

Books by James Clifford

Double Daggers
Ten Days To Madness
The Unraveling
Blackbeard's Gift
A Griffin In Her Desk
The Ford Files

Double Daggers

Double Daggers by James R. Clifford has placed as an Award-winning finalist in the Historical Fiction category for the National Indie Excellence Awards.

“*Double Daggers* is very strongly recommended as a complex, superbly crafted, thoroughly entertaining novel from beginning to end.”

— James Cox, Editor, *Midwest Book Reviews*

Double Daggers was one of seven books selected by the American Numismatic Association as a notable and great read.

“James R. Clifford has been graced with a fertile imagination. This is one novel that will refuse to be forgotten long after it has been put to rest on one’s bookshelf, as Clifford’s characters linger in the readers’ minds as well as his scenes that have an icy clarity to them.”

— Norm Goldman, Editor, *Book Pleasures*

“History is evoked in James R. Clifford’s novel of intrigue and suspense. Anyone with a love of history will thoroughly enjoy this carefully researched and splendidly told story that spans the centuries.”

— Alan Caruba, Editor, *BookViews*

“If you want to read something edge-of-your-seat-engaging, historically fascinating, and really well written. This book would make wonderful book club fodder, it is well written and intriguing to the end.”

— Michelle Boucher-Ladd, *FrontStreet Reviews*

“An attractive, enjoyable novel that even provokes thought in those who go for that sort of thing.”

— Seabrook Wilkinson, *Charleston Mercury*

“*Double Daggers* is a fascinating story revolving around the infamous Eids of March coin. Combining history with a touch of the paranormal, *Double Daggers* is an original, well-crafted-and dare I say strange-story that will be enjoyed by all.”

— Mayra Calvani, co-editor, *Voice In The Dark*

Ten Days To Madness

“*Ten Days To Madness* is an intriguing twist of psychological fiction. Highly Recommend.”

— *Midwest Book Review*

“*Ten Days To Madness* is a fascinating story and extremely entertaining with many unexpected twists and turns. Mr. Clifford, created an exceptional psychological thriller with a paranormal Native American flare.”

— *Tome Tender Book Review*

“It’s a fast paced, page turning madness.”

— Jeff Reichenberger, *E-Sylum*

5 Stars: “This is a great read. IT is well written, with a great story . . . and some really cool twists.”

— *Goodreads*

A Griffin In Her Desk

A Griffin In Her Desk was an Award-Winning Finalist in the Children’s Fiction category for the National Indie Excellence Awards.

“A magical excursion from the classroom into the realm of monsters Greek gods and fabulous treasures.”

— Virginia Barrett, *National Committee for Latin*

“*A Griffin In Her Desk* is creative education at its best.”

— Diane Donovan, Editor, *Midwest Book Review*

“Mrs. Moneta makes the classics, ancient history, Greek mythology, and reading fun and educational, with her own magical twist.”

— Kerry Wetterstrom, Publisher, *The Celator*

“What a fun story and truly wonderful way to bring ancient history, mythology and numismatics to life.”

— Elizabeth Hahn, Librarian,
American Numismatic Society

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www.jrclifford.com

THE UNRAVELING

by

James R. Clifford

JR Rutherford Books

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THE UNRAVELING

by

James R. Clifford

This book is dedicated to the new Axis of Evil:

Washington, DC

Main Stream Media

The Federal Reserve Banksters

“Give me control of a nation’s money and I care not who makes its laws”

— Mayer Amschel Bauer Rothschild

PROLOGUE

Frankfurt, Germany 1806

Mayer Rothschild walked down the cobblestone streets of Frankfurt sidestepping animal waste and eluding vagrants begging for scraps of food. A sudden chill surged through his body. He shivered and stared off at the darkening autumn sky. Streaks of fading sunlight filled the horizon and the brilliance of the solitary rays of light amongst a sea of perpetual gray provided Rothschild a temporary comfort.

He couldn’t explain the distress that plagued him but he had felt odd for the last couple of weeks. Even

though he couldn't identify the source of his anxiety, it felt like he was being watched by some unknown entity.

The queer sensation had distressed him so much that it had begun to affect the most sacred thing in his life, his business affairs. Rothschild was a dealer in rare coins but his career was branching into a potentially lucrative but more dangerous path. Most people hated upheaval but not Rothschild. He understood that chaos and uncertainty brought vast opportunities for men who were able to rise above the masses and seize upon the fear of others.

The entire city of Frankfort, especially the merchant and noble classes, had thrown themselves into a state of panic as the French usurper Napoleon had invaded Germany and was pushing toward the city.

But Napoleon's march into Germany had created a once-in-a-lifetime proposal from Prince Wilhelm Landgrave. The Prince was one of the wealthiest men in Europe and he wanted to employ Rothschild with the task of hiring Hessian mercenaries to halt Napoleon's advance. The Prince agreed to pay Rothschild a hefty commission if the Hessians were successful in pushing Napoleon out of Germany and back to France.

It was a risky proposition and Rothschild knew he was playing a dangerous game. If he sided with Landgrave and was successful, then Rothschild would finally have the financial resources to embark upon his obsession of building a family dynasty.

However, if he failed incarceration or worse were sure to be his fate. So he made a wise business decision and hedged his bets secretly lending support to both Landgrave and Napoleon. He even devised a plan to play their forces against one another, to further strengthen the need for his services and loyalty.

Rothschild would never allow himself to be guilty of the greatest flaw of men - to blindly swear allegiance to others. Over the years he had carefully crafted an outward appearance that adhered to societal norms of the time but in truth he did not trust or believe in any religion, country or leader. His loyalty was aligned only to his interests and all his actions were solely for his own greater good.

Rothschild abruptly stopped walking and wheeled around, certain someone was following him. No one appeared to take notice but still, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched. Rothschild hurried into a dark alley and peered around the corner trying to locate his pursuer.

A swooshing noise from behind gave him a startle. He turned and hesitantly inched his way down the building's stone wall trying to locate the source of the strange noise.

An unnatural flickering rippled through the air causing him to stop dead in his tracks. He stared for a moment at the disturbance before fright drove him out of the alley and back into the street. He hurried home, wondering if he was suffering from some type of brain

ailment or mental condition that might be causing his growing paranoia and disturbing visions.

Upon arriving at home Rothschild retired to his quarters where he drank a large quantity of brandy to aid his sleep. Despite his harrowing experience in the alley he climbed into bed where he instantly fell into a deep slumber.

He tossed and turned through the night tormented by queer dreams about the light in the alley. During the darkest part of the night Rothschild opened his eyes. He sat up against the headboard and a ripple of light appeared at the front of his bed, but unlike the episode in the alley he was not scared. In fact, a sense of tranquility filled him. The flickering of light swayed and grew more pronounced and Rothschild was hypnotized by the light.

A translucent human form emerged from the aberration of light and spoke to him. A sense of knowledge filled his soul and Rothschild understood that this glorious entity was an angel sent by God. The angel explained it was the Keeper of the Records and that Rothschild's family had been chosen to serve The Source.

If he followed their commands then for as long as man lived on the earth, the Rothschilds would be granted wealth and power beyond their widest imaginations. But more important than even the earthly riches, glorious immortality with The Source was to be their ultimate reward.

Rothschild awoke early the next morning and sprung from bed. He felt a sense of clarity, an energy that he had never experienced before. He knew what the Angel had commanded and what his destiny would be. Rothschild gathered his family and commanded the following to his sons:

Solomon would leave for Vienna where he would become a leader in the Austria-Hungary Empire.

Nathan would leave for London and take control of the Bank of England.

James Jacob was to settle in Paris and establish a Central Bank.

Carl was to leave for Naples and create a banking cartel.

And his last son, Amschel would remain in Frankfurt and help his father oversee the creation of the Rothschild Banking Dynasty.

The Rothschilds had been chosen to perform God's work, and in return, the world would be theirs.

“Just a Banker doing God’s work.”

— Lloyd Blankenfine, CEO Goldman Sachs

CHAPTER ONE

He stumbled, then heaved the empty vodka bottle against the wall. The bottle missed the target from point blank range, ricocheted off the wall and struck him in the left shoulder.

“Goddamn it,” he cursed. Was it possible he was that drunk?

“Yes he was.” He answered his own question as he burst out laughing, even as his shoulder began to throb. But the hilarity of his drunken idiocy quickly faded as he rubbed his aching shoulder. Despite the massive amount of alcohol flowing through his system, he understood that his head, and now his shoulder, was going to hurt like hell tomorrow.

He ripped the intended target off the wall and stared at the framed journalism award with his name, West Collins, raised in fancy gold lettering. It was just one of many awards he had won early in his professional career as an investigative reporter back when he was a hotshot journalist for the *Wall Street Journal*.

West stared at the award with that all too familiar sense of self-loathing. During his time at the *Wall Street Journal* West's specialty had been reporting on the great Wall Street crashes, the financial collapses, the currency wars and the almost complete systemic corruption of the economic and political systems.

But his writing style with the *Journal* was not pure economic reporting. Early in his career he had developed a knack for spicing up what normally would have been dry business articles with a human interest angle that seemed to captivate and entertain a large reader base.

Specifically, he wrote articles about people who were ingrained with the personality traits that seemed to have infiltrated most organizations in the United States. West had called it the New Axis of Evil and its members included Washington, DC, the Main Stream Media and the Federal Reserve Banksters. His theory was that the single most important character trait needed in order to succeed in today's world was to be a Machiavellian sociopath. The ends always justified the means.

Early in his journalism career West had understood the concept that every good writer needed a villain to keep their reader's interest. Bram Stoker created

Dracula and the Vampire myth from a real life historical person named Vlad Tepes who slaughtered both friends and foes during his reign of blood-thirsty terror during the Middle Ages.

So West had simply copied Stoker. But instead of using bloodsucking creatures that haunted the night, his modern day monsters - the evil creatures humanity needed to dread and fear - were the smiling politicians, the greedy Banksters and the corrupt media.

For a while his stories made him a star and despite his constant demonizing, the more shit he wrote about the criminal ruling class the more they wanted to associate with him. It was a type of group psychosis with those people that any attention was good attention. So he ran around with all the power players - hedge fund managers, Wall Street traders, TV pundits, celebrities, union bosses, crooked politicians, shady businessmen, Mafioso's and all their assorted groupies and wannabes. They were all his friends, for a while.

They say timing was everything and for a few years West happened to have the right job, with the right writing style where he was able to fan the public's growing outrage.

But in reality he had been nothing more than a naïve schmuck. He really had thought it was his talent that had earned him all of the accolades and attention, but the truth was he had morphed into the same narcissistic sociopathic mentality of the people he had been writing about.

Years later he understood he had simply been used as a propaganda tool during the upheavals that seemed to shake the world on an almost continual basis during the early twenty-first century.

The creeping disintegration of the United States had begun much earlier, but the time bomb's fuse was really lit in dual events - first in 2001 with the World Trade Center bombings and in 2008 with a financial meltdown that almost collapsed the world's banking system.

The bombings ushered in a warfare/surveillance state, and the financial crisis exposed and then accelerated the centrally planned crony capitalist system. The Stateist's managed to hold things together and the world stabilized for a while until a series of events moved the world closer toward the edge of the abyss.

The European Union splinted then collapsed under its own corrupt bureaucracy. The Middle Eastern and African wars raged unabated for decades. The long promised economic recovery never materialized, which finally plunged America and the world into its second Global Depression. Years of economic hardship sowed the seeds for widespread domestic terrorism and the rise of a surveillance-police-fascist state headquartered in Washington, DC.

Of course, the events that led America down this path took decades to play out and it eventually led to, for all intents and purposes, the suspension of the U.S. Constitution. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights still existed on paper but they offered no protection for

the average American against the tyrannical nation-state regime now simply called DC.

And with Armageddon at America's doorstep on almost a nightly basis the one thing West could never understand about his fellow Americans was the complete apathy towards the corrupt institutions that basically controlled their lives in every way.

It was as if America had raised a white flag and traded its freedom and liberty in exchange for promises of a false stability at any cost. America had surrendered to the unholy alliances of big government, big business, state controlled media, a failed education system, and a too-big-to-fail financial system.

West figured he and the rest of America got what it deserved, which was a rogue fascist state that claimed the power to impose its will on its citizens at its discretion with no rule of law. George Orwell had been proven right when he said, "If you want a picture of the future imagine a boot stomping on the face of humanity, forever."

So as one financial crisis morphed into yet a larger one. As the wars that weren't wars raged on. As Americans willingly gave up more and more of their freedoms and rights, and as the parade of career politicians lied to the public with smiles on their faces, the one thing West could never figure out was how delusional could a nation become?

At the time it was pretty obvious that the country was rapidly rotting from the inside out and his articles

had evolved into scathing diatribes about the systematic destruction of the United States by psychopaths. They were psychopaths who didn't wield knives or knotted cords but wore suits and were articulate and well educated.

Somehow America had - either through idiocy, laziness, stupidity, apathy or some combination of all those factors - let the alpha rats rise up and take complete control of everything.

The world had been locked in a slow-motion death spiral for years now but the doomsday prophets had been wrong at least on this point: there had not been a sudden collapse but more of a slow crumble. America's decline was reminiscent of the Roman Empire whose civilization deteriorated slowly over hundreds of years until Rome suddenly collapsed in the West, ushering in the Dark Ages.

Even though there had not been a complete societal collapse, West had an uneasy feeling the worst was far from over and America and the world might actually be on the brink of a modern day Dark Ages.

A sudden surge of anger engulfed him, causing him to fling his award across the room where it smashed against the far wall, shattering glass everywhere. He stared at the bent frame and shards of broken glass strewn across the floor and it dawned on him that the scene pretty much resembled his own shattered life.

A stabbing pain in his bladder suppressed his reflections regarding his life failures. By instinct he shuffled

over to the bathroom with glass crunching underneath his feet. He started to pee while staring at a framed article above the toilet. It was the last article he had written for the *Wall Street Journal* and he hung it in the bathroom as a reminder of when his personal Shit-Hit-The-Fan.

He had been so proud of the article. In his egomaniacal self-delusion he had actually thought the article was going to propel him to a new level of stardom. Instead, he was fired and subsequently became a pariah in the circles he had publically vilified, but privately cherished.

To make matters worse his employer had made sure his career as a journalist was over by issuing repeated statements that West had been fired for due cause because of chronic drug abuse, journalistic malfeasance, filing false expense reports and sexual harassment.

Of course, most of the accusations were technically true but that wasn't the real reason why he was fired. After all, he had been drunk or high and had chased women around the office for well over a decade. That was just part of the job. And certainly, on occasion, he had abused his expense accounts with his insatiable penchant for partying. None of his editors had ever complained about it before and every year he received glowing evaluations from his bosses and journalism awards from his peers. But none of that mattered because he had been effectively blackballed.

The reality was it was all a giant facade, just one big fucking lie. It wasn't until after he was fired and sobered

up some that he realized he had underestimated the content of his articles and its effect on the powers-to-be. His editor had warned him hundreds of times that the newspaper's new corporate owners didn't particularly care for him or his subversive articles and had tried to get West to tone things down a bit. But in his delusional and often drug-induced state he was too smart, he was too important.

The final straw had been the article hanging above his toilet. West had spent weeks researching and writing the essay that outlined the structural changes in the United States and how the Constitutional Republic and The Declaration of Independence had been thrown into the trash bin of history to be replaced by an all-out fascist-police state ruled by an authoritarian government, financed by a corrupt Federal Reserve, empowered by judicial activism and controlled by a morally bankrupt media and education system.

He supposed he might have kept his job for a little bit longer if he had just stopped there, but no, he had to push the envelope as far as it would go. At the end of the article, West individually listed the names of the top 100 traitors he felt were responsible for destroying the United States and he ended the article with the line, "the greatest enemy of America is Washington, DC."

Of course, it didn't help that the day the article was published an anti-government group called The Republic Keepers detonated bombs in half a dozen federal agency buildings across the Midwest, killing

hundreds of government employees along with scores of innocent civilians.

Two days after he submitted the article West was fired by the company's CEO in front of the whole newsroom. The CEO along with six armed security guards had surrounded his desk and forcibly removed him without allowing him to take any personal possessions. The guards physically escorted him to the elevator and literally threw him out of the building.

It was one helluva a sendoff, West thought while he zipped himself up, ignoring the urine that had dribbled all over his pants. He stepped out of the bathroom, walked fifteen feet into the tiny kitchen and grabbed a beer, which was the absolute last thing he needed.

He sat down on an old, smelly brown couch that for some reason he thought was originally green? He stared out of the apartment's only window and watched the muted skylights flicker across the endlessly dark sky.

West reflected back on the last few years. Despite DC's iron grip on the country there had been some push back. A low-level sporadic uprising against the government mostly in the Midwest continued, but even those efforts seem to be slowing as people appeared to have given up and relinquished themselves to their fate.

Whether people consciously knew it or not, the point of exponential decay had been reached. The national debt was north of 50 trillion dollars, not including unfunded entitlement liabilities. Real unemployment was

perpetually above 25% and wages, if you could find work, were abysmal. On top of that the cost for the most basic necessities had exploded and most of the population was living a day-to-day existence.

As a last resort, hundreds of thousands of Americans joined the military or one of the dozens of government policing agencies. After successfully turning the Middle East back to the Stone Ages, the war machine had set its sights on Africa but that still wasn't enough and a new enemy of the state was created. DC had declared war against its own people.

The government-run media even gave this new enemy a name and it constantly reported this organization was so evil just the mention of their name should strike fear and spark hatred into the hearts of all patriotic Americans.

The enemy combatants fell into a broad definition of various, and in many cases, ragtag collections of anti-DC groups officially labeled The Local Terrorists or LT's. The LT's were Americans who fell across the vast socio-economic-political spectrum. Their old labels included militias, far left radicals, survivalists, conservatives, IRS tax cheaters, preppers, libertarians, constitutionalists, states-rights groups and the Tea Party. But just about anyone who thought or lived outside of the collective groupthink demanded by DC could be labeled a Local Terrorist.

Over the years the LT's had claimed a few high profile victories including assassinating the Federal Reserve

Chairman. But their biggest coupe de grace had been the kidnapping of Nevada Senator Harold Reidson who had been instrumental in trampling the last vestiges of individual rights.

After kidnapping the senator, the LT's took him to a hidden location and staged a trial complete with attorneys, a judge and jury. The whole trial lasted for four days and the LT's managed to get it transmitted to every multimedia outlet in the country. No matter how much the government tried to suppress the broadcast, they couldn't stop people from watching it.

The jury found Senator Reidson guilty on 72 counts of treason, violating the RICO laws, conspiracy and murder. The jury handed down a sentence of death by hanging. In what was probably the highest viewed event in the history of broadcasting America watched Senator Reidson begging then crying for mercy while turning on and denouncing all his fellow comrades in Washington, DC. His plea for a stay of execution was denied and the last photo of the senator was a grainy image of him hanging from a barn rafter.

But the trial and execution only served to further infuriate those in power, and they turned the screws tighter and tighter. Drone strikes went on across rural America for months afterward as Homeland Security delivered payback for the execution of one of their own. There was no telling how many innocent people lost their lives due to DC's wrath over Reidson's execution.

West belched loudly and set the empty beer can down. He grabbed his monthly mail off the coffee table. Very little mail was sent via the post office anymore because of the expense and lack of dependable delivery. A first class postage stamp cost \$1.89 and took two weeks to arrive, if it even arrived at all since the post office barely functioned anymore.

Most communications ended up being sent via the AmeriNet System including bills, government announcements, insurance payments, personal communication, IRS inquires, and Homeland Security Watch Lists.

Forget about any privacy because everything was monitored and recorded, then stored in underground fortified facilities capable of processing information by supercomputers at the speed of light.

Only the government regularly sent correspondence through the mail. Every month anyone with a government registered address was lucky enough to receive the Citizens Watch Newsletter that was published by DC in conjunction with the *New York Times* who in the 20th century had been one of the greatest news publications in the world. Back then it was affectionately nicknamed The Old Grey Lady but now the newspaper was simply known as The Old Grey Whore because it served as nothing more than a state controlled propaganda machine.

West picked up his copy of The Citizens Watch and scanned through the table of contents. The publication consisted of eerily robotic articles about what DC was

doing to protect and improve the lives of its destitute citizens.

The newsletter also contained a section called The Patriots Report which tried to run feel-good stories about average Americans doing their patriotic duties in the fight against the LT's by reporting their neighbors, friends and family for suspicious activities. The slogan "See Something, Report Someone" was now part of the American lexicon and was displayed everywhere.

The Citizens Watch also had a large section listing the names and rewards individuals had earned for turning in people for anti-American, terrorist or suspicious activities. There were actually clubs across the United States called Patriot Watchers who made good money solely from snitching on people and collecting rewards from DC.

West never read the bullshit newsletters, only the snitches and citizen bounty hunters did. He tossed all the government and state crap on the floor. Only a beaten-up envelope that looked like some eight year old had scribbled his name and address on it remained.

What the hell was this, he wondered?

The last time he received a personal letter was over two years ago when his girlfriend broke up with him because of his constant drinking and erratic behavior. West stared at the envelope then noticed it wasn't stamped.

Great, he thought. Some Citizen Watcher must have gotten access to his post office box and was probably leaving him some type of warning.

He carefully opened the envelope and pulled out a letter printed on old discolored paper. The first thing that caught his eye was a faded blue timestamp in the upper right corner dated June 4, 8:32 AM.

He began reading the letter:

The Akashic Records contain the vibrational information on every soul in the cosmos and stores every thought, emotion and action. The Records connect each of us to one another. After your death you will return to what you were before birth. Everything in this universe is entangled to The Source as The Source is entangled to THE ONE. You are an anomaly but you are not alone.

The Dracun grows stronger but they are not The Source. By the time you read this Mark Sloan will have passed from this plane and returned to The One. He was the same as you.

West read the letter three more times. He had no idea who would have sent this crap or why. The only part of the letter he could understand was the mention of Sloan's name but even that was perplexing - to this day no one knew about their relationship.

Sloan had been a managing director for Lehman Brothers and was his inside contact during the investment bank's collapse. According to the mainstream media and financial pundits the Lehman bankruptcy had almost collapsed the world's financial system but Sloan had told him that Lehman really was only a false flag within a global high stakes power struggle.

But even in his alcohol-induced daze West couldn't understand why Sloan would have told someone about their relationship, because it would've been suicide. Sloan's Wall Street career would be finished for good if his employers knew he had provided corporate secrets to someone like West.

After the 2008 financial debacle Wall Street had closed ranks and adopted an *omerta* style silence. The legalized criminals were much better than the Mafia at stealing and laundering money while keeping the secrets inside the family.

West threw the letter back onto the coffee table. It really didn't matter because Sloan was still alive. It was obvious the letter must be a hoax but what would be the purpose of sending him some stupid letter?

West couldn't shake a nagging feeling that something didn't make sense and maybe because of the alcohol he dialed Sloan's home number.

After a few rings a lady answered, "Sloan residence."

"Is Mark available please?" West asked

"May I ask who is calling?"

"This is West Collins. I'm a buddy of his," he answered trying his best not to slur his words.

There was a long pause then a noticeable sigh. "This is a friend of the family's and I hate to be the one to tell you but Mark passed away this morning. I'm sorry but I don't know any of the funeral arrangements."

"Oh, I'm sorry," West stammered fumbling for words. "That's awful. What happened?"

There was another long pause before the woman added, “All I know is the police say he committed suicide in his office. I’m sorry but I have to go.”

He heard a click and the phone line went dead. He stared incomprehensibly at the date on the letter. He knew today was the 6th but he went to his desk to check the calendar and confirm the date.

“Holy shit!” he cursed.

He got up and grabbed a fresh beer. He chugged half of it with the realization that the letter had been time stamped a day before Sloan’s death. So whoever wrote the letter must’ve had advance knowledge that Sloan was going to be dead by the time he received it.

He looked at the letter again trying to rectify the impossible. His head suddenly felt like it was going to explode and he stumbled over to the sofa and collapsed onto it.

He stared up at the brown cracks lining the ceiling, trying to figure out what the hell was going on. His last coherent thought before his alcohol-soaked brain shut down was maybe if he went to sleep he’d wake up the next morning with a hangover and just a fleeting memory of a bad dream.

“Dreams are today’s answers to tomorrow’s questions.”

— Edward Cayce

CHAPTER TWO

West found himself in the hallowed place. He felt strange, almost as if he had entered a different plane of existence but he had been to this place before, many, many times.

He was standing on top of a steep, tree-lined hill. Behind him massive white-tipped mountains framed the horizon against a crystal blue sky. A trail winded down the hillside to a small, tranquil harbor.

He didn’t understand why but the air, the light, felt different, almost mystical. A slight chill permeated the air but he didn’t feel cold.

He stared down at the harbor realizing why he felt so odd; it was the silence which was absolute and

complete. He turned and what he saw confused him. Twenty feet directly in front of him was an enormous stone building that resembled an old church or a majestic library. How had he not seen the building before?

Spurred by an unknown force he walked to the entrance of the mammoth structure and pushed on one of the giant wooden doors. It creaked open and he stepped inside.

Weird, he thought. The room he stood in was actually quite small compared to the appearance of the building from the outside. Had the size of the building been some type of an optical illusion?

He slowly walked further into the room with his footsteps echoing off the grey stone floor. In the center of the room rows of wooden pews with giant stone columns led up to a tall, vaulted ceiling. Strange symbols and mathematical formulas were etched upon colorful stained glass windows that lined the walls. He watched in awe as the symbols and numbers that filled the glass windows constantly flickered and changed.

He walked toward the front and took a seat in one of the pews. He closed his eyes for an indeterminable amount of time, and when he opened them a brilliant stream of yellow light cascaded through a large cathedral window down to the floor. A swarm of infinite floating particles swayed and danced within the wall of light.

He rose and walked to the edge of the light. Slowly, he stuck out his arm and placed his hand inside the

shimmering light. A surge of warmth filled his body and he sensed that the particles weren't dust motes being illuminated by the sunlight. They were something much more. The particles were alive and held great secrets.

Without hesitation he stepped inside the inviting light. He raised his head towards the cathedral's window and closed his eyes.

When he opened them he was no longer in the magical building. He was standing in the middle of a long, curved beach that stretched from horizon to horizon. A dark blue ocean that looked more like a tranquil lake filled the landscape for as far as he could see.

He walked for what seemed like hours, never reaching the end of the beach. But that didn't concern him, he only thought about the sand. When he grew tired he sat, crossed-legged on the fine white sand. A few feet in front of him a translucent ripple appeared in the fabric of space and unconsciously he closed his eyes. In both hands he began picking up handfuls of the sand, letting the grains fall through his closed fists like an hourglass.

Time passed and when he opened his eyes sitting across from him was a man with his legs crossed. No words were spoken. They simply stared into one another's eyes.

Then something magical began to happen. The entity was inside of his mind and he was telling him a wonderful, magical story about life, the universe and his place among the great expanse of a circular infinity.

As much as he tried to understand the full meaning of the message, he realized much of it was beyond his grasp, at least for now, in this time, in this place.

He just sat there listening to the never-ending story, all the time picking up handful after handful of the fine white sand, slowly letting the grains fall through his fists over and over again.

Somewhere between the threshold of a tortured sleep and a bad hangover West understood his cell-phone would not stop ringing until he answered it. Forcing himself into a semi-consciousness state he swung his arm over to the coffee table and grabbed his cell.

“Hello,” he answered through a throat that felt like it was clogged with sawdust.

The line crackled with static.

“Hello,” he repeated.

“The onion is an illuminating bulb,” a voice whispered through the static, “but only by peeling back all the layers can you find an enlightened soul or a rotten core. The truth lies with The Source. Follow Ulysses.”

“Who the fuck is this?” West snapped.

The line clicked a few times then went dead.

“Damn it,” he groaned trying to force one of his eyes to open. After a blurry few seconds he managed to get one eye open and for his success he was greeted by an explosion of pain that ripped through his head.

He forced his other eye to open and through double vision he saw an empty vodka bottle and beer cans

strewn across the floor. He dropped the cell phone onto the floor and started to drift back to sleep until a memory flashed through his tortured consciousness.

He vaguely recalled reading a bizarre letter claiming that Mark Sloan was dead. Some memory synapse fired causing West to bolt upright once he realized it wasn't a dream. He remembered calling Sloan's house where a woman had confirmed his death.

A stab of pain tore through his shoulder. West grabbed his aching arm, wondering if he was having a heart attack. After a few seconds of panic, he remembered the liquor bottle incident.

Then he looked down in confusion. "What the . . ." he began to say, slowly rubbing a hand over the couch. The couch was covered in a fine layer of sand. He remembered going out to a few bars but he hadn't gone to the beach. He hadn't been there in years. What the hell was going on?

He picked up a handful of the sand, letting the grains fall in between his fingers back down onto the couch. Slowly the dream filtered back into his memory. He recalled the library or church or whatever it was, the windows with the strange symbols, the light and the man from the beach.

No matter how much he thought, he could not come up with a logical explanation for how all the sand got onto his couch. Had he gotten so drunk that he went to the beach and put a bunch of sand in a bag, brought it home and spread it out on the couch?

He looked over at the letter on the coffee table and picked it up with a shaky hand. West read the letter half a dozen times while his confusion increased significantly.

He turned on the business channel for no other reason than to bring some type of reality back into the present situation. A smoking-hot, 20-something news reader was trying her best to act professional yet concerned as she read off the teleprompter that the Japanese stock market had crashed 10 percent overnight and the stock index futures were indicating another bad day for the U.S. Stock market.

The clock on the TV read 8 o' clock.

"Shit," he cursed. He was going to be late for work and that thought made him feel even worse.

After he got fired the only media outlet that would have anything to do with him was the *Weekly World Enquirer*, a conspiratorial, gossip tabloid posted on Amerinet every Friday.

His boss, Simon Stossel, had made no bones about it when he told him that the only reason he was hiring him was because of the train wreck principle. Simon had explained that his tarnished and disgraced name would add subscribers to the newspaper's list of morons who bought the tabloid for its enlightening insights into the New World Order, UFO's, Atlantis, Elvis sightings, vampires, hobbits, Area 51, and alien abductions.

Simon told West he wanted him to continue following the Wall Street Banksters and the crooked politicians but in keeping with the paper's conspiracy twist.

He could still hear Simon saying to him, "Add a tiny sliver of fact and then a whole lot of crap. That's what our readers want."

A few times when he had questioned his boss about journalistic integrity Simon had just scoffed and replied that at least they had the decency to add the tiny sliver of fact unlike the so-called Mainstream Media which either blatantly lied or spewed absurd government propaganda.

West picked up some more of the sand and stared at it for a long time. What the hell did it mean? He briefly thought about cleaning the sand up but decided to leave it there for now. He was late for work and his brain still needed more time to figure out how the sand had gotten there.

He forced himself to get moving and proceeded to perform all the necessary daily rituals of showering, shaving, and dressing so he could try and function like a normal human being. He left his apartment and headed to work, the whole time his mind screaming at him to just get out while he still could.

“Hence, naturally enough, my symbol for Hell is something like the bureaucracy of a police state or the office of a thoroughly nasty business concern.”

— C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

CHAPTER THREE

West walked into the half empty news floor and the first thing he saw was Simon frantically waving to him from his office.

“Shit,” West cursed. “What the hell is his problem?”

He shuffled across the news floor with his head down and when he looked back up he saw two men in dark suits inside Simon’s office.

Double Shit, he thought. Who the fuck are they?

He walked into the office. “Hey, what’s up?” he pretended to ask cheerfully, trying his best to ignore the

fact that his head felt like it was going to split open and his heart was on the verge of exploding.

Simon's scowl looked even nastier than usual, which was not a good sign. He pointed to the two men. "These two gentlemen are with Homeland Security and they have a few questions they'd like to ask you."

The older agent stepped forward and handed him a card. "I'm Agent Joe McCain and this is my partner Larson Graham. You're familiar with Mark Sloan, correct?"

West looked down at the card then back to the agent. He had wispy white hair combed over a mostly bald pate and his face appeared as if it could slide off his skull at any moment.

"Sure . . . I mean." West shook his head. "I can't believe he's dead."

The two agents exchanged a glance then McCain asked, "How do you know that?"

By the look on the agent's liver-spotted face it was clear West should have kept his big mouth shut. "Well, I called his house last night, and someone told me he had died."

"Who answered the phone and what exactly did they say?" McCain prodded.

"I don't know. It was a lady who said she was a family friend. I didn't ask her name and she didn't say much of anything except that he had committed suicide."

"How close were you to Mr. Sloan?" McCain asked.

“I really wasn’t that close at all.”

“Then what was your relationship with Mr. Sloan?”

“He worked on Wall Street and over the years I’ve called him for comments, research, quotes. You know, things I could use in articles . . . You know, all pretty routine stuff,” West stammered wondering how many times he could say ‘you know’ in a sentence.

“And he worked for...?” McCain stared at West with a smile that was reminiscent of the Grim Reaper.

“He was at Goldman, but when I first met him he was working at Lehman Brothers,” West answered while trying to take a deep breath to slow his racing heart. The last thing anybody wanted to be was in the crosshairs of Homeland agents.

The second agent, Graham, edged toward him. He was pudgy with a bitchy attitude attached to his effeminate demeanor.

“Why were you contacting Sloan?” Agent Graham asked in a whiny Southern drawl. “Was he a whistle blower? An informer? Was he embezzling money? What’s the deal?”

Jesus what had he gotten himself into? West began to panic. He felt like he was about to have an anxiety-induced heart attack.

“Look guys,” he replied trying to sound calm and collected. “Sloan was one of hundreds, maybe thousands of traders, executives, politicians that I’ve had conversations with. I’m not sure what I can tell you about him that you probably don’t already know?”

Agent Graham took a step closer. West instantly hated the smug bastard. He had seen his type a million times over the years. He was the stereotypical government thug who hid behind the power of DC to threaten and coerce anyone not on board with the agenda. West wasn't sure if it was the after-effects of the alcohol but he began to feel dizzy and lightheaded. Damn, he needed a drink badly.

"You appear disheveled this morning, Mr. West," McCain interjected. "Are you sick?"

"I had a little too much to drink last night. That's all."

"Didn't you take an AmeriMerck Wonder?" Graham snorted.

"No. I was running late for work and I forgot."

It might seem hard to believe coming from a former drug addict but West hated those feel-good pills. Five years ago the government-owned pharmaceutical company AmeriMerck had come out with a revolutionary new drug that basically made most psychological medications obsolete. A single dose of the AmeriMerck's Wonder Pill would instantly create a hyper-relaxed feeling with no unpleasant side effects.

It was hailed as the drug discovery of the century which was laughable to West. Due to the horrific and prolonged economic conditions the populace had been in a constant state of edginess for years. Mass anxiety, depression, rampant substance abuse, constant violence and high suicide rates had become a normal part of life

but the new drug temporarily relieved those afflictions by providing an overwhelming sense of calm and well-being.

The net result was most Americans had subtly become drug dependent courtesy of DC. But it was easy to understand why the government promoted the drug so heavily: a properly medicated population was a properly controlled population.

West figured he must be an aberration of the human race because he hated the drug and its all-encompassing blissful state that it produced. For almost 15 years of his life he had loved and craved illicit drugs. He consumed any and everything he could get his hands on. You name it: cocaine, LSD, amphetamines, pot, heroin, ecstasy, uppers, downers and a plethora of laboratory produced designer drugs were his constant companions.

But something weird happened after he lost his job and was at rock bottom. One morning he woke up and quit drugs cold turkey.

Even now he wasn't exactly sure why he refused to take the wonder drug. Maybe it had been the duality of drugs that West had sought out for so many years because he loved both the ecstasy and the misery that they brought. It was a contradiction most people wouldn't understand but it was the combination of both the pain and pleasure that made him crave drugs. He had no interest in feeling good or peaceful all the time because that just wasn't natural to him. After all, without suffer-

ing how could anyone ever experience happiness and tranquility?

So in his strange, some would say, demented world if you could do drugs to feel good, then take an AmeriMerck Wonder to eliminate the pain once the drugs wore off, well, what the hell was the point of taking any drugs in the first place?

But he couldn't tell the agents all that because taking the AmeriMerck Wonder was strongly encouraged by DC and the system abhorred abnormalities and non-conformists.

Simon reached behind his desk and pulled open a drawer. "Here," Simon said. "Take one of mine."

West could have throttled his boss but he had no choice and took the pill. "Thanks," he said meekly while dry swallowing the pill.

Agent Graham looked at a little notebook and continued the questioning, "You used to work for the *Wall Street Journal*, didn't you?"

"Yes."

The agent smiled and looked out towards the newsroom. "Just out of curiosity why'd you move over to the *World Weekly*? You get a big promotion or something?"

"Maybe he thought he could increase his chances of winning a Pulitzer," McCain laughed.

West couldn't believe these assholes were goading him like this because he suspected the agents knew damn well that he had gotten fired.

“I moved for the great honor of working under Mr. Stossel,” he answered sarcastically. “Not to mention the outstanding benefits.”

“Was Sloan passing you insider trading information or anything like that?” Graham abruptly jumped in like a rabid pit bull.

“Of course not,” West snapped.

Neither agent said a word then West felt the drug suddenly kick in. His racing heart dropped by about a thousand beats a minute and an overwhelming sense of tranquility overtook his body.

“We have phone records indicating hundreds of calls were made between you and Mr. Sloan,” Agent McCain continued. “Do you always talk to your casual sources that often?”

West realized the agents were trying to rattle him for some reason but with the drug coursing through his body he felt calm and relaxed.

West forced himself to smile. “That was years ago. And we stayed in touch for quite some time, so I’m not sure if that is unusual or not.”

“Mr. Collins,” Graham stepped back in front of his partner. “This is all standard questioning in a homicide. Everyone is guilty until we can adequately eliminate that guilt. So we are not implying anything; we are simply asking a few questions to see if we can perhaps jog your memory which may help us with our investigation.”

“Homicide?” West rebutted. “I thought he committed suicide?”

“Right,” Graham smiled. “However, standard investigations procedures dictate that we completely rule out homicide, even if we’re pretty certain it was a suicide.”

“Anyway,” interjected McCain obviously changing the subject. “We know from your tax returns and financial disclosures that you never used any insider information for personal gain.”

Warning bells began ringing in his head. Fucking DC! This was no simple inquiry because they had pulled his Personal Financial Records (PF Record).

It had become impossible to hide anything from DC. Four years ago a bomb was discovered inside the chambers of the California State Assembly so Congress had added provisions to the Patriot Act requiring every American’s tax return, a complete financial statement, credit report and annual financial transaction report to be filed with IRS.

A PF Record could be pulled by DC or a DC-approved law enforcement agency with only the approval of a DC-appointed bureaucrat. No warrants were needed. No judge had to sign off on it and the government wasn’t even required to notify the individuals whose records were pulled.

The law was supposed to be a temporary measure to help curb homegrown terrorism and to quell the rash of violence against Federal employees. But in America, no law, no matter how unconstitutional, was ever rescinded and in order to keep its citizens in further

check a year later the Digital Currency Act eliminated physical paper and coin currency for the first time in the country's history. The U.S Mint ceased operation and all paper and coin money transactions were illegal. America's fiat currency known as Federal Reserve Notes were replaced by a new electronic currency called DigiDollars.

So unless you had something to barter with, all transactions were made with electronic cards or through electronic devices where the activity was transmitted in real time to the IRS department within Homeland Security.

The net result was every good or service that was purchased in the United States - food, liquor, houses, prostitutes, cars, mortgages, rents, drugs, books, electronics, clothes or explosive-making materials - was seen in real time or could be pulled up with a keystroke.

At first the law had created a huge black market for gold and silver but just as Franklin Roosevelt had ordered during the first Great Depression the President issued an executive order making not only gold but also silver bullion ownership illegal.

Initially, the order was largely ignored because the scope of private ownership was so large it was impossible to enforce. But after an irate Tennessee farmer blew 9 high ranking members of FEMA to smithereens with a fertilizer bomb, DC went ape shit.

The farmer had been pushed over the edge when Homeland Security had forcibly removed him off property that had been in his family for generations. The non-appealable seizure of property was executed under the Progress For All Americans Act (PFAA) which allowed “private property to be seized by Homeland Security if it was deemed to be of greater or more beneficial value to a larger group of citizens than the current owner(s).” DC seizures of private property had become so widespread that it was an almost daily event and the practice was promoted under the slogan of *PROGRESS FOR ALL*.

If the PFAA laws weren’t bad enough, after the fertilizer bombing the President via Homeland Security passed through Congress the new Protect America Enforcement Act (PAEA). Anyone violating the PAEA law by possessing gold or silver or anyone caught receiving or using precious metals to purchase goods and services faced draconian prison sentences.

First-time offenders received a mandatory 10 year prison sentence with forfeiture of 30 percent of any net worth and a third time offender faced a non-appealable death penalty.

West knew he was in some type of trouble if they had pulled his PF records, although he couldn’t figure out why they would be so interested in a Wall Street executive that had committed suicide. There had to be a lot more to it and that’s what made him nervous.

“When would you say was the last time you met Sloan in person?” Graham continued to probe.

“I really don’t know but it’s been a while.”

“Ballpark it, a few days? A few weeks?”

“Oh no,” West answered. “I think I haven’t seen him in probably a year and a half. Maybe even two years.”

There was no reason for him to lie, especially because he knew that if they had pulled his PF records they also had his phone records, not to mention that Protect America surveillance cameras virtually tracked all movement within the city.

High tech surveillance software had been developed by the Micromerica Corporation. There were so many cameras and drones in the city that a person’s image could be entered into the Protect America database and a person’s generalized movement could be re-created for any given day over the past two years. There were holes in the network especially outside of cities or in rural areas but in places like New York it was hard for a person to interact in public without being continuously observed and recorded.

Agent Graham glared at West. “Let me get this straight Mr. Collins, you made hundreds of calls to Sloan but you really weren’t that close to him. Which is your explanation as to why you haven’t talked to him in two years. Yet you just happen to call his home on the day he was killed? I’d say that is quite a coincidence, huh?”

“I, uh . . . yeah,” West stuttered, having mentally determined there was no way he was going to mention the letter he had received. “Look, like I mentioned earlier I was home drinking and I started to clean out my desk and I found his card. I hadn’t talked to him in a while so I decided to call him and see what was going on. I don’t know what else to tell you. It was just a coincidence.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences, Mr. Collins,” Graham replied.

“All right Mr. Collins,” Agent McCain interjected. “I think were done for now but if you can think of anything else that might be helpful give us a call.”

“Okay, I will. Thanks.”

The agents walked past West but Graham stopped and turned. “One last question, did Sloan give you any documents? More specifically a book.”

“No, he never gave me a book or anything like that,” West lied because something told him he better not get in any deeper than he was. Sloan had given him a book but if there was some type of incriminating evidence in it then West could be arrested for not reporting Sloan to DC.

Agent Graham stared at him for a few more moments then turned and left.

“So what the hell have you gotten yourself into now?” Simon asked.

West turned around. Despite the pill, he wasn’t in the mood for Simon’s shit.

“I don’t know what the hell they wanted. Typical Homeland bullshit harassment, that’s all”

“Yeah, whatever. Where’s my Mars Face article and alien WOW Transmission or whatever you call it?”

“I’ll forward it you tonight. I’m pretty much done. Don’t worry, you’ll have the article for Friday’s print, like always.”

Simon grunted something unintelligible, which usually served as West’s cue to leave. He returned to his desk and pulled out his file on the Mars rock formation. He stared at what appeared to be a human face on the Martian landscape that was filmed by the Viking orbiter back in 1976. The conspiracy nutcases argued the photo proved a humanoid sculpture or pyramid structure had been carved into the surface of Mars by aliens.

To add more bullshit to their delusion the very next year in August of 1977, the night before Elvis Presley died, a scientist at the Big Ear Radio Telescope recorded a supposed non-terrestrial non-solar system radio transmission. The event was called the WOW! Transmission and it lasted for 72 seconds. The source of the transmission was pinpointed to somewhere in the Sagittarius Constellation. The signal was received in a radio frequency of 1420mhz which happens to be the same frequency as hydrogen.

The ET believers argued this was proof of the existence of aliens because it would be logical to use the most common molecule in the universe for the communication.

Technical errors including reflected earthbound transmissions were all but ruled out but the signal was never heard again. So with the 50 year anniversary of the WOW! Transmission coming up this summer Simon was doing what he did best, and that was taking a little bit of fact and creating layers of conspiracies to get his whacked out subscribers fired up.

The article West was working on linked the Mars Face to the WOW! Transmission which was part of a communication link built by ancient aliens.

West looked over his notes, shaking his head in disgust. But he had a job to do and a deadline was a deadline. He started mindlessly typing on his laptop, knowing he'd have to work late tonight to get the asinine story done for tomorrow's paper.

He started grinding out words and just like the good old days, West completely shut out the world and concentrated on the story at hand. Hours passed as he entered a time vacuum and when he finally looked up, the dingy newsroom was empty.

He stared out of the office's window at New York City's darkened skyline. He almost was ready to congratulate himself on a job well done when he realized what crap the story actually was and then he remembered Sloan and the agents. Any satisfaction he previously felt dissipated into a haze of melancholy as the thought of just dropping out of life resurfaced.

West opened the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out a bottle of vodka wrapped in a brown paper

bag. He had quit drugs but not the booze. He had to have some way to shut down his mind, at least for a while. West slugged down the fiery liquid while choking back both the rising fire from the cheap liquor and his growing disgust of what he had become.

“Screw it,” he announced to the empty office. “Time to go home.”

“What you know you can’t explain, but you feel it. You’ve felt it your entire life, that there’s something wrong with the world. You don’t know what it is, but it’s there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad.”

— Morpheus, *The Matrix*

CHAPTER 4

West took the stairs down to the lobby and walked out of the building where he was greeted by a stormy night. Twenty-five years ago, even at two o’clock in the morning, New York was lit up like a Christmas tree. But now entire offices, apartment buildings and even city blocks were empty, abandoned and dark. The whole city was rotting from the inside out.

West lit up a cigarette and blew out a stream of smoke. He became transfixed watching the burning ashes of

his cigarette as they disappeared unceremoniously into the night sky.

He pulled up the collar of his 20+ year old trench coat and looked around. The Tabloid's dilapidated office was in a rundown section of upper Manhattan, which was not safe during the day, but at night it was outright dangerous.

Although nowhere in the city was really safe at night except for certain sections that were sealed off and patrolled by armed security guards. These "safe zones" were populated mostly by the ruling class and unless you were able to show the proper identification the guards wouldn't allow you to pass through the restricted area.

A pre-2000's taxicab sped by and West watched as its brake lights faded from view then something strange, almost surreal occurred. He turned completely around. There was not a car or a person in sight. His senses kicked into overdrive and a deafening silence enveloped him.

West stood frozen in terror until his fight or flight instinct took over and without consciously deciding, he fled. He had no idea what he was running from but he sprinted to the train station where he caught the subway home.

Sitting alone, he drank from the bottle of vodka in the semi-dark subway car as it sped through a centuries old hole underneath the city. West couldn't stop thinking about the strange note and Mark Sloan's death.

Their relationship had been a unique one and to this day West wasn't sure what to make of it. Generally, high-level contacts within Wall Street gave reporters information because they had an axe to grind or wanted to get someone out of the way in order to make their own career path easier. But Sloan was different. He had contacted West directly and after they had engaged in the usual dance of 'can I trust you,' a wary partnership was formed.

Initially, Sloan had provided him with information about the fragile state of Wall Street, including Lehman Brothers dire fiscal condition. But after the collapse of Lehman the nature of their relationship, and especially the information that Sloan started providing, morphed into some type of weird Twilight Zone episode.

Their conversations went from how Lehman had overleveraged their book taking on way more risk than they could afford to how the Federal Reserve Banking system was a dangerous cartel run by a small group of international bankers that served a shadow group that controlled the world's financial system.

As time went by Sloan opened up a whole new dimension of absurdity when he began telling West there was an even smaller group of individuals whom he called The Dracun who hid in a global shadow world. Sloan swore that this small super-elite group controlled it all: Central Banks, heads of state, the military, corporations, everything.

Sloan would go on tirades that the whole system, including the implosion of Wall Street and the constant financial crises, had been orchestrated by The Dracun to begin ushering in a New World Order and that all these events had been planned decades ago.

West had been grateful for the information Sloan provided him because it had basically jumpstarted his career. But he did not adhere to all the whacked out conspiracies about the Super Elite and their New World Agenda supposedly being carried out by the usual suspects. The main reason for his skepticism was the most obvious, why would those that have everything want to destroy that?

He owed Sloan a lot so he grinned and listened to all of his insane ramblings, even though he didn't really believe most of Sloan's shit. In West's view the world had gone flat busted due to insatiable spending, massive debts and unsustainable entitlements run up mostly by a generation of people called the Baby Boomers who had now almost all died off.

In West's thinking it was simple: he believed that bad times sprung all kinds of crazy ideas, but the fact was the United States was in a decade long depression because like all structures built on a rotting foundation, the collapse was certain to come and boy had it ever.

But he had to hand it to Sloan because he never wavered and steadfastly dismissed all of West's counter-arguments and insisted this was just the beginning of

a carefully constructed collapse and the next wave, the true unraveling, was almost upon them.

West had no idea what the hell all that meant but many of these conversations came after quite a few drinks so West never took any of it too seriously.

He distinctly remembered the last time they had met because he thought Sloan had completely gone insane. At the time he didn't give it much thought because Wall Street had just been shell-shocked by a massive 25 percent stock market crash in the closing minutes of a Friday, and Sloan had every right to be rattled.

Once again the whole financial system was teetering on the brink of the abyss and the regulators had to close the markets for a full week in order to restore balance and order. Eventually, the crash was declared to have been a coordinated attack by an anti-Wall Street hacker group but that claim was growing old and no one trusted the markets anymore.

It was during that conversation that Sloan had asked him if he had seen the movie *The Matrix*, which, of course West had because it was a sci-fi classic. Then Sloan asked him if he was ready to take the red pill and see the world for what it truly was.

During those days he would have taken any pill someone had offered him without even asking what it was, so West humored him and nodded that he was ready. Instead of giving him some reality-altering drug Sloan handed him an enormous sheaf of documents

haphazardly bound in leather. When West had asked Sloan what the documents were, he had just dismissed West only saying he would have to read and search out the answers to discover the truth on his own.

West repeatedly tried to give the book back but Sloan refused, saying he owed him so West relented and kept the book, figuring it was just easier to humor him. That was the last time West ever saw Sloan.

Weeks later, almost as an afterthought, West had picked up Sloan's book from his desk and began thumbing through it. The whole thing was a jumbled mess of seemingly random and sometimes incoherent documents.

Some of the pages were hand-written, clearly by different authors, while other pages were typed. The book included newspaper articles from as far back as the 1800's, obscure research papers, New Age shit, economic reports, philosophy journals, analyses of old Stanley Kubrick movies, Federal Reserve minutes, currency charts, pages of mathematical formulas that he would never be able to comprehend, UFO reports, conspiracy theories and even gossip columns.

There was even a college dissertation paper written by some student from the University of Alabama. After he read the dissertation he wondered how the kid was even allowed to graduate with the shit he had turned in. The paper took a speculative physics theory called The Grand Unified Theory and applied it to the current global socio-political economic world.

But rather than producing a thought-out academic theory, the paper contained a constant underlying fringe element about a massive global conspiracy involving a group of individuals who worked behind the scenes to create and control the world we live in and that many of the decisions being made resulted from a type of quantum gaming theory this shadow group was running. The paper was the same exact craziness Sloan kept repeating.

Also attached to the kid's dissertation was a couple of newspaper articles about him overdosing after graduation. The kid's parents had demanded an independent autopsy because they swore he didn't drink or do drugs. There was even a quote from his roommate of four years stating that he was a strict Southern Baptist and never drank, smoked, and certainly had never taken any drugs.

West took another swig of the vodka and felt his eyelids beginning to close. He was exhausted and the motion of the train was lulling him to sleep.



Buildings burned far off in the distance, enveloping the city in a reddish hue. A noxious smoke filled his nostrils and stung his eyes. Pillars of blood-red clouds filled the dark gray sky casting a death pall over the city. He watched as an endless stream of faceless soldiers marched down the streets. A wave of revulsion infiltrated every cell of his being. The Army of Darkness had arrived and all hope was lost. He had lost his chance to flee so

his fate had been sealed. A child in front of him held her mother's hand, pressing her little body into hers for comfort.

Dread filled him, knowing that the child had no future and he hoped her suffering would be quick. He cowered back from the crowd into the crevice of the building and waited for it all to end. He wasn't afraid of dying any more but what filled his soul with loathing was the knowledge that it all could have been stopped.



West awoke with a jerk. The raw emotions from the nightmare was almost too much to bare and he couldn't shake the image of the child with her mother in front of the faceless goose-stepping soldiers.

The subway came to a halt at his stop. He left the train and walked through the dingy subway terminal strewn with litter, anti-government graffiti and dozens of homeless people or drunks bunking down for the night. He climbed up the subway stairs onto the street where he was only a few blocks from home. Despite being the height of summer, a cold gust of wind greeted him and he thrust his hands inside his overcoat. His body felt like it weighed a thousand pounds.

He pulled a cigarette out, bent his head to block the biting wind and lit it. As he exhaled a stream of grayish-white smoke, a figure from across the street caught his attention. A man stood motionless at the edge of the street with his hands tucked inside his overcoat pockets.

“Jeez,” he muttered under his breath. “Just what I need, some psycho stalking me.”

He turned and began walking toward his apartment. After a block he glanced across the street. West couldn't get a clear look at him but the damn guy was following him. He stopped and his unknown pursuer also stopped.

A bus drove past blocking his view, and when it passed the guy was no longer there. Where in the hell could he have gone that fast?

“Screw it,” West flicked his cigarette into the gutter and briskly walked toward his apartment building. When he reached the entrance he took one last look across the street. The psycho had reappeared out of thin air with his arm held out and his fingers formed into a gun gesture.

Slowly, the mystery assailant pointed his hand at West and moved his thumb down gesturing like he was pulling the trigger of a pistol.

Eerie laughter echoed off the surrounding buildings. West took a step forward and a cab's headlights cast a beam of light across his face, temporarily blinding him. The blinding light lasted only for an instant but whoever was following him had once again disappeared into the darkness of the city.

West pulled his keys out and hurriedly opened the door, making sure to lock it behind him. He took the stairs two at a time up to his studio where he locked himself inside.

He flipped the lights on and poured a large scotch. The message button was blinking on the SmartLink so he wearily pressed the listen button. When he heard the voice on the machine he instantly regretted checking his messages.

A voice from the grave began: “Hey good buddy, its Mark. Hope you are doing well. By the time you get this message you would have heard about my demise. I suspect you are beginning to question the world you live in. We share the same bond, West. I didn’t ask to be this way, just like you didn’t. I still don’t know what it means and neither do The Searchers. Read the book carefully and question everything. Start with Nigel Firth. Good bye for now, West.”

SmartLink clicked off and West looked at the time the message was received: June 5th at 9:45 am. Just before Sloan had supposedly killed himself.

He drank the entire glass of scotch trying to figure out what Sloan was talking about and why he had not seen the message yesterday.

“I’m just doing my job”

— Weak minded, immoral men

CHAPTER 5

Agent Larson Graham handed the Homeland Security force his weapon and began the lengthy identification and clearance process to enter the secure building. Even though he carried one of the highest security clearances available, he was still subjected to intense screening every time he entered the New York headquarters of Homeland Security. Only after his identity was confirmed and his body was scanned for any internal explosive devices or biological weapons was he waved through minus his weapon.

He walked down a long windowless sterile hall lined with armed security agents. He hesitated before knocking on the Homeland Security Director’s door.

No agent, no matter how high their ranking, liked to be summoned by the Director for any reasons, under any circumstances.

He knew he was being paranoid but being paranoid was part of the oath he took when he joined Homeland Security as a field Agent straight out of Columbia. The last sentence in the agent's oath was "Trust No One" and Graham took that vow seriously.

He knocked lightly and a beefy voice bellowed, "Enter."

Graham opened the door. "Good morning, Director. How are you?"

Homeland Security Director Jennie Napolitano looked up from a stack of files. "Take a seat Agent Graham," she commanded briskly.

He sat and watched the Director return her attention to the documents in front of her. She was a 58 year old heinous beast. The Director always wore the same frumpy grey mens suit she had altered to fit her stocky frame. Her peppered gray hair was cut military short and it framed a meaty face that had a permanent scowl etched into it.

Despite being one of the most powerful people in the country, and in contrast to her ornate office at the Pentagon, she maintained a small, sparsely furnished office in New York.

There were no windows, for obvious security reasons, and the only furniture in the office was her desk, the chair Graham was sitting in and a book shelf.

A withered plant sat in one corner and the walls were a bland yellowish-white color that desperately needed a couple coats of fresh paint.

She had only one personal item, a photo of her and the former President after she was awarded the National Patriots Award for her service to the country. She had won the prestigious award primarily for her role in disbanding the Wyoming Militia after they had seized control of the state capital and had taken the entire legislature hostage.

At the time Napolitano was in charge of the Western region for Homeland Security. While in negotiations with the militia, she ordered a powerful nerve gas to be pumped through the air-filtration system of the capital building. Before the militia knew what had hit them the gas had attacked their central nervous system, rendering them unconscious and neutralized. Four legislators, 17 civilians and 3 militia members had died from acute respiratory distress due to the powerful nerve agent.

Napolitano's innovative solution led to her promotion as Homeland Director and even Graham respected her ingenuity in eliminating the terrorist threat with minimal collateral damage. The surviving members of the militia were tried in military court and found guilty of murder and treason. They were executed with no appeals. Some might have considered her methods extreme but Graham felt her decision was exactly what was needed to halt the spread of anarchy and chaos that was overtaking the country.

If there was one thing in life Graham hated, it was disorder. He had grown up in a dysfunctional family. His mother was a functioning alcoholic who could take care of the household's most basic needs but that was about the extent of her ability. His father had been a basic training sergeant for the Marines who treated his two kids like little soldiers when he was home, which was not often.

Despite his father's disciplined military training the family's home life was anything like it. Chaos ruled and every year they packed up their belongings and moved to a new military base in some crappy little town. Graham was perpetually the new kid on the block.

His childhood grew more unstable when his mother died from a brain aneurism when he was 12. Graham was left to take care of himself, his younger sister and most of the household duties because they could not afford any help. To make matters worse his father was always at the base training fresh recruits to help protect the United States from its multitudes of enemies.

Two years after Graham's mother passed away his father was part of a military convoy on a training mission in Texas when their transport vehicle ran over a series of incinerator bombs. Fourteen soldiers were killed, including his father. The Texas Militia claimed responsibility. They left flyers across the state declaring war on grounds that Texas' sovereignty was being attacked by an illegal military force.

With no other known relatives Graham and his sister were separated and sent off to military orphanages. He never had contact with his sister again and sometimes he wondered if his family had ever really existed.

The Director tapped a manila folder on her desk and looked up. “We’ve received some disturbing news regarding the Local Terrorists. We’ve intercepted numerous transmissions that they’re planning a major attack in the fall. From the information we’ve received there is reason to believe it’s not going to be a low-level isolated event. Undercover agents who’ve infiltrated a number of militia and LT groups in different regions of the country all confirm or substantially corroborate the intelligence. The data suggests that the attacks have been in the planning stages for a number of years and they would encompass multiple high-level federal targets throughout the country.”

Graham shifted uneasily in his chair. “How credible do you think this information is?”

The Director’s lip curled into the scowl she was famous for. “As you’re aware, we still lack reliable information about who the LT central powers are, and where they originate. Most of the information is chatter but it is being filtered through multiple channels. If the information is correct the scale of attacks would be on an unprecedented level.”

Graham shook his head. “I just don’t get it. I’ve never understood these people’s hatred towards DC. It just doesn’t make any sense to attack people who are doing

their job, who are trying to help protect them and their families.”

The Director held up her hand. “That doesn’t matter right now. We’ve acquired intelligence from multiple sources that they have acquired one, maybe two nuclear devices, and these traitors are so damn fanatical they might threaten or blackmail the government of the United States.”

Graham sat back in his chair because what the Director had just told him was a game changer. “Even if they have acquired a nuclear device you don’t really think they’d make good on any threat, do you? It would be suicide.”

“You know the mindset of these lunatics, their fucking fanatical anarchists,” the Director rebutted. “Who knows what they are capable of? But we can’t underestimate them and we have to consider that any possibility is a probability, no matter how remote. Any rogue group, no matter how small they are, who has possession of a nuclear, chemical or biological weapon is everyone’s worse nightmare.”

“What kind of specifics are we looking at?”

“Our best analysts believe they have a two-pronged attack planned. First, they would use a nuclear threat as a distraction while assassination teams would be dispatched to try and eliminate high-level targets throughout the country. Heads of government agencies, state-aligned CEO’s, key politicians, union bosses, and various members of the media. They would also

target large-scale destruction of government facilities, especially surveillance and information technology centers. It goes without saying their main target would be to destabilize DC.”

“So what’s the plan to stop these lunatics?” Graham asked.

“This evening the President is going to declare a National Emergency.”

Graham wasn’t sure what good that would do since DC had regularly declared some type of a national emergency for the better part of two decades.

The Director continued, “The President is going to raise the Homeland Security Warning Level to Code Seven.”

“Seven,” Graham repeated with a bit of shock.

The alert system ranged from Code One to Code Seven and it had never been higher than Code Five before. The implications of a Code Seven were enormous because the President then had the power to operate without constitutional and legal restraint, or even Congressional oversight. The Homeland Security code change also was a declaration of War resulting in local and state law enforcement officials and all military agencies being placed under the President’s direct command.

“The United States of America has entered its second Civil War, Agent Graham. We are officially declaring war on the LT’s. The very existence of the country is at stake and we have to take drastic actions to ensure its survival. That is why I asked you here today.”

“Of course. What are my orders?” Graham asked.

“You went to school with Tank Wilson?”

Graham winced at the mention of his former friend. “Yes, we were college roommates,” he answered, wondering what in the hell Tank had to do with this.

When Graham had turned 18 he received A Fallen Soldiers College Scholarship via Homeland Security which gave him a free ride to any school of his choice. He chose Columbia where he roomed with Tank and, despite their obvious differences, they had become friends, at least until their senior year.

The first cracks in their friendship started when Graham was being heavily recruited by Homeland Security and Tank constantly harassed him about it. He would needle him and continually asked him why he would ever want to work for DC fascists.

They were the quintessential odd couple and looking back on their college relationship Graham wondered how they had even lived together, let alone become friends. Graham loved organization, routine and order whereas Tank thrived on the exact opposite. School hadn't come easy for Graham who had to work twice as hard as his classmates. After studying and working his part-time jobs Graham didn't have much time for sports, beer or girls.

Tank on the other hand hardly picked up a book, passed all his classes with flying colors, played multiple sports and chased the co-eds around the campus with reckless abandon.

For a few years after graduation they stayed in touch with an occasional phone call, although both of them grew more and more distant as they concentrated on building their careers. As the years passed they spoke less frequently and an unmistakable underlying tension seeped into what few conversations they did have.

Their relationship ended for good more than a decade ago with an ugly episode. Graham had traveled to New York for a security training seminar and the two men had met at a bar to have a few drinks and catch up.

The more they drank the more Tank kept goading him about working for Homeland Security. After the constant ridicule and having consuming more alcohol than he was used to, Graham's usual stone-faced composure left him and when Tank insulted him one time too many, he snapped.

Graham had never been athletic or played much in the way of sports but with extensive training including hand-to-hand combat Tank never had a chance. A well-placed blow to the solar plexus laid out his college friend with a single punch.

Graham remembered how good it felt to watch Tank writhing around on the floor sucking air like a beached fish. After a few minutes Tank managed to stand and had surprised Graham when rather than get angry he began laughing.

Even after all these years he remembered Tank's last words, "You're no better than some Nazi storm trooper and you know it. I know your bureaucratic mantra that

I'm just doing my job. But that is just an excuse of a weak minded, evil man. It is a pathetic attempt to shift the blame for your lawless, immoral actions. You are the enemy my friend and quite frankly you make me sick. You've been brainwashed and have turned into a card-carrying sociopath but I suspect I am not telling you anything you don't already know."

They hadn't spoken since but in an odd way Graham had to admit that Tank was right, at least on one point. In the past he had always thought the reason Homeland Security recruited so many Ivy Leaguers was because of their high intelligence. But as the years passed after the incident he did come to realize that most of the agents for The System were byproducts of Ivy League schools and that they all shared certain similar distinctive character traits.

As Graham's career had progressed and he became responsible for recruiting prospective agents he was indoctrinated with the criteria for Homeland recruitment. Basically, Homeland was seeking out candidates whose psychological profile displayed an amoral, borderline sociopathic personality trait with a character complex that gravitated towards a strict, unquestioning hierarchy structure. There was no such thing as right or wrong or good or evil as long as you were following your superior's orders.

But eventually he came to think of these traits as morally superior to the average person. He believed humans functioned best when there was order and

stability in their lives and that was what Homeland agents provided. It was their job to keep order and give the people the stability they needed and deserved.

The Director handed him a manila folder. “Open it.”

He pulled out a report with a picture dated from the previous year stapled to the front. He stared at his old friend. Tank had a short haircut peppered gray. His face had filled out some but other than that he looked very similar to the man he had first met more than three decades ago.

He turned over the photo and scanned the Classified Insider Surveillance Report on Tank.

He looked up in astonishment. “This can’t be right. Tank Wilson works for the government?”

“He’s more of a subcontractor. He manages one of our GMO food distribution facilities. And he runs it pretty damn well too. But for the last few years we’ve been watching him closely. We’ve always assumed he has some high-level connections to the LT’s.”

“I don’t understand. He was placed in control of a government facility? I placed a letter in his surveillance file regarding his anti-government tendencies. How could anyone have thought it was a good idea to hire him, especially if his LT connections were known?”

“I personally signed off on it,” the Director snapped. “Homeland does many things that seem counter-intuitive and sometimes the reasons are not clear or obvious, but there is always a purpose. We’ve been aware

of Mr. Wilson's predilections for years. He sought us out and after some consideration he was hired and promoted to the position. As they say, keep your friends close but your enemies closer. This is highly classified but we believe he is connected to high-level LT's, so rest assured we always felt he had ulterior motives but he has been placed in a position where we could monitor him and get to him quickly, if we needed to. This is one of the reasons I called you here today. We want you to pay him a visit under the guise of a Homeland Facility Inspection Report."

"Me," Graham interrupted with a crushing fear surging through his body. "Director, I don't understand. Am I being demoted?"

The Director held up her hands. "Absolutely not. Consider this assignment your most important job to date." She handed him a letter with the President's seal on it. "This is the other reason I asked you here. Congratulations, you've been promoted to Director of Homeland Security for the Midwest."

A wave of relief then euphoria replaced his surging fear. Graham read the White House letter announcing his appointment. "This is truly an honor," he replied.

"You earned it, Agent Graham. Do you have any questions on your assignment regarding Tank Wilson?"

"Don't you think he'll be a little suspicious with me showing up and inspecting the facilities?"

“Probably, but with your appointment it would be standard protocol for the regional director to make a surprise visit. Let’s assume he’ll be a little suspicious but it’s worth the risk. We believe he has information or could be directly involved with the LT fall offensive. You know him better than anyone and we’re hoping you might be able to pick up something we can’t. There’s too much at risk here and one way or another we have to flush these guys out. We have dozens of these operations going on as we speak. I hate to say this but failure is not an option.”

Graham nodded. “I understand.”

“Good, because this nuclear issue is the single most dangerous threat this country has ever encountered. I need you to get me results.”

“Of course.”

“There is one last issue we need to discuss. After the President’s Code Seven issuance tonight you will be granted Black Authorization Status.”

Graham tried to contain his shock. Black authorization meant he would have carte blanche to pursue his operations with no legal or constitutional restraints. He was completely exempt from prosecution for any act he might commit in the line of duty. He answered only to the Director.

“Thank you, Director. I appreciate your confidence in me. I won’t let you down.”

“I know you won’t. I’ve followed your career for some time now and that is why I am giving you

Black Authorization. I need results and I need them quickly.”

The Director looked down to her papers and Graham took that as his cue to leave. He got up and left her office with a feeling of pure elation. All hell was about to break loose.

“Absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

—John Aton

CHAPTER 6

Graham sat back in his chair, studying his team of agents who had gathered in his office to watch the President’s address to the nation. Each agent was handpicked because of their specialized talents and even though he was 99 percent certain each one of them would follow any order he gave with no questions asked, he still could not explicitly trust them. Part of his basic training was to always assume there was a traitor in the group.

Graham smiled after the President announced he was issuing an Executive Order to raise the Homeland Security Threat Level to Code Seven.

“That’s it boys.” Graham held up a copy of the directive from the Director. “It’s official. I’ve got Black Authorization. We are now on our own.”

“Shit yeah! We’re fucking untouchable,” an agent sitting next to Graham exclaimed.

He glared at Agent Culler, who was a bit of a loose cannon but that deficiency was offset by an efficient killing machine who was also one of the most talented interrogators Graham had ever seen.

“I don’t recall you receiving Black Authorization,” Graham snapped. “I’m untouchable, not you.”

“Yeah, right,” Agent Culler replied. “So what now, boss?”

“It’s time to right some wrongs. Tonight we start Operation Long Knives. For way too long DC has been too lenient with traitors and we need to begin the purge from within. I’ve chosen each of you because of your loyalty to your country and because you simply are the best at what you do. We are at war. And make no mistake about it, we will now be operating at a magnitude that’s never been required of you, but your country needs you now more than ever. If anyone here feels they are not up to the task I would like you to leave now. There will be no shame in doing so but once we begin there is no going back. So take a minute to consider it.”

Graham looked around the room. He knew the agents were already fully committed but he liked playing the charade, letting them think they had a choice. He knew none of them would leave but if he made a

miscalculation and one decided to opt out, he was prepared to have them taken care of by the morning.

After a brief moment of silence, the lone female agent in the room spoke, “We’re all in. So what’s the plan?”

Graham looked over at Sara and felt that unmistakable stirring every time he looked at her. She was a five foot three, 105 pound certifiable sociopath. She had shoulder-length black hair, emerald eyes and the face of a porcelain baby doll.

She wore top of the line designer clothes and expensive jewelry but underneath her exotic good looks and polished manners she possessed the character traits of Charles Manson including a tattoo of Medusa that started at her left shoulder blade and ran all the way down to the crack of her ass.

Due to his line of work Graham had met a lot of cold blooded individuals but he had never met someone quite like her. They had worked closely together for the last five years and had been sex partners for just about as long.

She was a contradiction of epic proportions and that made her dangerous but Graham was attracted to her in a way that even with his discipline he could not quell his desire. He had to have her, and he hated her for it.

He had watched her torture and kill, eat meals at the finest restaurants, step over dead children and have sex, all with the same empty expression on her face. In fact, he tried to never look into her eyes if he could

help it because it was one of the few things in this life that actually disturbed him. They say the eyes are windows to the soul, and if that was true than her soul was comprised of utter and complete darkness.

He recalled one time giving her an expensive diamond bracelet for her birthday, that he had extorted from a corporate informer. He watched her unwrap the present and take it out of the jewelry case. She had just stared at the bracelet like it was a poisonous snake before finally asking Graham why he was giving it to her.

When he had responded that he just wanted to get her something nice for her birthday, she had looked back down at the bracelet for a few seconds and then asked him the same question again as if she couldn't comprehend the idea of giving someone a present on their birthday.

Graham didn't know how to respond to her so he took back the bracelet, placed it on her dresser then threw her down on the bed and used her in the violent way he thought she liked. Of course, he never knew whether she liked something or not, so he had to guess most of the time.

But even more than Sara's complete apathy to all things, it was her past that disturbed him the most. Graham was in the information business and he kept files on everyone. But even with his high-level contacts there were lengthy gaps in her life he couldn't find any information on. No work history, medical visits, tax returns, nothing. It was like she had been a ghost for a

significant number of years of her life. When he had subtly questioned her about it she had just told him the information was classified even for him.

Graham had gone so far as to kidnap and torture a CIA recruitment agent in hope of learning something about her missing years. No matter how much he tortured the guy he swore he didn't know anything except for rumors she was involved in a group of assassins called Hessians.

The Hessians were kind of the equivalent of an urban legend within Homeland Security. The story goes that the mercenaries could trace their roots back to Germany during the early 1700's and the soldiers of fortune belonged to a secret mercenary sect that operated throughout the world.

The Hessian mercenaries had a long history of warfare, starting with successfully pushing Napoleon's army back to France during his invasion of Germany in the early 1800's. The Hessians went on to fight many different battles over the centuries, oftentimes switching allegiances at the drop of a hat. They had fought for Sweden against the Russians. They were hired out by King George to combat the Jacobite Rebellion and later the British used the Hessians during the Irish Rebellion of 1798.

But it was their involvement in the American Revolution they were most widely known for. Roughly 30,000 Hessians fought for the British during the American Revolution with some accounts suggesting as many as

5000 remained in North America after the war. In fact, the folklore of the Headless Horseman was said to be a Hessian ghost who had lost his head from a cannonball during battle.

Graham didn't know whether any of the Hessian bullshit was true or not, all he cared about was that Sara served him and no one else. The problem he had was he didn't know for sure who she was aligned with and that was another reason not to trust her.

"We start tonight," Graham answered Sara. "Grab the briefcase. We're going to make a little house call."

Graham's team walked out of the building and got into a black van with no windows. The license plates were registered so that no local law enforcement officers would dare interfere with them under any circumstances.

Sara drove while Graham sat in the passenger seat. "Time to pay a little visit to the Haddocks," he said to Sara who smiled and punched the gas.

Graham briefed the team while Sara drove and he began to get excited over the thought of inflicting some discomfort. They arrived at the Haddocks residence and Sara pulled the van over to the curb. Graham nodded to the head tech agent who punched a few numbers into a handheld scrambler and in seconds the buildings security and surveillance monitoring system had been disabled.

The team exited the van and entered the building. The security guards inside the lobby had already been

removed and replaced by an advance team that Graham had sent over during the President's speech.

They took the stairs to the third floor and despite the expensive security systems outside of Haddock's apartment, the agents dismantled the security locks in seconds and burst through the door.

Haddock and his wife were sitting on the couch having drinks listening to classical music when the agents stormed into the apartment. After a brief moment of shock Haddock jumped up but he was quickly subdued by Sara with a punch to his kidney.

"Take them into the bedroom," Graham ordered.

He looked around the expensive suite of Luther and Ester Haddock. Very interesting, he thought because the first thing he noticed was they were not hooked up to the SmartLink System. Haddock was the longtime CEO of the National Broadcasting Channel and his company had been granted the government contract to manufacture, promote and distribute the SmartLink System.

But as they all do, over the years Haddock had gotten a little too big for his britches and Graham had built a nice little dossier on him knowing it would be useful one day. That day was now and tonight's visit would lay the foundation for his master plan. Haddock and his network were the kings of state propaganda and if all went well he would need Haddock's services very shortly.

Graham walked into the bedroom where Mr. and Mrs. Haddock were seated in chairs after having been

stripped of their clothes. The sight of the naked, 70-plus year old couple made him sick to his stomach but it was an effective interrogation and torture tactic.

“What the hell do you want?” Haddock angrily swore. “Do you know who I am? I’ll have your fucking ass for this you bastard.”

Graham smiled. “Only an arrogant fool would say something like that considering your situation. But I do have to say I admire your balls.”

“Who are you? And what do you want?”

“I am Agent Larson Graham, Midwest Director of Homeland Security.”

“You can’t come in here and do this,” Haddock screamed. “I swear I’ll have you arrested and sent to a FEMA camp where you’ll rot to death you little prick.”

Graham smiled then nodded toward Agent Culler who proceeded to slap Mrs. Haddock across the face so hard it echoed off the bedroom walls. At first Mrs. Haddock was too stunned to even change facial expressions but after her tiny brain registered what had happened, tears flowed followed by bellowing sobs. Her heaving wrinkled mass of fat rolls and sagging breasts was almost too much for Graham to take.

“Okay, stop. Leave my wife out of this,” Haddock pleaded in a more docile tone. “She has nothing to do with this. I’m sure we can work something out. You do know who I am, right?”

“Of course I know who you are but just to let you know, your wife is going to very much be part of this.”

“Why are you doing this? I am a friend and supporter of DC. Surely you’re aware of that?”

“So you say but that is not the real issue.”

“Well, what is it then? We can work something out. Just tell me what you want.”

Graham walked behind the couple trying not to look at their backsides for fear of retching. “Do you really think we can work out a mutual agreement?” he asked.

“Of course,” Haddock answered.

Graham picked up an expensive antique figurine from their bedside table and studied the exquisite design. “What’s this?”

“It is from ancient Macedonia. From the time of Alexander the Great. Take it if you want it. It’s worth a small fortune.”

He sat the antique back down on the table. “Sorry, Mr. Haddock, I’m not sure I believe that I can trust you regarding our future partnership.”

“But I don’t even know what you want?” Haddock protested.

Graham nodded over to Agent Culler who pulled a large computer monitor out of the duffel bag. He dragged a coffee table in front of the Haddocks and turned on the screen. An image of two individuals wearing burlap bags over their heads appeared.

It only took a few seconds before Mrs. Haddock started sobbing. “Oh my god,” she cried. “I think that is Tina and Sasha.”

“Damn it,” Graham cursed sarcastically. “That is really disappointing. How’d you guess so fast? I reckon their clothes must have given it away. All right, remove their hoods.”

An individual stepped in front of Haddock’s daughter and granddaughter and removed the hoods covering their heads. They were both gagged but it was not hard to see the utter fear in their eyes.

“Please, whatever you want it’s yours,” Mr. Haddock pleaded. “I can transfer DigiDollars to any account, anywhere in the world. Any amount you want, just name it. Or, I can get you gold or silver. Please, you don’t have to do this. I told you I can get you anything and I mean anything.”

Graham flipped off the computer screen. “Do you really mean that?”

“You have my word. I swear it. Just let them go.”

Graham tapped his chin pretending to ponder the offer. “Okay, let’s think about this. First of all, I don’t want your money and as you undoubtedly know gold ownership is illegal. People go to jail for those type of criminal misdeeds.”

“I know people. I can make things happen for you if that is what you need.”

Graham ignored Haddock and walked into the bathroom and grabbed a large towel. He came back out and threw it over Mrs. Haddock’s body because it was making him too sick to think correctly.

“The problem I have Mr. Haddock is that I am an expert in human behavior. And I know you are a powerful man and maybe not now but in a few days you’re going to start getting really mad about our visit and I know you’re going to try and start planning some type of retribution.”

“No. No, he won’t,” Mrs. Haddock interjected. “I swear to you I won’t let that happen. Please just let them go and I’ll personally see that he does anything you ask of him. You have my absolute word.”

It always astounded Graham how much people would give up to protect their families. “Okay, let’s say I believe you, Mrs. Haddock and that you can control your husband regarding this matter. I will allow your daughter and grandchild to be safely returned to their home. Then we will leave here tonight and you will be free to live your lives with no interference from us. You have a beautiful home and I know you live a privileged life. That will not change but there will be a price. Mr. Haddock, from this moment forward you owe me a favor that I will call upon at some time in the future. I promise I won’t ask you to kill someone or to act in a way that will put yourself or family in direct physical harm. But I need your assurances right now that my favor will be granted without hesitation or complication. Is that a deal?”

Haddock looked over at his wife then nodded. “You have my word.”

“Can I trust you Mr. Haddock?”

“I will grant your favor when it is requested without hesitation.”

“I still don’t quite believe you but just in case, when those nagging thoughts of revenge start popping up in your head - and trust me they will - I want you to look at these documents and you better pray nothing happens to me because if it does, well here, just take a look.”

Graham handed him a report that contained every conceivable detail about his children and grandchildren’s lives.

“So Mr. Haddock, when the urge strikes you to seek revenge against me, please put that emotion back in its secret box where it belongs because if you fail to cooperate in any way, I promise you I won’t come for you. I won’t even come for your heinous wife whose ass looks like a million pieces of chewed bubble gum. What I and my associates will do is we will kill your grandchildren first, then your children, one by one, very slowly and very painfully. And we will even send you the tapes of their demise. So what do you say Haddock? Can you quell your true nature? Can you fight your desire for revenge knowing that it will drive you to the edge of madness? Can you do that to save your life style and precious family?”

“Your request will not be a problem. You have my absolute word,” Haddock replied.

Graham smiled. “Okay. I believe we have a deal. One last thing before we leave. I’d like you to tell me about your involvement or knowledge of the Dracun.”

Haddock took a deep breath and answered. “I don’t know much about them. In fact, I’m not sure they actually exist. What I do know is stuff you’ve probably already heard, just a bunch of crap if you ask me.”

“What are their ultimate goals?”

“I don’t know but I’ve heard various theories.”

“Please indulge us.”

“There are some who believe the Dracun is a type of master race chosen by,” Haddock paused before continuing, “and I think this is bullshit, but they believe certain families were selected by an extraterrestrial power to rule over the human race.”

“Interesting,” Graham replied. “Just for fun. Who exactly are these small groups of families and why were they chosen and for what purposes?”

“The story goes that the Rothschild’s and a few others were granted generational wealth and almost unlimited power. In return, they operate with these extraterrestrials to control us.”

Graham laughed. “We both know this is absurd but I am trying to get a handle on the thought process of these people who do believe in this nonsense. So, according to this fairy tale, what do these aliens want with us?”

“I’ve heard all kinds of crazy theories like they’re some type of parasites that feed off our electrical energy produced from our bodies. I’ve heard they are galactic nomads and they have advanced scouts on Earth waiting for their ships to arrive so they can colonize this

planet and mine rare earth elements. Some believe they are from an alternate universe. A few lunatics actually are convinced they are playing some type of cosmic game with the human race for their entertainment. Kind of like a high stakes reality show.”

“I think I like that theory the best. Thank you for the information Mr. Haddock. We’ll be leaving now. Please enjoy the rest of your evening.”

The agents left Haddock’s apartment and returned back to Homeland headquarters where Sara dropped off the other agents and continued on with Graham.

“Pull over to the curb for a second,” Graham instructed.

Sara followed his instruction. “So what was the deal with tonight?”

“Control my darling. Haddock is the Chief of State Propaganda, the master of lies and manipulation. He runs NBC and as such has power over the state information machine. I intend to use that power in the near future. If things work out like I plan he will be a valuable asset. But I had to offer him a deal he could not refuse. First we have some more business to take care of. Take a look at this.”

He handed her a manila folder. She opened it and pulled out a black and white photo of a man, attached to a detailed surveillance report.

“We need to get rid of this guy,” Graham said nonchalantly.

She studied the material. “You want me to assassinate the Director of Homeland Security’s chief bodyguard?”

“Yes. And I need you to make it look like an LT attack. Everything you need is in the packet.”

“When do you want it done by?”

“Immediately, but no fuckups. Just get the job done. I’ll leave it up to you when you feel the target is ready. Forget everything else for now and just take care of this.”

“Fine,” Sara said while putting the photo and documents back into the folder. “I’m hungry. Do feel like Chinese? Or do you want to go to that little Italian place over on Madison?”

Graham thought for a second. “Let’s go with the Italian joint, drink a ton of red wine and go home and fuck all night.”

Sara shrugged then replied, “All right.”

“If privacy had a gravestone it might read: Don’t worry this was for your own good.”

—John Twelve Hawks

CHAPTER 7

West sat in the diner booth eating a greasy breakfast, trying to soak up some of the massive quantities of vodka he had consumed from the previous night. He had just started into the hash browns when a man dressed in a nice suit approached and sat down in the booth seat across from him. Whoever he was, he was definitely out of place in this joint.

“Can I help you?” West asked in irritation.

The man flashed a smile and for a second West experienced a wave of *déjà vu*. He felt like he had met him before, but couldn’t place when or where.

“Do you know Mr. Collins the average New Yorker is recorded by surveillance cameras over 500 times every single day? And flying above this city, right this second, there are hundreds of high altitude drones listening, watching, and recording everything we do. And that doesn’t even count all the electronic monitoring that goes on 24 hours a day.”

West set his fork down and stared over at the man.

“Do I know you?”

“Perhaps.”

West picked his fork back up and took a bite of the soggy hash browns. Based on the last couple of days with the agents and the Sloan episode, West should have assumed he was some type of agent, but for some reason he felt sure the man did not work for DC in any capacity.

West decided not to humor him by asking how he knew his name so instead he replied, “If you’re that concerned about being watched don’t leave your apartment.”

The man laughed. “Stay at home. That’s the easiest way for you to be monitored. Do you know there are surveillance devices that can see straight through buildings and can even record someone whispering inside a concrete fortified bunker?”

The man looked around the diner and then pointed up toward the ceiling. “Who knows, they might be recording you this very second. Yeah, staying home is just about the worst thing you can do because almost everyone has a SmartLink System.”

“Man, can you just please let me eat in peace?”

The man ignored the question and continued, “Damn smart of The System. Give every household a free SmartLink device that bundles all your phones, computers, televisions, security system, utilities, and entertainment into one easy-to-use home system. Of course, besides being electronically connected the most important selling point is that the SmartLink is free. I guess most people don’t realize or care that SmartLink is micro- chipped and The System records everything you do. And I mean everything. It knows when you’re home. What time you leave. What time you come back. It knows who you’re calling and whose calling you. Did you know that the SmartLink records every phone conversation you have and sends it to the NSA’s Motherland Mainframe for storage?”

West grunted then swallowed a mouthful of what he hoped were just runny eggs. “So move to another country and leave me the hell alone.”

“You know nobody except DCers can leave this country. You’re trapped here. Did you know the SmartLink monitors the TV shows you watch? It records everything you do on your computers. What time you go to bed and wake up. It knows what temperature you set your thermostat. Heck, it even knows how many times a day you use the restroom, unless you don’t flush.”

“Okay . . . okay,” West broke in. “Look, I’m eating here. There are plenty of empty tables. Could you please move somewhere else?”

“No problem but don’t you at least want to know how I knew your name?”

“I don’t care. Go sit somewhere else before I call the manager.”

The man raised both his hands. “Hey take it easy, Sloan wanted me to get in touch with you if something happened to him. Here take my card. Call me if you need me.”

The man handed him a crinkled business card with the words BYRON typed in the middle and a telephone number handwritten underneath. He got up and turned to leave.

“Hey wait, come back here,” West looked around the diner. “Sit down.”

Byron sat back down in the booth and the waitress came over and asked, “Refill on coffee?”

“Please,” West answered.

He watched as she poured the coffee and left. It occurred to him that it was strange the waitress didn’t ask Byron if he wanted anything. In fact, she acted like he wasn’t even there.

“So do I call you Lord Byron or is just Byron okay?” he asked.

“Byron is fine.”

“So how’d you know Sloan?”

“That’s a little complicated but you could say I was kind of like his guardian angel.”

“Oh, so you’re doing God’s work, huh?”

He smiled. "I don't know about that but Sloan was a good man. He was very sympathetic to the LT's."

West almost choked on the toast he was eating. "Keep it down. You know just being affiliated with the LT's is a capital offense."

"I understand. So I take it from your interaction with Sloan you know about the Dracun."

There was that strange name again, the Dracun. Both the anonymous letter and the book Sloan had given him had mentioned them.

West forced himself to take a deep breath then asked, "I'm sure you know a lot more than I do so why don't you tell me what you know about the Dracun?"

"I believe the proper name is *Dracunculus Medinesis*. The science books refer to it as a parasite dependent on its hosts to survive. This parasite doesn't kill the host because it needs it in order to survive but it can only survive at the expense of its host."

"Okay," West interrupted. "What does this have to do with me?"

"The Dracun is an entity that has morphed into a type of parasitic organism. Actually, it is a macro-parasite because it needs multiple hosts in order to survive but it has evolved into a perfect freak of nature that has become almost impossible to destroy. It is out of control and even its creators can't stop it now."

Byron looked around the room and continued. "Everyone in this room is the Dracun's host. It needs people to survive but any one individual is expendable

if the parasite thinks its power is in jeopardy. But that's why it is so powerful, because there are billions and billions of hosts available, any of which can be discarded with no harm to the parasite."

"Okay, I get the analogy. Just tell me exactly who or what this Dracun is and what it has to do with me?"

"Long ago the Dracun were given certain benefits but regrettably they were allowed to gain too much strength and they are not controllable anymore. In a nutshell, they are civilization's shadow lords who have come to control this world."

West stared across the table at Byron. "I don't care about any of that bullshit, you haven't answered my question. How do you know Sloan and what does this have to do with me?"

Byron scanned the room then quickly reached into his jacket and slid across a rolled up newspaper.

"Now is not the time or place. Inside the paper is a phone. It is untraceable and cannot be monitored, at least for a few minutes. It can only be used once, then destroy it. If you need me, call that number I gave you."

"Why would I need to call you?"

"You and Sloan are similar in an unusual way. But a word of caution, I have reason to believe you have been flagged by the Dracun, probably because of your relationship with Sloan. The good news is that I am pretty sure they don't know the extent of your involvement but if they find out..."

“Involvement,” West interrupted. “But I haven’t done a damn thing.”

“Are you familiar with the concept of entanglement?”

“No,” West answered.

“It’s what binds the universe together. Entanglement is what connects all of us together and to The One.”

“What in the hell are you talking about?”

“I’ve got to go for now but I’ll be watching out for you. We’ll talk later.”

Byron stood and West thought about asking him to stay longer but thought better of it. He watched Byron or whoever the hell he was leave the diner. He had lost his appetite so he paid for his half-eaten breakfast with his electronic money card and headed to the office.

“The high office of the president has been used to foment a plot to destroy American’s freedom and before I leave office, I must inform the citizens of their plight.”

—JFK, six months before his assassination

CHAPTER 8

West sat at his desk in the newsroom double checking the 50th anniversary of the Wow! Signal article one last time. Once he was satisfied with the drivel he had written he walked over to Simon’s office and threw the article on his desk.

“There you go. I’m sure our readers will be on edge for the rest of the summer waiting for the aliens to signal us again.”

Simon smiled. “Sounds delightful. Hey, by the way I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

“Yeah?”

“Did you do it?”

“Do what?” West asked.

“You know, did you kill that Sloan guy?”

“Man, you’re a piece of work. Look I’ve got something serious I want to talk to you about. I’ve got a great idea for a story.”

“Usually I don’t encourage my reporters to think for themselves, but what’s the pitch?”

“Well, first I’m asking you to keep an open mind and remember even the *USA Today* will occasionally print a serious article without too much distortion or propaganda in it.”

“First off the *USA Today* isn’t our competition,” Simon scoffed. “We don’t compete against Corporate Media propaganda syndicates. And second, no one has actually purchased a copy of that newspaper in decades.”

“They claim to be the most read newspaper in the world.”

“Oh Jesus, West just tell me what your damn idea is so I can turn it down and get on with my day.”

“Okay. So as you now know, I knew Mark Sloan fairly well. Every bit of information he provided me during the first big meltdown in 2008 was completely accurate. And later his information also allowed me to connect the dots that Goldman Sachs was nothing more than a government-controlled hedge fund that was manipulating the world markets with advance information from the Federal Reserve.”

“C’mon everyone knows that. They are all one in the same. It has been a revolving door for decades. You’re in government then you go work for Goldman or you make it big at Goldman and you go to work for the government. Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Okay, but we’re getting away from the point. After Lehman collapsed I thought Sloan’s behavior was becoming strange, almost erratic.”

“And?”

“Well, he wanted me to pursue what I can only describe as some crazy worldwide conspiracy theory that got me thinking.”

“Oh dear god. Please don’t tell me you’ve been thinking.”

“Just listen for a second,” West rebutted. “What Sloan tried to tell me, well it’s turning into something much more. At the time I thought he was losing it but when I look back now, his behavior never really changed. It was just what he was suggesting sounded so crazy. He swore that the Federal Reserve was the financial wing or bank of some group called the Dracun.”

“Okay,” Simon interrupted holding out his hand. “Our readers like the word “conspiracy” but what’s the point? I mean, look West, I’ve told you this a thousand times - our readers want bullshit. They don’t want to read about monetary mumbo jumbo or the inner workings of some government agency. And they especially don’t want to be told the truth.”

“I understand all that but listen. When I started to look into what Sloan was telling me about the Fed, he said follow the money and the Federal Reserve is all about the money. So I started digging into the history of the Fed and its inner workings. Some of the dots started to connect but then, well you know, I started to have my troubles and I kind of just dropped it. But I did find out some things that are unbelievable about our country’s monetary system.”

“Like...?”

“First of all the Federal Reserve is not a government agency. It isn’t even part of the government. Congress does have some oversight but the Fed has never been fully and independently audited.”

“If it’s not part of the government then what the hell is it?”

“Well, let me start from the beginning and I’ll give you the quick overview of what I know, most of which can be found by anyone who researches it for themselves. First of all the Federal Reserve is a private entity with shareholders. Some people argue it is a quasi-semi-private, semi-government entity but the courts have consistently ruled it is a private entity.”

“You mean like a corporation?”

“Exactly.”

Simon looked skeptical and asked, “If it is a corporation then who are the shareholders?”

“I don’t know who they are today but I know who the original ones were. They were Rothschild Bank of

London, Warburg Bank of Hamburg and Amsterdam, Lazard Brothers of Paris, Kuhn Loeb Bank of New York, Israel Moses Seif Banks of Italy, Goldman Sachs, Chase Manhattan and Lehman Brothers, which, of course, is now gone.”

“Well there you go. You’ve already shot down your argument because why would the Fed allow Lehman, supposedly one of its own, one of the ‘in guys’ in the monetary Wizard of Oz conspiracy scheme . . . Why would they let them go bust?”

“That is a good question. I don’t know that answer but it would be part of the story. Let me give you a bit of history about the Fed because that might help put a little perspective on it.”

Simon looked at his watch. “I have a lunch appointment with a stupid blond with enormous tits. You have two minutes.”

West began, “At the turn of the 20th century, America was growing at a phenomenal rate and a small group of the world’s most wealthy individuals correctly believed that America was where they should place their bets and it’s pretty clear how they intended to conquer the United States without firing a single shot. The patriarch of the most secretive, wealthiest, most powerful family dynasty the world has ever known was Mayer Rothschild and he described how to really control a country by saying, ‘let me issue and control a nation’s money, and I care not who writes the laws.’

“So the banking dynasties from Europe, represented by the Warburg’s and Rothschild’s, met in secret with representatives from the American industrial families of JP Morgan and Rockefeller. They organized secret meetings at an island off the Georgia coast called Jekyll Island owned by JP Morgan. There they laid the framework for the creation of a central bank they would control. Their strategy was to establish a banking cartel which by definition is a group of independently owned businesses which come together for the purpose of eliminating or reducing competition between themselves in order to enhance their profit margin.”

“Wait a second,” Simon interrupted. “If what you are saying is true how’d they ever hoodwink the United States into this deal?”

“Well, they had to be careful. They knew the American people wouldn’t stand for a central bank controlled by a few individuals so the cartel had to work behind the scenes to accomplish their mission. Their big chance came in 1912 when the cartel discovered presidential candidate Woodrow Wilson was in desperate need of funds. The Central Banksters cut a deal with Wilson. They would fund his presidential campaign and in return if they got Congress to pass a law creating a central bank, Wilson had to promise to sign the bill into law.”

“So basically you are saying that Woodrow Wilson took a bribe to become President of the United States.”

“Basically, yes. Wilson agreed to the deal and with the Banksters’ money he won the 1912 presidential election. And then on Christmas Eve 1913 with most opposing senators absent for Christmas break, Congress snuck through the Federal Reserve Act which Woodrow Wilson promptly signed into law.”

“Sounds kind of like how they pass laws today,” Simon interjected.

“Right, because both Wilson and the supporting members of Congress knowingly and willfully violated the Constitution of the United States because Article 1, section 8 states, ‘that only Congress shall have the power to coin or create money and regulate the value thereof’. The Supreme Court has even ruled that Congress cannot delegate its power to another group.”

Simon looked back down at his watch with a sigh. “So what? The Constitution, are you kidding me? The Constitution hasn’t been a valid document for 30 years. It is nothing more than a relic, an ancient manuscript that serves no purpose. Do you know any branch of the government that adheres to it?”

“No, but the bottom line is we have a private corporation called the Federal Reserve unconstitutionally and illegally printing money. Of course, now that’s all done digitally since there is no more physical money in circulation.”

“All right, I get that part,” Simon cut in. “But you’ve lost me a little. Who cares if they create our money? I mean someone has to, right?”

West laughed. “That’s kind of what I thought at the beginning of my research. I think Henry Ford said it best when he was asked about the Federal Reserve. Ford said, “It is well enough that people of the nation do not understand our banking and monetary system because if they did, I believe there would be a revolution by tomorrow morning.”

“Shit West, you’re giving me a headache. I still don’t get the angle here. Nothing you’ve told me is of any interest to my readers. You’re down to a minute. Miss Big Tits doesn’t like me to be late. Wrap this up.”

“Hold on, I’m getting there. I could get into fractional banking and all that but for the sake of Miss Big Tits let me break down our current monetary system this way: the government needs money to fund DC’s constant wars against our friends and foes. And the government also needs to finance projects or pay entitlements demanded by its citizens so they go to the Treasury and asks for, let’s say one trillion dollars. The Treasury laughs and says “C’mon you guys spent all our revenues by March. There’s nothing left.”

“Now of course, the politicians don’t like that answer so they start complaining and whining about their re-election bids until finally the Treasury says “OK guys, don’t worry we’ll call our friends over at the Fed.” So some Fed official answers and says “Sure we’d love to give you a trillion dollars, no problem.” And with a single keystroke they send a trillion dollars over to the Treasury.”

“But where’d they get the money?”

“They got it from nowhere. This is all done digitally.”

“It all sounds make-believe if you ask me,” Simon added.

“It kind of is. The Fed literally created it out of thin air. So now the Treasury gets a trillion dollars and in exchange it gives back to the Fed one trillion dollars in U.S. government-guaranteed bonds that pay interest to the Fed. So the simplistic net of this is the Fed prints money out of thin air not backed by anything. They then loan it to the government to pay for things there’s no actual money for. Then the Fed charges the government interest, and you’re going to love this part, the government taxes you to pay the interest to the Fed for money they created from nothing.”

Simon shook his head. “Motherfuckers! You know my CPA told me the other day I paid over 71 percent in just federal, terrorism, state, local, and carbon taxes last year?”

West whistled. “Ouch. 71 percent. You need to hire Government Electric’s accountant and you would have gotten a refund.”

“Yeah, right but I mean . . . we still have to pay taxes to someone, right?”

West shook his head. “This is exactly what I’m talking about. We’ve forgotten our own history because for most of the United States’ existence it never had a federal income tax.”

“What, that’s not right. Is it?”

“Yes it is. No citizen of the United States ever paid a dime in federal income tax until after the Fed was created in 1913. Six months after the Fed was created Congress then passed the 16th amendment creating the federal income tax and IRS. And the reason they had to do that is because how else is the Fed going to collect the interest on the bonds given to them for printing money from nothing? Then of course in 2018 the 32nd amendment established a flat across-the-board 10 percent terrorism tax to help keep us all safe and a 5 percent World Tax to be used to help developing countries to fight climate change.”

“Yeah right, global warming. We’ve been in a goddamn mini Ice Age for the last 20 years. Who was that loser politician who started all that warming bullshit?”

“I don’t know, some vice-president I think. But Sloan was right about one thing and that is to follow the money. Those who have the money have the power. And that was what all those carbon taxes were about.”

“Yeah right, but I guess that is their story and they’re sticking to it. I knew there was a good reason to hate those sons of bitches.”

“The IRS is just the enforcer. Before all money was electronically digitized, when you wrote a check to the IRS and got that check back. If you looked on the back it would’ve had a stamped endorsement that read *payable to any Federal Reserve Branch.*”

“Look, if all you say is true,” Simon said. “Why doesn’t someone in government do something about it? Because it sounds like this is the greatest swindle in the history of mankind?”

“I asked Sloan that exact same question and he told me the simple answer is the Fed provides politicians with an unlimited blank check to do whatever they want. They spend and make promises to keep the voters happy and they get re-elected over and over again. And the criminal politicians reap all the benefits. High salaries, free healthcare, security, tax breaks, pensions for life, and exemption from prosecution. I mean it is crony capitalism at its best. There are two sets of laws in this country - one for them and one for us. It’s that simple.”

Simon leaned back in his chair. “Or as Orwell said, all the animals are equal, it’s just some are more equal.”

“Exactly.”

“Okay. I admit this is kind of interesting but you’re going to need to jazz it up some. Where exactly are you going to go with this? I can’t print a story about the Fed and how it is screwing America. I need more.”

“How about that there is no reason for the Fed to exist? You know the Treasury Department could issue our currency debt free.”

“Why don’t they then?”

“Another good question. I don’t know why they don’t but one president tried.”

“Who.”

“JFK. He was believed to have thought the Fed posed a clear and present danger to the country. Six months before his assassination JFK issued Executive Order 11110 which authorized the U.S. Treasury to print “United States Notes” which would be interest-free and effectively end the Federal Reserve system. In fact, 10 days before his murder at a speech at Columbia he said, ‘The high office of the president has been used to foment a plot to destroy American’s freedom and before I leave office, I must inform the citizens of their plight.’

“Hot damn, West. I like the direction of this now. Are you saying the Federal Reserve assassinated JFK?”

“No, but it is a heck of a coincidence isn’t it? You know Kennedy wasn’t the only president who was assassinated trying to break a central bank. Presidents Lincoln, Jackson and Garfield all were assassinated while in office after publically calling for the end of a central bank in the United States. But back to Kennedy, after Lyndon Johnson was sworn into office one of his first acts was to rescind Kennedy’s order and the banking cartel continued. And of course, Johnson gave birth to the Great Society which the country couldn’t afford unless the Fed could print money at will. Johnson’s presidency gave the country a big push down the path of socialism and central government planning.”

Simon was pacing around his room, which he did when he became excited.

“All right, our readers love conspiracies regarding JFK. Is there any way you could throw in a love tri-

angle, or wait a *ménage a trois* between JFK, Jacqueline Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe?”

West shook his head. “Man, you’re too much. Just let me finish and you can go meet your friend and do whatever it is you do. I mean just think about how stupid we are. According to the Federal Reserve’s own stated objectives of economic stability it is a dismal failure of epic proportions. However, I’m really going to throw a wrench into this story when I say the stated objectives of the Fed were never its true goals. And this horror story is now going to morph into *Alice in Wonderland* because the Fed’s real goals are to make money for its shareholders, which if you think about it should be the main objective for any corporation.”

“But remember the Fed is not only a corporation it is a cartel which is a group of businesses that come together to reduce competition and increase their own profits. And they’ve gone one step further because they have the policing powers of congress because the Fed is Congress’s mechanism for an unlimited blank check. So I’ll give the Fed an A+ in terms of achieving its real goals which are to act in its own best interest. The Fed and its bank owners are like the space monster in that old sci-fi movie *Alien*. It is a perfect organism. A parasitic freak of nature that is virtually indestructible and its victim is all of us.”

“I’m really beginning to like this now,” Simon replied. “We have JFK, conspiracies and alien orgasms.”

“You mean organisms?”

“Whatever, but we just need some sex or drugs though. A little pizzazz to keep the reader interested.”

“Maybe I could find some of that in the Lehman angle? You remember your earlier question about why the Fed would allow one of its original shareholder’s - Lehman Brothers - to fail?”

Simon nodded.

“The Lehman failure is one piece of the puzzle that doesn’t fit. Something happened with Lehman that really rocked the boat. They were allowed to fail for a reason. First, if you give me the go-ahead I’m going to try and discover the Lehman connection to the Fed. Why were they allowed to fail? Were they a scapegoat? A smokescreen? Or did they have a falling out with the powers that be within the Fed?”

“And there is also the New World Order possibility of control and power through the issuance of money and the collection of taxes. Like Rothschild said, whoever controls the money controls the world. Plus there are some leads and information Sloan provided that makes what I just told you seem like a Sunday picnic in terms of conspiracies and cover-ups.”

“Like what?”

“It’s too complicated and some of it I really don’t believe. Give me the time I need and I’ll keep you updated and if you don’t like the direction, you can pull the plug anytime. So what’d you say?”

“You know sometimes I get the feeling the world we live in is not exactly . . .” Simon paused as if searching

for the right word. “I don’t know, not right in some way. It’s like something is missing?”

West had never thought about it in those terms but he knew what Simon was feeling. “I kind of know what you mean. I sometimes ask myself if we are really this fucking stupid to let a handful of people control the world as they do.”

Simon stood up. “Trust me my friend. We are that stupid but it doesn’t matter because our readers are even bigger idiots. Okay, I’ll green light this but I reserve the right to pull the plug anytime, especially if it turns into some lame monetary economic research paper.”

“Deal,” West agreed, knowing that was the best he was going to get.

“I’m out of here but I want updates every Friday. You hear me?”

“No problem.”

Simon began to leave, then turned back toward West. “You know how we could correct this whole mess?”

“How?”

“Kill everyone above the age of 60, hit the reset button and let the young people take over the world. The last two generations had their chances and they’ve completely fucked it up.”

Simon left and West had to admit, he had a good point.

“Highly unlikely, but not outside the realm of extreme possibility.”

— Mulder, X-Files

CHAPTER 9

West sat at his desk thinking about his Federal Reserve article. He wrote down the name Nigel Firth on a legal pad and circled it in red ink.

Why had Sloan told him to start with him? The only thing West could recall was that Firth was a super-wealthy European who came from a long line of bankers and commodity traders.

West jumped on AmeriNet and punched in a search for Firth. Surprisingly, for someone with his extensive business successes, there wasn't much information available except for a listing of general business affiliations. West scanned the list and discovered he was on the board of Lehman when it crashed in 2008.

“Bingo,” he exclaimed because he was certain that meant Firth was Sloan’s insider at Lehman.

West spent another hour of fruitless searching and the lack of information about Firth raised a serious red flag because it appeared as if he had been scrubbed from AmeriNet.

Getting hold of this guy was going to be a bitch because people of his status were impossible to track down. Over the years West had become an expert in deciphering AmeriNet and the information that flowed, or didn’t flow, through it. It had been less than 10 years since Homeland Security took control of the internet. Gradually, and then very quickly, the entire availability of information had been irrevocably corrupted.

A small group of unknown, unregulated DC agents controlled the entire flow of information through the internet, at least in the United States. China operated its own internet systems called Chi-naNet and West was certain it was at least as corrupt as the AmeriNet.

He paused for a second, weighing the pros and cons of the phone call he was about to make. After a brief hesitation he realized he had no choice and dialed a number from memory.

On the second ring a shrill voice answered, “Damnation, if it isn’t Mr. Big Time Disgrace himself. How the hell have you been?”

West shook his head. “Hey Jimmy, how’s it going?”

“It’s going fantastic, although I am a little shocked to hear from you. You must either be in big trouble or you really need something badly.”

“Maybe I just called to say hi, and to see how you’ve been doing.”

A cackle erupted from the phone. “Oh, you don’t change much, do you? Why don’t you buy me a beer and we can catch up?”

Jimmy refused to discuss any business over the phone for good reasons. ‘Why don’t you buy me a beer’ was code for ‘if you need a special favor’ please respond ‘that sounds good’ and then a meeting would be set to discuss the job.

“That sounds good,” he replied, playing Jimmy’s game. “Do you want to grab some sushi?”

“Nah. I ate some bad tuna last week.”

“Okay,” West replied. “How about tomorrow at that Italian place on 81st and 7th?”

“All right. Is 9 Ok?”

“That’s fine.”

West hung up and waited exactly two minutes before calling Jimmy back. “Hey man, I apologize, I don’t know what the hell I was thinking but I can’t make it tomorrow. I got this huge story deadline and I have to get it done. How about I call you early next week and we’ll set up a time then?”

“No problem. Just let me know what day is good for you,” Jimmy replied.

West hung up the phone again and grabbed his jacket to go meet Jimmy at an Irish dive over in Brooklyn, which served as his hangout. Jimmy was paranoid, to the extreme, about being electronically monitored and everything he did was in code. If Jimmy said he wanted Italian that meant he wanted to meet today and they always met at his hangout, a hole-in-the-wall Irish pub. Everything else was gibberish.

West grabbed his coat and headed out of the office. He hopped a subway over to a dilapidated section of Brooklyn and walked into the smoked-filled Irish joint. He spotted Jimmy seated at his customary booth, drinking a beer.

West walked over knowing he was going to regret asking Jimmy for this favor because it was almost the equivalent of asking the underground mafia for a loan. The payback was always a bitch.

He slipped into the booth and lit up a cigarette. "Hello Jimmy," he replied while motioning to the waitress to bring him a beer.

"West. Good to see you, old buddy. What has it been four, five years?"

"Something like that."

"I was going to say you look good except for the fact that you look about 20 years older. You need to keep in better shape there my friend."

Jimmy hadn't changed much in the last couple of years but that wasn't saying much. He was razor thin

with shallow cheeks and hooded eyes that made him look like he was perpetually stoned. His thin greasy hair was slicked over to one side and he was wearing the same old gray suit the last time West saw him.

The waitress set the beer down and West drank half of it in two gulps. He waited for her to leave then said, "I need contact information and some background."

"I see, and who is this person you are inquiring about?"

"Nigel Firth."

There was a slight pause then Jimmy said, "Ah, the tangled web we weave."

"You know him?"

"I've heard of the guy. He's way connected."

"In what way?"

Jimmy smiled, which meant this information was going to cost West a lot. Jimmy ran a very unique black market business. He was employed by DC in the National Telecommunications Office as a security software analyst. Basically, his job was to try to hack into DC's own networks so they could build firewalls to prevent LT hackers or foreign enemies from compromising the systems.

If DC ever discovered Jimmy's little side business he could expect to get at least 20 years in a FEMA Camp and that was only if he cooperated and brought more people down with him. It always made it a huge gamble to deal with Jimmy because of the Terrorists Statutes. Over a period of time Congress had passed a series of

laws that gave mandatory prison sentences for anyone it considered to have aided and abided terrorists.

The laws were similar to the RICO Act but even tougher in its punishment. Hell, in many cases you were better off murdering someone than being arrested under the Terrorist Statutes.

West knew he was going to have to play ball if he wanted the information, so reluctantly he asked, “So do you want the job or not?”

“You know I always like to play with fire and this guy is a supernova. But we need to discuss my payment. It’s been a while West. My fee has doubled.”

“Jimmy I couldn’t afford you then, what makes you think I can pay you double now?”

“It’s called cost benefit analysis. It is all about the risk my friend.”

West knew Jimmy held the negotiating power because there was no one else he could contact.

“How about I pay you the usual and I’ll owe you a favor?”

Jimmy thought for a second then reached inside his jacket and pulled out a strange looking electronic gadget. “Agreed. Betcha you’ve never seen one of these before?”

“Can’t say I have. What is it?”

“Well if you ever need one let me know. But it will cost you a fortune in gold and a few vital organs. And I mean that literally.”

“So what is it?” he repeated.

“It’s a prototype of a functioning quantum computer.”

“I didn’t think those things existed.”

Jimmy smirked. “You naïve plebeians know nothing about our government. Quantum computers have been around for years. Of course, that is on a need to know basis only. They are all kept in a secret underground laboratory in New Jersey or in a military complex underneath the Rocky Mountains.”

“I don’t even want to know how you got your hands on this one.”

Jimmy took a swig of his beer. “No, you don’t.”

“What’s the difference between a regular computer and a quantum computer anyway?”

Jimmy looked at him like he was an idiot. “The lack of knowledge among the common man is astounding. The biggest difference is a quantum computer uses the power of atoms or molecules to perform calculations whereas computers use binary digits of zero or one.”

“And this means?”

“A Quantum computer uses qubits which can be in a superposition of states. The superposition of states gives a quantum computer its inherent parallelism which allows a quantum computer to work on a million computations at once while an old computer can work on only one.”

“I don’t know what the hell you just said but I assume that means it is a lot faster than a regular computer?”

“By a magnitude of about infinity. The government has been mining data for decades and its biggest problem is that it does not have the computing power to translate the data into real-time usage. But for me the real beauty of this thing is that it is like being invisible. I can hack into any computer system in the world and no one can trace it back to me. On top of that because of its computing power I can break through just about any computer system’s encryption safeguards. In the old days a 128-bit cipher encoded message would be almost impossible to crack even using the most powerful supercomputers. Now, with a quantum computer it can be done almost instantaneously. You have no idea the computing power this little sucker has.”

“And DC is going to use this to further enslave us, I suppose?”

“Damn straight. You don’t think they would be using it for the betterment of civilization, do ya?” Jimmy began punching on the device. After a few minutes he swore, “Damn, this Firth guy is locked up tight.”

“I think he’s been scrubbed from AmeriNet,” West responded with disappointment because if Jimmy couldn’t get him the information no one could.

West slid out of the booth. “See what you can do. I’ll get us another round of beers.”

West went over to the bar and ordered two beers. He brought them back to the table and handed one to Jimmy, who looked frustrated.

“Well, Mr. Firth is as encrypted as it gets. I can’t break into his financial records at Homeland and I can’t find any references to him in any of DC’s databases. It’s like the guy doesn’t even exist. I even tried hacking into some Dracun sites.”

The hair on the back of West’s neck rose. “Dracun?”

“Yeah, you know, the Evil Empire guys.”

West looked around then almost in a whisper said, “Until a couple of days ago I had never really heard of the Dracun and now I keep hearing their name being referenced on a daily basis.”

Jimmy glanced up from his computer with a questioning look on his face. “Are you serious? And you write for a conspiracy tabloid? Jeez, what hole have you been living in?”

“So you think the Dracun actually exist?”

“I sure as hell do. They’re the descendants of Atlantis. The true bloodline. They were close to discovering the secret of immortality and that is why their utopia was destroyed. You can read about in the Hall of Records. It contains all their historical records.”

West couldn’t tell if Jimmy was joking or not. “And where would I find this Hall of Records?”

“Underneath the Sphinx in Egypt,” Jimmy laughed and then said jokingly, “I’m just messing with you. The Hall of Records is a plane of existence in the Akashic Field.”

“C’mon, be serious.”

“Who said I wasn’t. Look I know the Dracun exists. I’ve hacked into places that confirm it but I believe they are really just a club of sorts. The most powerful, most exclusive club in the history of the world.”

West raised his hand. “Okay, let’s focus here. Maybe Firth is not in the system because he is part of the Dracun and if this group is that powerful they probably would want to keep a low profile, right?”

“Maybe, but I do know this, if I can’t find anything about him with this computer then he truly is a ghost. Hold on, wait a second, here we go.” Jimmy punched a few more keys.

“Whatcha got?” West asked.

“I got a number and address for you.”

“At least that’s a start. You think it’s correct?”

“I don’t know, but based on how limited the information is on this guy it could have been planted.”

Jimmy wrote the information on a cocktail napkin and slid it across the table to West, who put the cocktail napkin in his pocket.

“Hold on,” Jimmy mumbled. “I’m getting a strange coding sequence I’ve never seen here before. All right mama, let’s see where this takes us.”

He watched as Jimmy entered data into the quantum computer. “Holy shit!”

“What? What is it?”

“I don’t know where or how I got to where I’m at, but according to this Firth has a Code Zero clearance.”

“Code Zero. What the hell does that mean?”

“I don’t know exactly. I mean, I’ve heard of it. We always knew that certain high-level individuals within the government had secret clearance codes. The highest level that I know of is Code Black and that is reserved for the President, top levels of Homeland Security, the head of NSA and a few upper echelon criminals. It basically gives them blanket immunity.”

“What do you think this Code Zero means?”

“It’s kind of an urban myth among the hacker crowd. The story goes that the reason the world seems hell bent on committing mass suicide is because we’re being set up to be taken over by...get this, aliens.”

“You mean illegal aliens from Africa and South America?”

“No. I mean fucking little green men from outer space.”

“Get the fuck out of here,” West interrupted. “That’s insane.”

“Listen. I’m not saying I believe it.”

“Alright, so what exactly does Code Zero mean and why does Firth have it?”

“They call it Zero Theory. Supposedly, a few individuals in the world have a Code Zero clearance and they are in cahoots with the aliens. Here’s the story: In the early 1750’s, right before the Industrial Revolution, some alien scout ship discovered our planet. They also discovered Earth has certain natural resources they needed for their cosmic travels. So this scout ship left a few of their kind behind to direct the course of

human development in a way that when they returned we would be technologically advanced enough to help them extract the resources they need, but not technologically capable enough to cause them any problems via rebellion or warfare.”

“So you’re saying these aliens are responsible for all of our technological advancements over the last 300 years?”

“I’m not saying anything. I’m just telling you there are people who believe our civilization was pushed in a certain way. The industrial and technological advancements were given to us in a limited manner to ensure we developed the infrastructure needed so that when the alien mother ship arrived everything would be in place so they can extract the resources they need.”

“Well, the first flaw in this asinine theory is if these aliens are so advanced why would it take them so long to get back? Or for that matter why don’t they just kill us off and mine the shit themselves?”

“A hacker buddy of mine who swears on his life Zero Theory is true told me Einstein’s theory of relativity is right, at least in our universe. These aliens are far more advanced than us but they still live under the laws of physics so they can only travel at 99.99% of the speed of light. In conjunction with Darwin’s Theory of Evolution these aliens would have enormous life spans or they might be conscious robots.”

“Conscious robots. What does that mean?”

“Just what I said. They are basically robots with artificial intelligence. They would be practically immortal and their spaceships are basically traveling planets.”

“Okay but why couldn’t they just mine whatever they needed themselves? What do they need us for?”

“That answer is the basis of the original theory. It takes thousands, even millions of earth years to travel distances in the universe, even if you can travel at 99.99% the speed of light. That extra 0.01% makes all the difference in the world and if there are no such things as wormholes then it would make sense they would cultivate a civilization in a certain manner to prep things and ultimately use them to help extract whatever resources they need.”

“Well, I’d say they better hurry up and get back because we’ve pretty much used up all the natural resources on this planet.”

“No, no you’re not listening. You’re talking about what we use for our energy demands, fossil fuels such as coal, natural gas, and oil. You can’t use those resources to travel through the vast distances of the universe. They gave us the technology to develop those energy sources for our energy needs, not theirs because they can’t use it. I mean if you think about it, we can split an atom, build quantum computers, send spaceships through the solar system but we can’t develop a car or airplane that doesn’t need fossil fuels in order to operate? I mean it’s ludicrous if you really believe that.”

“I guess I can’t disagree with you on that point. I’ve always thought we had the capability to manufacture a

high-tech, low-cost battery that could power a car efficiently while doing it with little or no pollution.”

“Shit man, DC’s been promising an energy policy for 60 years now. Hell, I know we’ve got the technology. But think about it, who would be the big losers with that kind of technology?”

“Obviously, the big oil and car companies,” West answered.

“Right’o, but far and away the biggest loser would be DC. Those companies are nothing more than nationalized government entities run by government unions anyway. There is absolutely no reason for them to allow this technology to be used because it would mean a tremendous loss of money but more importantly power.”

“And I guess the theory goes that the aliens wouldn’t want us to develop these technologies because we would use up their resources and could even become a threat to them.”

“There you go, Mr. Investigative Reporter.”

“Ok so let’s back up here. What are the resources these aliens are after?” West asked, thinking this conversation was eerily beginning to remind him of the last few times he met with Sloan.

“You ever hear of rare earth elements?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m not talking about the rare earth elements that we use in electronics. I’m talking about elements that technically we have not discovered yet.”

“What do you mean technically? Either we have discovered them or we haven’t.”

“Just hear me out. If you believe the Zeroists, there are elements that exist that are not on our Periodic Table of Elements. You’ve heard of dark matter?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, physicists have been trying to discover the missing elements of the universe for well over a century. The missing elements are typically called dark matter. You’ve heard of the Hadron Collider in Switzerland?”

“The one that was blown up by anti-EU terrorists decades ago?”

“Correct. The Zeroists believe the collider had discovered miniscule amounts of dark matter elements and they also discovered that material could be found at the core of the Earth. But the reason we can’t use it is that we do not have the technical ability to extract the elements. And even if we did, because of the immense pressure at the center of the Earth, once we did extract the elements they would lose their properties when introduced into a much lower pressure environment.”

“Kind of like Schrödinger’s Cat, right?”

“Yep. Quantum physics says by simply observing something, the observation causes the basic nature to change. These rare earth elements are the resources the aliens want from our planet and they have the technology to detect, find and collect them without observing or changing the quantum structure.”

“So let me sum this up,” West said. “Basically the Zeroists believe these aliens are galactic nomads. They have enormous lifespans and their ships are their homes. They build galactic superhighways but despite their technological advances they still need fuel to power their ships. The story goes that when they discovered earth, they left behind scouts who recruited a handful of human families and through these families they have directed and, when necessary, altered the course of human development to be able to mine the elements when the species return. So our planet is nothing more than a galactic rest stop for some little green men?”

“Yep. That pretty much sums it up,” Jimmy answered.

“But wouldn’t someone have seen one of these aliens after all these hundreds of years?”

“You know how I’m going to answer that don’t you?”

“So they’re invisible?” West said sarcastically.

“Not exactly. Black holes are invisible to our eyes but we know they exist. Perhaps the “little green men” as you call them live in a frequency or spectrum not visible to humans. Kind of like a radio station. When you change the radio station the music hasn’t really stopped playing. We just don’t hear it because we’ve switched to a different frequency. Our basic senses, especially vision, can only see in a specific type of frequency or spectrum and its possible these aliens live in a spectrum that we can’t detect.”

“Then who are these human families who are supposedly in cahoots with the aliens?”

“Think about it. What family dynasties have survived centuries with each subsequent generation becoming more wealthy and powerful than the previous despite wars, despite countries and currencies breaking apart? I mean if you really think about it, this crazy alien conspiracy doesn’t sound so crazy because it is almost impossible for a family to sustain wealth longer than two or three generations. It’s almost against the basic law of nature. But yet there are a handful of family dynasties that have survived and amassed enormous amounts of wealth and power over the decades.”

“So let me guess,” West interrupted. “You’re talking about the Rothschild’s.”

“Pretty much. My friend swears the aliens cut a deal with the Rothschild ancestors. They promised them unlimited wealth and power and in exchange these families would wield their power to direct and cultivate human development so that when the aliens return they can embark upon their plan.”

West shook his head then whistled. “I’ve heard all kinds of crazy ass conspiracies as to why those in power seem hell bent to destroy the world but this one takes the cake. You sound like you actually believe this crap?”

Jimmy didn’t answer. He was staring over his shoulder with a concerned expression.

“What is it?” West asked.

“Don’t turn around, but there is a man at the far corner of the bar. I think he is an agent?”

“Homeland Security?”

“I wish. An X-Agent.”

“C’mon, an X-Agent,” West replied.

“I’m serious,” Jimmy whispered.

X-Agents were another urban myth that people only whispered about. The rumors were that they were assassination squads that operated under the cover of Homeland Security. They were granted full immunity from the laws of the United States. Basically, if the government wanted to get rid of someone they saw as a problem they sent an X-Agent.

“Why do you think he is an X-Agent?” West asked as a cold shiver went through him because Jimmy looked whiter than a ghost.

“A friend of mine hacked into a top secret embedded file in Homeland Security and he inadvertently discovered a file that contained the names, operating alias and pictures of all the X- Agents. I swear that guy at the bar was in the file.”

“What the hell should we do?” West asked.

“Shut up and listen. I’m going to laugh like we’re joking around and when I do that, laugh too and then get up and head to the bathroom in the back. There’s a storage room across from the bathroom. It’s my escape route. There is an unlocked window in the back that leads out to an alley.”

“Don’t you think this is a little extreme?”

“Not if you don’t want to get arrested or worse,” Jimmy said.

West hesitated. “What about you?”

“I have to think of something but I’m not leaving this computer here and if I took it to the bathroom that guy would be all over me. I’ll think of something. Hopefully, I’m wrong and he just looks like that X-Agent. Better safe than sorry.”

West wasn’t sure what to think but with everything that had happened over the last couple of days he wasn’t going to take any chances.

“All right. I’ll call you later tonight,” West said in a hushed tone while sliding out of the booth.

“No, whatever you do, don’t call me or they’ll know for sure who you are and I don’t want them finding you since you know about this computer. I’ll contact you in a week or so. Go!”

West forced himself to laugh. He slid out of the booth then headed toward the back of the bar and walked down the hall. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure no one could see him and he opened the storage room door.

The room was cluttered with liquor and cigarette boxes. He found the window, climbed onto a box and managed to push his body through the opening. He fell down into a grimy alley. Pain exploded through his elbow as it took the brunt of the fall. He jumped up and jogged down the alley and ended up about three blocks from the bar.

West took a couple of deep breaths and then peered around the corner. Outside the bar three homeland security military vans with at least a two dozen agents surrounded the entrance.

Seconds later they stormed into the bar. West wasn't going to wait around to see what happened to Jimmy so he high-tailed it down the street in the opposite direction.

Us do opposite of all Earthly things! Us hate beauty! Us love ugliness! Is big crime to make anything perfect on Bizarro World!

— Bizarro

CHAPTER 10

West walked quickly down the sidewalk with his hands tucked inside his pockets. He was rattled, first the Sloan business and now this. He hoped Jimmy was all right but he knew at the very least he would be caught with the stolen quantum computer. There was no question Jimmy was in deep shit, and that meant West was also in big trouble.

For a brief moment he thought about calling Byron but he dismissed the idea. Despite being close to midnight the streets were clogged with merchants, prostitutes, drunks, fortune readers, criminals and the permanently unemployed.

It was strange, but the worse the economy got the more people flocked to the streets and the later they stayed out. It wasn't unusual for sections of the city to be packed until the crack of dawn. However, most sane, law-abiding citizens locked themselves inside their homes at night because nightfall brought out the gangs, thieves and murderers who were all competing for their next client.

After a few blocks West's panic subsided some and he decided he needed to sit and think about what he was going to do next.

He turned the street corner and took a seat at an outdoor noodle shop. Despite the late hour, the area was bristling with activity and he felt he had put enough distance between himself and the raided bar to be reasonably safe for now.

It was all a moot point anyway because if Jimmy told Homeland his name, there would be nowhere he could hide. He just hoped Jimmy would do the right thing and tell them he didn't have anything to do with the stolen computer.

He ordered a beer and a noodle bowl from a haggard Asian woman who looked like she was about a thousand years old. She brought back the bottle of beer and he took a sip of the warm bitter beer that tasted like pine straw. He turned around on his stool and watched the nighttime shenanigans of his fellow New Yorkers.

Across the street a pimp was roughing up one of his ladies. Further down the street a gang of teenagers

strolled down the sidewalk harassing every person they passed. He watched an old bag lady picking through a trashcan but she was so wretched that even the hooligans left her alone.

A constant stream of taxis, scooters and bikes streamed down the crowded street. Neon signs, interactive billboards and strobe lights lit up the dark skyline, casting eerie shadows that danced across the towering buildings.

A low hum filled the dark sky and for the first time in his life West thought about how many electronic devices had to be around to create that background noise.

The old lady set his food next to him with a grunt. He dipped the chopsticks into his beer hoping the alcohol would kill most of the germs and he dug into his food. Despite what had happened at the bar he was ravenous.

He shoveled the noodles into his mouth and watched the pimp from across the street slap his employee so hard across the face she collapsed into a heap onto the ground.

West kept eating. He never even considered going over to help her. To survive in this city, you had to look the other way while looking out for only yourself.

He finished the noodle bowl and motioned for a new beer. He pulled out his government-issued Digi-Dollar card and fiddled with it, thinking if Jimmy had told the Homeland agents his name, the instant the card was swiped this place would be overrun with

agents. He stared at the card trying to think about what to do.

Like the dollar bills of the old days, the government debit banking cards were issued with past president's images on them. His card had the portrait of Lyndon Johnson on it.

Ironic, he thought. Johnson's legacy to America was the Great Society. His creation of an entitlement society coupled with Nixon taking the country off the gold standard was the opening chapter of a sixty-year march toward national suicide.

"Wasn't it Voltaire who said all paper money returns to its intrinsic value of zero?"

He turned and saw Byron smiling back at him. "How'd you get here?" West asked.

"Same as you. I walked."

"Funny."

"Looks like you got yourself in a bit of trouble tonight, huh?"

West studied Byron's face. Something about this guy didn't make any sense. "How in the hell could you know about that?"

"It was recorded in the Hall of Records."

"Look, I am in some deep shit. I don't have time for your crap," West replied.

"You are too caught up in the here and now. The daily minutia of life. You need to broaden your horizons and think of the bigger picture. It might help put a perspective on things."

“Well then why don’t you just enlighten me?” West replied in exasperation.

“I think it helps to realize and not forget there is an intelligent design at work.”

“So is that what gets you through the day?”

“Yes. I mean think about this for a second. If you created two electrons at the same time, they are entangled. Then if you sent one of the electrons a trillion light years away and if you spun the electron here on earth then instantaneously the other electron a trillion light years away would also spin. That could only mean information is traveling faster than the speed of light. But in reality the electrons are still entangled and that would mean space is an illusion. From nothing sprung the big bang and that means everything is connected to The One, the singularity. We are all entangled with one another and with The One.”

West suddenly felt very tired. He sighed heavily. “I have more important things to worry about right now.”

“Do you?” Byron asked.

West turned back around and stared down at his noodles. Byron’s response did make him wonder if he had better things to worry about.

West had always felt there was not something right about himself, like he was disconnected in some way. But he could never explain or understand what he was feeling and as he grew older he taught himself to dismiss or even suppress those feelings. But now with everything going on, the feeling was striking him with a

magnitude of a strong earthquake. It was like reality was a giant illusion, nothing more.

A hand on his back brought him out of his thoughts. West turned, expecting to see a Homeland Agent but instead, he saw Simon wearing a black trench coat and hat.

“Mind if I sit down and join you?” Simon asked.

West turned to introduce Bryon but he was no longer there. Where the hell did he go?

“Did you see that man who was sitting here?” he asked Simon.

Simon gave him a strange look. “No. I didn’t see anyone.”

West looked around but Byron was nowhere in sight. He turned back to Simon. “What are you doing out on the streets this late at night?”

“I have insomnia. What’s your excuse?”

“Research.”

“I bet,” he said sarcastically. “You know that Agent McCain came by to see me again today.”

“Yeah, so?” West shot back.

“He was asking some strange questions about you. In fact, he told me in no uncertain terms that if I even mentioned any details of our conversation to you, or to anybody for that matter, I could be in violation of the LT Statutes.”

“So why are you telling me then?”

“That’s a good question.” Simon motioned for a beer. “Let me ask you a weird question, West. Haven’t

you ever wondered how we publish a weekly paper with only a skeleton crew at the office?”

“No, not really because you really don’t need a lot of people to write the worthless crap you publish.”

Simon raised his beer bottle. “Good point. But let me ask you another question. Have you ever read the paper?”

“Of course I have.”

Simon smiled. “C’mon. I know you better than that. I mean have you ever really read it on a regular basis?”

West shifted in his chair. He hated to admit he didn’t read the paper he worked for because that wasn’t exactly the height of journalistic integrity.

Thankfully, Simon let him off the hook and continued, “I know on the surface the paper is rubbish but it serves a purpose that 99 percent of its readers and even some of the paper’s reporters, such as yourself, are not aware of.”

“Such as?”

“Some of the articles written by me and a few others . . . Boy, you’re going to get a kick out of this West, but they are coded with messages and directives to The LT’s and various anti- DC splinter groups.”

West stared at Simon. He should have been completely shocked by Simon’s admission but with the events of the last couple of days he guessed his nervous system was becoming immune to it all.

“You know Homeland Security is offering millions of dollars in reward money for information that leads

to prosecution of any citizen aiding the LT's. With the information you just told me I could cut myself a pretty good deal. I could rat you out, make a bunch of money and run the paper while you rot in a work camp for the rest of your life. So why are you taking the risk to tell me that?"

Simon waved his hand dismissively and took a sip of his beer. "I'm not taking any risk at all. You're the one in trouble since a couple dozen Homeland Security agents are sweeping the city as we speak trying to find you."

"What makes you think they're searching for me?"

"C'mon West, we can both stop playing games now. Listen my friend, the Dracun have their eyes on you. You're damn lucky you didn't get arrested like your friend back at the bar."

Simon grabbed West's electronic money card off the counter and handed it back to him. "This one's on me. After all we don't want to make it any easier for them to find you, now do we?"

"No."

"All right then, we got to skedaddle. Insect drones are being released all over the city. The Dracun's trying to find the other person who was with Jimmy because they don't like people stealing their nifty toys like that quantum computer."

West looked around the sky. "Insect drones?"

"Yep, our good friends at Rand Corp are responsible for those. The drones come in all kinds of insect

varieties: bees, flies, ladybugs, dragon flies. You can't tell them apart from the real insects unless you capture it and perform an insect autopsy. They are the ultimate state-of-the-art surveillance tool. Trust me you'll never look at a bug in the same way ever again. C'mon we need to get out of here. I'll fill you in more and answer all your questions when we get to a safer spot."

A beam of light shined across the rooftops. A humming noise was followed seconds later by a low flying helidrone. West had no doubt that the drone was out looking for him.

He followed Simon to an empty cab and they hopped in. "Fifty-Five and Lexington," Simon directed the cab driver.

"Where we going?" West asked.

"My place." Simon placed his finger to his mouth indicating he didn't want to discuss anything more. After a 10 minute ride in silence the cab pulled up to a luxurious brownstone. Simon paid the driver with his Electronic Money Card and West followed Simon past two armed security guards into the building's lobby. Simon pressed the elevator button for the top floor suite.

The elevator took them up to Simon's floor and they walked into his apartment suite. West looked around and whistled. "I didn't know the newspaper business was this profitable?"

"The paper hasn't come close to making a profit in over ten years. I inherited this from my parents."

West whistled. “Nice. What line of work were they in?”

“My dad was a senator.”

West thought for a few seconds before the realization hit him. “Your dad was the Jonathan Stossel?”

“The one and only.”

West was thoroughly confused and a wave of exhaustion swept over him. “I gotta sit down.”

“Help yourself.” Simon pointed toward a black leather couch. West slumped onto the couch and Simon took a seat in a chair in front of him.

“Didn’t your father help spearhead the committee that basically destroyed the Bill of Rights and the last vestige of a constitutional Republic? I still remember the protests at the capital after three dozen people were shot in cold blood by TSA agents.”

“You’re correct but as you know he had lots of help. Like all of us, he was just a pawn being manipulated, and ultimately, he paid the price for it.”

“How can you be so blasé? Your father’s committee was responsible for thousands, maybe tens of thousands of Americans being sent to FEMA camps without so much as a trial. Why should I believe anything you say?”

“I guess you’ll have to take your chances.”

“So why are you working with the LT’s then, especially considering who your dad was?”

“It is a long story.”

“Looks like I’ve got all night.”

Simon stood and walked over to the bar. He poured two glasses of cognac and handed one to West. He sat back down, took a sip then began, “My dad and I never got along very well but it had nothing to do with his politics. Our underlying problem was we simply had a father-son personality conflict. To be honest, from a political standpoint, I agreed with him on most things including the prosecution of the LT’s.”

“So what changed your mind?”

“My father got sick, pancreatic cancer. He had known about it for a year before he told me. I went to visit him to say goodbye and I guess you can say he gave me a deathbed confession. He told me that over the last couple years of his life he discovered things that made him reconsider everything he had fought for. He confessed to me that everything he had believed in was a complete lie. It was actually sad to listen to him and it was obvious he was quite depressed, not because he was dying as much as he felt he had wasted his life on a lie. He asked for my help to try and make it right.”

“So that is when you started working with the LTs.”

“No, I told him to go to hell and there was no way I was going to help a bunch of terrorists. About a week later my mom called and told me he was on his deathbed and might not last the night. She begged me to pay him one last visit. I couldn’t say no to her so I went. He was in bed and I couldn’t believe how much his condition had deteriorated in just a week. There was no

doubt he had reached his final hours. He begged me to forgive him.”

“So did you?”

“He was a dying man. What was I going to say? The important point is he gave me a folder that changed everything. He told me to keep it and open it when I got home. We said goodbye and he died later that night.”

Simon got up and walked over to the kitchen table. He stood on top of it and lifted a tile from the ceiling. He pulled out a black binder and walked back over to West.

“This is what he gave me. You can see it for yourself.” He threw the folder on West’s lap. “I’m going to take a shower.”

Simon walked into his bedroom as West opened the binder and stared at the photo inside.

Half an hour later Simon came out of his bedroom wearing a white robe with his initials over his left breast. He poured two fresh cognacs and sat down in the chair across from West. He crossed his legs, lit a cigarette and said, “I bet your world just got rocked, huh?”

“Where in the hell did your father get this from?”

“Before I left that night he told me it was stored underneath the Lincoln Monument. He said there was a subterranean library where the world’s real history books are stored.”

“Really?”

“I don’t know if this secret library really exists or not. But he didn’t have any reason to lie at that point, so I guess we’ll just have to take his word on it.”

“Why haven’t you published this information? You have undeniable proof. The world has a right to know.”

Simon laughed. “The world has a right to know, eh. Well, the way I look at it I have a right to live and if I published this I’d be dead before it hit the newsstands.”

“But you can’t just keep it hidden.”

“It will come out one day, when the world is ready.”

West would never have believed it if he hadn’t seen the proof. He looked at the picture again. Five smiling men surrounded an autopsy table. They were obviously quite happy that the man lying on the table was dead.

West pointed to the men in the photo. “I know Lyndon Johnson but who are these other guys?”

“The guy to the left of Lyndon Johnson is William McChesney Martin who was the head of the Federal Reserve at the time. The gentleman to the left of Johnson is Sir Nigel Firth.”

“Holy shit,” West exclaimed. He stared closer at the image of Firth. “The father of Nigel Firth, the European banker and commodity tycoon?”

“Yep.”

Simon pointed to the man standing to Lyndon Johnson’s left. “He’s the mystery man. My father didn’t know who he was and I’ve never been able to find out.”

“I know who he is,” West replied.

“Who?”

“I’ve met him twice before. He was at the noodle bar tonight. You just missed him.”

“What? That’s impossible.”

“I know it isn’t possible but I am telling you I’ve met the man in this photo. He calls himself Byron and he knew Sloan and he seems to have some affiliation with the LT’s, I think. Well, I really don’t know.”

Simon grabbed the photo from West. “This guy looks to be in his mid-forties so that would mean the person you met would be going on 110 years old. How could you know they are the same person? He’s aged over 60 years since this picture was taken. You have to be mistaken.”

West shook his head. “You don’t understand what I am saying. This person, Byron, in the photo from 1963 looks exactly the same. He hasn’t aged at all.”

“How could that be?” Simon asked.

“You tell me.”

“I don’t know what to tell you but I’d be careful no matter who this guy is.”

“Can I see that photo again?” West asked.

Simon handed it over and West stared at the body of the autopsy table for the thousandth time. Despite the gruesome head wound it wasn’t hard to recognize John F. Kennedy.

“Fuck me,” West replied. “So Lyndon Johnson and the Federal Reserve murdered JFK. Why?”

“You were the one who pitched me on the Federal Reserve story and said you’ve been researching it. Why don’t you tell me?”

“I... ” West couldn’t answer.

Simon lit a cigarette and exhaled a stream of smoke. “Okay, I’ve held some things back but I guess it doesn’t

matter now since obviously we're in the same boat on this deal. Some of this is conjecture but first you have to understand the Federal Reserve operates as the bank for the Dracun. You were right West, the Dracun murdered JFK because he issued Executive Order 11110 and with the stroke of a pen President Kennedy declared that the privately owned Federal Reserve Bank would soon be out of business. And that would not have been good business for the Dracun's bank system."

"So they assassinated the President of the United States?"

"Kennedy was despised by The Dracun. Evidently, JFK was an aberration to them. They didn't support his election and besides his hatred of the Federal Reserve he posed other threats to the Dracun and their ultimate plans. Supposedly, Kennedy wanted a complete end to United States involvement in Vietnam by 1965 which was also against the Dracun's interest."

"In what way?"

"The industrial war complex is very profitable thus they constitute a very powerful group. If you controlled the world's wealth and had the military to back that control up, you pretty much controlled everything. And for the Dracun's plans to be successful they need the philosophy of collectivism to be instituted worldwide. A controlled population that thought they were free but in truth were enslaved. Individualism, free enterprise, self-reliance are the Dracun's archenemies. Their goal is for a modern-day medieval-type feudal system."

“Why?”

“Because if the population of Earth is made up of billions of free thinking, freedom-loving individuals, they would never stand to be enslaved by others. The Dracun have succeeded in giving us the illusion we are free, when in fact we are not. We are modern-day serfs.”

“How could all of this remain a secret all of this time?”

“It hasn’t. Everyone knows the conspiracies but that is the problem. Those in power have been successful in perpetuating facts and the truth as conspiracies created by whacked out nutcases. We live in a complete bizarro world where up is down, right is wrong. The truth is a lie and the lies are the truth.”

West laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Simon asked.

“Bizarro world. It reminds me of that comic book back in the 1960’s. It was set on a planet called htraE, which is Earth spelled backwards. Everything on the planet was the exact opposite to that on Earth. I remember one story where a salesman was selling a bunch of Bizarro bonds by pitching the bonds, “as guaranteed to lose your money”.”

“I sure as hell feel like we are living in a bizarro world.”

”So what do we do now?” West asked.

Simon shook his head. “The photo is just the tip of the iceberg. There is more to it than just this. Right before he was assassinated JFK gave a speech at Columbia.

He said: “The high office of the President has been used to ferment a plot to destroy American’s freedom and before I leave office, I must inform the citizens of their plight.”

“Sounds like he was talking about the Federal Reserve?”

“On the surface I would say that’s true but I think Kennedy knew the rabbit hole went much farther than that.”

“Do you think he was referring to the Dracun in that speech?” West asked.

“All roads seem to lead back to them but I don’t know if the Dracun is just a diversion or false front like Area 51. I do know DC is a smokescreen. They are the strongmen used to carry out the wishes of the Dracun.”

“I don’t suppose they had something to do with Elvis’s death as well?” West said trying to make a joke.

“To my knowledge he died of a heart attack while taking a poop.”

West laughed but the night was catching up with him and he could barely keep his eyes open. Simon must have noticed his exhaustion because he stood up and said, “I’ve got a spare bedroom in the back. Go to bed. You’ll be all right here tonight. We’ll figure out something in the morning.”

West nodded. He rose from the couch and felt like his body was being pushed down by a weight he couldn’t define. He went into Simon’s spare bedroom and didn’t even bother taking off his clothes. He collapsed on the bed and was asleep in seconds.

“Cowards make the best torturers. Cowards understand fear and they can use it.”

— Mark Lawrence, Prince of Thorns

CHAPTER 11

Graham walked down the corridor to the soundproof interrogation room with a sense of urgency. He opened the door and walked up to the man bound in the chair.

“Good afternoon Jimmy, my name is Agent Larson Graham. How’s it going?”

The man’s eyes displayed a mix of terror with a sense of the inevitable.

“Not so good,” Jimmy answered feebly. “I guess I’m in trouble.”

Graham was more disgusted by the man’s weak constitution than the fact that he was a traitor who had

been stealing DC secrets and selling them to the highest bidder. In less than six hours the little weasel had already been broken.

Graham had perfected interrogations and his typical protocol he had developed from trial and error consisted of three phases depending on the emotional constitution and strength of the subject. Phase One was designed to break down the natural fight or flight defenses of a person and this phase could last up to three days depending on how aggressively he felt like conducting the session. Sometimes he liked to take his time and would deliberately stretch things out.

During this stage an individual's senses were constantly bombarded by changing stimuli. Usually on the second day more invasive techniques were administered beginning with painful electric shocks at random time intervals over a two-day period.

Graham had received electric shock as part of his training and the pain was intense but it was the uncertainty of when it was going to be administered that broke most people. During this phase the prisoner was also subjected to severe sleep deprivation and mental instability by randomly changing the rooms lighting from complete darkness to painful fluorescent lighting in various mood altering light spectrums.

The thermostat was constantly changed to extremes from bone chilling temperatures to scorching hot and humid conditions. But according to the experts the worst was the high pitched noises that had been

developed over the last few years. Scientists had created vibrations in certain frequencies that could literally drive a man insane.

A sharp chill went through Graham when he recalled experiencing the vibration torture as part of his training. If there was such a thing as hell that noise had to have been part of eternal damnation.

If a subject was tough enough to endure Phase One, Phase Two continued with the external stimulus by heightening noise tortures meant to destroy the person's will, while not leaving any physical scars.

Generally, after Phase One and Two, 99.9 percent of the subjects were broken and fully cooperative. Graham had only personally witnessed one person who was subjected to Phase Three. The woman had been an accomplice in the assassination of the Federal Reserve Chairman and she absolutely refused to talk.

He actually admired the amount of pain she was willing to endure and thought she was quite amazing. But no one could withstand Phase Three for long and 22 minutes into the interrogation she suffered a massive heart attack and died. Graham wished there were more Homeland agents with her constitution because it would make his job a lot easier.

He returned his attention to Jimmy. He knew the traitor would give him any information he needed but for fun he wanted him to watch the video.

“Okay Jimmy we both know why you are here so I am going to cut to the chase. I want to show you this

video and afterwards you have two choices. You can either cooperate or what you see in this video will be your fate. If you decide to cooperate and help your country, you will go free. It's that simple."

Graham saw a spark of hope in Jimmy's eyes. It was a look he saw in just about everyone. Little did they know how much that hope was going to cost.

"Agent Graham," he slobbered. "I swear I am willing to tell you, or do anything you ask. I'm sorry about stealing the computer. I "

"Shhh," Graham put a finger to his lips. "I believe you but just in case you try and mislead me I want to show you what the consequences will be."

He motioned to the technician who attached eyelid clamps onto Jimmy's eye socket to ensure he watched every gruesome detail of what his penalty would be if he refused to join up or provided false or misleading information. When the video was over Graham ordered the technician to remove the clamps, mouthpiece and his restraints.

Jimmy's face registered pure terror. "I swear I'll do anything you want. Anything," Jimmy blathered. "I'm sorry. Please tell me what I can do to help you?"

Graham held back his disgust and forced a smile. "I think you mean it, Jimmy. I really do. That is a good start."

"So let's begin with an easy question. Who was at the bar with you and what was the nature of the meeting?"

Jimmy didn't even hesitate. "His name is West Collins. He is a reporter for the *World Weekly Enquirer*."

"West Collins?" Graham asked again.

"Yes."

Little surprised Graham these days but the coincidence was a bit unsettling. He and his partner had just interviewed Collins in a follow up to Mark Sloan's death who they knew was deeply involved with the LT's. Graham also believed there was a chance West was in possession of a book that could perhaps provide more information about the Dracun.

If there was one thing Graham hated it was the unknown and he had become more and more convinced the real power in the world was not held by the President and Homeland Security. The true power had remained elusive and he could not rule out the possibility that the Dracun were the ones he was looking for.

"And why were you meeting with him?"

"He wanted information about a guy named Nigel Firth."

"So this meeting had nothing to do with the quantum computer you stole."

"No. He didn't know anything about the computer, he just wanted information on Firth."

"And what did he want to know about Mr. Firth?"

"Contact information. He believed Firth had been scrubbed from the system. West thinks he might be part of a group called the Dracun."

“And why did he think you could get him this information?”

He watched Jimmy cringe at the question. “I’ve done work for him in the past. I’ve used resources, access that I had at work to gather information.”

“I see,” Graham said. “We had forensic computer scientists sifting through all your computer history. I do have to say you’re good but you guys always make one simple, really stupid mistake.”

Graham stared at Jimmy. “C’mon play your part you’re supposed to say, what mistake is that?”

“Ah, what mistake is that?” Jimmy mumbled.

“You always think you are smarter than everyone else and that you will never be caught. The money even becomes a secondary issue. Am I right?”

“Yes,” Jimmy answered with a look like a deer caught in the headlights of a semi-truck ready to plow it over.

“So what type of information was Mr. Collins interested in?”

“As far as I know it was always research for newspaper articles. Generally, he asked for background or contact information about people in finance or you know, DC related. But I swear to God this is the first time I had met with him in years.”

“You know what Jimmy, I believe you. But we have one big problem. I could probably have worked something out but the computer is a different story. You know just the act of stealing that quantum computer is a capital offense?”

Jimmy nodded trying to stifle a sob.

Graham continued, “I want you to think about this long and hard. Is there anything you forgot to tell me about Mr. Collins or the purpose of your meeting?”

“No. I swear. That is it.”

He believed Jimmy but there was one thing he didn’t believe in and could not dismiss and that was coincidence. They had gone to West’s office on a basic fact-finding mission after discovering West’s name among some of Sloan’s documents and now this business with Jimmy. West Collins had now become a person of high interest.

“Well, Jimmy do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“I’m sorry. I’ll do anything you ask of me. Just name it.”

“Anything?” Graham repeated.

“Yes, I swear. Anything.”

“Okay then. I’m going to hold you to that.”

Graham nodded to the technician behind Jimmy. The technician walked up to Jimmy and injected a powerful anesthetic into his neck.



“Jimmy . . . Jimmy. Wake up Mr. Sleepy Head.”

The hacker began to stir and his eyelids started to flicker.

“Sit him up,” Graham instructed the technicians. “Jimmy.” Graham snapped his fingers in front of his eyes. “Nod if you understand me?”

The anti-dose worked quickly and the hacker was becoming lucid. Jimmy slowly nodded his head.

“Good. Guess what partner, you’re free to go and the best part is I want you to go home and resume your normal activities, just act like nothing happened.”

“I don’t understand,” he said weakly. “What happened to me? What do you want me to do for you?”

“Why nothing Jimmy-Boy. Like I said go home, continue to hang out with your hacker buddies. But most importantly, I want you to continue all your illegal computer and subversive activities. In fact, we want you to even become more aggressive.”

“I . . . I don’t understand. I don’t want to get in any more trouble. I want to help.”

“You will be helping us because now you work for us. You will be collecting valuable data and helping us infiltrate the LT’s. You will be a hero.”

“Am I supposed to send you reports or meet with you?”

Graham smiled. “Nope, you don’t have to do a thing.”

A confused look appeared on Jimmy’s face. Graham paused. This was the part of the interrogation he loved the best. “We’ve implanted you with a Super Bug.”

“A what?” Jimmy asked.

Graham laughed. “And you hacker guys think you know everything. A Super Bug is a state of the art surveillance device. It tracks your movements but more importantly it is a surveillance device that will record all of

your conversations and computer activities. Everything. Isn't that terrific?"

Jimmy looked down at his body. "So I'm like wired? Where is it?"

"Why it's been implanted inside of you."

Graham watched in amusement as the man tried to digest the information. "And just so you know, Jimmy. The device cannot be disabled or removed. If someone tries to do that the device will emit a neurotoxin that will kill you in seconds. And we don't want that to happen, do we?"

Jimmy slowly nodded as the reality of his situation began to set in.

"Good then. Go and live your life my friend and I'd like to thank you for your service to your country. You are a true patriot. I will be in touch if I need anything specific but until then you are free to go."

"But what about West? What should I tell him if he contacts me?"

"Play it like we discussed but remember we will be monitoring everything. He has a book that belongs to me and you're going to help me get it back."

Graham laughed and left his surveillance slave to his fate. It was time to have a little conversation with Mr. Firth.

“There was a possibility I could have been under surveillance.”

—Julius Rosenberg

CHAPTER 12

West stared out of the cab’s window with a sense of dread. Dark clouds hung low across the skyline and a dirty mist made everything look old and dull. The day promised to be warm but West couldn’t seem to shake a chill running through his body.

The last few days had thrown his world upside down but maybe that was what he needed to wake up from his lethargic existence. Even though West knew he was in danger he felt something he hadn’t felt in a long time. Despite the mess he was in, he felt alive. He looked over at Simon, who was typing something into his phone and he still couldn’t believe he never had an inkling about what really happened at the paper.

“What do you think happened to Jimmy?” West asked.

“Like I already told you, he gave them your name and that you wanted information on Nigel Firth. Then he gave them every detail of every meeting you ever had.”

“You think so?”

“Trust me everyone eventually gives into DC interrogation techniques. I checked with a few sources. Your buddy has a checkered history. Even though he worked for the government Jimmy was a day trader and he didn’t have allegiance towards anyone, except whoever was willing to pay him money. The big question is what is DC going to do with you?”

The cab stopped in front of the newspaper building and dropped them off. They stood on the sidewalk and Simon glanced around. “Listen, we’ve got to play it cool and come up with a game plan.”

“Game plan,” West said angrily. “I’m fucking toast. You said so yourself.”

“We’re all toast. There are just different degrees of how badly burned. The one thing on your side, at least for the moment, is that your threat assessment level has not been raised.”

“What the hell is a threat assessment level and how would you even know that?”

Simon smiled. “There are a lot of things you don’t know about me. We’ll talk about that later. But DHS

has a master database called Protector and every single person in the United States is registered and has a file within the program. It is an algorithm and runs Monte Carlo simulations to assign a threat assessment level from one to ten. Continuous updates are added and your assessment level could rise or fall depending on their analysis models.”

“And what does DC do with these assessment levels?”

“If you reach Level Seven or above, unless they are using you for some purpose, you’re either in a federal prison, been assigned to a FEMA camp or dead. If you have a rating of three through six you are carefully monitored. A week ago you carried a Level Four mostly leftover from your subversive reporting days and that has not changed, yet.”

“How in the hell do you know that?”

Simon turned and pointed. “Take a quick glance into the coffee shop.”

West looked into the dingy coffee shop next to their office. “Yeah, what am I supposed to be looking at?”

“See the sign above the counter.”

West squinted. “The one that reads serving customer four.”

“That is your threat assessment.”

West looked back into the coffee shop. A haggard old man at the cash register turned and stared at West. He bowed slightly then turned and walked behind the counter.

“I don’t understand what is going on.”

“No one does. We can’t communicate electronically because it’s all under surveillance so we have to be creative. We have an insider, a programmer at DHS who has access and provides us with individual threat assessment ratings. He is monitoring yours and we’ll know if it gets raised. The best case scenario is that after this episode you’ll move to a five or six and hold there. At least that will buy us some time.”

“Great,” West responded. “What happens if it goes above that?”

“I already told you what happens then. Look, we’ll worry about that when it happens. First things first, when I get to my office I’m going to contact Agent McCain and tell him I think you have been acting a bit strange and I am also going to give them your rough draft about the Federal Reserve.”

“Why the hell would you do that?”

“Think about it. It is a perfect cover. You went to go see Jimmy because you wanted information about Firth, who is an insider with high level connections to the United States and European central banks. I’ll tell them I’ve been keeping an eye on you and that you came up with some cockamamie story about the Fed and a banking cabal conspiracy. Maybe they’ll buy enough of the story to think you’re some wacko and as part of your job here you were just digging around where you shouldn’t have been. Hopefully, they’ll buy

the cover and just keep you under close surveillance for the time being.”

“What do you think the chances that’ll work?”

“Like I said it might buy us some time but you still may have to disappear.”

“Disappear?”

“The Dracun don’t play around. How many people have you known over the years that have supposedly moved away, died from mysterious circumstances or just vanished?”

West thought about it and Simon was right. He didn’t have any close relatives and after his demise at the *Wall Street Journal* he had lived like a recluse but he had known quite a few acquaintances or co-workers who had just ceased to exist.

“While I’m calling the agents,” Simon continued. “I want you to call our friend Jimmy.”

“What are you crazy? You know both our phones are being monitored.”

“Think about it, West. It makes sense for the cover story we’re trying to create. If he’s dead, it won’t matter but if you get through to him they’ll be listening so play it straight and dumb. You need to bitch and moan that he probably got you in trouble. Tell him he shouldn’t have stolen that computer and gotten you involved because the only thing you wanted was information about Firth for your two-bit conspiracy article.”

West nodded. “All right, that makes sense but what should I do after that?”

“Assume you are being followed and everything you say is being overheard. Continue to investigate and see what you can find out about Nigel Firth. That will lend credence to your cover and maybe we can find out something about him we can use.”

West nodded in agreement because after all what choice did he have?

They walked into the shabby lobby of their building. The elevator was broken again so they took the stairs. They entered the newsroom and West felt like every person on the floor was a Dracun spy.

Simon walked to his office and West went to his desk. He pretended to work on his computer because he dreaded calling Jimmy but he knew he had no choice, he had to make the call.

He took a deep breath and dialed. On the second ring Jimmy answered, “Hey West. I was wondering when you were going to have the decency to call me and see if I was still alive.”

West was a bit taken back about how cheerful he sounded. Maybe Simon was making too much out of all of this. “Well, I knew you were in big trouble over that computer. What the hell were you thinking?”

“I know, that wasn’t my brightest idea but what is done is done.”

“Damn Jimmy, why’d you drag me into your mess? All I wanted was some information for a stupid conspiracy story.”

“Yeah, what can I say? Sorry about that.”

“Are you in a lot of trouble?” West asked.

“Yeah,” Jimmy laughed. “The only thing that saved me was I told them the exact truth and I have a skill set they desperately need.”

“So they just let you go?”

“Not exactly. I am on, like, lifetime probation. I also agreed in lieu of a criminal conviction to teach three classes a week to their computer security recruits for the next ten years with no pay. And I signed a confidentially agreement promising to never discuss the computer.”

“Kind of like a community service deal, huh?”

“Kind of.”

“Well, I hate to ask you this Jimmy but did you tell them about me?”

“Sorry West, I had no choice. But I told them the truth. I told them you had nothing to do with the computer and that you just wanted information for an article. I don’t think you have much to worry about. They’ll probably contact you to make sure my story jives but just tell them the truth and you shouldn’t get into too much trouble. I hope you’re not too mad at me. I feel bad as it is.”

“No, don’t worry about it. I suppose if my article gets killed who cares anyway. It was all a bunch of conspiracy nonsense in keeping with the exceptional journalistic integrity of the *World Weekly*. I was kind of at a dead end anyway and my editor is not all that supportive of the story or me.”

“All right, well good luck with the article. And after things die down a little maybe we can get a beer or something.”

West faked a laugh. “I appreciate it but maybe we should stop while we’re ahead.”

“The least you could do is buy me lunch for all my trouble,” Jimmy said in a slightly forced tone.

West paused for a second and figured he had no choice if he was going to keep up with the façade.

“Okay. I’ll take you to any place you want to go. Price is no object. You tell me.”

“How about that sushi place on 55th?”

West grip on the phone tightened. “Sure. Sounds good, but let me call you next week because I’m swamped right now.”

He hung up the phone, realizing Jimmy had just sent him a warning. He had passed him a code by asking to get together at the sushi restaurant. The restaurant didn’t exist and had always served as Jimmy’s dummy site to meet. Jimmy was being used or controlled by DC or the Dracun.

He pulled out the cocktail napkin Jimmy had given him before Homeland had stormed the bar. It had Firth’s address on it. He printed the only photo of Firth he could find from AmeriNet and headed out. He was going to camp outside Firth’s apartment and hopefully get a chance to talk to him.

“On a planet that increasingly resembles one huge Maximum Security prison, the only intelligent choice is to plan a jail break.”

— Robert Anton Wilson

CHAPTER 13

West took the subway across town and found Firth’s brownstone. He sat down on a bench and began his stakeout.

An hour later he spotted an older gentleman dressed in a suit and overcoat walking down the street. West looked at the picture again. Hot damn, it was Firth. He quickly walked up to the man and flashed a large smile. “Mr. Firth,” he called out in a friendly voice. “Hi, my name is West Collins. I’m a reporter and I was wondering if you had a few seconds? I’d like to ask you a couple of questions.”

Firth looked at him like he was a serial murderer. “Who do you work for?”

West wished he hadn’t asked him that. “I’m with the *World Weekly*,” he answered.

Firth looked even more disgusted. “I really don’t have the time now, call and schedule an appointment with my secretary.”

Firth turned and started walking toward his building’s entrance. West knew this was going to be his only chance.

“Mark Sloan told me to contact you if something happened to him,” West called out hoping for some type of response. “You know Sloan was murdered by the Dracun.”

Firth turned and stared at him. “Sloan was a good man but I don’t know what you’re talking about. The newspaper reported he hung himself because of financial difficulty.”

“You believe the news media?”

“You’re in the industry, should I not?”

“Why do you think Sloan told me to contact you if something happened to him?”

“I have no idea.”

West knew his time with Firth could be up at any moment. He had to take a shot. “Sloan was my source inside of Lehman. I know everything.”

Firth’s ice cold features suddenly changed and the response was not what West was expecting because Firth burst out laughing.

“You know everything, eh? That my friend is one of the most amusing statements I’ve heard in a long, long time.”

West felt his agitation growing but he tried to keep it in check. At least he had engaged Firth but now he had to lay out his cards.

“Allow me to clarify that. What I meant to say was I know you gave Sloan information that he then passed on to me.”

Firth regained his cold aristocratic expression. “Did he tell you that?”

West had learned sometimes the best way to get information out of a hostile person was to answer a question with another question.

“You were on the board of Lehman Brothers. Why’d the Dracun let Lehman fail?”

Firth took a step closer. His stare was actually unnerving and West wasn’t sure how to read him now.

“Companies, in particular financial companies, fail all the time. Why do you think Lehman was any different?”

“C’mon we all know every major investment bank at that time was probably insolvent. Sloan told me Lehman was chosen to fail for a reason.”

Firth took another step closer and in almost a whisper he said, “Trust me son, you don’t want to get involved in this.”

“I agree with you, but it’s too late.”

Firth took a step back and looked around. A look of resignation swept across his face. “It’s about to be

all over with anyway. I guess it doesn't matter. They let Lehman go bankrupt to send a message."

"Who's they?"

"The Dracun. The Federal Reserve operates as their bank. It is nothing more than a digital ATM machine they alone control."

"You are a member of the Dracun, aren't you Mr. Firth?"

"I had no choice, I was born into it. There is no escape from membership, ever. My name is Nigel R. Firth. The R is for Rothschild. My family's side of the Rothschilds were the original and largest shareholders of Lehman Brothers. By letting the bank fail, its shares became worthless wiping out a large part of my net worth. But more importantly it stripped me of my power within the Dracun. I was excommunicated if you will."

West looked up at the brownstone. "You seem to be doing fairly well."

Firth smiled. "It's all relative. I am still wealthy by your measures but I am now a powerless outcast."

"What did you do to piss them off so badly?"

"It is too long of a story. You wouldn't understand anyway."

"At least tell me the purpose of the Dracun?"

"To create a Panopticom."

"What's that?"

"The term was first used in 18th century England when a theorist suggested it would be possible to build

a prison that allowed a single watchman to observe all the prisoners. An omnipotent watchman who the prisoners would never be able to see while they were incarcerated. It was an ingenious theory that has come to fruition.”

“How do you mean?”

Firth laughed and looked around with his arms held out. “My dear boy certainly you are not that naive. Whether you realize it or not everyone in today’s society is imprisoned. We all operate, whether we subconsciously know it or not, as if every conversation, every action is being watched, recorded and scrutinized. We are controlled by omnipotent Wizards of Oz who pulls our strings like little puppets.”

“So according to you the Dracun has succeeded?”

“Success is a relative term, but yes the Dracun has succeeded. The only problem is once you achieve your only goal, your only purpose, what do you do afterward?”

“This is going to be a strange question but have you ever heard of the Zero Theory?”

“Yes.”

“Is it true?” West asked.

Firth hesitated a second before answering, “That is an unanswerable question.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like the old metaphor says, the answer is like an onion. You have to peel back all the layers until you get to the core and discover the truth, huh.”

“So are you a rotten core or an enlightened soul, Mr. Firth?”

Firth smiled. “It doesn’t matter what or who I am. I can’t do anything about it because it’s too late.”

“Too late for what?”

“To stop it and return the world to how it should be before.”

“Before what?”

“Before the interference.”

“Can you please speak in English?”

“Before the world as we know it was manufactured and manipulated by forces beyond our comprehension.”

“Is this just some big game to all of you?”

“This is not a game.”

“Well how about enlightening me a little.”

“You possess, or I should say lack, something that confounds Ulysses.”

West was afraid to ask but he had crossed the Rubicon long ago. “Who is Ulysses and what is it that I possess that confounds them?”

“You’ve met Ulysses. They have thought you, or one of the others, might provide an answer to their quest to discover The One and that is why they stayed here. But they will soon leave. When they do the system as we know it will collapse.”

West head was spinning. “Look Mr. Firth, tell me who this Ulysses is and maybe we could talk to him. Maybe it’s not too late.”

Nigel looked at his watch. “It wouldn’t be safe for either one of us right now. There is someone I have to meet with and you definitely don’t want to be involved with him. Come back tonight. I will give you a pass at the nighttime checkpoint to get you through. I’ll leave word with the security guard at the building to escort you to my apartment. I’ll tell you everything then.”

“What time.”

“Nine o’clock.”

“Thank you, Mr. Firth. I’ll see you at nine.”

West watched Rothschild go inside. He hopped into a cab and as he sped by Firth’s apartment building he swore he glimpsed a man who looked like Agent Graham entering the building.

“Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.”

— Benjamin Franklin

CHAPTER 14

West’s cell rang at eight-thirty from an unknown caller. “Hello,” he answered.

“Mr. Collins. Hi, this is Nigel. I was wondering if it’s possible to meet at ten at The Black Crown Pub over on 44th?”

“Why the change?”

“Maybe it is an overabundance of caution but for both of our protection I think it would be wise to meet somewhere other than my apartment.”

Firth sounded strange, almost as if he were a little short of breath.

“Are you all right? Is something wrong?”

“No. I assure you I will answer all your questions. Just ask the bartender for me.”

“All right. I’ll see you at ten.”

West left his apartment at nine-thirty and took the subway over to the Black Crown Pub which was located in a rundown two-story brick building in a seedy section of town.

What was a Rothschild, a man of high society, doing frequenting this place? Warning bells were ringing off the hook but West quelled them by convincing himself Firth just wanted to meet where he was guaranteed not to be noticed.

He walked into a smoke filled bar. The bar was small with a low ceiling and a dark, oppressive atmosphere. There were only a handful of men sitting around tables drinking, smoking and playing cards. They looked like Irish gangsters and West thought it was odd not one of them acknowledged his presence.

West walked over to the bar. A burly man whose face was crisscrossed with broken blood vessels hung up a phone and walked over. A toothpick dangled from his mouth.

“Whatcha you havin’?” He growled.

“I’ll take a beer.”

The bartender handed him a beer then placed his hands on the bar and stared at West.

He took a sip of the beer and the bartender continued glaring at him. “Uh, I was supposed to meet Nigel Firth here.”

The bartender took the toothpick out of his mouth and flicked it on the ground. He pointed to the back of the room. "Follow the hall to the last room on the left."

West left his beer on the bar and walked through the pub into a dark narrow hallway. He could barely see anything and every nerve was on high alert. He hesitantly walked down to a room near the end of the hall. The door was open and West walked in.

A single desk was in the middle of the room. Sitting behind it was a man dressed in a black suit, smoking a cigarette and reading a newspaper.

West coughed to get his attention. The man looked up and set the paper down.

"I'm looking for Mr. Firth. I was supposed to meet him here."

"Yes, of course, have a seat," he replied in a thick eastern European accent. "Mr. Firth has been delayed."

West's unease was pushing into the red zone but he couldn't turn and run. Despite his rising misgivings he walked over to the table and sat down in front of the man. "Are you an acquaintance of Mr. Firth?"

"More or less," the man grunted.

West stuck out his hand. "I'm West Collins."

The man smiled but ignored his outstretched hand. "Ivan," he replied.

West glanced around the room. It was dimly lit with dark wood floors, walls and ceiling. An enormous fireplace was on the far wall and there were no windows in the room or any other furniture.

“Do you know when Mr. Firth is supposed to be here? I have to meet my editor for a deadline,” West lied. “I told him I was coming to the Black Crown first to meet Mr. Firth but that I would meet up with him at eleven.”

Ivan smiled then stubbed out his cigarette. “Yes, your editor, a Mr. Simon Stossel I believe. He is the son of the deceased Senator Stossel.”

West had no idea how - or more importantly why - Ivan knew that. “Yes, well I don’t have a lot of time so I guess if Mr. Firth is running late we should just reschedule.”

Ivan’s smile disappeared. “That will not be possible. Anyway, if you are supposed to meet your editor how come he is at Restaurant Million enjoying dinner with a female companion?”

“I am supposed to meet them there,” West stammered.

He heard laughter from behind him and turned to see another man standing in the door entrance. He was tall and built like a solid piece of granite. He wore a black leather jacket and had dark sunglasses on. He walked in and shut the door behind him.

“It is astonishing how blind these sheeple are,” the man spoke to Ivan, “For 30 years we have stripped them of almost all their freedom and rights but they’re so fucking blind they can’t even see it.”

Ivan laughed. “They’re miserable serfs, Aleksei. What do you expect?”

A shot of adrenaline surged through West's body. Firth must have set him up. His flight response took over and he stood.

"If you don't mind please tell Mr. Firth I'll call him later."

But before he could even turn, an explosion of pain ripped through his spinal cord. He lost control of his body and felt himself being slammed back into the chair.

"Your appointment with Mr. Firth has been cancelled," Aleksei said nonchalantly.

"What the hell is this about?" West shouted.

Ivan smiled. "Like I said, Mr. Firth is presently pre-occupied. But we've been sent to answer all your questions. We mean you no trouble."

West heart raced and fear like he'd never known surged through his body. Aleksei stepped in front of him and began taking off his gloves.

"So Mr. Collins, it seems as if you have a problem."

"Look I don't know what this is about but I promise I won't try to contact Mr. Firth ever again. This is all some big mistake."

The two thugs laughed and Ivan said, "I don't think you're ever going to have to worry about that. And do you know why?"

West dutifully shook his head.

"Because Nigel Firth is dead."

"What are you talking about? I just...," West stopped as he began to understand. It was Graham who had entered Firth's building.

“Yes. You were saying?” Ivan prodded.

“There’s some kind of a mistake. I need to talk to Agent Graham. I can explain.”

Ivan stubbed out his cigarette. “Do you know what the Dracun is?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” West stammered. “I swear. I’ve heard their name before but in the context of some type of urban legend.”

The two men laughed and Ivan replied, “The Dracun are the ones that make the world go tick-tock. What do you think?”

“I really don’t know.”

“I think the Dracun is all bullshit,” Aleksei said. “We are the ones that make the world go tick-tock.”

“Maybe so,” Ivan rebutted. “But Graham wants us to ask this peon about it.”

“Tick-tock, tick-tock, Mr. Collins,” Aleskei mocked. “We want everything. But why don’t we start with some names.”

“Names! Whose names?”

West glanced over his shoulder toward the door trying to judge if he could make a run for it. A flash of pain tore through his midsection. It happened so fast he didn’t even see the punch coming. West collapsed onto the floor and involuntarily curled up into a tight ball. He gasped for air and felt like he was on the verge of suffocation. After a few minutes of agony Aleksia pulled him up by the lapels of his jacket and threw him back into the chair.

Finally, West managed to get his breath back and he watched in horror as Ivan reached inside his jacket and pulled out a switchblade. He flipped out the knife blade and began cleaning his fingernails.

“So, we will ask you nicely once more, why did you contact Mr. Firth?”

“I was writing an article about the Federal Reserve and I thought he would be a good person to talk to because of his dealing with the Federal Reserve.”

“Very foolish of you Mr. Collins,” Ivan replied.

He opened a drawer and took out a metal tool that looked like a miniature garden pruner.

“First, I’m going to need the name of the person who told you to contact Mr. Firth.”

“Like I tried to tell you, nobody gave me his name. I am a reporter and I wanted to interview him for a story.”

“That lie will cost you a finger.” Aleksei said as he grabbed West’s hand and slammed it on the table.

West tried to struggle but he was completely manhandled by the two larger men. He couldn’t believe this was happening. West watched in horror as Ivan took the metal tool and with one quick snip nonchalantly snipped off his pinkie.

West screamed for 5 minutes straight. Never in his wildest imagination could he have imagined losing a finger could be so painful. A hand slapped him across the side of his head.

“Stop crying like a fucking girl,” Aleksei shouted.

Ivan opened a desk drawer and threw him a towel. West was shaking while cradling his hand, trying to stop the blood flow. He wrapped the towel around his hand, causing the intensity of pain to shoot from a ten to one million.

Ivan pulled out a small bottle from the desk and dumped a pink tablet onto the table.

“Here, take one of these. Best painkiller you’ve never heard of.”

The pill could have been cyanide for all West knew but the pain was so great he was willing to risk it. He swallowed the pill dry.

West sat there in agony as Ivan stared at him. The pain began to subside after a few minutes.

Ivan smiled. “So let’s begin all over. Who told you about Nigel Firth?”

“A banker named Mark Sloan.”

“See how hard was that? Please Mr. Collins, let’s make this easy for both of us from here on out. Please tell me what else Mr. Sloan told you about Nigel Rothschild Firth?” Ivan asked.

West’s survival instincts took over and he decided there was nothing to gain by holding back so he started from the beginning. He told them every single thing he could remember about their conversations, including Sloan’s belief that the most powerful institutions throughout the world were controlled by The Dracun. They listened to his story without commenting or thankfully cutting off another one of his fingers.

Finally, when he was done with his story Ivan asked, “And did Mr. Sloan say what the objectives of the Dracun are?”

“He was talking crazy shit. He said they are the real power in the world and they’ve been around for centuries and their objective is to create a new world order. He thought some alien beings were behind it all. I mean it was all crazy shit.”

“And how did Mr. Sloan say they were going to accomplish this New World Order?”

West flexed his hand. The drug they gave him was some strong shit. He barely felt any pain, only a dull throbbing where his finger used to be.

“He told me their grand plan couldn’t be accomplished until the technology had been developed to basically make people virtual prisoners without them really knowing it.”

Why was he talking so much?, he wondered, before realizing the pill they gave him for pain was probably also some type of truth serum.

He watched Ivan light another cigarette. “Typical American coward,” he said to Aleksei. “They never knew what they had. They don’t even know their own goddamn history.”

Ivan glared at West and asked, “Do you know what your Benjamin Franklin said about liberty?”

West shook his head.

“He said those that give up liberty for security, deserve neither. And that is what you and your country

have chosen my friend. So rest assured we are going to give you neither. But I don't want you to hate us. See, our struggles against one another are really just about basic human nature. Man has chosen sides and fought against one another since the dawn of time. I do not personally hate you. Your problem is you just picked the wrong side.

Anyway, it does not matter. I have one last question and I want you to really think about this because your immediate well-being will depend on your answer. Did this Sloan guy give you any documents or books of any kind?"

West couldn't believe he had forgotten about the book. A flicker of hope rose. Maybe he had been given a bargaining chip to try and save himself.

"Yes. Yes," West stammered. "I swear I wasn't holding this back I just forgot. You can understand with all this..." he raised a blood soaked towel. "But he did give me a book. I completely forgot about the damn thing it was so long ago. Well, it really wasn't a book but a stack of random documents. I didn't even really read it but I can get it for you."

"This is most helpful," Ivan addressed West. "And where is the exact location of this book?"

West thought fast. His answer would probably determine whether he had any chance of getting out of here alive.

"I hid it. I can't really tell you where it is because you would never find it or be able to get to it, but I'd

be more than happy to take you there and give you the book.”

Ivan motioned to Aleksei, who walked behind the desk. Aleksei leaned down and Ivan whispered something to him.

Aleksei nodded and said, “Call Graham first.”

Ivan stood and smiled. “Very good, Mr. Collins. Please excuse us for a few minutes. We have to touch base with a business associate.”

Aleksei stabbed the stub where his finger once was, causing shooting pain to surge through his whole arm. He pointed his cigarette at West. “Don’t even try anything funny or you’ll lose another finger, or worse.”

They left and the door slammed shut. West knew he had bought some time but there was no doubt, one way or another, they were going to kill him. He had to find a way to escape. West stared around the room. No windows. No exit other than the door. He was trapped, which meant he was dead. He got up and started pacing around the room.

He wasn’t sure what he was looking for, a weapon. An escape route. A miracle. West felt a sudden draft of air. He stopped in front of the fireplace. He bent down on his knees and looked up into the flue. He couldn’t believe it but the crawl space was enormous.

Was it possible, he thought? Could he fit inside and somehow jimmy his way up to the roof?

A part of him wanted to wait it out and hope the thugs would let him go but his flight instinct was overpowering.

He walked over to the table, grabbed his pinkie finger off the table and stuck the bloody stump into his shirt pocket. He crawled inside the fireplace and started inching his way up the flue. Ridged grooves inside the chimney helped him make quick progress but he still had to fight the rising panic that he wouldn't make it before the Russians came back. He was sure they carried guns and he would be a sitting duck inside the chimney.

Thank god for the pain medicine because he didn't think he would have been able to climb up the flue without it. He felt a slight gust of wind and when he looked up he could see a few blurry stars in the dark night sky. He had no idea if the top of the fireplace had a big enough opening for him to crawl out, or if there was some type of grate, but he had no choice. He reached the top of the flue. A rusty grate did cover the top but it was not welded on and after a couple shoves West managed to push it off.

West climbed out of the fireplace and out onto the roof. He scrambled over to the side of the roof praying that the building had some type of fire escape. He spotted one on the other side of the roof and ran over. He climbed down the fire escape, hoping his luck would hold.

He reached the bottom with no sign of his killers and West didn't hesitate. He ran down the street without looking back. After he had put a few blocks between himself and the Black Crown he found a cab parked at the curb.

He jumped in and ordered the cabbie to take him to the hospital.

“Every revolution evaporates and leaves behind only the slime of a new bureaucracy.”

— Franz Kafka

CHAPTER 15

“Mr. West. Mr. West. Can you hear me?” A voice kept asking.

West’s eyes flickered then opened. He scanned the darkened room through blurry eyes and was able to focus well enough to see a digital clock on the wall that read four-thirty in the morning.

“Where am I?” he asked groggily to a lady dressed in medical scrubs, standing next to his bed.

“New York General Hospital. Do you remember anything about last night?”

He felt a dull throbbing in his hand. He raised it and saw his hand bandaged in a thick gauze that stretched past his wrist.

Slowly, then very quickly the nightmare from the previous night flooded into his memory and panic began to set in. He had to get out of here because Agent Graham, the Russians or the Dracun would have tracked his admittance to the hospital by now.

The nurse handed him a pill and a glass of water.

“Take this, it will help with the pain. You came in last night missing your pinkie finger. But the good news is the surgeon was able to reattach it.”

The door opened and a doctor entered the room. “Good morning...,” he glanced down at his chart then continued, “Mr. Collins. How are you feeling?”

“Fine, I guess.”

“Terrific. You’re very lucky. Your finger was cut off perfectly and the surgeon was able to reattach it without too much of a problem. You will have to be careful with your hand for a few weeks, but barring an infection you should be good to go.”

West looked at his bandaged hand and was relieved to not have to go through the rest of his life, however short it was at this point, with a missing pinkie.

“Quite a night you had,” the doctor continued. “We rushed you to surgery so there wasn’t much of a chance to gather information for the report.”

“Report?”

The doctor smiled. “We’re required to report all unusual injuries to the Department of Homeland Security Health Records Department.”

“What do you mean unusual?”

“Oh, things like gunshot wounds, knifings, domestic violence, any youth injuries and, as you could probably expect, unexplained missing fingers. All pretty standard stuff.”

“What about patient privacy?” he asked.

The doctor laughed. “That’s a good one. So we have your name, rank and serial number from your National Registration Card that we pulled from your wallet but I need to know exactly how your finger was cut off for the report.”

“It was an accident.”

“Please be more specific.”

“It was a kitchen accident. I was chopping some carrots for a salad and I got a little careless.”

The doctor’s smile disappeared and he turned toward the nurse. “Will you please excuse us?”

She nodded and left the room.

The doctor looked back at him. “Look Mr. Collins, to be honest with you I don’t give a shit how your finger was cut off. It really is none of my business. But here is the problem. I am required by law to report an incident like yours. If I don’t, I will be fined, and probably fired which also means I’ll lose my medical license. Then I can no longer support my family which includes two

young kids. So we have two choices, I can check the box that you refused to disclose the nature of your injuries and you will have two agents from the Department of Health harassing you in 20 minutes. And let me tell you these are not nice people and if they're not satisfied with your answers you'll be placed under arrest until you decide to cooperate. Or we can do this the easy way which is you can give me a reasonable explanation that I can put in the report and hopefully your "little accident" will be cleared, and that will be the end of it. I don't really give a shit either way but you are wasting my time and I have other patients to attend to. So let's try this again, how was your finger cut off?"

"I got mugged over on 55th," he answered, realizing fighting the doctor - who was only a cog within the vast bureaucracy of a corrupt system - wasn't going to help his cause.

"The bastard pulled a knife on me. We scuffled some. It all happened so fast. I think I raised my hand in defense and I guess I got lucky or unlucky depending on how you look at it, but he made a clean strike cutting my pinkie off. I screamed bloody murder and the guy ran off. The last thing I really remember was picking up my finger and coming to the hospital."

"How did you get to the hospital?"

"I flagged a cab."

The doctor jotted down some notes and smiled again. "See, was that so hard? We logged you in last night arriving via cab so your story adds up somewhat.

It will probably pass through The System without raising too many flags but in case you do get a visit from the Department of Health boys you'd better come up with a little bit better lie than the one you gave me."

"I hear you. Thanks, Doc."

The doctor handed him the clipboard. "Just sign for me at the bottom and date."

"I'm a righty," he held up his bandaged hand.

The doctor chuckled. "Do your best with your left hand then."

West obliged and the doctor added, "They'll probably discharge you later this morning. And Mr. Collins, try to stay out of dark alleys."

"Hey Doc, just curious, why do you do this job with all the bullshit you have to put up with?"

"Believe it or not in the old days doctors made a bunch of money and we were generally left alone to take care of our patients, but now, well you know, everything has changed."

"Why do you do it then?"

"Do you have any kids Mr. Collins?"

"No."

"You wouldn't understand then. I have two kids and it's for them. I gave up being general manager of the world years ago. I can only take care of my family. That's my job. And that is why I put up with idiots like you. Good luck Mr. Collins."

West watched the doctor leave and he could feel the pain pill the nurse gave him beginning to dull his

senses. He had a sudden overwhelming urge to go to sleep even though he knew he had to get out of the hospital but he couldn't fight the inevitable and drifted off.

"Wake up. Wake up, West."

He felt his shoulder being poked. He opened his eyes and saw Byron standing next to his bed.

"I see you had a bit of a rough night?"

"Yeah, how'd you know about that?"

Byron shrugged. "I've got my sources."

West stared at Byron through foggy eyes. "You know I saw you standing next to JFK after he was assassinated. He was on the autopsy table and you were with Lyndon Johnson and the head of the Fed. That was you wasn't it?"

"I think the trauma you suffered and the medication has affected you some. How are you feeling?"

"Like you really care," West answered. "What are you doing here?"

"You're lucky because the hospital didn't enter your data into the system until a few minutes ago. If they had, you'd be up shit creek right now. I came here to help you leave before it is too late."

West yawned. "Just leave me alone. I'm tired. I need some sleep. I'm not in the mood for your shit right now."

"You're in a precarious position. You have both DC and the Dracun looking for you. I'd get out of here before it's too late."

West knew he was right and forced himself to sit up. He was getting sick of Byron but his self-preservation instinct took over.

West sat up in the bed. “Yeah, I’m getting bored anyway. Where are my clothes?”

Byron grabbed his clothes from a bin and handed them to West. “Good choice because your friends are probably either on their way, or are waiting for you outside of the hospital.”

He still didn’t trust Bryon but then again what was the alternative? Byron helped him up and West changed into his street clothes. Byron peeked out the door and motioned for West to follow. They hurried to the back stairs and left the hospital through the rear service exit.

West followed Byron down a few streets until a cab pulled in front of them and stopped. Byron opened the door. “Get in.”

West felt a shove and the door slammed. He turned and saw Byron standing on the curb.

“Howdy,” the cabbie said, then peeled away from the curb. He watched Bryon waving goodbye as the cab sped away.

“You need to go back and pick up that other guy,” West said angrily.

The cab driver looked at him in the rearview mirror. He was in his mid-twenties and was dressed in khakis and a crisp button down shirt.

“What other passenger?”

“The guy standing on the street with me.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about. I was instructed to only pick you up.”

West looked back and Byron was gone. He was too tired to argue and he slumped into the seat trying to figure out what he was going to do. They drove for a few minutes before West realized he hadn't given the cabbie a location to go to.

"Drop me off at 110th," he instructed.

The cab sped through a red light and veered onto a ramp leading to FDR Drive.

"Hey, where the hell are we going?" West asked.

The cabbie held up a pistol with a silencer on it. "Don't worry Mr. Collins. I am a good guy. Your buddy Simon sent me to pick you up."

"Where are we going?" West asked again.

"Right now your life is in danger and you need to get out of the city for a little while. Simon made arrangements for you to be flown to a safe location."

"And where is that?"

"For your protection they don't tell me that type of information. I was told only to get you to the air strip as fast as possible. That's it."

"Un-fucking-believable," West cursed, sitting back in the cab's seat.

They entered Holland Tunnel exiting into New Jersey. West sat back realizing there was nothing he could do at this point. At least Simon was the one who had arranged this.

"So what is your story?" West asked the cabbie.

"I'm a cab driver."

“If you are in cahoots with Simon there must be more to it.”

“Before I started driving cabs I went to Brown. Graduated with a political science and corporate psychology degree.”

“What kind of job did you think you’d get with those bullshit degrees?”

“Yeah, I know. I borrowed a small fortune to pay for school because all the guidance counselors in high school and even my parents promised me that a degree from an Ivy League school would pay off. Now I know it was all a lie. My degree is basically worthless and I am indebted to the state for my entire life.”

“How do you plan on paying it off?”

“Are you kidding me? I’ll never pay it off. I was forced to join the Homeland Reserves. Yep, two weeks out of every month I get to go work for Homeland.”

“And on the side you work with the LT’s? That kind of makes you like a double agent.”

“I wish it was that exciting. Mostly, I just drive people around. I guess I shouldn’t complain, at least I got this job. I figure at my current pay scale and my weekend work for Homeland, I only have to work fifty more years, live in a one-bedroom rat infested dump and eat scraps every night to pay for my four years of political brainwashing.”

Another Ivy League cab driver. It was a joke that New York City cabbies had the highest education levels

in the world. The job market had become so bad for college graduates that even the most menial job opening resulted in thousands of college graduate applicants flooding the prospective employer with worthless resumes.

Over the last couple decades, except for corporatists and federal employees, the only people who had steady, decent-paying jobs were individuals who had technical skills in mechanics, machinists, welding, or computer technology. These people were the new upper middle class but unfortunately for the country the new upper middle class was such a small percentage it made almost no impact on the economy. The liberal arts unemployable wage slaves dwarfed the new nouvelle rich blue-collar class.

The cabbie threw back a small paper bag. “Those are for you, Mr. Collins.”

West opened the bag, which contained a bottle of painkillers. “Thanks. Can you at least tell me what airport we are going to?”

“There’s a small airstrip in southern New Jersey. Near the Pennsylvania border.”

West leaned back into the seat and popped open the medicine. He took double the dosage and resigned himself to the fact that he now had no control over his life anymore. Which begged the question, had he really ever?

Maybe it was the medication or maybe he just didn’t care anymore because West didn’t feel panicked or even scared. It was as if the cloud of fear that had ruled his life

had been lifted. It was kind of liberating when you realize you've lost everything and had nothing more to lose.

"How'd you get hooked up with the LT's?" West asked stifling a yawn.

The cabbie looked into the rearview mirror at West. "I want to kill the bad guys."

"And who are the bad guys?"

"I think you already know that," the cabbie laughed.

"I wonder why everyone always thinks it is everyone else who are the bad guys. The only thing consistent about all of this is that we all think we are important. That our actions mean something. But for thousands of years humans have battled one another in various forms all over the world and I bet each time those people thought they were fighting for the fate of their civilization. This time is no different. Civilization will go on without us, one way or another. Individually, we really don't matter that much."

"You might be right about that," the cabbie responded. "But maybe this time if the right group doesn't win civilization might be doomed. What do you think about that?"

"I think you're a nut job."

The cabbie laughed. "So I've been told. We've got a couple hours of driving. Why don't you get some rest?"

West slumped down in the seat and closed his eyes. He drifted off thinking about the sand from his dream.

“To learn who rules over you, simply find out who you are not allowed to criticize.”

— Voltaire

CHAPTER 16

A sharp jarring woke West from his drug induced Adream. He stared out the cab’s window and they were driving down a dirt road cut through a dense forest.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“Coming up to the airstrip,” the cabbie answered. “It’s about as off the System as you can be.”

A small prop plane sat at one corner of the field with someone working on the plane’s engine. The man glanced up at the approaching car for a second then went back to work on whatever he was fixing or checking.

“This place looks more like a cow pasture than an air strip,” West said.

“Like I said, it’s off the System.”

The cab pulled up to the plane. “Good luck Mr. Collins. Maybe I’ll catch you back in New York one day.”

“Yeah, I guess you never know. Good luck to you too.”

West got out and the cab sped off. The mechanic who was working on the plane walked over.

“Howdy, Mr. Collins,” he said in a Southern drawl. “My name’s Kevin. We’re ready to go.”

“Where’s the pilot?” West asked.

Kevin laughed and West watched as the mechanic climbed into the pilot’s seat of the plane. West figured there was no use protesting so he climbed into the co-pilot’s seat thinking maybe dying in a plane crash might be his best option at this point.

Kevin handed him a headset. “We’ll be airborne in a few minutes.”

“Is there enough runway to be able to take off?”

“Most times,” Kevin answered.

West didn’t even want to think what “most times” meant. “Where are we heading?”

“Montana.”

West buckled his seat belt while Kevin flipped the ignition and the propeller spun reluctantly to life. He spun the plane around then gunned the throttle.

West gripped onto the door handle as the plane gained speed on the grassy runway. The plane shook violently as it bounced along the ground. The end of the runway rapidly approached and the bank of trees just at the end of the runway grew larger and larger.

West's death grip grew tighter as he willed the plane to gain lift. Just when he had given up all hope of surviving takeoff the plane lifted dramatically and cleared the trees with little to spare.

He looked over at Kevin, who smiled. "We've got a long flight. You might want to get some sleep while you can."

West's breathing had almost returned to normal so he took two painkillers and closed his eyes. It didn't take long for the narcotics to kick in and once again he drifted off to never- never land.



West woke to find the plane banking steeply. Cold gray clouds stretched out over the horizon. West didn't know if it was his imagination but it seemed the sun had shrunken in size over the last few years, almost as if some force in the universe was pulling it further and further away from Earth. The small dull yellow orb hovered low in the sky overshadowed by dark foreboding clouds.

"Did you have a good nap?" Kevin asked.

West yawned. "Yeah."

"Must have needed it. You were out for almost three hours. How does your hand feel?"

“It hurts like hell,” West answered while popping another pill into his mouth.

“Well, you should consider yourself lucky. Few people escape from Dracun agents like you did. You were as good as dead.”

“How’d you know if they were Dracun or not?”

“Just guessed. No matter who they were, you’re still lucky.”

“Yep. I sure am lucky,” he replied sarcastically. “So how’d you get involved in all of this?”

“I suppose I had nothing better to do.”

“Seriously?”

“What the hell else is there to do? I was bored just getting by day after miserable day. Accomplishing nothing but living. I happened to meet a few people who pushed me in this direction but I did my own research and discovered the truth. So what else was there to do but to fight the Dracun? The funny thing is I didn’t even care if I was wrong about the LT’s, DC or the Dracun. Sometimes you just have to pick a side and go with it.”

“I guess. So what are you like the transportation division for the LT’s or something?”

“Nah, I’m just a bush pilot. After you meet with Tank Wilson I think you will have a better understanding of the big picture.”

“Tank Wilson,” West repeated the name and thought for a second. “You don’t mean the Wall Street trader who disappeared years ago?”

“Yeah, I guess. I never really kept up with that kind of stuff back in the day,” Kevin answered.

“So what did you do in your previous life?”

“I had a little real estate company. Specialized in appraisal work.”

“How’d you like it?”

“I loved it until DC-appointed bureaucrats fucked it all up.”

“What happened?”

“First, they made me join a union.”

“I guess you didn’t have any choice, huh?”

“Not if I wanted to work.”

“What happened after that?”

“The union started telling me what values to enter for my appraisals and how much I could charge. It got so bad I wouldn’t even begin the appraisal process, I would just call their real estate section and ask them to forward me the price they wanted on whatever project I was assigned.”

West shook his head. “At least you had work.”

“For awhile. It all ended when all the licensed appraisers were forced to join a collective.”

“I thought you were in a union, why’d you have to join a collective?” West asked.

“Here was the deal, I worked my ass off to drum up business but once I was forced into the collective, any contract I received was placed into a pool, then a bullshit union appointee would take all the work contracts and divvy them among the members.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Because it was determined it was not fair to the less successful companies or individuals and the powers that be decided it was more equitable to spread the business around to everyone.”

“Fucking crazy. What did you end up doing?”

“I stopped hustling for new business and just completed the contracts I was assigned to.”

“Can’t say I blame you. Why work if you don’t receive the benefits of it. How long did you operate in that fashion?”

“Until I stopped receiving any new contracts or work from the Real Estate Appraisal Collective.”

“Why’d you stop getting contracts? I thought that’s why they set up the collective in the first place, to spread the work around.”

“Those systems always become corrupt and it didn’t take long for the commission to start giving the bulk of the work to a few of their friends, family members or political allies. So I said fuck it.”

“That’s too bad.”

“It was for the best. Things happen for a reason. Anyway, I got my revenge.”

“What did you do?”

“I killed the bureaucrat in charge of dolling out the contracts.”

“You did what?”

“I followed him until I was able to corner him one night in an alley,” Kevin answered nonchalantly.

“I stabbed him with a knife in the stomach so he would die slowly and in great pain.”

“Wow, I guess I’d better not do anything to piss you off. Did you really kill him?”

Kevin looked over at him. “This guy deliberately and maliciously destroyed my life. He took money away from me that I deserved. I had a four year old daughter that needed specialized medical treatment she never got because I didn’t have the money or connections. She died.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“And let me tell you another thing,” Kevin continued. “I killed that guy four years ago and to this day I have never had a second thought about what I did. These fuckers in control never stop and think about the consequences of their behavior.”

West tried to imagine what he would’ve done in Kevin’s place. He couldn’t blame him but he was not sure if he had the balls to do what he had done.

“I thought I remembered hearing Tank Wilson was dead?” West asked trying to change the subject.

“Well, he’s definitely not dead.”

West sat back in his chair and stared out the plane’s window. Tank had been one of the most successful traders ever. He had made tens of billions betting against paper assets in the stock market, the U.S. dollar, and U.S. and European government bonds, while simultaneously amassing a fortune in gold, silver, real estate, equipment, and other tangible hard assets.

West recalled that Tank's mantra whenever he was interviewed was that if Uncle Sam liked it, then he was going to sell or short it. That simple strategy enabled him to make tens of billions of dollars.

The last time West remembered anything about him was during the great U.S. Treasury Bond squeeze. Tank had built a massive short position in government bonds betting that the world's seemingly endless appetite for U.S. debt would dry up sending interest rates higher and bond prices lower. He had made five billion dollars in one single day now known as the Halloween Holocaust when the China/Russia confederacy dumped over two trillion dollars of U.S. government bonds onto the market in a single day.

Unfortunately for Tank, his gains were short lived. He was hauled in front of Congress, where he was dressed down by politicians from both sides of the aisle who were trying to find a scapegoat and deflect attention away from their decades of fiscal mismanagement. One Congresswoman went so far as to try and bring him up on charges of treason by declaring his short position in US treasuries was equivalent to aiding and abetting the enemy.

The treason charges fell short but after the Congressional hearings, the IRS, with backing of Congress and the President, declared the China-Russia Treasury Bond dumping to be a declaration of economic war and Tank was subject to a 100 percent profit tax and fined a couple of million dollars on top of that.

Shortly after his money was seized and he was declared *persona non grata* by DC, Tank vanished into thin air. There had been all kind of rumors that he had been assassinated by the Federal Reserve or that DC had sent him to a prison.

But West also heard a scattering of rumors he had been flipped and had gone to work for the government to avoid being sent to prison. But like most things in the world over the last few decades the truth had become blurred past the point of recognition.

The plane banked one more time and he heard Kevin announce, "Prepare for landing, this is going to be a little hairy."

West looked out the window and didn't see any kind of terrain they could possibly land in.

"Where the hell is the runway?" he asked.

"Eleven o' clock, two miles out."

West squinted. A small strip of dirt appeared to be cut out of the ground. Once again he assumed a death grip on the plane handle.

The plane came in fast and landed hard. West was jerked forward like a ragdoll but the plane stayed in one piece. Kevin taxied to the end of the runway where two pickup trucks were parked with a couple of large, tough-looking men standing around the vehicles.

Kevin turned off the engines. "They'll escort you to Tank's compound. Good luck, West."

West shook his hand. "Yeah, you too. Thanks for the flight."

“No problem. What else was I going to be doing, right?”

West smiled then opened the door and stepped out of the plane.

“Hey,” Kevin yelled out of the door. “Remember, no matter what happens it really is all bullshit anyway. We all have to learn that at some point.”

West grinned, realizing that was the first intelligent thing anyone had said to him in years.

“The Roman Empire was very, very much like us. They lost their moral core, their sense of values in terms of who they were. And after all of those things converged together, they just went right down the tubes very quickly.”

— Dr. Ben Carson

CHAPTER 17

A man who looked like he could snap West in half waved the shotgun he was holding. “Get in,” he snapped.

There was no point arguing so West jumped in the truck. They took off down the dirt road and traveled for about twenty minutes in silence. They passed no buildings, no signs, nothing except for a few outcroppings of trees among a barren landscape. West stared out of the window with the realization that he had never been in such an isolated place in his life. The stark desolation

of the landscape was simultaneously beautiful but unnerving.

The truck came over a rise and slowed as they approached a 20 foot high brick wall. An armed security guard opened a steel gate and waved them into an enormous compound. They drove up to a main building with warehouses stretching as far as the eye could see behind the building.

“What the hell is all this?” West asked the driver, who ignored him.

The truck stopped and a man dressed in old jeans and a flannel shirt rushed out of the front door. He ran around to West’s side of the truck and opened the door.

“Good to meet you Mr. Collins. I’m Bill, Tank’s assistant. I hope you had a good flight.”

West got out of the truck. “It was fine, thanks.”

“Terrific, terrific, please follow me.”

West followed his hyper escort into the building and down a long corridor. The man stopped in front of a closed office door and knocked lightly.

“Come in,” he heard someone call out from behind the door.

Bill opened the door and motioned for him to enter. West walked into the room where a burly man who looked to be in his late 50’s sat behind a large desk. The man had salt-and-pepper hair cut short in a military fashion. He was wearing faded blue jeans, a white button down shirt and cowboy boots. He smiled broadly as West entered the room.

He walked around the desk. “Ah, Mr. Collins. Glad to finally meet you. I’m Tank Wilson.”

West raised his bandaged hand and shook hands with his good one.

“Have a seat.” He motioned to the leather chair in front of his desk. “I heard about your little accident. How’s the hand feeling?”

“I guess I’ll live. But what I’d really like to know is why I’ve been shanghaied here?”

Tank went back behind his desk and sat down. West looked around the office and the decor was what he always visualized a gentleman rancher’s office would look like complete with a hardwood floor and a thick wooden beam stretching across the ceiling. There was even a stuffed bear’s head mounted above the fireplace with bookshelves lining an entire wall behind Tank’s desk.

“I don’t know if I would think of it as being shanghaied,” Tank answered. “You really don’t have too many other places to go.”

West supposed he was right about that but he was getting sick of all the bullshit answers.

“Look, I’m sorry but I just had my finger cut off by some Russian criminals who are in cahoots with a Homeland agent. I have no doubt they would have killed me if I hadn’t gotten lucky and escaped. Now, I’ve been flown to somewhere in butt fuck Egypt. Why don’t you just tell me what you want with me?”

Tank laughed again. “Fair enough, it is pretty simple. I want to destroy the Dracun and maybe we can help each other.”

“See was that too hard?” West replied. “You’re the first person in this vast Dracun conspiracy club I’ve meet who hasn’t talked in complete bullshit riddles.”

“I guess you’re welcome then.”

“So why don’t you tell me what your desire to destroy the Dracun have to do with me?”

“For one, you wrote many anti-DC newspaper articles before Washington, DC was even referred to as DC. We know you’ve had extensive contact with Mark Sloan who was sympathetic to the LT’s. We know your boss Stossel and his paper is a communication front for the LT’s. You’re much more intertwined in this drama than you realize and we also know you are in serious trouble right now, so maybe, we can help you and you can help us.”

“How can I possibly be of any help to you?”

“You’d be surprised. We recruit many people from many different walks of life. You’re still a reporter with access to certain things.”

West laughed. “*You’ve got to be kidding. I work for the World Weekly Enquirer.*”

Tank’s expression grew more serious. “But we both know that the tabloid serves another, much more important purpose. Look, if we can get you back to the paper you may be valuable asset to us at some point down the road.”

West held up his injured hand. "I doubt that."

Tank grabbed a cigar off his desk. "Want one?"

"No thanks. Anyway, to be honest with you I don't know if I believe this entire Dracun mumble jumble."

He watched Tank light up his cigar. "What do you believe in then?"

"Occam's Razor makes more sense to me."

"So you adhere to the philosophy that the simplest answer is the right explanation?"

"Yes I do. Since the dawn of civilization man has experienced golden eras and dark ages. Individually, we'd all like to think we live in a different age or that each of us are special in some way but everything and I mean everything has been done before. Right now it's just our bad luck that economically, we're busted. Politically, we're run by tyrants. Institutionally, everything is corrupt and individually we're morally bankrupt. Our civilization is in a massive decline and bad things happen to crumbling societies. We've reached the Dark Ages like Europe did after the collapse of the Roman Empire. The System needs to be cleansed. One way or another it will happen. It's that simple."

Tank blew out a stream of white cigar smoke toward the ceiling. "You believe we are in a secular era of a collapsing civilization, huh?"

"However you want to put it. I prefer a slow crumble rather than an outright collapse. It is a law of nature that structures disintegrate very slowly but

the end comes very quickly, usually by the means of war. I believe that is where we are for this epoch of civilization.”

“You don’t think this decline can be stopped or reversed?” Tank asked.

“It’s too late. We’ve slit our wrists. It’s just a matter of time before we bleed to death.”

“Pretty pessimistic. So I guess one could extrapolate that individually and collectively as a country we have succumbed to a deep-seeded character flaw for self-destruction?” Tank asked.

“I’m not a psychiatrist or sociologist or whoever studies that shit. All I know is this ebb and flow has gone on since the dawn of man. And like hundreds of other periods in our history right now our world has disintegrated into complete lunacy run by corrupt individuals who use the power of authority given to them by governments as their weapon to maintain and enforce their greedy, narcissistic, sociopathic and megalomaniacal behavior.”

“I agree with everything you have said but where we disagree is that I believe we have the power to do something about this. And that is what we are fighting for. Otherwise, what is the point?”

West shrugged. “To survive and go on.”

“I don’t want to just survive. You know I read your articles when you wrote for the *Wall Street Journal*. You were one of the few people who started grasping what the world was turning into.”

“You’re wrong about that. I simply had a voice. Most half-way intelligent people in America knew what was going on but had no power or outlet to do anything about it. Anyway, what did I accomplish? Nothing.”

“That’s because you’ve done exactly what you said earlier. You’ve survived and that is your problem because just living to survive goes against human nature. You’ve been your own worst enemy.”

“I think you’ve been cooped up in your isolated compound for too long. You don’t know what it is like out there.”

“Maybe so,” Tank rebutted. “But my point is I believe America was once a great country, and it still is made up of great people. DC is the problem. It is a rotting cesspool of absolute corruption. The politicians and bureaucrats are slave puppets to the Dracun who are now in full control of the show. If we conquer them we can restore our greatness.”

“I think you’re dreaming.”

“That’s a defeatist statement but on a personal level, at this point, what options do we or you have?”

“I have no options. I can’t go back to New York.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Look we’re all expendable but DC’s enemy list is so long they can’t even keep up with it but more importantly, we have the power to make the Dracun forget things.”

“Forget? Like what? And how?”

“We could make them disremember you for instance.”

“How?”

“I’m not guaranteeing your safety because no one is safe in this world but we have our ways. What I am offering you is the chance to discover the truth and to make up your own mind whether you want to live in the world forcibly handed to us by the Dracun. Or do you want to at least fight for something you believe in like freedom or good over evil?”

West knew he was screwed. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to realize his only real choice at this point was to go along with the LT’s, but either way he knew his expected life span was dwindling rapidly.

“I’ll listen to what you have to say and think about it but not because of your little speech,” West answered. “The good and evil thing is contrived bullshit. The simple fact is I have no other choice at this time.”

“There are always choices but I’m glad to hear you are open to our offer because your skills are going to be greatly needed.”

“I really doubt that, but let me ask you something that I don’t understand. How come you’ve been able to hide from DC and the Dracun?”

Tank grinned. “You cannot truly hide from the System. It is impossible. I suppose a single individual could disappear in a cave in Mongolia if they wanted to but if The System really, really wanted to find you, it would only be a matter of time.”

“So why does the government let you operate?”

“Because they know all about us.”

“I don’t understand. Then why aren’t you rotting away in some FEMA Camp?”

“I said you can’t hide but that doesn’t mean you can’t fool them. This complex is a DC owned agriculture center. We are one of six federally owned transportation and storage facilities located throughout the country that stores and transports genetically modified grains. This particular center exports wheat, corn and soybeans mostly to South America in exchange for political allegiances and access to their natural resources.”

“What about the Middle East?” West asked prodding for information.

“No one ships to the Middle East any longer.”

West knew the government and main stream media had been lying for years about what had happened in the Middle East.

“Do we still buy oil from over there? I heard their deposits are gone.”

“After we had consumed most of their oil we bombed them back to the Stone Age, including our longtime allies Saudi Arabia. Then whoever was left fought against each other for control and whatever natural resources remained, which wasn’t much. Now the whole Middle East is a barren wasteland with enough biological and chemical fallout to discourage anyone from ever going there.”

“I didn’t see any shipping facilities,” West probed. “How do you ship the grain?”

Tank waved a finger at him. “See I knew you are a good reporter, always gathering information. We ship it by rail. When I first built this facility, largely with my own funds, I insisted that the government divert a rail line here. The train depot is on the other side of the property and we get a cargo train here every day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. The shipment goes straight down to New Orleans where it is then transported to its final destination via container ships. But the rail also serves another purpose for us because it’s kind of our equivalent of the Underground Railroad. We can send other cargo like people and information on the trains and we largely don’t have to deal with TSA and Homeland Security.”

“You still haven’t explained why the government allows you to operate this place?”

“You remember when the Chinese started dumping our treasuries during the great Bond Crash?”

“Of course, and I seem to recall you made a fortune from that until the government made you give it all back.”

Tank looked at his cigar with a wide grin. “That’s mostly correct. But I saw the writing was on the wall and my exit strategy had already been put in place. A few years earlier I had negotiated a secret deal with the Department of Agriculture to provide the capital to build this facility. It was a great deal for the government because they didn’t have to put up any money and they received most of the profits and benefits. My only

stipulation was that I was to be left alone to run the place as I saw fit. Of course, in order to accomplish all this it still took a couple hundred million in bribes and payoffs to the head of the USDA and a couple other high-ranking bureaucrats. I also had to give the treasury all the money back I made shorting their bonds but it was a small price to pay. I'd say it was worth the investment."

"Good old-fashioned crony capitalism at its best. But the USDA doesn't know your true operation here, right?"

"Of course not. Right now I am a valuable subcontractor for the Feds. We are inspected by the USDA every other Thursday and we abide by every rule, regulation, and all the red tape bullshit the Government throws on us. Our real facilities are underground. It's ironic but the truth is we are operating or hiding, however you want to look at it, right in front of their noses."

West grinned. "I do have to say that's kind of brilliant."

"To survive in this game you have to turn the tables and, like the Dracun, you have to transform yourself into a parasite. We feed off the host, DC. In the real world that is how you destroy something much bigger and more powerful than yourself."

"But if just one person spilled the beans you'd be history."

"Most of the people working here are straight-laced government employees. They are more than happy

to have a roof over their heads, steady employment and decent food. They are nothing more than worker drones. They don't have access to our underground facilities and we are discreet with our comings and goings. But there is always a risk."

"You know I could rat you out for a lot of money."

"Yes, but you know I'd kill you if I thought you were a threat to our operation. Look, whether you like it or not you have passed the Mendoza Line and there is no returning. Here read this."

Tank passed him a copy of the *New York Times*. "This is today's paper. Turn to page six."

West flipped to the page and read the headline: **PROMINENT FINACIER AND PHILANTHROPIST NIGEL FIRTH FOUND MURDERED.**

"Holy shit," West muttered.

"Something big is happening. The Dracun have killed one of their own and they allowed the story to be published because they're sending a message to someone."

West read the story:

European financier and philanthropist Nigel Firth was found dead in his home yesterday afternoon. Firth was strangled with piano wire in his brownstone where he was discovered by his wife of 46 years. The assailant is still at large and the authorities want to question West Collins, a reporter for the World Weekly Enquirer. Anyone who has any information about Mr. Collins or his whereabouts are asked to call the Department of Homeland Security or the New York State Crimes Division immediately.

West flung the paper on Tank's desk.

"I'm being set up. I didn't kill Firth. That article is a complete lie and I can prove it. I was at his building and we did have a conversation and I was supposed to meet him later that night. Hell, I thought he was the one who had set me up and was trying to kill me."

"You and I know you weren't responsible, but that doesn't really matter does it?"

"It is all about the power and control, isn't it?"

"I think it is more about money. There are no poor tyrants or emperors. Money equals wealth which translates into power. In Rome it was silver and gold coins. In Mayan civilization it was agriculture and water. In the United States it was paper and that's when our true decline began in the 60's with three defining events. The war in Vietnam, LBJ's Great Society and Nixon who first laid the foundation for the destruction of the dollar by taking us off the gold standard that ultimately destroyed the heart and soul of this country by creating the Petrodollar System."

"You're starting to sound like Sloan. I never did quite understand the petrodollar deal?"

"A petrodollar was simply U.S. dollars oil-exporting countries received from selling their oil, which was then deposited into U.S. banks. Nixon never got credit for it but for a couple of decades it was a stroke of genius. At the time the Petrodollar System was a brilliant political and economic move because it forced the world's oil money to flow through the US Federal Reserve, which

created an ever-growing international demand for both US dollars and US debt.

In 1973 President Nixon and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia struck a deal that required Saudi Arabia to accept only US dollars as payment for oil and it also required them to invest their oil profits in US Treasury bonds, notes, and bills. In exchange, Nixon pledged to protect Saudi Arabian oil fields from the Soviet Union and other hostile nations like Iran and Iraq.

By 1975 all members of OPEC and most oil-producing countries agreed to sell their oil only in US dollars. Over time the petrodollar system spread beyond oil with the majority of international trade and payments for commodities being denominated in US Dollars.

For decades the Petrodollar System allowed the US to reap many rewards because it created constant worldwide demand for US dollars. A strong US dollar allowed Americans to buy imported goods at a massive discount – the petrodollar system essentially created a subsidy for US consumers at the expense of the rest of the world. Think about it this way: we have imported vast amounts of the world's natural resources and products in exchange for paper IOU's backed by nothing more than governmental decree.

The net result was that through the 1980's and 1990's the strong dollar helped America create a lifestyle for the majority of its citizens that has never come close to being duplicated in the history of civilization.

But the Petrodollar System had downsides and unintended consequences. The first problem with the Petrodollar System was that the availability of cheap imports decimated the US manufacturing industry.

But the biggest problem with the Petrodollar System was once international trade began to shift away from the US Dollar into different currencies it resulted in a long term decline in the value of US dollars.”

“And of course, economic decline brings instability,” West interjected.

“It brings the death of civilizations. Despite what public schools teach 9/11 was won by America’s enemies. They succeeded in destroying what they hated the most about America, which was individual freedom and liberty. 9/11 ushered in the State Security System. Nineteen Saudi Arabians flew planes into three buildings and how did we respond? We declared war on countries in the Middle East who had nothing to do with the attack, but the real tragedy of 9/11 was America went down the wrong fork in the road. We declared war on ourselves.

The Department of Homeland Security was established solely to protect the United States from terrorist activities. Yet the organization has become the largest terrorist organization to ever exist in the history of the world. Their sole *modus operandi* is to fight terrorists and the terrorists are everyone and everywhere.”

“Look I don’t disagree with anything you have said but I still don’t understand how I can help you at all.

I am wanted for murder. If anything I would think I would be a liability for you.”

“It’s possible we can find a solution.”

“How?”

“I’ll call in some chips.”

“We’re talking about the murder of a very well-known and connected person, a Dracun for Christ sakes. I don’t think there is anything you can do about it.”

“You shouldn’t underestimate the corruption of the system we live under. No one matters and everyone is expendable. For the right price, anything and everything can be bought. This is lesson number one and don’t forget it. You should think of us as double agents. We have access to the System, we operate within the System but our objective is to destroy the System. Sometimes innocent people get killed. You need to adopt that mindset if you have any chance of surviving going forward.”

“So the end justifies the means?” West asked.

“I wish it was that simplistic. You remember the big scandal about 10 years ago when Warren Hathaway went to prison for life?”

“Yeah. Wasn’t he arrested for trying to take possession of black market gold?”

“That’s right. He was one of the most loyal, most destructive of the corporatist that served the Dracuns. The guy truly was an evil son of a bitch. Of all the people I’ve dealt with over the years I don’t think I ever came across a more hypocritical, lying weasel than that guy.

It is amazing how much people will believe in something if it comes from DC or the fucking television. I mean everything about who he was and how he acquired his wealth was a complete lie perpetuated by the System.”

“I know all about Hathaway, I wrote an article about him. He was the ultimate “do as I say not as I do” douche bag. But the *Wall Street Journal* pulled my article for obvious reasons.”

“We were responsible for his downfall.”

“How?”

“Besides the fact that he was a fraud and a liar? We figured out his biggest weakness was he had a compulsive need to be in the spotlight. In his mind he needed constant adoration, so we attacked his weakness.”

“How’d you set him up?” West repeated.

“We knew a guy like that could buy himself out of just about any situation so we had to do it in such a way that left him with no chance of escape. We set up the transaction but we also tipped off high-ranking officials from all the government agencies then we made sure journalists from a dozen different outlets were there and we also contacted the Citizens Watchers in the local area. We knew they would be practically salivating over the prospects of how large the government reward money would be. And once he was caught red-handed by everyone DC had no choice but to turn on him.”

“So in the end he got what he deserved.”

“It was never reported in the news but he was shanked to death by another prisoner who had been

financially ruined by Hathaway's company with DC's compliance a few decades before."

West leaned back in his chair. "You know it is only a matter of time before the Dracun will discover your operation."

"Probably. But this is only one operation. We deliberately spread ourselves out and we don't have a central chain of command. Like I said, the simple fact is every single one of us is expendable, including me."

"And that doesn't bother you?"

"Of course it does. I have an exit plan if I have the time to enact it. And if I don't, I'll die with no regrets except for the fact that I got caught."

"You still haven't told me specifically what you want me to do for you."

"You'll work with Simon. He needs lots of help. Like him you'll operate as kind of a liaison between us and various LT groups spread out through the United States. Much of that activity is done through code used in the *Weekly's* articles."

"Aren't you afraid I'll rat you out?"

"I'll just have to take that chance."

West thought about it for a second, then reached his hand across the table and shook with Tank.

"Good, we'll start getting your name cleared inside the System and hopefully you'll be back in New York in a day or two. C'mon, I'll show you to your room. You can shower up and take a quick nap before dinner."

“The smallest minority on earth is the individual. Those who deny individual rights cannot claim to be defenders of minorities.”

— Ayn Rand

CHAPTER 18

West looked around the guestroom which was larger and much nicer than his dump back in the city. What in the hell had he gotten himself into? He was in as much control of his life as a dandelion pedal spinning through a hurricane. He was exhausted and his eyelids felt like steel curtains. He took two pain pills and sat down on the edge of the bed. After a few minutes the pain started to dull and his mind began to calm. He didn't feel like fighting anymore. He lay down and drifted off to sleep.



West was running through the darkened streets of the city in a panic. Faceless Dracun agents were closing in on him. He ran blindly into an alley and halted to a stop. He bent over trying to catch his breath, his heart was beating erratically. But he couldn't stop now. West straightened back up prepared to flee again as a figure emerged from the shadows.

A sense of relief swept over West when he recognized it was Tank. He would save him from the Dracun.

"It never ceases to amaze me how naive people like you are," Tank said.

"I don't understand?"

"You are so caught up in the miniscule dilemmas of your own life that you cannot see the forest for the trees. Hell, you're so damn blind you can't even see the goddamn trees."

"What you are talking about?" West stammered.

Tank pulled out a gun and pointed it at West.

"What are you doing?" West screamed.

"You've been lying to yourself your whole life. You know what you are and now the price has to be paid."

Time slowed. He heard a muffled explosion and watched the bullet exit the barrel of the gun.

West bolted up in bed covered in a sheen of sweat. Someone was knocking on his door.

"Yes," he called out trying to calm his breathing.

“Mr. Collins,” he heard a female voice reply from the other side of the door. “If you feel up to it Tank wants you to join us for a drink.”

“Ah, okay. Can you give me a few seconds to clean up? I just woke up.”

“No problem. Take your time,” the woman replied. “I’ll wait out here.”

West got out of bed still shaken by the dream. He walked over to the sink and splashed cold water on his face. He stared at his reflection in the mirror. A week ago he looked like shit, but now, he looked like crap piled on top of old shit.

He dried his face, took a few deep breaths then went over and opened the door. A woman was standing up against the wall in the darkened hall. She held out her a hand.

“Hi, my name is Sam.”

West shook her hand. “Hi. I’m West.”

He suddenly felt self-conscious and wished he didn’t look so bad. Sam was somewhere in her mid-thirties. She had long raven hair that fell halfway down her shoulders. She wore designer jeans with a black turtleneck, gold hoop earrings and a leather jacket. Her complexion contained a hint of cocoa that was prevalent in South Americans but it was her eyes that made his heart skip a beat. Even in the dark hall her translucent emerald eyes radiated a beauty he did not think was possible.

“You ready?” she asked.

“Ah, yeah sure,” West managed to reply. “Where are we going?”

“Have a drink with Tank. C’mon, follow me.”

She turned and West dutifully followed her down the hall. They rounded a corner and she replied over her shoulder, “You know I used to read your articles years ago in the *Wall Street Journal*.”

“Yeah, that was a long time ago, and it was a much different world back then. So what did you think?”

She smiled and replied, “Someone once said in a time of universal deceit that telling the truth is a revolutionary act.”

“Right,” West said trying to remember who had said that. “If you don’t mind me asking what happened to you? You just disappeared.”

The last thing West wanted to talk about was his past. “It’s a long story but the short of it is I got fired and then trouble just seemed to follow.”

“What sort of trouble?”

“I seemed to have a penchant for self-destruction.”

Luckily Sam didn’t press for anymore answers and West followed her into a dimly lit library. Bookshelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling and a comforting old leather smell permeated the room. West walked over to one of the shelves and pulled out a book whose spine was cracked and weathered with age. He turned to the first page and smiled. It was a first edition Charles Dickens *A Tale of Two Cities*. He put the book back into its space and traced his fingers down the spines of the books.

The authors carried the names of Orwell, Twain, Bradbury, Lovecraft, Vonnegut, Sinclair, Plato, Lewis, Shakespeare, Hemingway, London, Tolstoy and Poe. Timeless treasures bound in leather filled with magical words born onto paper spilling forth the stories of life with all its heartache, joy, tragedies, struggles and beauty.

The book titles were *The Iliad*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Macbeth*, *Dracula*, *Count of Monte Cristo*, *Of Mice and Men*, *1984*, *Slaughter House-Five*, *White Fang*, and *Brave New World*.

A voice from behind him interrupted his thoughts. "I knew a man of words would appreciate my collection. The writers have stopped writing and the readers have stopped reading and the dreamers, well they only have nightmares now but I will never forget."

"How'd you get all these books?" West asked Tank, astonished at the magnitude of the collection.

"Back when we lived in a cultured civilization this collection would have cost a fortune. But I've been able to amass all this for a relatively small amount of favors and some Digidollars. It seems people are more interested in eating than reading or collecting books."

Tank walked over to a small bar and picked up a bottle of wine. He poured three glasses and carried them over.

He handed a glass each to West and Sam. West cautiously took a small sip because of the medication and his propensity to consume a thousand if he drank one.

Tank walked over to the one of the bookcases and pulled out a thick book. “You ever read this one, West?” Tank handed him the heavy book.

He traced a finger across the cover and smiled. “Ann Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*. I haven’t seen a copy of this in years.”

“That’s because the government banned the book from schools and then destroyed every copy they could find.”

West felt the weight of the book in his hands containing over six hundred thousand words of wisdom.

“Who is John Galt?” He asked Tank.

Tank smiled obviously understanding the reference to the hero in *Atlas Shrugged*. “I think Rand answered that when she said, *Galt went on strike along with all the creative minds of the world who have refused to allow their inventions, art, business leadership, scientific research or new ideas be taken from them by the government or by the rest of the world.*”

“Too bad her books were blacklisted by the Department of Education. They should be mandatory reading for everyone,” Sam replied.

“Come now, Sam,” Tank said sarcastically. “I don’t think the Department of Education appreciates the promotion of rational self-interest over bureaucratic mandated collectivism. I mean to think it’s preposterous Rand argued that when men are compelled through collectivism’s forced moral code to place the needs of their neighbors above their own rational self-interest,

the result is chaos and evil. I mean who cares if incentive is destroyed and corruption becomes inevitable.”

“You’re right about that,” Sam interjected. “I know this is a pretty lame story but I remember in high school I decided to compete in swimming rather than team sports because I liked the fact that if I won or lost it was all up to my individual hard work and talent. During my senior year I qualified to go to the state championships for freestyle. There were ten of us from across the state competing and I won by five lengths. I had spent four years getting up at five in the morning to train before school and it paid off. I was the fastest freestyle swimmer in the state. I was ecstatic, that was until the awards ceremony.”

“What happened?” West asked.

“An official from the state’s Athletic department showed up. No one knew why the hell she was there including the coaches but she took control of the awards ceremony. Up to that point it had been customary to award a gold medal for first, silver for second and a bronze for third. Well, this fat pig gets up on the platform and gives a thirty-minute political speech about the new governor and how every student athlete is important and how everyone’s achievements needed to be celebrated and on and on. So when it came time to hand out the medals, instead of awarding the top three finishers she called all the participants up to the platform. She handed out a silver medal to everyone in the race and declared that through our collective efforts our state’s education and athletic departments have proven to be the champion.”

“Welcome to America,” Tank said.

“Yeah. I had beaten out hundreds of other swimmers across the state and then I won against the ten best and I remember standing there with ten other girls looking down at my silver medal. I felt sick to my stomach. The sense of accomplishment and all the hard work I had done to accomplish my goal were crushed.”

“Why’d everyone get a silver medal?” West asked. “Why not just give everyone a gold medal?”

“The gold medal was awarded to the state Athletic Department. Can you believe that? That was the last day I ever swam competitively.”

West shrugged. “What can you do?”

Sam pointed to the copy of *Atlas Shrugged*. “I discovered this book shortly after and it changed how I looked at the world. And it completely changed how I viewed the United States of America. Rand said, *that man, everyman, is an end in himself, not the means to the ends of others. He must exist for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself. The pursuit of his own rational self-interest and his own happiness is the moral purpose of his life.* Anyway, the govocrat got what she deserved.”

“What happened?”

“She was found murdered at her home two weeks later.”

West remembered the pilot’s story and he began to ask her what had happened but thought better of it. He returned to the books and next to *Atlas Shrugged* was *The Prince* by Machiavelli.

That's kind of weird, West thought. Ann Rand and Machiavelli were on opposite sides of the philosophical spectrum.

Rand felt a man was a means to an end while Machiavelli supported the employment of cunning in general conduct and he felt there was no such thing as immoral behavior. The means, any means, always justify the ends. West thought the corrupt bureaucrats and the people behind the rise of state collectivism held Machiavelli's moral code.

Tank set his wine glass down. "It's time."

"Time for what?" West asked.

"You are about to witness what few people have ever seen."

"What's that?" West asked.

"You ready to take the red pill?"

"I thought I already had?"

Tank laughed. "You are about to meet the representatives from every major resistance group in the United States or as the government calls them the LT's."

"They're here?" West asked.

"Yep. Even the ones you didn't think existed. The Rand Coalition, The Constitutionals, The Patriots, Tea Party, The Capitalist Society and the leaders from each region of The American Militia."

"Why are they all here?"

"I guess you're about to find out." Tank answered.

Tank set his glass down and West followed him and Sam out of the library.

“Gentlemen, you can’t fight in here, this is the War Room!”

— President Merkin Muffley

CHAPTER 19

They walked down a hall until Tank stopped in front of a storage closet. He opened the door and motioned for them to step in. They all squeezed into a room that was barely big enough for them to move. Tank took out his phone and quickly pressed some numbers on the keypad.

West felt a movement and was slightly thrown off balance before realizing the storage closet was actually moving down.

He looked over at Sam. “It’s an elevator,” she replied.

“We’re going to an underground complex,” Tank added. “It’s where the meeting is taking place.”

After about thirty seconds the storage elevator stopped then opened. West followed them down another hallway that led to a door. Tank flung it open and they entered into what appeared to be a large conference room with monitors and computer terminals lining the walls.

A large round table was in the center of the room where leaders of the various LT groups were seated. Tank walked over to an older woman who was sitting at the head of the table. He whispered something into the ear and she nodded.

Sam took his arm and led him to a row of chairs situated a few feet behind the table. They sat down and Tank took the last seat at the table next to the older lady who then stood, cueing everyone in the room to rise.

They stood and Sam whispered into his ear, "That's Margaret Simmons, the leader of The Patriots."

West looked over at her with astonishment. Simmons looked more like a grandmother who should be playing bridge rather than leading a government designated terrorist organization. West had heard rumors The Patriots were responsible for the trial and execution of Senator Reidson and the assassination of the Federal Reserve Chairman. Supposedly, The Patriots had declared war on Washington, DC and anyone working or supporting them was considered fair game as an enemy combatant.

Simmons began to recite the Pledge of Allegiance and everyone in the room joined in. She then called

upon one of the militia members who followed with a prayer asking for guidance, strength and wisdom.

After the prayer everyone sat and Simmons announced, “We all know why we are here. We have dreaded this moment for years but DC is close to implementing its Final Plan. Their endgame will be the last stage for the creation of a virtual prison in the United States. The Final Plan will make every person in this country a prisoner, a slave with no rights, no privacy and no escape.”

“We have learned that within the next two weeks the President in conjunction with the Homeland Security Director will issue an Executive Order that will require every single person in the United States to be imbedded with a microchip. This microchip is a state-of-the-art tracking and recording device that once implanted will be impossible to remove.”

An anxious murmur rose from the room.

“Quite frankly, I’m surprised it took them this long,” one of the militia leaders replied.

Simmons turned around and motioned to a man behind her who stood and approached the table.

“It’s worse than you think,” Simmons continued. “I’ve asked Dr. Hamilton to brief you on this chip and DC’s plan. He was an original member of the scientific team that designed the chip technology.”

Looks of pure hatred burned in the eyes of the LT representatives and the atmosphere in the room turned palatable.

Simmons must have expected the response because she quickly added, “For the last two years the doctor has been providing us with valuable information about the program and we asked him to stay on the job, despite great personal risks. A month ago he was briefed on DC’s Final Plan and that’s when we extracted him. We all owe him a debt of gratitude.”

Simmons words seemed to temper the atmosphere in the room and she sat back down, giving the floor back to the doctor.

He looked around the room and began, “I know many of you probably detest me due to my work with the government. I am not here to ask for your forgiveness. I have been a scientist for my entire adult career, over fifty years. Most of you don’t remember what this country was like forty or fifty years ago but it was a much different place. Back then I was proud to work for the United States and I truly believed I was helping this country. The history books won’t be able to pinpoint an exact moment, or an event that led us down the road we have chosen. It just slowly happened. Bit by bit this country crumbled into what it has become today. Yes, I admit to you I am guilty in that I should have left or done something years ago but I can’t change that now. What I can change is the reason I stand before you now and that is to hopefully help you stop DC’s Final Plan Project.”

“Excuse me Doctor, but how do they expect to be able to successfully implement this program,” a Rand

Coalition member interrupted angrily. “There will be tens of millions of people who won’t stand for it.”

“It will be easier than you think,” the doctor quickly countered. “They will phase the plan in over a period of five years. I’ve seen the data from the forecast models. The country’s non-incarcerated population is around 250 million. The government statisticians calculate that 80 percent of the country will be, for lack of a better word, good sheeple and accept the chips in the name of national security but mostly for personal survival.”

“Survival. What, are they going to execute anyone who refuses to be chipped?” the Rand representative called out.

“No. But for starters all forms of government benefits will be tied into the chips. The Executive Order states that any citizen who has not been micro-chipped cannot receive one penny in government funds. That means no Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, grants, health subsidies, unemployment benefits, food stamps, and DigiDollar supplements. Absolutely no financial assistance at all if you refuse to get chipped. And if you work in a federal job or with any government subcontractors or affiliated companies your continued employment will be based on complicity.”

There was a murmur in the room at the realization of the scope of the government’s plan.

The doctor continued, “So the statisticians believe the remaining twenty percent of the population will be

divided into two categories. Those two groups are simply referred to as The Reluctant and The Hardcore. The Reluctant will represent 95 percent of the remaining population who will refuse the initial micro-chipping and that comes to roughly ten million people. DC estimates that 99.2% of this group will accept implantation of the chips within five years.”

“That’s bullshit. How do they figure that?” the Rand representative asked.

“First of all, remember they will get no government financial assistance so many of these people will agree to it eventually. But there will be additional executive orders phased in after the first year. The orders direct that if you are not chipped you won’t have access to medical treatment or health insurance benefits. It will be a government requirement for employment, hospital treatments, or medical emergencies.”

“I still believe DC is way off on their statistical assumptions,” the Rand member interjected with a lot less confidence in his tone.

“Remember, The Reluctant are the population segment that does not include you or the people that support you. They are independent minded but they are in The System and to remain there, they’ll have to be chipped. Let me give you a couple examples of how easy it will be to get a Reluctant who initially rejected the chipping to succumb. Say a child gets sick, so the mother takes that child to the doctor. Let’s say the child needs medicine or god forbid a lifesaving surgery.

At this point every medical facility will have at least one employee from Homeland Health who has only one job which is to coerce the chipping of the Reluctant. The case would be turned over to the Homeland Health Representative who will give the mother two choices. Either accept the implants for everyone in her family or the child receives no treatment. I don't think I have to tell you the pressure that would be placed on any family faced with this dilemma. It is a near 100 percent certainty they would eventually give in to being chipped. Here is another example. Let's say a father is called in by his boss and is given the ultimatum, get chipped or lose your job. What do you think his choice will ultimately be if he needs to make money to provide food and shelter for his family?"

West watch the Rand rep shake his head, acknowledging the truth in the doctor's statement.

The doctor looked at each individual in the room. "The last population segment would be The Hardcore, which basically represents the LT's. This is you. Your demographics only represent less than two million Americans. The numbers have been run and even if not a single LT voluntarily accepts the chip, from an actuarial standpoint the majority of this segment will be deceased within a decade. Keep in mind the government databases will also identify all suspected LT's and they will be rounded up by special task forces and given the choice of being chipped or sent to a FEMA Camp. Additionally, all newborns will be required to

be implanted at birth. If you have a baby at any hospital or medical facility within The System, the infants will be chipped. There is no way of getting around it. The numbers are what they are and within five years 90-plus percent of the population will be chipped and within a decade 99.8 percent of the U.S population will be chipped forcibly or not.”

One of the militia leaders stood and angrily replied, “We’ve discussed this possibility for years now. I think we’ve heard enough from the doctor. All of us have known this moment would come, and now it is here. It is our duty to our children, our grandchildren, to all future generations to make it right. I’ve heard enough. I motion that we move to vote for American Phoenix?”

Simmons appeared to hesitate but then she wearily asked, “Do I hear a second?”

A round of ayes were affirmed from the other members.

“I really thought it would never come to this,” Simmons said as she took a piece of paper out of her folder and began reading, “I call to a vote, that the groups represented in this room will issue a cease and desist order to Washington, DC. Our order demands DC completely eliminate the plan to microchip all its citizens.”

She looked around the room then continued, “If our demands are not met we will authorize the launch of multiple nuclear bombs into the atmosphere directly above the United States, resulting in an EMP event

that will complete the job of halting the micro-chipping by destroying most electronics circuitry in the United States. The EMP pulse would also effectively end DC's control of America."

She put the paper down on the table. "I remind everyone that if we carry out our threat it will also result in the death of millions, maybe tens of millions of innocent Americans. And our actions could very well lead to the end of the United States as we know it."

"The United States as we know it is not an acceptable alternative," the Rand representative replied. "It has been dead for decades."

"I think we should open the floor up for debate before we call a vote," Simmons announced.

"We have debated this possibility for years now," a militia leader interjected. "There is nothing left to discuss. Anyway, our ultimatum is a moot point because I promise you DC will halt their Final Plan after we prove to them we are not bluffing. The fact is they don't have the guts to go forward because DC's desire to stay in control far outweighs all considerations."

Another militia leader banged the table with his fist. "Mr. Boyle is right. We've already discussed this and as much as I hate to call for it, it is time to vote."

Simmons nodded and replied, "All those in favor of issuing the Phoenix Ultimatum to DC signify by raising your hands."

West looked over at Sam in disbelief. Would they really nuke their own country? He felt a wave of revulsion

surge through him. He wanted to scream out to somehow stop the vote but he knew there was nothing he could do to change anyone's minds.

With little hesitation all seven voting members raised their hands. Simmons slammed the gavel down on the table.

“I'll have the American Phoenix Ultimatum delivered to Congress, the President, the Supreme Court justices and all media outlets by tomorrow morning. This meeting is adjourned.”

“In a time of universal deceit - telling the truth is a revolutionary act.”

— George Orwell

CHAPTER 20

West watched in stunned disbelief as the room cleared. Tank walked over. “I bet you didn’t expect that, huh?”

“What do you want me to say?” West stammered. “This is pure lunacy. Don’t tell me there is any chance you nut jobs would go through with that asinine plan.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it too much, neither side has the guts to call the other’s bluff,” Tank casually answered.

“I’m not so sure about that,” Sam replied.

Tank looked at his watch. “I’ve got some good news, West. I got word you’ve been cleared to return back to New York.”

“What are you talking about? A day ago I was wanted for murder and now I’m free to go back? This is all beginning to smell like shit to me. You know what, I don’t want to be a part of this anymore, so thank you for helping clear my name but just take me back to New York and we’ll call it all square and we both can go our own ways.”

“What the hell are you going to do then?” Tank angrily replied. “Become a mindless worker drone like 95 percent of the world? Or are you going to wait around for the Dracun to remember its unfinished business with you? Either way, you might as well just consider yourself dead.”

“I tell you what I’m doing, I’m going to get the hell out of this country as fast as I can. I don’t care if I get shot in the process because if you ask me you’re all fucking crazy.”

Sam began laughing but Tank looked more and more pissed. “I thought you were naive West but I never took you for a coward.”

“I don’t give a shit what you think. I think I trust you about as much as I trust DC or the Dracun. I want no part of a group that would even think about nuking their own country. Talk about fucking cowards. There’s got to be another way. “

Before West had time to react Tank slammed him up against the wall. “I want you to listen to me you son

of a bitch. You're all in on this. I pulled every string and favor I could muster to clear your name. You work for me now whether you like it or not. You're going back to New York. You're going back to the paper and you're going to help us. Is that clear?"

"C'mon Tank," he heard Sam say. "Let him go,"

Tank released his grip and stepped back.

West shoved him in his chest. "You're using me for something."

"We're at war. I've told you were all expendable. You have a valuable skill and we need you at the paper to help our people in the field. It's that simple. I'll tell you what," Tank continued in a more measured tone, "Here is what I am going to do. Sam is going to fly back with you to New York. You can have the plane ride to reconsider your position. When you land tell her whether you're in or out."

"What happens if I say no?"

"You'll just have to take your chances then won't you," Tank answered then stormed off.

"You all right?" Sam asked.

"Yeah, I guess. Finger hurts like hell though."

Sam shrugged. "Listen, don't think he doesn't understand the consequences of that act. He's had years to think about it. How do you expect him to act? He doesn't like it any more than you do but what are the alternatives?"

"I really don't care. You can play your game of life or death chicken all you want but I don't want to be any

part of it. C'mon Sam you've been involved in this for a long time. What the hell is really going on?"

"Let's talk about it more during the flight. C'mon, let's get your medicine and go."

West knew despite his blowup with Tank that he had limited options and didn't really have any choice but he also wondered how much of his decision to help the LT's was because of Sam.

They were driven to the airstrip and West followed Sam into the small plane. They sat next to each other in the backseat while the pilot and co-pilot went through the preflight checklist. The plane was bigger than the one he flew to the compound on but the space in the back of the plane was tiny and their hips and legs were pressed against each other. West felt a stirring he hadn't felt for a long time.

He glanced over at Sam. Goddamn, she was beautiful. She caught him looking at her and gave him an awkward smile.

"So what is your story, Sam? How in the hell did you get here?"

"It's a long complicated story."

"It looks like we've got some time?"

"I was a military brat. My father was a career Sergeant in the Army. He spent the last ten years of his life stationed in North Africa. I followed in his footsteps and joined the Marines right out of high School. I served three tours of duty."

"You were in the Marines?" West asked in disbelief. "Where else were you stationed?"

“North Africa was my base but I moved around the world on various assignments.”

“What kind of assignments?”

“I was in the sniper division, which means I was really nothing more than an assassin.”

“Wow,” West finally said after digesting the information. “If you had told me that a few days ago I guess I would have been shocked.”

“And now?” she asked turning back toward him.

“I guess it is just par for the course. So how’d you get hooked up with Tank?”

“I discovered the truth.”

“Which is?”

“We live in a make-believe world. Nothing is as it seems.”

“How so?”

“Well, this is a small example. I was sent overseas to fight and kill individuals we were told wanted to destroy us. You know, the Forty Year War on Terror. We were instilled with the doctrine that we were fighting to save America. Let me tell you the truth. There was no such enemy.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was all bullshit. We had these huge military bases in Northern Africa and when I wasn’t assassinating people I helped support a military unit. Our job was to escort convoy vehicles transporting natural resources back to the United States. Basically, we were there to steal resources.”

“I don’t understand. What about the Al-Jihadi?”

“Al-Jihadi,” she laughed. “Just like everything else they were nothing more than a DC-created illusion. A smoke-screen. They never really existed. Al-Jihadi was nothing more than a false flag to build the military bases in Africa and to keep Americans back home in line. Do you know we virtually created directly or through our own incompetence every major Middle East terrorist group?”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Study your history. The CIA directly funded the Mujahedeen in the 1970’s to fight the Soviets and were also allies with Iran until their revolution. So the Mujahedeen we supplied with arms splintered into the Taliban and one of their leaders named Bin Laden, who we also gave arms and money to, helped create Al Qaeda who were our allies in the 1980’s until 9/11. We also created ISIL to destabilize the region and on it goes. Iran, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, dozens of terrorist’s organizations and leaders have been friends then enemies and sometimes both simultaneously for decades until the whole region finally blew itself up. It is a complete joke and a lie of historic proportions.”

West sat back and didn’t say anything for a few minutes before changing the subject by asking, “Who’d you assassinate?”

“Anybody I was ordered to. Politicians, business leaders, political dissidents, supposed trouble makers. Most of the people I killed I had no idea who they were, let alone why I had been sent to kill them.”

“Jesus. How many people did you kill?”

“I stopped counting after twenty.”

“Why’d you leave the military?”

“I got a week of R & R that coincided with my father’s and I went home. It was the first time I had seen him in person in three years. I knew the moment I saw him that something was wrong. He looked different. He was no longer the fearless dedicated military man I had always known. He looked tired, defeated. We had a big family dinner and afterwards he took me on a walk at a park. I thought he just wanted to catch up but as we walked he explained that he had something he needed to tell me and he thought the house was bugged. He also told me this would be the last time we saw each other because his squadron was planning a military coup.”

“A coup? Wow. What happened?”

“I was still a good soldier at the time. I yelled at him that I couldn’t believe he was going to betray his country. I called him a traitor. I begged him not to go through with it but he wouldn’t change his mind. He wanted me to go AWOL because he was worried about what the military might do to me afterward.”

“Why would your father, a career military man, do such a thing, especially if he was that concerned about you? Why not just retire?”

“I asked him that exact question and he told me he had discovered the truth.”

“Which was?”

“What I was telling you earlier, there were no real enemies. Russo-China and DC had basically split the world into two halves and then they declared war on their own people. The US got the western half and Russo-China got the eastern. The secret agreement was that each country was to stay out of the other’s affairs in their own part of the world. Basically, China and the United States made a strategic decision to split the world up instead of fighting each other. Those in power knew a war against each other meant mutually assured destruction. You know what the economic conditions have been like here for the last twenty years but you haven’t seen what it is like outside of the United States. You think it is bad here? Go to Africa or the Caribbean, the Philippines or South America. You literally would be stepping over people who are dying in the streets from hunger, illness or rioting. In some cities every street is a mini war zone.”

“What happened to your father?”

“He left the next morning and I went back to my base in North Africa. I was in Brussels on an assignment to assassinate the opposition leader for the German Democratic Federation.”

“I thought Germany was an ally?”

“Ally,” Sam laughed. “DC does not have any true allies, only degrees of enemies. I followed my orders and killed anybody and everybody. And it was easy. We’d use insect drones to inject deadly toxins, remote bombs, non-traceable drugs that would mask heart attacks. We

implanted internal bombs and occasionally, if we were lucky, we got to do it the old-fashioned way with a sniper rifle. Anyway, after I shot the German politician in his hotel room I went to a designated safe house. This safe house operated in a looser military fashion and a fellow sniper who I had known for years told me I had to get out immediately. When I asked him why, he gave me the news I had been dreading. My father had led a coup against a military council that had come to tour their base. His regiment had taken three Senators, five Congressmen and a host of government officials hostage.”

“Holy shit. Are you talking about Tunis?”

“Yes.”

“But I thought it was terrorists who had stormed the complex, murdered the politicians and then blew up the base?”

“That is what DC wanted everyone to believe and the media reported it as such but that was not what happened.”

“So what happened?”

“Our Air force dropped a vaporizer bomb that incinerated the entire base in an instant. They murdered every man, woman, and child. Over four hundred people were killed instantly.”

“Why the hell would they do that?”

“Because there had been uprisings within the military for years and DC was losing control of their military complex. I guess what my father did was the last

straw and DC decided to send a very direct message to their own military, which was follow your orders. No negotiations. No mercy. You are either with us or against us and if you're against us we're simply going to kill you no matter how many innocent people die."

"God, I never knew things had gotten that out of control. So what did you do?"

"I went AWOL. I had no choice. They were going to come after me for retribution, revenge, who knows."

"But you didn't do anything wrong."

"It didn't matter. He was my father. I was in the armed forces. You should know that by now. I spent the next two years living in basements, abandoned warehouses, and empty buildings throughout Europe. I was constantly on the move."

"How were you able to get back to the United States?"

"I couldn't fly back, that was for sure. Arrangements were made and I hopped on a cargo ship from Amsterdam that was making port in New Orleans."

"And you've been underground ever since?"

"Yes."

"I just don't understand how with the technology and the surveillance systems DC hasn't found you yet."

"It's really not that difficult to understand."

"How's that?"

"You remember the old FBI Most Wanted list?"

"Yeah."

“Well that list typically had ten individuals who were deemed the biggest public threats to the country. If they had that list today there would be tens, maybe hundreds of thousands of people on it. The Dracun’s technology has developed so rapidly they can’t keep track of their own data. They are suffering from system overload. I was trained to hide as an assassin and I was good at it. My biggest risk is getting caught up in some random check point or police sweep and being brought in for fingerprints, DNA exam or iris analysis. If that happened, they would discover who I really am.”

“Aren’t you afraid of getting caught?”

“Nope.”

“Why.”

“I would never end up in that situation. Either the people trying to apprehend me would be dead or I would be. I’ll never see the inside of a government prison. I can guarantee you that.”

The prop engines roared to life and the plane began taxiing down the runway. Sam turned away and closed her eyes. West took two pain pills and closed his eyes, thinking that things were sure fucked up in this world.

“I disagree with what the majority of the American people want.”

— John McCain

CHAPTER 21

West didn't open his eyes until he felt the plane touching down. It took a few moments for him to realize where he was and that the past few days hadn't been part of some crazy nightmare. He looked over at Sam who was sleeping. He looked outside the window and they appeared to have landed at a small airport in New Jersey.

West stared at Sam with mixed feelings. He felt something for her but he knew beneath her physical beauty laid a cold-blooded killer and his intuition was telling him there was something quite not right about her.

He was conflicted about his feelings. Who was she really? A sociopathic killer? A loyal soldier dealt a bad hand? A freedom fighter trying to help save America from a tyrannical government? Or was she just using him like Tank?

The plane taxied to a stop and Sam opened her eyes. “Hi there,” Sam replied after a deep yawn.

“Hey,” West replied. “I guess we’re back into the frying pan.”

“Guess so,” she answered while stretching.

They climbed out of the plane and a tall man dressed like an old-time gangster walked over. He ignored West and went straight to Sam. They hugged tightly. Certainly she wasn’t romantically involved with him, West thought with a sudden pang of jealousy.

Sam stepped back with an enormous smile on her face. “You look well, Tom. How’ve you been?”

“Good. And you?”

“Eh, same ole same ole,” Sam answered. “This is West Collins.”

The man shook his hand dismissively and replied back to Sam, “I think we’re a go so we’d better get going.”

West looked over to Sam who said, “I’ll explain in the car.”

They followed Tom over to a 40-plus year old black limousine. Sam jumped in the front seat and West got into the back, a little peeved about the situation.

“I thought you were going to drop me off back at my apartment?” West replied to Sam.

Tom lit a cigarette. “Relax, Chief. We have some business to take care of first.”

“What going on?” he asked Sam.

She put a finger to her lips then pulled out a disposable phone and dialed. She whispered something then rolled down the window and threw the phone out.

“It’s a go, she replied calmly.

Tom nodded and punched the gas pedal, throwing West back into his seat.

Sam turned and looked back at him with an apologetic expression on her face. “The fire is about to get a little hotter. We’re going to go meet a DC agent.”

“To do what?”

“He’s bringing us the schematics for the underground facility that houses the Whispering Project.”

“You mean the metadata collection facility?”

“Yeah. They’ve developed the technology to record and store all electronic messages. If we can destroy that and have the DC back down on the micro-chipping directive we might have bought ourselves a few years.”

“Why would a DC agent give you that information?” West asked.

“Everyone has a price,” Tom answered.

“But what would getting the schematics do?”

“He’s just doesn’t get it, does he?” Tom cut in.

“If we get the blueprint and location of the facility,” Sam explained, “we can eventually destroy it or we

can hack the computer with viruses and at least slow it down for a while. But if we don't and DC gets this up running and fully functional they are going to have the capability of recording and storing every form of communication, forever. Even worse, they are close to solving what has been DC's biggest problem with the massive amounts of data they receive and store."

"Which is?"

"They have developed a workable quantum computer. And that computer will give them the capability to analyze and decipher astronomical amounts of data and information at the speed of light."

"I still don't understand why this is all that catastrophic."

"Are you brain dead, man?" Tom snarled. "DC has surveillance satellites right now that are recording this conversation but what they can't do is analyze the data efficiently or quickly. But with a quantum computer they can run a program and as we are being recorded talking about meeting with an agent, in milliseconds it would alert their technicians who can triangulate our location with satellites and have us cornered by Homeland agents, special military ops or they could just have a drone blow us up, all in a matter of minutes."

"You know what the LT's are planning," Sam added. "You said it yourself, what if DC doesn't give in to their demands? Tank is trying to do everything possible so the LT's don't carry out their plans if DC decides not to cooperate. If the Whispering Project is neutralized

even for a little while it buys us all some time. So now you have your chance to help.”

West leaned back into the car seat. A bad feeling started to sink in as he realized everyone was hell bent on a mutually assured destruction.

He stared out the window, once again relegated to the fact he had no control over his fate. The car sped through an industrial wasteland. Nothing seemed alive. The few sickly trees he saw had no leaves, the sparse grass was brown and dead, and row after row of burned out vacant buildings and abandoned factories filled the landscape. West had yet to even see a living creature. No dogs, no birds, no rats, nothing.

After five more minutes of driving through the hellish landscape Tom pulled the car off the road and drove into an empty parking lot of an abandoned factory. He turned off the car and they sat there for a few minutes.

“What are we waiting for?” West finally asked.

“Quiet,” Tom hushed him.

A couple more minutes went by and a phone rang. Tom opened his jacket and handed Sam the phone.

“We’re here,” she replied. “They will be here in a few minutes. We’re supposed to meet them inside.”

Tom turned around and handed West the car key.

“Take this.”

“What for?”

“If something goes wrong.”

“You want me to stay in the car?” West asked.

Sam turned to face him. “We’re going to meet them in that building. I want you to lay low. When their car pulls up just stay out of sight and we’ll be back in 20 minutes. We need you to be a watch out back here. If someone else pulls up, honk the horn twice.”

“What if more than 20 minutes go by? Do you want me to come looking for you?”

She shook her head. “If we’re not back in 20 minutes we’re probably dead so just get the hell out of here.”

“Sounds like a well thought out plan,” West mumbled under his breath.

Sam smiled. “Sometimes we don’t have time to plan.”

He began to protest but knew he would lose any battle with them so he remained silent and watched as they got out of the car. He sunk down into the seat so no one could see him.

Sam and Tom walked into the factory through a section of missing wall. Five minutes later West heard a car approach from behind. He lifted his head and peeked out the back window.

His heart started racing and he slipped further down into the seat. The car pulled up and stopped less than twenty feet away. What if they came over to check out the car and found him?

The car doors opened and he heard someone say, “Grab the briefcase.”

West took a deep breath and mustered enough nerve to peek out the window. A man in a dark suit was

standing next to the car smoking a cigarette. Another man got out of the back of the car. West ducked, it was Agent McCain along with Jimmy.

His chest felt like it was going to explode. What were they doing here? It had to be a set up. West watched as McCain and Jimmy walked into the warehouse.

West looked at his watch. Only eight minutes had passed but the situation had changed. Sam was in extreme danger. He slowly opened the door and crept up to the warehouse. He poked his head around the wall then quickly pulled back. McCain had a gun pointed at Sam and Tom, who held their hands above their heads.

West heard a humming noise off in the distance. He turned and spotted black specs flying this way low on the horizon. The Black copters meant Homeland was coming.

He heard Agent McCain say, "I'd prefer to shoot you but my superiors believe after a couple days of torture we can extract some valuable information."

"We had a deal McCain," Sam replied. "Why are you doing this? The Dracun is as much an enemy to your survival as the LT's are."

McCain laughed uncontrollably. "Today my friends are my enemies. Tomorrow my enemies are my friends. Don't you know that your enemies are my friends are my enemies are my friends?" McCain kept repeating his insane chant over and over like some deranged madman.

West looked around and realized he was trapped. He couldn't get back to the car and drive off and leave Sam but he couldn't just stand there either. He had only one choice. He surveyed the area and spotted a heavy metal pipe laying on the ground. He ran over and picked it up and went back to the opening in the warehouse. The buzz of the approaching helicopters was getting louder. He peered around the corner and McCain and Jimmy were laughing with their backs turned toward him.

They were about 12 feet away. West took a deep breath. It was now or never. He turned the corner with the pipe in his hand and took a few quiet steps. He saw Sam glance in his direction, causing him to sprint toward McCain.

Sam screamed at the top of her lungs and the diversion distracted McCain for an additional second or two but he must have sensed West coming and began to turn. At three feet away the agent raised his gun. At two feet he aimed the pistol directly at West's chest but before he managed to get off a shot West clubbed him across the side of his head.

McCain fell into a heap with one leg twitching uncontrollably and a stream of drool coming out of his mouth. West stood over him and watched as Tom tackled Jimmy before he had a chance to move. The humming of black copters grew louder and West knew it was too late, they couldn't escape the building without being seen.

He watched as Sam ran over to Agent McCain and picked up his gun. At point blank range she shot McCain then without hesitation she walked over to Jimmy who was sprawled out on the ground.

“Wait,” he pleaded. “West is my friend. He’ll tell you I’m okay. You don’t have to do this.”

West flinched as the gunshot echoed inside the building and Jimmy’s head exploded. He stared at Jimmy, fighting the hot bile rising in his throat.

“We’ve got to go,” Tom said.

West couldn’t move. Sam pulled on his arm.

“C’mon. West,” she screamed. “We have about 30 seconds to get out of here before we’re all dead.”

Self-preservation took over and he followed them as they ran toward the back of the building. The roar from the helicopters had become deafening. They raced to a door that Tom threw open. A set of metal stairs led downward into a lower subsection of the building.

They raced down the stairs and West could hear the stampede of boots echoing on the floor above them. They sprinted down a hall lit by fluorescent lights that led to another metal door. Tom opened it and once they were through he sealed the door with a metal bolt.

The hall led to another set of stairs down to a lower level that emptied into an old sewer treatment facility. The place reeked of decay and waste.

He heard an explosion above them. The soldiers had blown through the sealed door. Shouting followed by

a spray of bullets ricocheted off the metal equipment. Sam pushed West behind a large generator. Tom bent down and opened a circular hatch that led down into darkness.

Sam jumped down and pulled West in behind her. His hands grabbed the rung of a metal ladder and he started climbing down. Tom slammed the hatch down and a bright light replaced the darkness. The walls were loaded with explosives.

“Get the hell out of here,” he heard Tom yell. “We have two minutes before this whole thing blows to Kingdom Come.”

West climbed down as fast as he could. He lost control and fell the last five feet, landing onto the hard concrete. Tom fell on top of him, knocking the wind out of West. Sam jerked both of them up and they sprinted down the sewage tunnel.

They turned a corner and Sam picked up a metal grate. West didn't need any more instructions and he jumped down into the opening falling into a pile of wet muck. Seconds later Sam and Tom jumped down next to him followed by an ear piercing explosion.

The ground and walls shook like a massive earthquake had just hit and for a second West thought the whole place was going to collapse on top of them. A bright white light followed by a reddish flash blinded him as the tunnel above the grate filled with a stream of fire and searing heat.

Sam screamed in his ear but he couldn't hear a thing from the explosion. She grabbed his arms, pulled him up and they stumbled down the tunnel.

They passed by a series of intersections. West noticed they were following glow-in-the-dark arrows painted on the walls which meant they were following a pre-designed escape route.

After ten more minutes they came to the end of the tunnel and one by one they climbed up a ladder. At the top Tom threw open a manhole and they emerged out into an alley.

A car sped toward them and the back doors were flung open. Still in function mode West hopped into the back seat as the driver gunned the car out of the alley into the city street.

“I wouldn’t mind the rat race - if the rats would lose once in a while.”

— Tom Wilson

CHAPTER 22

The nameless driver drove them slowly through the burned out industrial city directly across the river from Manhattan. After making a few turns the car pulled into a side street. Tom leaned forward against the driver’s seat and whispered something to him. The driver nodded and Tom opened the door and they all got out.

West didn’t say a thing. He was still shell shocked by what had just happened and he followed Tom and Sam in silence. They walked about a dozen blocks, cutting through alleys until they ducked between two burned out buildings. West followed them up a fire escape to

the fourth floor where they climbed through an open window into an apartment. A couple was sitting on the couch smoking, drinking beer and listening to music.

They didn't so much as bat an eye as three people who must've looked like they had just been in a war climbed into their apartment from the fire escape.

The man on the couch smiled then stood up. He was probably in his 50s but looked like he had lived a hard life. He had a scruffy beard and was dressed in faded blue jeans and an old button down shirt.

"Ah, brother Tom," he gestured with his hands then bowed dramatically. "I heard you might be in the neighborhood. We're certainly glad you were able to join us. After all we're a lot more fun to hang out with than those nasty Dracuns or LT people."

He turned to Sam. "And what a pleasant surprise, my favorite femme fatale. I was not aware you would be joining us as well and you even brought a new friend."

"It was a last minute decision," Sam responded.

Tom pointed at the man's beer. "You got some more of those?"

"What is mine is yours. Help yourself. They're in the kitchen fridge."

The man turned his attention back to West and stuck out his hand. "I'm Harry, Tom's brother. It is a pleasure to meet you."

He shook his hand and replied back, "West Collins."

"Well, West I can tell you the first mistake you've made is to associate with these two outlaws."

West laughed because it was probably the most truthful thing anyone had said to him in the last couple of days.

“And why do you say that?” he asked.

Harry looked at him with a serious expression. “Because they’ll eventually get you killed. You understand that, don’t you?”

Tom walked out of the kitchen with three beers. He handed one to Sam and West. West drank two-thirds of the beer in a single gulp.

Harry gestured toward the couch. “Please make yourself comfortable.”

They sat down on the couch. “So Assassin Sam, tell me, whose side you working for today?”

“I heard she works for the Dracun, the LT’s, and DC. A true anarchist,” the woman sitting on the couch exclaimed.

“I don’t know what you two are talking about.” Sam replied back.

Harry smiled. “I’m sure you don’t. Well, let me ask you this then, are all the stories of your exploits true or are they like everything else in the world today?”

“And what do you mean by everything else in the world today?” Sam retorted.

“You know, a tiny shred of the truth wrapped around layers and layers of bullshit,” Harry answered.

“All the stories are lies,” Sam replied.

Harry’s woman friend laughed. “Don’t believe her, Harry. I’ve heard she could kill you with a paperclip.”

Harry raised his beer toward Sam. “Well, I better not do anything to piss her off then.”

“We’re going to need to crash here tonight,” Tom said.

The old David Bowie song *Pressure* blared through the speakers.

“Like the sound system?” Harry asked West.

“I guess.”

“It doesn’t look like it but it is a state-of-the-art noise cancellation device. Anyone trying to listen in on our conversations right now would hear the music but whatever we are saying is scrubbed, and preprogrammed conversations are piped in to hide our true conversation. Ingenious isn’t it?”

“Very impressive,”

“Damn straight. And it is a good thing because I can guarantee you after your little escapade earlier today this area is swarming with Homeland Agents and drones. Hell, they probably even have some serious shit Dracun fuckers out here by now.”

“I don’t know what it is but for some reason they don’t like it when a bunch of their agents are blown to smithereens,” the girl next to Harry chimed in again.

All three of them stared at the woman.

“Where are my manners?” Harry said. “This is my friend Brenda.”

West turned toward Sam and asked, “You trust these people?”

“Relax my boy,” Harry replied. “Tom is my brother after all. You don’t think I would turn my own flesh and blood in now do you?”

“They’re okay,” Sam added. “You just have to ignore their bullshit.”

“I appreciate your confidence in us, Sam,” Harry added “But you’ve got it backwards, West. The people you shouldn’t trust are them.”

“They should be grateful we don’t sell you out to the Dracun,” Brenda replied.

“No one ever said we weren’t grateful and by the way we’ve saved your asses more times than you’ll even know,” Tom replied angrily. “And despite your claim of neutrality, you hate the Dracun just as much as we do.”

“Yes that is true,” Harry said. “We do hate the Dracun but for much different reasons.”

“And what are your reasons?” West asked.

“Well, first of all you have to understand why most of the people you currently associate with hate the Dracun. I mean they’re so 1990’s with their misguided notion of God Bless America and the delusion that this country can return to the principles of the glory days or the Founding Fathers. You know freedom, baseball and apple pie, all that crap. Your misguided friends seem to think if only that could happen, then everything would be honky-dory.”

“So you’d rather live as a slave under DC?” Tom interrupted.

Harry raised his hands in a mock gesture. “Of course not. Personally, I find y’all much more tolerable and certainly a whole lot more fun than the DC or those dreaded Dracuns. But it is you, the LT’s, who I think are flawed, because the DC’ers are just acting upon the most fundamental aspect of human nature.”

“Which is?” West asked.

“To control and dominate other humans. It is a story as old as mankind. It’s actually pretty simple math. Ninety-one percent of the world’s population is made up of beta rats and about six percent are the Alpha Rats. The Alpha’s are the king rats who only care about establishing territory for power and control. They rule over the Betas. The Beta’s are the followers, the sheeple who are content to live off the scraps of the Alphas. Think of the Alphas as the perfect sociopath. They want control, no matter the cost or the destruction they might cause.”

“So are you an Alpha or a Beta?” West asked.

“Neither. We are the least populous of the rats. We are Gammas, which represents two percent of the population.”

“Your math is a little off. That only comes to 99 percent.” West said.

“No. The remaining one percent are the Deltas. They alternate states between all three of the rat species. These people are the most dangerous, most unpredictable of all. We call them the crazies.”

“So what are the character traits of the Gammas?” West asked.

“Gammas are not followers but they also do not wish to rule and control the Betas. They are the true visionaries and usually the architects of successful civilizations. The Gammas are responsible for most of the world’s achievements.”

“And let me guess,” Sam replied. “You are a Gamma.”

“Correct. I am a Gamma just as much as you and West are Deltas and Tom is a Beta.”

Sam laughed. “Glad to know you think so highly of yourself.”

“I’m still a little confused,” West broke in, wondering if he should be insulted by being referred to as a Delta. “Whose side exactly are you on?”

“We’re not on anyone’s side. To be honest with you we don’t believe in anything that is part of the current human organizational structure. The whole world is in an unraveling mode and we know for a fact that ultimately it doesn’t matter if the LT’s or DC or the Dracun prevail. The fate of mankind has already been decided.”

“Really and what fate is that?” West asked.

“I can show you if you want?”

“How?”

“Just hold out your hand and swallow the truth pill.”

West looked over to Sam. “Who the hell are these people?”

“They’re Multiverse Surfers.”

“What the hell is that?”

“They believe they can travel through parallel universes and different dimensions using a powerful neuron-drug.” Tom answered.

“Brother, you are wrong,” Harry replied. “We don’t believe. We know for a fact and I have offered you many times the opportunity to join us but you have refused.”

“That’s because the drug you consume like candy fries your brain. And as much as you have taken over the years I’m surprised you even still have any brain cells left,” Tom rebutted.

Harry looked over to West. “It is the price one must pay for ultimate freedom and the truth. If you want the answers, West you have to take this and find out for yourself.”

Harry smiled, reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a large purple pill and held it up to West.

“Thanks, but I think I’ll pass.”

Harry shrugged and put the pill back into his pocket. “I can tell you this, there is an entity much more powerful than even the Dracun and they are the ones that control all things.”

Tom set his beer down. “You’ll like this one West. They believe in a multi-dimensional alien they call Ulysses.”

“We don’t believe,” Brenda said. “We know. If you had any balls you could find out for yourself.”

“Why can’t you just show us the proof?” West asked.

“It doesn’t work like that. How are you alive, West?”

“I don’t know, because I’m breathing. I’m here. I’m conscious. You’re talking with me, right?”

“Prove it.”

“You’re being ridiculous. How can I prove it? It is what it is.”

“Exactly and you just answered your own question. My point is there are billions of assumptions we, as humans, have been preprogrammed toward and this is just one more. You’d have to go into the Multiverse to understand the Multiverse. It operates in a different frequency than the one we are currently in and only in that frequency can you understand a Ulysses.”

“So you’ve seen one of these Ulysses?”

“Yes. We have. And you have to.”

West laughed. “I have, have I? Well refresh my memory so I’ll know the next time I see one.”

“Surprisingly enough they look just like us. Or maybe that is just how they want us to view them.”

Sam stood. “That is what happens when you start destroying your brain. You go bat shit crazy. I think I’ve heard enough for tonight. I’m going to go to bed.”

West watched as she walked back through the kitchen toward a bedroom. After he finished his beer a weariness descended upon West. “I think I’ll do the same.”

“Feel free to grab any bed,” Harry called out.

He walked down the hall, leaving the group to their beer and music.

“West,” he heard Sam call his name. He cracked open the door and saw Sam laying underneath the covers of the bed. She motioned for him to come over to the bed.

He walked over and sat down on the edge. He pulled off his shoes and turned back toward Sam. She pulled back the bed cover revealing her lithe naked body.

“The human mind is not capable of grasping the universe. We are like a little child entering a huge library. The walls are covered to the ceilings with books in many different tongues. The child knows that someone must have written these books. It does not know who or how. It does not understand the languages in which they are written. But the child notes a definite plan in the arrangement of the books - a mysterious order which it does not comprehend, but only dimly suspects.”

— Albert Einstein

CHAPTER 23

West opened his eyes. The room was dark and it took a couple seconds of panic before he figured out where he was. He looked over and Sam was sleeping next to him.

He quietly got up, put his clothes on and left the bedroom. He walked down the dimly lit hall toward the

kitchen, where he spotted Harry standing completely still facing the far kitchen wall.

What the hell was he doing? West wondered.

He stepped into the kitchen while Harry remained motionless, facing a poster hanging on the wall. West cleared his throat but got no response. He walked closer toward Harry and looked up at the poster then over to Harry who appeared to be in some sort of trance.

West stared back at the ragged poster. He wasn't sure exactly what he was staring at but it appeared to be an old photograph of the cosmos.

"This is the most beautiful picture that has ever been taken in the history of mankind," Harry suddenly replied.

"What are you doing?" West asked wondering if he had taken those Multiverse surfing pills because he seemed completely out of it.

"Man, you don't know what you're missing."

"Yeah, like what?"

"I've traveled to super giant red stars. I've flown through supernova explosions. I've seen suns collapse then burst out through the universe as supernovas. I've crossed the event horizon and fallen through Black Holes."

Damn this guy was cooked up on something, that was for sure. "So what exactly is that a photo of?"

"You remember the old Hubble telescope?" Harry asked

"The one that crashed into the Pacific Ocean a decade or so ago?"

“Yep, that’s the one. Probably the last worthwhile thing our government ever did. The satellite’s function was to photograph the universe. This photo is called the Ultra-Deep Field.”

West took a step closer toward the poster to try and get a better view.

“What exactly am I looking at?”

“First, you’ve got to let your mind go. Escape the boundaries you’ve placed on yourself. Take a deep breath and look, and I mean really look. Not at the picture but what the picture represents.”

West took a deep breath and looked harder at the poster.

“What do you see?” Harry asked.

“A bunch of swirls and blobs. Mostly blackness. What do you see?”

“I see God or Yahweh or Brahman or whatever you want to call The One. When this photo was taken it represented only a tiny patch of sky, just a keyhole glimpse into the universe, only one ten-millionth of the total sky. You might think that all those specks, every swirl, dot or smudge you see are stars but they’re not.”

“So what are they?” West asked.

“Every little point of light in this photo is an entire galaxy and if you were so inclined and started counting, you would find there are over 16,000 galaxies visible in this single image. And each one of these galaxies contains hundreds of billions of stars and trillions of planets.”

West thought for a second while Harry continued staring motionless at the poster. After a few moments of silence West replied, “Those numbers are so large and so incomprehensible that it’s almost impossible to put into any kind of meaningful context. I guess it makes all of our trials and tribulations seem a lot less important here on Earth.”

“You’re right about the incomprehensibility of the numbers but what we can grasp is that the Hubble telescope is a time machine and what this photo represents is that we are traveling back in time to almost the creation of universe. It is a baby picture of our universe because most of the galaxies in this photo are only 500 million years old or at least their images are only 500 million years old because it then took over 13 billion years for their light to travel across the vast expanses of the universe to reach Earth. Meaning that if one of these galaxies ceased to exist today we wouldn’t even know about it for another 13 billion years.”

“That’s pretty wild.”

“You know what I find fascinating?” Harry asked.

“What?”

“The greatest minds the world has ever known repeatedly refer to mathematics in regards to our place among the stars. Galileo said, “mathematics was the language of god and Einstein was quoted as saying, “god doesn’t play dice with the world.” You ever hear of the Anthropic Principle?”

“No,” West answered.

West stared back up at the poster. “Maybe you’re not as crazy as I thought.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Harry chuckled. “But I do know one thing - when I look at this picture, I look at it with childlike curiosity and wonderment because it is almost as if there is some type of divine magic involved and maybe, just maybe there are creators out there in the universe. Maybe there are reasons to believe. After all scientists disagree on many things but I’ve never read one scientist who will dispute that our bodies at the most fundamental levels are comprised of energy and the *first law of thermodynamics states* that energy cannot be destroyed, it can only change form.”

“True,” West added.

“So I think Einstein perfectly summed up our place in the universe when he said the human mind is not capable of grasping the universe. We are like a little child entering a huge library. The walls are covered to the ceilings with books in many different tongues. The child knows someone must have written these books. It does not know who or how. It does not understand the languages in which they are written. But the child notes a definite plan in the arrangement of the books - a mysterious order which it does not comprehend, but only dimly suspects.”

“Do you believe a designer, a creator has influence over us or watches us?”

“I think there is a chance that a God, a They, or an It, however you want to refer it, doesn’t even know we exist if we are talking about trillions of possibilities.”

“That would be kind of disappointing.”

“There are others that have been searching far longer than you can imagine.”

“You mean other Multiverse Surfers like you?”

“No. Our creators, the Ulysses.”

“Oh no, is Harry trying to tell you about the searchers, the galactic nomads who live amongst us?”

West turned and saw Sam standing in the kitchen entrance.

“Don’t mind her,” Harry said. “You’ve got something she doesn’t.”

“And what is that?” Sam asked.

“Sam and her kind, the group you’ve somehow got tangled up with, only can see things as they are in this world. They are designed to function and they can’t ever get beyond that. But you West, you have something inside of you. You’re part of something bigger than them.”

“Yeah, well I don’t know about that.”

“Harry, I really wish I lived in your world,” Sam replied.

Harry finally took his eyes off the poster and looked back at Sam with a smile. “It’s okay Sam, eventually you will.”

“Great, at least I’ve got that going for me. C’mon West, we’ve got to go. Or do you want to stay here and convert to a Multiverse Surfer?”

“No, I’m coming. What about Tom?”

“My brother left last night,” Harry said.

West didn't even bother to ask where he disappeared to. "Thanks for letting us stay here. I guess this is goodbye."

Harry turned back toward the Ultra Deep field poster and said, "Don't worry, we'll meet again my friend."

“There can only be one.”

— The Highlander

CHAPTER 24

“So my friend, I bet you never thought we’d finally be in this position, huh?” Graham replied to Tank.

Tank raised his glass of whiskey. “I had my doubts but when I heard you received Code Black clearance, I figured I’d be hearing back from you. I must say I am impressed.”

“I’m impressed you knew that. So how did you find that out?” Graham asked.

Tank smiled and took another sip of his whiskey. “We all have our secrets, don’t we?”

Graham knew their alliance was one of mutual self-interest combined with absolute distrust so he

decided not to pursue how Tank had received that information since he was going to lie to him anyway.

“Can you believe that Napolitano bitch actually thought you’d believe I was inspecting your facility as just a random visit?”

“The stupidity of DC never ceases to amaze me,” Tank answered.

“With the stupidity of DC coupled with the blind fanatical extremism of the LT’s, we could go far together.”

Tank stood up and walked over to the bar. “This is the finest bourbon you’ve ever tasted. You want one?”

“Absolutely.”

Tank poured three fingers of the bourbon, added a few ice cubes and handed the glass to Graham.

“It has also come to my attention that your partner McCain was killed.”

Graham took a deep drink of the glorious brown liquid. “Man that is good. Yeah, old insane McCain, he would have had to go anyway. In the end they did us a favor.”

“So you weren’t responsible for McCain’s freelance plan with that hacker.”

Graham hated being placed on the defensive. “I passed the hacker off to McCain. He went behind my back in order to score some points with the Director. Obviously, if I had known about it I would have stopped him since his little operation was putting ours at risk if something happened to West.”

“I guess it is all a moot point now. Good ole Sam managed to take out another. What would you estimate her kill number to be?”

“Over a hundred that I know of,” Graham answered. “And by the way, I prefer to call her Sara.”

“Sam, Sara what the hell is the difference. That damn Hessian cult sure knows how to breed sociopathic killers don’t they? I can’t believe she’s been working for both of us all these years. I wonder if she had to choose one of us to kill, who would you think it would be?”

Graham swirled the ice in his drink. “She would probably kill us both just for the fun of it. She and her ilk believe in only one thing and that is chaos. They are true anarchists. So I guess the big question is can you control her one last time?”

“Are you insane? Control her, who knows what she is capable of? I can only try to maneuver her some to help our interests. That’s it.”

“That’s not exactly the answer I wanted to hear.”

“So what is our Plan B?” Tank asked.

Graham thought for a moment. “We need her to help control West. We’ll have to eliminate her after the Director is dead.”

“I don’t care what you do with her after all this is done. But let me ask you a personal question, how long have you been banging her?”

Graham would have to take Tank more seriously in the future. He obviously had more resources than Graham had given him credit for.

“Long enough to know that she is completely devoid of human emotions as we know them. She is dangerous.”

“So what do you make of this world we live in?”

“It’s all gone to hell,” Graham answered. “And it ain’t ever coming back.”

Tank set his bourbon down. “Whatever happened to my DC idealist I remembered back in college?”

“We’ve been through this before but let’s just say I was born again. I gave up the false religion of an idealist and committed myself to becoming a devout realist. And as we’ve discussed a partnership could be mutually beneficial to both of us.”

“But how long do you think we could actually coexist with one another?” Tank asked.

“I know we’ve been over this a billion times but you know if we can both temper our mistrust and ambitions then we could do big things. The fact is we need each other. Everyone knows the Director of Homeland Security is the true power in the United States. If I could secure that position and if you can tighten the reins on the LT’S and position yourself as their leader; if we can accomplish this, well then we can rule the goddamn country.”

“I always believed the simplest plans are the most likely to succeed so let’s say Napolitano is disposed of. What makes you think the President would appoint you to the position?”

“That’s actually the easiest part of the plan. I have enough information on him to not only wreck

his political career but send him to FEMA Camp for good.”

“You intend to blackmail the President of the United States?”

“Why not? He’s just a puppet anyway. Like I’ve explained, I’m not greedy. I can share the western hemisphere with one more person and it looks like you are that person. You just have to keep the LT’s in line.”

“I can only do that for a short period of time.”

“Well, barring some unforeseen circumstance that’s all we’ll need,” Graham said. “But you do need to go to New York and take care of West. I’ll do the rest on my end.”

Tank raised his glass in a mock salute. “Consider it done.”

Graham drank the rest of his bourbon and set the glass down. He stared at Tank and fought back a smile because they both knew that ultimately, there could only be one. But that would be decided after *The Unraveling*.

“Sometimes, the person you’d take a bullet for ends up being the one behind the gun.”

— Tupac

CHAPTER 25

West and Sam left Harry’s apartment and caught a ferry across the East River back to the city. They sat on the top deck of the ship in silence. West didn’t know what to say about what had happened between them the previous night so he stared out at the skyline of New York.

A few days ago he would have never thought he’d return to New York unless it was in handcuffs or a body bag. For now he had his freedom but something wasn’t right and deep down he knew that one way or another, a day of reckoning was quickly approaching.

The ferry dropped them off in lower Manhattan and despite it being a work day there were only a sparse number of New Yorkers out and about.

They caught a half empty bus uptown and took seats by themselves in the back.

“Let’s get out of this place,” Sam finally said.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve got a few things to clean up but when I’m done let’s leave for good.”

“Where would we go? And how could we even get out of the country?”

“I’ve planned ahead. I’ve known for years that eventually I would have to disappear for good. I just have a bad feeling things are catching up to me and now is the time to leave for good. Look, I know we just met but...” Sam stopped and took his hand in hers. “Don’t answer me today. You’re safe for now but that will change. I don’t trust Tank anymore. Just think about going with me.”

“I will,” West answered.

Sam looked out the window then replied, “I’ve got to get off at the next street.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’ve got some business to take care of. I’ll meet you back at your place late tonight or tomorrow at the latest. Are you going back to your apartment?”

“No, I think I’ll go down to the paper.”

The bus stopped and Sam leaned over and gave him a peck on his cheek. “I’ll see you later.”

West watched her leave the bus and it dawned on him that Sam had said she would meet him at his place, but he never recalled telling her where he lived.

The bus dropped him off a few blocks from his office and West hoofed it the rest of the way. He stopped in front of the coffee shop. He looked in the window and the Now Serving number that a few days ago had his Threat Assessment level posted was blank.

West walked into the newsroom and down to Simon's office. "Hey, man," he said to Simon, who was talking on the phone.

Simon looked like he had just seen a ghost and he put a hand over the receiver. "West, damn glad to see you. Close the door and sit down."

West closed the door. Simon yelled a string of derogatory insults at someone then hung up the phone.

"Holy shit. I can't believe you're here after everything."

"Neither can I. I guess I owe you a big thank you for getting me out of the city."

"Don't mention it. We're kind of in this together you know."

"Just out of curiosity, how'd you know what happened at the bar and that I was in the hospital?"

"I'd like to know that myself."

"What do you mean?"

"Someone whose voice I didn't recognize called and told me what happened and that you were at the

hospital and then they hung up. So I called Tank and arranged to get you out of the city.”

“Tank did all that?”

“Yep.”

“Who do you think it was that called you about me?” West asked.

“I have no damn idea.”

“I guess it doesn’t matter now. Well, here I am reporting for duty. So what am I supposed to do now?”

“Tank wants to meet with you this afternoon in the park.”

“He’s here in the city, already? I just flew in from his place. What the hell is going on?”

“Something big but I am not privy to that information.”

West thought for a second. “Where does he want to meet?”

“In front of the old Central Park Zoo at four.”

“Do I have any choice?”

“We’ve made our choices. Do you have an idea how many favors, let alone the risk he took to get you scrubbed from the System?”

“I just wonder what it will cost me.”

“Hey, by the way your article on the Mars Face and the WOW! Signal generated a huge response from our readers. And you know what is so weird?”

“What?”

“The 50th anniversary is only three days away. Wouldn’t it be wild if the signal was picked up again?”

“It’d be pretty crazy,” West replied, not really caring one bit.

He stood and stretched. He was exhausted and it was only ten o’clock in the morning.

“I guess I’ll head to my desk and kill some time before I go meet with Tank.”

“Hey West,” Simon called out.

“Yeah.”

“Be careful about that girl you’re with. She’s dangerous.”

“Yeah, and who isn’t?” West left Simon’s office and killed a few hours at his desk before his meeting with Tank.

He arrived a few minutes early for his meeting and sat on a park bench outside the old Central Park Zoo. The place was in shambles and all the animals were long gone. The city had run out of money to care for them properly and the end came after a couple hundred homeless people stormed the zoo one night and attacked the animals, presumably to eat.

But the human predators hadn’t counted on Homeland Security officers arriving who added to the carnage by shooting everyone in sight.

West watched his fellow New Yorkers stream past. They all seemed to have a mindless devotion to either survive the day or to accomplish some seemingly important task. A few weeks ago he had been exactly like them, but not anymore.

A sharp sting in the back of his neck caused him to jump up. Standing behind him was an albino wearing a dark suit and sunglasses.

“What the hell was that?” West demanded.

The albino flashed an evil grin and waved a little black tube. A boiling rage began to grow inside West as he stood up and approached him with clenched fists.

“I said what the fuck was that?” he repeated, getting ready to strike the asshole in the face. The albino took a step back and motioned to his side. West turned to see Tank approaching. “What’s going on? What did he just do to me?”

“You were injected with a biological agent that is encapsulated in a timing device,” Tank calmly answered.

West sprinted toward Tank, who held up his hands in defense. “Go ahead, kill me if you want but if you do, you’ll only be signing death warrants for yourself and Sam.”

The mention of Sam’s name quelled his rage a bit. “What the hell do you want?”

Tank motioned toward the park bench. “Let’s take a seat and have a conversation like two gentlemen.”

West forced himself to calm down enough to sit on the park bench. The stinging in his neck was diminishing but that didn’t bring him any comfort, considering he had a ticking time bomb implanted inside.

Tank sat next to him. “I’ll get straight to the point. The director of Homeland Security is holding a press conference where she will be touting micro-chipping

the population for their protection. You will be attending that conference in your capacity as a reporter for that piece of shit tabloid you work for.”

“First of all,” West interrupted. “How the hell am I going to gain access to that type of a press conference? Most of those reporters are nothing more than glorified spokesmen for DC. Not to mention, don’t you think I might be on some governmental bad guy list? I’ll never clear security.”

“I told you we took care of that. We scrubbed you out of DC’s system. We went to great lengths to create a security clearance for you. Don’t worry about that, you’ll have no trouble getting in.”

“I know you didn’t inject me with a neurotoxin to ensure I attend a DC propaganda speech and write a newspaper column about it. So cut the bullshit and tell me what you really want from me?”

“You will be given a laptop computer. You are to take the laptop into the conference room with you. After that you can do anything you want. You can either stay for the question and answer session, or you can leave. It is your choice. I’d personally try to leave if I was you.”

“And what exactly is in the laptop?”

“A Disintegrator Bomb.”

West leaned back on the park bench and stared off at the rusty metal cages of the zoo. “So the truth finally comes out. That is the reason you supposedly gave me safe passage to your compound and then miraculously

got me back to New York. You intended to use me all along for this little job of yours.”

“We all have a job to do. You’ll be remembered as a hero.”

“So you’re willing to kill innocent people just so you can take out the Director of Homeland Security.”

“Yep.”

“That makes you a cold-blooded murderer.”

Tank folded his hands in his laps and looked out across Central Park. “We are at war. This is what happens during war. Anyway, most of the reporters who will be there serve the Machine. They are nothing more than glorified spokesmen for DC. I don’t care what happens to them, nor should you. They are traitors.”

“Not everyone in that room is a surrogate for DC.”

“Don’t be so damn naïve, West. I know there will be a few innocent people who will get caught up in this but it is called collateral damage and it is unavoidable. You were there. You know what the LT’s intend to do if DC’s Final Solution with the micro-chipping continues. They’re going to nuke the fucking country and if you think I can stop them you’re wrong.”

“What about me?”

Tank shrugged. “You got a chance to survive. You just have to use your ingenuity and figure a way out before the detonation.”

“What if I refuse?”

Tank reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a cell phone. He held it in front of West. “Listen this is

much bigger than me or you. Don't take it personally but if you refuse or try something funny then I will punch in a three-digit code and the toxin in the capsule is released. It will take about 15 seconds to reach your central nervous system, where quite literally it will dissolve your brain into mush. But it does this slowly and very painfully. And once the toxin is released there is no cure, no antidote, you're dead. West, you have to think of the millions of lives you will be saving by doing this. We can't let DC start the micro-chip program and we can't let the LT's do what they voted for. You said it yourself back at my compound. This is a way to kill two birds with one stone."

"If I do this for you and if by some miracle I make it out of the building alive you'll deactivate this thing?"

"Yes."

"What kind of a fool do you think I am? You really think I trust you? You can't afford to let me live."

"I guess you're going to have to take a chance because it is your only choice."

"Pardon me for asking a stupid question but how in the hell am I going to get that bomb in there? You know I will have to pass through multiple scanning devices and security."

"Obviously, we know that. This is the best part of the plan. The bomb you will be carrying was developed by the Department of Homeland Security. It was designed to be undetectable and untraceable. And let me tell you, they did one hell of a job. Don't worry, the scanners won't pick it up."

“If I get out of there alive, DC will know I planted the bomb.”

“Yes, they will. There is nothing we can do about that.”

“That is where you’ve made your mistake.”

“How’s that?” Tank asked.

“You’ve given me no hope of survival. I’m a dead man if I refuse. I am dead man if I stay and I’m a dead man if I get out of the building alive. Therefore I choose not to sacrifice others in order to save my ass. Go ahead motherfucker, enter the code. Release the toxin. I don’t give a shit.”

Tank smiled and put his phone back in his coat pocket. “Nice try, West. You don’t think we don’t know about you and that pretty assassin’s plan to leave the country?”

West didn’t say a word, trying to figure out how he would’ve known all that.

“We know she’s making arrangements to leave the country via Canada and we won’t stop her or you,” Tank continued. “It is a perfect solution for all of us. There is your hope and that is why you will do this.”

Game. Set. Match. West was playing checkers while they were playing three dimensional chess. It was clear Tank had planned for every conceivable outcome to ensure West carried out his plan.

Tank stood. “Two days. Meet me here at eight in the morning. And West, for once in your life, don’t fuck it up.”

“Undermine their pompous authority, reject their moral standards, make anarchy and disorder your trademarks. Cause as much chaos and disruption as possible but don’t let them take you ALIVE.”

— Sid Vicious

CHAPTER 26

West opened his apartment door and hesitantly peeked in, half expecting a DC agent to attack him. No one sprung out of the shadows and he walked into his dingy apartment. He went over to the refrigerator and opened it. There were three beers and a moldy block of cheese.

He shut the refrigerator because for once in his life he didn’t feel like drinking. A sudden overwhelming feeling of exhaustion engulfed his body. He collapsed on the couch where he drifted off to sleep.

In his dream state West felt like he was suffocating. He woke suddenly and realized someone had covered his mouth. His eyes focused and Sam was standing over him with a raised finger to her lips. She removed her hand from his mouth and West sat up.

He watched as she pulled some type of electronic device out of her jacket. She flipped a switch and sat it down on the table. "It's okay now."

"What's going on?"

"It's a long story."

West pointed to the device. "What's that?"

"It's an anti-surveillance bug like the one at Harry's apartment. It blocks out our conversation from any listening devices. Your place is bugged."

West rubbed the sleep out of his eye. Sam was an absolute mess. One eye was swollen shut, her hand was wrapped in a crude bandage and there was blood everywhere. "Holy crap. What happened to you?"

"I... " She looked like she was going to faint. West grabbed her arm and eased her down onto the couch.

"Where are you bleeding from?" He asked, frantically looking for any signs of injury.

"Most of it's not mine," she answered.

"Tell me where you are hurt?"

"It looks worse than it is. I'll be fine. I just need to lie down for awhile," she barely finished the sentence before losing consciousness.

West carefully carried her into his bedroom, laid her on his bed and took off her jacket and shoes. He

grabbed a wet towel from the bathroom and tried to clean her up as best as possible. She didn't move a muscle. He didn't see any signs of serious wounds except for the fact that her body had been battered. He hoped she didn't have any internal injuries.

West pulled over a chair and sat beside her. He watched her for a long time before succumbing to sleep. Sometime later that night West woke with a startle. His heart skipped a beat, Sam was gone. He jumped up in a panic just as the toilet flushed.

Sam limped out of the restroom and smiled meekly when she saw him. He grabbed her arm and helped her back to bed.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

"What in the hell happened to you?"

She shrugged but didn't say anything.

"Hold on," West went to the kitchen and grabbed a large glass of water and some aspirin. "Here take these."

She took the aspirin and chugged down the water.

"You cried out in your sleep a couple of times," he said.

"I have nightmares."

"What about?"

She didn't answer.

"Look Sam, you're just trying to do your best and survive in this crazy ass world like everyone else."

"I haven't told you everything about me."

West sat down in the chair. "Alright, I'm listening."

She looked away then said, "I kill people."

"I know. You told me, but like Tank said, we are at war."

"No. You don't understand. This is not about my relationship with Tank and the LT's. I don't really work for them."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm what you might call a double agent. I kill DCers on behalf of the LT's and I kill Lt's for DC but ultimately I serve only one, the Hessians."

"Hessians," West repeated. "Who the hell are they?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Are you kidding me? After the last couple of weeks I'd believe anything. Just tell me."

Sam laid back against the headboard of his bed. "I'm a member of a stateless, leaderless entity whose origins go back to the Middle Ages in Europe."

"Sam, what are you talking about?"

She looked back at him. "You wanted the truth."

"How did you get involved in this?"

"I was chosen, but I believe it was always my fate."

"What exactly are the Hessians?" West asked.

"You ever hear of a guy name Vlad Tepes?"

"Yes, I have. I hope you are not going to tell me you are a vampire?"

"Don't worry, vampires don't exist. Anyway no monsters can match the cruelty inflicted by humans on humans. I don't know how much you know about Tepes

but he was a prince who ruled a portion of Romania during the 15th century and was a member of a military-religious society called the Order of Dragons that was financed by the Holy Roman Emperor.”

“And the function of this society was?”

“They were formed to defend the Catholic Church from its enemies, which at that time was the Muslim Turks who were invading the Balkans.”

“Are you saying you work for the Catholic Church?”

Sam laughed. “No, but to understand the Hessians and my true mission I have to tell you about Vlad.”

“Okay, I’m listening.”

“Vlad was born into a tumultuous world in 1431, the same year Joan of Arc was burned at the stake for heresy. He lived during the Middle Ages, which was highlighted by calamities, upheaval, famines and constant war. Vlad’s territory was in the center of a geopolitical storm because Eastern-Central Europe was constantly fighting one battle or another with not only its own neighbors but with the Ottoman Turks, who were hell bent on conquering all of Europe. The collapse of Constantinople in 1453 opened the floodgates and the Turks made a relentless push westward. For Vlad that meant he was directly in the crosshairs of the battle between the East and West.”

“Doesn’t sound all that different from today,” West replied.

“Except back then the killing was more personal since there were no drones, rockets, robots, lasers, guns.

You looked into the person's eyes you killed. Today, people are killed on a daily basis without ever seeing the face of their executioner."

"Death is death," West replied.

"So it is but Medieval Europe was a cruel, vicious era and it was truly live by the sword or die by the sword."

"So what," West said a testily. "What's the point of this history lesson? Nothing has changed all that much."

"Just hear me out. The history of mankind is nothing more than war with a few years of peace in-between all the slaughter. Vlad came to realize the real enemies weren't the invading Turks but those he trusted and loved the most. He was betrayed by his soldiers, his country, his allies but none more than the Catholic Church who he had taken an oath to die for. Vlad realized all individuals are expendable and that the power structures men create are the true enemy. For an individual to be free in this world means you have to unbind yourself from the chains that imprison all of us the moment we're born. All societal structures inevitably become corrupt. They have to be destroyed. So after coming to this realization Vlad created a group within the Order of Dragons."

"The Hessians?" West asked.

"Yes."

"And what was, or is the Hessians mission?"

"To destroy centralized power structures."

"So you don't believe in any societies ruled by a government?"

“No, because all powerful countries or empires or civilizations in the end become corrupt war machines, and if you don’t believe me name me one country, empire, or civilization that never succumbed to that simple fact.”

West thought for a moment. “I can’t. But tell me what you believe, Sam.”

“I believe in what you might loosely call individual anarchism.”

“And what is that?”

“Simply, I believe in the individual and their will rather than groups, organizations, governments, and even societies as a whole. The individual represents good, while the structure is evil and it is always the root of humanity’s sins.”

“And you are willing to kill because of this belief?”

“Where have these so-called societal structures gotten the human race? How many billions have been murdered in the name of a religion or by a madman who happened to be a leader of a powerful country? Everything becomes corrupt, eventually. It is a simple, undisputable law of nature.”

“Sam, I don’t even know what to say. I mean so what?” West replied in exasperation. “How could you just go out and murder people because they believe in something you don’t. I mean, how’d you ever get involved with these Hessians?”

“They approached me after I deserted the Marines. I believed everything they stood for and it was not a hard decision to join.”

“So that is how you were able to avoid getting caught all these years.”

“Yes.”

“Is that how you got hurt?”

“I was sent to eliminate an executive for a media company.”

“Why did they want him murdered?”

“C’mon, West do you even need to ask that?”

“Something went wrong obviously?”

“I was taken by surprise. There was a bodyguard that wasn’t supposed to be there,” Sam paused and then continued, with a pained look. “And there was a little girl. I guess it was his daughter. She was caught in the line of fire. I killed her. I killed the little girl. Then I killed the bodyguard and the intended target. I left a bloodbath.”

West didn’t know what to say. They sat there in silence for a few minutes until finally he asked, “What are you going to do?”

“My time is up. I have to get out while I can.”

“But to where? There is nowhere to hide.”

“There is a place. A sanctuary to where I’ve earned admittance.”

“Where?” West asked.

“It’s called Iram.”

“Sam, I can’t believe I even know this but you’re referring to a mythological city. You know, kind of like Atlantis. Iram doesn’t exist.”

“Yes it does. I know because I’ve been there. I want you to go with me.” She wrapped her arms around him and whispered into his ear, “Make love to me.”



West woke and watched a stream of grey sunlight poke through his bedroom curtain. He rubbed the back of his neck and felt the swollen area from the implant.

He began to feel sick to his stomach. He pondered what Sam had meant by Iram. He knew she must have been talking metaphorically but still, she was right. It was time to get out or die trying.

The only problem was getting out of the country. Unless you had the right connections and money, leaving the United States of America was next to impossible. The risk would be enormous but even if he died trying, what would he be losing?

Sam stirred and rolled over. Even with her bruised and battered face she was beautiful.

West ran a finger across her cheek. “How you feeling?”

She smiled. “Better.”

“Sore?”

“Yeah.”

He ran his hand through her hair. “So you want to go to Iram, huh?”

“It’s all going to end badly.”

“I know.”

“Listen Sam, there is something I’ve got to tell you. It’s going to seriously affect any decision to leave, or at least for me it is.”

“Okay. What happened?”

“I met Tank yesterday . . .”

“He’s here in New York?” she interrupted.

“Yes and well, I was set up. They implanted some type of neurotoxin device in my neck.”

“Let me see.”

He moved closer toward her and turned his head. A shiver went through him as he felt her finger trace the area where the neurotoxin had been implanted.

“Tank did this?”

“Well, one of his buddies did and then he showed up after.”

“Was it an albino?”

“Yes. How’d you know?”

“He’s used this method before to get what he wants done. I need you to tell me everything and I mean everything that was said from start to finish.”

After telling her everything he asked, “I’m good as dead, aren’t I?”

“It’s not good. I think the biggest problem is going to be getting out of the building with security. You can’t just walk out during her presentation. They’ll apprehend you and probably wouldn’t even let you leave the floor. We need to come up with a plan of getting you out of the room before the bomb is detonated, then somehow get you out of the building without being

caught. And then I'll have to figure something out on the neurotoxin. No matter what he says Tank would never let you live if he thought you escaped."

"Can you get me a gun?" West asked.

"Why?"

"Because when I meet with Tank I am going to kill him."

"You'll die too."

"So? You and I both know I'm a dead man no matter if I get out of the building or not."

She got out of bed gingerly.

"Where are you going?" West asked.

"To find out how to get you out of that building."

"Listen Sam, even if by some miracle I get out of the building alive, what about the poison inside of me?"

"I already have a solution for that."

"Sam you can barely walk."

"I'm okay. Stay here. I'll figure something out."

Sam threw on her clothes and jacket.

"I'll go with you."

"No, you can't. The people I have to see would never agree to help me if you're there. You'll just have to trust me."

"I do."

She kissed him goodbye and left his apartment.

“Kill one man and you are a murderer. Kill millions and you are a conqueror. Kill all and you are a God.”

—Jean Rostand

CHAPTER 27

West spent the day nervously pacing his tiny apartment waiting for Sam to return. Finally at six that night he heard two sharp knocks on the door. He looked out the peephole and it was Sam.

He opened the door and she gave him a hug. He didn't know if that was good or bad.

“So any luck?” he asked resigned to his fate.

“There's a chance.”

“Well, I guess that is better than nothing at all.”

She held up a roll of building diagrams. “The schematics to the building. I've got an idea to get you out

of the room where the Director is speaking. Now let's figure a way to get you out of the building."

They went over to his desk. Sam spread out the building's floor plans and went over her plans. After they had reviewed it for the 200th time they went to bed. They made love and much to West's surprise he fell asleep and didn't wake until the morning.

West couldn't believe how calm he felt. He brushed a finger though a lock of Sam's hair then rolled out of bed and dressed. Sam woke up as he was putting on a shirt and watched him gather his things.

"Time to go," he said.

Sam got out of bed and walked him to the door. They embraced. She looked him in the eye and said, "No matter what happens it will be all right."

He hugged her tightly and let go. He had a funny feeling he would never see her again. West flagged a cab outside his apartment and instructed the driver to take him to upper Grand Central Park. The cab dropped him off and he walked through the park to the old zoo.

He sat on the bench and waited for Tank. After ten minutes he approached holding a small briefcase.

He sat down next to West and without looking at him replied, "You ready?"

"What do you think?"

Tank handed him the briefcase. "Your press pass and credentials are in the front pocket."

"It is all about controlling others, isn't?"

“What else is there to do in this life, huh?” Tank answered. “Should I be a fucking drone like 99 percent of the world’s worthless population? Here is the deal, someone has to win and someone has to lose. That is what it is all about.”

“That whole thing back at your compound was an act, wasn’t it?”

“How so?”

“You never intended to go along with the LT’s threat of detonating an EMP.”

“What makes you so sure about that?”

“Because I now understand who you are. You’re a textbook sociopath. At least DC is fighting for something they believe in. This is all a game to you. Nothing else matters. You’re a power hungry control freak so I know you don’t want the LT’s to detonate the EMP bomb because if that happened you’d lose your control and power.”

Tank grunted but didn’t say anything.

West stood. “I hope you rot in hell. If I ever see you again I will kill you.”

He left Tank and hailed a cab which let him out a few blocks away from the Homeland Security Building. He paid the driver and hopped out. He wanted to walk the last few blocks since it might be the last time he ever would get the chance.

It was one of those rare bright sunny days and he couldn’t believe he felt so calm, almost peaceful. It was probably because his fate was sealed and he had lost the sense of fear. Or maybe his mind had shut down

and he was functioning like some kind of a robot rather than an emotional, feeling human being.

Despite his resignation to his fate his senses seemed to be on hyper-alert. Everything seemed crisp, bright and alive. The green in the trees was more colorful. The neon signs were more brilliant. The blue in the sky was brighter. The white clouds were crisper and even the pollution-stained buildings appeared to be works of great architecture.

He approached the Homeland Building. A concrete wall had been set up creating a perimeter that would stop any car bomb. Heavily armed agents manned the concrete checkpoint. He flashed the press pass to the guard who waved him through.

A queue had formed at a security checkpoint outside the building's entrance. It took ten minutes for him to reach the head of the line. He forced a smile as the guard motioned with his high powered assault rifle for him to approach.

A second guard took his press pass and scanned it through a security reader.

He handed the pass back to West and asked, "Birth month?"

"June," he replied realizing he was about to get a security grilling.

"Mother's maiden name?"

"Roberts."

"Her residence?"

"Deceased."

The guard paused then typed on his laptop before continuing, “Father’s birth city?”

“Boston.”

The guard looked him over then glanced down at his security reader which would tell him if West had answered any of the security questions incorrectly.

“Brother’s name?”

“Don’t have one, unless my father needs to tell me something,” West laughed.

“Move ahead,” The Homeland agent motioned.

He passed through another layer of security outside the building and entered a set of rotating doors that contained high tech scanners. As a deterrent the government had gone out of its way to make sure everyone knew what would happen if someone entered any security checkpoint with a gun, bomb or any type of malicious instrument. Upon detection of anything suspicious the rotating doors sealed and the occupant was trapped inside a bombproof capsule. Once trapped inside the compartment a deadly toxin could be released depending on the risk threat perceived by Homeland Security. Other options afforded to security included incineration and implosion.

West had no idea if the laptop would make it through undetected but he had no choice. He walked through the doors knowing if they detected the bomb he would be dead in seconds.

He walked to the center until a robotic voice told him to halt and stand still. He heard a soft vibrating

noise followed by a swoosh of air. After about twenty seconds of pure terror the doors rotated and opened. Since he was alive the laptop bomb had successfully passed the first test.

He was herded to the next security checkpoint. A new agent looked directly into West's eyes and held the stare. "You're here for the Homeland Director's press conference?"

"Yes sir," he tried to smile innocently.

The guard scanned his body with an electronic wand. "OK, please proceed."

West walked 50 feet where he was instructed to place his briefcase on a conveyor belt. He handed his press credentials to another security guard.

"Who is the editor in charge at your publication?" the guard asked.

"Simon Stossel," he answered then realized he had never given any consideration to what would happen to Simon after this was over.

The soldier marked something on a clipboard then punched a button causing the conveyor belt to start moving. West watched as the laptop bomb went through the high tech scanning device. He felt perspiration building under his arms and a sudden desire to flee took hold of him. He had been astonishingly relaxed up to this moment but now panic was setting in.

The briefcase cleared through the machine and before he had a chance to pass out the guard waved him through. West picked up the laptop bomb and took the

elevator to the 37th floor along with two other reporters and four soldiers.

They exited the elevator and were escorted to the conference room by the armed guards. West entered the room and took an aisle seat in the back. He had been told it didn't matter where he sat, the bomb was powerful enough to blow everyone in the room to smithereens.

He had made it in but now could he make it back out before the bomb went off? He had put all his faith in Sam's plan and he hoped to god she was right.

West looked around the room. Most of the reporters were busy scribbling notes on pads, tapping away on their computers or idly chatting to kill some time before the director came out. Warm bile began to fill his throat and he had to hold down the urge to vomit. Every single person in this room was about to die because of him.

A few stragglers entered the room and the doors were pulled shut. The Director of Homeland Security entered the room through a side door and walked over to the podium.

She glanced over the room quickly and began, "Good morning. Thank you for joining us today to help spread the word about a major development that is going to improve the lives of every single American. We have been working extensively with the President and government scientists to create a national data tracking system called Personal Freedom. The

program is voluntary and it is designed to help secure the United States' status as the safest country in the world.

I asked each of you here today, to help promote the project. In fact, you are probably the most important aspect of whether this plan will succeed or fail, and we are counting on you and your journalism skills to convince America this is in the best interest of their families and their country.”

The Director went on to lay out the details of the government's plan to micro-chip all Americans within the next five years. She finished her speech and opened the floor for planted questions.

After the first question West stood up and headed for the exit.

“Where you going?” a security guard asked.

He feigned a sick expression. “Give me a break, I waited for the Director to finish but I'm about to puke. I'm sick as a dog. I told my editor I was sick and couldn't attend this but he threatened to fire me if I didn't. C'mon on man, I need to go throw up in the bathroom. You can come watch if you want or I can just puke right here.”

The security guard looked him over then pulled off his press pass. “All right Mr. Collins. I'll hold onto this until you come back.”

“Thanks,” he mumbled and left the room.

Two agents were stationed outside the door and West nodded at them.

“I’m sick, I’ve got to go to the bathroom,” he said feigning an illness.

He walked past the elevator and headed toward the men’s room. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure the agents weren’t going to follow and he turned the corner and walked past the restroom. He waited for a second and when no one appeared to be following him he picked up the pace and hurried down the hall. He had no idea when the bomb was going to detonate but he knew it could happen at any second. He had to get off the floor. Then something dawned on him. There had to be surveillance devices all over the floor. Someone had to be watching what he was doing.

He found the elevator and pressed the button. “C’mon. C’mon,” he urged.

He heard voices down the hall and someone called out. “Hey you, stop.”

Before the agents turned the hall corner the elevator door binged then opened. He jumped in and pressed the button for the 6th floor. The deal was up. They knew something was going on, and the bomb better go off fast because he was certain the director was being ushered out of the room by now. The elevator stopped on the 6th floor and just as he stepped out an enormous explosion rocked the building. He lost his balance slightly as the entire building swayed.

Sirens and bells started ringing everywhere. Sprays of water shot down from the fire sprinklers in the ceiling.

People ran out of their offices in panic. West fought his way through the crowd down toward the office where Sam had told him to go. He found the office and barreled through the door.

It was empty and West spotted the private elevator in the corner. He ran over and inserted the key Sam had given him into the security lock. He turned the lock and a light came on above the elevator. The door opened and West hit the basement button. The elevator headed down to the basement and West prayed it didn't get stuck or stop. The door opened and West hurried through the parking garage.

Sirens were blaring from every direction. He walked up the exit ramp into the street and mass chaos. Debris from the explosion filled the street and blood was splattered everywhere from the dead and injured who had been struck from falling glass and steel.

He put his head down and walked down the street. People were running everywhere. He had to go six blocks to the rendezvous spot Sam had set up. The plan was she was going to leave him instructions in a PO box and he would go from there. He couldn't believe he was still alive but for how long? The clock was running with the poison inside of him.

West hurried into the building, found the PO box and opened it. Inside was a manila envelope. He pulled it out and looked around.

He pulled out the note instead and started reading.

Dear West,

I'm sorry. I can't change what I am. What's happening is bigger than either you or me. There was never a plan to leave the country. I had to make you believe that so you would go ahead and plant the bomb.

The plan was for you not to make it out alive but for reasons I can't figure out, I couldn't do that to you. The pill in the bottle I left will neutralize the neurotoxin. They think you're dead anyway because that was the plan. I was never supposed to help you.

I know you won't understand and I don't know if you will ever discover the truth but you have to try and leave the country if you can. When the dust settles DC and the LT's will know you made it out alive and they'll both be after you.

Take Care,

Sam

West took the pill out of the bottle and quickly swallowed it. He walked outside and looked around. He was a dead man. He crumbled the letter from Sam and threw it on the ground. He started walking with no plan, oblivious to the world around him.

“Then the shit hit the fan.”

— John Gailbraith

CHAPTER 28

West spent the night curled up next to a dumpster in an alley with a bottle of vodka. The next day was spent walking the streets of New York in a quasi-drunken blur. The only thing he knew for certain was the antidote must have worked because he was still alive. But he knew DC had already determined he was responsible for the bombing and the LT’s and Tank probably knew he had survived. He had a price on his head from all sides but despite that he didn’t even think about running. There was nowhere to go, there was nowhere to hide. Anyway, he deserved whatever he got.

Figuring his situation was so hopeless he used his DigiDollar card to buy drinks, food and to pay for a nasty hotel room where he slept for a few hours. When he awoke he was surprised his room had not been raided by DC agents or that he hadn't been killed by one of Tank's assassins.

Since he was still alive and had nothing better to do he got up and left the hotel. It was late afternoon and the sun had fallen behind the buildings surrounding Times Square. The air had a smell that signaled fall was on the way and for perhaps the first time in his life he studied the people on the streets. Everything on the surface appeared to be normal but beneath that illusion West detected an underlying madness. It was like everyone knew the situation was hopeless and everyone was waiting for the shit to hit the fan.

He walked down to Times Square and was swallowed by a sea of people and chaos. In his lifetime he had seen Times Square go from a rundown shithole with men in trench coats buying drugs and visiting sex shops to a tourist-filled Las Vegas spectacle to what it was now, a mini city filled with people who had no future and who gathered to drink, gamble and pass the time.

A commotion stopped West and he watched as an inordinate amount of people began to gather underneath dozens of giant television screens lining the square.

West walked across the street into the square, where he watched a reporter who was stationed underneath a giant radio telescope interviewing a SETI scientist.

West watched as the reporter asked, “Has this signal been confirmed?”

The scientist responded by saying, “Yes, we have received independent confirmation from agencies across the globe that the signal is not man-made and it is not a random occurrence of some natural event. This is the same WOW SIGNAL that was recorded at the precise moment 50 years ago.”

“So what does this mean?” the reporter asked breathlessly.

“It means there is intelligent life originating somewhere in the constellation of Sagittarius trying to communicate with us,” the scientist answered. “There can be no other explanation. This is the greatest discovery in the history of mankind. We finally know we are not alone in this universe.”

The screen blinked and a new broadcast was picked up. A reporter was standing on the front lawn of the White House talking into a microphone, “.... the LT’s had demanded the President and Homeland Security halt their micro-chip program and they have given the government 48 hours to accept their demands or they are threatening to detonate an atomic bomb above America resulting in an EMP pulse that would potentially destroy the electrical grid. The result would be catastrophic. Some government officials have claimed

that tens of millions of Americans could perish in the first year.”

The Dracun and the LT’s had pushed the envelope as far as it would go and it looked like things were ready to blow.

The television screen then switched to the floor of the New York Stock Exchange and West was able to hear the reporter screaming over the chaos, “We have breaking news. A perfect storm has hit the United States. After the nuclear threat issued by LT’s, the China-Russian Federacy and the United Countries of Europe have announced all debts, obligations, trade agreements and currency swaps with the United States have been cancelled null and void. Additionally, all United States assets held overseas have been frozen and the China-Russia Federation further announced that at midnight tonight they will cease to recognize the United States DigiDollar.”

The broadcast switched to the Chicago Mercantile Exchange where sheer pandemonium had broken out. Another reporter shouted, “All commodities priced in DigiDollars from oil, corn, sugar, livestock, and wheat are locked limit to the upside. There is no telling when or at what price they will open back up at. In fact, I talked to one long-term trader who told me he doesn’t believe these essential commodities will ever open back up again in terms of U.S DigiDollars.”

The reporter looked back over his shoulder at a bank of numbers and continued, “The trader went

on to tell me the DigiDollar has almost ceased to trade on any exchange at any value and he believes the financial system of the United States as we know it has collapsed.”

The screen went fuzzy, then dead black.

Pandemonium broke out and West crossed back over the street and ducked into the corner of a building's edifice. The scene in Times Square went from surreal to ballistic in a matter of minutes.

The match that was going to blow the tinderbox sky high had finally been struck. All the television monitors suddenly went black and West tried to stay out of the way, watching the growing mayhem.

After a few minutes the screens came back on with an official-looking woman standing behind a lectern in a government facility. She announced that after the assassination of Homeland Security Director Napolitano a new acting Director of Homeland Security had been appointed by the President and he would be making a statement.

West watched in disbelief as Larson Graham walked up to the podium.

Graham stared into the camera and addressed the country, “Citizens, Patriots of the United States, war has been declared on this great nation by foreign enemies and traitors inside our own country. For your safety I am declaring a state of Martial Law and ordering all citizens to confine themselves to their homes for the next three days. Further instructions will be given via

SmartLink and anyone in violation of the Homeland directive will be shot on sight.”

West wasn't sure what Graham thought would happen but the martial law declaration had an immediate impact. It sent the crowd into a rampage. Decades of pent up fury suddenly exploded.

The policemen, Homeland agents and military personal patrolling the area seemed to be taken by surprise at either the announcement or the public's reaction because the crowd turned their confusion, fear and anger toward them, and it was evident they were not prepared for it. Violence filled the streets. West watched in revulsion as a Homeland agent was cornered by a gang who proceeded to rip the poor bastard limb from limb.

West cowered back against the building trying to make himself invisible as he watched the beginning of the second American Civil War.

“My God-it’s full of stars.”

— David Bowman, 2001

CHAPTER 29

West’s skin prickled as an electric charge filled the air around him. Had the government unleashed some type of crowd control weapon? West half expected to see people exploding when the air in front of him began to ripple.

“What the hell is going on?” West mumbled forgetting the anarchy surrounding him.

Byron materialized out of the disturbance. “Hello, West,” he said, motioning to a green door behind him. “Why don’t you join me? We’ll be able to talk more freely in there.”

West turned and looked into the streets. It looked like a scene out of some apocalyptic zombie movie.

Flames were shooting out of buildings, cars were overturned, and people were on a rampage looting stores, attacking Homeland agents and killing each other.

“Are you responsible for this?” West asked.

The green door cracked open and blackness spilled out. “We can talk in there.”

Byron walked through the doorway and disappeared. Despite an overwhelming sense he was walking into some type of a trap, West stepped forward. He had absolutely nothing to lose by remaining in the chaos surrounding him.

West approached the doorway, hesitated then walked through, letting the darkness consume him. He emerged from the black vacuum and found himself in an empty cafe. He had never been to Paris but the café was exactly how he envisioned Paris back in its glory days.

Byron was seated at a table, drinking a glass of red wine. “Please have a seat,” he replied.

West looked around the bar. The tables, the walls, the long oak bar, the bottles on the liquor shelf all appeared real but he had a strange feeling everything was just a little too perfect.

There were no scratches or markings on the wall, no water marks on the bar or scrapes on the floor. Every liquor and wine bottle on the shelves had perfect labels and were unopened. Everything about the place was flawless and pristine, as if he had entered into an illusion.

“Would you care for anything to drink?” Byron asked.

“I’m fine,” West answered, looking back toward Byron. “I may see you and I may be talking with you but I think the more likely scenario is that I’ve completely lost my mind, or maybe I was killed out there. I don’t think this could be hell, so am I in heaven?”

Byron smiled. “Heaven is an individual concept so I’ll pass on answering that one but you have not lost your mind and you have not been killed.”

West stared at Byron. “Every time we talked in public. The waitress in the diner, Simon at the noodle bar, the cab driver, they never saw you, did they?”

“No they didn’t, but I suspect you always knew that?”

West thought for a second but even he didn’t know the answer to Byron’s statement. “So are you finally going to tell me who you are and what this is all about?”

Byron set his wine glass down. “I am the Keeper of the Records.”

“And what is the Keeper of the Records?”

“I guess the best way to think of it is that the Hall of Records is this universe’s library and I am its librarian.”

“And what is in this library or Hall of Records?”

“It contains all experiences, knowledge and consciousness of every being that has ever existed in your universe. It collects all that has ever happened, all that is currently happening and all that shall ever happen in space and time in the quantum field. All historical in-

formation about the past, all current information about the present, all future possibilities or probabilities that could exist are stored in the Hall.”

“Okay and where is this so-called library?”

Byron looked around and gestured with his arms. “It is everywhere in space and time in the Akashic Field. It is the missing dark matter and energy your leading scientists have been trying to find for decades. The Hall of Records is the missing mass that binds the universe together. It is the missing piece that completes the puzzle of the grand unified theory of everything.”

What Byron said made something click in West’s memory. “You wrote me that letter just after Sloan died, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You know this is hard for me to comprehend. Let’s say I accept your explanation for the moment. Where are you from and why did you come here?”

“I guess the easiest thing to do is to think of your universe as a single soap bubble in an endless bathtub filled with infinite bubbles. Sometimes a single bubble can escape down the drain, similar to information falling into a black hole. And that bubble may fall into a whole new bathtub also full of an infinite amount of bubbles. This analogy represents the multiverse we inhabit. We can slip down the drain to newly-created universes to act as Liberians and to search.”

“What are you searching for?”

“The Creator. The Source of all.”

“You mean God?”

“If you like that term.”

“Why do you look like us?” West asked.

“Actually it is the other way around.”

“What do you mean?”

“You look like us. How I appear before you is how our essence appears. But I am an energy being and do not possess a physical body as you do.”

“Hold on, are you saying you created human beings?”

“Yes and no. We are creators of life but we are more like your parents, not your God.”

“But you still created us.”

“The One who created us - and ultimately you -is unknown. You are entangled with us and we are entangled with The One. What we provided to you was our light. Light is made up of energy and information and we gave you a spark of our existence and from that light your consciousness was born. The body that holds your consciousness is just a function of the laws of biology, chemistry and physics in your universe.”

West’s mind was racing and he knew he was just throwing out random and unrelated questions but he couldn’t help himself. “But then why is the universe so devoid of life? Why haven’t you created life everywhere?”

“You are wrong about the universe being devoid of life. Your universe has certain physical laws that are constant and cannot be altered and for that reason in-

teraction among conscious life forms is limited because of the great vastness of the system you inhabit. But I assure you even in your infinite universe, life is abundant even if interaction amongst those life forms is not.”

“Okay, but if you created us then fundamentally we are the same?”

“If you mean essence then yes, fundamentally we are the same but structurally we are not. We are pure energy beings compared to your carbon based bodies. We do not succumb to the elements of this universe that would destroy you. We do not need oxygen, food, water. Nor would things like radiation, extreme heat, or cold harm us. Your bodies are fragile with very short physical life spans, as all carbon based species are. But I am only referring to your physical body because your light, which is nothing more than energy and information, lives on even when your body dies.”

“You mean our soul?” West asked.

“You could say that, yes.”

“But what is the purpose of creating us?”

“Why do you have children?” Byron answered. “One of the greatest gifts of any conscious being anywhere in the multiverse is to create, especially to create new life.”

West thought for a couple of moments. “Obviously, you must know how hard this is for me to grasp. And I know this is going to be a dumb question but in light of everything you just told me don’t you have more exciting planets, universes or dimensions to go to? Surely

being on this wretched planet for so long must not only be boring but pretty depressing by now. I mean to use your analogy of ‘parents’, you have to be damn disappointed in your offspring.”

“I have never looked at it that way,” Byron answered.

“So how do you look at it then? Are we like zoo animals to you? Some sort of a pet or entertainment or an experiment? I mean, if you haven’t noticed life pretty much sucks around here.”

“That is your reality. I have intervened in a limited fashion to protect your species from destroying themselves but that dilemma is no different than most entities in this particular universe once a certain technology threshold is achieved.”

“So we’re not the only fools with the propensity for mass self-destruction?”

“Your civilization has passed the technological threshold as has many others.”

“What does technological threshold mean?”

“It simply is the point a civilization reaches when it has the technology to destroy itself. In your universe the point is crossed once a civilization has discovered and learned how to split atoms.”

“I understand that but if life is teeming in this universe, why are you still here? What is so interesting about us?”

“We have found anomalies amongst you.”

“What do you mean anomalies?” West asked.

“The best way I can describe it is to remember the Hall of Records stores all your universe’s life forms, experiences, knowledge and consciousness. And over the length of your civilization on Earth there have been a few of your species whose their light has disappeared. Like a book being checked out of a library that is never returned. However, in this library that is an impossibility.”

“Wouldn’t that just mean the person had died?”

“No, when a human’s body dies that specific individual’s light energy returns to its source, which means it returns back to us but their complete existence is stored forever in the Hall of Records.”

“I still don’t get what you are saying.”

“There are individuals on this planet, who for lack of a better term, their light or information has disappeared from the Hall of Records. And when their physical body dies they come back again to this plane rather than returning to us.”

“So are you saying you came to this planet and stayed here because you believe someone’s missing spark or energy has checked itself out of the Universal Library and returned to those who created you? The so called One you are searching for?”

Byron smiled. “It is a theory, yes.”

“And who are these people with no spark?” West asked.

“I thought you would have figured that out by now,” Byron answered.

“Why would you think that?”

“Because one of them is you.”

West heart skipped a beat and he felt a sudden panic. “You’re saying I have no soul?”

“No. I am suggesting your conscious information from the Hall of Records has gone missing and your light energy has temporarily disappeared, but to where and how or why, I don’t know.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You have become non-entangled. You have lived many incarnations over hundreds of Earth years now and we have observed you, and others, hoping to find out why.”

“You mean reincarnation?”

“Not as you think of it. Remember, energy cannot be destroyed only changed so in that regards every conscious being is immortal and is reincarnated into different forms of energy an infinite amount of times. That is a constant law of this universe. You are different because your consciousness body remains here but your energy spark, all the information about you is somewhere else.”

“I don’t know. I ...” West stopped because he didn’t know what to say or how to feel.

“On some level you must have known something was different about you?” Byron continued. “Your dreams West - you think everyone travels to other dimensions and comes back with physical proof?”

“What do you mean?”

“What about your sand dream? Where’d you think that sand came from?”

It seemed like such a long time ago but it was only weeks ago when he awoke to find his couch covered in sand. He had never put it all together but that was the beginning of all of this, or was it the end of the beginning? He no longer knew.

“I kind of dismissed the dream and the sand,” West replied. “I thought I just got drunk and . . .

“If that was really what you thought, why’d you scoop as much as you could and put it into a jar?”

“I guess that is a good question. So where did that sand come from?”

“If you tested it in a laboratory you would have found out it did not originate from this planet. But where’d it come from? Even I can’t answer that. Maybe you traveled to where your light is? Maybe it is linked to The One?”

“Are you asking me?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know.”

“What about the *déjà vu* you have?”

“Everyone has that.”

“No. Not like your kind. The longer you exist in one plane, the more frequent, the more intense you experience it.”

West thought of all the times when he wondered if he was living some type of a rerun of his life. Moments in time when he felt as if he was observing his life, not

living it. Feelings, thoughts, and emotions that seemed to be repeated over and over.

“So what does all this mean? What do you want with me? What does this have to do with everything that is going on?”

“I have watched and observed, thinking maybe one day your light would return back to you.” Byron smiled. “Or to put it another way the Book of You is returned to the Hall of Records. But maybe you are just a strange anomaly, a cosmic quirk nothing more, nothing less.”

“Why are you telling me all this and why now?”

“My time here is up. I have to go for now. Your civilization is about to undergo a great change. What will emerge from this event, I do not know but I have seen it before. There is a probability your species may not survive here.”

“Can’t you change this? I mean you said you’ve influenced things before.”

“We only impose very limited influence. The group you call the Dracun was created then supported to help “move” civilization in a certain direction and to protect mankind from self-destruction while I observed the non-entangled beings.”

“But if you have influence over us, why have you let the world disintegrate into the shithole it is? Why don’t you help?”

“It is not the way it works and anyway the Dracun are out of my control.”

“You lost control of them. How the hell could you do that with all your supposed wisdom and advancement? Can’t you do something?”

“You still don’t understand our place in your universe. It is not that I don’t care but that is really not the point. The point is you are creatures of free conscious will and you must be allowed to fulfill that free will. I did interfere here but that was a mistake. You need to understand the fact that I don’t view your physical death or even the destruction of this planet as the end. Your light returns back to the Source. Death as you define it is an illusion. It does not exist.”

“That is it,” West said angrily. “This is the great mystery of existence. How is there any meaning in any of this?”

“The meaning is that the greatest gifts any conscious being in any multiverse can have is to exist, to explore, to create and to love.”

“Pretty damn simplistic, not to mention disappointing.”

“Perhaps because you have never truly achieved any of these gifts is the reason for your struggles.”

“So that is it, this is the end?”

“There are never endings only beginnings. A new adventure awaits for you once you pass through that door. Goodbye for now, West. We will meet again.”

The air began to ripple and Byron faded from view. The green door reappeared. West stood and walked over to it. He turned and looked back at the café. He

knew he could not stay. He entered into the blackness of the doorway back into the chaos.

West straightened his tie and buttoned up his overcoat. He lit a cigarette and walked into the end of civilization.

The Unraveling had begun.

