asses up a friggin’ mountain.”

“Manning, my friend,” said Digger as he put a friendly arm around his small, wiry squad-mate. “Perhaps they do not know that heaven awaits them. It is our job to bring them the truth, to orient them to the possibilities, to let them choose, to give them an opportunity to convert. Not missionaries, but on a mission for their good and ours.”

Most of the squad winced visibly at Digger’s sarcastic recitation of text from their Conversion Forces training manual.

"I don't haul this equipment around for nothing, you know," noted Wires quietly. He had finished disassembling the conversion scanner with one hand as he had eaten his breakfast with the other.

". . . And, if they reject our generous offer of eternal life, then we'll just hafta' blow their asses to kingdom come," retorted Manning, patting his automatic rifle like a faithful dog.

"In which case, I get to do my job," finished Digger as they headed out, trying to keep pace with the ever-aggressive A. K.

Derek held his tongue during the exchange and wondered for the thousandth time what a misguided sense of duty and a slick recruiting vid had gotten him into. Back in his real life, before the Conversion Forces, he had been told he was a good-looking guy: average height, brown hair, with an athletic build from playing sports and a broad, white smile. And, back then, he had a bright future ahead of him in one of the new worlds, just like everyone else.

Now look at him. Dirty, banged up, and bruised, with greasy, unkempt hair that looked almost black, three day's worth of stubble, and a hobbled, bent-over gait that reminded him of his grandfather. And he couldn't remember the last time he had smiled.

Worse yet, he couldn't imagine the next time he would smile.

He had a violent, miserable, and dangerous job. And the future, at least the immediate future, didn't look all that promising. In fact, it looked like hell.

\* \* \* \* \*

He hated firefights with religious zealots. The gangs and the loners could be vicious opponents, too, but at least those mals mostly fought in a straightforward, military way. They would battle to protect turf or supplies or to cover while their wounded were evacuated to safety. Occasionally, they would simply run away in retreat. Sometimes, the gangs and the loners would even peaceably surrender.

But the zealots never surrendered. They feared conversion more than anyone else, more than anything else. They not only fought for their lives, they fought for their eternal souls.

Click [here](#) to get Forced Conversion.

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**FORCED  
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**DONALD J. BINGLE**

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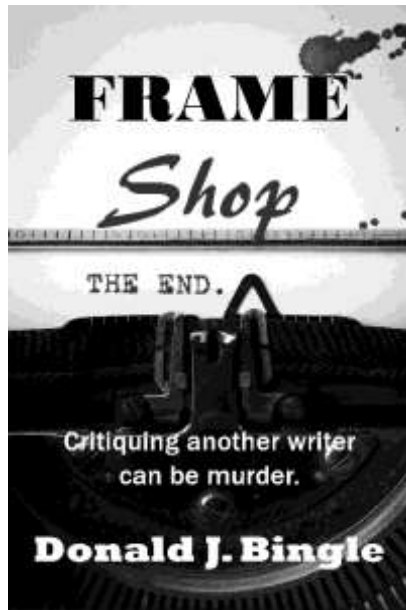
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