

iWorld

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WASHINGTON

Julius Fortune sat back on the leather-bound-bench, his cane placed on the seat beside him. The wait he endured was much longer than anticipated, and in a place where he felt less than comfortable. Not that it showed in the sixty-three year old. His weathered features well practised at concealing emotion. A trait evolved from forty years of trading in the shadows to protect his country. Fortune checked his watch. The formal decor of the high-ceilinged corridor, the oak-panelled walls; the bureaucracy of it all, it was testing him. He was happy this was an aspect of the job which played only a minor role in his work.

Another check of his timepiece. The senator had been in the room opposite for nearly two hours. Obviously his briefing wasn't going to plan. What happened inside room S127 would not be written down, and only a handful of powerful people would ever know it took place.

Fortune welcomed the vibrating distraction as his cell-phone rang on silent. He lifted himself with the help of his cane.

'April?' His voice permanently set to calm.

'Is the senator out yet?' she asked.

'Not yet.'

'Ahh, that doesn't sound good.'

One of many things that Senator Joe Rushmore didn't like was prolonged meetings. He had a mission in life, and it detested answering to bureaucracy.

'You've received the results?' Fortune asked

'I've just spoken to the doctor,' she paused. 'It's not good, Julius. The patients are all showing negative.'

Not what he wanted to hear.

'Are you going to tell him?'

'No, we'll keep it to ourselves for now. I'll inform the Board before we leave.'

'You're going to leave him out of the loop? He won't be happy if he finds out.'

'Timing, April. It's what oils the machine. I'm putting you on hold, the senator's coming out.'

The seventy-seven year old senator wore a dour expression as he left S127. His famous hawk-eye and battle ready expression scouring the hallway. His moody gaze levelled on Fortune.

Senator Joe Rushmore was flying high. He was riding the wave. Up seven points in the polls and receiving more fan-mail than a movie star; not that he ever took the time to read any. Joe didn't preach the campaign image he portrayed. Not the caring, sharing, self-made billionaire, who wanted nothing more from the world of politics than to help out his fellow Americans. What the senator did best was make the American public feel good about themselves, and more importantly, about him. He'd promised to make America great again, and who didn't want that?

In reality Joe was a political tyrant; a coiled viper who savaged his opponents. Woe betide the man who became indebted to, or ever crossed Joe's political path. He was a man with little or no time for 'the little people,' unless he needed their vote. But even powerful reptiles like Joe had to answer to someone, especially for funding. And the senator was always keen to liberate more funding from the public purse.

Fortune had to ask himself, did the American people really want this man as their president? His conclusion was an unfortunate, but a resounding, *aye!*

‘In here, Fortune,’ the senator opened a door further down the corridor. ‘Wait outside Charles,’ he snapped at his sharply dressed aide, who dutifully closed the door for his master’s privacy.

‘Problems Senator?’ Fortune asked.

‘Complications,’ Joe replied.

‘Did they decline the new budget proposal?’

‘They want to think about it some more. Can you believe that? Those sons-of-bitches, who the hell do they think they are?’ He was pacing, showing more agitation than usual. ‘We need to change the way this country works, Fortune. Those bastards are making me cow-tail and beg for every dollar and cent. And for what? To fill the bowl I spend wholly in our great nation’s best interests,’ he wrestled to release the knot in his tie. ‘Do you know what they asked me in there? They actually wanted to know how the money was going to be spent. Can you believe that? Oh, and they want to know why NEXUS isn’t online yet? Those sanctimonious bastards want to know if we’re having any problems that they should be aware of? Huh, if only they knew.’

‘Problems are just puzzles,’ said Fortune. ‘Conundrums that require a solution. The important thing is, that they didn’t say no.’

‘Oh, I’ll get the smug bastards to approve the money. That’s my job. What about *your* job, Fortune? Have you solved our *little conundrum* yet?’

‘No. We’re scaling back the free service trials.’

‘You’re what? No, we need to press on. You need to get these problems resolved.’

‘Unwise, sir. We’re nation-wide with the trials. The project could become exposed. This is nothing more than a temporary measure.’

‘Temporary, is that right?’ He speared his attention toward Fortune. The elderly senator had more energy and fire than most men half his age. He was driven with an almost fanatical belief in himself. When he looked at someone like that, it was obvious why other lawmakers had

dubbed him, The Hawk. 'What about Doctor Outman, is he on hold? Or is doing his job and finding me a cure?'

'The doctor's vaccine, it shows potential.'

'Potential? What exactly does *potential* mean? He does realise that kids don't fall off fucking trees,' Joe was agitated, looking to vent his anger. 'Do we have progress on the cure, or not?'

'April's on hold, she's updating me,' he'd been asked directly, so had to tell.

'Well?' The senator demanded.

'The doctor says he needs more time.'

'Time? He's had two fucking years, with unlimited funding and resources. I built that cock-sucker an off-the-book clinic in a foreign country. You do realise that the Oversight Committee just sautéed, grilled, and then tried to fry me to find out how I've been spending their billion dollar budget.' Joe took a breath. He had a habit of brushing at his lapel; a sure sign he was scheming. 'Shall I go back in there and tell them what their budget is doing to healthy American kids, because *your* doctor needs more time?' The tie finally came loose. 'You came to me with a diamond-cut-reputation for getting things done. Fortune, you do your fucking job. Make NEXUS work. Or find me a cure. I don't care which. And let me be clear about *time*; it'll be you who runs out of it. Charles!' He shouted, and the door opened. 'Get the car out front, I'm leaving.'

'Right away, Senator,' the young aide stepped aside, he held a gaze that suggested Fortune wasn't welcome to follow. 'You look more peaky than normal, Mr Fortune,' he said. 'Maybe it's time to hang up that cane of yours. We could put you somewhere nice, to pasture, so to speak,' he smirked as he closed the door.

Fortune waited until the footsteps fell silent on the marble floor outside, than lifted his phone.

'I take it you heard that?'

'*Difficult not to,*' April replied. '*Why do you let him talk to you like that?*'

‘Stay focused,’ he replied. ‘The children Doctor Outman has at the clinic, is there any hope at all for them?’

‘No, the NEXUS Web is projected to be a hundred per cent fatal.’

Words Fortune found difficult to hear. For forty years he’d patriotically cleaned up one political mess after another. His business was protecting his country. But to be associated with the deaths of American children, despite the importance of the programme, it was a career low. The fact that he and April were desperately trying to save them, it didn’t help.

‘Cut them loose,’ he said, ‘put them through the health project. Whatever their families need. It’s all we can do for them now.’

‘And the doctor?’

‘Tell him to cast his net again. Check every hospital with links to the Pharmacy. We need more candidates.’

‘I’m on it. But Julius . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘Julius, are we in too deep that we can’t get out this time?’

‘Errr, excuse me, Mrs Krane? Mrs Krane, can you ask your kids to stop bombing in the pool, people are complaining. Mrs Krane, please, I’ll have to ask them to leave.’

Leave, we’ve only just got here? Kass squeezed a peek through sleepy eyes. *Oh.* She saw chiseled pecks and broad tanned shoulders. A well sculpted body topped off by a cheeky smile, and a mass of blonde curls. *He’s wearing Baywatch briefs, and frowning. Why’s he frowning?*

Kass lowered the bug-eyed D&Gs that guarded her eyes, with instant regret. *Eurgh, too much sunlight.* And why did her head hurt? *How much did I drink last night?*

‘Mrs Krane, your kids?’

‘Hmmm, what kids?’ *Whoa, flash-back.* Glass, cup, bottle, and then there was that pitcher of, God only knew what was in that thing. *Uh-oh, no, I didn’t?* An image was assembling. *Oh, please no.* She hadn’t jumped up on the desk to do, ‘the superman.’

Reflex caught the vomit just in time before she shared last night’s buffet with the young Adonis who stared down at her. *What is that terrible noise?*

‘Mrs Krane, please. Mrs Krane, are you feeling all right?’

‘Did you say, bomb?’ she sat bolt upright. ‘Clear the area, now.’

‘No, no, they’re jumping in the pool. It’s not allowed,’ he was pointing.

Kass was squinting, and having a reprieve. *It wasn't me. It was Marlene up on the table.* The pint-size blonde from accounting, making a complete idiot of herself. 'It wasn't me,' she said with relief. 'Oh, Pierce,' she added. *We didn't?*

She'd been all over him like a rash. More shots had followed, the loud music spinning her head. 'Oh crap, on the Captain's desk . . . we didn't, did we?'

'Mrs Krane?'

'Nothing . . . *Time out. Time out.* She tried squinting again. 'It's Jason, isn't it?' *Why are you staring at me?*

'Mrs Krane, please, I'm getting complaints.'

Complaints, right. Kass had to focus now. She wasn't going blind, it was the bright Californian sunlight. *What's he pointing at?* About fifty feet away, she could see them now. The sound of lost-souls screaming in purgatory, was just kids splashing excitedly in the pool.

Okay, focus, get a fix on Josh and his friends. They're somewhere out there in the blur. Ah . . . oh, hurling each other off the poolside. It seemed the lifeguard did have a point.

'Come a little closer will you. No, down here,' she reached for the whistle that hung from his neck. A long torturous shrill pierced the air, and the pool went silent.

Josh was looking at mum.

Everyone was looking at mum.

'Lay off the tsunamis' darling. Mummy's trying to get some sun,' *and some sleep.* She wagged a stern finger, then smiled up at Jason. 'They won't bother you anymore, promise,' she let the whistle drop against his chest. *Hmm, where can I get a tan like that?*

'Thanks Mrs Krane,' he said.

'Please, Jason, call me . . . ' *Old enough to be your mother?* She slid the sunglasses back to hide the torpor in her eyes. 'It's Ms Krane,' she said. 'Just shout if you have any other problems.'

The noise from the pool went back into overdrive as the Baywatch backside slinked away. She tried not to watch, but she'd been trained by the LAPD to be observant; in any and *all* situations. Now, if only she could get the hundred or so kids to keep the bloody noise down, this could still turn out to be a lovely day.

‘Hey Mom.’

‘Hmm, yes darling?’ Kass loved the sound of Josh’s voice. Her lips smiled, her eyes remained asleep.

‘Mom, look, head shake causes waterfall.’

‘Josh, no, no, stop it.’ *Fuck that’s cold.* Kass was up from the lounge, grabbing for her towel.

‘Just checking you’re still with us,’ he laughed.

‘Mummy is trained to be alert and ready at all times, she said, and took his hand. Pulled him close. Mummy is very affective at using towel to take punk-kid down,’ he was in her arms. She was kissing him on the cheek, the nose, around his eyes. *Kiss, kiss, kiss.* She knew how much he loved her showing affection, *kiss, kiss, in public. Kiss, kiss, kiss.*

‘No, Mom, people are watching. Hey, help. Crazy old bag-lady kidnapping handsome teenager.’

‘Hey, less of the old,’ she could see Matt and James, Josh’s friends, both happily wetting themselves with amusement, feet dangled in the pool. She petted Josh like a fish out of water so his friends could see.

Josh was the one good thing to come out of a short, violent marriage to his father. At fourteen her boy was growing tall and handsome, just like his dad; but that was where the similarity ended. He’d inherited none of his father’s demons, none of his aggressive traits. He was sweet and beautiful. She couldn’t hug him tightly enough.

‘Mom, people are watching. Arrest me, but stop kissing me.’

His dad was a cop too. Kass endured two years of psychological and physical assault until she'd snapped, drawn her Glock, shoved it in the bastard's face. That moment was the closest she'd ever come to killing another human-being. Dean knew it too. He was smart enough to understand it was time to move on.

'Hey, are you going to take these off?' Josh's fingers tapped on the Bugs.

'No, and if you value your life you won't either. I'm not feeling very pretty under here'

'Did you get wasted last night?'

'Wasted? Well, maybe, just a little,' the world hadn't stopped spinning yet.

'Mom, who was the guy that brought you home last night?'

'Guy? What guy?' *Oh shit, you saw him?* She needed a cover story, fast. 'Oh, him, his name's Pierce. A friend from the DA's office. I think he was the designated driver last night. Not sure, don't know,' could Josh see through her sunglasses?

'Is he the same guy you were having coffee with in Starbucks on Friday?'

'Friday?' *Has my son got me under surveillance?* 'I don't remember Friday? Was it the day before Saturday?'

'Matt's dad saw you in Starbucks with a man. He told his mom, who asked his sister who he was. Sam mentioned it to one of her friends at school, and hey, you know, now I know. He was described as tall dark and handsome, just like the man who brought you home last night. Mom, is there anything you want to say before you call your lawyer?'

She shrugged. 'Okay, could be the same guy, I suppose.'

'It is okay. You are allowed to have a life.'

Busted by the freaking grapevine? 'It's nothing serious, he's just a friend really,' she dropped the sunglasses. 'We, errr, might have dated. Once or twice.'

'Are you sleeping with him?'

Am I what?!

‘It’s just, well, I heard from one of the kids at school, that his father had a friend . . .’

‘No, stop, I don’t want to hear. Shit, are people talking about us, me? Are you messing with me?’

Josh was laughing. ‘Your face, it’s a picture.’

‘Okay, you’ve got me. Guilty as charged. That man has kissed me, and on numerous occasions. He’s got great lips, very moist. And you should see his . . .’

‘Eurgh, Mom, no. Building pictures here. Not what a son wants to hear before lunch.’

Her turn to smile. She should have told him. There’d been a few flings. A one night stand that made her cringe whenever the memory resurfaced. Making a career for herself and bringing up Josh was all she’d needed, until Pierce.

Relationships were difficult when the scars run so deep. Not having a father figure hadn’t stopped Josh growing into a fine young man. His dirt-bag father never sent a card for his birthday, nor at Christmas. She knew that hurt him, but he never complained. Josh was a child witness to spousal abuse; so he understood.

‘Why don’t you bring him over for dinner?’ said Josh, furiously rubbing his head in a towel.

Wow, really?

‘You wouldn’t mind?’

‘Derrr, no.’

I’d love that. She was sure that Pierce would too. Kass lifted her sunglasses fully away. ‘Josh, baby, are you feeling okay?’ she asked. He was looking pale. A little bloodshot in the eyes.

‘I’m fine, just a bit hot. It is like, what, six million degrees out here. Ahh, wait a minute, not so fast. This is classic interrogation deflection technique. Mom, it’s okay. You’re allowed to have a boyfriend. I give you permission.’

She grinned. That meant a lot. But still, he did look pale. 'Josh, you look a bit peaky. Take a break from hogging the pool. Stay here with mum for a bit,' she touched his brow.

'Mom, I'm good; it's just a bit of a headache. Probably all the chlorine.'

'Okay,' she handed him her water, 'drink plenty,' she said, reaching into her handbag. 'And, take these,' Kass handed him two Tylenol.'

'Mom, I'm fine, really.'

'All right, but let me know if it gets worse. And please don't upset the lifeguard again.'

'Who Jason? Nah, he's cool.'

'Josh, he came over and complained about you.'

'Mom, he came over to check you out.'

He what?

'Jason's got a thing for older women.'

'You're kidding me?'

'Hey, it wasn't me who blew his whistle.'

Oh my God?

'Look Mom, Jason's waving. Oh, no, he's waving to you.'

Oh my God!

You know you're in trouble when your fourteen year old kid is smarter than you. She managed a half-smile, and then shrank back behind the Bugs. *Boy are you gonna get it later?* And he was. She almost burst out laughing.

Pierce? Kass was daydreaming: about the tall, and very handsome, Assistant District Attorney. *Should I bring him home?* She wanted to. There had to be more to the relationship than just bonking his brains out whenever their schedules allowed.

Pierce was sweet, intelligent, and one of life's nice-guys. At thirty-six he'd never married, something he said he regretted. He was trim, athletic, and boy was he hot, in or out of those impeccably smart suits he always wore. If he had any rough edges, they hadn't snagged on her yet. The boys at the precinct had him 'odds on' to become District Attorney before forty.

Oh God, forty? Only two more years before *she* reached the dreaded four-O. *Would it be so bad? A proper relationship?* Mrs *Kassandra Stonegate*.

It sounded like some rich bitch from a Clive Cussler novel. *Tough but sexy.* She'd be the wife of an LA, ADA. Maybe she could be his PA? Hey, this new acronym lifestyle was sounding pretty good. It could even mean an end to filing other people's shitty reports. She'd kiss her crappy desk in 'the Cupboard' goodbye. Give a big two fingers up to Sergeant Carol Madowski, aka 'Fat Carol' aka 'The Mad Cow.'

To Kass she'd always be, 'Troll Bitch.'

Kassy loves Piercy. The blond hunk would walk her down the aisle and make an honest woman of her. She'd take early retirement and bake

cakes. *Hmm, cakes.* Kass really liked cakes. Her imagination was up and running in overtime. Josh had only invited him for dinner.

Uh, crap, who the hell's dripping over me now?

'Mrs Krane. Mrs Krane . . .'

'Yes, Jason, you're getting me wet?' That didn't come out right. 'Jason, what's wrong?' He was looking stressed. Kass instinctively looked toward the pool; for Josh.

'You have to come? It's Josh, he's collapsed.'

Kass was already up and heading toward the crowd huddled around the poolside.

'He just, collapsed. Will he be all right?'

'Get out of the way,' she couldn't get through. 'Get out of my way!' The crowd parted, Kass' heart froze. Her beautiful son was lying on the grass, blood smeared across his face. Had someone hit him?

'Has anyone called an ambulance? Has someone dialled nine-one-one?' she demanded to know.

Gawkers filed in behind her as Kass dropped to the grass, her fingers trembling as they checked his neck for a pulse. Weak, but beating. *Thank God, I thought . . .* 'Has anyone called for an ambulance?' If she had to ask again this would get ugly.

'I have,' a short lean woman offered her phone as if to prove she wasn't lying. 'Three minutes. They said three minutes.'

'Good, thank you,' *three minutes?* That meant they'd got lucky, there was a Wagon close by. Kass checked his pupils. Small, they were small, like tiny pin-pricks. 'Josh, baby, can you hear me? Squeeze my hand if you can hear me.' He didn't.

'Jason, what happened?' she saw see no sign of a struggle, no bruising on his arms or body. He was so pale. *Shit, is he bleeding internally? Where the fuck is that ambulance?* 'Jason, what happened?'

'We were talking, about the girls by the changers,' his finger pointed. 'Josh was laughing, and then his nose started to bleed. He looked really

scared, and then he fell. Is he going to be all right? He is going to be all right?’

‘He’s going to be fine.’ *Where’s that frigging ambulance?* ‘Has anyone got a towel?’

Three were offered. She took the closest and covered his torso; placed another below his head. *He’s got no colour in him.* Josh’s hair had dried in the heat and his lips were slightly chaffed. He was so still.

‘It’s all right baby-boy,’ Kass cradled his head in her lap. She checked his pulse again; no change.

Why is it so slow? What the hell’s going on. Josh?

‘Help’s coming Josh, it won’t be long now.’

Her heart leapt as a siren whooped wildly in the car park close-by.

Kass struck the coffee machine.

Why had this happened? What was going on back there? It had been over an hour since she had last seen Josh.

The siren, that damn siren, she could still hear it trumpeting at the traffic to get out of the way. Six minutes the paramedic had said. It seemed more like thirty. The back doors of the ambulance had flown open as the two paramedics had wheeled her son from its belly. The frantic calls as the gurney was wheeled down a faceless corridor. *Don't let go of his hand.* Was all she could think as the doctors shouted words that were technical, medical, and downright terrifying. As if losing touch would allow him to drift away.

She'd refused to stay behind as a nurse insisted she wait elsewhere. Leave her baby with tubes in his arm, an oxygen mask on his face. The feeling of helplessness as Kass had been ushered away, to do what . . . paperwork. And now the coffee machine didn't work.

She struck the machine again, harder. Extra sugar, she'd pressed the button for extra sugar. The crap it dispensed needed extra sugar. Kass admitted defeat and sank into a ghastly metal chair. The ones that big nameless factories deliver to all the hospital waiting rooms across America.

Josh?

'Mrs Krane?'

'Ms, it's Ms Krane,' she was up. Her cup left on the chair's arm.

‘*Ms Krane*, if you’d like come this way.’

Of course she would. Dr Sheefan, the name on his badge, he didn’t have to ask, as she followed. He looked mid-sixties, well groomed with hair that was over-dyed. Officious and unsympathetic features, and a voice that was too calm. But that was good, right. Calm was good, wasn’t it?

Say something. ‘My son, Josh, is he okay?’

‘He’s awake now. He’s weak, but all his vitals are steady. I think he’ll be fine.’

You think? ‘Can I see him?’

‘Yes, of course. But . . .’

‘But what?’ she asked, and the doctor stopped walking.

‘Josh is in no immediate danger,’ he said. ‘He’s doing well.’

Okay. So why say, but?

‘Before I take you in I’d like to talk to you about the results of Josh’s MRI.’

Her dazed look obviously encouraged more explanation.

‘Magnetic resonance imaging,’ he said. ‘We’ve taken pictures of his brain.’

‘I know what an MRI is, doctor,’ *Kassandra’s* adrenaline surged, or did it drop. ‘What is it that I need to know?’ she was fighting a sudden urge to cry, and then she got angry. Doctors didn’t get coy about brain scans, not unless? *Oh my God.* Kass tried to stay calm. ‘Whatever it is,’ she asked. ‘Say it, and say it now.’

‘It will be easier if I showed you. Please, just in here,’ he opened a door and offered her to enter. ‘You’re a police officer, yes?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’ *That doesn’t mean bad news is easier to take?* ‘LAPD,’ she added as he closed the door. ‘I’m not a street cop, just admin. I gave out tickets before they put me in *The Cupboard*.’ Blinking helped to stay off the tears. It couldn’t stop her babbling. ‘I’ve only ever shot my weapon on the range,’ she said.

‘I see,’ he replied, unimpressed. The flick of a switch powered bright lights from the ceiling to light the small room. ‘This is what I’d like to show you.’ Dr Sheefan swiped his card through a slot on a keyboard, he punched a few keys. Pictures came up on the monitor on the desk.

‘What is this?’ she asked. *What? Just fucking say it.* She’d seen that look before. *No, don’t say it.* Sympathy, it slipped out from a chink in his professional armour. A sudden drop of the eyes that told her that this was bad news.

‘We’ve found abnormalities in Josh’s MRI, just here in the frontal lobe,’ he pointed at the screen. ‘We’ll have to do more tests, to be absolutely certain,’ he had her fixed in his gaze now, square and sure. ‘Ms Krane, Josh has a tumour.’

‘A what?’ *That’s ridiculous; why would you say that?* ‘Of course he doesn’t have a tumour,’ she said. ‘For crying out loud, he’s fourteen years old,’ he was unmoved. ‘Check again,’ she insisted. ‘He’s got his entire life ahead of him.’ *No. If there are any tumours it should be me that has it, not Josh.* ‘No, you’re wrong!’

‘As I said, we have more tests. But with luck it will be a meningioma. They’re quite common tumours, and in most cases can be operated on.’

Dr Sheefan’s voice faded. Drifted off to a whisper she could barely hear, except the words surgery and insurance, harsh words, and not the sounds a mother needed to hear.

‘Ms Krane? I understand that this is not what you wanted to hear, but Josh is stable, he’s fine for now. I’d like to suggest transferring him to another facility. A place where they have more expertise in this area of medicine. I’ve already taken the liberty of calling them, and we can transfer him before the day is out. Ms Krane? Ms Krane are you all right?’

All right? Was a lack of blood pressure, a heightened sense of foreboding, and the urge to start screaming normal for this kind of news? If it was, then she supposed she *was* all right. ‘I understand,’ she said. There really wasn’t anything else to say.

She supposed this was how ice felt at the point where it started to melt. When everything that it is, and was; or had ever aspired to be, began to drain away. ‘Yes, I’m okay,’ despite the numbness that had set in, she had to be. ‘I want to see Josh.’

It was a nice room; the window sparkled and held a view of the hospital's garden outside. A strangely diluted world for Kass, despite it carpet of grass, that burst with colourful floral arrangements. From his bedside she could see trees, and a perfect Californian sky; blue with barely a cloud in the sky.

Kass turned back to the peach walls, maple furniture, and the king size bed in which her baby boy slept. She took his hands, which were cold, so she cupped them both between her own and tried to warm them.

‘Mom?’

That was the most precious word a child could ever speak.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I didn’t mean to wake you.’

‘I wasn’t sleeping, just resting my eyes.’

‘You’re looking so much better today,’ she said. ‘No, really, your colour’s almost back to normal. Hospital life obviously suits you.’

‘Does that mean I’m not going home today?’ he looked disappointed.

‘Well, I spoke to the doctor, and he says there are just a few more tests to do. He thinks you’ll be shaking hands with the front door tomorrow. His words not mine.’

‘Mom, it’s been a week. Do I have to stay?’

‘Do you want to get better?’ she hugged him. ‘I do have *some* good news. Matt’s coming in later and he’s bringing someone with him. Some girl has been hassling him to come see you.’

‘Girl, what girl? What’s her name?’

‘Have you found anything good to watch on this yet?’ The TV’s remote was in her hand.

‘Mom, what girl, it’s important.’

‘Any sport on here? Let’s watch some men kick a ball around. What about the one with the stick and the little white ball, thingy.’

‘It’s called golf, Mom, and you hate it more than soccer,’ he was sat on the edge of the bed. ‘Mom, what girl?’

‘I think Matt said her name was, Jem, Jam.’

‘Jamie?’

‘That’s her, Jamie. Oh look, your colour’s improving again. Is there something going on that I should know about?’

‘No, she’s just a friend.’

‘Just a friend, eh. You want to bring her round for dinner? I could invite my friend to. What was his name?’

‘It’s Pierce, and no, I’m not double dating with my mom.’

‘So, it would be a date then?’

‘No.’

‘Is she hot? I bet she is. Look at that grin, from ear to ear.’

‘Mom, you’re not going to be here when she turns up are you?’

‘I think I should be, yes. I’m a cop, I need to investigate. I’ll run a background check just to be sure.’

‘No way, don’t. Do you think I should change my t-shirt?’ he sniffed his armpits. ‘I should probably take a shower.’

The door opened.

‘Hi Josh, hi Ms Krane.’

‘Hey Crystal.’

One of the day nurses. She was slim and demure, and didn’t look much older than Josh in her uniform, as she skipped around the room. Off went the TV, and the blinds were closed.

‘The doctor would like to see you, if you don’t mind.’

‘Sure,’ Kass replied. ‘Josh was just going to take a shower. Apparently his girlfriend’s coming over.’

‘Mom, she’s just a friend.’

‘You have a girlfriend? Please excuse us Ms Krane, your son and I need to have a talk about him fraternising with other women. I thought I was the one.’

‘Crystal, I’d advise taking his blood pressure again,’ said Kass. ‘Heaven knows what else will come up when she gets here?’

‘Oh my God, Mom?’

This was the door she hated. Behind it was the office of Doctor Hans Brutik, the chief neurosurgeon at the Mercy Memorial. Chief Inquisitor of the treasury, more like.

She knocked twice and took a deep breath.

‘Enter.’

Enter? It’s like being back at school.

‘Ahh, Ms Krane. Please, come in and take a seat.’

She did.

For a doctor, Hans Brutik had a magnificent office. The furniture was oak, old, and loud. A bit like the man himself. He sat in front of a window that held one of the best views in California; the hills in the distant seemed rugged and wild. The other walls held a library of medical books and manuals, and Kass would bet ten bucks that he’d not read a single one of them. At least this time he bothered to get up and greet her.

‘I’ve been going over Josh’s notes,’ he said. ‘There are one or two things that I feel we need to discuss.’

‘What things? You said that the tumour was benign.’

‘Yes, yes, quite benign. It’s nothing to worry about, at least not for now.’

What does that mean? ‘I thought Josh was out of danger?’

‘He is, he is. There’s no immediate danger. But the results of this morning’s scan have highlighted a new development.’

Don't you dare pause after saying something like that. Just tell me what it is. Her mouth was suddenly too dry to ask.

'To put it simply, the growth is getting bigger. We're not sure why at the moment. I'm afraid we'll need to do more tests.'

Kass bit her lip. She didn't like the way Brutik had taken his glasses off and put the hook to his mouth. He began tapping it against his teeth and was breathing way too heavy even for a fat guy. He flicked through the notes on his desk, like a man unsure of which donut to take from the box first.

'Hmm, yes,' he closed the folder. 'Josh will need further surgery.'

'Surgery? But you just said . . .'

'We cannot *remove* the meningioma. It's already covered too big an area of the meninges. That's the membrane that covers the brain. But I've consulted with his doctors, and we agree that it cannot be allowed to grow unchecked. The complications could be, well, disastrous.'

Kass was shaking her head. 'But he's doing well . . .'

'Yes, in all other aspects. But the eventual pressure, if left unchecked, will affect his reasoning, coordination, and speech. I'm afraid he'll require several more visits to the table, and then there's the recovery time. Surgeons, nurses, drugs, you do understand?'

No, not really.

'I like to think of our hospital as a bespoke garage, Ms Krane. All of our customers are luxury vehicles, and they come to us for repair and fine-tuning from time to time. We have excellent mechanics and an abundance of the right tools. The food's not bad either.'

Was that a joke? 'Why are you talking to me like this? Is this about the costs?' she asked. 'Are you telling me my son's tumour is getting bigger, and then checking I can pay his bill?'

'I have to think of the hospital, as well as the patient, Ms Krane.'

This can't be for real. 'My insurance is fully comprehensive, all the payments are up to date. You'll get fucking paid.'

‘Really, Ms Krane? Expletives are wholly unnecessary,’ he opened the folder again. ‘The problem is, well, we have been informed that you just don’t have the required cover.’

‘What?’

‘It’s the insurance. Admin has informed us that your policy cannot,’ he paused, ‘will not, cover your son’s treatment.’

‘Bullshit. My Medicare is funded by the Department. I took out all the extras the day I signed up. And I’ve never missed a payment.’

‘Ms Krane, please, don’t shoot the messenger. I’m sure that there’s been a mix up somewhere. That’s it’s just a simple and honest mistake. A clerical error, if you will? I believe you when you tell me it will all be dealt with. But at this precise moment, well, you understand, it’s not me. It’s the accountants.’

‘Look,’ she tried to stay calm, ‘this can’t be right. I don’t understand. I’ll talk to the Department.’

His little fat hands and face went all Italian on her. Far too much expression and thought for a man who obviously didn’t give a shit about her son. Just the money.

‘How much?’ she asked and really didn’t want to know the answer.

‘Hmm, at this current time. And without further treatment. One hundred and ninety four thousand dollars. Give or take.’

‘That’s what it costs?’

‘That’s what you owe us, Ms Krane.’

‘Is this a joke? The policy’s been payed regularly.’

‘I do assure you this facility does not joke about its finance,’ he seemed offended. ‘I just believe it best to deal with these matters in a forthright and open manner. And please, we’re not asking you for a cheque today. We just cannot extend any more good will.’

‘Good fucking will? Are you asking me to take Josh home?’

‘Nothing so crass, Ms Krane. Your credit is good until the weekend. Now I’m sure that this is just a clerical error by your insurance provider. I’m sure that you’ll sort it out and we won’t have to take this any further.’

Please, be seated. I've forgotten my manners and not offered you refreshment,' he pressed a button on the comm. 'Charlene, will you be kind enough to bring coffee. Cream and sugar Ms Krane?'

Valium. It was the only word she could think of. Brutik's statement had reached out and crushed her like a dry cigarette.

'You said Josh needs more treatment? *A hundred and ninety thousand dollars, give or take?* What did money have to do with Josh's health? Kass watched the invoice slide across the desk. It felt like someone else's hand as she picked up the thickly embossed sheet of paper. She didn't dare look at the page that had been so politely folded. She half expected the toxic print to burn through the page and singe at her fingers as she took it in her hand.

'We've confirmed the diagnoses, Ms Krane. Your son will need surgery if we hope to stop the tumour growing.

'Josh,' her voice faltering. 'His name's, Josh.'

'Quite, of course.'

'I think I need to make a phone call,' she said.

'Of course, Ms Krane. And again, I am so very sorry. If I can help in any way, please, don't hesitate.'

Kass stood. He could stick his coffee, she couldn't afford it anyway. Brutik got up from his chair and ushered her to the door.

'This is a mistake,' she said. 'I'll contact Medicare and get it rectified. Are you sure about the amount?'

'There's no mistake. It's all itemised.'

Of course it was.

'I'll get it sorted,' it was hard to breathe. 'Doctor, please . . .'

'I have absolutely no doubt you'll rectify the situation,' he replied, and then turned to his approaching receptionist. 'Ms Krane is leaving, see her out. Oh, and Charlene, just bring coffee for one,' he closed the door.

Medical books in the opposing wall swung open to reveal a concealed door into the doctor's office. 'Are you sure you want the boy?' asked Brutik.

Fortune came slowly toward the centre of the room. 'His test results are perfect. Apart from the mother, and an estranged father, he has no family.'

'Isn't the mother enough? You do realise she's a cop?'

'I'll handle his mother. Is everything in place?'

'Yes, yes. It's going to be a rough few days for them. Our contact at Medicare will confirm the bad news I've just passed on. Apparently she neglected to tick certain boxes on the policy when it was taken out. It's a most unfortunate situation for both her and the boy.'

'Good. Your payment will be made in the usual way,' Julius took a moment to look out through the window. It was getting harder to ignore the emotions the NEXUS Programme was stirring within him. Maybe he was getting too old.

'Is the leg giving you trouble?' asked Brutik. 'It's been a while, would you like us to look at it again? I can raise your medication if it would help?'

'The leg's fine, doctor.' The view was distracting. 'Give her a few of days to get angry. Let me know when she's ready, and we'll make our approach.'

'Of course. Look, Fortune, your business is obviously your own. But I have to admit to a certain amount of curiosity as to why you have me checking the state hospitals for these kind of patients. This boy is the fourth in three years.'

'Hans, we've been acquainted for a long time. Your service to your country as always, is appreciated. But you are a small cog in a very large wheel. Lift your head to see more than the view,' he gestured to the window, 'and the fall can often be fatal.'

'Doctor patient confidentiality, it's my core ethic,' he replied. 'Always a pleasure to help.'

The door was knocked from the outside.

‘Ahh, that must be coffee. Mr Fortune, can I get you a drink?’

‘Josh . . . Josh?!’ He was lying by the pool, his eyes closed, head in her arms. She was sobbing, screaming, as the crowd of onlookers watched on; fired by their morbid fascination. ‘For God’s sake why won’t anyone call for an ambulance.’ *Stop staring at us.* She cried out again for their help.

‘Hold on Josh. Don’t you leave me. Please don’t die,’ the swirling lights were blinding, bright flashes above their heads, and behind. White light so intense it hurt her eyes, the air buzzed with conversation and interest from the faceless formation around them. ‘Josh, please don’t leave me . . .’

‘Someone call for a doctor?’

‘No, not you,’ she shouted, but Doctor Brutik already had Josh on a stretcher.

‘You should have paid your bill, Ms Krane. You can have him back when the account is settled.’

Why are they all holding out there hands? ‘I don’t have enough,’ her hands were filled with one dollar bills. ‘Please don;t take him. Get off him. Get your filthy hands off my son. *Josh!* Don’t touch me, let go. *Josh.* Let go of me . . .’

‘Kass, hey, wake up.’

‘Get off me,’ she pushed the hands away.

‘Easy, easy. It’s just a dream.’

‘Pierce? *A dream.* She was back in her lounge. The blossom coloured walls, the railway sleeper above the fire. The prints of orange squares on yellow background that hung above it. ‘Pierce, what are you doing here?’ She’d fallen asleep on the corner couch without realising.

‘You gave me a key,’ he let it dangle as proof. ‘Keeping you company, remember? Wow, you came out of that slumber party punching.’

Some slumber, it was more like the fight-factory.

He was smiling, Kass liked that. She liked the way his eyes wrinkled in a way that showed deep sincerity. He had a young face, brown eyes that bubbled with concern. Blonde, good looking, and strong.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘My head’s a bit messed up. And so are my dreams, apparently.’

‘Hmm, I got that,’ he sat down next to her. ‘You fall asleep on the couch?’

‘I must have dropped off,’ that’s what she needed, his arms. wrapped about her. Now she she felt safe. ‘Josh?’

‘He’s fine. Josh is fine. I checked on him before I woke you. He’s snoring away; sounds like a tractor roaming around in his room.’

Good. That was good. Pierce was good. Kass nestled back into his arms and hugged him tighter than a lifejacket in a storm.

‘What am I going to do, Pierce? I haven’t slept properly since the hospital let us out.’

‘That’s hardly surprising. I get sleepless if I spend too much on my store card. Did Medicare get back to you?’

‘Yeah, and they’re adamant that when I signed, I omitted the family cover. It’s only for me, she sat up. ‘What mother would sign a form like that and not include her son? It’s got to be a mistake,’ Kass unpeeled herself from Pierce. ‘They took the payments and now they’re refusing to cover him. He basically told me that I should have read the form properly. It’s bullshit, Pierce. I know what I signed. I have a real good memory for details like that.’

‘It was a long time ago, Kass.’

‘Six years, eight months, and four days. Do you want to know what time I signed? Eleven sixteen, that’s what time.’

‘Seriously, you remember the time?’

‘What, you don’t believe me?’

‘Yes, of course I do. I’m just saying, mistakes can happen. Believe me, I see it every day in court.’

‘No, there’s no mistake. That’s why they stuck me in The Cupboard. Things just stick, up here. I like numbers. Hey, you got a virus in your code, give Kass a ring. Locked yourself out of your computer, again, give officer six seven seven a call. Got a stack of old case reports you want friggig digitised and stuck on the system? Call Cassandra, she’ll fucking do it. She’ll sort out all your shit. But when Kass wants help . . .’ She began to sob. ‘Why’s this happening to us?’ she was up and walking around the lounge. ‘I signed the right form, Pierce. I know I did. Why won’t they pay up?’

‘Hey, hey, it’s gonna be okay. Come here, I’ve got you. We’ll deal with this, I promise.’

He was being so nice. And all she could do was cry like a baby. ‘Pierce, this is bullshit,’ she nestled into him again, glad that he was here.

Such a simple act, his lips against her forehead. The soft touch of his fingers as they stroked through her hair. The scent on his clothes, the warmth of his body.

‘Mom?’

Kass broke free. ‘Josh, how are you feeling?’

‘I heard voices. Hi Pierce.’

‘Hey kid.’

‘Josh, it’s late, you need your sleep. And you need your eyes examined; you’ve got your t-shirt inside out again?’

‘Huh? Oh yeah. I’m thinking of starting a new trend.’

She smiled. ‘I think we pretty much covered them all back in the nineties. Pierce, be a love, there’s some wine in the fridge.’ *A large one, please.* She mouthed. ‘I won’t be long. Come on, back to bed.’

‘Sleep tight Josh.’

‘Hey, later, Pierce.’

‘Sorry, it was the biggest glass I could find. I did find a vase?’

‘Don’t tempt me.’

Kass pulled a stool from beneath the breakfast bar. She’d always liked her kitchen. It was modern, sharp, filled with light from the bulbs in the ceiling.

She liked things that were modern and elegant. Say what you wanted about the ex, and she usually did, but he was never afraid to spend money on tasteful things. She’d asked him once where he got the money. The resulting argument had left her battered and bruised, and she’d never asked again. He had a well-earned reputation for being hard out on the streets. It followed him back home. It was a reputation that placed him in the crosshairs of Internal Affairs, more than once.

‘I’m going to have to sell the house,’ she said. ‘I’m going to have to sell Josh’s home.’

‘Will it be enough?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe five years ago it was. Before the banks shafted everyone.’

‘Kass look, it’s not nearly enough, but I have some savings. I’ve got two credit cards, neither of which ever gets much use. And I have to admit to a long standing desire to max them both out.’

That’s so sweet. She hadn’t expected him to say that. He was willing to run up his credit for her; for Josh. ‘No,’ she kissed him. ‘I can’t. I’m going

to ask his dad for help?’ Kass necked the rest of the glass. Maybe the vase was going to come in handy after all.

‘You want to go cap in hand to that thug. Has he got that kind of money?’

She shrugged.

‘Probably not, but his grandmother does. The bitch hates me, but she’ll do it for Josh.’ *She will. I know she will. She has to.*

‘Didn’t you say his grandmother was dead?’

‘She is, sort of,’ the memories came surging back. ‘That woman refused to believe what a bastard her son was. She stood up and called me a lying whore in court,’ the sound of the gabble being hammered, it was powerful, even now. ‘She stood and applauded when the Judge delivered his verdict. Not guilty of . . .’

‘Things are different now.’

She forced a smile. Took another long sip. ‘Not then,’ she said. ‘Believe me when I tell you, it wasn’t pretty outside. I let rip with a few home-truths about her son. I bombed a few at her as well. Things were, said. The kind of shit that can never be unsaid,’ Kass tipped the wine bottle. The smooth flow of liquid into the glass was somehow calming. ‘Josh was clear. He never wanted to see either of them again. He meant it back then, and he means it now. What he saw, Pierce, what he watched that man do to me, no kid should ever . . .’ now she wanted to cry. Not for herself, she’d dealt with all of that. The tears were for Josh. For the family life he’d been robbed of. ‘It runs deep,’ she said.

The thought of falling to her knees before Grandma Jezebel, it was sickening. But if it’s the last port before you sink.

‘That bitch is vindictive and spiteful,’ she said. ‘But Josh is her grandson. He’s Dean’s little boy.’ *What choice do I have?* I’ll sign over the house as collateral. Dean loved this place. She knows it. *Oh God, please let her lend me the money.*

‘Pierce, do you mind? I’m not good company at the moment. I need a bit of space, just to get my head around all this.’

‘Oh right. Yes, of course.’

The truth was she wanted to scream at someone. She needed to rant and bitch at the crazed scenarios that were flying around her head. She wanted to feel sorry for herself and get smashed. So drunk that the room would spin and she’d vomit all the demons that made her stomach so sore. She’d spend tomorrow in bed nursing a sore head. Then she would do what had to be done. Even if it meant prostrating herself and begging for his grandmother’s help.

‘Sure you don’t mind? I just need some sleep,’ she asked. We’ll go skinny and get extra shots at Starbucks in the morning. Maybe a muffin, or two.’

‘Sure,’ that was better, ‘I’ll ring you, he was smiling,’ Pierce understood.

Kass closed the front door. The sound of the latch jutting out into the bolt hole confirmed that she was alone. Its sullen clunk the catalyst that ushered out the tears. A steady unstoppable flow as she sank to the floor and sobbed. The sound of Pierce’s car reversing off the drive.

She pulled her knees up tight and wrapped herself into a ball. The same position that *he* had left her in so many times before. The end result of another physical battering. *Find a corner somewhere, anywhere.* It was all coming back. Memories well buried had resurfaced with vivid colour. Her eyes shut so tight they might start to bleed. Her mind filled with stupid sounds, a repetitive song, that built a shelter to stop the terrible words. To soak up the fists, and make them bounce away.

It wasn’t Dean this time, the courts had forced him to leave. But still she was shaking. The past trying hard to leave her helpless.

No, not this time. She was stronger now. *Josh!* He was ill. Her baby could die. Anger took hold and she unfolded her body. *I won’t let the past drag me down.* This wasn’t the way. *Get up off the ground. Deal with this; make him better.*

She was forming a plan. First stop was the Union rep, again. Tomorrow she’d go to the bank and assess her options. Sell the house; it

was only bricks and mortar. Then she'd make the phone call to the wicked witch. Prostrate herself on the floor and beg for that bitch's help. She'd prostitute herself, she'd take a beating from his father.

Whatever it takes.

She put her ear to the door and listened, but Pierce's car had gone.

Whatever it takes.

Kass picked herself up and walked to Josh's bedroom, she watched through the doorway as he slept. What was all this doing to him? He was fourteen and staring down the barrel of a gun. He faced a death sentence unless a solution could be found. She walked on eggshells as she crossed the room, pulled the Star Wars duvet away, and slipped below the cover.

Spooning, wasn't that what the kids called it? Not for Kass, this was a mother creating a shield to protect her child. She nestled close, heard him mumble, as she slid her arms around and held him.

Whatever it takes, baby boy. I'll do whatever it takes.

‘Yes, yes, I’m coming.’

Nothing was that urgent. She’d overslept; the doorbell had woken her from a deeper sleep than she’d thought possible. Where was Josh?

‘Josh . . . Josh?’

‘You’re awake then,’ he said. Josh sat dressed for school at the breakfast bar, cereal bowl in hand. ‘You’ve got five minutes,’ he said. ‘Can you drop me at Matts? His mum’s taking us to school today, remember?’

‘Oh, yeah. No, not really. Why didn’t you wake me up?’

‘Why were you in my bed?’

She puffed her lips and raised a finger as if to respond. ‘On it,’ she said. Oh, and remember to take your meds with you, all of them.’

The doorbell chimed again, somehow more insistent this time.

‘Either wait or get lost,’ Kass shouted. *I swear, if the owner of that finger rings my bell one more time.* ‘I’ve got a gun,’ she added.

‘Mom, please don’t shoot the mail-man. I’m waiting for a parcel from eBay.’

‘eBay? What the hell have you ordered this time? How can one kid buy so much crap from halfway round the world? Hold on, I’m coming!’

Go on; just press the damn thing one more time, where’s my frigging gun? It rang again. ‘Oh my god, I said I was coming.’

Kass pulled the front door open. She was greeted by another beautiful Californian day. This proved it, and beyond a shadow of a doubt; when God had created good weather he had definitely used Orange County as

the template. A pale blue sky with the merest hint of white fluffy clouds for effect. All well and good, but the perpetrator of the bell ringing wasn't there.

'Ms Krane?' A tall, thin, mid-sixties male approached from the side of the porch.

Kass took a step back. He seemed to be alone, but what the hell was he doing snooping around the side of the house?

'Can I help you?' she asked.

'Ms Krane?' he repeated.

'Can I help you?' she could play this game all morning.

The stranger relented, seemingly acceptant of her identity. He offered a well-practiced smile through a sullen and serious face. His stolid demeanour clothed by an expensive suit fashioned in the sixties. The old family attorney allowed out for one last hurrah.

'My name is Fortune,' he said. One hand on a walking stick, the other held the worn handle of an old briefcase.

Either someone had died, or this was a brand new strategy by the Jehovah's Witnesses.

'Please don't be alarmed, Ms Krane. I'm here representing the Quantrell Foundation.' He placed the briefcase on the ground and took something from his jacket pocket. A business card that he offered to Kass.

'The what? Foundation?' she asked. It was a nice card, obviously expensive, and seemed to confirm everything he'd just said.

'The Quantrell Foundation,' said Fortune. 'We're a charity affiliated to the Saffron Action Foundation for Earth. Have you heard of them?'

'Sure, I've heard of SAFE. It's a big charity set up in the nineties to represent the planet.'

The Foundation had grown in stature throughout America. Everyone that was anyone seemed to welcome the opportunity to associate themselves. Plenty of rock stars and politicians.

'How can I help you?' she asked.

‘Okay, let’s do it Mom. Number one kid is ready to take the taxi ride . . . Oh, sorry, I didn’t know we had company.’

‘Ahh, this must be Josh. Good morning young man, my name is Fortune, and I’m very pleased to meet you.’

Julius extended his hand. Josh looked to Kass. She still wasn’t sure what was going on, but nodded it was okay.

‘Get yourself in the car; I’ll be there in a mo.’

‘Okay, but don’t take long. Nice to meet you Mister Fortune.’

Kass waited until Josh was out of earshot.

‘You got sixty seconds to interest me in whatever it is you’re selling.’

‘Yes, of course. Perhaps it was unwise of me to arrive uninvited.’

‘Fifty seconds.’

The smile returned to Julius’ lips. Each time it warmed a little more than the last.

‘The Quantrell Foundation would like to invite Josh to participate in a study at one of its clinics. The Foundation will pay for his treatment and care, and if you accept our invitation, the Foundation will be more than happy to settle any, and all, outstanding treatment bills being pursued by Mercy Memorial.’ He looked her square in the eyes. ‘If I have any time left, Ms Krane. I would happily go over the finer details with you.’

‘Did you just offer to pay my medical bills?’

‘Yes, under certain conditions, All of which I think you will find most favourable.’

Kass said nothing. What was there to say? Had she just won the Lottery, or was this some kind of sick practical joke.

‘I’m sorry; I don’t know what to say,’ she re-read the card. ‘Err, can I call you, later?’

‘Of course. There is no hard sell here, Ms Krane. You may have all the time you need. I believe you’re a police officer, yes? I’d expect you to do a background check on us before committing to talks. I understand perfectly,’ he turned to leave. ‘Call me when you’re ready, Ms Krane; the number is on the card.’

For all things financial, Christine Gemka was the girl to find out. She ran a mobile unit of three that investigated fraud and money laundering. She used her laptop to fight crime, and Kass had known her since the Academy.

The moment she'd dropped Josh at Matt's house she was on her cell to Chrissie. Almost pleading for them to meet, she wanted to know *what* the Quantrell Foundation really was, and why it had targeted her.

'I'm telling you, he stood on my porch and offered to pay the hospital their blood-money. Chrissie, it's got to be a con?'

'Con-men usually try to rip off the wealthy, Kass.' Chrissie sounded doubtful. She lowered her glasses as she looked up from the card. 'That is unless you've had a big inheritance you haven't told me about.'

'I wish.'

'Well, I've been on the phone since you called me. Obviously I can't check out your Fortune character. That would land me in trouble as there's no active investigation against him. You know how the Department is about using its resources for personal reasons. But as far as the Quantrell Foundation is concerned, it's been helping the children of America for nearly thirty years.' She turned her screen like a salesman so Kass could see. 'Philip Quantrell; big time financier in the seventies. A bit of a playboy by all accounts, until he met the future, Mrs Quantrell. It's the old story, playboy settles down, has babies, and makes a fortune investing in the stock markets. He liked to buy small companies that

struggled financially; he'd break them up and sell off their more lucrative assets. From what I know of him, he was a financial pariah. He started the foundation when his oldest kid died of cancer in nineteen eighty-five. Philip Quantrell died twelve years later, in ninety-seven. The charity has been growing ever since. Kass, the Quantrell Foundation pulls in hundreds of millions of dollars a year, it's even got a dedicated cable channel. And as far as I know, they're a law abiding charity with big assets.' Christine closed down the browser. 'The charity has numerous heavy-weight-backers, in both the corporate and political realm.'

Chrissie put her glasses on the table and wheeled her chair closer to Kass. The stony faced detective wore no make-up; her hair was pulled tight in a bunch on her head. She dropped her work masque and took Kass' hands. 'How are you holding up?' she asked. 'If there's anything that Mike and I can do?'

'Thanks, but we're still trying to find our feet at the mo. It's all been a bit of a head spin, but we're going to be all right.'

'Yes, you will, and we'll pray our hearts out for you both, every day. Poor Josh, how's he feeling? Is he talking to you?'

'Yeah, we've talked. I think he's handling it better than I am. He's strong Chrissie.'

'He's strong and he's gorgeous. You tell him Mike and I will call round later in the week,' she squeezed Kass' hand, then put her arms around her. 'I know you're not much of a believer, but God will see you through this. He will!'

'I hope so,' Kass replied. 'I can't lose him, Chrissie.'

'You won't. Be strong . . . What?' Chrissie barked, as the door to the office was knocked.

The bustle of the Department broke through the opened door. Ringing phones and broken conversations previously muffled by the walls. Outside a dozen uniforms strolled about their business, half as many plain clothes firmly parked behind their desks; most sipped coffee and spoke on the phones.

‘Sergeant Beany,’ said Chrissie. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘Chrissie, the Captain needs an update on the Ergo Teller case. You need to get your hot-ass up to the seventh floor, pronto.’

‘Beany. This *hot*-ass is gonna kick your *dumb*-ass if you keep up that sexist shit.’

‘Oh, hey, Kass. Sorry to hear about your kid. Er, yeah, we all are. Hey, hope it all works out for you both.’

‘Excuse me one moment, Kass. I’m going to take sergeant Beany here outside and update him on the Department’s grief counselling policy,’ she smiled and whispered as she kissed Kass on the cheek. ‘With a left hook and a knee to his groin, probably. Now be a love and switch the computer off before you leave.’

So, Beany was still a prick. Kass watched as Chrissie left the room and closed the door. Their outline through the glass amusing as Chrissie gesticulated her dismay. “Be a love and switch the computer off before you leave.” *Shit, has she left her laptop logged in?* Kass wheeled her chair around the table. *Go Chrissie, go. I love you.*

Kass’ nimble fingers dabbed at the keyboard. ‘Let’s see what the computer has to say about the man on my porch.’ Several seconds later, Fortune’s much younger face appeared on the screen.

It wasn’t so much what Fortune’s file said, as what it didn’t. Born in nineteen forty-seven, the man was sixty-five years old. According to LA Dept records he’d just a single blemish against his name. An accusation of grand theft auto had been made way back in nineteen sixty-eight. A drunken prank, apparently. The owner had dropped the charges whilst speaking in court.

Strange place to change his mind. She read on.

An application to have the record sealed was denied by the judge. There was nothing before and nothing since. Not even a parking ticket in over forty years. Mister Fortune was squeaky clean. His birth was recorded in Molokai, Hawaii. A US citizen with Dutch parents, mother and father both naturalised in nineteen forty-six. Father was in the Navy,

and served in the pacific theatre during the war. A war hero, twice wounded; he'd received the Navy Cross. The mother's occupation was unstated. Address at time of arrest, 433 Pistina Road, Malibu.

Fortune's occupation at the time of arrest was, US Marine.

So, Julius Fortune is as squeaky as the charity he works for. Kass was almost disappointed. She logged out and powered down. Took Fortune's card in her hand. Why was it so difficult, what did she have to lose? Somewhere in the back of her mind was urging caution. But what choice did she really have?

Kass picked up the phone on Chrissie's desk. It rang. A man's voice answered.

'Hi,' she said, 'it's Cassandra Krane. I'd like to talk about your offer.'

The wind suddenly rising did nothing to calm Kass' suspicious nature. Nor did the rustling umbrella above her head. A bag of nerves, she seemed tuned in to almost every sound.

'Your coffee madam.'

'Thank you,' she said.

At least the waiter seemed calm. He also seemed somewhat old to be waiting tables as she watched him gather glasses from other tables. A very smart fifty something, in a white cotton shirt pristinely ironed, a black apron tied about his waist.

She hesitated to think how much they were charging for the egg-cup of a coffee he'd put in front of her.

Hmm, tastes okay.

This was a nice place. An oasis of Mediterranean simplicity, on a cliff-top in San Diego. Its distinctive red bricks and gaily coloured shutters were pleasing to her eye. As were the real grape-vines that covered just about everything else.

Outside was an oak decked veranda, a private beach beyond, with hardly a soul to disturb the pristine white sand. It was Fortune's suggestion to meet here. The right environment to hear what he had to say.

She'd barely mentioned her name to the concierge, and he'd welcomed her as an old acquaintance. A brisk snap of his fingers had

brought instant attention from *Rene*, the waiter on call. Who was returning, *thank God*, with more coffee.

‘Thank you,’ she said. *A waiter that reads minds*. ‘Have you got the time?’ She asked.

‘It’s twelve twenty-nine, madam. Is there anything else I can bring you?’

‘No, I’m expecting someone . . .’

‘I’ll show Mr Fortune to your table the moment he arrives. Please, enjoy the coffee, and our lovely view.’

Kass nodded, smiled, and as he walked away, pulled her phone from her bag. She wanted to text Josh. Maybe send him a few photos of the café. It was the fifth text this morning, and maybe a little over the top, but he didn’t seem to mind.

Since the invention of the smart phone Kass no longer felt the need to wear a watch. Not necessary as her phone displayed the time, along with everything else. It rarely left her hand when she wasn’t at work. Her entire life was on the phone, that loitered, somewhere in her purse?

She looked into the lens, and the screen welcomed her. All five bars conforming she had a great signal, as always. Since she’d signed up to her new service, NEXUS, the reception was, well, unbelievable. Compared to her old provider. It downloaded data almost before she’d requested it, a bit like the waiter with her coffee.

NEXUS WEB flashed up on the screen, and then retreated to the top corner. She’d signed up to the hottest service in data communication. She’d heard they did a lot of high tech stuff for the military, that’s what had clinched it. That and a heavily subsidised package. They’d approached her through a survey site she’d been supporting for several years. Points and dollars for your time spent filling them in.

Josh said it was unnatural how anyone could walk, talk, eat, clean, and prepare food, whilst constantly engaged in data transfer on her mobile. She’d dropped it in the bath once and the resulting panic and furore had Josh banging on the door, convinced she was being drowned

by an intruder. But it was just mum skinny dipping in the suds and performing CPR on her CPU.

The text beeped twice as it left the handset. Just checking her baby was okay. As she looked up she saw him, Mr Fortune, the well-dressed man with a cane, and he was bang on time.

‘May I sit?’ Fortune asked.

‘Please, yes,’ she gestured toward the chair opposite with her hand.

‘Thank you,’ Fortune raised a hand and the waiter responded. ‘Coffee, please. Black, strong, and no sugar. Ms Krane?’

‘Err, no, I’m fine.’

Fortune found space for his old leather briefcase on the table and clicked open the lock. ‘I was so very pleased to receive your call, Ms Krane. May I surmise from it, that you are open to the Foundation’s approach? For which I may need more than sixty seconds to explain.’

‘Ah, yes, apologies for that.’

‘Not necessary, I assure you. It would have more been prudent to have phoned you first. But I prefer to be more personable, under the circumstances. Are you hungry, may I order you some lunch?’

‘No, thank you.’

Fortune was different this time. Gone was the pale face of the funeral director, replaced now with a warm smile and natural charm. She watched his hands move with dexterity through the papers. They looked soft, despite his age, and were professionally manicured. He smiled from his eyes and positively beamed each time he glanced up at her. Like a kid about to present his school project with pride. Damn, he was good. She was already being sucked in without a word being spoken.

If she wanted the truth, she had to go for it. Get ahead of him before he told her everything that she wanted to hear, and had no choice but to say yes.

‘What gives you the right to come to our home and invade our privacy, Mr Fortune?’

He sat back. Calm, unflustered by her demand. His mind obviously re-calculating his approach.

‘Josh’s life, Ms Krane.’

‘He’s my son . . .’

‘Your son is dying, and I believe our Foundation may be able to save him.’

Shit, round one to Fortune.

‘And you? What about you, Mr Fortune? Forgive me, but you arrive on my porch unannounced, and you offer us hope. What’s in it for you?’

‘Salvation, Ms Krane. That’s as simply as I can put it. Through helping others, I hope that I can eventually help myself,’ his smile faded to a look of regret. ‘As a younger man I spent a good many years serving my country. They asked a lot of me. Things I cannot talk about. Things that no man should be asked to do.’

Seriously? She hadn’t expected this.

‘We all have history, Ms Krane. Some are just a little more checkered than others. Some of us wish to try to atone. I think the future should be a far more optimistic place than the past, don’t you?’

She nodded.

‘My future comes from the love and care of the Foundation. They take care of me, and *we* hope we can care for you, and for Josh.’

Son of a bitch. He just took round two as well.

‘For the record, your name was passed to us by someone at the Mercy Memorial hospital. Information usually comes to us from an anonymous source.’

Anonymous? Did Dr Brutik passed Josh’s name to the Foundation. And she’d thought him to be just a fat git with absolutely no empathy. No, he

is. Brutik's only concern was getting paid. Maybe it was Crystal? Hell, I'll send them all a card at Christmas just to be sure.

'I'll be frank with you, Ms Krane. Your time is a precious commodity, under the circumstance. So I will explain our interest, and our offer.

Josh has a very particular meningioma, that affects the part of his brain that deals with the correlation of new data. As the doctors have already explained, it cannot be operated on. Not with conventional methods. Trying to remove the tumour is far too dangerous to Josh's health. Even if they were to try and succeed, it could only achieve limited success. The damage left behind could mean that Josh would never be the same boy again.

Of course, if the growth is left unchecked, the tumour will continue to grow. The resulting pressure will lead to a loss of functions in his brain. He will slowly begin to shut down. He will lose the ability to learn new things, and he will likely lose his short term memory. There will be a loss of speech and balance.'

'Yes, I get it. Bad prognosis, you've done your homework.'

'Yes, but I don't say these things to upset you. It is my job to ensure that you are made aware of *all* the facts before we proceed. The Foundation has a clinic. It is at the forefront of cancer research and treatment. Obviously I cannot promise you anything, but there are options available to us, and only us, that we can apply to Josh's cancer. That said, there is some good news that I *can* guarantee. The Foundation is prepared to fund all of Josh's treatment, and it will settle your debt at the Mercy Memorial. We are not just trying to defeat cancer; we are trying to understand it as well. By helping Josh, we are helping ourselves, and hopefully leaving a legacy to all of our future generations.'

'I must also add,' he held her gaze for a moment, 'if you sign up with the Foundation, all and any technical or medical data relating to Josh's care will *belong* to the Foundation. That said, we hope that the research obtained by helping thousands of children, like Josh, will lead to a better understanding of cancer, and hopefully one day, to a cure.'

Okay, he'd sold it. Future funding and clearance of her debt to the hospital. More importantly, hope. Fortune had offered it all. So why did she hesitate?

'I do understand your apprehension, Ms Krane. Let me assure you that the Foundation wants only the best for Josh. We have links to government agencies, not only in this country, but overseas. You've heard of Senator Joe Rushmore? He's one of our staunchest patrons in the US. He may even become the next president of our great country.'

Now he's name dropping. More support for his legitimacy. Maybe she should ask him to leave, and then pinch herself. Oh my God, is this for real?

'Thank you,' Fortune's coffee was placed on the table. 'Ms Krane, we would like to invite Josh to the Foundation's Hope Clinic in Colorado. It's one of four clinics that we fund. The others are in Europe, Africa and South America. Each clinic is a hub where we collect all the data from our hospitals and research interests. Last year alone the Foundation spent over one billion dollars on the research and treatment of cancer,' his eyes were fixed on hers. 'Ms Krane, if it has *ever* been written about, experimented on, or practiced; the Foundation has researched it at one of our Hubs.'

She felt numb, excited, somewhat helpless. This was more than a lottery win could ever do to help. *Where did she sign?* 'Do you mind,' it was hard to speak. 'Do you mind if I think about it?'

'Of course, but I fear time is of the essence. May I ask that you let us know within twenty four hours. We can only offer this opportunity to a limited number of patients. There are others, Ms Krane.'

So there it was, the coup-de-gras. The countdown and a limited number of spaces. Fortune's face, his demeanour, they were all so encouraging. She had to say yes. He knew it, and so did she.

'I have to talk to Josh, is that okay?'

'Yes, of course. This is an important decision. I'll wait for your call,' he said.

Julius watched Kass leave. He had to admit that he found her an interesting woman. This was the first time he'd actually found it necessary to *sell* the clinic to the parent of a child. Most were understandably desperate to get onboard.

Fortune took his phone from the briefcase and hit speed dial number one. A moment later the call was answered.

'He's suitable,' he said, still watching despite Kass having left the building. 'His results suggest he's your best candidate to date.'

'No, it's just the mother, but she *is* a police officer.'

'I disagree. Her background shows her to be highly intelligent. Her psych report suggests a high degree of analytical skill.'

'No, I do not anticipate any problems.'

'Yes, of course, there is always a *but*. She's smart, naturally cautious. The fact that you wear a white coat may not be enough to suppress her suspicious nature.'

'No. We proceed as planned. Josh is the perfect subject for the procedure.'

'Yes, I'm sure. But I want a Scratch Team on permanent stand by. Just in case Ms Krane gives us cause for concern.'

'No, I'm not worried. I think it prudent to be prepared. That is what I'm being paid for.'

It took an hour to reach LAX airport. It would have been less if Pierce had let Kass do the driving. Bless him, he had a powerful engine under the bonnet of the Lexus, but had absolutely no idea how it should be used.

‘You okay back there, Josh . . . Josh?’

‘Pierce, he’s plugged in with his iPod. You won’t get any sense out of him.’

‘Really? I think he’s the first person to plug anything into those seats.’

‘Pierce, he’s the only person you know, who knows how. Why buy yourself a new car with TV’s in the back seats when you don’t have kids?’

‘Err, for other people’s?’

‘Really, like who?’ *Why are you looking at me like that? Oh. Uh-oh, change the subject. No, wait, maybe we should talk more about this.*

‘Are you sure you want to do this?’ he said. ‘On your own I mean. I could tell the District Attorney I need time away. I must have a year’s worth of vacation stashed in the bank. And I’ve never been to Colorado. I bet the Rockies are beautiful this time of year.’

‘Pierce, the Rockies are beautiful at any time of the year.’

‘Oh, yeah, I guess. Hey Josh, you and Mum have to check out the white water rafting, oh, and the sand dunes National Park. It’s like a desert with big waves made out of sand.’

‘Mom, tell him not to do that with his arms, I’m fourteen, not four.’

So you can hear him then?

‘Hey, and don’t forget to go see Pikes Peak,’ Pierce added, ‘and the Garden of Gods. Oh wow, you could go bareback through the red canyons.’

‘Mom, is Pierce being disgusting?’

‘I’m not sure, I think the subject needs further discussion.’

‘Eurgh, Mom,’ he hit the volume so even Kass could hear the music.

‘Pierce, is there something I should know about you and Colorado?’

‘Cowboys,’ he said with pride.

‘Really? Cowboys?’

‘Oh yeah, I’ve always loved cowboys. John Wayne, Gary Cooper. Clint Eastwood’s right up there, he had a Remington 1858 to shoot the bad guys.’

‘Pierce, they were film stars, not cowboys. And if you think I’m going line-dancing when we get back, think again,’ she laughed. *Bless him, he wants to come with us. Oh Pierce, I wish you could.*

‘Line dancing, eh?’

Why was he smiling?

‘That’s not a bad idea.’

‘Yes it is. Forget I mentioned it. Josh, ignore him. Mummy will protect you from all things country and western,’ she checked the sound of his iPod was still at a level that the deaf could hear. ‘Now then,’ being careful to hide her lips, ‘are there any more delusions you’d like to include me in? Do they all involve uniforms?’

‘Oh please,’ Josh interrupted. ‘Long gap between music tracks.’

They both laughed as Josh cringed

‘Seriously, I’m missing you already.’

‘Eyes on the tarmac, Mister Assistant District Attorney, and take a left toward the private runway. I think we need to be in one of those hangars, you see, over there.’

‘Kass, are those Learjets?’

‘Wow, Mom, are we going in a private plane?’

‘I have no idea.’ There were several in view as the car pulled up. Josh was the first one out, earplugs retracted, his attention fixed firmly toward the hangar.

‘Mom, look,’ the roar of jet engines as a Lear 55 rolled forward and began to taxi away.

‘Mom, look, it’s taking off.’

‘Yes, I’m not blind dear.’ *And I’m not deaf either.* ‘Let’s find Mister Fortune.’ In the distant sky she watched as several larger planes, big Boeings, were racked and ready for landing on the far side of the airport. She could only imagine the hive of activity going on in that iconic tower.

‘Mrs Krane?’ a stranger in a suit called out to her.

‘Ms,’ she called back. ‘It’s, Ms Krane.’

‘Apologies, Ms Krane,’ he was tall, well built, wearing sunglasses that he removed. ‘My name’s Ed,’ he extended his hand in welcome. ‘Would you and Josh like to come with me?’

Another jet began to leave the hangar. The sleek shiny plane moved slowly, two men in the cockpit wearing headphones. The noise and smell of the hot engines were making her quite giddy with anticipation. Josh was ready for a moon landing by the look of him. And Pierce, poor Pierce, he was looking sad and lost.

‘Thanks for the lift,’ she hugged him. ‘I’ll phone every day, promise,’ she was feeling the nerves. Her agreement to go had become real. The stranger who’d welcomed them took their bags. ‘Hold me,’ she whispered. ‘I’m scared.’

‘You’re doing the right thing. They can help Josh. Be strong.’

She nodded, but her stomach was doing cartwheels.

‘I wish you could come.’

‘Boy, me too. You can add Audie Murphy to that list.’

‘Pierce, he was an actor. Listen, when I get back,’ she lifted her eyes to meet his. ‘We’re going to explore this cowboy fetish I’m just hearing about,’ she kissed him. For a moment she thought she would cry.

‘Holy shit, Mom, look where he’s taking our bags. That is the coolest plane ever. Later, Pierce.’

‘Bye Josh. Make sure you get a seat by the window.’

He was already heading into the hangar.

‘Guess that means it’s time to go, she said. ‘It’s just a few weeks. We’ll be back,’ she had to let go.

One last kiss.

‘I’ll be waiting,’ he said.

‘Mom, hurry up will you,’ Josh’s impatience clear to see as he stood on the airplane’s steps. ‘Mom?’

She squeezed Pierce’s hands. ‘Later,’ she said, and turned to see their carriage. Her son beaming with delight.

So this was what the inside of a private jet looked like.

‘It’s nicer than that hotel room we stayed in at Disney, do you remember?’

‘Mom, I was five?’

‘Well, it is, trust me.’

Three space shuttle chairs, the type that spun round. Lots of oak, stainless steel and she’d never seen so much leather. The co-pilot closed the door, and the airports noise was shut out. He turned, slipped off his shades, and gave a warm smile.

‘Hi, I’m Ed, if you’d like to take a seat we’ll be ready for takeoff as soon as the tower clears us,’ he flashed the large Tag Heuer on his wrist, gesturing with his hands as he spoke. ‘The fridge is fully stocked. The TV on the wall has hundreds of channels, and is full 4k. There are 3D glasses in the seat-box just here. May I also bring your attention to the cabin’s ICE, which you control from the touch screen glass on the table. I’ll turn that on for you now. The plane’s digital-library holds more DVD’s and CD’s than you can ever browse through. I’m sure you’ll find something good to watch. So, we have about ten before we get clearance, which gives you plenty of time to get comfortable. Any questions?’

‘Wow, can I throw things from the table to the TV,’ Josh asked.

‘It’s just like the one in the movies,’ said Ed. ‘And there’s a drawer underneath with paddles inside. Switch it to Playstation mode, the games

are awesome. Ms Krane, the washroom is to your left, the galley is aft. If it's out on show, it's good to go.

Okay, so when that light flashes,' he pointed to the wall, 'buckle up, sit back, and enjoy the ride,' he backed away, turned, and closed the door to the cockpit as he left.

'Mom, how long does it take to get to Colorado?'

Kass shrugged her shoulders. Not long enough she was guessing. He looked so happy.

Ten minutes later the plane was on the move and taxiing to the runway. A roar of engines began an acceleration that left Kass feeling sick. The undercarriage lifted, and the Learjet headed up into the skies above Los Angeles.

Josh didn't look like a kid who had a tumour growing inside his head. He was laid back, feet up, bopping his head to some crappy music video playing on the wall.

It was an age thing, had to be. They were on a rocket ship, to a clinic that might as well be in outer space. It just kept going around and around in her head as she sipped cool water from a chilled bottle. Kass was terrified, despite being filled with hope. No way she could sit back and enjoy the ride.

This clinic, in Colorado, it really was the best place for Josh to be. Julius Fortune had made the sale. God help them both if he couldn't deliver.

* * *

The light on the wall came on at last; she'd been staring at it for over three hours. She'd thought the flight wouldn't take so long.

'Josh,' she shook him gently by the shoulder. 'Seat belt on, we must be close to landing.'

'No way, I've just got comfy.'

‘Yes, way. It’s been three and a half hours.’ It had felt double that. ‘Take the headphones off before your head shakes loose.’

‘Mom, check this out. I’ve downloaded my own compilation to my iPod.’

‘Is that allowed?’ she asked.

‘It didn’t say I couldn’t. Check this out.’ A dire screech sprang from his headphones. ‘How about some Acid Bath, or some Rammstein. Maybe you’d like the soulful tunes of WolfHammer?’

‘I don’t think soulful is a word that any *sane* person would use to describe bands with names like that. Put some Michael Bublé on.’

‘Seriously? You have to be at least sixty to like, *the Bubble*.’

‘Some Timberlake, then?’

‘Okay, now you’re really freaking me out.’

‘Fine, put some *Rammsplein* on. Give your mother a headache,’ she prepared for the worst. Wailing males playing instruments with sledge hammers. ‘Is that Celine?’ she asked, surprised. *Wow, flashback*. She and Chrissie had gone to see Celine at Caesars Palace in Vegas last year. ‘You have Celine Dion on your iPod?’

‘Derr, no. This is straight from the plane’s archive. And I *will* deny ever playing it,’ he grinned. ‘It’s just for you,’ and blew her a kiss. ‘*I love you*,’ he mouthed, and lifted the diet coke in his hand as if to salute. ‘To the best mother a boy could ever have, he said. And the worst taste in music a parent could ever aspire to listen to.’

She raised her water bottle. ‘I love you too,’ she said. ‘Now put your seatbelt on. By the way my stomachs turning, I think we’re coming in to land.’

A few minutes later the undercarriage flexed as the tyres found a tarmac runway.

It was a good ten degrees hotter than LA as they walked down the steps.

‘Where are we?’ the question was rhetorical. ‘Denver International should be bigger than this.’

She saw a hut with a viewing tower. Not a terminal in sight. Nothing but dry dust on her tongue and a hot breeze to welcome them.

‘Where are we?’ she asked again.

‘Sorry it’s not much to look at,’ said Ed as he walked down the steps. ‘This a small airport north of Yampa Valley. Denver’s an hours drive east. It’s the closest we can get to the clinic by air. If you follow me, I’ll get you your bags,’ he did the hostess thing with his hands again.

Kass had expected the landscape to be darker, and where were the table top mountains; the tumble weed? A large SUV drove up close to the plane.

‘That’s your ride,’ said Ed. ‘I’ll put the bags in the trunk for you.’

It was a nice car. A Chevy Tahoe with a crisp black paint job. Even the windows were blacked out as Ed opened the rear door for her.

‘Sorry Kid, just a standard CD player in this one. But it’s got really comfy seats,’ he closed the door and got into the front passenger seat. The throaty engine throbbed back into life.

Kass watched as the Learjet turned around. Its engines whipping the dust around the runway and making the plane hard to see. As it taxied away, the Tahoe’s tyres found traction of their own. The car accelerated away just as the plane hit full throttle. Its wheels left the ground, and

somehow the plane lifting up toward the sky made everything seem real again.

‘Where’s Pikes Peak?’ Josh asked. One earphone pulled from his ear. The question seemed to surprise Ed.

‘Wherever he left it, I should imagine. Now if you’ll strap yourselves in, I have a call to make. Let the clinic know we’ll be there in twenty. There are a couple of doctors eager to meet you both.’

Kass wasn't impressed, they didn't look like the Rockies out there. More like the Hillies. There was dust, dust, and more dust, the earth outside was rugged and dry. A landscape of hills that overlooked a parched wasteland. Only the cactus flourished outside. Thankfully the air-con in the car was refreshing. Her mind still filled with anticipation; it was a whirl of ifs, buts, and maybes. Truth was, she was scared. The Foundation had been absolutely clear that Josh was a special case. His illness made him the perfect candidate for the doctors at the Colorado clinic.

Look at him, my Josh. He must feel like a rock star. So much strength, so much confidence. I love you baby.

Her pride welled and surfaced, it overflowed. He was excited, not scared. If only she could feel the same. They'd been so lucky that Mister Fortune had found them. Lucky, it seemed a bitter sweet word.

'So, where do the cowboys live?' Asked Josh.

'Cowboys?' Ed seemed surprised at the question.

'If this is the Wild West, where are all the cowboys?'

'They're out there somewhere,' Ed replied.

He shared an odd glance with the driver. There was a silence between co-pilot and driver, both men wearing their sunglasses. Neither man seemed willing to converse.

‘I did some Colorado surfing at Matt’s house, and according to the Big Bad Web Colorado is bordered by eight other states? Did you know that?’

‘That’s interesting kid,’ said Ed.

‘Did you know that the Ute Indians are the native tribes of Colorado? Or that Colorado has the world’s biggest flat top mountain. Ed, where are all the flat top mountains?’

‘Err, they’re on the other side of the State.’

‘Oh, okay. But did you know that Colorado means, coloured red? Ed, it doesn’t look very red out there.’

Josh had a point. This wasn’t what Kass had expected either. It did kind of look like the Wild West.

Heck, if you can’t trust Hollywood?

‘Ed, here’s a fact I bet you don’t know.’

‘Excuse me, Josh. Ms Krane, is there anything you’d like me to arrange before we get to the clinic? I can phone ahead. Maybe get some bubbles foaming in a bath for you? I think you’ll both like the suite; it’s more like a five star hotel than a hospital. Anything I can arrange, you just let me know. Sorry, I have an incoming call. We’ll be there in ten,’ Ed put his hand to his ear. A window went up between them and the front.

Josh pulled a long face. Kass doubted he had a call, but sympathised.

‘He’s not a tour guide,’ she whispered. ‘I don’t think he comes from these parts. He probably lives in Beverley Hills,’ she pulled a face. ‘Wouldn’t know a wolf from a wedgie up there.’

It put the smile back on Josh’s face.

‘Can we go to a rodeo while we’re here?’

‘If the doctors say it’s okay, yeah. Remember, you have to get well first.’

‘I feel fine, honest.’

Of course he did. But she knew it was only temporary. The fall by the pool was only the beginning. His frequent headaches were the calm before the storm. The cowboys would have to wait, at least for now. But

look at him, he had his nose pressed against the window. Kass snuggled up to him.

‘Your right, Rodeo’s rock. We’ll defo do one. Just so long as I don’t have to sit on a horse, okay?’

Kass pressed send on her phone. It felt good to text Pierce, just to let him know they'd arrived safely. She had to admit she was impressed; even out here, surrounded by all these hills, no signs of civilisation or a phone mast, her cell's signal strength was full. The NEXUS logo backing up the bold claims of its provider. Maybe it was her lucky day getting picked for the trial. 'Hmm?' Josh was getting excited again.

'Mom, look. Please tell me that's the hospital?'

They'd reached the top of another small hill and were heading down a long winding road, if you could call it a road. Below them, set between two further hills, was a white structure that brimmed with the sparkle of glass. The building's roof curled like a musical note, completely surrounded by lush green gardens.

Wow, look at all those palm trees? Quite the sight out here in what could only be called a desert. 'Is that the clinic?' she asked.

'No waaay. Mom, it has a water-park. Look at the pool, and the slides. Can we try them out when we get there? Please . . .'

'Let's see the doctors first, okay.'

'You like?' asked Ed. The first thing he'd said for a half hour. 'It's pretty cool inside as well.'

Kass was speechless. There did appear to be an oversized pool out here in the middle of nowhere. The building that surrounded it seemed to be in three distinct sections, the dome at its centre. Even the car park out front was cool, with suspended lights arcing from ultra-modern

poles, each with an angular shade on top. Canvas style curtains criss-crossed the tarmac.

Not what she'd expected out here in this scrubland of nothing; sparse vegetation and haggard trees. To come upon this oasis was nothing short of inspirational.

It's a sign. She felt hope surge in her heart again.

'Here we are.' The Chevy went silent as it eased to a stop. 'It's not Disneyland, but I think you'll enjoy your stay. My name is Ed,' he said, 'and I hope you enjoyed the ride.'

He exited the vehicle and opened the door for Kass. The sudden heat left her breathless as she left the air-conned environment. On went her Bugs as she got a full view of the building that rose up before them. It was bigger than she'd imagined. An ultra-modern design of glass and steel. Three figures approached. Two men wearing white coats, being closely shadowed by a woman in a razor sharp suit.

Are those Jimmy Choo heels? Wow, cosmic pumps . . . Lucky bitch. She wore them with style, below a catwalk stride. Her suit a light pinstripe, capped off with sultry looks and a shoulder length pony tail. Kass lowered her sunglasses. *No friendly smile from that one then?*

'Ms Krane,' the fifty-something man who lead them approached with his hand extended toward. 'I'm Dr Steven Outman, and I'm so very pleased to meet you. This is my head of research at Hope Clinic, Mr Spencer Koch.'

Koch reminded Kass of the puppet, Joe-90; it was the glasses and dark hair. She thought him mid to late twenties at best.

'May I introduce SNT, April Chimes. She's our Senior Nurse Technician, and will be your liaison with the clinic in all things during your stay. Anything you need, please ask April.'

Kass shook his and Spencer's hands. Jimmy Choo feet remained out of reach.

Is the Suit eyeballing me?

‘Ahh, and you must be Josh,’ asked Outman. ‘I’ve heard a lot about you young man.’

‘Hi,’ said Josh.

‘Welcome, welcome. It is my great pleasure to welcome you *both* to Hope Clinic in Colorado. Please, follow me. Let’s get you out of this infernal heat.’

Kass slipped the Bugs back in place. *She is. The Suit is eyeballing me? Talk about frosty. Obviously the Jimmy’s were compensation for having a chest like a little boy.* Kass smiled at April as she passed. *Being the wrong end of thirty-something, really love? Freckles and a ponytail? You’re about a decade too old to be seen out like that.*

‘Hi,’ she said with a smile. Beaming her animosity telepathically and trying to ignore the hard stare.

‘Welcome,’ April responded.

Kass had been a Cop long enough to recognise the stance and gait; April had been through some kind of professional training. Ex Cop, or military? Frosty cow had a frighteningly lean and fit look. No cakes for that one, she bet the bitch was ferocious in the gym.

‘This is a wonderful looking place that you have here,’ Kass complimented Outman. ‘Josh is excited about the pool area round the other side.’

‘And he is very welcome to indulge. We’re very proud of our clinic. The Foundation has invested huge sums in building this facility, in the hope that it can help children like Josh. Would you like to see your rooms before you take the tour?’

‘Can I go check out the pool?’ asked Josh.

‘Told you,’ said Kass. ‘Maybe we should settle in first,’ she added.

Doctor Outman pulled a long face. ‘Guess we’d better check you out first. Get pool-time authorised as quickly as we can.’

He seems nice, for a doctor.

‘If you could show us to our rooms that would be great, I’d love to take a shower.’

‘Of course. There’s just one thing that I must mention before we enter,’ tall glass doors opened as they approached. ‘The interior of the facility is essentially a clean-room. No dust or microbes allowed. Once you are inside, you will need permission, and one of these, to leave, he showed her a smart-card. Everyone has to have one, even me. Security are very conscientious about their work, but they’re very friendly.’

‘Sure, I understand.’

‘Good. April here will take you to the guest’s accommodation. Feel free to shower, change, and take whatever time you need to feel refreshed. I’ll check back with you in say, two hours? Good, excellent, until later then.’

It seemed like a plan, except for Frosty, as SNT April gestured sharply to an orderly who was loitering inside the building.

‘Unit twenty,’ she sounded like a woman used to giving orders. The burly orderly was obviously used to taking them, as he lifted the bags. Kass began to follow him.

‘Not that way, Mrs Krane. If you’ll please follow me.’

‘It’s Ms,’ she said. I’m not a Mrs.’ *Read the file, dear.* She couldn’t help the condescending grin. *So, not following our bags then?*

Miss short sharp and unfriendly had better be careful with their things. She’d brought her best casuals on this trip, and when you shop at TJ Maxx, you only buy the best. Not to mention some very expensive hair straighteners that were totally irreplaceable. ‘Let’s follow Ms Frosty,’ she whispered to Josh. Who was still taking in his surroundings.

‘This is our meet and greet area, Ms Krane. All our residents get the tour,’ she looked like she meant it too. Maybe Kass was being a bit hard on her, she was attempting a smile.

‘Our facility took nine months to complete and cost the Foundation over three hundred million dollars. It is essentially three buildings in one. Here we meet and greet, as I stated. Above us is the canteen and hospitality area. Level three is the control room, and through these doors we have video conferencing and the facilities communications. As you

may have noticed, some seventy-five per cent of this building's structure is made of glass. That helps keep our carbon footprint a small one. Please, keep up.'

Kass shared a discreetly raised eyebrow with Josh. He looked shocked, then pulled a face of his own.

'In the tall building to the side of the clinic we create all the wonderful techniques and technology,' April paused her stride. 'These are the very same procedures that we will employ to help mend you, young man, so you're in very good hands here. We are at the forefront of cancer research and medication. We would normally have in excess of fifty patients in residence. But the clinic is running a very specific programme and has fewer than ten patients in attendance. I assure you, we have the brightest minds working here. This facility has cutting edge laboratories,' she slowed, 'what we do at this clinic is groundbreaking.'

'Which way's the pool?' asked Josh, and winked at his mom.

'The pool? The pool is behind building two, as is the accommodation block. *This* building has four floors, one more than the others. You can access all floors by means of the glass elevators. Of course the fire stairs can be used for the more adventurous, though some of our older parents do tend to struggle.'

Why did she look at me when she said that?' April gestured that they continue. *What's that supposed to mean?*

Josh rolled his eyes and moved his hand like a glove puppet. It jerked up to scratch his head as SNT April spun around on her heels. Her hazel eyes narrowed and lingered on Josh.

'Could we do this later? Josh was just saying in the car how tired he is.'

'Of course. I'll show you to your rooms.'

Kass pinched Josh's bum. 'Glass, reflection,' she whispered. 'Idiot,' she added, and hugged him to her side as they followed.

'A suite has been prepared for your stay. As I mentioned, there are several other patients presently residing at the facility. And whilst we do

encourage you to fraternise, please understand, and respect the privacy of others,' she stopped walking, again. 'You may have noticed that the building has very prominent security. I assure you that they are here to help at all times. Should you become lost, or need other instruction, they will be glad to help.'

Kass *had* noticed an abundance of dark grey uniforms, two sat at every desk. She'd also noticed several roaming the grounds outside. All of them were armed at the hip with state of the art, nine-mil Glocks.

'They look more paramilitary than hospital security,' she said jokingly, as April opened the doors to the elevator.

Josh entered, but Kass found her entry blocked.

'As a police officer I'm sure you understand the need for security, and the protection of assets. In the twenty-first century, medicine has become the *golden commodity*. Its patents can be worth many billions of dollars, which makes this facility very valuable to the Foundation. Interest from outside agencies is strongly discouraged, as you can imagine.

Ms Krane, pharmaceutical companies around the world would pay huge sums just to get a look at our hard drives. As a charity we work for the good of our patients, and not for the wealth of anonymous shareholders.'

Josh pulled a long, *well that told you*, face. No windows to rat him out this time.

'I'm sorry, which way did you say our rooms were?' as she stepped around the taller woman. It was childish but she kept the eye contact as she entered the elevator. A grinning Josh jabbed *her* in the buttock.

Childs shared an uncomfortable look with his colleague Pullman, but held his tongue as April kicked the door shut.

This is unusual; not like her to visit the Security Suite. Hobnobbing with the paid help wasn't exactly her thing.

'Give me room twenty, I want a look-see,' she instructed, and threw her jacket across his desk. 'Now,' she insisted.

Childs pressed at the keyboard on his desk.

What the Ice Maiden wants . . . He tapped at the keyboard on his desk. One of a dozen screens on the wall received a new camera view. *The new arrivals?* Removing clothing from their bags, and finding space in the drawers.

April moved toward the screen almost yanking the top button loose from her blouse. 'Big screen,' she said.

'Is there a problem?' Childs asked. His fingers quick stepping the consul.

'Bigger,' she said.

All the monitors worked in harmony to create a single flawless picture on the wall. Pullman stood up.

'Now that's proper Milf,' he said. 'Very nice.'

'Did you search her bags?' April asked Pullman.

Childs felt the chill of the hard gaze being directed at his colleague. He was nodding his head.

'I did. Nothing to find in her bags but some nice underwear.'

‘What my idiot colleague means is he checked their bags personally. Everything went through x-ray, nothing was flagged. Kids got an iPad, but it came back clean when I ran the tests. What’s the problem, April?’

‘*Her,*’ she was pointing at Kass. ‘There’s something I don’t like about *her.*’ April rounded the consul, eyes hawking up at the big-screen. ‘I want a camera feed on that woman whenever she leaves her room, is that clear?’

‘Sure.’

‘Feed it straight to my phone. I want eyes on her twenty four- seven,’ she took a breath. ‘Anything else I should know?’

Pullman seemed thoughtful as he watched the image.

‘Other than she curves in all the right places, and fills those jeans . . . Err, no mam, she’s clean.’

‘Pullman, you’re a sexist pig. Drool over mature, fat women, in your own time. You disgust me.’

Child’s had no idea what had rattled April’s cage but he decided to remain ignorant, best not to push her on the point. Well, not too much. Anything that annoyed the Black Widow had his vote. What the hell was her problem anyway?

April grabbed her jacket. ‘If she so much as looks at building three, I want to know.’

‘No problem,’ he replied, and watched her leave. Childs’ attention turned to Pullman. ‘Milf, really?’ he said. ‘Is there anything else that goes on inside your head?’

‘Hey, we’ve been sitting here looking at those screens for weeks now. When’s she putting us back in the field?’

Childs stood. He was a considerable man. Smart, loyal, and in full agreement with his friend. ‘You shot the guy we were supposed to bring in,’ he said.

‘He had a gun; that didn’t give me too many choices.’

‘Yeah, well, April’s not happy with you.’

‘Not happy with us, we’re a team, remember?’

‘I didn’t shoot him, you did.’

‘Semantics, shut up and get the Playstation out.’

Food was good; the canteen very pleasant, if a little sparse. Which included patients and staff. Kass had enjoyed watching Josh maul his way through a burger and fries, followed by two bowls of ice-cream sundae. He was acting so normal. As if this was a bad dream. She knew that the last few days were only the Eye of the Storm.

‘You know you don’t have to keep hugging me,’ said Josh. ‘That’s the second time since the canteen.’

‘I hadn’t noticed,’ she replied. ‘Is there a limit?’ she hugged Josh again. Knocking him off balance as they walked the long corridor, that looked the same as the last.

‘Hey Mom . . .’

‘Hmm?’

‘How did you and Pierce hook-up?’

‘Hook-up? What are we, made of Velcro?’ he’d gone a shade of sullen. ‘Why?’

‘Just wondered.’

‘Okay, err, we met at the Department’s Christmas social event, last year.’

‘You’ve been dating for a year?’

‘No, that’s when we first met. It was a posh; ticket only Soiree, Proper frocks and jackets. A benefit do, laid on for a well-known charity.’

‘Does that mean you met at a party?’

‘I suppose.’

‘So you were drunk then?’

Drunk? ‘I s’pose I had one or two,’ she said. ‘What’s so funny?’

‘You, booze, party. You did, didn’t you?’

‘Josh?’

‘You did the Superman, didn’t you? You always do the Superman,’ he moved ahead; began to make the moves. ‘Pierce saw your moves and he felt sorry for you.’

‘Actually, I spilled a drink down his suit.’

Now he was laughing aloud. ‘No way, and then you did the Superman?’

‘I did not do the Superman. You make me sound like a right lush.’

‘Mom, you go out twice a year with Chrissie. It takes two beers to get you loaded. Oh, I am so going to die of embarrassment.’

‘For your information, young man. People like it when I do the Superman.’ *Why are you laughing?* ‘I have nothing but hot moves on the dance-floor, she said. ‘I could boogie when I was younger.’

‘Boogie, is that a medical term? Ha ha ha, here it comes. Sad Emoji.’

‘Your face will stay like that, and then who’s sorry.’ *How long is this corridor?*

‘Sad or not, it’s okay. I still love you.’

‘Cheeky sod.’ It was so good to see him laugh. Then he became sullen again.

‘So, you and Pierce, is it serious?’

‘Why are you asking?’ he wasn’t saying. ‘Okay, I like him. And yes, he likes me. Why? Oh, you don’t like him?’

‘No, no, he seems cool. I like him, I do.’

‘You sure?’

‘I’m sure,’ he threw himself into her arms.

‘Josh, what’s wrong?’ he’d become tearful. ‘Josh, hey, talk to me.’

‘I don’t want to leave you on your own,’ he whispered.

Kass stopped breathing. All feeling sucked away.

‘You mustn’t think like that. Don’t ever think like that. We’re a team, remember? You and me, forever. Don’t you ever think like that,’ tears welled up but were suppressed. ‘That’s why we’re here, to make you better. You have to believe, Josh,’ she lifted his head. ‘Promise me. You have to believe.’

He nodded as Kass wiped the tears from his face. She kissed him.

‘Mom,’ he said.

‘Yes?’

‘Pierce . . . he likes cowboys?’

She pulled him tight and felt him laugh. Even in a moment like this he brought a smile to her lips.

‘He did say that, didn’t he,’ now she was laughing. ‘That’s something we’ll have to tackle later.’ *Sweet baby, I won’t let anything happen to you.* ‘It’s time you hit the sack,’ she said, and Josh grunted. ‘Talking about Wild West Pierce, I’ll try to text him.’

‘You’ll have to find a phone that works,’ Josh squeezed then let her go. He checked his phone. ‘It’s ten-fifteen. The clock works, don’t you find that odd?’

I find this whole place odd. ‘Hey, just our luck to visit when the phone’s are down. Not really a priority right now, that’s you. So let’s get you back to the room.’ Three days without Candy Crush, or a survey. It was torture.

‘Mom, I thought you said this couldn’t happen?’ He was shaking his phone. “NEXUS is sweeeet; the best deal in town,” Josh cuddled his phone like a teddybear. “We’re so lucky to get chosen.”

Really, I said that? She didn’t remember using those exact words.

But that was the gist of what NEXUS had promised. She held her phone out as she walked. NO CONNECTION, displayed on screen. The two words the company had promised she would never see. The first year was free. All NEXUS wanted was her feedback once a month. NO CONNECTION. It seemed that their freebie Sims weren’t as infallible as the company had led her to believe.

‘Maybe the building is shielded in some way,’ she said. ‘Odd that the clinic’s phones are down as well though.’

‘It’s a conspiracy, you do know that. We’re here so the aliens can do their tests.’

‘Josh, you may be right,’ she took his hand in her own as they headed back to their room. But I doubt they’ll find anything up here except Coca-Cola and pool water,’ she fluffed at his hair as a sudden and all consuming feeling took hold. Kass looked about her. The glass and metal, the touchpad locks. So much security, and no contact with the outside. The excuses for the lack of communication over the last few days.

They were in the middle of, well, who knew where? For the first time Kass realised how cut off from from everything they where.

‘Mom, you okay?’

She stopped, gathered Josh in her arms and gave him a lingering kiss on his head. ‘I’m fine. What say we forget sleep. Let’s go watch a movie on that big tv in our room.’

‘Sounds good. Awe, can I choose the film though?’

‘Yeah, defo. Something full off big-bangs and bad dialogue. I’m up for that.’

The truth was, she just wanted to forget where they were. At least for a couple of hours.

Kass checked her hair one more time. Her face was looking peaky, probably the air-conditioning. At least she hoped that was why. A dab of powder helped, as did a touch of pencil and paint. But nothing stopped the dark circles growing beneath her eyes, or the deepening lines that had etched themselves across her brow. Since that day at the pool, stress was having a field day on her.

‘You’re fine,’ she said. ‘Josh is fine.’ She was doing it again, staring at her reflection; a bad habit since entering this edifice of glass. Josh had noticed too. *For crying out loud, he’s worried about me.* That wasn’t the way it should be. *Deep breath. Today is going to be a good day.* ‘That’s it, smile.’ *Get some lift in those cheeks.* ‘A touch of powder on my face, and voila! Kass, you don’t look a day over thirty-nine.’

She’d give up every day from here on in if it would save Josh. Another slow sigh, the millionth since she’d woken up. This was the big day. Time to see the head-honcho, Doctor Outman. Three days of tests and scans by the mice in white coats, it came down to a meeting with Doctor Outman. The man who talked big. Well, now she’d find out if he could back up his boasts about this place. Kass stood, fluffed at her shirt, checked herself full length in the mirror. Today’s fashion was slightly baggy blue jeans and a hillbilly coloured shirt. She wore her lucky grey Vans; the pumps she’d been wearing when she’d scratched off the third cup cake in a row and won two hundred bucks. These were the trainers she’d been wearing the day that the legal papers had been delivered. Her

divorce finalised and legal. She'd been wearing them the day that Pierce had asked her out. Pumps didn't get any more fortunate. She'd said a prayer too.

Go me.

It was time to put an end to the endless checks and examinations that were wearing her down. How Josh put up with them, how he kept himself cheery, it was incredible. She supposed the pool helped. He'd been keen to get out there early again. "Get some wet time," he'd called it. That's where he was now; outside with another of the patients. A boy Josh's age and similarly diagnosed . . . she didn't want to think the words. Terminal brain cancer.

Phone check. It was 09:40. Meeting with Doctor Outman was in twenty. She took one last look at herself. Who was she kidding, as her stomach tied itself with another excruciating knot. *Deep breath, deep breath.* Kass opened the door and left their room.

Glass, glass, and more glass; she found herself staring at the carpeted floor as she walked. She looked up and pressed the elevator button.

There he was again, caught in the glass. Several times now she'd noticed him, watching. Did she have a stalker? Maybe it was time to say, 'hi'. The elevator arrived. Large, gleaming metal doors separated to invite her inside. Which way to go?

Not the first time she'd seen him watching. A good looking lad, his face round and set with pretty eyes. She bet the girls liked him, despite his geeky demeanour, and obviously shy personality. Why else hadn't he approached her?

Kass smiled and waved into the glass at his reflection. *You're busted.* He looked away.

How many times was that now? Add that to not having a phone that worked. To not being allowed outside beyond the pool area. This place was feeling more like a prison than a clinic. The elevator doors began to close, Kass put a foot out to stop them. When she looked around Geeky was gone.

Don't be silly, Kass. He's not a stalker, he works here.

A quick descent, another long corridor. She took the stairs for a change to reach the ground floor, and the doors to the outside.

'Hey, Pool Boy!' There he was, her gorgeous boy, sat neck-deep in the pool with his new found friend. *That poor kid.* He'd lost all of his hair. And now she really felt crap because she couldn't remember his name.

Kass raised her best smile and waved to them both. Sent a kiss by finger-mail to them both. There'd be no pool for her, not yet. She'd just wanted to see Josh happy before her appointment with the doctor.

'Good luck,' Josh shouted. He was sending handfuls of kisses by return.

Good luck? Oh my God, he acts as if I'm the one with a tumour. She waved until she'd walked out of sight. Around the odd statue that had pride of place in the garden; some Greek bloke in a toga. She barely noticed the life-size tribute. Kass was dreading the meeting ahead; she could already feel her heart thumping as she entered Building Two. The inside of her mouth was drying out fast. And her head hurt. This was it, the diagnoses for Josh.

Kass passed a small bridge that led over to Building Three. She supposed it was where they did the science stuff. No guards to be seen, just some heavy duty doors, and what looked like a palm scanner and numeric key pad. A cunning plan seeded in her head. Before they went home Kass decided it would be fun to go bang on all the doors and press their buttons. SNT April, 'Bitch Face' would wet her pants when the alarms went off. It brought the first genuine smile to her lips, which faded as she found herself outside the main doors to Building Two.

Another deep breath. She'd pass out at this rate.

Fuck, fuck . . . he's going to be fine.

A young uniform opened the door for her. He'd obviously thought she needed his help.

'Thanks,' she said, and walked inside.

The décor was a bit bland, unless you liked aluminium and white. Nothing that the healing patterns of Laura Ashley couldn't put right as she quickened her step. Stress causing her to perspire despite the air-conditioning. Trying not to think about things was giving her a headache.

Be strong. They said Josh was responding well. Hmmm, look at all the doors. What could be behind door number one? Could it be X-ray? Yaaaay, I've won a new car.

Good girl, keep moving down the tunnel. Here comes another door; this one's tougher. What could possibly be on the other side of door number two? Wait, wait, could it be? Yes, its CT and MRI. The girl wins a holiday to Hawaii. Yaaay, the crowd go wild.

Doctor Outman's office was in view.

One more correct answer and Kass wins a house in Malibu. Think carefully now, you've chosen this door amongst all the others. What's going on behind door number three? Don't rush your answer, it'll come. Could it be the entrance to Narnia? Or the gateway into the Twilight Zone. No, neither, I've got it. Its, its . . . Shit? The door had opened.

'Good morning Ms Krane,' said Doctor Outman. He was kind enough not to ask why she stood with both hands above her head. 'Thank you for coming,' he stepped aside. 'If you'd like to come in and take a seat.'

This was her last chance to breathe before she entered. Her lungs felt as limp as the rest of her body. The door closed behind her.

‘How is Josh feeling?’ Outman asked. ‘I hear he’s making full use of our facilities.’

‘He loves the pool, thank you. I can’t get him out of there, you’d think he was on holiday.’

‘Good, good. And you, Ms Krane? How are you bearing up?’

She hated the way he glanced up and down at her whilst reading Josh’s notes. Surely he knew what was printed on those sheets. Kass rolled her eyes around the sterile consulting room. She just wanted him to get to the point.

‘Me, I’m fine,’ she said, and tried to smile. ‘How’s Josh?’ She asked.

‘Ms Krane.’ Outman placed both hands down on the notes.

Oh God, what is it?

‘I’ll be frank with you. Josh is very ill. His tests have indicated, well, its a worst case scenario.’

He did not say that. No, not that. You’re not supposed to say that. ‘What, what does that mean?’

‘Perhaps it would be easier if I showed you.’

Outman slid several images out from the file and stood. Three steps and he opened an inner door. ‘Please follow me.’

Time was rushing full-steam ahead as he left the room. As she followed into another generic looking box enclosed by four white walls. Just a single cabinet on the wall, above a trolley filled with medical supplies; like the one that Josh had laid on.

For a moment she was back in that hospital corridor watching nurses rush her baby . . . *What's wrong with this man? Get on with it. Please, just say the words.*

Three lights flickered on the wall and Outman slipped the negatives under purpose built clamps. She didn't bother to look, she couldn't, not again.

'The tumour,' he said, 'rests over the frontal lobe of Josh's left hemisphere. The side of the brain that is responsible for all our verbal skills. How we talk, read, and listen,' he turned to look Kass in the eyes.

Don't say it. Please don't. She felt she might faint.

'Despite the current drug regimen,' Outman was shaking his head, 'the patient's tumour is still growing.'

'The patient? His name's Josh,' she said, staring at the picture. At the dark orb the doctor's finger was pressed to.

'Of course, I apologise. If Josh's tumour continues to expand, his nausea and headaches will continue. They will become more severe. And as the growth enlarges it will interfere with the electrical signals in his brain. Your son will experience difficulty with speech, and concentration. The invasive nature of the tumour will eventually lead to seizures, and result in changes of behaviour, and personality. The pressure will build to a critical point where if it is not suppressed, Josh will die.'

You bastard. He'd said it. He'd actually spoken the word. 'Die?' she could barely say it herself. Why would she? That word was a knife in her heart.

Shock set in and the world went silent. She could hear him speaking, but couldn't hear the words

'Ms Krane, can I get you some coffee?'

No, you can't get me coffee. Coffee doesn't make everything better. You fucking bastard. 'You said he was responding?'

'Yes, but not quickly enough. And the scans confirm the treatment has stopped working. The tumour is growing again.'

'How long?' she asked, trying to be strong.

‘Undeterminable. Without knowing how long the tumour has been present, or why it evolved in the first place? That answer will take time.’

‘Tell me you can do something for him. Drugs, surgery?’

‘Unfortunately, conventional surgery or medication will do more harm than good,’ he turned his attention back to the images. ‘But we have found something quite remarkable in the scan that does offer us hope.’

Outman was pointing again. At what? What was it that offered Josh hope? He started talking again.

‘It seems the tumour is spreading outward toward the Meninges. These are the membranes that cover the brains exterior. It has already woven itself into parts of the Leptomeninges, the Pia Mater, and the Arachnoid. You can see it quite clearly on the scans.’

No, she couldn’t. The images meant nothing.

‘The remarkable thing is the tumour seems to have originated in the Hippocampus, the part of the brain that deals with information. It’s our RAM memory, if you like. See here, the growth, it’s attached by an umbilical no thicker than a strand of silk; it’s reached out to the frontal lobe where it began to expand. From a medical point of view, Josh’s tumour is extraordinary; quite unique.’

Is that a grin? Josh is dying and the doctor has a hard on for the thing that’s killing him?

‘Mr Fortune was correct to send you to us,’ he said. ‘There is nowhere else in the world you would wish Josh to be right now.’

That’s good. That’s better. Get rid of the Simon Cowell smile. Outman knew something but was prepared to let the moment linger. ‘Can you save my baby?’ she asked. Words were still difficult to form. ‘Please . . .’

There was a Jekyll and Hyde nature to this man. The nice friendly doctor was licking his lips. *Fuck you.* She’d drop to her knees and beg him, and he knew it.

‘There is a chance,’ he said at last. ‘There is a treatment that we can attempt. I’ve been developing a new procedure for this kind of cancer.

Please, come with me Ms Krane. I want to show you how we are going to save your son.'

She hated Outman's smile. You buy one, you get one free show of teeth. The smug bastard was doing it continuously. Or maybe she was overreacting? Kass couldn't be sure. But a single thought now dogged her. It was just the way her mind worked. Doctor Outman had said Josh's cancer was unique. So how come he'd been developing a new procedure for his kind of cancer?

'Sorry, what were you saying?'

'That this is a wonderful piece of technology, Ms Krane. We borrowed the blue prints from the military. Very hush-hush,' he added. 'I'm not quite sure what they intended it for, but Josh will undergo a series of highly focused, Sonic Scalpel treatments.'

Outman moved the lance up and down in its crib as if the fluid movement would calm her concerns. All Kass saw was a sinister tool hovering above a bed, looking like something from Hellraiser.

'The lance itself removes any need for cutting the top of the patient's skull away. It's designed to lacerate the tumour without disturbing any of its cohesion. The last thing that Josh needs is bits of tumour becoming unstable,' he paused, as if for applause. 'Yes, well, the cranial bowl you see here will be fitted over the patients head, and then adjusted to size. When the growth is ready, I'll drill microscopic holes into the cranium with the use of a laser.'

Kass wasn't sure she wanted the details.

‘The lasers are unfortunately, unavoidable. We have to get physical access to the interior of the tumour. From there we can deliver what we term *cancer nuking* drugs. They have to be applied directly into the cancerous growth. There will be other, milder, and more common drugs such as steroids. They can be given orally or intravenously, depending on the patient’s preference. The procedure will allow your son to keep all of his hair.’

Was that an attempt at levity? Really? Probes, lasers, drugs injected into the brain? Just the thought made her feel queasy. Josh had the lead-role in a crazy B-movie, the kind he watched on the Sci-fi channel.

Outman must have noticed the colour drain from her face, the wide eyed stare at all the equipment.

‘I promise you the procedure is safe. It has full FDA approval. I assure you that they are the *only* people aware of the ground breaking work we do here. We’ve ticked all the right boxes. Had all the checks done and verified,’ he gave her his best Hollywood smile. ‘Josh is in the most capable hands the surgical world has to offer.’

‘I understand,’ she said. ‘It just frightens the shit out me.’

‘Of course, you’d be the first parent I’d ever met that *wasn’t* worried before a life saving procedure. And if I make it sound overly simplistic, I assure you, it’s not. But please, try not to worry; it’s not as invasive as it sounds.’

Sonic lance? Lasers? Doesn’t sound invasive at all. She looked at the pictures on the light again. *What choice do we have?*

She wanted to believe, she wanted so badly to believe in everything he said. But this was Josh they were talking about. This was her baby. So why didn’t she trust him? Why did she feel embroiled in a secret nightmare? What was it that they weren’t telling her? Kass had an itch, and Doctor Outman wasn’t helping her to scratch it.

‘Have you got something that I can read through, maybe a laptop that I can borrow. It would help if I could trawl on the internet, look up the

basics?’ *What? What did I say?* ‘This is my son’s life we’re talking about. You make it all sound so easy, so routine.’ *Why did his smile just fade?*

‘Hardly routine,’ he sounded annoyed. ‘As I said, this is the most advanced cancer research facility in the world. I can’t in all conscience give you access to extremely sensitive data. At the risk of insulting you, I hardly think the medical data would make a good read. And you wouldn’t understand it without several PHD’s,’ the campaign smile was bolted back in place.

‘I’m sorry. Blind faith, it’s not a forté of mine. Please, help me out here, doc.’

‘Would it help to see some video of the procedure? Perhaps some film of a smiling child, fully recovered after the surgery?’

Kass nodded. *Yes, yes it would.* ‘That would help,’ she said.

‘Good, I’ll get April to arrange something for you.’

‘Okay, yes, thank you. Oh and doctor, just one more thing. I need to make a phone-call. It’s Pierce, my boyfriend, I said I’d ring. You know how men get when they don’t know what’s going on.’

‘That will be a bit more difficult,’ he said, losing his smile for the second time. ‘Apparently we’re having problems with our communications. I don’t understand the technical issues, but I’m told it should be up and running within the next twenty-four hours.’

‘No phone?’

‘Sorry.’

‘What about a lift into town?’

‘Ms Krane, please. We are a clean-facility, remember? We discourage any departure from the clinic for the sake of the children’s health. Some of them are very delicate and the merest hint of an infection, please try to understand. It’s quite literally a matter of life and death.’

‘Well, when it’s put like that.’ *Kass, what are you doing?* Trying her best to alienate the only doctor in the world that could save Josh? ‘I understand,’ her tone more humble.

But something didn't sit right. Four days ago she was sat on the beach drinking coffee with the stranger, Julius Fortune. On his word she'd taken Josh across state, been treated like royalty, and now, she hesitated to think the words, willing prisoners in Dr Strange's cancer clinic. Shacked up with people that, quite frankly, scared her shitless.

Maybe she was the one with the tumour? This was all starting to sound like a conspiracy. Kass thanked him and left the room. She ran down the corridor, face in hands, trying not to throw up.

‘I take it that you heard all of that, Fortune?’

‘Eavesdropping is an occupational necessity, Doctor.’

‘Fine, so what do you think? Should we do something about her?’

‘Her?’

‘The woman. The boy’s mother.’

‘What would you suggest?’

‘I don’t know, Fortune. That is your area of expertise?’ he looked confused at the lack of support. ‘She’s already asking questions, and I’m hearing that April has concerns.’

‘April is paid to be cautious, I’m the one who decides what should be of concern. Doctor, I suggest you do what you always do. Give her your best smile and make promises that you are unable to keep.’

‘Is that a criticism, Fortune? Do I need to make a phone-call and have certain parties remind you how important this work is? What’s at stake?’

‘Children’s lives are at stake, Doctor. And I’m well aware of the importance of the programme.’

‘Oh good, I’d hate to have you reminded.’ Outman pulled a file from his desk and dropped it on the table. ‘Let me be very clear about that woman’s son. How very special he is to us?’

They were all, special. Julius looked forward to the day that Doctor Outman would not be considered, special. Years of practise allowed him to remain impassive. He even feigned an interest in the pages of the file.

‘The network has never attempted to map so intensively inside any of the other patients before?’ he asked.

‘No, with all the others it’s always the same. Cancer, more cancer, and then death. This time it’s actually starting to leave markers. Fortune, that boy is a fucking miracle. NEXUS has found a way to graft itself onto his brain.’

‘And it’s not supposed to do that?’

‘Are you being glib? You know full well it’s not supposed to.’

This was an interesting development. The affable exterior that the good doctor had perfected so well was slipping. Would the real Doctor Outman please step forward? The cold and calculating monster who wielded his scalpel like a mercenary’s knife.

Julius closed Joshua’s file. He recalled reading the doctor’s highlights some years earlier. It had been grim reading. He’d almost declined the job, not that he really had a choice.

Employed by the Iraqis, the North Koreans, and numerous others. Most of the more sinister regimes had bankrolled him at one time or another. He had been a rising star in the world of genetics and viral biology, quite the prodigy in his younger years. But a lack of moral boundaries had all but alienated his peers and caused the grants to dry up. Outman’s hands were covered in blood from four continents.

April’s concerns about their involvement, whilst coming too late, were still of concern. He’d see how this one played out.

Outman had poured himself a drink, he seemed keen to talk. Julius decided to encourage the dialogue.

‘You have something on your mind, Doctor?’

‘On my mind? I have a lot on my mind, Mr Fortune. And most of it revolves around profit for our backers.’

Julius pulled up a chair. He gestured a hand toward the bottle on Outman’s desk. The doctor pulled a second glass from his drawer. ‘The NEXUS web is very adept at causing the unexpected,’ he said. ‘Doing things that it’s not supposed to do.’

‘You have no idea,’ said Outman. ‘I wonder, do you understand what this boy’s brain is doing?’

‘Yes, it’s creating complications?’

‘Hardly. NEXUS interaction with these kids is showing us the future. The only *complication* is the mother,’ the doctor poured another drink, and then topped up Julius’ glass. ‘We have an opportunity here, he said. ‘To study and understand a process that is biologically impossible. And yet it appears to be happening. Do you have any idea of the consequences for mankind? No, of course you don’t.’

‘Enlighten me, doctor.’

‘NEXUS is grafting itself onto this boy’s brain.’

‘And you’re being paid to find a cure for these side-effects.’

‘You’re missing the point. The data-transport within the NEXUS package is acting like a virus. Not content to corrupt the tissue in these young brains,’ he sat forward. ‘It’s begun to bond with it. If I didn’t know better, I’d say NEXUS is trying to survive. It’s found a host in that kid that it finds compatible.

‘Stopping that happening is the priority, until my employers tell me to the contrary. They’ve outlined their requirements very clearly.’

‘Fine, it’s nearly done. Just a few minor tweaks to the proteins and you’ll be shipping the results in a chemical briefcase. Your employers will be very pleased. When NEXUS goes global the money train will stop at all their stations. When the medical complications arise and the shit really hits the fan, your masters will be able to step in and save the day, *as per* their requirements, *and* under budget. But you’re still missing the point, Mr Fortune.’

‘I’m still waiting for you to make one, Doctor Outman.’

Outman was fidgeting, sparks were obviously flying inside his head. He poured another drink and sent it quickly down his oesophagus.

‘I want you to speak to the senator. He in turn can talk to the others.’ Outman took a small black thumb-drive from his pocket and pushed it across the desk’s surface toward Julius. ‘They’ll all want to see this. I

think they'll appreciate how huge this has become. Positively megalithic,' he said, sitting back. 'This kid has done something that none of us could ever have dreamed. And it has to be studied. I want you to pass this up the chain, Fortune. Get me a bigger budget and some serious brainpower to help out.'

'What are you suggesting?'

'I think you know exactly what I mean,' his expression hardened. 'I'll say it in simple laymen's terms. Get rid of the mother and find me somewhere suitable to take the boy. I want to open him up and study his brain.'

One day the order would come to terminate this man. He'd be doing the world a favour. Julius would do it for free.

'And your reasoning for such an extension to your current employment; in laymen's terms of course?'

'Fine, so even you, a Grunt can understand,' Outman picked up the thumb-drive. 'What if I could surgically implant a chip into a soldier's head? Much like this, but smaller. A piece of silicon that would improve his memory, by as much as, oh I don't know, a thousand fold? Raise his or her IQ by a factor of three, or thirty-three? Give the recipient instant recall, make their memory eidetic, and photographic. And give you absolute control over actions and behaviour?'

'Can you do that, doctor?'

'No, of course not. No-one can. So here's my *point*. What if NEXUS can? I want you to think about this very carefully. What if the package that's infiltrated that boy's brain is successful in re-mapping itself, using just the hardware in his head,' Outman paused. 'Fucking eureka, that's what. You have a revelation. And you also have a revolution in military application. We're talking giant step for mankind here. A hop, step and a jump for military hardware. You could data transfer between brains. Plug someone into the internet. Turn your tv on with a thought. Fortune, you'd have more than a Super Soldier on your hands,' Outman put the thumb-drive back on the table. 'Imagine the applications? So I think

that's worth the lives of a few kids, don't you?' His finger slid it back towards Julius. 'Make the call, Fortune.'

'I caution you to be careful with your flights of fancy, doctor. We are just small cogs in a very large wheel,' He took the drive. 'But I'll make the call.'

The thought of that terrifying equipment being used on Josh, it was almost too much to bear. Kass had to talk to someone. Pierce, Chrissie, anyone, but her phone was useless. The super-reliable NEXUS was dormant with no signs of waking up any time soon. It had left them stranded.

From the gantry she looked down on the front entrance. Just the one guard at the desk; he was armed and seated, watchful. Where was his partner, they always worked in pairs? He was outside, smoking, his back to her. There was definitely something amiss with who Josh called “the uniforms” she couldn’t put her finger on it. Not the kind of security you saw wandering around a shopping mall. No, they were too deliberate, too watchful. Their movement was ex-military, not law enforcement. Whatever secrets they had here, they were keen to keep them protected.

Hey, is he . . . ? A surge of adrenaline as the uniform outside turned with what looked like a phone in his hand. *Is that fucker texting?* She couldn’t see for sure as what looked like a cell-phone was tucked into his top pocket.

Kass checked her phone, still no service. She took to the stairs, taking two at a time. *How can he be texting if there’s no service?* She stopped at the entrance to reception. *Why wouldn’t they tell me if there was?* Kass’ hands held ready to fling the doors apart. *No service. The phones are down. No flights in or out until further notice.* They were less than keen to have her contact anyone outside the clinic. *Why?*

Kass stepped back from the doors and took an anxious look around; a sudden ominous feeling of exposure. That the guards in the building weren't just to keep people out, but to keep them in as well.

On the other side of the doors was a camera bowl in the ceiling. Was it looking at her? No, the shape inside, though difficult to see, it was pointed at the door. Kass took a deep breath, fluffed at her hair; she unclipped two of the top two buttons on her shirt, pushed the doors open and walked toward the front doors.

As expected, the lean figure sat behind the desk stood as she approached. The shorter man outside dropped his cigarette, his eyes on Kass.

'Hi,' she said, reading his tag. 'Smitty,' his name spoken with a smile. 'Another day in paradise,' she added. 'Wouldn't you rather be outside than sat in here?'

'Good morning, Ms Krane,' he replied in a welcoming manner.

Kass sat herself on the edge of the desk wishing she'd worn a skirt. The uniform outside had lit another cigarette and begun a walk toward the shade of an awning outside. Kass leaned a little closer. 'Really, Smitty? What's that short for?'

She tried not to be obvious as she leaned over and picked up the phone.

'Sorry mam, still not fixed the problem,' he said. He was young, early twenties. Green eyed with a sharp buzz-cut of hair. He stood at ease with his hands behind his back. Not too obvious he'd been in the military. Kass was betting this wasn't covered in his training as she lingered, disappointment on her face. The crinkle of her shirt allowing exposure of smooth pert flesh. The movement of his eyes confirmed that nature had intervened. He was a man after all. Smitty's pale green eyes locked in with laser precision toward her cleavage.

Check them out Smitty, they're all warm and squishy. Soon you will be powerless to deny me.

‘I do love the sun,’ she said replacing the receiver. A despondent sigh followed to expand her chest. Hardly her fault if it caused her breasts to accentuate. ‘What about you, Smitty? You like the warm feel of sunshine on your body?’ She lifted her arms and pulled her hair back.

Smitty gave no response.

Sure, your allowed to resist, a little.

‘Smitty, can I be honest with you. There are two things that a girl needs, both of which I am being deprived of.’ *Let the tongue touch the lips, flash a dash of innocence.* ‘A nice glass of red wine,’ she said. ‘And some good male company,’ Kass moved in for the kill. ‘I don’t suppose?’

‘Sorry mam. You’ll need a key-pass to exit the facility.’

What, are you serious? I haven’t even asked yet?

‘Really? Can’t we bend the rules just for a minute? It’s my mum, she’s not been well for some time, and my cell is down.’ She sighed. ‘I don’t s’pose you, or your friend out there, would have a phone that I could borrow. Just for a minute. So I can let her know that we’re doing okay. She’s bound to be worried about her grandson,’ another sigh, ‘I’d use a land line but apparently your dish needs servicing.’

‘Sorry mam, no cell-phones allowed. Not even for the staff. Is there anything else that I can help you with?’

Really, you’re denying the strategic deployment of my cleavage? You are so obviously gay. Or was it worse than that. Had she lost her allure? For crying out loud, I can’t persuade a bloody teenager to open a fucking door. Is this what happens when you approach forty?’ She asked.

‘Sorry Mam, I don’t understand the question.’

And your not looking at my boobs either.

She felt like that painting, the one where the face is screaming. Did her cleavage have wrinkles? She was a breath from asking why that guy outside could text when another voice joined the conversation.

‘Is there a problem here?’

Fuck. The Bitch Queen cometh.

Kass removed herself from the desk and straightened her shirt.

‘I was just making conversation with young Smitty here.’

‘Security are very busy, Mrs Krane.’

Ms, you cow. I’m a, Ms.

‘Is there something *I* can help you with?’

‘Yeah, there is. How about opening the door so I can go get some air that isn’t filled with chlorine?’

‘I’ll take your request to Doctor Outman. But may I remind that you signed a contract before we brought you here. It stated categorically that patients were required to stay within the clinic at all times. There are R&R facilities within these building.’

This had gone beyond a contract.

‘I understand,’ said Kass. ‘But I’d be grateful if you could get some transport and run me into the nearest town. I’d like to make a phone-call.’

‘Mrs Krane, we are making all efforts to reconnect to the outside world. But this facility is a clean room, and it must remain so.’

‘Then why is *he* outside, smoking?’

April half turned to look. Her gaze caught between the two. She seemed to be finding it hard to remain courteous.

‘The security officer outside has finished his shift. He won’t be returning until tomorrow.’

‘How’s he getting home?’ *Cat got your tongue?*

‘The staff live in. Two weeks in, and two weeks out. He’ll be decontaminated before his shift.’

It was a slight movement but Kass caught it. So did the guard outside, who’d been cautiously returning. He stopped, seemingly aware of the situation inside. He walked himself out of sight.

April’s attention turned fully to Kass. ‘Is there anything else I can help you with?’ She asked.

‘No, thank you.’ The way they looked at her. Kass’ will to persist had withered.

What the fuck is going on here?

The canteen wasn't busy, it's occupants mostly straight-faced security, and nurses. Candy-stripers who she'd began to notice were nearly all Latino.

'Mom? Earth calling Mom. You sure you're okay?'

'Hmm, yes. Fine.' Kass wasn't sure whether to bring her crazy conspiracy theory to the table or not. 'Josh, have you noticed that all the nurses are Mexican?'

'Mom, are you a racist?'

'Hardly.' That one wasn't getting a free pass. 'It's just, well, we're supposed to be in Colorado, not California,' she said. 'I've only just noticed, and probably because bitch-face takes up most of our time.'

'Tell me again how you told Queen Frosty to do one.'

'No, Josh. She told me to do . . . Yes, very funny.' Kass stared at her plate. She'd never seen so much lettuce as she stabbed into another Quorn dipper. *We have to eat healthy*, she'd told Josh. He'd insisted she set a good example.

'I'm sure she didn't, not really. You really don't like her, do you?'

'What gave me away? I tell you, I was this close to bitch-slapping the mare.'

'Now that I would have paid to see,' Josh eased far too much spaghetti into his mouth; it hung like a scene from a bad horror, before being dropped or devoured. 'So let me get this straight,' he said. 'You're hot for

the security guard, but he rejects you because he's gay. And April hates you because you're prettier than she is?'

'Josh, I'm beginning to see you in a different light. Mummy needs help and support here.'

'She needs help all right. Are you going to eat those or just play with them?'

She slid the plate across to him. 'I'm going stir crazy. Tomorrow I'll see if I can arrange a day out for us. Denver is a big place; we must be somewhere close to the city. Mummy really needs a little retail therapy. And you need less pool water and more exercise. Shopping's good for your heart.'

'Is that your medical opinion?'

'It's the opinion of your mother, and she's *always* right.'

'Wow, April really does bitch you out. I think she's kinda cool.'

Cool? Was that code for hot? Oh dear Lord, please don't let him have a crush on the Ice-Bitch.'

'Josh, look at me. You can't take her home. There's nowhere safe we can bury the body.'

It was good to see him laugh, even if the smile came laced with bits of red sauce. *I love you Josh*. He seemed to be enjoying it here. *Fight this thing and stay alive*. Kass looked around the canteen again. Just uniforms doing their job. Josh was right, who cared where the nurses originated from. It was the stress, messing with her head. One minute she was seeing conspiracy, the next came thoughts she tried so hard to reject. Tried to hide with normality.

What if this is all the time we have left? Where was her golden faced boy putting all that pasta? *What if the surgery goes wrong?* Is he really eating my fake dippers? And for the hundredth time she suppressed the flow of tears that edged up and threatened to burst free. *What if Josh dies?*

'Josh, I need a drink from the mini bar.'

'Mom, dippers?'

‘Put them in your pockets. Come on, we need to go.’

‘I wish you’d tell me what’s going on?’

‘Why can’t I get a bloody signal on this cell-phone? I swear, your mother believes every bit of crappy advertisement she reads,’ Kass was up and moving towards the exit. ‘Josh, please, come . . .’ It was hard to finish a sentence when you’d been body slammed by a passer-by. ‘Great, thanks,’ her cell had dropped to the hard floor and bounced away to be covered by papers that tumbled from the idiot’s hands who’d walked into her.

‘I’m so sorry, my fault. I wasn’t watching my feet.’

‘Too bloody right it was your fault,’ she smiled, her inner Grrr kept in check. *What if I’d had cake in my hand?* Kass looked up at the doctor. He was young, mid-twenties. A bit stringy, with short dark hair. Was this guy stalking her? It was the first time she’d seen him wear glasses, the rims too big for his face. Obviously a childhood passion for Joe-90.

‘It’s fine,’ she said. *Your glasses not big enough?* ‘No, it’s fine. I’ll find my phone.’

‘Mom, calm down, it was an accident.’

‘Sure, accident.’ *Don’t get between me and the mini-bar.* ‘I see you a lot around here, don’t I?’ It came out more accusatory than she’d intended. ‘Hey, I don’t suppose you have a signal on your phone?’

‘Sorry, they don’t let us have mobile phones here. Bloody security, it’s a bit of a drag really. Honestly, there’s no need for you to do this, I can pick these up.’

‘I’m looking for my phone.’

‘Hope it’s not damaged,’ his hands were scooping papers. ‘My name’s Spencer by the way.’

British, by the sounds of the accent. Could be Australian?

‘Kass,’ she said, as her hands swept through the paperwork. All she found were Josh’s feet.

‘Lost something,’ he asked.

Oh, so you think this is funny. I'll tell everyone you brought a teddy with you to Colorado. I will.

'You're the police officer aren't you?'

'What? Oh, yes, that's right.'

'Would you do something,' he whispered. 'It's very important for us both, Cassandra?'

That was the first time anyone had called her Cassandra. And he'd whispered, why had he whispered. Conspiracy Chick honed in on his words. Her hand stopped sifting, and began to pile.

'I've just put a piece of paper in your pocket. Please, don't be alarmed, and don't look at it now,' he smiled, but there was no disguising his nervous state. 'I'm really very sorry,' he said, glancing up to Josh, who was fingering his pockets for more dippers. 'Wait until you get back to your room. Preferably in the toilet, as it's the only place they don't watch you.'

What? Kass' hands stalled. *Who's watching me?* She could see her phone now.

Spencer stood. 'Well, thank goodness that's all picked up. Once again, I do apologise,' he stepped away and entered the canteen.

'Okaaay, that was odd.'

'He bumped into you, Mom. It was an accident.'

Sure, she'd play along. *Oh crap. Please, not a love letter.* He had looked really nervous. Like a puppy caught mid-wee on the lounge carpet.

'Watch where you're going next time.'

'That's a bit harsh, Mom. And a bit late.'

'Josh, I could have been bruised. I think I might have a paper cut. Now I really need to get to our room.'

'Do you think he was British, Mom?'

'Yeah, probably.' *James Bond, apparently.* Guess she'd find out later.

Childs sat back, his inner mistrust fully engaged. If he hadn't been watching so keenly, he may not have noticed. He reached for his radio, took it in his hand.

Probably just an innocent bump. No harm done. Childs followed Spencer onto the next monitor. He took up a tray and slid it along in front of the food. Child's finger tapped the hand held radio. *Computer analyst and all round geek, he's harmless enough. Been at the clinic for a few months now.* But April had left strict orders to watch Krane closely. Report anything suspicious no matter how small. He lifted the radio .

'Time's up, buddy.'

The door opened and Pullman entered. Short, beefy, typical security type. 'Go get some food, it's hot and spicy night in the canteen. Check out monitor . . . you're already there. Is Carmen still in there? Oh, anything I should know about, and will I give a shit if there is?'

Maybe? Or was it was just late and a cool beer was overdue.

'No,' he said, 'it's all quiet out there. Last delivery's been and the proximity alarms are all dialled in. Main doors are on lock down. And yes, Carmen is still in there.'

'Christ, that woman has a great, assets.'

Pullman sat as Childs vacated the chair.

'Ooh, nice and warm.'

'April wants us to keep an eye on suite twenty. Check she doesn't go walk about, anything like that.'

'Sure, no problem. What the fuck's her problem with Krane anyway?' He put camera twelve up on the big screen. Three nurses eating lunch.

'Suite twenty,' Childs threw the picture back to the smaller monitor. 'I'll be an hour, no more. Try not to fall asleep.'

'Yeah, yeah. Suite twenty. Got it.'

The door closed.

'Now then, where was I?' The canteen camera went large again. 'Please take a swim like last night. Carmen in the pool, Carmen in the

pool,' he took his phone from his pocket. A moment later the air was filled with music.

‘Get some sleep Josh, you look tired. As of tomorrow you take things easy, okay. You’re not boy from Atlantis.’

‘Aww, Mom, the pool’s cool. It’s where everyone hangs out.’

‘And I’m going to see Outman. Demand he let us off the reservation for a few hours. I’m gonna bust a window if they don’t open that door.’

‘Are you talking jailbreak? I’m up for that.’

Kass pulled the quilt tight to his neck.

‘It may come to that, I’m getting seriously ticked off with all this clean-room shit. We wash every day,’ she kissed him. Then gave him a lingering sniff.

‘Hey, I’m chlorine clean.’

‘Yes you are. Now get some sleep,’ she reached for the light switch.

‘Mom, do you think I’ll have super powers when they’ve finished poking around in my brain?’ Josh waved a hand towards her. ‘These are not the droids you are looking for,’ he said.

‘You already have super-powers.’ *You are so brave.* ‘I watch you use them every day,’ her tears were welling again.

‘I was thinking more like Wolverine, or Captain America.’

‘Sweet dreams, Josh.’ *You sweet boy.* Kass turned out the light.

What the hell made him so resilient, so positive? Maybe he did get some of his father’s genes after all. Dean was shot twice in the line of duty. He had no right to survive, either bullet could, maybe should have killed him. Resilient was an understatement where that man was

concerned. She closed the door and rested her head against it as the memories ran cold through her blood.

The last time hospitals had been prominent in her life, it was Dean. Kass could picture him, clear as day, lying in the hospital bed, monitors bleeping mercilessly.

She'd sat dutifully by his bedside, half wishing the man would die. What sort of a person stands over their husband and wills him to die?

Whoa, time out. Wipe those tears and get your head straight. This isn't about that bastard; it's about Josh. My sweet, beautiful, Josh.

This place was gloomy enough without letting him back inside her head. She needed a drink. And two years of abstinence from cigarettes would be ended if she could find one. Kass' hand touched the door, as if in hope that she could feel Josh's heart beat.

Deep breath. Take a deep breath. Grab something from the minibar. It was why she'd hurried Josh back to the room. *Shit, Spencer?* She'd forgotten about 007 back at the canteen, as instinct moved her hand toward her pocket.

What was it he said? "In the toilet, as it's the only place they don't watch you." *Who's watching me?* Kass tried to read the room without being obvious. A yawn and stretch helped, but she saw nothing out of the ordinary. A couch and chair, which she had to admit were comfy. A fake fireplace, a mirror. A side-stand and some drawers. Was someone watching in her bedroom? Kass closed the bathroom door. A mirror hung above the vanity, the suite was white, a shower not a bath. An uncomfortable reflection in the glass as she studied her reflection; the thought of someone watching.

Kass felt for the note that Spencer had slipped her. Neatly pressed, easy to unfold. It was a single sheet in her hand.

Pease let this be a joke. She was twelve again and smoking in the school toilets. Scared shitless that the Hall Monitor was not about to walk in and catch her. She opened the page and read.

My name is Spencer Koch. Please take this warning very seriously. You and Josh are in great danger.

The Foundation is not trying to help you. Nothing you see is real. Do not believe them. I will try to help but our time is short. The cameras will be on a loop for forty minutes from 23:45. After this, they will find out what I've done. Cassandra, they'll do anything to get it back. Please, meet me in the staff smoking area, South-west corner, level three. Come at midnight. I don't know who else to trust?

"Come at midnight." Seriously? Is this a joke?

Kass closed her eyes and watched the man as he came toward her in the canteen. She's always been able to see more with her eyes closed than when they were open. It was something to do with her subconscious awareness. Something like that, she'd read up on it years ago. She replayed the events in the canteen, step by step.

Spencer had definitely instigated the incident. His face when they'd first engaged. The fear in his eyes. It was genuine, she was certain.

No, come on, really. You're taking this seriously? She scrunched up the note, lifted the toilet seat, threw it down the pan. She watched it float, her hand on the lever. Kass reached down and retrieved Spencer's warning. Placed it the toilet seat and pressed it with a towel. A downward swirl of water as she flushed.

Where's my phone? Kass exited the bathroom, grabbed her handbag from the couch, walked into her bedroom and emptied its contents onto the bed. She grabbed her phone. *Fuck.* Still no signal. *Where the fuck is NEXUS?* Just the clock on her phone, showing 10:32. *You super-providing piece of shit.* Not a single bar, not since the moment they'd sighted the clinic.

Oh my God. She couldn't leave, and she had no way of contacting anyone outside. Those facts alone gave cause for concern. Scrunched in her hand was a note that sent her paranoia sliding right of the scale.

Are you really going to meet him? She wanted to, badly. She had to force herself not to pace the room. And which way was northeast anyway? *Wait a minute, doesn't this phone have a compass?*

Southwest, which ways southwest. Ah, got you. I can't make a phone call but I can circumnavigate the world. Maybe this smart-phone shit isn't so dumb after all.

At 23:45, Kass opened the door. *Cameras on a loop, remember.* She closed the door as quietly as she could and walked quickly down the white corridor. It was the first time she'd noticed so many cameras. Were they really watching an empty corridors? God, she hoped so.

Kass avoided the lifts and took the stairs. Up two floors, in through the fire doors, her compass showing the way down the faceless corridors. This was fun. So why was her tummy doing cartwheels? At the end of another glass hallway she found a door, its plaque read, Smoking Area 2.

Her heart was doing a dance and causing her fingers to vibrate, as they reached out.

The outer door opened into an airlock of sorts. The first door closed before she could push the next one open, to the sound of strong fans that gave the informal interior an ominous tone.

By the smell of things this was where she was meant to be. Its decor reminded her of a coffee-shop. Comfortable chairs, well padded. She counted half a dozen tables and at the end of the room a huge window with a view of total darkness. outside

Now what? Something caught her attention, lying there on the table, closest to the window. *Please don't let that be a wind-up.* Her heart eased back from the Formula One start-grid and she found a sudden bounce to her stride. *Please don't let it be empty.* The carton was in her hands, the lid flipped back.

So the world wasn't such a crap place after all. Kass pulled one of the brown tips from the packet and a slim white cigarette followed. There was even a lighter next to the pack. Now her heart fluttered, and sparked an uplift in her mood. The last few days had been screaming out to her. 'Spark one up'. Finding a half-filled pack of ciggies was all the convincing she needed to throw two years of sobriety into the ashtray.

It was simple physics. Cause and effect. Her thumb was the cause and the flame was the effect. She drew it hungrily into the tinder tobacco. The smooth swirling vapour was sucked deep into her lungs, and then ejected in violent spasms which she tried to quieten with her hand.

Neither the burning, nor the watery eyes dampened her enthusiasm. She needed this; she goddamn deserved it. The fumes gave her such a rush, her backside fell onto the nearest chair.

Kass picked up the packet. *Faros Clasica?* The front had a picture of man in a hat staring at a lighthouse. Not the most familiar brand, and why was the print in Spanish? And since when were galleons in full sail popular in Colorado? Last time she looked this was a land locked State. Right now she didn't care. Spanish or not, the dirty disgusting smog drawn from its tip was a wondrous experience.

She spotted something else, a newspaper on another table. She grabbed and unfurled the paper, to find the print impossible to read. More Spanish text below the paper's name, *El Universal*. *Never heard of it.* A quick check of the ashtrays revealed a combination of Marlboro and Spanish dog-ends. A sudden thought hit her about the amount of Mexican nurses in the building. Confusion that was abruptly ended when her heart missed a beat. She heard music, a voice singing. "I just haven't met, you, yet."

Michael Bublé? Shit, my phone. It was buzzing along with the ring tone. *Oh my God, it's a text.* A sweet little icon confirmed a text had been received. *How, there's still no signal?* No NEXUS motif, all the signal bars still absent.

"I just haven't met, you, yet." *Shh, stop. Open the fucking text.*

She nearly flipped the phone out of her hands. Who and how was someone sending her texts? Two of them. No return number on the icon. Kass pressed and opened the first text. It was from him, Spencer.

Ms Krane, I've sent this via the clinic's internal Wi-Fi. I don't have much time. After this, I cannot help you, they'll know it was me. Look under the chair nearest the window. Stop them. You'll know what to do.

She opened text number two.

My real name is Granville Spencer. Find me. Tell Megatron what you found. Jay feeds the Sabbath Angels. Kst19foggybottom. Please, tell Grace, I'm so sorry.

Leave here, Ms Krane. Take Josh and leave. NOW!

What's this guy on? And why am I creeping around the clinic at midnight? This is stupid.

Two taps on the packet exposed another Clasica, quickly followed by a spark and a flame. But not even the nicotine could quell her growing sense of unrest. Kass was hardly given to bouts of paranoia, or even flights of fancy, but something was definitely wrong with this entire setup.

No-one leaves in case they bring back mud on their shoes? Sorry, no phone lines because the fuse in the dish has blown. She looked at her phone. They have internal Wi-Fi? What the fuck is going on? Why are they isolating us in here?

Had desperation turned her blind? Oh God, did Josef Mengele smile at his patients like Doctor Outman. This was wrong, and on so many levels. No hospital needed a private army at its doors, and what about bitch-face April? She would be more at home with an M16 than a clipboard. Her reflection stared back from the window. Pitch black outside.

Look at me, I'm sat on a chair edge, smoking again?

Kass inhaled a deep one, arched her back, and flicked the nicotine crutch across the room. She opened the first text again, at least that one made sense.

"Look under the chair nearest the window. Stop them. You'll know what to do," she was already looking. *Shit, that's why the cigarettes were there. Clever bastard.*

There were three chairs in total, she checked the first one, found nothing. Both hands felt below the second chair, and came up empty. Last one. Half of her didn't want to look; the other half had her down on both knees, fingers feeling for . . . for whatever it was she'd just found. A small object taped to the underside, that came off with a tug.

A flash drive? Okay, now she *was* paranoid. It may have been a bit late but she checked the walls and ceiling for cameras. Her phone, it read 00:12, she felt her heart-rate rise again. Not much time to get back.

As she moved towards the doors, she heard voices outside. The outer door was being pushed opened. No other doors in sight. *What the fuck am I supposed to do now?*

Two women in nursing whites entered through the door. Their conversation excited and boosted by girly giggles. Secrets were being passed, the gossip was obviously exposing. Overspill of banter faded to a quiet look of surprise as they saw Kass.

'Hi.' What else could she say. Sat with her feet up hogging two chairs. 'Hope you don't mind,' a stream of smoke was exhaled. 'I just had to get away from all the sick people.'

She took her feet off the chair and felt the flash drive dig into her groin. Where else was she going to hide it with such short notice? It was unfortunate the effect that tape has on body parts that should never touch adhesive.

'Senora, here is for staff only. You must please to leave.'

'Really? You're asking a mother of five noisy bambinos to leave the sanctuary of the smoking room. Don't send me back out there, I beg you.'

What, no sense of humour?

The taller nurse seemed narked, as did her companion. With an almost hostile expression she stepped forward and picked up the cigarettes and lighter.

Oh, they're yours. It was a good job looks couldn't kill. 'I was just leaving,' she said, and blew a large cloud of fumes that offered the limpest of smoke-screens. 'Sorry, I thought they were lost,' she smiled.

Six strides later she was out into the corridor and moving fast. Unaware that the clock on her phone had changed to 00:15.

Pullman switched to camera forty.

‘Now what is one of the parents doing up on level three?’

It was staff only level. He worked the joystick and followed the woman. Lenses in the ceiling domes discreetly revolving as he switched from camera to camera. As she jumped down the stairs two at a time. She exited and ran down the corridor. Took another flight of stairs, completely unaware of the cameras that turned to follow her path.

‘Let’s have a look at your face,’ said Pullman. ‘Heads up, can’t take a picture if you stare at the ground. Come on, look up.’

Pullman watched the fire door swing slowly closed. The woman descending the stairwell, head down. Six of the twelve screens reacted to his touch and framed the doors on each floor.

‘Come out, come out, whoever you are. Show uncle Pullman some face,’ his finger stroked the joystick, patiently waiting; it was just a matter of time before she looked up.

The ground floor door flew open.

‘Here we go,’ he moved the joystick keen to engage. ‘Wait for it. Wait for it. Smile for me, aaaand, action.’

There she was, framed on monitor four. Pullman’s fingers typed at the keyboard.

‘Face recognition, female entry, last, oh, I don’t know, seven days. A face came up on screen five. ‘Well, hello there, Ms Krane.’ Pullman didn’t

like the way her name was flashing, then it twigged. She was the woman that Childs had told him to keep an eye on.

Oops.

He didn't have a choice, not now? Krane was digitally stored going walkabout in the facility. This was bad. April was going to shit a brick, and doubtless in his direction. Reluctant fingers grabbed for the walkie-talkie on the console. He winced at the brief static as the comms opened up.

'Err, April.' *Fuck, she's bound to be asleep.* 'It's Pullman here. I'm in the security suite, and I think we've got a problem.'

He waited.

'Another one?' came April's sleepy response.

This wasn't going to be pretty. How best to put it? Maybe there was something else going on that might get him off the hook.

'You had us doing a watch on suite twenty. I just found the Krane woman on floor three, and doing a fine impression of Usain Bolt.'

He waited.

'Are you telling me that Krane was up by building three, at this time of night, unattended?'

'Err, that's a positive.'

The stream of expletives down the comms confirmed he'd dropped the ball, and big-time.

'I want this facility locked down. No-one gets in or out, I don't care who they are.'

'Yes mam. Consider it done.'

Pullman lifted a large plastic cover and flipped the switches below six of them. His palm raised, and then plunged down on an oversized button. All over the facility titanium dead-bolts snapped into place. In the twitch of an eye, every door and window was sealed. Silent alarms activated and sensors began to glow across the his workstation.

The clinic was now in lock-down.

‘What do you mean she went walk-about?’ April was staring at the monitor. She turned to Pullman. ‘Didn’t I give you instructions to watch her? What the fuck are we paying you for?’

‘I was running a systems check. It was overdue.’ Pullman lied.

The door opened; Doctor Outman entered with Childs by his side. Fortune entered behind them.

Nice one. Childs mouthed to Pullman.

‘What’s going on, April?’ Outman looked seriously put out. ‘Why am I here, what’s going on?’

‘We’ve had a security breach,’ she answered calmly. ‘The mainframe’s security was circumvented twenty minutes ago. I’m not sure yet what files have been accessed.’

‘Circumvented? What does that mean?’ Demanded Outman.

April turned to Fortune. ‘You picked a good night to turn up,’ she said.

‘Tell me what you know.’

‘There was an initial attempt to hide the access, but we’ve discovered the access card belonged to Spencer Koch.’

‘Spencer?’ The doctor stepped closer to Fortune, he was whispering. ‘We need to talk,’ he said, ushering him away from the others. ‘He has my access code.’

‘And why would that be?’ Fortune asked.

‘It was easier to get things done. All the tests with the kids, it helped get the data processed faster. Shit, can he use that to get into, you know? Can he?’

‘Do you use the same password for all your secure data?’ Fortune asked. He’d already read the signs to confirm he did.

‘But he’d need finger prints to bypass the extra security.’ Outman lifted his hand. ‘Oh fuck.’

Fortune had a hardcore pokerface, but April understood. The moment his eyes turned toward her, she knew.

‘April has men checking every floor.’ She nodded. ‘We’ll find Koch. And then we’ll get more answers.’

‘But Fortune,’ Outman insisted on whispering. ‘What if he’s copied the medical data? You do know what would happen if that got out?’ He sat beside Pullman. ‘Fuck, if it were to be leaked. There’ll be a panic. Fortune, we can forget about NEXUS. Every user of a mobile phone will be trashing it and taking out a law-suit. You realise what would happen to the markets if this gets out?’

‘No-one’s left the facility,’ said Pullman, as if it might redeem his fuck-up. Saying it now couldn’t make things worse. ‘There’s been . . .

‘A second incident,’ April interrupted. ‘One of the parents was awol near building three when the breach occurred.’

‘What? Who?’ Demanded Outman, almost up from his chair.

‘The Krane woman,’ she answered.

‘Krane? The cop that security is supposed to be watching?’ Outman stood, he glared at April. ‘Oh this just gets better.’

‘At least I didn’t give her my password.’

Outman slumped, his ego deflated. Pullman eased his chair away from the doctor. April’s gaze fell on Childs, before it deferred to Fortune.

‘Krane is just a patient’s mother.’

‘Oh really? Fortune, so you don’t think that Officer Krane turning up, just as Spencer decides to go rogue isn’t part of a plot?’

‘It’s possible,’ Julius replied. Though he doubted the two were related. Still, it was a coincidence.

‘She’s a cop,’ Outman rallied. ‘There *has* to be a link between the two of them.’

‘April?’

‘Krane works in human resources. FBI, or CIA, those I could stretch to, but LAPD? No, to have a child with a tumour to assist in her undercover work? I don’t buy it, Julius.’

‘And what if it’s not her kid? Please tell me you checked them out before you brought them both here?’

‘Of course we did, Doctor. And you’ve done the tests, they’re DNA’d down to their toenails.’

‘Well, I find it a bit of a coincidence, don’t you?’ Outman seemed happier that he’d passed on some of the blame. ‘Is there anything else? Any more surprises? Have the Marines parked their tents outside on the drive?’

‘All we know for sure is Spencer infiltrated the mainframe. We’ll know exactly what he got in less than an hour. There’s no way in or out of this facility, and he can’t communicate with the outside, we’re on lockdown.’

‘The clinic is welded shut,’ Fortune added. ‘Whatever Spencer has, it’s still here. As is Krane. We’ll find out why she went walkabout and whether she’s had contact with Spencer.’

‘Let me deal with this, my way.’ April asked.

‘You let her do whatever it takes,’ said Outman. ‘I don’t believe she’s wandering around without purpose. It’s safer to get rid of her. She’s become a liability,’ Outman stood, his anger directed toward April. ‘Nobody, you hear me, nobody touches that boy. Fortune, you make that crystal clear to her.’

‘You just did,’ he replied. How much longer was he expected to take orders from this man? Still, this was an unexpected turn of events. No doubt that security had fucked up. He looked at Childs, whose eyes

looked down. That said all he needed to know. They'd find Koch, he was still in the facility. But was there a link between him and Krane?

There was something going on that they hadn't picked up on, not yet. It all felt more random than organised. He opened his phone and touched the speed dial. It rang twice and was answered.

'The leak is contained,' he said, and paused listening. 'I understand, yes, one hour. Of course. But I'll need a decision on our previous conversation. The doctor is insisting.'

Another pause. Fortune glared at the doctor. 'I understand,' he replied. 'Yes, the Doctor is here with me. Very well. Yes, I'll make the arrangements.' He snapped the phone shut.

'What? Why are you looking at me like that?'

'You've been instructed to proceed with the boy.'

'Well, it's about time.'

Julius redialled. The distant tone pitched three times before it was answered.

'You have a green light,' he said, and then hung up.

'What about the mother?' Asked April.

What am I missing? He hid his reluctance at giving the order. 'You have a green light as well,' he said, and noticed April seemed please to hear it. *Is there something personal going on?* 'Childs, find Spencer and bring him to me.'

'Got it, boss. Pullman, get your arse out of that chair.'

'Oh, it will be my pleasure,' he replied.

Kass opened her second airline-sized vodka from the fridge. So many scenarios had already played out in her head. She'd ask for a car in the morning. Insist they complied, if necessary. Then she'd take Josh on a road-trip to the nearest town. Buy him a proper steak. Get some fresh air that would prove this was all a sick joke.

Right now Kass needed to be a cop and not a mother. Everything about this place felt wrong. She should never have allowed them to entice her here. But what other choice could she have made? The truth was, it didn't matter if the entire clinic was involved in illegal activities. All she cared about, all she wanted, was their help for Josh. But tomorrow morning she'd demand they allowed her to use a phone. Talk to Pierce, that's what she needed to do. They could edit the call for all she cared; just to hear his voice. The glass stopped at her lips, her heart skipped a beat, the sound of someone knocking softly on their door.

Who the hell was calling at this time of night? Could it be Spencer? Who else . . . he had a lot of questions to answer. Kass pulled at the handle and the door opened. Not who she expected. It was the Ice-Queen stood smiling.

'What do you want?' asked Kass. Why was she grinning like that?

April's hand lashed out with lightning speed and caught Kass in the throat. Shock, horror, pain, they all gripped her as she fell back. She landed awkwardly feeling unable to breathe.

What? Stop. Help . . .

‘Take the boy,’ April ordered.

No, don’t. Stop. Why couldn’t she breathe?

‘Don’t worry, Ms Krane. Your airway will clear, hopefully before you suffocate. But then again, I was always better with a knife than my hand?’

‘Mom? Get off me. Mom?’

Oh my God, Josh? Get up, get up. ‘Let him go,’ her voice-box croaked. *Get your hands off him.* Kass tried to stand, and felt the sting of April’s hand. Its venom knocked her against the wall. *Breathe Cassandra, Breathe.* It came with long wheezing gasps as the gas finally seeped down into her lungs. The uniforms, they were taking Josh.

Get up, must stop them. They’re hurting him.

‘Get off me. Mom, help me, please,’ he was being forced from his bedroom, arms flailing, until one the two men injected him, and he fell limp.

Oh God, his face. Pleading with her to help. *Josh, no . . .*

Kass got to her feet. She had to stop them taking her baby, but rough hands held her back. Iron grips that yanked her hair and shoulders and forced her to kneel. She felt the cold press of a handgun against her cheek, below tears that had breached her eyes and made a steady stream.

‘Why?’ The word difficult to say. *No, not my baby.* ‘Josh.’

The two uniformed thugs manhandled him from the room, as his eyes closed, his voice fading, and he was gone.

‘Stay calm, Ms Krane. No-one’s going to hurt Josh.’ April gestured her captors, allowing her to stand.

‘Why?’ As rough hands lifted her. ‘Why are you doing this?’

‘Josh is going to take a nice holiday from his overbearing mother. By the time you wake up he’ll be a long way from here, and from you.’

‘You fucking bitch. Where are you taking him?’

April’s head came as fast as her fingers. Impacting on Kass’ brow, it stunned her into darkness.

Carl Grapple closed his phone. The tall, blonde man, slid it into the pocket of his black denims. The roll-neck he wore was dark, as was the belt around his waist. He turned to the other members of his team, sat patiently in the Ford Voyager. Doors open, the windows blacked out, all three extinguished their cigarettes. They understood that the call to end their wait had finally been made.

Carl knew his team as Two, Three, and Four when they were working. No names, just numbers, it was more efficient. They were a highly trained team, and a last resort for Fortune to call.

‘We have a green light,’ said Carl. ‘Weapons and comms check, then we go. Two will take us to the drop-off.’ He nodded to the blonde twenty something who wore glasses and sat behind the wheel. ‘You have the address, why aren’t we moving?’

The car’s lights exposed the empty road ahead, as the doors closed and the vehicle pulled away. In the back seat the familiar sound of ammo clips and slides being pulled as Three and Four checked their weapons.

This was the good bit. Carl could feel his adrenaline level rise levels. That was how it was, and how it had always been. This was the life that Carl Grapple had carved out for himself.

The Voyager pulled to a slow stop in the shadow between the street lamps. Lights it seemed that were more for effect than to actually see by. It gave the street a sleepy, picture book ambience. A typically wealthy suburb in the city of LA. Carl slid his Glock into the shoulder holster hidden below his jacket.

‘Two and Three, you stay with the car. Four you’re on me.’

Barely a sound came from the closing doors as Carl checked the street, and then his watch. Two thirty in the morning, not a light or a movement for as far as he could see. This was long after the witching hour; only cats, rats, and loose women wandered the streets at this time, but not in this neighbourhood. He gave Four a nod and they crossed the road. Both men walking up the closest driveway. Its mail-box had 227 painted on the pole.

Carl gestured two fingers toward the house, and Four approached the porch, Carl in the shadow of the neighbour’s tree.

No need to pick the lock when the client had supplied a key, which Four slipped silently inside the barrel and turned. As the door opened, Four gave Carl a signal to join him.

Inside, an alarm flashed its presence, until Four’s gloved finger jabbed in the code and the light went off. Carl moved stealthily down the hall, Glock in hand, pointed and ready.

He used to own a place just like this; his suburban castle. These days he preferred to live out of motels, a more fluid way of living, much easier to remain anonymous. The Glock led his way into the lounge.

Who lives in a house like this? He wondered.

Of course he already knew the answer but he liked to play the game. The owner was obviously a clean freak, probably had a mild compulsive disorder. There was an orderly feel about the place. *What on earth is that?* He spotted something awful hanging above the mantle of the fire. *Orange squares on a yellow background, that’s shocking.*

Carl checked the kitchen. *Much better taste.* He bet himself the cupboards were well stocked, all the cans neatly lined in rows. He passed

by an open doorway, towards a door at the far end of the hall, where bedroom one was revealed.

A well sized room with a double bed. Nice furniture, though not keen on the wallpaper. But hey, it takes all sorts.

Kid's room, obviously male, teenager, no older than sixteen. Hmm, Miley Ray Cyrus poster on the wall, kid's got good taste in girls. He fingered the vast cd collection. Really? You don't get a sore neck just listening to this crap? There wasn't a sign of anything classical. Kids these days?

Carl moved back out into the hall again, a push on the toilet door confirmed it was empty. Last room on the right was the mother's bedroom. He entered, checked the corners, then slipped the Glock back into its holster.

Where would you keep it? Bet it's in the only locked drawer. As far from the kid as you can get it, tucked away in mummy's safe place. Where would that be?

Carl opened the closet and fingered through the hanging clothes, his eyes checking for boxes above and below, there were two on the floor, one on the shelf.

No, you'd definitely lock it away. Take no chances. He tried the drawers one at a time, three in each cabinet, one on either side of the room. He was careful not to disturb anything. Just tweak a little at the edges as he felt his way through the smalls.

Bedside drawers, bet you keep it with the condoms. No, no condoms. You don't bring the boyfriends home, do you?

Top drawer, bedside left, it was locked.

Found you.

Several seconds later a flat-hook and a rake were teasing the inside of the simple tumbler. Four pulled the drawer open and stepped back. Carl smiled having found what he came for. The home-owner kept two guns. Carl reached in for the standard issue Glock 22, and the Beretta which was obviously her back up weapon.

LAPD haven't issued these since 2002. Carl lifted a shiny badge out in his other hand. Officer six seven seven, sorry love, you're just about to have a bad life.

Carl closed the drawer. Four locked it.

'Heads up out there, we're coming out.'

The underground garage was deserted. Just a few cars parked up in the dark spaces. The last thing April wanted now was some unwelcome attention.

‘Pick it up Pullman,’ she ordered. ‘I want her in the trunk pronto.’ At least the muscular hulk was fit for something. He’d dropped the ball, he knew it, and she wasn’t going to let him forget. The lights flashed twice on the Range Rover as they approached, the trunk door clicked open.

‘The doctor gave her a shot that should keep her out for an hour or so. Do you think that you can get this right?’

‘Look, April, I . . .’

‘Do I look like I want to hear you speak?’ *Good decision.* She had half a mind to put him in the back as well. ‘Make sure *that* isn’t found,’ she gestured to the tarpaulin already inside, that was wrapped around something large. ‘As for Krane, you know what to do.’

‘Affirmative.’ The trunk’s lid powered down and He rolled Kass inside. The light flashed again as the front doors were unlocked.

Full beam flashed at the garage doors as the heavy rolling shutters were lifting. Pullman hit the gas and the V8 growled; the SUV’s massive tyres squealed with empathy at his frustration as the vehicle bolted out from the garage into the black of night.

Music, Kass could hear music, she slipped back into sleep, but a jolting bump brought her back.

Fuck . . . What's happening? She was being jolted, vibrated; the easing tremors encouraged her slumber to return.

She was a child again, jumping and falling, running across the bouncy-castle. This was how birthdays were supposed to be, gay and happy, and full of spring. It didn't matter that it was dark or that the air stank of, what was that, cinnamon and apple? Kass bounced again and landed awkwardly. The impact hurt her head. Not fair, she wanted to cry. Her eyes opened again.

Where am I? More bumps. She reached out to steady herself, desperate to fight the urge to sleep.

Kass' head and half her body was lifted, and then grounded with a thud. *What the fuck?* Panic rallied her senses, dull as they were. She felt her world turn to the left and a large heavy parcel shifted into her floor space crushing her up against a wall. They began bouncing together until the floor finally returned to a steady trundle.

Am I in a car? It wasn't easy to move whilst jammed by whatever it was that had parked by her head. *Get off me.* Freedom came as the lump shifted. Her space brightened to a sultry red glow. Then the faint light returned. *What the hell is going on? Where am I?* Last thing she remembered was Bitch Slut's head moving in like a hammer. I must have passed out? Been put somewhere. *Oh crap, I feel sick.* That normally only

happened when she was sat in the back of . . . *a car*? She was airborne again. Shifting places with something else, wrapped in what felt like a tarpaulin. *Am I in the trunk of a car?*

Red lights again, one in each corner. Her feet against the bulkhead stopped her sliding.

Apple and cinnamon? Her face was chaffed by a carpet that had been recently detailed. No doubting it, she was in the trunk of someone's SUV. And they were off-roading according to the constant assault on her spine.

Josh? The memory stabbed her in the heart. *You bitch!* The memory of Josh being taken. *If it's the last thing I ever do, I swear . . .* She was squashed up again, between the heavy weight and the end of her space. *What the fuck is this?* The object was heavy and wrapped in something smooth. So difficult to make out in the poor light. Kass pawed at the wrapping. If she really was in the trunk of a car? *Shit.* She wanted to scream for help. Beat on the metal that encased her. Her police training came to the fore.

Shit, shit. She had to find a way out. At least find something to use on the driver when they stopped. *Maybe something in this thing?* Kass worked her hands into the folds, clawed at it for a way in, desperation for something that could help.

Come on, open up! For all she knew their journey's end was imminent. *For Christ's sake who wrapped this thing? Come on, give it up.* A layer gave way, let her hands inside, to feel fabric, clothing that was wet. *Please, not laundry?* She groped deeper, her hand settling on something slim, long . . . *Oh my God, oh my God. It's a body?*

Kass barely contained the scream, rolling away just as the car lifted, then sent the deceased rolling on top of her again. Panic screeched through her veins and the sudden flood of adrenaline caused her to beat at the bundle to go away. She fought for her space and slid the body away. *It's a fucking body!*

No dream then.

Get off me you piece of shit. A dead body was no use. Calm down, take a breath. Fuck, it's a body! Kass put her feet between them. There had to be something else in the trunk.

Carl was adept at picking locks. They were a challenge, and he liked to be tested. The owner of this apartment had gone to great expense to make the challenge more formidable than usual.

‘Got you.’ The lock retracted. ‘I’m in,’ he whispered. His signal sent back to the Voyager. ‘Two and Three, keep eyes on the road and entrance. Four, watch the stairwell and elevator.’

‘Roger that.’

Carl pushed the door open and drew his Glock. Since childhood he’d enjoyed breaking and entering. Sneaking around other people’s houses in dead of the night was fun. Taking from others was a profitable, not that he did it just for the money. It was also just for the crack; the high. You had to experience the sensation to understand it. In his early teens he’d liked to watch from the bedside. The owners oblivious that he was there. It was the Marine Corp that had sharpened his talents into the man he was now. The front door opened inward and Carl entered the apartment.

Nice place. He closed the front door, careful not to make a sound, then moved down the hall. *Big apartment just for one person.* Carl checked each doorway. Watchful as he moved down the hall. This was game on, what he did best. Special Ops had taught him, the CIA had honed him. He took it all in, every facet and crack, as he hunted his prey. Only one door left to open, as expected. At this hour normal people were in bed.

Carl eased back the door and stepped inside the bedroom. *Tasteful furniture. Nice smell. Ooh, big tv on the wall.* He moved quick and silent toward the bed. One occupant, a sleeping male.

At the bedside he looked down on the sleeping man, naked from the waist up. He obviously worked hard to stay trim. Not that it would help him. Carl holstered his weapon and reached for a spare pillow. He took a deep breath and positioned it above the man's head. What little light there was glinted from the barrel of the Beretta that Carl pulled from his jacket, and pressed into the pillow. He took a firm stance.

'Sweet dreams,' Carl used his weight to force the pillow onto the man's head. Before the victim could move, a muffled shot rang out and sent organic shrapnel spraying out across the headrest and bed. A pool of dark blood flooded onto the pillows below the man's head. Carl lifted the pillow, took two steps back, then dropped the down filled headrest and Beretta as he turned away. *Someone has to take the blame.* He walked out into the hallway

'Any sign of life out there?' he whispered into the comms.

'All clear, boss.'

'I'm coming out,' the front door latch clicked into place as he left.

Frantic would perfectly describe Kass' state of mind as she slid atop the tarpaulin. Playing Twister with a corpse in the boot of a car was way beyond surreal. Somewhere in this claustrophobic cave was a weapon; had to be. *Please God, there has to be something. Anything.*

More lurching from the car through the rough terrain as each bump felt more personal. This wasn't good; she knew the corpse's head was right below her own. She was probably eyeball to eyeball. More hard work by the suspension thumped it up into her face, bringing bile closer to being expelled. If she leaned any harder away the parcel shelf would flip and the driver would know she was awake.

Yes, got something. Metal and hard, she could feel it. 'Oh come on,' It was teasing her fingers. *If I can just, reach, around . . . got it.* Some sort of lever in her hand just as a voice from inside the car seized at her limbs. *Is the driver talking to me? Shit, he can't know I'm awake? No, no . . .* Kass listened in, a terrible fear had grabbed at her heart and soul. *He's on the phone?*

'Where are you?' A woman's voice. A familiar voice.

April? There's gonna be a reckoning with you, you bitch.

'I'm heading out into the middle of nowhere, said Pullman. 'I'll be burying the first one in ten, then I'll dump Krane at the agreed site.'

'No delays. I want you out at the airport to meet Childs. Ed will fly you both to Washington where you'll hook up with G'co. You're both back on the senator's security. We need to know if anyone approaches

him. We don't know how far this has gone, or who's involved. No more fuck ups, Pullman. Or the next trip you take to the middle of nowhere won't be at the wheel, got it?'

'Yes mam. I'll be at the airport in two hours.'

A pause was followed by music playing. It sounded like Mariachi Music. Lots of Mexican trumpets.

Shit, he said ten minutes. She had a hold of something. *Move damn you, move. Fuck you, why won't you move?*

The harsh crunch of chassis on ground threw Kass back, and the object came free in her hand. She slid up hard behind the rear seats with involuntary contortion. The car slowed, skidded on the ground, then stopped.

He said ten. Fuck fuck, he said ten. She wasn't ready. The engine purred on idle, and then went silent. Whatever drugs Kass was running on just dropped away. *Oh God, is this it? Is he coming for me?* The driver's door opened and then slammed shut, as footsteps came around to the rear. *She wasn't ready; too soon, she wasn't ready.* Her feet were braced on the rear seats, she was on her back and coiled like spring. She'd just worked out what it was she had in her hand.

The tailgate lifted.

As the trunk tailgate raised, the interior lights came on and Kass' world became real again, as a dark looming figure blocked out the moonlight.

Pullman seemed surprised as his eyes registered hers; he gave her a curious kind of stare.

'Bad time to wake up, Ms Krane,' he said.

Now, Kass, do it now. Her fingers gripped the hard metal object, her arm swung it with all the venom she possessed.

It was cause and effect, and an instant success. As Pullman leaned in, the chunk of metal went out, and impacted his face. He fell back, face in hands, cursing her for what she'd done.

Kass scrambled to get out. In her hands was a canister, large words written in bold . . . FIRE. Instinct and recognition worked together as the slim red fob on the short hose was ripped away. Kass didn't know what it was that hissed from the container but the fluid erupted into Pullman's eyes. He'd tried to fend it away but was forced back. *Get out, Kass. Get up.*

One of them had to. Second place wouldn't get a prize, and Kass wasn't going to come last as she fell out of the car, white spray circling above her head.

Oh shit, he's got a gun?

Pullman was blinded, but his reactions went into survival overdrive. The weapon exploded with angry flashes of light that exposed his foam

covered face, eyes jammed closed, mouth spitting and cursing as he tried to see.

One, two, three flashes as bullets hissed through the air. It was life and death now as Kass fell on him, the metal cylinder launched down on Pullman's head. Once, twice, she just kept hitting the man's head as he squirmed to get out of the way.

Again and again, why wouldn't he just stay down? Every last bit of energy was thrust through the extinguisher until she realised he had finally stopped moving. Kass hit him again. The last one, that was for Josh.

For the second time in as many minutes Kass rolled off a dead body.

'You bastard,' she screamed at him. 'I don't bury in the dark so easy. You hear me you fucking bitch,' she shouted at the moon. Kass dropped the makeshift weapon and started to laugh. Not because it was funny, but because she was scared. Because the tears wouldn't come, and because she was angry.

Battering the life out of Pullman had evoked too many emotions, most thrust out in desperation; focused into a single point. When they were done Kass was left drained; lying on the ground crying. She couldn't stop staring at the man's face, what was left of it. Blood and flesh pounded to a mangled mess, her hands covered in it.

Self-defence, it was self-defence. No court in the world would convict her. *It's okay to bludgeon any mother-fucker engaged in the act of murder and burial.* She had to stop staring at him. Kass turned away and staggered to her feet. 'Fuck you,' she shouted. 'You deserved it.' *Every vile impact.* It helped to get angry again. 'You son of a bitch,' she kicked his booted foot as she passed, intent to get to the car. To find something that would clean him off her hands. This had been her favourite shirt. No way was this mess going to wash out.

The gun, where's the gun?

It was like exiting a trance as she picked up the weapon. A Smith and Wesson P40 compact. It had a nice, if somewhat oily feel in her hand.

Still, it gave her a sense of power. She wasn't frightened anymore as she checked Pullman for a pulse. He really was dead, and killing was thirsty work. Kass pulled open the heavy driver's door looking for water. She found a thermos in the passenger floor-well. The cool water inside felt divine.

As she drank Kass opened the rear door. She unzipped a bag sat on the soft leather. Clean shirts, a razor, all manner of bath room goodies for a man. She circled the car, finger on the trigger of the Smithy, pointed at the limp body on the dusty ground. Kass put the Smithy back in her belt.

She grabbed at the edges of the tarpaulin. Her pumps slipped as she pulled; the tarp landed on the hard ground. She began to unwrap. 'Oh my God.' Two steps back. 'Spencer?'

Kass froze. He'd been so *alive* the last time she'd seen him. This stranger had risked his life to warn her, but why? She grabbed at her jeans, the thumb-drive? Relief calmed her anxiety to find it was still in her pants where she'd hidden it.

Kass knelt by his body. 'I'm sorry,' she said, as she fingered through his pockets. All were empty. She gingerly checked Pullman for a phone. He had a spare magazine for the gun, and a wallet filled with cash that wasn't going to do him any good so she took it. Now she needed to get out of here, wherever here was?

First thing she needed was a direction. Second thing was a new sat-nav, the one in the Range Rover had a bullet hole in the screen.

On the dashboard was a digital compass, a big sucker stuck it above a Tele-tubby shaped clock that glowed with idiot sized digits. They looked like something kids would buy their daddy for Christmas.

Sorry kids, Daddy's not coming home.

Kass turned in all directions; nothing but empty dark space. The ground was dusty and hard. 'Where the fuck am I?' She shouted. Nothing but a vast expanse to get lost in.

The V8 fired up, the turbo charged engine ready to go. The volume on the radio was raised several decibels as the four wheel drive lurched the two ton Range Rover off into darkness.

Kass was LAPD, and these fuckers had just messed with the wrong officer. She throttled the car eastward, following the line of the compass. Denver had to be out there somewhere, and she'd find it.

The raunchy tomes of Ricky Martin, 'livin' la vida loca' blared out as powerful halogen headlamps lit the empty desert.

It was a postcard night as the powerful SUV forged ahead of a tyre fuelled cloud of dust. Nothing but no-man's land ahead, the ground below worked the suspension hard, the tyres working furiously to find traction on such gritty terrain.

Kass didn't notice as the speedo crept past fifty and the massive projectile threatened to leave its wheels behind. She'd expected a smooth ride.

La-La, or was it Tinky-Winky, that beamed 03:41. Sooner or later she had to find a road. Until then, this was no different to the off-roading experience at Palm Springs two years ago. All she could think about was Josh. All she could see was his young beautiful face filled with so much fear. She was unaware of the drug that was clawing its way back into her system.

Simple logic had been applied, turn the motor about and head it back in the opposite direction. She'd find the clinic, find Josh, kill April. Eliminate anyone that got in her way. She was cop turned fucking Terminator. They had her baby, and she was going to get him back. It was a perfect plan. Perfection, if it wasn't for the little yellow icon that began winking at her from the dashboard.

'No, no, you have to joking,' Kass punched at the wheel. Had Pullman driven out into the Colorado Desert without filling the tank? *He can't have . . .*

Moments later the yellow light stopped winking and gave her a cold hard stare in crimson red. The V8 juddered, picked up, and then began to cough. The dashboard lit up like a Christmas tree as the speedo slipped into regression. She'd been doing seventy without a care.

'No, no, no!' Hitting the steering wheel didn't help. 'This cannot be happening,' her thumb pushed at the start-button. 'Come on you piece of shit.' Engine turned but wouldn't fire. 'Come on. Come on.' *Oh, shit.* Power steering went and left her hands straining at the wheel. She couldn't keep the car going straight. *Fuck, going too fast.* Range Rover had turned bucking bronco as the wheel was pulled from her hands. *Brake, brake!* Her foot jammed on a rock hard pedal.

Kass couldn't stop the wheels from veering left. There were oncoming boulders ahead, and no way to miss them. She braced for impact as the car began to topple, fall, and then stop for a moment, as the contents of the cab were thrust violently toward the windscreen. Impact came with a crunching roar.

The seatbelt bit hard across Kass' chest and stopped everything but her head and arms being slung forward, and for a moment she floated and time stood still . . . before the massive car flipped up and over, to sail like a kite out of control, before 'touch down'. A perfect body-slam against the canvas as the force unleashed tore the windscreen and half the roof away to allow desert grit and sand to spray hard across the front seats.

Helpless, and with no time to pray, Kass closed her eyes and waited for the end.

Kass opened her eyes. She'd been sleeping; dreaming.

Am I dead?

The pain in her shoulder, her lower back, just about everywhere, all confirmed another diagnosis. That she was still alive.

'Fuck.' Kass unclipped the belt and pulled at the door lever, to find it resisted. The door refused to open. She took a look around. Sliding through one of the missing windows was an option. As her legs came free she felt her weight shift toward the bent and torn remnants of the roof. Crawling was difficult, but she had to get out.

Oh yeah, can't keep a good cop down. She dragged herself out of the wreckage and managed to stand. 'Ha!' She shouted, convinced she'd just proved she was tougher than a Range Rover, and harder than a desert rock. Kass managed several steps, and then fell. Head resting against the ground. *I gotta sleep.* She needed to close her eyes. *No, stupid, wake up.* Her head hurt, she might be concussed.

A small boulder wasn't as comfy as the car's luxurious seats, but far enough away to be safe from any sudden explosion. Close enough to see a hundred thousand dollar motor had a lot of parts. Most of which were scattered across the desert. The car was wrecked. Staring at the chassis she saw them, Pullman's parting gift. Two large bullet holes in the side of the car, their exit wounds in the fuel tank now facing the sky.

Bastard. She'd have to walk from here on in.

The gritty-ground that her pumps scuffed over was parched beyond belief. Everything was so dry. What flora there was, was spiky. Small cacti were abundant, anything else was browned off by the harsh sun. Which was about to rise. The horizon began shimmering with anticipation.

At least it would warm things up. The night had been cold. At one point her teeth had begun to chatter, despite wearing Pullman's oversized jacket, and a clean shirt she took from his bag.

Kass lifted the thermos to her lips. Not much left now, and the sun was about to rise. The dust got everywhere, settled in every crease and crevice. Her mouth was so dry, her body still suffering the shock. But she just had to keep on going. Keep walking until she found a road, or a house, she'd settle for a pool and a spa.

Kass laughed out loud. Her head still hurt, she was cold. The moment the sun broke free of the horizon she felt it warm her bones. Such a good feeling, it helped her stagger up one more rise, another small hill that threatened to crack her spirit, to break her will. She had nothing more to give as one leg buckled and fatigue encouraged the rest of her weight to fall. Gravity insisted she stop, just for a moment. Take a breath and decide what to do. She watched the sun rise, and the vastness of the land ahead was revealed. An empty space with no signs of life. She may as well have been walking on the moon.

Kass fell into a stupor. A numb feeling of abandonment. The drugs April had given her still bringing her down. It was the call of a coyote, way off in the distance, that brought her back.

Get up. Keep moving. I'm not being eaten by a wolf. She got to her feet. 'You here me? I'm not for you.' The Smith and Wesson was brandished in her hand. Other coyote responded, they didn't sound convinced.

'Fuck you,' she said, and began walking. Another gulp from the thermos; that was it, the last of the water. 'Good riddance,' she was tired of carrying it anyway.

Head toward the sun. The pilot had said they were west of Denver. So heading east was the way to go. *Toward the sun. Keep heading toward the sun.* She huddled as she walked. Hoping the sun would bring more warmth. Her footsteps uneven but filled with purpose. *Oh God, buzzards.* She could see them in the distance, circling on the thermals. *So, not for me then? Not yet.*

* * *

It must have been three, maybe four hours. The sun was high, the heat stifling. Pullman's coat had been dropped somewhere back there. Another hill was being ascended. Maybe the last she could bear to try.

One more effort, just to the top. Please.

It was out there, somewhere. Civilisation could be over the other side. *Josh?* Where was her baby? *Oh Josh, I'm so sorry.* Every muscle in her legs screamed at the lactose to *back off*. She was drunk, delirious, worn out but still moving. Kass trudged the final steps to the summit. Below her the world spread out. She shook her head. The view was the same as the last. Nothing but desert. Kass fell to her knees. It was over then.

Or was it? *Please God, don't let that be a mirage.* A wide track of tarmac, as if by magic. *A road means cars; which means people.* More dust as Kass scuttled down the embankment, her excitement building, her legs unable to carry the speed of descent. *Slow down.* She wasn't listening.

Kass stumbled, fell, kept moving forward. She left one sneaker behind, ripped her jeans on the dry earth. She didn't care, barely felt her skin being chaffed and cut. Ahead was salvation. Literally a roadway out of this parched and torrid place. Kass took her last steps and collapsed by the roadside.

* * *

She was sat by the beach, an umbrella keeping the scorching sun from her head. A boy selling ice-creams walked by.

Time to get a shower and cool myself down. Hmm, get a burger from the stand. Heavy on the ketchup and onions. Hmmm, I like onions. Maybe I'll jump in the pool after and get that nice young lifeguard to fish me out. ♪ A S O N, the name on the tag he wore. Hey, he was cute.

Kass no longer felt the heat of the ground scorch at her skin through her jeans. Her other pump purposely flung onto the road to stop traffic passing.

To hell with the calories; I'm going tongue deep into the next full-fat ice-cream I come across. Hmm, cake.

She really did want a shower, but sleep seemed determined to intervene. Slumber was insistent that she roll herself into a ball; allow herself to be carried away. Like a lilo on the ocean, she would drift off into open blue, where there was calm, and order

Calm, order! Kass tapped her head, something was wrong. She could hear music. *No, no music. Just sail away.* She heard it again, coming from a distance. A casual peek. Something small cutting through the haze. Hey, it was red and had big bright eyes. She lifted her head to see more.

Is that a car? What was a car doing in the pool? *Does it have ice-cream in the trunk?* Kass tried to lift her body. It refused. She moved onto all fours and tried again. Unsteady at first, but she got to her feet. The image was getting bigger. Its sound becoming louder. No mistake, that was the

growling sound of a car. The more she stared, the more the heat from the tarmac blurred her vision.

I can see you.

Bright headlamps coming out of the haze, a red bonnet followed. Kass raised both hands above her head and stepped into the road. Moments later a sixties Ford pick-up squealed to a stop, music thumping out from the cab. She took a step back, pointed, then fainted.

So windy? Turbulence was rife. *I'm so dry.* As her vision cleared she realised the outside was moving by too quickly. The wind buffeting her hair. *I remember, a car?* Kass pushed her hand out of the window, she was in a car. The window fully down, the cool air tangling up her hair.

'You're awake then?' The question owned by a male voice, and it sounded ticked off. 'I managed to get some fluids down you before you passed out. You mind telling me what you were doing wandering around the desert on your own like that?'

Kass turned toward the voice. *Dear God, it's a troll?* She reacted by shuffling away. Squeezing hard up against the door. *Eurgh, no, stop it, please.* Why was he licking her? His breath stank of fish.

'Boon, come away. I think he likes you.'

'Boon? That's assault, you know that.'

'That's my dog, don't mind him. It's just his way of saying hello.'

'A dog,' she fended it off. *Please let it be a dog.*

'Boon, get off the lady. Come on, over here. There's water in the glove box, help yourself. I managed to get some in you about an hour back. But you're pretty damn dehydrated.'

She could see him now, the man driving. Not that she could tell which end up was the beard or the hair. A fluffy dog sat beside him, panting.

'Thank you,' she said. Shaky hands reaching for the glove-box. Grabbing the water within. It was warm, bland, glorious, as it slid down her throat. 'Don't . . . don't suppose you have a smoke?'

‘There’s a couple made up in the tin; just there on the dashboard, lighter’s inside.’

More water went down her chin than in her mouth, hands still shaking. The smell unleashed as she opened the lid of the tin was dark and sweet. It had been over twenty years since she’d rolled her own. The flame from the lighter was hard to keep still. But when it finally met the paper, it was good. Unbelievably sweet and aromatic. The feel of the smog as it descended deep into her lungs. The sudden wave of calm administered. This was a dirty, filthy habit. She loved it. Why on earth did she ever give it up?

Because I was pregnant with Josh. ‘Oh God, Josh?’

‘Are you gonna tell me what you’re doing out here? You’re damn lucky I came along when I did, this is a lonely road; mostly undesirables, not too many tourists. I reckon it’s all the sand, but the lack of a beach. Were you looking for a beach, lady?’

‘No.’ *Can I trust him? Will he try to take me back?*

‘Weldon,’ he said, and held out his hand.

‘Weldon?’ She didn’t want to touch him.

‘My name, it’s Weldon.’

He had that old timer, gold miner, kind of thing going on. Kris Kristofferson after a weekend bender. He was tanned, weathered more like. Did he live in that t-shirt? The old blue-jeans he wore hadn’t fared much better. The dog was at least a hundred years old. And what breed was it anyway, Shaggy bad breath? If it was, this pup was a thoroughbred.

Kass drank some more. Her senses reviving. Her eyesight clear now, her other senses returned. She wasn’t sure if the smell was him, or the dog. *Oh God, is it me?* It took both hands to wind the window fully down. To find that eureka moment and understand why canines stick their heads out in the breeze. It was wonderful. ‘Where are we?’ She asked.

‘Just south of Caborca,’ he replied.

‘Caborca? How far is that from Denver?’

‘Denver? Lady, you really are lost.’

‘How far?’ She insisted.

‘About a thousand miles, give or take.’

‘Is Colorado that big?’

‘Colorado? Lady, where do you think you are?’

Are you deaf? ‘Colorado.’

‘Lady, the last time I checked, this was Sonara Province, south of the border. You’re in Mexico.’

Her cigarette lowered. ‘What?’ She’d obviously misheard. ‘That’s not funny. This is Colorado. We flew into Colorado a few days ago.’

‘Then you got lost in the air. I promise you, we are most surely in Mexico.’

Mexico? ‘Oh my God, Josh?’

‘Josh? You lost your boyfriend as well your country?’

Kass pulled her feet up to her chest. Her eyes welled as she stared at the countryside.

‘No,’ she said. ‘He’s my son.’

She'd said enough. Whatever country this was, they'd realise she wasn't as dead as they'd like her to be. She couldn't trust this man, or his dog. Where the hell was he taking her?

Kass pretended not to notice as Weldon turned the sound up on the archaic radio. The music had stopped and a Spanish voice was chirruping words like a verbal Gatling-gun. She didn't have a clue what the woman was saying but her rhetoric had certainly perked Weldon's interest.

Oh my God. Spanish or not, she recognised the name. She'd said, Spencer Koch. Twisting anxiety now turned into full blown foreboding. 'Who is that? What's she saying?'

'That's Juanita; she works the local police radio Mondays and Thursdays.'

'You scan the local police band?'

'Sure, always good to know what's going on with local law enforcement.'

'Why?' *Shit.* 'Do you run guns?' She turned to see what was in the flat bed. Nothing but a flapping tarpaulin. 'Are you a drug dealer?'

'Not in my truck, lady. No, sometimes I help the locals take a holiday, that's all. Just now and then.'

'So you're what, a vacation planner?'

'Sure, that's me. I plan vacations.'

Weldon turned the scanner down and the music back up.

'The Juanita woman, what was she saying?'

‘Just letting everyone know about the weather. You want some more water? Another cigarette maybe?’

‘I want to know why you’re lying.’

The pick-up lurched to the right and skidded to a full stop just off the tarmac. He shoved the stick shift into neutral and the hum of the engine died at the turn of the key.

‘What are you doing?’ *Why was he looking at her like that?* ‘Why have we stopped?’

‘It’s on the outside,’ he said. ‘You’re looking for the door-handle, it’s on the outside. The inner one broke last year.’

Kass’ hand returned to her lap. ‘Im fine,’ she said.

‘It’s funny thing really, but Juanita just put a BOLO out for an American woman. Crazy lady wanted for a double murder. They’re saying the Señora is armed and dangerous. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?’

Kass pulled the Smithy from her sock and rested it on her lap.

‘Oh crap. A hundred miles of desert and I give a ride to some crazy bitch who’s shooting people? That is you, right?’

‘No,’ she shook her head. ‘I mean, probably. Look, you have to help me . . .’

‘Listen lady, Boon and I don’t want any trouble. Whatever it is you’ve done, or ain’t done, I don’t want to know. Ain’t none of our business.’

‘Please, they’ve taken my son. Help us.’

‘No. I like to keep myself to myself. If you know what I mean.’

Kass raised the Smithy and pointed it at him.

‘Put both your hands on the wheel,’ she said. ‘Please, I need your help.’

‘Damn, you need help all right.’

‘Start the truck.’

‘Fine, I’m starting the truck.’ The stick-shift was column change, and jarred into gear.

‘So where are we going?’

‘Your place?’

‘I don’t want no crazy bitch at my place.’ The gun was cocked. ‘Maybe you could stay for a while. I always welcome company.’

The truck’s tyres left a cloud of dust behind as they bit back onto the tarmac.

‘Only I could drive in an empty desert, and find you.’

‘I’m sorry. Give me your cell-phone?’

‘I don’t have a phone.’

‘Everyone has a cell. Empty your pockets.’

‘You told me to keep both hands on the wheel.’

‘One will do. And careful, no sudden movements.’

‘At my age everything I do has to be careful. I leave that to Boon, ain’t that right buddy? Sure, he likes to chase balls, even the odd rabbit or two. Me, I don’t work like I used to.’ Weldon emptied his pockets onto the bench seat. ‘Is this gonna take long? I mean, Boon and I, we got things to do.’

‘Is that everything?’ She looked down at a penknife and a half empty pack of gum. What gave her a sinking feeling was bank-notes, Banko de Mexico written across them. Some old coins, she recognised as Pesos.

‘You wanna frisk me?’ He asked, then hit the throttle as another gear was ground into place. He started muttering, words she couldn’t make out.

‘They’ve kidnapped my son,’ she said.

‘Yeah, sure. That happened to me last year. I told them to keep the ungrateful little bastard. Do you know it’s been fifteen years since the little shit has spoken to me. You gonna shoot me, lady?’

‘No.’

‘Then put the gun down.’

‘No.’

‘Then shoot me.’

‘What? No.’

‘If you’re not gonna shoot me, you don’t need to point the gun in my direction. That’s just plain old common sense.’

Kass lowered the weapon to her lap. ‘Don’t try anything, okay.’

‘Okay, yeah, that’s good. Tell you what, let’s get off this road and find somewhere a bit more private. Somewhere we won’t run into the local Federales.’

That sounded reasonable. ‘Okay.’

‘Good, now we’re making progress. Tell you what, you put the gun *away* and I’ll take you somewhere safe. We can be there in, oh, twenty minutes.’

That sounded better than reasonable. ‘Okay.’

‘I got a small place, it’s not much. Just a few miles east of here. It’s well off the track but if you promise not to shoot me, I’ll take you there.’

Kass nodded.

‘I wanna hear the words, lady.’

‘Sure, yes, I promise.’

‘Only me,’ he muttered. ‘This shit could only happen to me.’

Josh's illness, Fortune, the clinic. It all seemed so fantastical when Kass relayed it out loud. She couldn't blame him if he didn't believe her. But he had to; Kris Kristofferson just had to believe that everything she'd told him was true.

'You live here?' She asked.

'You got a problem with my house?'

House? 'No, it's nice,' she lied. The Beverley Hillbillies came to mind.

'This is where me and Boon call home,' he said. 'It's off everyone's radar, you'll be safe here till you decide what to do. I'll get some coffee brewing, and you can tell me some more of this tale of yours.'

He'd smiled when he said it, but slammed the car door, to leave her sat staring at a panting canine. *Hey. Oh, no, don't come near me.* 'You need a bath.' She said exiting the truck, Boon jumping down to follow. 'Both of you,' she whispered. 'Don't suppose you have a shower?' She called out.

'Sure I do. But you'd be quicker if you jumped in the pool out back. Come on, Boon. Here boy.' The wiry mutt ran to follow his master, and they both disappeared inside.

‘Coffee’s on,’ said Weldon, stood by an ancient looking pipe-stove. The burner door open, the wooden fuel burning with an orange flame. An old metal coffee-pot being roasted on the griddle.

‘There’s no pool out the back,’ Kass scolded, annoyed with herself that she’d believed him.

‘And I don’t have a shower inside,’ he replied. ‘And you’re wondering how you got into this situation?’

‘No shower? *Seriously?* I didn’t catch that last bit?’

‘Lady, this is the Outback, Mexican style. I got a generator that works, well, most of the time, and some barrels filled with water. Several miles north there’s a creek where Boon and I take a dip twice a week.’

‘A creek?’ That sounded nice.

‘So, you say this Spencer fella, he tried to warn you?’

‘Yes. Somehow he managed to mate with my NEXUS chip. He probably scanned for me on the clinic’s Wi-Fi Pod, and then sent a data package direct to my cell.’ *You don’t know what I’m talking about do you?* ‘He sent me a text.’

‘Right, a text. Why didn’t you just say?’

Okay, dumb it all down. Keep it simple for the old-timer. Please, I need your help. ‘Thank you,’ she said, ‘for saving me.’ He mumbled something, she didn’t catch the words as Weldon opened the coffee pot and stirred. His foot closed the door on the living flames inside.

She'd seen nicer rabbit hutches. Weldon's crib was old, soiled, downright crap. Its decor was wood, everywhere. Boards and shiplap. Timbers that held it all together.

'Did you make this yourself?' She asked.

'No, it used to belong to a prospector. He was shipped back to the US a long time ago, I brought it from his daughter. Though I did extend through the back there. That toilet used to be outside, but not anymore. Oh, you feel free to freshen up out there. The newspapers only a week old. The Gazzetta, good read, helps keep me up to speed with the world.'

'I'm fine for now, but thank you.' There was no radio that she could see, and no stereo. How did anyone live without a television? 'I expect you take long walks with the dog?'

'Boon, his name's Boon. Get's tetchy if you call him anything else.'

'Uh-huh.' *Of course he does.* She craned her neck to see into the adjacent room. A large bed, unmade, clothes across the floor. She could make out a picture in a frame. A woman laughing. Kass looked around, the picture was the only thing that personalised Weldon's hutch. Before she realised what she was doing, Kass was holding the frame. A woman and a child in a park. A young girl hugging her mother; they looked so happy together. *Josh* . . . Kass' hand came up to her mouth to stop herself crying. 'Do you have a family?' She asked.

'That gun doesn't give you the right to touch my things,' he snatched the frame from her hand.

'I'm sorry. You're right, I shouldn't have . . . They have my son,' she said staring at the picture.

'So you say. You want milk and sugar in your coffee?'

'Yes, please.'

'Well, I'm out of milk.'

'Really? Don't tell me, you're out of sugar too.'

'I got sugar. Just got no milk. Ain't got a fridge to put it in neither.'

Didn't he understand the gravity of what she was telling him? 'They have my son,' more urgent this time. Words should be enough to get his help.

'Well, I am truly sorry for that,' Weldon sat himself on the big sofa in the lounge, he gestured her to the smaller one.

It looked like the dog slept on what he offered. Boon jumped up and settled next to his master.

'Help me, please.'

'The pots nearly boiled. I'm making you coffee,' he opened his tin. 'You want another smoke?'

'No. I want you to take me to the police.'

'You heard Jaunita. The Federales are looking for a crazy, gun toting, female Gringo.'

'So you say.'

Weldon shook his head, more intent to roll-up than listen. A quick lick of the gum and a perfect smoke hung between his lips. Boon yawned and rested his head on Weldon's lap.

'A quick lesson in Mexican law enforcement,' he said. 'The police in these parts are, how shall I put it? Bent as a six-dollar-note. And I'm guessing your *alleged* kidnappers have deep, dollar lined pockets. They've set the local police on you.'

'If you won't help me, then take me back to the clinic. It's a big white building the size of a shopping mall,' Kass pulled the gun from her belt and waved it in his general direction. 'I'll make you.'

'Maybe. Maybe not.'

Was he scratching his butt or reaching for something behind him? Kass had both hands on the weapon, just like on the range. Weldon pulled a lighter from his pocket. A moment later a cloud of smoke billowed from his nose.

'But not without these,' he pulled a bright red hankie from his sock and opened it on his lap.

‘You son of a bitch.’ Kass ejected the magazine from the Smithy. It was empty. ‘How? When?’

‘Lady, you were out cold when I picked you up.’

‘You frisked me whilst I was unconscious?’

‘You want that smoke now?’ He offered her the tin. ‘Sad truth is, you never know who you’re picking up in these parts. Even the women carry guns.’

You bastard. She could throw the gun at him. Maybe he’d pull a muscle or two when he ducked out of the way. *You smug SOB.*

‘Kettle’s boiled,’ Weldon got up slowly, as if his back resisted. Boon followed.

She didn’t take her eyes off him as he plucked the steaming antique off the stove. The wall cupboard he opened seemed to list badly. The massive sink below was big enough to bathe a child, and looked a likely candidate to have E.coli growing on its surface. The single tap had somehow been bent at an angle. She could only guess what the bucket in the corner was for.

‘You want sugar?’ He asked.

‘Yes,’ she said reluctantly, as he lifted a rusting tin from a shelf.

‘Damn, I ain’t got no sugar.’

‘Oh really. You surprise me. Is lying just a habit, or do you try hard?’

‘Why don’t you take a seat, lady? Coffee’s coming, and you’ve had a long day.’

She baulked at the idea of sitting. Both sofas were heavily worn, and likely to house more wildlife than the desert outside.

‘Is there anywhere the dog doesn’t sleep?’ She asked.

‘Not really. Boon’s a part of the furniture round here.’

‘No shit.’ The bits Boon left behind were holding the furniture together. ‘I’ll stand, thanks.’

It was doubtful she’d touch anything. Best to leave her hands in her pockets. That’s when she felt it. Hidden down her knickers was the flash

drive that had been so important to Spencer. *Thank God.* At least he hadn't frisked her down there.

'Stupid question, but do you have a computer?'

'No.'

'A smart phone?'

'Nope.'

'A hamster in a wheel?'

'Can't say as I got any of those things.'

'Do you live in the eighteen sixties?' All she knew was she had to contact Pierce. He'd know what to do. Kass paced back to the door. There had to be a town somewhere close, a payphone she could use. She saw nothing outside but a vast basin of gravel and sand, that rose to form far away hills and whatever was beyond. Nothing, she'd seen nothing but that road since Pullman had opened the trunk.

Oh God, Spencer? He was still wrapped up out there.

'Lady, would a laptop be of any help?'

'A what?' Kass marched back into the shack. 'Are you fucking with me?'

'May I remind you who pulled a gun on whom?'

'I said I was sorry, okay.' *Hey, how come your syntax keeps changing? Who, whom. Me and Boon, and Boon and I?* She gazed at the face half covered in beard. *You're not as old as you look . . . as you want me to think?* 'Hey, mister, don't fuck with me over a laptop,' she opened her hands, gazed around. 'Well?'

'I put it somewhere. Where did I put it?'

Kass pointed the gun at him. 'I've been lied to, manipulated, drugged and kidnapped. I've been shot at, thrown through a windscreen, and did I mention being cooked by a desert? Oh God, no, Josh? They've got my baby. They've taken my baby, don't you understand? He should be here, with me,' Kass lowered the gun. 'I should have protected him. I couldn't stop them.'

‘Boon’s got some pills the vet gave him last year. He was getting stressed on account of the coyotes. I can find them. Might be they’ll help calm you down.’

‘Calm me, what for? A healthy dose of pissed off is just what I need right now. Fuck you, and fuck that, that, mangy animal. Just give me back my bullets, and lend me that scrap heap out there.’

‘Uh-uh, I don’t think so.’

‘Then help me, please. I don’t know where they’ve taken Josh. I don’t know what they want with him; what they plan on doing to him?’ *Oh God.* ‘He’s alone out there, he’ll be afraid and confused.’ Her hands began gesticulating wildly. ‘Right now I need to spit, swear, and wave this freaking gun in someone’s face.’ She stopped. ‘I need to point it at that cow, April. I need to stick it in her skinny bitch face,’ she raised the gun toward Boon. She jarred back the slide. ‘I’m going to stick this in her eye, and squeeze one off. Give the bitch’s head some air conditioning.’

Boon hang-dogged it down off the sofa and ran tail between his legs for the other room.

‘Kass. Can I call you, Kass? I don’t think I checked the barrel for a chambered round. So, please, don’t shoot my dog.’

Dog? Why would I shoot your dog? She turned the weapon toward Weldon.

‘Are you frightened, Prospector? You, the dog, every mother-fucker at that facility should be frightened. They should be scared shitless. I’m going back for my son, you hear me? I want my baby boy back in my arms. Josh should be with his mother. Don’t you think a baby should be with his mother?’

‘I am definitely moving toward your way of thinking. Now please, take it easy, and no sudden movements. I’m just going to take the weapon. That’s it; your hands in mine, nice and easy. I’m going to slip the safety on, just like that.’

Kass felt Weldon’s hands on hers. He gently eased the gun from her grasp to leave her fingers empty. The power of the weapon gone. Her

anger quickly followed, drained as if a plug had been pulled. 'My baby,' she said, and the tears came. Pooling at first to blur her vision, and then a steady stream that no mother could resist.

'It's okay, I've got you. I've got you.' The Smithy's slide clicked and the bullet surrendered itself. 'You got a bit testy there, girl,' he was looking around. 'Boon? Hey Boon, where are you boy?' Boon peeked gingerly around the doorway. 'It's all right boy, she didn't really want to shoot you. Kass, you need rest, and more fluid. You're still in shock. Tell you what, let's get you comfy, and then I'll go get you that laptop. Shit, I'll even put some milk and sugar in your coffee.'

You'll what?

Weldon stepped back into the kitchen. Kass watched as well practised fingers dismantled the Smithy into several pieces on the drainer.

'Hell, I'm not sure if the Federales didn't get the crazy-Gringo BOLO right after all,' he shouted from the kitchen.

‘You feeling better now?’

No, she wasn’t. Kass put her coffee on the arm of the sofa. Something had happened whilst she’d been sat blubbering in dog hair. A reality had set in. The chance to absorb her situation. She realised now that she had allowed all of this to happen. She could see it all so clearly now. The way that the doctors, and that man, Fortune, had manipulated her. It was concern that had prompted her decisions. Fear that had allowed them to suck her in. But she wasn’t frightened any more. Now she knew what had to be done, just not how to do it.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

‘You keep saying that.’

‘I was talking to the dog.’

‘Oh, well I’m sure *he* appreciates the sentiment. But it wasn’t your floor he pissed on.’

‘Take me back to the clinic.’

‘Sure, and I’ll give you your gun back too. You can walk in there, maybe even shoot a few people. Tell you what, I’ll wait outside and keep the meter running. Shouldn’t take more than a minute or so before they bring you back out, in a body-bag! Lady, committing suicide ain’t gonna help Josh.’

He’s doing it again, like a crappy accent that comes and . . . *He said Josh’s name. Does that mean he believes me?* ‘Tell me you believe me.’

‘If what you say is true, and you’re not some psycho from the farm, you’re going to need to get back across the border.’

‘What, no, I’m staying here,’ she was pointing her coffee at him.

‘Kass, law enforcement in Mexico runs like an auction. And from what you’ve told me, you’re not in the bidding. You need to find friendly ground, contact the State Department, get in touch with the FBI.’

‘I need to talk to Pierce.’

‘Pierce? He your boyfriend?’

She nodded. ‘He’s an Assistant District Attorney in Los Angeles.’

‘That’s great, he’ll be as helpful as a fart in a firestorm. By the time the paperwork is filed your kid will be in South America, or the Far East. Look, these people are obviously organised, and very well connected. From what you’ve told me, these guys aren’t a bunch of paedophiles here.’

‘Ain’t,’ she said. ‘Ain’t, a bunch of Paedophiles.’ *Why are you smiling?*

‘Ask yourself this,’ he sat forward. ‘What are people, with this obvious kind of finance and clout, doing with a clinic full of kids? Who should all be, according to you, in Colorado?’

She shook her head. ‘I don’t know.’

‘You got an itch there?’ He asked.

‘No, just this.’ Kass pulled out the thumb-drive. ‘Please tell me you do have a laptop.’

‘I saw that, it’s got some interesting scratches on the side. Any idea what they mean?’

‘I don’t kn. . . When did you see this? How did you see this?’

‘I only peeked.’

‘You put your hands in my . . .

‘Don’t wine, it was two fingers to get it out. Could have been a bomb down there.’

‘Really, a bomb?’

‘Stop whining, your chastity’s safe.’

‘Oh you frisked me good.’ *Son of a . . . and yet you left a bullet in the chamber?* ‘What’s going on here? Who are you? And don’t fob me with the old-pro prospector lost in time routine. Who are you?’

‘Someone who’s deciding if you’re crazy or not.’

‘Not,’ she stated, vehemently.

‘Okay, so where did that come from?’

‘Spencer, he left it under a chair in the canteen.’

‘Why?’

‘Don’t know. I guess he was in a hurry. All I know is they killed him for giving me this. Where are you going?’ *Oh my God, he really does have a laptop.*

‘You know how to use one of these?’

‘Just give it to me,’ she took it eagerly. ‘Okay, plug in thumb-drive. Import, load, open.’ *Or not?* ‘Is it broken?’ *This thing is older than you.* ‘Ahh, got it. Open the file, hope that it isn’t password protected. Wow, we’re in? That was easy.’

‘May I?’ He turned the screen and sat next to her. ‘What is that? Some sort of game?’

The screen was full of letters and numbers and they kept changing, moving randomly. A skull and crossbones had assembled from the pieces. Oh, now it was laughing at them?

‘It’s been encrypted. Let me try,’ said Weldon.

‘It doesn’t run on gas or coal,’ she said, and slid it onto his lap.

Hobo-pro prospector-man knows how to use a laptop, why am I not surprised. His fingers danced across the keyboard like a hundred word a minute secretary. *Who the fuck are you?*

‘Nope, can’t get in. We’re going to need the key, and a processor with more power than this one.’

‘We?’ She said. ‘Does that mean you believe me?’ *Please, just say yes.*

‘Maybe,’ it came on a deep sigh. ‘This has definitely perked my interest.’

‘You know about computers?’

‘I can write my name and scratch my arse in four different languages, as well.’

Weldon’s smile was like sunshine through her veins. He put the laptop down and pulled out the stick to study the symbols scratched onto the plastic.

‘Did he say anything else to you? What about the texts he sent, can you remember them?’

Kass closed her eyes and focused on the words. For her, this was the easy bit.

‘Spencer sent me two texts,’ she said. ‘The first text was personal; the second more abstract, it didn’t seem to make any sense.’ She recanted them both to him, word for word.

‘That’s quite a memory you have there? Any idea what they mean?’

‘I don’t know, and that’s why I need your help. Maybe he was desperate; maybe fingers and brain got out of synch. He panicked, it happens.’

‘You said you were a cop, right? Well, Kass, start thinking like one. I’m guessing Spencer was a pretty smart fella. His texts were in code.’

‘Code? A stranger sends me two texts and my life turns into a PlayStation classic.’ *No dragons, wizards, or scrolls. Just Kris Kristofferson, Benji, and me.* She wanted to cry again. ‘Wait, there is something,’ she’d missed it. It seemed obvious now. ‘Both texts have exactly 192 characters and spaces. He must have been restricted by the size of the package,’ she looked to Weldon for an explanation. ‘Why would a man so scared, send precious words, that meant nothing?’

‘He wouldn’t. The meaning is obviously in the words, even if the words aren’t obvious.’

‘So it is a frigging scroll! Do you have a pen and some paper? I need to write those texts down.’

‘Good for you. Now we’re cooking. I’ll get Boon his lunch whilst you work this all out.’

Patronising git. Why did she get the feeling he already had the answer? And why did he have an icon for Firefox if there was no signal out here? Kass watched Weldon in the other room, her finger redirected the pointer over Firefox. Two taps later the icon had opened. *Son of a bitch.* 'You have internet?' She shouted.

'Sometimes,' Weldon called back. 'Signals a bit crappy in these parts, but if I'm lucky I get some great porn sites.'

Urgh, really. She pulled her fingers away from the keyboard. *Fuck it.* She logged onto her email account. A couple of dozen spam. The pointer fell over 'NEW' and she was typing. Pierce.LawgiverDredd@Google.com. It was time to go on the offensive, to bring in the marines.

A couple of minutes later Weldon brought coffee, Boon close at his heels.

'Before you go off half-cocked emailing half the world you might want to give a thought to the people that you *claim* are chasing you. There's obviously a lot of money, and a shed-load of tech behind them. Think about it, if they have the Mexican authorities out looking for you, they're well connected. They probably got more high tech shit than NASA searching for you right now. Anything with ones and zeros is a liability when you're on the run.'

Kass looked at the laptop's screen. Too late, the email had been sent.

Special Agent Paul Santini was tired. Thirty minutes ago he'd been asleep in the marital bed with Mrs Santini. Now he was pulling up at a crime scene.

Paul put the car's transmission into park, watching the scene ahead. There were a lot of cops and flashing lights, and a cordon had been taped around the steps up to the building. It was a murder scene, he knew that much, but not the details. The call had been non-specific about the victim, or victims. What he saw was a serious deployment of local resources.

Paul exited the car. So much for him being suspended then? He'd thought they'd try to make it permanent this time, but the call had magically reinstated his badge. Back on the job with a chance "to collect brownie points with the Director". That alone was interesting. The victim in the building was obviously important to local law enforcement, and to the Feds.

'Courtesy of the sergeant,' the young officer who approached him said.

Paul knew some of the faces; he'd liaised with local homicide before. But not the fresh-faced newbie that offered him takeaway coffee, outstretched in his hand.

'That had better have an extra shot, triple foam, with a squirt of hazelnut? Oh, and three sugars.'

'Err, no. I got it from the Five and Dime a few blocks . . .'

‘It’s fine, kid. Just an early morning joke,’ he took the cup, surprised the contents were still hot. ‘Hmm, nice. Tastes good.’

‘Sarge is up on the third floor, he’s waiting for you.’

‘Okay. Who was the first responder?’

‘That was me, sir. I took the call,’ he looked at his watch, ‘seven thirty-two, fifty-three minutes ago. The victim’s maid, err, her name’s, Margarita Unancia. She cleans for the victim three times a week, does two hours in the early morning before her regular job. She let herself in and found the place trashed. The victim was in the bedroom.’

‘Did she do it?’

‘Who? Oh, the maid?’

Another car pulled up. Its siren wailed and then faded as two more cops hurried to the scene. Newbie acknowledged them as they passed. Paul clicked his fingers, brought his attention back.

‘Err, no, I don’t think she’s the gunman, sir.’

‘Okay. So tell me something you do know.’

His notebook was opened. ‘Victim was shot twice. Apartment was trashed. The maid doesn’t think there’s anything missing. But she is a bit traumatised. Medic checked her out, Sarge sent her home.’

‘CSI’s on scene yet?’ Paul sipped as he walked toward the building’s steps. Newbie close behind.

‘Err, yes sir. They got here about fifteen minutes ago. They’ve been doing their thing ever since.’

He stopped, stared up at the building’s summit. These were expensive apartments, in a nice suburb. He was impressed that the circus was already here and in full swing. So what was so urgent that it required his reinstatement. He nodded to several more blue uniforms who greeted them at front door. Another by the stairs, its steps guided by an iron railing that curved away and up. By the third floor the lactose was squeezing at his thighs.

‘Officer? He looked at the boy’s tag. ‘Officer Simpson, I have a very important assignment that I think you can handle.’

‘Yes, sir. Absolutely sir.’

He seemed eager, that was good. Santini handed him the empty coffee cup. ‘You know how I like it; a good cop remembers every detail.’

‘Oh, err, yes sir,’ he hurried away.

Paul watched him descend. *Was I ever that young and eager?*

‘Agent Santini,’ a familiar voice, from just inside the door. ‘I thought you were taking a holiday?’

‘Hey Beany,’ he replied, as he entered the apartment. ‘Are you putting on weight?’

‘Fuck off,’ Beany replied. ‘Some of us take care of our bodies,’ he said.

‘Good to see you again.’ The Sergeant was lean; fit looking for someone in his mid fifties, now staring retirement in the face. He stood tall, cap under his arm. A no nonsense expression as he gestured Paul to enter further.

First impressions were good. The deceased had a very nice apartment.

‘What do we know, Beany?’ Santini asked.

‘Not much. The holes were made by a 9mil. Weapon was found there, on the hallway floor. Looks like the assailant dropped it in their hurry to leave. Victim received one in the face, and the other where you really don’t want it. Made a mess of his shorts.’

‘Wow, that sounds personal.’

‘Apparently neither shot killed him. Medical examiner said he bled out, took less than a minute.’

‘I find that hard to believe.’

‘Wait till you see how much blood there is..’

‘No, that the ME’s been here already? Am I missing something. Has the A-Team been employed whilst I was gone? And where are the homicide detectives?’

‘Sulking,’ he smiled. Because they put you in charge.

‘Yeah, odd that, isn’t it?’

‘Way I understand it, the Commissioner asked for you, personally. You do know who’s lying dead in there?’

He shook his head. 'No, I just got a call telling me where to go.' Santini was gathering information from the victim's apartment. *Whoever he was, he liked to listen to classical music. Must be a hundred or so cd's. That's a nice system to play them on, Bang and Olufsen, that's big bucks.* He liked the nice big buttons, and the way its sleek black outline fitted on the custom built shelves. Five super-skinny speakers on the walls of the lounge. Two more that rose like the twin-towers, one on either side. He obviously liked the arts too, but couldn't afford the real thing. Some nice prints hung on the walls.

This is interesting. A row of certificates from Berkeley Law School. Top student by the name of. 'Pierce Reeseman? 'Seriously, this is Assistant District Attorney, going to be Mayor someday, Reeseman?'

'Surprise,' said Beany.

Great, the press would be all over this in an hour. Now he knew why they'd allowed the Commissioner to have his way. *Clever bastards.* Solve the murder and he'd be good with the Department again. Mess it up, and he was out on his ass. *I should have stayed in bed.* 'Professional hit?' He asked.

'Only if the shooter was a hooker. Bullets were fired from real close. I'd say the position of the bullet holes make this a personal thing. A crime of passion.'

'Hmm, has the victim got a wife? A girlfriend? A boyfriend?'

'No wife, but we're checking on the rest.'

'Okay, well knock on every door in this building, someone must have heard something. Is there any security, I haven't seen a single camera. Check the street for traffic cameras, see if there's an ATM spy-cam. Shake down the local hobos.'

'Hobos . . . In this neighbourhood? The rest is in hand. I'll have forty officers knocking on doors by eight-thirty.'

'All right, good. Any chance you can keep this from the press? Fine, forget I asked.'

'Excuse me,' a woman's voice interrupted.

Santini watched as the young CSI passed between, her latex covered hands gripped to the handle of an aluminium case.

‘Have the ghosts given you anything concrete yet?’ Beanie shook his head.

Ghosts was their nickname. Ghouls dressed in their white onesies, they picked over the flesh of the dead. This one was young, barely out of college. Dressed in her snow coloured outfit.

‘They didn’t look like that when we started,’ said Beanie.

‘Are you talking about her outfit, or her backside?’

‘Both.’

Paul lifted his eyes in disappointment. ‘Keep your eyes above her shoulders, or we’ll both be in hot-shit if Mother Hen hears you. And I’m in enough of that already.’

‘Yeah, I heard. Was it worth it?’

‘I never thump my boss and tell. It’s the FBI code. Ahh, speak of the devil, here she comes. Mother Hen,’ he stepped to one side. ‘CSI Suzanne Heinz,’ he couldn’t keep a straight face. The grin gave away his pleasure at seeing her. ‘Good to see you,’ he said.

‘Paul, always a pleasure,’ she scowled at Beanie. ‘Don’t let us keep you,’ she said.

‘Miss Heinz. Paul, I’ll go check . . . things. I’ll give you an update in thirty.’

‘CSI Heinz waited until Beanie had gone. ‘Are you still fraternising with that sexist pig?’

‘He’s a good cop, Suzie. He gets things done. You going to tell me what your team has?’

She smiled. ‘We got plenty, and I don’t need thirty minutes to give an update,’ she led Paul into the bedroom. ‘Victim’s been dead for about five hours. Two 9mil bullets, one to the face, and the other to the pelvic region. Looks like he was sleeping when the first bullet hit. He must have really pissed someone off,’ she moved to the top of the bed. ‘If it has a surface, we’ve dusted. The gun we found outside is a match to the

bullets. A Beretta, it should already be at the lab by now. Serial number might name the owner? We've got blood and hair samples from the bed. Some love juice on the sheets. It appears our victim has entertained recently.'

'A girlfriend, you think? Maybe a hooker?'

'Give me a couple of hours to work up a preliminary. I've got the DNA fast-tracked. If she, or he, is in the system, I'll let you know.' She walked to the bed. Blood spatter across the pillows and sheets. An explosive reaction thrown up at the headrest; it ended on the wall. 'Near as I can tell the shooter fired from about here; standing above the victim. Perp dropped a pillow on his face. From the blood spatter I'd say the victim didn't wake before the trigger was squeezed. Shooter put a pillow across him like this, using their body weight. And then, bang. Bullet was a through and through, found it in the floorboard. Second slug fired at close range too, it left powder burns on the sleeper's pyjamas. This was up close and very personal,' she gave him a smile. 'A crime of passion?'

Paul nodded. Something felt off about the scene. 'Maybe,' he said. 'But why use a pillow?'

'Well, if it was a female companion, perhaps she panicked. Couldn't bear to look at his face?'

'Hmm, maybe. But doesn't the use of a pillow suggest premeditation?' *Experience?* 'At least enough to want the gunshots muffled.'

'Well, lucky you. You get to unwind this scenario and find the killer. We're still gathering evidence, Paul. I'll Let you know what I know, as soon as. Think lucky, Paul. Maybe we'll get prints off the gun.'

'Hmm, yeah, maybe. Thanks Suzie.'

Up close and personal was an understatement, the poor bastard. The ADA was a bleeder all right. His blood had soaked through the sheets and dripped onto the carpet. The headboard was a Jackson Pollock. Maybe they were right? It was a girlfriend, this did look very personal.

'Agent Santini, sorry to interrupt. There's a detective outside. Name's Christine Gemka? She'd like to speak with you.'

‘Gemka?’ *I know that name.* ‘Ask her to wait, I’m just about finished here.’

Knots, that's what they say your stomach ties itself into when you wait for bad news. Chrissie's stomach hurt. Flashing her badge had got her in, but no-one was talking. Every cop she'd asked had referred her to the 'agent in charge'. She'd seen this kind of silence before; they were under orders to keep their mouth's shut. It could only mean something big; an attempt to avoid the press, no leaks would be tolerated. That in itself meant that something bad had happened to Pierce. The fact that the Feds were in charge filled her with a terrible foreboding.

A tall well-built figure stepped out into the hallway. Chrissie instantly recognised the features of Special Agent, Paul Santini. Liaison between the FBI Bureau and LAPD homicide. Damned if he hadn't been the talk of the Department some weeks ago. He'd got suspended for shoving the Deputy Chief through a door. Rumour had it a fist was coming next if others present hadn't intervened. This was her first time close up. Hey, he was pretty buff for his age. Over six foot tall, dark haired, and pretty mean looking. He had that Gerard Butler thing going on, and by the looks of him, his game-face was engaged. Chrissie could see it a mile off, that he didn't like her being here. It was the way those pale green eyes held her, they had questions, and a certain amount of attitude as he approached.

Santini spoke first.

'What brings accounts to a homicide?'

‘Homicide?’ He’d just confirmed her worst fear. ‘Who’s the victim?’ She asked.

‘Me first.’ Santini said. ‘Why are you present at my crime-scene?’

‘Is it Pierce?’

He’d dropped the bombshell deliberately, she was sure. Now he looked more calculating; considering his next words. ‘You know the *victim* personally?’ He asked.

Oh no. The knot became a tug of war. *He’s used the word, victim.* Now it was a struggle to breath.

‘Six one, blonde, lives at this address. Detective, do you know our victim?’

‘Yes, yes, I think so. It, it sounds like Pierce. I know him.’

‘May I ask how you *know* about my crime scene?’

‘I was checking for . . . It came over the radio,’ she took a deep breath. ‘I recognised the address,’ she said. ‘Oh no, does Kass know yet?’

‘Kass?’

‘Kassandra Krane, she’s my friend. Works for the Department, down in the Cupboard. Her and Pierce, they’re an item.’

‘So, she’s the girlfriend?’

‘Yes. Why do you say it like that?’

‘She’s now a person of interest.’

‘Kassy? No, no way. That’s stupid.’

‘You know how it works Detective.’ Santini’s attention turned to the patrolman who had called him outside. ‘Find Officer Simpson for me. Remind him that advancement through the Department depends on the happiness of his superiors, and all outside agencies involved. The latter is me, and these days my happiness depends on my coffee being hot, and served with a doughnut. Would you like one, Officer Gemka?’

‘No, no thank you.’

‘Well, go seek. Do not return without caffeine.’

He was gone.

‘Officer Gemka, to the best of your knowledge, are you aware if the victim, if Pierce, had any enemies? Did he owe money to any *questionable* characters? Was he involved in any illegal activities that I should be aware of. Was he taking bribes?’

‘No! He was hard working and honest. Everyone liked him.’

‘Really? Okay. There was a time was that everyone liked me, Officer. No, wait, that might have been my dog? Come on, let’s take a walk you and I; I want to chat about your friend, what’s her name, Cassandra? I don’t suppose you know if she owns a Beretta?’

‘I, I’m not sure.’ *Kass does own a Beretta. Why would he ask? No, the look on his face. This has to be a mistake.*

‘Are we cool with the techie stuff, Two?’ Asked Carl.

‘We are, and we’ll be coming on line in . . . three, two, one. Sentinel is up and running.’

‘So, just to be clear. Every cell-phone that enters that apartment is now connecting with your Pad?’

‘If it’s switched on and has Bluetooth, I’m picking their pockets. Got six numbers already. One, you own that crime-scene.’

‘And every time these phones make a call, we can hear the conversation?’

‘Roger that.’

‘Modern technology, you can’t trust it.’

‘Got an incoming on my screen. It’s Mr Fortune.’

Carl took the Pad. ‘Touch base with Three and Four, make sure they’re up to speed. Give me a few minutes.’

‘Done.’

‘Carl waited until Two had left the car. Then answered the call. ‘Mr Fortune, so nice to hear from you. Everything is sweet at my end, when can I expect the package?’

‘There’s been an unexpected development, Carl. The package has gone missing.’

He had to contain his surprise. ‘You’ve lost her?’ This was pleasing. The high and mighty Mister Fortune wasn’t so perfect after all.

‘We’re looking for her. Our Mexican friends have enlisted local law enforcement. It’s just a matter of time.’

‘Well, what’s she going to do? Contact Border Control? No-one will believe her story. In a few hours she’ll be on the most wanted list, on both sides of the border. Whatever that woman says, no-one will listen. We’ve left a trail an idiot could follow.’

‘You’ve gone quiet Mister Fortune. They cops will think exactly what we want them to. She’s killed her kid, it’s a mercy killing. Shit, happens all the time. She’s killed her lover because he’s a cheating bastard, and tried to lose herself in Mexico. Our asset drove across less than half-an-hour ago. Her passport’s been scanned by the system, so have her car’s plates. It’s a tragedy. A mother’s mental collapse because her child’s received a death sentence. If she surfaces in Mexico it will only strengthen the police’s case.’

‘I like your optimism, Carl. But somehow I doubt that she will make it that simple for us.’

‘When do women ever make it simple? She’s alone, cut off from her friends.’

‘One,’ Two opened the car door and interrupted. ‘You need to see this.’

‘Just a moment, Mister Fortune,’ he indicated Two mute his conversation. Then leaned across the leather seats to view the Pad’s screen.

‘What is that?’ All he saw was a screen full of numbers and text.

‘The freshly deceased has just received an email.’

‘And?’

‘It’s from the package.’

‘Well, well, she’s reaching out,’ Carl’s eyes opened with eager interest as he read the text. Then nodded that Two resume the call.

‘Mister Fortune, I may be able to help you with your problem. We put Sentinel on the boyfriend’s laptop, and it’s intercepted an email from Ms Krane.’

‘Can you track it back to its source?’

Carl shrugged and opened the floor to his colleague.

‘Shouldn’t be a problem,’ Two answered. ‘I’m already running a trace. The accounts registered to a Mexican National, his name’s José Doroteo Arango Arámbula. Bit of a mouthful, I’m tracking the providers, there’s a few of them. This may take a few minutes, sorry.’

‘Gonna put you on hold for just a moment, Mister Fortune.’ Carl indicated that Two should mute the call. ‘Jose Arumbula, is that a joke?’

‘Possibly boss, but not one of mine. Why?’

‘José Doroteo Arango Arámbula, no? AKA, Pancho Villa?’

‘Isn’t he dead? Oh, and this could be a problem too. Tell Mr Fortune he’ll need a helicopter.’

‘Put him back on the line.’

‘Mister Fortune, I’m sending you the location now. It’s pretty rural, no house numbers out there. And I have a suggestion. Since the woman wants to talk to her boyfriend, why don’t we oblige? Doesn’t the delightful April type over a hundred words a minute?’

‘He’s gone,’ said Two.

‘What, no thank you? Fuck that man, he’s rude.’

Weldon exited the kitchen holding two cups.

‘My Little Mermaid or Incredible Hulk?’ He offered the shamelessly branded cups up before checking the stove. Kettle hadn’t boiled as he dropped a single tea-bag into each cup. ‘You got any ideas about Spencer’s code yet?’

‘No, not really.’ *Check your emails, Pierce. Just look at your phone. When it pings, you have email. Please, open up your email.* Still nothing. ‘I can’t just sit here, we need to do something.’

‘We? Are you including Boon in your plans?’

‘Can he drive a car, or get me across the border?’

‘For a bar of chocolate he’d try.’

‘Is this funny to you? Does a child’s life mean nothing?’

‘Look, lady. I just picked you up and gave you a ride. From where I sit you’re either living a monumental fantasy, or involved in a deadly conspiracy. Neither one is good for me, or for Boon.’

‘Fine. Tell me how far the nearest crossing into the US is?’

‘It’s a ways. You thinking of crossing the line like a tourist? Not a good idea.’

‘Why not?’

‘Let’s re-cap shall we. You’re wanted by the Federales. By now you’ll have a price on your head, which means every La Chota from here to Texas will be looking for you.’

‘La Chota?’

‘Local police. They won’t miss a chance to collect on a gun toting crazy gringo. Even one as pretty as you.’

She sent him a sour smirk. ‘I can’t just sit here and do nothing.’

‘That’s exactly what you should . . .’

‘What? What’s wrong?’

‘Kass, I don’t need to tell you that sending email is the most stupid thing you can do when on the run?’ He was looking at the laptop. ‘The kind of people you’re talking about have eyes and ears everywhere.’

Kass put her hands on her lap. ‘I’m not stupid,’ she said, and put the open laptop on the couch. *Why won’t he read his fucking email?*

‘Look, I could run you to the border. Introduce you to a friend who runs a local business.’

‘Who would that be; Illegal Immigrants Are Us?’ She was up and pacing. The desolate view from the window didn’t help, it just reminded her how alone she felt. ‘Okay, that sounds good,’ she said. ‘Get me to the border without getting me arrested; I’ll surrender to Border Control, have them call Pierce. He’ll help me get Josh back,’ her voice was breaking.

‘Sure, call Pierce; I’m sure he’s a hoot with the LA crime-club. But I guarantee when they get to that clinic, if they get to that clinic, they’ll find business as usual and nothing else. The likelihood is, you’ll never see Josh again.’

That hurt. She felt a long deep breath sting at her lungs.

‘What if we went to the papers?’

‘We? What is this, We? I’m not your partner, and I sure as hell am not your shrink.’

‘So what then? Tell me what I have to do. I’m a cop, Weldon. But all I do is office-work. I’m not a field agent, or a spy. So tell me. You tell me. What do I do?’

‘Going to the press is the worst thing you can do. You’d spend the rest of your life searching for your boy, wishing you’d played it differently back here, back now?’

‘What then?’

‘You have leverage,’ said Weldon.

Why’s he looking at the laptop again? No, of course, its thumb-drive.

‘Whatever’s on that chip, that’s leverage to get your son.’

Josh. ‘How do I use it?’ She asked, as a trumpet sounded a loud hurrah from the laptop’s speakers.

‘Kass, please tell me you haven’t sent an email?’

It may as well have been a loaded gun sat halfway between them. She'd seen friendlier wolves as he circled her, his eyes refusing to leave hers. Whatever his thoughts, they made her nervous. She decided that she liked him even less when he was silent.

'You may as well open it,' he said. 'If it's being tracked they've already found us.'

So you do believe me. Kass shifted across the couch and pulled the laptop onto her knees. She opened the mail, it was a message from. PeacemakerDredd. Pierce had replied through his personal mail.

"Kass, I have been so worried about you. What's wrong darling, what on earth are you doing in Mexico?"

Where to start? Her nimble fingers pressed at the keys.

"Pierce, they've kidnapped Josh. The Foundation, or whoever they were, they lied to us. They took us to Mexico and kidnapped Josh. They're trying to kill me!' She hit the send button.

'You forgot to add crazy scientists and political conspiracy,' Weldon interjected. 'Oh, and the dead bodies lying out there in the desert; where the sun nearly fried your brain.'

Kass glared over her shoulder. *No point in trying to keep this personal.* Inbox registered another email.

"Don't worry Kass. I'll get in touch with the State Department. I'll come and get you, we can sort this out. There's a town just short of the border called Sonoyta. Just north is a crossing, at a place called Hombres

Blanco. I have friends in the FBI that will help. They'll be waiting to take you through. Can you meet them there in six hours? They'll take you into protective custody until I can get there. Trust and talk to no-one, it's the only way to be safe. I'll come for you, we'll find Josh!"

'Yes yes.' *God bless you Pierce.* She turned to Weldon. 'Where the hell is, Hombre Blanco?' Her hands moved back toward the keys, just as the lid was shut over them.

'What are you doing?'

'Hoping you'll stop and think about what you do next.'

'It's Pierce, he'll help.'

'Pierce, you sure?'

'Of course it is.' *Don't fuck with me old man.* 'Please remove your hand.'

'Okay, but I want you to ask yourself this before I do. If that was you at the other end, wouldn't you want to know more? I know I would. I mean, your story is a little far-fetched. And why Hombre? It's a small town with a lot of bad Mexicans. Think about it Cassandra, no Federal agency would roll with this without more information.'

'It's Pierce, okay?' *It is him. It has to be him. Who else would it be?*

Weldon opened the laptop. 'Test him. Where's the harm in being sure?'

'There is something,' she said. *Pierce types with two fingers, they hover and plod. His secretary types everything for him.* 'I suppose the reply was a bit quick.' *No. This has to be Pierce.* She conceded. 'Test him, how?'

'Ask him something that only Pierce would know. But don't be too obvious. Kass, I'm sure it's fine; but just to be sure.'

Too late. Weldon had stolen the hope from her. Deflated, that was how she felt. Like a punctured balloon. Pierce's response had been too quick. And it was in his nature to want to know more. He would have been more personal, more concerned. Was she safe, was she injured, was Josh okay? Heavy fingers moved slowly onto the keys. More deliberate as they spelt out the words.

“I knew you wouldn’t let me down. The last few days have been such a nightmare; I don’t want to be alone anymore. I’ll find a way. I’ll be there in six hours, I’ll be there . . .”

Kass glanced up at Weldon who smiled reassuringly. She felt his hand on her shoulder.

“I know this is a stupid time to bring this up, but I’m scared Pierce. I’m a mess. That thing we joked about before I left, I’ll do it. We’ll do it together.” A smiley face finished the line.

“Princess Leah.” Another smiley face. “Shit, I always loved her really. Darth or Luke? You’ll look every bit my husband as either. Thank you, thank you. This is the first time I’ve been able to relax for days.”

There was a pause before the next email came through.

“You choose, darling. I like them both. I’m coming to get you, Kass.”

Kass closed the laptop like a teenager caught watching porn.

It’s not him. No, no, no, it’s not Pierce.

‘Problem?’ Asked Weldon.

‘You know there is, so why ask the question?’ Her head was already in her hands. ‘It’s not Pierce. He would never miss a chance to dress up as Han Solo. It’s his favourite . . . He’s been Han at every fancy dress party he’s ever been to since he was a kid.’ The tears were dripping out between her fingers. ‘Fuck, fuck!’

‘Han Solo, really? You don’t find that odd for a grown man.’

She managed a smile; turned to face him. ‘He’s a good sweet man,’ the smile faded. ‘Oh God, if they’re using his computer? What have they done to Pierce?’

‘Take it easy, you don’t have to be anywhere near a man’s chips to use his hardware these days. They’ve probably infected his software with a virus. They can intercept his emails and calls whilst sat in a café down the street. Pierce is fine. *We*, on the other hand, are not. Thanks to your intervention in our lives, Boon and I have to find another place to live.’ He sat back. Closed his eyes as if in thought. ‘You’ve dragged us into something very dark and dangerous.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said following him to the kitchen.

‘You’re sorry? Believe me; had I known, I would have taken another road.’

‘I didn’t ask you to pick me up.’

‘Yes, actually you did. And my life has just become more complicated because of it. Which proves the old proverb, that no good deed goes unpunished.’

Thanks, just what I need to hear. Kass stopped shadowing him, and took a step back. ‘Where did you get that from?’ He’d pulled a hand-gun from his belt, concealed behind his back.

‘Say hello to the Beretta 93R,’ he said, ‘it has a twenty round magazine, with three round burst capability. You squeeze this, and it hurts people. Safety’s on, okay. You keep it that way for now.’

‘You’re giving me a gun? Why can’t I have mine back?’

‘I removed the firing pin back when I picked you up.’

‘You did a lot of things when you picked me up,’ she was recalling his mention of a good frisking. ‘So, proof then, I’m not a psycho nut job?’

‘It would appear so.’

Hey, did he say burst capability? She liked the sound of that.

‘Now they know where *you* are, they’ll be trying to find out about me. Did I say thank you for that? Shit, I like living here.’

She watched him step to the stove; tip the pot to refill his mug. Who the hell was this man, who handed out guns like sweeties?

‘The way I see it,’ he said. ‘You have three choices. You’ve initiated the first one, and I’m sorry to say that it has been anticipated. The second is pointless. A one way trip into a body bag if you go back to the clinic.’

‘And the third?’

‘I told you, information is the source of all power. You have that power, right there in that little thumb-drive. We need to find a way to use it?’

‘We don’t know what’s on it.’

‘Not important, not yet. We know that Spencer gave his life for the data on that drive. And they’re looking for you, so they obviously want it back, or destroyed. Maybe they’d be interested in an exchange, for Josh?’

Look at him, such serious features. His eyes have gone cold. Calculating all the variables like a Pro. Christ, she hadn’t felt this nervous since her first time. Little Bobby Pennik, in his parent’s study, and look how that ended. *All over too quickly, and leaving her with a sticky mess.* That wouldn’t happen again. *Whoever you are?* He’d become a different person in the last few minutes. *This isn’t your first time in a situation like this? You know exactly what you’re doing.*

‘Who are you?’ She asked. ‘You’re no ordinary hermit.’ It wasn’t that she meant to whisper. Their words just came out that way. ‘Who are you?’ More demanding. ‘And don’t give me any crap about hoboing, or prospecting.’

Why doesn’t he say anything? He’d put his coffee down. *Why are you glaring at me like that?* Weldon approached her.

‘I want you to remember this moment. The moment you involved me in this.’

‘Okay.’ *What does that mean?*

‘I have just the one question for you, before we jump into bed together. How far are you willing to go to get your boy back?’

Kass took a step closer to Weldon, their noses almost touching.

‘I’ll kill any mother fucker that stands in my way,’ she said. Words more potent than any she’d ever said. She meant every word.

‘It will doubtless come to that. Follow me, and bring the laptop with you.’

There were eight steps down into the basement, if that's what it was? He'd pulled the floorboards up in one piece using a hook hanging over the stove. *Is this how prospectors stash their gold?* Levity, to counteract the action of following a stranger down into darkness.

'The lights to your right,' he said.

Kass took the last step, looked to her right, something touched her hand as she felt for it. A piece of chord that dangled. She pulled it.

A moment later she was blinded. A powerful lamp above. She was squinting. If her heart kept thumping like this there'd soon be a hole in her chest. If he so much as touched her, he'd find his eyes on the floor, his face clawed by her nails. Oh God, she'd just realised. *Look at my nails.*

'Is there a problem?' Weldon asked.

'No,' she wasn't looking at her cuticles any more, but about her. And she wasn't believing what she saw. It was some kind of workshop.

Most men repaired their car, or furniture. Weldon had a workshop filled with guns. A lot of guns. Automatic rifles hung on the walls. A bundle of smaller arms were parked muzzle first into sleek wooden sleeves along a desk, that was attached to three walls. This was taking home-defence to the extreme.'

'Is Weldon your real name? Shit, is that a Satellite phone? You son of a bitch, you said you didn't have a phone.' It was the first thing she reached for. Weldon grabbed it first.

‘What are you, a Spook? Fuck, are you an assassin?’

‘Let’s just say, I worked security in another life.’

‘Security? Government or private?’

‘The big one, Uncle Sam.’

He picked a holdall from below the desk and opened it. He lifted a gun from the wall and carefully placed it inside.’

‘Is that an MP5?’ She asked.

‘Heckler Koch, they’re always at your service. You ever fired one?’

She shook her head as Weldon lifted the weapon back out. He flipped it around for her to see.

‘The MP5 is durable, reliable, and it’s light. It has a retractable stock and a thirty round magazine.’ As if to offer proof the stock was snapped out, the magazine discharged into his hand. ‘The single and most important aspect of this weapon, is that you do not point it, at me,’ he held it out to her like as if making an offering.

She took it. ‘It’s nice, she said, turning it about. Trying to make out she felt more than comfortable than she did. ‘Well balanced, I like.’ Kass pulled the slick moving charging handle, then let it snap back. ‘It’s lighter than it looks,’ she added. ‘This is nice.’

‘Well, it’s mine,’ he snatched it back. ‘You get to play with the Beretta.’ Which he dutifully packed.

Kass was thinking about her own Beretta, locked safely in the drawer back home. She watched as spare magazines, and another assault weapon she didn’t recognise, went into the holdall.

‘Are you ex-CIA?’ She asked.

‘I can type you a CV, or I can get you prepared. I can’t do both.’

Not that it really mattered. It was like Bin Laden’s cave down here. Dozens of shelves filled with gun parts waiting to be oiled and reintegrated. A mass of assorted weapons and ammunition. He had a small lathe in the corner.

‘Christ, you have grenades?’ There was a whole box of brand new grenades open on the work-surface.

‘Please don’t tell me you’re a terrorist.’

Weldon stopped packing. ‘I was in Signals, okay. I’ve been round the world a few times, one shitty conflict to the next. I work up at Arlington now.’

‘The cemetery?’

‘Yes. I mind my own business and look after graves. A thank you for spending my life in the service of my country.’

‘You were in Signals, really?’

‘Sure. After I joined up they re-wired my brain.’

‘Rewired? You mean like, Jason Bourne?’

‘No. It’s a natural process of creating neural pathways, something they teach you,’ he paused, gun in hand. ‘I’m a quick study. I see things, patterns, codes,’ he shrugged. ‘So they moved me to Signals.’

Okay, she’d roll with that. Signals was obviously code for Army Intelligence.

‘And what about all of this? Some sort of hobby?’

‘It beats cycling in spandex shorts.’ The gun went in the holdall. ‘Have you any idea know how many middle-aged dumbasses want to look like Lance Armstrong these days? Huh, too many. They must be taking more drugs than he was if they think Lycra hangs well on a fat-ass.’

‘Fashion advice aside,’ she said. ‘I’m guessing that you’re not as poor as you make out. These firearms are state of the art, latest issue. Very expensive.’

‘I’m looking after them for a friend.’

‘You are so full of bull. Do you ever tell the truth?’

The raised eyebrows suggested not.

‘Open up the laptop,’ he said, and pulled the well-stocked bag from the desk. ‘We need to play these guys whilst we still have the element of surprise.’

We? He said we? Kass had a surge of hope fill her heart. This stranger who had saved her, was he going to help save Josh?

‘Fire up the email,’ he instructed. ‘You’re going to make these people an offer they won’t able to refuse.’

‘I am?’

What he suggested was crazy. But what choice did she have? Weldon, whoever he was, was offering her a chance to get Josh back. Why? That was immaterial. Kass began to type.

“April, I know it’s you.”

Her hands left the keyboard as if it were poison. Was she even right about this? Kass turned down the volume as the trumpet played aloud again.

“Kass, I don’t understand. Who’s April?”

Perhaps a different approach was called for.

“Come on you flat chested beanpole. I have something that you want. Spencer gave it to me. He stole it from right under your incompetent, surgically altered, nose!”

‘Give her a minute.’ Said Weldon. ‘Let it sink in. She’ll bite, she hasn’t got a choice. Ah, here we go.’ The reply flashed up.

“Should I have gone for Darth Vader? Was it a fifty-fifty, or just a no win? Either way, you’re dead if you don’t give me what Spencer gave you?”

‘Wow, I have her attention. Now what?’

‘Ask her the obvious questions. Who she is? What this is all about? What colour knickers does she have on? It doesn’t matter, Just keep her chatting.’

‘You want me to have a conversation? You said they could trace us?’

‘I think they’ve already done that. But fortunately for us this place will take time to find, even with Satellite Intervention. Here, take this.’

He had something that looked like an iPad in his hands. A cable integral to the unit was being extended. He encouraged her to plug it into the laptop’s USB.

‘What is that?’

‘You’ll see. Just keep her busy. Shouldn’t be too difficult, she’s probably having the same conversation at her end,’ he started to type on the pad.

Deep breath, be nice to the bitch. No, screw that.

“Where’s my son? If you hurt him, I’ll spend the rest of my life searching for you.”

“Josh is fine. We’ve had to move him, of course, but we won’t hurt him. On the contrary, Josh is our star pupil; we’ll take great care of him. He’d probably send his love, but I won’t wake him to ask. Bless him; he looks so peaceful lying here. What hair product do you use, he has such soft hair. I could stroke his head all day.”

It was a reflex, her hand finding her mouth like that. She thought she might vomit. That bitch, the thought of her touching him.

Stay calm, Kass. Keep her online. For God’s sake don’t piss her off.

“Please, just let him go. I’ll give you what you want. Just let Josh go. He’s a kid; why are you doing this to us?”

There was a pause.

“If you really had what Spencer took, you should know why we have Josh. Are you lying to me Cassandra?”

Kass’ hands froze. *Shit.* What now? *Something, type something.* But how to prove what she said was true? *Think Cassandra, think.* There was something. The conversation that Pullman had on the phone. *A name, what was the name?*

“Goodbye Cassandra. I’ll give your love to Josh when he comes round.”

Comes round? You've drugged him? Her fingers did-dabbed across the keys.

"Fuck you, bitch. Harm a hair on my son's neck and everything Spencer gave me will go over the internet. I'll start with some real interesting shit about Senator Joe Rushmore. It'll make WikiLeaks look like Chinese Whispers."

There, she liked that. She liked it a lot. They wouldn't mess with her, not now. Unless she was wrong? No, there had to be a connection. The senator, Washington, that's where their power base was. There was a link, there just had to be. Why then, despite the need to strike out at these people, did her hands tremble as they waited for a reply?

Her body was running on a cocktail of authority and fear. She was high and empowered by the knowledge that she could hurt them. Terrified that they call her bluff, and then raise the stakes by hurting Josh.

It felt like forever as unseen forces pondered their next move.

Type something. Please. Tick Tock, seconds seemed like minutes. The light of the screen burnt at her eyes, she stared so hard. *Do something, say something. Josh?*

A message opened on the screen.

"I'd like to speak to José Doroteo Arango Arámbula."

'Weldon, who's José Doroteo Arango Arámbula?'

Text began to appear on the screen, but she wasn't typing it. It wasn't *her* fingers tapping at the keys. *Weldon?* She watched the text reveal itself.

"Talk." The text read.

"Can I just call you, Pancho?" A pause. "The woman with you is dangerous. She's killed several people, Americans, you may be next."

"I can take care of myself."

"I hope so. Are you trained to do so?"

"I've got the Miami Vice box set. Muérdeme, perra." (bite me, bitch.)

Weldon smiled at Kass. He seemed to be enjoying this.

“If you’re Mexican, why are you helping this woman? She’s trash-American. Whatever she’s offered you, it’s a lie. Perhaps you’re a business man, we can make alternative arrangements?”

“Talk.”

“A free pardon for your intervention, and some financial compensation for your time?”

Weldon sucked a deep breath. *Why are you looking at me like that? Please, no, you’re not considering . . .*

‘How much are you worth?’ He asked. ‘Nah, not a lot, I don’t want to frighten them off,’ he started typing again.

“Fifty-thousand US dollars, in cash. You get the data-stick, I put a bullet in the woman. You can keep the kid. It’s a win-win for us all. Just like Vegas, without the odds.”

A short pause. Enough time for Kass to feel events were slipping away again. *Is he really considering this?* Faint trumpets sounded.

“Your terms are acceptable. You have a deal, Signor Pancho. Send me your GPS coordinates and I’ll have the money delivered in an hour.”

“Excelente. I’m sending GPS for a meeting. Be there in six hours, come alone.”

‘Wait, that’s not what we agreed,’ Kass had her hand on the Beretta tucked behind her back. ‘I want to talk to Josh. I need to know that he’s still alive,’ her free fingers tapped out on the keyboard but nothing happened on the screen. ‘What are you doing? Weldon, give me control of the keyboard.’

‘No.’

No? What does that even mean, no?

‘I’m gathering Intel. You need to trust me, Cassandra. Josh is still alive, because she’s just told us that Josh is a priority focus for them; they’re not going to hurt him. And we’ve just created an opportunity to get him back.’

She wanted to trust him. What choice did she really have? Kass lowered her hand to her side.

‘We also know that these people have military hardware and support if they’re pinging satellites to find me. Not to mention heavy political clout, now they’ve confirmed that the senator’s involved. But best of all I am happy to report that they haven’t tracked us down yet. Or there’d be a lot of angry gunmen outside putting bullet holes in my front door.’

She felt his hand on hers. He knew exactly what she was thinking, and she guessed that this time the Beretta still had its firing pin. Her gaze met his. Kristofferson started to talk.

‘My name is John Streemer. I’m ex-Military Intelligence. I’m a man whose lied, thieved, and killed for his country. I’ve been deployed in every shit-hole this planet has to offer, and served two tours in Iraq. I was a damn good Navy Seal. Up until a few minutes ago I was retired. Now it seems I’m not,’ he let his gaze linger, and gave a gentle squeeze on her arm. ‘Now persons unknown are tracking my laptop, and will doubtless know more about me than I do if they have the right connections. Crap, I should have dropped you at the nearest McDonalds, that was my mistake. Your mistake is caring too much for your kid.’

She pulled her arm away. ‘That’s not a mistake; I’ll die before I let those scumbags hurt him. And if you don’t want to help me, then go fuck yourself. Just give me some of these guns.’ Kass still didn’t like the way he stared at her. He wasn’t angry, though he had every right. No, there was something else in his eyes. There was a vacant sadness of sorts, as though a long buried memory had begun to resurface. He was calculating, sifting through the variables, trying to make a decision.

The laptop sounded a new message had arrived. Weldon’s eyes relented to a mischievous smile. He offering her the pad.

‘She’s getting impatient,’ he said. ‘How’d you like to fuck with April?’

Kass realised her hands had stopped shaking. She realised as well, that she *did* trust him.

‘Okay.’ *Sounds like fun.* ‘What have you got in mind?’

‘We give them what they want, only we bring a little surprise, to make sure we get out alive.’

Weldon kept talking. She liked what he had to say.

“Still waiting for your GPS?” The text read.

“Deals off. Manuel has a 9mm headache he won’t be recovering from. You listen to me, freckles. I’m going to send you instructions. You will follow them to the letter. When, and only when I see my son, will I exchange for the thumb-drive.”

She waited.

“No need. I have what I want. Goodbye Cassandra.”

‘What does that mean?’ Weldon took the pad, he looked concerned.

‘Get out. Now!’ He ordered, and was pulling her by the hand.

What’s going on? What’s wrong? Weldon, you’re hurting my arm.’

‘That’ll be the least of your problems if we don’t get out of here right now.’

‘Why?’

She was led to the steps. ‘Move, now,’ he urged. The look in his eyes, it was enough to get her running upward, out through the door, straight through the house to the back door. The kettle still steaming on the stove. ‘Boon, here boy. Come on.’

Boon scrambled from the couch and hightailed it after them as they ran out into the sunshine.

‘Take this,’ he handed her the heavy holdall. ‘There’s a dry creek several hundred yards in that direction, get in it.’

‘Where are you going?’ *Has he gone mad?*

Weldon went back into the house. As she slid into the old creek’s depression, she saw Weldon sprinting to join her.

That’s when she heard it, as Weldon and Boon were halfway to her. It was a windy sound, nothing frightening, like something big passing through the leaves of a tree, and getting closer with unbelievable speed. A crack of thunder scared her half-to-death.

Weldon threw himself into the creek as Armageddon flashed lightning across the desert, and sent a thunderous shock-wave which

shook the ground. The air glowed so hot around her, she thought she might melt.

Oh my God. Kass huddled tight to the bank, as a deluge of hot sand fell from the sky to cover her. A moment later what was left of Weldon's home began to rain down around them. Pieces of wood from his shack dropped and floated like burning cinders.

'Kassandra, are you okay?'

'Weldon?' It was difficult to speak with dust sticking to everything moist. 'What happened?' *Where are you?* She couldn't see more than a few feet.

'I think I was wrong,' Weldon shouted. 'They did find us.'

When it seemed as if the sky were empty, Kass peered above the bank. 'Weldon, the house, it's gone.' She watched his tall figure emerge from a curtain of dust.

'We just got a Dear-John, military style. Is it normal for you to piss people off like this?'

'Most people like me,' she said. The missile had missed but the dust that filled her lungs might still prove fatal. 'Do you still want to date April?' She asked.

'Hell, yes. April and I, we have some serious issues to sort through,' he held out his hand. 'Come on, we've got about an hour before a team arrives to confirm the kill. We need to be somewhere else before that happens.'

She couldn't stop staring at the big hole and all the debris where the house used to be.

'Wait, where's your dog? Where's Boon?' She asked.

'Boon?' He called out.

'Boon?' She called his name. 'Oh no, come on dog. 'Boon, here boy.'

No response. Weldon called again, his voice more agitated. 'Boon,' and again. 'Boon, get your ass out here, right now.'

'Look, over there,' she saw tin from the roof moving of its own accord. She could have cried at the sight of the mangy animal trotting out from

below, toward them, his tail curled and carried between his hind legs. Weldon's macho bullshit went out of the window as he fell to his knees and smothered the animal. The wiry canine buried his head into Weldon's lap, tail now wagging like a flag in a wind.

‘Oh my God, did they send a missile to get us?’

‘Good boy, yes you are. I'm gonna call you, Boom, from now on.’

Despite the scorch-marks Weldon's truck was drivable, their first stop the home of a crazy looking Mexican man living in a lean-to entrance to a cave. She didn't want to ask, it was enough that Boon seemed happy. Weldon left his Ford, and borrowed what seemed like a lousy trade off.

'This camper smells,' she said, as they headed northeast on what could only be considered a dirt track in the desert. 'Where are we going?' She asked, and all he would say was he had friends who would help her cross the border, back into the US.

A two hour trip that Kass spent mulling over the previous few days. What ifs and maybes dominated her thoughts. She felt bad not trying to think about Josh. But how could a mother deny the guilt she felt.

From nowhere the countryside began to sprout buildings.

'Are we close?' Her feet came off the dashboard. 'Is this it?' She filled with anticipation, and dread. Leaving the country her son was in, it barely made sense. 'Weldon, is this Sonoyta?'

'We're just outside. This is a little town south. The border's a couple of miles northeast.'

'Why are we here? What's going on?'

Broken buildings began to pass by on either-side. Not a window left uncovered by bars. Each tanned face they passed on the roadside took the time to stare, hardly welcoming. And there were dogs everywhere, they lazed in the hot sun, some slinking around alleys between the houses. The air stank of poverty.

Kass had never considered how poor the Mexicans were. No wonder they were so eager to cross the border, so keen to risk so much, to pursue a better life. The camper squealed to a halt.

‘This is it,’ he said.

‘In there, no way,’ she meant it too. ‘I’m not going in there.’

The town had a square, of sorts. Its fountain broken and surrounded by weeds. A once colourful array of buildings and awnings, now bandaged and soiled by age. Weldon had parked outside a bar; at least it looked like a bar. Two horses, rode by sombrero clad riders, reared up on either side of the iron-barred gates. Between them a doorway into a dark space.

She read ‘Welcome to Mexico’ the words painted in yellow on the brickwork, that did nothing to assuage the irony of a half-dozen hostile looking Mexicans now rising up out of their chairs.

‘It’s fine. Just don’t make any sudden moves.’

‘I’m not moving at all,’ she replied. ‘Weldon, they have guns.’

‘Get out of the van; let me do the talking. Everyone here likes Americans. Unless of course they’re from the Middle East. Or Asia. Or Central America,’ he’d already opened her door. ‘Hey, Greaseballs, you got any decent American beer inside? Got a Miller, or a Bud?’

Now they were looking at each other. ‘Please tell me you know these people,’ she whispered. ‘Weldon? Shit, at least let me close my door. Weldon, you asshole. Weldon?’

A woman broke the tension on the veranda. She was demure and dark, but a handsome fifty something.

‘There she is, my little Chipotle,’ Weldon’s hands reached out to embrace her. They hugged. Then she slapped him, hard. A gatling gun of words Kass didn’t understand were rapped out, and six brutish sentinels sat back down.

‘Kassandra, meet Chessiq. Chess, this is the American woman I spoke to you about. Kass, come on, she doesn’t bite. Inside you’ll find the best tacos in Mexico. Beers a bit warm, but you get used to it.’

Reluctantly she slid out of the camper's seat.

'Please, come; I welcome you to Chessiqa's hotel,' she beckoned to a man inside, and barked more orders and he left. A man behind a high bar called to another who emerged through saloon doors with bottled beer on a tray. The inside looked like a nineteen sixties Taco-Bell, most of its furniture salvaged from the Alamo.

'Okay, the only thing you need to know is, we don't do anything to upset her, okay? Oh, and always pay your bill. Remember those and we'll be fine.'

'Why did she slap you?' Kass whispered.

'Errr, because she loves me?'

'You're sleeping with her?'

'God no. That women would eat a male after copulation. Or worse, she'd expect him to marry her. Either way, you end up fucked. Ha ha ha. Hey Chess, beautiful woman, it's been a while?'

It had been an hour, but despite the beer being cold and refreshing, nothing had happened.

‘She’s not coming back,’ Kass scolded. ‘She’s taken your money.’

‘We’re lucky I’d already packed it. Look, it takes time. There’s phone calls to make, palms to grease. Gets dark around eight pm, we’ll be good to go by then.’

‘So remind me again why *I* can’t use the phone to call for help?’

‘You tried that already, remember? Right now our phantom friends have already plugged into the law enforcement switch board, on both sides of the border. Local PD, Federal Enforcement, and I hate to say it, but they have military ties as well. That was a *kinetic event* that nearly spread us across the desert. Probably a Hellfire missile shot at extreme low altitude by a drone. Got some balls firing that thing into Mexican airspace? If Mexican radar picked it up . . .’

‘I’m sorry, are you worried I’ve caused an international incident?’ She pushed her empty tumbler past the beer bottles mustered on the table. ‘More,’ she insisted. ‘And where’s Chessika, whatsherface?’

‘I’m impressed because *whoever they are*, they can trigger some heavy-duty shit. It’s not a local cartel or Organised Crime that want you dead. This is CIA, Black-Ops shit.’

Kass dabbed the glass toward him with her finger.

‘You sure you haven’t had enough?’

‘Not nearly.’

‘Fine,’ he clicked his fingers to attract the barman, then held up two fingers.

‘This place is the pits,’ she said looking around.

It was dark and dingy, most of the light entered through the front door. ‘When was the last time they cleaned this table?’ Her finger wiped across the surface. ‘What, ten tables, six booths? How hard would it be to clean?’ She grinned as the elderly barman, his face cratered from spots as a child, a long moustache that drooped either side of his chin, placed two more shots on the table. ‘Can we,’ she fanned the bottles, ‘get rid of. Hasta-la-vista, el . . . Miller. Hey, don’t look at him, look at me.’

Weldon spoke in Spanish. It sounded apologetic.

‘Don’t fucking apologise for me,’ she said. ‘Oh God, no. Not again.’ Someone was feeding the jukebox in the corner. A fanfare of trumpets erupted throughout the room. ‘I fucking hate trumpets,’ she said. ‘It reminds me of a . . . Range Rover’s arse.’ she lifted the glass and drained the tequila.

‘Did I mention that you weren’t to upset anyone?’

She fanned her hands at Weldon this time.

‘I think the Mexicans find it soulful,’ he said.

‘It’s a funeral, Chimichanga style. Look at them, not an upbeat face in the room. What were you thinking bringing us here?’

‘I think someone’s drunk too much. She’s getting cranky.’

You think that’s funny?

‘I’m not cranky, I’m angry. I’m tearful, bloated out with guilt, even borderline neurotic. Someone has my son, you understand, and I’m sitting here getting smashed in a cartel brothel?’

He smiled and raised his glass. ‘Welcome to Mexico.’

‘Why?’ She asked.

‘Why Mexico?’

‘Why are you helping me? What’s in it for you?’ She snapped her fingers, her hand unable to remain still. She stuck two fingers up at

Mister Moustache who leant behind the bar, watching. 'Again,' she said, 'don't look at him. At me,' she whispered aloud. 'At me.'

Weldon nodded approval and Moustache picked up his towel, and two glasses.

'Spill,' she said. 'And I want the truth.'

'Self-sacrifice,' he said. 'My guru-master encourages me to follow the great Buddha's example.'

'That's bullshit.'

'You're right. Who'd want to be re-born as a Horny-Jack-Toad anyway? I'm being a nice guy, okay. I got too many genes from my mother's side. No, wait, I'm bored. Ah, got it. I'm a man looking for high-seas and dangerous adventure. Kass, what difference does it make?'

'You are nice,' she said. 'And you're scared too, go on admit it. Someone found you. They blew that piece of shit shack you were shackled up in,' she seemed impressed she'd said that. 'Huh, and you don't know who it is. That's eating you up inside isn't it, that you don't know why?'

'I know who, she's a "skinny bitch" named April. And I think you've had enough to drink.'

'No, don't you stop him. That's my drink.' Moustache put the drinks on the table. Kass snatched the closest. 'Mine,' she said. And I have a question. Who's the woman in the photo?'

'Photo?' Weldon sat back. What photo?'

Bingo. Gotchya. It was the first time she'd caught him off-guard. She could almost hear the calculations purr through his head. The tumbler of lies he was preparing.

Weldon sighed. 'Her name was Susanna Rey,' he said. 'That was her maiden name, she was my wife. The cute little thing next to her was Kirsten, my daughter.'

'Seriously, you have a family? Where are they?'

'They're both gone.'

‘Left you did she? Don’t blame her, you’ve got control issues. Not to mention the lies . . .’

‘They’re both dead.’

Shit, dead? Is that the truth? One look in his eyes confirmed he wasn’t lying. ‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to . . .’

‘One thing you get a lot of, living down here,’ he said as he raised his glass. ‘Time to reflect. To remember. Stupid thing is, I came here to try and forget. I guess some people aren’t meant to.’ Weldon raised his glass again, and downed the liquid.

‘How? I mean, did they die?’ *If you’re lying to me?*

‘I killed them.’

‘You what?! You’re talking metaphorically, right?’ *For Christ sake, I hope so.* She was feeling more sober than sombre now.

‘I wasn’t there when they needed me.’ Weldon began tapping his glass on the table’s surface. ‘Maybe life is trying to tell me something?’

‘I’m sorry. Really, I am . . . Thank you,’ she said.

‘It’s almost funny when I think about it. And I do, a lot. All the training and skills that I utilised to protect my country, were ineffectual when my family needed them most. I was halfway round the world when . . . It was a burglary that went wrong. Two kids looking for initiation into a gang that I’d never heard of. Oldest one was sixteen.’ Weldon raised his hand again. ‘Shall I get him to leave the bottle?’

‘No, I, think I’m fine. What did you do?’ She wasn’t sure she wanted to hear.

‘I developed *anger issues* on the job. I became a mite too efficient. Collateral damage became a by-product of my work. Huh, and they said *I was out of control.*’

Moustache placed two more glasses on the table. He put his fingers into the empties and lifted them away.

‘I was debriefed for the final time, and they gave me the job at Arlington.’

She sniggered, couldn’t hold it in.

‘I shit you not,’ he began to laugh. ‘But here’s the kicker, Kass. When I saw you out there on the road, you reminded me of her, of Susanna just for a moment. Now I’m wondering if maybe the universe has a sense of justice after all. Stupid really, but I thought it was giving me another chance.’

Kass didn’t know what to say. Misery and tequila, it tasted like the proper combination, and probably the only two words that were necessary right now.

‘I swear,’ she said. ‘If you’re lying to me?’

‘Tell me, Kass. Does the music sound different now?’

‘Yes.’

‘The Mexicans understand. It’s why the trumpet and tequila are meant for each other,’ he raised the empty glass and turned it upside down on the table. ‘Kass, try to visualise your conversation with Spencer.’

Spencer? ‘I have done, a dozen times. There’s nothing else.’

‘What about this, April woman, or the guy in the car who took you on the desert drive-thru?’

‘Pullman? No, he never spoke to me. Only on the phone to April. It was a bit difficult to hear whilst bouncing around in the trunk.’ Music, she remembered the music. It was definitely April’s voice through the rover’s Bluetooth. Kass closed her eyes, trying to tune in, listen for the sounds.

Trumpets and singing, what else? Don’t remember the words. Wait, there was music, more familiar, it was more westernised. Just before the call. ‘Ricki Martin?’ She said. ‘La-vida-locas, it was playing when the call was interrupted.’ She used to adore that song, now it made her heart palpitate as she remembered. *Spencer, oh God, he was lying right next to me.* ‘It was April’s voice,’ she said

‘Speed it up.’ She recanted. “You’re to meet Childs at the airport. Ed will fly you both to Washington where you’ll hook up with G’co. You’re both back on the senator’s security. We need to know if anyone

approaches him. We don't know how far this has gone, or who's involved. No more fuck ups Pullman."

'Is that it, word for word?'

'Yes.'

'Hmm, impressed. Did you overhear any other names?'

'No, but Fortune mentioned Senator Rushmore when we spoke in LA. That's why I put him in the email. Fortune was keen to drop his name into the conversation, he's a patron of the Foundation.'

'That figures. It gives the lie credibility when you drop names, but it doesn't mean that Senator Rushmore is involved. A lot of politicians ingratiate themselves with charities; it's good for their image.'

'Really? How many senators have criminals on their staff?'

'Most of them, probably. It's the only way to get things done on Capitol Hill. Still doesn't mean that they're dirty. Well, probably not. But I think you just found the key to Spencer's riddle.'

'I did? Well, what did I find?'

'Washington,' he said.

'What's that?' He'd pulled something from his pocket? 'Are those the texts I scribbled down at the shack?'

'Back in two thousand I got transferred to the 3rd Infantry regiment at Fort Myers, Washington. I was retired. No handshake, no watch, not even a thank you from my country. I spent three years to and fro on the public transport system in the capital, trying to cork the rage in a bottle.' He handed Kass the paper. 'Read it out loud for me.'

'Why?'

'Please.'

She took the paper. "My real name is Granville Spencer. Find me. Tell Megatron what you found. Jay feeds the Sabbath Angels. Kst19foggybottom. Please, tell Grace I'm sorry. You must run, take Josh and leave. NOW."

'Do you know what it means?' *Do you?* 'Spit it out, Weldon.'

‘When you have something important to say, but you think someone might be listening, what do you try to do? You try to conceal the true meaning of something in a code. One that makes sense in your world but no-one else’s, at least you hope not.

I think I know what Kst19 is.’

Kass' synopsis fired up. A sudden shot of adrenaline lifted her above her alcoholic veil. 'Go on,' she said.

'Look at the way you've written it down, how Spencer wrote it down. Kst. The st is lower case, it could mean a street? Now put that with the DCCB he scratched onto the thumb-drive, and the number 19, and what do you have?'

She shook her head as the Mexican mist began to lower again.

'I think it's a number twenty-seven bus that leaves from a stop on K-street, somewhere on the DC circular bus system. Ergo, I think he's telling us about a bus route in Washington.'

'A bus route, in Washington?' the noise she made through her nose was an attempt not to laugh. 'Sorry,' she tried to sound it. 'You got that from a few scratched letters?'

'Public transport is a hobby of mine.'

'Stop bullshitting me,' her head slumped. 'A fucking hobby?'

'Of sorts. I spent 25 years in the Military. I never needed to drive, the Corp took me everywhere. The rest was by train or by cab, and mostly via bus in the latter years. Not everybody drives a car.'

'You're serious aren't you?'

'I'd driven an automobile, four, maybe five times before I came south of the border. Let you into a secret, I still haven't got a driver's licence.'

'Please don't lie to me,' she said. *You really are serious.*

‘I don’t think Spencer drove a car either. He never needed to, and for the same reason. I bet he hated the thought of polluting the environment. Look, you keep the lies as close to the truth as possible, if you want to be believed. If Spencer was a pro, this encryption would be as well. But did that look like a billion dollar, three sixty bit algorithm chuckling back at you? No, and for that reason this is starting to make sense.’

‘It is?’ She looked up, suddenly aware of Moustache, who placed two more glasses on the table.

‘It’s on the house,’ he said with a strong accent. ‘You want some food?’

‘No,’ she replied. ‘Do we?’ She pushed her glass to the centre of the table, as Weldon spoke to Moustache in Spanish.

‘Look, Spencer was obviously undercover,’ he said when prying ears had left. ‘He clearly wasn’t a cop, and not a journalist, not if he could fool the doctors at that clinic. No, Spencer was freelance; but willing to risk his life to get whatever he gave you, on this.’

‘You can’t be sure of any of that?’ *But it does make sense.* ‘So why approach me? Why put us in danger?’

‘I think he’d realised how important Josh was to these people. Kass, this whole scenario is built around cancer patients, medicine, and I hate to say it, but national security as well.’

‘You think they’re spies?’ She put her hand on her chest. ‘Our spies?’

Weldon shrugged. ‘There’s a damn sight more going on here than just that clinic, he leaned closer. ‘They vaporised my house. That’s heavy duty shit.’

‘I don’t care,’ she said. ‘I just want Josh back.’

‘I know,’ he took her hand in his. ‘We’ll get to the bottom of this; we’ll find Josh, I promise.’

‘Thank you,’ the tears were welling up again. ‘I’m sorry about your house.’

He smiled. ‘You said that Spencer seemed shy, yes? So let’s assume that he’s probably *not* a doctor; he’d have a bigger ego for a start. He

sounds more like the kind of white-coat who sits alone in a lab, talking to his test-tubes. So maybe he's a biologist, or a chemist of some kind. We'll know more when we find out where he worked before the clinic. And now we know his real name that shouldn't be a problem.' He stood.

'Where are you going?'

'I need to get something.'

Kass realised that all eyes in the room were on Weldon.

Oh God. She'd almost forgotten where she was. Was it really that dark in here, or had the booze affected her eyes. *Please God, keep my baby safe.* She crossed herself, before realising at least a dozen locals were gawking her way. She raised her glass and offered it to the room, then slugged it back, slamming the tumbler upside down on the table's top.

'You took your time,' she said. 'I could have been mugged, raped, or stabbed to death with a tortilla. Where the hell did you get a laptop from?'

'I always carry a spare behind the driver's seat.'

'Of someone else's car?'

'You're not much of a drinker are you?' Weldon opened the laptop, he started to type.

'Maybe you should give that to me. I'm an expert. I work in a cupboard full of other experts. *Why are you looking at me like that?*

'I think I'll manage. I told you, I was in the Corp. They taught me all I need to know about resistors. The chips in these things have a couple hundred million of them.'

'Really? *That's quite interesting.* 'Oh God . . . do you think anyone would mind if I threw up on the bar?'

'I don't suppose anyone would notice much. Now if you can keep God out of the conversation for five minutes, I'll show you what I've found about the mysterious Mister Spencer.'

'Fine. I s'pose you're good at crosswords too?'

'I have a gift for crosswords, and puzzles, oh and those little squares, the ones with the numbers in. Boon's real good with those as well,' he

turned the laptop to face her. 'Kassandra Krane, meet Granville Spencer. A biologist *and* a chemist. He has, or rather had, Phd's in both sciences. He was cherry-picked from Washington Uni and offered a place at MIT. How about that, I didn't know MIT housed a biology lab.

From MIT he went into pharmaceuticals. That was four years ago. So now we have to ask ourselves how our Spencer got from a pharmaceutical lab in Venezuela, to a Black-Ops Cancer research facility in Mexico? And more important to us, why he did that? Why did he get himself mixed up with people like that?

'Money,' she said. 'It's always about money.'

'No, I don't think so. Focus on the texts. What about the name Jay, maybe someone he knows, and is fond of too. Most likely a girl's name, that's unlikely to be an alias.'

'Whoah, no, wait; before you leave me behind on this, I want to know how a few symbols turned into a bus route in Washington DC?'

'Arlington,' he said, 'and public transport. Think about it. All routes in this puzzle lead us to the Capital. G'co, you said Pullman referred to it. "Ed will fly you both to Washington where you'll hook up with G'co." It's a private security firm based in Washington. They have hundreds of millions of dollars worth of government contracts. They're the guys who run defence for the military in Iraq and Afghanistan.'

'Okay, so Foggy Bottom, what's that?'

'It's a metonym for the US State Department. And said Government Department is based, quite literally, in the district of Foggy Bottom, Washington DC.'

'Okay,' she was on board with this. 'But Washington, that's a really big place?'

'Not if you ride the DC Circular. Spencer was obviously familiar with the Capital's bus routes. Now, if we can just translate the rest of the riddle, maybe we can find his colleagues, his friends. They're probably the only people who can decrypt this thing. Maybe then we'll know as much as April. Maybe more?'

‘Keep going, I’m in awe,’ she said. ‘No, wait. I’ve got this.’ “Jay feeds the Sabbath Angels?” *Come on, Cassandra.* ‘Sabbath is a Sunday. Angels are messengers of God. Maybe it’s religious, some sort of communion? Fuck, it could be a soup kitchen, or a drop in centre for addicts.’

‘Yes, it could be. Or you could stop thinking like a cop for a moment. Your friend, Spencer, he was smart. He saw things in a deeper vein than most. I think he was a man of principle, and probably lived with a lot of guilt. Think about it, Kass. Who did he give the thumb-drive too? Not a corporation, or a hack journalist for profit. And I’d guess he wasn’t part of a political conspiracy; he would have had a better way of getting the information out than you. No, he wasn’t looking for profit or notoriety, and he was willing to put his life on the line to succeed. This is a principled man who was on a mission. “Sabbath, Angels.” I’m guessing Spencer was a spiritual man as well.’

‘Okay, that’s reasonable. But where do you get *guilt* from?’

‘He wanted Grace to forgive him.’

‘Oh, right. So Grace is, who, his mum?’

‘I doubt it.’

‘A partner in crime then. A girlfriend. One of several million females who live in Washington?’ *Too much thinking involved, it’s giving me a headache.* ‘And what about Megatron? Is he a Transformer that turns into a bus?’ *No, no. Shaking your head is not what I want to see right now.*

‘Look, Spencer told us everything we need to know with the tools he had available. I think we need to cross the border, take a trip to Washington DC, and then go for a bus ride around the Capital.’

‘Washington? No, *Josh*, he’s still here in Mexico.’

‘We don’t know that. Kass, it’s highly likely that they’ve moved him, for security. They’ll have moved him the moment they knew you were free. The only thing we know for sure is the contents of that thumb-drive are fatal to them. That makes the data on it your only way of getting him back. Think about it, they’ve killed Spencer. They didn’t think twice about taking *us* out, with a missile?’

No, they fucked up when they planned to bury you in the desert, because they didn't know Spencer had given you the thumb-drive. Well, they do now, and they want it back. Or they want it gone, and us with it. Our only way of coming out of this ahead is to follow Spencer's map. And everything we know right now is pointing us towards Washington. So that's where we were going.'

Josh is here, I feel it. Maybe not at the clinic, but somewhere. Somewhere closer than Washington. The drink was messing with her head. Her thoughts were scrambled, beginning to spiral.

Weldon raised his glass. 'To Josh.'

'Josh,' she could barely speak. *To you, the man who catches a bus; who found me in the desert.* 'To Foggybottom and Angels,' she added. *This has to be a sign from God.*

'Kass, are you okay?'

'No, I think I'm going to puke.'

Was this really the best he could come up with? All the assurances in the world couldn't convince Kass. She took a breath and repeated what he'd just said. "One person, one load, we never fail to deliver." *Really?*

It had taken less than eight hours to organise. The driver with the heavily slicked hairpiece was adamant.

'Is good, no problem.' He pointed at his overalls covered chest. 'I deliver, no get caught.' The smiling gaps in his teeth were the last thing she saw as he closed the lid above her head.

I'm locked inside a crate marked frijoles enlatados? Canned beans?

It was a rough loading onto the truck, being parked amongst dozens of identical boxes. She endured a spine jarring journey atop faulty suspension, across uneven tarmac. A blessing compared to the demonic orchestra of car-horns and idling engines. The foul language and exhaust fumes the truck had crawled through, as it joined the queue at the border.

She was a jack in the box when Pueblo finally let her out. No wonder the damn things sprang up with that look on their face.

'Welcome to the US,' said Sancho.

A relief and a curse. To be on home soil, but a country away from Josh as she watched the delivery truck drive away.

'If you're really up there watching,' she said, 'thank you. Please, keep Josh safe. I beg you.'

Her back hurt. Kass was tired. She was recalling Weldon's instructions.

"The authorities will doubtless be looking for a man and woman who travel together. So we'll cross separately." The Latino woman was taking photos with a large Polaroid; the flash kept making her flinch, and feel nauseous again.

Never again, not with the tequila.

"I'm thinking a few curls in your hair and a honey dew tint. Maybe glasses, a nice designer brand. Everything will be waiting for you. You'll need cash, and a forged ID. There'll be a disposable phone with a single number in the memory. Do not call anyone else!" He was adamant about that.

"You'll be dropped at a safe place, in a town called Ajo. It's about 40 miles north of the border. No-one there will bother you and you'll have a few hours to change your appearance. From there you can hire a car and drive directly to Phoenix; to the Sky Harbour airport. Leave the car in the long stay facility and walk to United Airlines departures desk. Board flight UA1542 to Dulles airport, Washington. A ticket will be waiting for collection in your new name. The flight leaves at 07:47, the day after tomorrow. It's the first flight I could get you on. Do not miss it." He'd been insistent on that point too.

Kass had memorised the directions from Dulles airport to the Capital.

"I'll find you in Washington," he'd said, and made it sound so easy.

It was still dark, the street she stood in was deserted. The stars above her bristled beyond the moonlight. Such beautiful stars, they were American stars, and they filled her with hope.

'Safe,' Sancho had said. He'd pointed at the small two storey pueblo styled townhouse. 'Number one, good. Thank you,' he couldn't wait to get back in the truck and leave.

Kass opened her hand, two keys tied together with string in her palm. One large, a long shank, the other smaller, more modern. The only things

Chess had given her before she'd left. She guessed the larger one fitted the lock in the house's front door. *God, I hope so.* Kass slid it deep inside the lock and turned. The tumbler inside responded by sliding back a well oiled latch. She couldn't help but look around as a wild sense of anticipation turned into relief. She stepped through the doorway.

Inside was a wide hall, and stairs that led to the upper floor. A small Mission style desk with a single drawer was set against the wall, a padded chair parked halfway into the gap below. Above was a thin bookcase, with what looked like activity brochures.

Is this a guesthouse? It would make sense. *Number one, is good. That's what he'd said.* The other key, smaller, flat with several cuts between the shoulder and tip. The door opposite the stairs, it had a number screwed to one of its upper panels.

Moments later Kass walked inside the room, her back closing the door behind her. She took her first breath in what seemed like an age, then reached to flick the switch that illuminated the large bedroom before her.

She'd made it, she was safe. At least for now

A single bed with colourful blankets, it felt like a lottery win as she slumped on the mattress. The simple wooden nightstand with an old brass lamp was adorable. On top sat a small digi-clock, and an envelope. The sight of it sent flutters through her tummy.

"Money and ID would be waiting," that's what Weldon had said. She felt more like a spy than a fugitive as she reached for the envelope. It's contents felt substantial. There must have been a thousand dollars in fifty and twenty dollar bills that she emptied out onto the bed. More interesting was the driver's licence she teased across the cover. It bore her image, but not her name. She was now, Maria Delaney. A blonde haired, forty year old who lived in Pasadena.

Blonde? I can do that. But not tonight. Mañana, isn't that what they say?

Tomorrow, she'd think better tomorrow. All she wanted now was to sleep.

The digi-clock read 03:56; it *was* tomorrow.

Kass curled up on the bed and pulled the covers tight to her neck. She was asleep in seconds.

The clock read 08:17.

Oh, come on. It felt like longer than that. Kass rolled over, she didn't want to see. *Three and a half hours sleep?* She buried her head into the soft pillow. *I don't want to pee. I don't want to pee. . . 'Damn it, I have to pee.'*

The covers came away and she rolled to the edge of the mattress. She had packing-crate-syndrome, her head still smarting from a tequila overdose. A moment later she was upright and walking toward the ensuite.

Not much point in trying to sleep now. She had a plane to catch, and more importantly, a coffee pot to find. *The kitchen?* She found herself staring at the large window, its drapes closed. *Is it really Arizona out there?* Kass tweaked the fabric apart to have a peek outside, and got a violent flash of sunlight that forced her to shy away.

"Sunshine in the desert state is pure." That's what Grandpa used to say. If only he were still alive; he'd know what to do. Ex-military, former LAPD: it was his shoes she'd followed in. His metal she'd tried to live up to. He'd been the only stable influence in her young life. Her father nothing but a distant memory. A bum, was what Mum called him. Maybe his genes were the reason she had such bad taste in men?

Thank you, God. Thank you for bringing Pierce into my life.

Maybe more counselling was required. Or sunglasses? Kass slid the curtain all the way back to be bathed in a bright, warming light.

Somehow the sun didn't look quite as pure as it used to. Outside, the world had changed.

'Please let this be Arizona,' she said aloud. There wasn't much to see through the window. Ajo's sights were limited to a road with no traffic, and a handful of cars parked on the hard ground opposite.

This is definitely a guesthouse. There were several pamphlets tucked in the rack below an overly ornate mirror. *Ajo has sights.* She fingered through the highlights; not much, just a mine, some Indian grounds, and a few desert escapades.

‘In here, dear,’ called an elderly voice that startled her. ‘I’m in the kitchen, back here.’

Kass followed the hallway to a colourful door screen. Ribbons that her hands parted as she stepped through. Or did she step back, in time. It looked like someone had handmade the cupboards on the wall. The oven was at least a ton of iron, its griddles as big as dinner plates, a door wide enough to stoke a boiler. The floor was wood, and groaned with age as she stepped inside. *What a beautiful old table.* She ran her finger across its surface.

‘Hello?’

Shit, behind me. A small elderly woman welcomed her. She sat fused to a comfy looking chair, her hands paused from hand-sewing a floral dress on her knees.

‘Hi,’ said Kass.

‘Did you sleep well?’ She asked with a strong Southern accent. ‘You got here so late, I thought it best to wait until I brought you tea. I’m hoping you found the bed comfortable enough? Everything in that room is hypoallergenic. All manufactured here in the USA, God bless her. And all sourced from sustainable materials.’

‘Err, yes, it was very comfortable. Thank you.’

‘Now, can I get you some breakfast?’ She placed the dress carefully on her chair, before opening the grate of a big iron stove. She threw another small log inside. ‘I got eggs and bacon; all free range,’ she looked up, ‘ain’t got no coffee, I fear that’s the devil’s brew. But I got tea that come with a hint of cinnamon, or lemon if you prefer. Earl Grey, if you must.’

No coffee. ‘Err, lemon?’ *You got something against caffeine?* ‘Mmm, something smells good?’

Grandma had a change of tone, and attitude. Her round wrinkled face hardened, as if it wanted to a fight.

‘Just so’s there’s no misunderstanding, your bills been paid in full. Two nights, no more, extra nights are a hundred and fifty a night, which will include a cooked breakfast. Fresh linen every day. You try to rob, abuse, or murder me,’ she pulled back her cardigan. ‘I got me a Smith and Wessen 500 revolver here that will cut you in two.’

Yes you do. That’s good to know.

‘I won’t need any extras,’ she said. ‘I have a flight to catch.’

‘Heading for the big city, eh? Don’t care much for it myself.’ Her eyes narrowed to a damning leer. ‘Dens of iniquity. Full of bums and guns, bores and whores. A handsome woman like you should stay away from such places?’

Believe me, if I had a choice . . . ‘Look, this may sound a bit odd, but where exactly am I?’

Granny’s hands stopped, an egg about to be cracked and fried.

‘You lost, dear?’

‘Let’s just say I’m in transit.’

‘Well, this here town is called Ajo,’ she said. The egg she dropped into a pan hit oil that voiced a fierce sizzle.

‘Do you know a tall, bearded man, name of Weldon?’

‘Nope.’

She figured that must be a lie, they were probably related.

‘Ajo,’ she said. ‘It’s Spanish for garlic. We’re stuck halfway between the Mexican border and the city of Phoenix, which is in Arizona. We ain’t got no shopping malls, no Disney outlets, and no whorehouse, not that I’m aware of. Not much in the way of tourism to speak of either, accepting your presence of course,’ she flipped the egg. ‘If it’s any help, we do have a sheriff’s office?’

Kass’ blood began to race through her veins. *Why is she looking at me like that?*

‘We don’t get too many visitors to our town; most just stop for directions, or drive through with their windows rolled up. What brings you to Ajo, dear? You on the run?’

‘It’s Kass, and no I’m not running.’ *I’m sprinting as fast I can.*

The toaster popped and Grandma lifted a plate from the table. ‘Unless I’m mistaken, the name you’ve booked under, is Maria. You’d do well to remember that.’

Shit, she’s right. Maria. Maria . . .

‘I like to use my middle name, Kass, its short for Cassandra. Maria’s a bit dull, don’t you think?’

‘Maria was my mama’s name, and she always found it suitable for polite introduction. And for the record my grandson wears the uniform of Border Control, God bless him; he voted for that fool who wants to build a wall from California to Texas. Someone should tell him, they’ll just buy taller ladders.’

Ma’ Barker’s teasing me, isn’t she?

‘My point being, you don’t know who you’re talking to, dear. So’s best you keep your talking to a minimum.’

‘Gotcha. I don’t suppose there’s a Starbucks round here?’ Kass was keen to change the topic of their chat.

‘We have a Dollar general store. There are a couple of flower shops, and a Dairy Queen. Oh, and Ruben’s Barber and Beauty Salon. May I say that you look like you’re in need of some tender care and repair?’

Cheeky bitch . . . Really, that bad?

‘I’m going to the bank in an hour. It’s not on my way, but I can drop you at Marcela’s café and Bakery. Get one of those modern lattes there, and a selection of sweet cakes,’ she dropped the overcooked egg onto a plate, placing it on the table. ‘I do not allure myself to such vices, but I will buy you a latte, with a double shot, and cream slice to get you on,’ she pointed. ‘The Dollar store is a few steps up and opposite if you need further supplies. Honey, I do believe you are supposed to be blonde. Check the drawer under the sink.’

I don’t need to be asked twice.

She assumed a hair-dye was in the drawer. Coffee and cake after, sounded wonderful.

‘No, there is absolutely no danger of that happening,’ April was losing patience with the man on the other end of the call. ‘Yes, absolutely, the moment they become visible. Yes, it’s all under control.’ *What’s wrong with you? If you want to keep your anonymity you shouldn’t keep phoning me.* ‘No sir, we’ll find them. We’ve tied in with surveillance on all border crossings into California, Arizona, and Texas. I’ve also got a team at the impact sight sifting through the remains. Local enforcement has been told it was a propane explosion. Gas containers exploding due to the desert heat. They’ve been financially encouraged to look the other way.’ *Where’s Fortune? It’s his job to deal with the clients. Where the hell is he?* ‘All we know for sure is the male is Caucasian, possibly American.

Yes sir, that’s been done. I have people checking with local sources, and I’ve offered a reward. We have an APB with all local PD’s and sheriff departments. There’s a BOLO out with the Justice Department, and the Rangers Service. If she tries to tap back into her life anywhere on the continent, we’ll know about it. Yes sir, any use of her credit or debit cards will flag her straight to us. Yes sir,’ *if she picks her nose or scratches her ass,* ‘yes sir, of course I will . . .’ The call had been terminated.

April slammed the phone down. The senator’s aide. *What a prick!* He’d given her a headache. She’d taken the call in the soundproof office; she stared out through its large window. Six operators in the room beyond sat busy at their terminals.

April shook her head. Her frustration close to bursting out. This was the HUB. Those operators out there were hooked into the Nation's communications. They had exclusive use of ultra-secret satellites that could photograph a stamp from orbit.

Who the fuck is our mystery man? Where's that bitch, Krane?

April rested her hand on the door, paused, then pulled it open and stepped down the six steps that led to a metal gantry overlooking the most high-tech and secure skiff in America. She took out her gun and tapped it on the railing.

'Heads up,' she said with authority, and in turn gave them all a hard glare. 'Talk to me.'

Each operator had their own work station; from each terminal an umbilical to the multi faceted 'Pedestal' at the room's centre. There were more screens on the walls than Murdoch had at Sky. Something had to give soon. The HUB was the eyes and ears of the Nation. The Pedestal was plugged into observatories, internet servers, and half the spy satellites that orbited the planet. It could earwig on political conversations in Russia and China. Hack into any cell-phone on the planet. The HUB cost the Senate Oversight more than a billion dollars in diverted funds to build.

'Well?' She asked again, her fuse fizzing towards its end. 'Peters?' *Yes you. Dough boy, with the pimples.*

'Yes mam, we have a tenuous track on his data downloads. He hides them well, lot of bouncing through Asian servers, they're stacked and hard to track. But his use of the dot-coms does tell he's been highly trained. If I had to guess, I'd go with US military. Sorry Mam, I'm just receiving the Google Earth images of the impact area for the last seven days.'

Did that little-shit raise his hand for me to be quiet?

'I have an image of a truck in front of the house. It's an old Ford pick-up, early nineteen eighties by its design. The vehicle is red; there are no

persons visible in the cab. Mam, there was no report of a vehicle at the site. I'll try to clean the image up, but the resolutions a bit vague.'

April released her grip on the gantry railing. *Take a breath, they'll find them.*

I have a plate, Mam. Cross-checking with local registries. There is one, red, ford pick-up, similar age, registered to a white male in the specified area. I have a name. José Doroteo Arango Arámbula. I'll run the name through local law enforcement and border security.'

'Don't bother. José has been dead for some time. Get the vehicle's plates circulated with local assets. Widen the sat-search area looking for similar vehicles. Find that truck.'

'Yes Mam.'

It had felt good all that soapy water washing across her skin. The shower was a hot and welcome distraction. She'd even managed to get creative with the hair-colouring. Reflected in the mirror was a person she didn't recognise, her name was Maria.

In one of the drawers he'd found a change of clothing. The checked-blouse and green combats were a diamond fit. As was the watch, a J12 in matt black from Chanel. Slim and stylish, as she held her wrist up in the light. The spectacles had a 'product of Walmart's Vision Centre' sticker on the lens. But hey, she still looked good. Smart but understated. And she smelled divine from a drop or two from the unmarked bottle of perfume. It was nice to feel clean and human again.

'I ain't got all day, *Maria*.' Her landlady's voice coarse as it summoned her. She had a voice that could melt ice.

'Coming,' Kass replied, as she grabbed some cash and stuffed it into the pocket of a tiny rucksack she'd found with her new clothes.

There was no mistake; the sign read Marcela's café and Bakery. "The only place in Ajo to get a modern latte." And please God, a piece of cake. A bell above the door announced her as she walked in.

Just smile and sit. Simple. Only it wasn't. *What if they recognise me? What if I have a wanted sign and a big finger pointing down at my head?* She felt ridiculous as she slid into a booth by the window. *It's just another café, folk minding their own business. There, look, the old man in the corner has already stopped staring.*

'What can I get you?' The waitress was tall, mid forties, with her hair tied back. She was smiling.

'Coffee, please.' Kass replied. *Why is she grinning like that?* 'And something sweet, please.'

'Got some pie, comes with fresh cream?'

'A bit early for pie, maybe something lighter?'

'How about a muffin? I got blueberry, lemon, apple and cinnamon, all low fat. Or there's Marcella's full fat, double whipped, stone baked chocolate cheesecake. It's light and lush, and every girl's worst enemy. She stooped down. 'But worth every damn mouthful. Coffee comes with a free re-fill.'

It was nice the way she smiled, mostly with her eyes. Big and blue, and honest, which helped to calm Kass' nerves.

'Cheesecake sounds good. Can I get a hot latte, extra shot, and no foam.'

‘Sure. Coming right up.’

The old man in the corner was staring again. *Stop it.* She tried not to return his gaze. *Go away, please.* Above the door the bell rang again. A ding ding ding that nearly caused Kass an unfortunate accident.

For crying out loud, this is ridiculous. An electrical discharge from a door bell, a boss-eyed OAP who works for the CIA. A waitress prepared to take me down with pie. Being on the run wasn’t much fun. She watched as the young girl who’d entered spoke to the waitress now stood behind the small counter.

It took thirty minutes to feel at ease. To accept who she was now, her name and persona was now, Maria. And all Maria could think about was Pierce. She tried so hard not to let her mind think the worst of what could be happening to Josh. It took two plates of cheesecake and cream to begin to feel at ease. A third ding of the bell and she didn’t bother to look up. Not until the latte was to her lips, did she feel her mouth go dry.

Oh shit. Kass looked down. *No, looking away is a sign of guilt.* Wearing a six-gun and a cowboy-hat was law enforcement; stood at the counter.

Below the hat’s brim was a fresh-faced young man with ruby cheeks. He removed the hat; was seemingly friendly towards the waitress. She felt her face droop as he looked about the café, eyes moving from one customer to the next. His gaze fell on Kass. He did have a kindly round face, set around sea blue eyes. A harsh buzz-cut of hair gave him a military pose. The dusty brown uniform and holstered gun brought an immediate hot flush to Kass’ face. Kass’ fight or flight protocol was overridden by the need to stay perfectly still as every feature of the room was sucked into close scrutiny.

Behind the counter was a door, it was open, but a deputy and waitress barred her path. Half a dozen plastic tables, several patrons. Maybe there was a toilet somewhere with a window.

Oh my God, he’s still looking at me. There was worse to suffer; he smiled. A welcome to the blonde haired stranger, not well received.

Kass tried to smile back. It was so difficult with a face that oozed guilt, and irradiated fear. *No, no, please do not come over here.* Her heart beat to the sound of his boots as they carried on the wooden floor. *Oh my God why does he want to come over?*

‘Good morning mam. How are you today?’

Smile Kass. No, not like that. ‘I’m good,’ she said. ‘Hi,’ she added.

‘We don’t get many visitors here. You a tourist, mam?’

‘No, not really. I’m just passing through.’ *Please go away.*

‘Hope Miss Sally is treating you right?’ He pointed to the waitress. Oh crap, she’s staring too. ‘Miss Sally makes a great pie, you should try it.’

‘Hmm, had two slices already.’

‘Well, like I said, we don’t get many tourists round here. Hope you don’t mind if I take the opportunity to point out a few good sights hereabouts.’

Are you fucking joking? ‘No, no, not at all.’

‘There’s the old mine just outside town. Folk don’t realise that Ajo had the first copper mine in Arizona,’ he pointed. ‘There’s the Indian park a few miles east. And if you carry on further up-state, you’ll find Alamo Canyon. There are some fine views; best to take a camera. Those little smart phones don’t do it justice. Then there’s Mister Colport, he takes folk out into the Sonoran Desert to show them sights. Did you know that Ajo is Indian for garlic?’

‘No, I didn’t know that,’ she lied. ‘That’s really very interesting.’ She was on the verge of a cardiac complication. *Please, go away.*

‘You’ll have to excuse Deputy Milo,’ Miss Sally intervened. ‘When he’s not on duty he runs the area’s tourist board,’ she was gently scolding him for intrusion. ‘And when he’s not disturbing my customers, he’s eating pie. Now leave the nice lady to her coffee.’

‘Apologies, but if there’s anything I can do for you before you leave. Just come up to the sheriff’s office. It’s a mile that way.’ He nodded and turned. They talked together as they walked away.

Just let him go, Kass. Don't you say a word. Don't be stupid. But why shouldn't she? Deputy Milo could help. This was America, not Mexico. He was a sheriff's deputy for crying out loud. 'Deputy,' she said, and he turned.

'Mam, I knew you'd want to see the sights.'

Her tongue froze.

'Yes, Mam?'

The words felt truly liberating as they came out. 'Deputy, I need your help.'

'Sure, whatever I can do,' he was stepping back.

No more lies. Tell him who you are, and what's happened. Get him to call Pierce.

'Deputy . . . My name's Cassandra, and I need you to contact someone in the Los Angeles District Attorney's office for me. *Why is he frowning?* ADA, Pierce Reeseman. Please, tell him Cassandra Krane needs his help.' *What did I say?* 'Deputy, are you all right?' *No, stop. Why are you going for your gun?*

His weapon was pulled and pointed in a fraction of a second.

'Hands above your head. Get on the ground. Down, get down!'

'Milo, what's going on?' Sally distanced herself from the deputy. The old man in the corner clutched his paper up tight and slid along the bench-seat out of the line of fire.

'Milo, what the hell?' Sally shouted. 'Have you gone crazy? You can't point that thing in here.'

'Stay back Miss Sally, this is a wanted woman. You, get those hands up . . . get them up.'

'No, wait,' Kass raised her hands. *This is America, I've done nothing wrong?* 'Milo, wait, you've got it all wrong.'

'Kassandra Krane, I'm arresting you for murder.'

'No, you don't understand. They were going to kill me. It was self-defence. I didn't have a choice.'

'Get down on the floor. Face down on the floor!'

‘Deputy, do not discharge your weapon. I surrender. Look, hands up, I’m not resisting.’

He looked more scared than she was. The revolver’s muzzle pointing straight at Kass. The sounds of Pullman’s gun flashed back from the desert.

‘Hands behind your head. Down on your knees!’

Okay, okay, easy with the gun. She knew the routine. ‘I’ve done nothing wrong.’ Cheesecake abandoned Kass dropped to her knees. *Please, do not shoot me.* ‘You don’t understand,’ her voice fragile. ‘They’ve kidnapped my son. They tried to kill me, I didn’t have a choice.’ *Why are you doing this?*

Milo shuffled between her and the table. ‘Miss Sally. Hold this, and keep it pointed at her.’

‘I’m not holding that thing,’ she backed behind the counter as Milo looked to the other customers, who’d bunched themselves behind tables by the far wall.

‘Do not move,’ Milo ordered, his hands shaking. Gun in one hand, cuffs in the other. She felt the cold metal of the restraints click about her wrist; her arms pulled behind her back. Seconds later she was cuffed, the deputy loud and verbal that she mustn’t resist.

‘I didn’t have a choice,’ she said staring at the linoleum. Tears dropping from her face.

‘You killed him in cold blood,’ Milo insisted. ‘Christ on a cupcake, I got her. Look Miss Sally, I got the Krane woman. Oh my, the sheriff’s gonna bust a gut. I caught me this country’s public enemy number one.’

‘Number what? What are you talking about? It all happened in Mexico.’

‘Miss Krane, your under arrest for committing murder in Los Angeles.’

‘What, no? I don’t know anything about that . . . ’

Milo pulled out his phone. His thumb scrolling through images she couldn’t see. ‘Yes, Mam,’ he looked down at her, then showed Kass the screen. ‘Says here you murdered, you’re wanted for said crime.’

Milo hadn't spoke to her during the short drive. He kept calling for the sheriff on his car radio. Pressing redial on his phone.

'Put your hands out through the bars Ms Krane,' his weapon pointed; hands more steady than before.

'This all a big mistake, Deputy.'

'I don't think so. You see this here,' he pulled a sheet of paper from his desk. 'That's a picture of you. And read what's below. There's an APB out for your arrest. You're a dangerous criminal.'

'No, you don't understand. It was self-defence. Please, just call ADA Pierce Reeseman, Los Angeles PD.' She was sick of saying it. 'He'll sort this out. Please, just call him.' *Why won't you listen?* She'd committed no crimes on US territory. This was all a big misunderstanding. *Pullman tried to kill me.* 'It was self defence,' she said. *For Christ sake stop staring at me like that.* 'Let me talk to the sheriff.'

Milo shook his head.

'I can't believe I've caught myself a notorious murderer. Ms Krane, you're going to make me the sheriff of Ajo.'

'Is there something wrong with your hearing? I need to talk to the sheriff.'

'Sheriff Landley is away on a fishing trip, in Miami. He's gone to catch the big one, his words. Damn, I just trumped any stoopid tuna he could reel in.'

'Has he got a cell phone with him?'

‘Yes Mam, but he’s not answering.’

‘Phone,’ she pointed to the desk where the cuffs he’d removed were lying. ‘DA’s office in Los Angeles, phone them, please.’

‘Ms Krane, are you a psychopath? Or have you got a poor memory?’

‘What?’ *You’re insulting me now?* ‘Deputy, I’m begging you, please. Phone the LA PD.’

Deputy Milo was the cat with the cream, she wanted to kick his feet off the desk; slap that smug grin off his face. It was then that Milo turned the flat screen he was so happy to stare at.

‘Are you Cassandra Krane, resident of Los Angeles County?’ He asked. ‘Are you a police officer with the LAPD Police Department?’

‘Yes, and yes?’ She answered.

‘Then you’re under arrest for the murder of LA, ADA, Pierce Reeseman. I can’t phone him because you killed him. Shoot, you really are a head-case.’

‘What? No, no no no. I don’t understand.’ Kass stepped away from the bars. ‘Oh God, are you saying that Pierce is dead?’

‘You should know, you’re the one that killed him. I can’t believe I’ve caught me a murderer. Jeepers, I thought you were gonna resist. Pull a gun or something. I thought I was gonna have to shoot you down.’

‘I don’t understand. You’re, you’re telling me, that Pierce . . . My Pierce, he’s dead?’ It felt as if her soul had parted from her body.

‘I surely am. You murdered him in cold blood whilst he was sleeping. It’s been all over Cable News. I just can’t believe I caught you. You look a whole lot different with your hair like that.’

Kass sank to her knees. *Can it be true?* ‘Pierce is dead?’

‘It don’t matter how many times you ask it, the answer will still be the same. There’s a warrant out for you in eight states. The FBI has sent notices to every law enforcement this side of Canada. Shit, they really will make me sheriff for this.’

‘No, you have to listen to me. I didn’t kill him. I swear to you.’

‘Sure you did. You told me a half-dozen times it was self-defence. You gunned the man down in his bed. What, did he get his tool out and threaten you? Is that why you shot it off?’

‘What?’

‘Yes mam, you shot it off, after putting one in his head.

Kass was shaking her head. She couldn’t breath. ‘No, no . . .’

‘Hey, you stop that. I’m not coming in there if you have a fit. Shoot, lady, you stop that.’

She fell forward, her head hit the concrete floor. Milo was up on his feet.

‘No, no, no. Not Pierce.’ She released a wail of emotion that had Milo reach for his gun. ‘They killed him!’

‘I think you need a decent attorney,’ Milo whispered. ‘One who sells a better defence, than self defence.’

She was heavy breathing; trying to understand. *Why Pierce? Why?* Kass lifted her head, her face a mess of tears. ‘Milo, please listen to me. I didn’t kill Pierce. I couldn’t. I was talking about a man named, Pullman.’

The words were out there, too late to take them back. Both hands covered her mouth, a distraught action. Or a look of guilt as the deputy stared, afraid to go near the cell.

‘You’ve murdered someone else,’ he asked. ‘Are there more dead bodies? Holy Moly, are you a serial killer? Jeepers, I’ve caught me a serial killer.’

He wasn’t listening; he didn’t want to. Why should he, there was a warrant for her arrest. Kass’ gaze fell on the monitor. It wasn’t possible, but there it was. No mistake, it was her face staring back. Her details typed below. No denying it now. The warrant read MURDER.

The Deputy’s threat with the gun. The vice-like grip of the cuffs, and being dragged from the café. It was all true. She’d even confessed to another killing. *Pierce, why?* She began to focus. *Who’d listen to a crazy woman who’d killed her boyfriend?*

‘I guess you know how this works. But FYI, I’ve responded to the Feds. That’s who put the BOLO out. They have been dutifully informed that you are in custody. I’ll bet the phone is about to ring off its hook.’

The FBI? But it would be an LAPD murder case?

Kass felt every vibration from the ring tone of Milo’s cell-phone.

‘Yes sir,’ Milo said with pride. ‘I took her down in the café. No sir, I brought her straight to the sheriff’s office. No sir, she’s spoken to no-one. No sir, just you at the moment. Is it okay if talk to someone from State . . . National Security? Err, yes sir, I understand?’

Why is he looking at me like that?

‘No other law enforcement to be alerted until you get here. Yes sir, I can see to that. Yes, there’s the municipal airport nearby, there’s only the one runway, not very flat . . . No sir, we don’t get much commercial service, the runway is only big enough for propellor . . . A helicopter? There’s plenty of open space just outside of town. But you’ll need a car . . . Oh, no problem. Well, yes, thank you sir. I appreciate that. No sir, I will keep Krane’s arrest quiet until you get here.’

Until who gets here? ‘Milo, you need to call state police,’ she said, as he ended the call. ‘Milo?’

‘That was the FBI Agent in charge. He said it was a matter of National Security that I keep your arrest a secret. At least for now.’

‘That’s not right Milo, the Feds wouldn’t interfere in a local homicide. And they wouldn’t ask you to keep it quiet for National Security.’ *Would they?* Something was wrong. She stood and came to the bars. ‘Milo, this is wrong.’

Beyond the bars was an open office. Several wooden desks, each with a keyboard and monitor on their surface. Kass’ eyes searched the furniture for help. Nothing except a coffee machine and a printer. A long window with blinds that Milo was busy closing. On the wall behind his desk were three modern shotguns, locked in a glass cabinet.

Kass gripped the bars. Cold half-inch metal rods, her cell barely eight feet square. Its entrance a gate that was locked.

What had she done? Handing herself to the deputy was stupid. She'd allowed herself to get locked away, and there was no way out. Worst of all, she doubted it was the Feds who were on their way to claim her.

April touched her earpiece. She was receiving a call from the HUB

'Mam, its Peters. Sheriff's office in Ajo, Arizona, has reported detaining the target. I'm routing the coordinates to your phone. A car is en-route to your position.'

This was good news. The world's most advanced skiff was money well spent after all.

'Peters, get Carl on the phone.'

'One moment. Switching.'

Her earpiece vibrated to the tone of a cell-phone ringing.

'Pick up Carl, I haven't got all day.'

* * *

'Please tell me it's not Fortune again.'

'No boss, it's April. You want to take the call?'

He nodded affirmation.

'Voice only,' he added.

'What do you have for me, April?'

'We've found her.'

'Well, that's good news.'

'I have a bird en-route, how quickly can you make the airfield?'

Two was researching the quickest route. He raised two fingers, and an okay with the other hand.

‘Twenty minutes, give or take.’

‘Make it less. You’re going to a place called Ajo, it’s in southern Arizona. The local sheriff has Krane in custody. You’ll have about four hours to get her, and get lost. After that you’re on borrowed time. Bring her directly to the ranch.’

Walk in the park,’ he said, and indicated that Two should close the link. ‘Three, turn the car around and take us to the airport. Two,’ he turned to the confident looking man who wore glasses. ‘Find me blueprints for the sheriff’s office in a place called, Ajo.’

‘Consider it done,’ he said.

‘Get me an overview of the town as well. I want a way in, and more than one way out. I want intel on communications and Wi-Fi present at the sight. Liaise with the HUB, I want them shut down before we go in. Three, practise your best smile, you and I are joining the FBI.’

‘I didn’t do it, Deputy.’

‘Isn’t that what they all say?’ Milo shook his head. ‘Would you like some coffee?’

‘No. Milo, you have to let me out of here.’

‘I know, I know, your son’s been kidnapped, and you didn’t mean to kill anyone. Oh, and there are some very bad people coming here to take you. Ms Krane, I think I’m the one that needs coffee.’

‘Think this through for a moment. Didn’t you think it was a bit odd that they insisted you don’t tell anyone else I’ve been arrested?’

‘Nope, it’s a matter of National Security.’

‘Milo, that’s the Secret Service, or the CIA. Not the FBI. Think this through, Milo. Why did I approach you? I could have just left? Got in a car and got lost in the desert. Milo, I wanted your help.’

‘Or you just panicked. Couldn’t live with the guilt? Maybe you just wanted to be caught so you could have your picture in the press. It happens all the time.’ His boots went up on the desk again. ‘No, you’re my prisoner until the Feds turn up. Hey, I’ll make the papers? Heck, this could be national news. I could be on a chat show. Screw this, I have to tell Mum.’ Milo picked up the phone and tapped in the digits. ‘That’s odd,’ his finger pressed up and down on the phone’s switch-hook.

‘Is there a problem, Deputy?’

‘Phones seem to be down?’

‘I’d call that a problem.’

‘Damn, I can’t get a signal on my cell?’

‘That’s definitely a problem. You’re being shut down, Milo.’

‘Ms Krane, I have been nothing but polite with you. So please, be quiet. In less than an hour you’ll be on your way with the Feds.’

‘Milo, where’s everyone else? This is a big office for just one deputy. And I noticed two other mobile units when we pulled up outside.’

‘Not that it’s any of your concern,’ he tried his mobile again, ‘but there are three deputies. Gus is off sick, and Max has a baby that’s due any minute, he’s on compassionate leave. The sheriff’s on holiday, he’s fishing in Miami.’

‘So it’s just you and me?’

‘Ms Krane, you are behind bars, I think I can manage.’

‘Okay, fine. But do yourself a favour. Go get coffee somewhere else. Leave the key where the Feds can find it. Please, I don’t want anyone else to get else hurt.’

‘Ms Krane, you surely have lost the plot. And what the heck is wrong with my cell? Damn it,’ he swapped the phone for an ‘I Love Ajo’ mug, its contents hot and steamy with a bitter smell.

‘Do you think I should wear my uniform?’

‘What?’

‘For the interviews,’ he was looking in the mirror again. ‘Dang, I hope I get on with James Corden.’

‘I’m sure you will.’ *If you get out of this alive.*

‘Heads up, lady.’ Milo retrieved his hat and jacket from the chair. ‘I think the Feds have just arrived.’

She saw them through the blinds he’d opened again. Kass instinctively backed further into the cell. This was one taxi ride she would happily pass on.

‘Are you Deputy Milo Hunter?’ The Agent asked as he knocked. He seemed to fill the doorway with his presence, and seemed genuinely pleased to meet Milo. ‘I’m Special Agent Bender, and this is Agent Turner. I understand you have a fugitive for us to transport?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Milo shook his hand. ‘It’s not every day I get to hand over a serial-killer to the FBI.’

‘Serial killer?’ The agent looked bemused.

‘Yes sir, she’s admitted to killing a caucasian male in the Mexican desert. Said his name was Pullman.’

Kass didn’t like the way they looked at each other when Milo mentioned Pullman’s name. They looked like FBI Agents; dark suits and sunglasses. Milo accepted the badges, and was willing to fill in the paperwork they brought..

Something about the taller of the two; the Special Agent. Something wrong with the way he looks me, his eyes cold, angry. And since when did the FBI budget extend to Armani suits and handmade leather shoes?

‘Can I see your badge, Special Agent?’ Kass asked, her hands back on the bars.

‘Don’t mind her,’ said Milo, ‘she’s been going on about a conspiracy ever since I arrested her. How many of these do I have to sign?’

‘Federal policy, Deputy. We can never collect enough signatures.’ He moved toward Kass. ‘So this is the infamous Ms Krane.’

‘That’s her,’ said Milo. ‘I never heard so many tall-tales coming from one women’s mouth. She’s a nut-job for sure. Got serial killer written all over her face.’

‘Well, we only want her for the one murder. But we’ll bring her back if your conspiracy theory pans out.’

‘Really, in our courtroom . . . ? Oh, yeah, that’s a good one.’ Even Kass had to look as he laughed. A panting throaty expression of mirth. ‘Still, I can’t wait to see the sheriff’s face when he gets back. Oh, he’ll shit a brick when he finds out what he’s missed.’

The Special Agent lifted his badge for Kass to see. It did look real. *Maybe they are who they say?* The wallet snapped shut and disappeared back into his jacket, a shoulder holster and gun exposed. He smiled as she saw it.

‘I’m sure you know how, Ms Krane,’ he offered up a set of handcuffs. ‘If you please?’

Fuck. Kass took them. She clicked them around her wrists.

Then held her hands up for him to see.

‘Don’t forget me in your report, Special Agent. The name’s Hunther, with a T, and a H.’

‘Sure, we got you kid. The Federal authorities owe you a great debt of gratitude.’

‘My pleasure sir. My pleasure.’

Kass pressed her face against the bars. ‘If you’re the FBI, I’m Dorothy Gale,’ she whispered.

‘Sure is a shame you didn’t wear your ruby slippers, then.’ Bender came closer. ‘My names Carl, Ms Krane. The man you killed in the desert, Pullman, he was a long time associate of ours. A stand-up guy who loved his country.’

‘A tall prick who murders innocent people,’ she replied. ‘He killed Spencer, and he tried to bury me.’

‘Well your safety is my priority right now.’

‘Why where are we going?’

‘To see the Wicked Witch, of course. You have something of hers she wants returned.’

‘Agent Turner, I think we’re ready to go now.’

The sun hurt Kass' eyes as she left the building. She thought about asking for a pair of the badass sunglasses her abductors wore; she thought about running too, but saw nothing but a highway in the distance, and a prickly desert that surrounded the sheriff's office. She'd found another dark place to visit as they crossed the parking lot. Carl's hand at her back as she was ushered toward a blacked-out SUV.

Carl and his associate stopped, he pulled her close by her shirt. 'Black Buick, ten o'clock,' he said.

'I see it,' Turner answered.

'Run a block while I take Krane to the car, just in case.'

'On it.'

Something was up. They were parting company, Turner heading toward the road. He'd drawn his gun, now carried out of sight behind his back.

'What's going on?' Kass felt a shift in pace, Carl more insistent with his hand. She resisted.

'Don't,' said Carl. He pushed her. He'd also drawn his gun, and was screwing a silencer into the muzzle. She could see Turner had done the same. Both men keen to see the car coming carry on down the road. It didn't. The dark Buick had eased to a stop. No chance of seeing who drove the car through its heavily tinted windows

'Three, check it out,' he said, and Turner walked toward the car. 'Move yourself, Krane.'

‘No,’ she said, and stopped walking.

‘Don’t try me,’ he said, and pushed her.

Kass resisted. She felt his gun jammed into her back. Maybe resistance wasn’t a good idea. ‘You’re supposed to keep me safe for April, remember?’

She was watching Turner; fronting up to Carl. She wanted to see this play out as Turner extended his badge at full arms-length.

‘FBI,’ he shouted. ‘You’re in a controlled zone, please move your car,’ he was waving his badge for the owner to move on.

‘Not one of yours?’ Kass asked.

‘Shut the fuck up and move.’

‘Make me,’ she snarled, as the Buick’s tyres tore into the dust and accelerated. Nought to thirty mph in a heartbeat, straight at Turner, who opened fire; bullets smashing into the screen. A moment later he went head-first over the bonnet.

‘Fucking move and you’re dead, bitch.’

Kass felt her hair being pulled from her scalp, Carl making her run for the office. Before she could fall, he’d dragged her back up the steps and launched her onto the office floor.

‘Hey, what’s going on . . .’ Milo was caught combing his hair in front of the mirror. ‘Agent, is that a silencer?’

The suppressor spat twice; Milo was hit in the chest and stomach, he fell back against the wall, arm flailing and catching in the blinds. All Kass could do was lie on the floor and watch as Milo sank to his knees, his eyes filled with terror and shock. They closed without understanding why he’d been shot.

‘You fucker, that wasn’t necessary,’ she screamed. Then flinched as she felt the hot silencer against her cheek.

‘Four,’ Carl whispered, his voice struggling to remain calm. ‘Four, get the car out front, I’m taking fire.’

Carl found a gap in the broken blinds and checked outside. Careful not to become a target.

‘Who is he?’ Carl demanded.

‘Fuck off. I hope he kicks your ass, whoever he is.’ She tried to stand, she wanted to see.

‘Four, I need that car, right now. You fucking move or April gets disappointed!’

Kass sat herself in a chair, in no doubt that he meant what he said. A loud squeal of tyres sliding in the desert dust told her Carl’s associate had arrived. She heard a car door open, and three shots bounce off the metal body.

She heard a man’s voice shout through the open door.

‘Taking fire, try the rear entrance.’

‘Up, now,’ Carl was pulling Kass to her feet. Her resistance ended with a silencer pressed to her nose. He pushed her from the office back into the rear of the building.

Oh fuck. The window in the storeroom exploded with gunfire as bullets hit the wall behind; shards of glass covering them both.

Carl opened fire, indiscriminately, a wide burst through the shattered window into the outside. The sound of its silencer a menacing brrrr.

‘Get off me you asshole,’ Kass had no intention of going anywhere with Carl. ‘Someone’s out there shooting at us.’

‘Krane, so help me. April can swivel when I tell her you caught friendly fire.’ He was too strong, too violent to resist as the rear wall stopped her motion. ‘Stop.’ Carl’s forearm hard against her throat. ‘Go,’ he said, yanking the rear door open.

They got nowhere as Turner limped by. ‘Back, back,’ Three stumbled past them covered in blood. ‘The son of a bitch is out back.’

‘Where’s Four?’

‘Four’s down.’

‘Shit! Can we reach the car?’

‘Yeah, maybe. I don’t know. Motherfucker’s got some serious firepower out there. Three opened the door and bullets spewed out into the emptiness outside. He slammed the door shut.

Three held some serious hardware of his own. Kass had fired something similar at the range. An HK SP89. Short, compact, and vicious.

‘Two, can you get the chopper here? We’re taking fire.’

Both men reacted to the reply. They didn’t seem happy.

‘Boss, we haven’t got ten minutes,’ said Three. ‘Fuck, fuck, is there a first aid kit anywhere?’

Carl expressed a quiet indifference. ‘Krane, if you don’t stop struggling, I *will* end this.’ He needed a moment to think. ‘One man can’t shoot at the front and rear exits at the same time, right? Three, I’m taking Krane out the front. Keep him busy whilst I get her out. I’ll grab one of the patrol cars and come back.’

‘Yeah, like he’s really gonna come back for you,’ she winced as the gun clunked into her head.

‘Boss, don’t you forget me.’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ Carl grabbed Kass’ arms. He unlocked one of her cuffs. ‘You drive, or you die, clear? Three, give me a five count, and then keep him busy.’

Three nodded his reluctant agreement. ‘One,’ he said, and moved toward the door. ‘Two . . .’ Was the last word he uttered as the door burst inward, kicked in from the outside. Three was caught in a strafing of gun-fire that burned him and the walls of the storeroom.

Three fell, tried to retaliate; sprayed bullets across the ceiling before his life zoned out. It didn’t stop the bullets from the back door, as they crashed and zipped into plaster, and shattered the overhead fan. As she fell Kass felt the sting of debris as the aggressor blew cavernous holes above her head.

* * *

Carl flung himself back out into reception. Kass’ face hit the floor. Plaster from the dry walling hung like a fog in the air.

He scrambled to his knees. *Where is she? Where's that fucking woman?* 'Krane, you're fucking dead,' he shouted, and took a look around the door. *What the fuck is that?* A Beretta 93R, if he wasn't mistaken, and sliding across the floor toward Kass. *Oh fuck.* Krane grasped it in her hand. *Get out, Carl. Get the fuck out now.*

He fanned the Glock toward the hazy figure of the Krane woman, and missed. The Beretta in her hand opened fire. She squeezed one round off after another, hitting the frame, wall, and the office beyond.

Carl rammed his last magazine into the Glock. He backed out low, able to sprint and shoot, as bullets rasped from the suppressor. This time his aim more aware, more calculating, more accurate. He threw himself through the reception doorway. A flying leap to find the hard sand. More shots fired through the doorway into the office as he scrambled toward the deputy's car. The keys in the ignition, the engine fired up. Carl yanked the transmission into drive and floored the gas pedal. The two ton vehicle charged forward. One, two, three clangs of steel from bullets hitting its panels. Krane was shooting at him?

Too late, Krane. He was out, the speedo rising through forty, fifty. *This ain't over, bitch. This is not fucking over!*

‘Kass?’ A man’s voice called her from the storeroom.

Kass spun her aim toward the storeroom. *I don’t think so.* ‘You’re friend’s gone. You’d better follow,’ she fired a shot through the doorway

‘Kassandra, put the gun away.’

Silence.

‘Boon says hi.’

What . . . Boon? No way. ‘Weldon, is that you?’

‘Are you hurt?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘Two bad guys dead back here, has the other one gone?’

‘Yes,’ her gun still aimed at the doorway.

‘Hold your fire, I’m coming in.’

It’s really you. Kass dropped the Beretta, her arms outstretched, she wrapped them around him. An outpour of emotion followed. She stepped back, full of tears; she hit him in the chest. ‘Where were you?’

‘Close,’ he said.

Now she was sniffing, wiping at her face. Embarrassed that she’d let it all out. *Fuck, fuck.* ‘I was so scared. I thought . . . They killed Milo.’

‘Milo?’

‘The deputy, he’s in the other room. How did you find me?’

Weldon stepped through into the office. ‘The phone I gave you, it’s cloned with mine. You’ve been on speaker since you turned it on this morning. Google gave me your position.’

‘Your beard, where’s your beard? You’ve had a hair-cut too?’

She’d recognised his eyes; been familiar with the sound of his voice. Gone were the shabby clothes he’d worn. He looked smart in a black jacket, old denims, and a heeled pair of boots. She couldn’t get over how much younger he looked, maybe mid forties. ‘I thought you worked in communications?’ She asked, as her fingers traced through bullet holes in the wall. She’d also noticed the wedding ring on his finger, that hadn’t been there before. ‘You look, different,’ she said. ‘More normal,’ she added. The lines around his eyes no longer making him look old. ‘Communications?’ She said again.

‘They insisted I learnt how to use a laptop,’ he replied. We have to go, now.’ Weldon came back into the storeroom. ‘They’ll send in a clean up crew. Then call the state police.’

‘Why? I didn’t do anything.’

‘You killed Deputy Milo, then made good your escape.’

‘No, I didn’t. Those men, they said they were the FBI. They had badges, paperwork. You just killed two Feds.’

‘Kass, I assure you,’ he took her arm and encouraged her toward the office, ‘those goons did not belong to any law enforcement. Take a good look at Deputy Milo. The FBI don’t kill in cold blood.’

Milo. Oh God, this is my fault? She was staring at him. ‘He’d still be alive if . . . Weldon, there’s a warrant out for me? Please, Pierce, tell me he isn’t dead?’ *Answer me?* ‘No.’ *Say it’s not true.* ‘They killed him, didn’t they?’ *My Pierce. Why? Why? Why did they kill him?*

‘Insurance, probably. Or maybe they intended that someone would find you in the desert. No-one will spend any time looking for a boy who they think is dead. If you killed your boyfriend, it’s not a big leap to think you might kill your son. Ill as he is. The headline would be a mercy-killing.

Look, I’m real sorry, Kass. But you’ll have to mourn Pierce, Milo, and anyone else who gets in their way, at a later date. Focus your mind on Josh. It’s all about Josh. We’ll save him, I promise. Think about nothing

else.' His attention had jumped elsewhere, he was encouraging her out from the storeroom.

'What are you doing? What are you looking for?'

'Where did the deputy put your belongings?'

She pointed. 'In that drawer.' She watched as he retrieved the plastic bag with her belongings. 'Really, you're stealing from a dead man?'

'Car keys,' he said. 'You can take the deputy's car, it's unmarked, no one will stop you. There's an unmarked car out back, that'll be his.' He threw her the keys. 'Take the road out of town and head north,' he said. 'The car will have a sat-nav; programme it to find Sky Harbour airport. You still have time. Get yourself onboard that plane.' She felt his hand on her arm. 'Kass, I told you not to talk to *anyone*. These people don't care about collateral damage, remember that.'

She was nodding. She shouldn't have done it. Milo's arm was still hanging through the blinds, like a puppet hanging by a string. 'Who are these people?' She asked. 'Why are they hunting me?'

'Mercenaries, maybe. Special Ops, probably. Whatever it is Spencer gave you, it's worth killing to keep it quiet. Get on that plane. Find Spencer's friends. They're the only ones that can help you decrypt what Spencer gave you. Focus! Or you may not see your son ever again.' He handed her the bag with her belongings. 'The thumb-drive, where is it?'

She put a hand to her groin. 'The only place he didn't search.'

'Well, keep it warm. This isn't over, not by a long shot.'

He was right of course. She knew it.

'He wouldn't have taken to me to Josh, would he?'

'No. The answers we need, that Josh needs, are in Washington. That thumb-drive is the only leverage you have to get him back. You need to stay off everyone's radar, especially the authorities. They want you for murder now, and they'll blame you for this.' He was pointing at Milo. 'Sky Harbour,' he repeated. 'Go, now.' He pushed Milo's car keys into her hand.

The deputy's body was a stark reminder that someone else had lost their boy today. Well, she wasn't going to lose hers. Kass left the sheriff's office, her head in a spin. Not from the chaos, or the blazing guns, but from the sudden calm. She knew well, that this was just the 'eye of the storm'.

* * *

Weldon dragged Three into the back of a police car. 'You find something funny?' He asked. Three grinned through gritted teeth.

Twenty minutes later he'd pulled the police car off-road and was moving at high speed. A cloud of dust lingered behind as he headed for a series of high mounds; once through he steered the vehicle down and into a narrow ravine.

'Fuck, slow down, I'm shot. My ribs broken too.'

'Ride's over, asshole. Time for a chat.'

'Ha ha ha, go fuck yourself. You've got five minutes before my friends are all over this place. You're a dead-man-walking.'

Weldon shifted in the driver's seat, he lifted something small between his fingers. 'You talking about this?' He held a capsule close to the grill that separated them. 'I took the liberty of removing your tracker whilst you were asleep, he shook the tiny transponder. 'Reckon I must have broke it.'

The smile slipped from Three's face. 'Fuck you,' he snarled, as Weldon exited the car and opened the back door. He reached in.

'Get your stinking paws off me,' he was dragged out onto the ground. 'Hey, easy! Fuck, you get off on this sort of thing? Handcuffing people to doors? You're not gonna scare me, you dickhead.'

'But I haven't shown you this yet? Does it get the love-juices flowing now?'

'Oh shit. Come on man, it don't have to be like this.'

‘Hmm, I disagree. And in case you’re wondering, this blade is a full six inches of 420 stainless steel. See here, the serrated spine? Makes this my weapon of choice for opening canned goods. But it does have other uses.’

‘I’ve seen a fucking knife before. Shove it where it hurts.’ The frown that followed suggested he’d said something else.

‘Another good thing about this blade, is it’s heavy,’ He grabbed the hand cuffed to the door. ‘Watch how easy it does this’.

‘Aaargghhhh . . .’ Three’s scream came before coarse profanity and promises of death for Weldon. ‘You cut my fucking finger off . . . you fuck, cunt . . . bastard!’

Weldon grabbed his hand again.

‘No, wait. Don’t, don’t . . . what, what do you want?’

‘Information.’

‘I don’t know anything, I swear I don’t.’

‘You’d be surprised what would be of interest to me.’ He closed the blade on Three’s face. ‘As you can see, we are parked in the middle of a desert. And the one good thing about a desert is, no-one can hear you scream.’

‘What, that’s space you fucking idiot. You got the wrong film,’ Three began to laugh. More hysteria than amusement.

‘You know what, I think you’re right.’

‘No, no, get the fuck off my hand. Don’t do it . . .’

Three’s scream threatened to burst his lungs. A terrible wail that went unheard in the vastness of the Arizona desert.

‘What happened?’ Two’s voice crackled in static, the whirl of the helicopter’s blades overhead. *‘Did you get into a firefight with the sheriff?’*

‘That was no sheriff.’ The radio in Carl’s hand covered in blood. ‘We got bushwhacked by a professional back there.’

‘Boss, where are Three and Four?’

‘Are you listening, we got set up, had to be. How else did he know we were coming?’

‘Three and Four, where are they?’

‘Both down,’ he said.

‘Oh shit, both of them?’

‘Yeah, both of them. Get a clean up team out there asap. Then make an anonymous call to the Arizona state police,’ he began punching the steering wheel. ‘Fuck, fuck, what a fuck-up.’

‘Boss, April’s not going to be happy.’

‘Happy? That’s not a state of mind I recognise right now. Get onto the HUB, I want that site cleansed. And Two, I want to know who that son-of-a-bitch is. You find him, his family, his fucking dog. I’m going to kill them all. Son of a bitch. Son, of, a, bitch!’ His hand slammed against the car’s dashboard. ‘Get that bird on the ground, now. I need EVAC.’

‘Boss, sorry about this. I’ve got April on the line. She’s requesting an update?’

‘Update her on this. Things just got fucking personal.’

‘I’m Agent Gayle, sir. Phoenix office,’ the lean man in a suit held out his hand in welcome. ‘Quantico called and asked Agent Cheedle and I to contain the scene until you arrived. We’ve got State PD doing road-blocks ten miles out in both directions and a local chopper’s flying high, but there’s a lot of ground to cover.’

‘How long has the deputy been dead?’ Asked Santini.

‘According to the coroner the deputy’s been dead a little under four hours.’

Four hours? It wasn’t a long time in most people’s worlds, but for the FBI, chasing down a suspect, it meant a lukewarm trail at best. ‘You’d better fill me in.’

Gayle led him toward the sheriff’s office, he already noticed the skid marks of at least two cars. One coming in, maybe the same vehicle going around back. Another had hot-tailed it toward the highway.

‘Best I can say at the moment is a vehicle came this way, stopped, and then came in fast. We have blood in the dust over there that suggests an impact with at least one, as yet unknown person. We have a firefight at the front of the building, and another at the rear. Phoenix CSI are sweeping inside and out. So far we’ve got blood in numerous places, over a hundred bullet holes, but a lot more were fired. We have several sets of tyre tracks. Looks like it all happened in a hurry. CSI’s have everything on a rush for us, so we can try and make sense of it all.’

‘I don’t suppose there are any witnesses?’

‘No sir, and no video,’ he indicated to the camera above the door. ‘The electrical feed to the office cameras was cut too.’

‘Best guess so far?’

‘Frankly, we’re not sure what to make of this. So far we’ve determined there were at least four shooters, and we have a dead deputy.’

‘Drug cartel?’

Gayle shrugged. ‘Deputy Milo’s log records he made a stop on the highway, and then found twenty kilos of cocaine in the trunk. That was early this morning. If this was a cartel hit, it was seriously overkill. Way too much attention to be drawn. My guess is that something went down here, and then went very, very wrong.’

‘All right, show me inside.’ *This isn’t a local indifference, that’s for sure.* ‘Make sure they swab the inside of the cell. And check the webcams on the computers. Let’s find out if this is really drug related?’ *Christ, it looks like the Terminator came to town.* ‘Only one body recovered?’

‘Yes sir, just over there. We found the deputy caught up in the blinds. CSIs determined one shooter from the front, and another at the rear. Someone was shooting back, and in both directions. Shots fired from the storeroom doorway,’ Gayle crouched. ‘from here, and a few paces this way back, the shots were fired toward the office. The bullet casings suggest the same gun firing in both directions. There were no bullets discharged from the deputy’s firearm, it was still holstered.’

‘So who was doing the shooting from the inside? You said four shooters?’

‘At least, we think that two men went down. CSI found a blood pool on the floor in the back room, and more out front. They think the blood loss in the back was probably from a fatality. Someone had to drag the bodies away. It was the sheriff’s deputy who called us, that’s him out back there with Agent Cheedle. He stopped by on his way home from the hospital. His wife is about to give birth. He had the day off.’ Gayle pointed. ‘That’s the deceased deputy lying under the sheet.’ He checked his note book. ‘Deputy’s name is Milo Hunther.’

Santini stepped through the storeroom out into the sunshine. 'Deputy? Hey Deputy?'

'Max, sir. Everyone calls me Max.'

'Okay, Max. Tell me what you know.'

It didn't look like much. And at what age were they hiring deputies nowadays, anyways? He had the classic *Jock* appearance, fresh from college, and about ready to puke. The man seemed shattered, shocked; pulverised by the carnage back in the office. 'Deputy?' Santini clicked his fingers. 'I'm sorry but I need your full attention.'

'Yes, sorry, it's just. It's Milo, sir? Someone shot him. I, I should have been on duty today. It's my wife, Jenny, she's pregnant. It was another false-alarm. It should have been me in there.'

'Be grateful that you weren't, or your kid would be growing up without his father. Now tell me what you know.'

'Well nothing much, sir. When I got here, I found Milo. What am I going to tell his mother?'

'That he died with honour, and in the line-of-duty.' He allowed what seemed like a sympathetic pause. 'You told dispatch that there was a warrant in his hand?'

'Yes, clutched tight, and covered in blood.'

'Max, you can't help Deputy Milo. But if we act quickly enough we might be able to catch whoever did this. That's something you *can* tell his mother.'

'Sure, yeah, of course. It was the Krane fugitive. You know, the woman who's been on TV. The one wanted for the murder in Los Angeles. Milo had started to type out the report, its still up on the screen.'

'I phoned the bakery,' said Gayle, 'they confirmed that Deputy Hunther arrested a woman and left to bring her back to the office. She was cuffed when they left. '

'And the description matches Krane?'

'It's a close fit. She was blonde, but most of the features match.'

‘Is that why *you’re* here? Not because of Milo?’

‘Max, get yourself some coffee, son. We’ll take over from here. And Deputy, tell his mother, we will find out who killed her son.’

‘Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.’

‘You making promises the bureau can’t keep, Special Agent.’

‘I hope not, Agent Gayle. Show me around.’

The office mimicked a combat zone in down town Iraq.

‘At a rough count I’d say, over a hundred bullets fired? Shell casings were everywhere, inside and out. Best guess at the moment is we have automatic weapons on the outside and small arms fired in here. Who, and why, I have no idea. There’s an SUV outside riddled with bullet holes. Plates have come back as phoney. No VIN numbers. We’ll take it in to Forensics in Phoenix. Department of Homeland Security have a top notch facility there. You realise that DOHS will want in on this. They’ll want to rule this out as a terrorist attack.’

‘This was no terrorist attack.’

‘You think it has something to do with the Krane woman?’

‘Or it’s one hell of a coincidence. Everywhere she goes, bodies get left behind. I have an unconfirmed report that a white female, fitting Krane’s description, is wanted by the Mexican authorities. She’s a person of interest in a double homicide. Krane seems to be a one girl war zone.’

‘Well I’m glad that it’s your case and not mine.’

‘Hmm, it seems that I’m chasing down an exemplary police officer, with no military experience, who’s out there on a killing spree. Everyone I’ve spoken to respects and likes this woman.

‘So what went wrong?’

‘Her kid became terminally ill? The facts as we know them; Krane’s insurance turns out to be a bum-deal. The hospital sends her the bill. It seems the doctors won’t care for the boy until she pays up. She gets angry at the world.’

‘You don’t look convinced.’

‘Her colleague and friend told me she’d accepted financial support from a well-known charity. She’d been asked not to say anything, as part of the deal. The problem is, they’ve denied making any advance to her. So far Krane’s kid is still missing. Her lover gets brutally slain. Officer Krane turns up in Mexico involved in another alleged murder. Now she’s popped up in Arizona, having got herself involved in a small war, and the murder of a local deputy?’

‘There’s one other thing sir. Five minutes after the deputy called this in, we got an anonymous call to report gunshots from this area.’

‘Anonymous? There’s nothing anonymous about all of this.’

‘Please tell me this is good news, Peters?’ April had the phone to her ear, her arms on the desk, her head in her hands as she listened.

She’d take anything right now. The Krane woman was fast becoming a headache. Fortune should have let her shoot the bitch in the head? Let Pullman *bury* her in the desert along with Spencer? But she “wasn’t seeing the bigger picture”. The client wanted a fall-guy, or girl as it turned out. It seemed they’d overplayed that particular scenario.

‘FBI is on the scene,’ said Peters ‘A request has been made by Homeland Security to assist, they’ve also made a call to the State Department. They’re insisting on jurisdiction because they think it may be a terrorist attack. FBI is playing it down, but it’s out there attracting attention.’

‘Can we keep it with the Feds?’

‘Mr Fortune is making calls as we speak. We’re throwing out a drug cartel involvement. The deputy arrested a courier with a shit load of cocaine in her trunk. Intelligence suggests that they wanted it back. Our operatives sanitised the scene before the helicopter was recalled. We’ve cleaned up the deputy’s call logs, and done a remote access to his computer. They’ll find what we want them to find. No reason anyone should be the wiser.’

‘And Carl?’

‘Err, he’s gone off the grid. Last report had Two inbound with the chopper. Nothing since. Would you like me to ping their cells again?’

‘You do more than ping them. I want Carl’s report of what happened. You remind him who he works for, Peters. And find that fucking woman. I want her nailed down before she creates any more chaos.’

“You have arrived at your destination.”

Those were beautiful words from the sat-nav after two hours of trying to drive, normally. But what was normal when you’re a fugitive from every law enforcement agency in America. Trying to drive at the speed limit is hell when all your foot wants to do is hit the gas. Go fast. Get out of Dodge. Kass’ neck ached from her constant vigil in the mirrors. Any second now, from any turning, they could come at her again. Nausea and migraine were now permanent travel companions.

“Leave your car in long stay parking,” that’s what Weldon had told her to do. At least she’d remembered to do that. The temptation to park outside the airport and sprint through to departures was intense, but denied.

Inside the terminal the crowds helped, but failed to stop her need to puke. The door to the toilet-stall slammed shut.

Breathe. No good, her head dropped and she retched. *Oh God.* Out it came again. She didn’t care that people were outside. This small cubicle; the liberating feeling of letting it all out. *Breathe, Kass.* She flushed; sucked in the lemony scented fresh air. Exited the stall for the sink to splash cold water across her face. A dozen more women entered, and left, but she barely noticed. Not one of them paid her any heed, which felt wonderful.

I can do this. She shed the same stupid feelings she’d had before, that had caused an innocent man to die. *Look at you, you’re a mess.* She teased

her hair. *You're a trained fucking cop. Start acting like one.* She checked her watch. Thirty minutes until the gate closed. Now, if only she could stop her hands shaking.

The glasses helped her to feel like someone else. She took her new passport out and held it up against the mirror. *The person in that photo is you. It's you, Kass, it's you. You're a cop going deep under-cover. The only way to find your son is to play the game. Focus, girl. Believe it's who you are.*

This time she didn't startle when the door opened. She smiled and thanked the person who held it open for her to leave.

Stay calm, look straight ahead. Talk to no-one.

She smiled at the lady at check-in.

"No, I have no luggage. No, I do not require an upgrade. I have no sharp objects, or liquids. *I have no freaking reason to carry a bomb on board.* She seemed nice, and handed her a ticket to board.

Kass kept her gaze down as she walked through to departures. She took a seat and waited, what seemed an eternity.

'Thank you,' said the stewardess after inspecting her boarding card. She invited Kass to turn left. Smiled as she explained her seat was halfway down, and on the right.

Look at them. She was desperate to look about at the other passengers, some seated, others still shuffling by. She clicked her belt into place, not realising how hard she grasped it, or that she didn't let it go. *Any one of these people could be an assassin. Or a Federal Agent? Why won't they just sit down and take their seats?*

The stewardess that had welcomed her pulled the airplane door shut, sealing the heavy locking mechanism with a turn clockwise.

No delays. Please God, don't let there be a delay. She was feeling herself begin to panic again. *My glasses? Shit, where are my glasses?* Her skin registered a sudden pulse of perspiration. *Where . . . ? Shit, they're on my head.* Blood pressure, heart rate, and adrenaline, all began to rise. *Why aren't we moving?* The chime of the seat-belt sign lighting caused a

chemical spike through her body. With it the realisation her hands hurt, she held the belt-clasp so tightly. Then pure relief as the aircraft began to move.

A few minutes later Kass felt the ecstasy and freedom as the rumble from the plane's wheels calmed as they left the ground. Her hands released the belt-clasp.

In just over four hours she'd be in Washington DC.

‘Mam, we have a positive identification on the deputy’s car. Phoenix PD has found it parked at Sky Harbour airport.’

‘The airport? Where the hell is she going? Fuck, does Sky Harbour fly International?’

‘Yes, Mam.’

‘Get a team there, asap. I want her photo shown to every international desk in the airport. Peters, check the internal flights too, just in case.’

‘On it. Oh, and I’ve managed to track down One and Two. They’re holed up at a motel near a place called Gila Bend. It’s close to Phoenix. One, has a minor gunshot wound, nothing serious. Shall I divert them to the airport?’

Her temptation was to divert Carl into an oncoming truck, but he was still the best she had in the area.

Think April, think.

‘Get two teams to the airport,’ she said. ‘I want Carl camped down outside until we find out where she’s gone. When we have a destination, send Carl on a trip to find . . . What? *I swear, I’ll cut your fucking hand off you raise it to shut me up again.*’ ‘You have something else to say?’

‘Err, yes, sorry Mam. Just hearing it now,’ he pointed to his ear-mike. ‘Mexican Police picked up a local man driving our un-sub’s, red pick-up. We have an agent on the ground talking to him. Waiting for his report now, ah, he’s just logged on. Un-sub. He is white, five feet eleven inches.

We have a name, Mam. Weldon Smith. And we have confirmation, our man is a white American.'

'His name's, Smith?'

'Yes, Mam, it also appears we have his dog in custody.'

'His dog?'

'A grey lurcher, answers to the name of Boon.'

'Would his first name be Daniel?'

'Not known at this time, Mam.'

That was levity you idiot

'Mam, now we know who we're looking for,' he was back at his terminal. Tapping at his keyboard. One of the monitors above changed to a high view of what April assumed was the lobby of a bank.

'What am I looking at?' She asked.

'That's the town's bank,' he replied. 'Now we know who we're looking for, it's possible we can get an image from the security camera. I've already uploaded a sniffer into the mainframe. Narrowing down it's parameters. Here we go . . . Weldon Smith has two deposit accounts. If you want I can make his funds disappear? If nothing else it might piss him off.'

'Do it.'

More tapping at keys. 'It's done. But this is interesting. One of the accounts is regularly funded from a foreign source. I'll start a trace, but it will take time. In the meantime I'm hacking the local branch's surveillance logs, which I might add is like taking candy from a small Mexican child. Here we go, last Thursday. Facial recognition is searching for white males, of which we have, one. Say hello to, Weldon Smith.'

An image of a man walking into the bank. He was tardily dressed, and sporting a full beard. His hair was long, his fringe over his eye. The baseball cap on his head didn't help. Smith walked across to the teller's window. Peters paused the image.

'Is that it? Can't you clean it up? We need a better image than that?'

‘I’ll try, Mam. Bank record say he visits the bank once a year. I’m running it double time on my screen here. No, sorry, he doesn’t look up at any of the cameras. Leave it with me. I’ll see how far back I can go.’

So this is our mystery gunman. She supposed the grainy image above was better than none. *Who are you? Why have you involved yourself with Krane?*

‘Try this one,’ said Peters.

The image changed. Smith wore the same cap, had the same facial hair. April walked down from the gantry onto the HUB’s floor. She looked up at the screen. Despite Smith’s obvious attempt to disguise himself, she recognised the years of combat and training behind his eyes. He hadn’t meant to look up, he’d been distracted. A chance occurrence that was bad for him, but good for her. The same questions on her mind.

Who the fuck is Cassandra Krane to you? Why did you get yourself involved?

‘More good news, Mam. Homeland has just conceded jurisdiction back to the Feds. The Ajo shooting has been downgraded; there’ll be no official Homeland involvement. Press release will blame it on a drug cartel shootout.’

‘Good, let Carl know. That’s one fuck-up he won’t have to answer for.’ *Finally, we seem to be getting a handle on the situation.* ‘Run that man through facial,’ she ordered. ‘Every law enforcement in the country. Run Interpol, and CIA. Try military as well. Find out who that man is.’

‘On it,’ Peters replied.

‘Carl?’ Two stopped the car’s window halfway down. ‘Carl?’

He was urinating against a dark green Cadillac’s wheel-hub. A quick shake, and he zipped up. ‘What?’ His mood still not improved. The flesh wound he’d suffered still hurt like hell.

‘The Krane chick, she’s jumped on a flight up at Sky Harbour. The HUB has teams up there combing the local traffic to confirm which one. Oh, and April is on the wire for you, again. She’s pretty insistent. Probably not a good idea to keep putting her off.’

‘Insistent, I’ll bet she is.’ *Stay professional, Carl. The only way to find him, is to find her.* Best to get it over and done with. ‘Put her on.’

Two tapped the touch screen and spun the pad.

‘You’re hot.’

‘April, your guys fumbled the ball.’ He had no intention of listening to her whine on about accountability. ‘Why the fuck didn’t we know we had hostiles on our six? That mother-fucker took out half my team before we got a shot-off.’ He grabbed the pad through the window. April’s image less than welcome to him.

‘What’s done is done, Carl. We have the situation contained, that’s all that matters. A clean up crew sanitised the evidence so the Feds think what we want them to.’

Really, is that it? Not going to shout and scream at me?

‘Consider this a wake-up call, Carl. We have a professional in the mix, and it’s still unclear whether another agency is involved. But we suspect

not. I'm sending you a face; we don't have a name yet. The HUB will sniff him out.'

Carl gestured with his fingers, come on come on, as Two leant out of the window trying to open the file from above. April's face disappeared, and the image of Smith replaced her.

'Ha, ha, ha, is that it? Some hobo drawing his pension? I don't think so.'

"When we know, you'll know. What we've confirmed, is Krane has taken to the air, and I want you on the first plane to wherever that bird has flown. She's got a few hours head-start but we're reeling her in. Stay focused on the woman, Carl. Find her, appropriate the package, and then make her disappear. And do not let that bastard get the better of you again."

The line went dead.

'She's not too happy, boss.'

'What did I say about happy? Not, on, the spectrum!'

'Just saying. Look, it's not a good idea to have April all moody with us. Let's just get this job done, and move on. Maybe get a job on a nice tropical island. Carl? Carl, are we cool?'

Carl was nodding. *We'll get the job done all right, but we'll get our hobo as well. If it's the last thing I do, I'll put a bullet in the smug bastard's face.*

'Sure,' he reassured Two. 'Job done. Nothing else matters.'

Kass' flight had seemed eternal. She'd tried to sleep, but in vain. Closing her eyes served up too many unwanted images from the past few days. Her feeling of nausea increased with her stress the closer they got to DC; not knowing what, or who, might be waiting when the plane touched-down.

She needn't have worried. With no baggage to reclaim she left the terminal within minutes of leaving the plane. It was dark outside and barely a queue to wait for a cab. Within twenty minutes she was sat on soft leather and leaving Dulles International airport behind. It was somehow a blessing that the cab-driver spoke poor English. He'd rolled up in line and opened the door for her; no way it was set-up.

'Hi, my name is Arkahn,' he smiled almost turning fully around in his seat. I am honest driver. Please, you to tell me which way?'

From his skin tone and accent, Kass deduced he was from Armenia, or maybe Poland; somewhere in Eastern Europe.

'DC,' she said. 'Take me into DC.'

'Pleasure for me,' he replied.

Airport Road was busy, the fading light outside a pleasure.

The road leading into the airport a procession of headlights, the faces inside becoming harder to see. She felt a kind of peace as the cab mixed into traffic on the 267. The highway signs proclaiming her destination to be near, the towns of Reston, and Wolftrap passing by.

The driver explaining, “how good the traffic was this evening,” and “how lucky she was to have such light traffic and be to riding in his cab.”

‘How long?’ She asked.

‘No more than sixty, or maybe seventy minutes to DC centre,” he replied, the smile never leaving his lips.

Kass pulled her knees to her chest and nestled into the head-rest, watching the traffic pass them by. Arkahn talked, and looked back, but Kass wasn’t listening.

‘Please to tell Arkahn where to go?’ He asked her again.

The next junction was for Pimmit Hills, wherever that was.

‘Lady, please, I need road to take. Which one?’

Where do I go? She felt like an alien dropped into DC from outer space. How odd it seemed that she’d never been to the capital. ‘Foggy Bottom,’ she said, and somehow felt silly saying it.

‘Okay, you give street when we get there, yes?’

‘Yes.’

That was easier than saying she didn’t know where she was heading. *Find the nearest hotel, get some sleep?* New signs sweeping by outside. The road had joined Interstate 66. At least this was a highway she’d heard of. As were the name signs they passed. Rosslyn, and Arlington.

Is that true? Did Weldon really tend to the graves at Arlington? Or is it just another one of his stories?

The old house and grounds once occupied by the Confederate General, Robert E. Lee, conjured images of trees in blossom, meadows of grass filled with flowers in full bloom and thousands of grave markers for American soldiers. Maybe not such an enticing place when strangers were hell-bent on ending your life.

The cab entered the western end of a bridge; Kass could see the lights of the city. Six lanes of heavy traffic crossing the river below, three passing on either side. To her left and below were dark and ominous waters.

‘Please be looking to your left. Below us the great Potomac River. Is back to front over four hundred miles. Here we are Virginia, on other side we become Maryland. This most famous river in America. Many big battle done in civil war.’

She sat up. *You’re a tour guide now?* She figured the driver was trying to raise a tip. *Best of luck.* The window felt cold against her cheek as she gawked down at the flow of water below the bridge. *So that’s the Potomac?*

‘Please to look down at Thedor Rusiefelt island.’

‘Theodor Roosevelt,’ she corrected. *Honestly, if you’re going to give the tour, learn the lingo.*

‘Sorry, will learn, much better soon.’ His smile had faded. He looked frightened to death.

‘No, no. Please, I’m so sorry. I’m having a bad day,’ she was staring through the windscreen. ‘Is that the Lincoln Memorial over there?’ She pointed.

‘Yes, is good time to come. Look, see, the Washington monument. And there is the big White House. Is beautiful for you as is for me, yes? I come to land of opportunity soon. Make good life for family. Is good, yes?’

‘Yes.’ *Yes it is.* ‘It’s a damn good country to live in,’ she said.

The big chalky edifice in the distance lifted her spirit. The White House dome was lit like a beacon of hope. *Surely this is a sign. Oh Josh.*

The edifice passed to their right as they left the bridge, the cab bearing left down the Potomac freeway. The wonderful monuments snatched away by the lights of the cars and the Freeway.

‘Now, please. To tell Arkahn which hotel you stay?’

‘I want to go to a place called K-street? You know where that is?’

‘Sure, everyone know. You want K-street, east or west?’

Good question, she didn’t know. It was a heads or tails moment, so she chose. ‘West.’

‘Is good choice. I take you Pennsylvania Avenue, and then to Washington Circle, is much quickest route.’

‘Take whatever route you like, I’m in no hurry.’ The thought of leaving the cab in the heart of a strange city, Capital or not, it filled Kass with dread? ‘Is it safe? Is K-street a safe place?’

‘Oh yes, is safest city in America. I live here, with my family. I have six children. Is safe, I promise.’

Pennsylvania Avenue was a blend of tall buildings and lush green trees. So different to Los Angeles. There was an older, more European charm at work here. Washington had the warmth and character that most cities she’d been to had lacked. Just the name, Washington, conjured up a historical past. There was a cosmopolitan air that swirled about the colourful canopies on both sides. It was shame she hadn’t come to shop.

Kass settled back into the corner of the seat and watched the city go by. She had no idea what would happen, or what she would find, when they finally pulled up in K-street.

But when they did, in that one moment as she left the cab, she knew she’d no longer be running. She’d be on the offensive and looking for answers.

Kass was going to get her son back.

How much for the ride?

She counted the fare out in twenties. No wonder Arkahn smiled so much, it was daylight bloody robbery. She watched him pull away into a steady traffic. The sound of car horns in the distance.

Which way? Apart from the heavy traffic she saw nothing to indicate which direction. *Think, Kass, think.* She recited the passage again, out loud, as if it might help.

‘My real name is Granville Spencer. Find me. Tell Megatron what you found. Jay feeds the Sabbath Angels. Kst19foggybottom. Please, tell Grace I’m sorry. You must run, take Josh and leave. Now.’

Nothing happened.

Weldon thinks it’s a bus route. She looked around for a bus stop. She found a bus instead, passing slowly by and indicating to pull over. Ordinary people filing slowly out through its doors, no more than fifty metres ahead. To her surprise the Stop Sign above the pavement read.

KSt & 19thSt NW

Kass began to run. The bus that idled below the sign was big and red, the smell of diesel fumes hard to ignore. The door still invitingly open. Weldon had to be right. He had to be. Kst19 was a bus stop, and the bus seemed to be waiting for her.

She launched herself onto the bus, frightened it might leave without her. 'How much?' She asked the driver. 'Sorry, running late,' she added.

'One dollar,' he replied. 'It's less than a Big Mac and you get to ride me all day.'

What? She was sure he didn't mean it quite the way it sounded.

The man sat behind the wheel had a Santa Clause thing going on. All belly and beard, but wearing the wrong colour uniform.

'Change a twenty?' She asked.

He shook his head and pointed toward the news stand opposite. Then put the bus into gear.

'Can you wait?'

'Sorry, got a schedule to keep. There's another bus in ten.'

'But you're empty. Please, I'll just be two minutes? Fine, keep the change.'

It was Weldon's money that she dropped in the bowl. The doors swished closed and the bus lurched forward. Kass grabbing for a seat to steady herself.

'Hey, if I said, *Grace*, to you. Would it mean anything?'

'That you want to take me for dinner?'

'No, no.' *Dear God, no.* 'How long can I ride on you?' *Dear God, did I really say that?*

'Lady, I've got eight more stops and I'm going home. Not to be rude, but if you could take a seat,' he looked straight ahead, and then back at Kass. 'It's against company policy for anyone to stand in the cab area. What Lady?'

'I don't know.' *Talk to him, say something.*

'Fine, I'm guessing you've never been to DC before?' He asked as they rounded the Washington Circle.

'No, never. Wow, is that George Washington in the middle?'

'It is.'

'Wow,' she said again.

‘George was made of bronze and erected in 1860. In summer there’s no finer place to sit and enjoy the Washington sunshine. Flowers up real pretty in spring as well.’

‘It looks nice now.’ Everywhere she looked there were trees filled with colourful lights. The night-time illumination from the stores gave the street a subtle glow. ‘Grace,’ she said, ‘are you absolutely sure?’

The driver shook his head as the bus continued down the K-street freeway. Two more stops and they headed north. A third stop and a young couple stepped inside. An elderly woman showed her bus-pass as she climbed onboard. Kass offered a gratefully accepted hand.

‘Excuse me; do any of you know the whereabouts of the Sabbath Angels?’ *Hey, it’s only a question.* ‘No? How about Grace? Anyone know a place, or a landmark, got a relative with the same name?’ *Okay, no need to look like that.* ‘What about you,’ she turned back to the driver. ‘Know anything about Sabbath Angels?’ *No? I thought bus drivers were supposed to be helpful?* ‘Where exactly does this bus go?’ She asked.

‘I follow the freeway until Wisconsin, which is where we are turning now. Hey buddy! What, I’m not big enough for you to see?’ The bus’ horn was loud enough to rupture an ear-drum. ‘You too, asshole, he shouted. ‘Okay, so now we follow Wisconsin until crossing Pennsylvania Avenue. Pennsylvania will take us back down to the Washington Circle. From there I follow K-street all the way down to Union Station. After that, I get to home.’

Santa gave her a fluffy grin. He’d obviously gone stir-crazy on his bus. Whatever it was that Spencer wanted her to find, maybe it wasn’t this route.

‘Excuse me dear,’ the old woman who’d sat in the front seat was keen to attract her attention.

‘Yes?’ Kass sat next to her. She was frail and had a walking-stick clutched in her hands. ‘Did you say you were looking for, *Grace?*’

‘I did.’ *What, where?* Kass followed the direction offered by a gruesomely gnarled finger.

‘Could that be her?’

*Oh yeah, maybe? ‘Whoa, whoa, stop the bus.’ Could that be her, Grace?
Oh dear God, it has to be.*

Right there in front of them, hanging on the gable of the church, a cross, and beneath it letters that formed the words . . .

G R A C E - Episcopal Church

The air brakes on the bus hissed as the driver made an unscheduled stop.

The bus roared away up Wisconsin as Kass stared at the sign.

A building just off the main bus route. She had to cross another road to get there. But this was it, it had to be.

‘Grace’ in big bright letters. *This is where Spencer wanted me to come?* Grace, was a church.

The path to the door was shingled and short. Some tall, and very old trees reached up from the grass to spread their limbs above the building’s roof. A wooden archway covered in ivy, inside a wooden door. She wasn’t sure whether to knock first.

No, the house of God is always open. At least she hoped it was. The brass latch was heavy as she lifted it and pushed the door inward, and the house of God was revealed.

No sign of habitation as she walked into a church that seemed much bigger on the inside. Perhaps it was the vaulted ceiling that gave an air of grandeur as it ascended high on massive rafters. The walls whitewashed. Below were row upon row of pews. Kass closed the door and walked timidly inside.

For all her use of God’s name, she hadn’t been inside a church for a long time. She closed her eyes and remembered the last time, with her mum, just before she died.

Please God, if you’re really up there, help me out. ‘Holy crap!’ A pigeon fluttered out from somewhere in the rafters. Not the sign she was

looking for. 'Hello? Anyone home?' This time much louder. 'Hellooo, Vicar?'

'You'll have to go to a Catholic church for one of those, we're all Protestants here,' said a kindly voice from behind.

Kass took a step back as she turned. 'Im so sorry,' she said. 'It startled me . . . You startled me.' He was shorter than Kass, and wore glasses. The kind that seem to made of wire. The lenses much thicker than most.

'Hi,' she said.

'We try to avoid profanity,' he replied, and made the sign of the cross in the air. 'I'm Grace's Rector, Joshua. May I be of assistance?' He spoke in a soft and unassuming voice. 'If you've come for evening service, it finished an hour ago. But please, feel free to take a seat and offer prayer to our Lord.'

Kass couldn't tell if the Rector looked young for his age, or the opposite. She wasn't going to ask. It was enough that he offered a smile of welcome, his hand offering her to sit.

'We don't charge here at Grace's.'

She wasn't sure how to respond to this unassuming man, stood before her in a black suit and the white collar.

'Are you lost, child?' He asked

'Yes,' she said. 'I think I'm supposed to be here, but I'm not sure.'

'The house-of-God is always a good place to be. Please, take a seat. If you ask for His help, I'm sure he will give it.'

Now she was shaking her head. Not prayer, not here. *Mum?* This was too weird.

'Can I interest you in some tea, and perhaps a cookie?'

'Oh, no, thank you.'

'Would you like to talk?'

'Yes. Oh, no, not like that,' she didn't need saving or anything. 'Look, this might sound a bit, well, crazy.'

'Crazy?' He smiled at that. 'I can assure you that after forty seven years in the service of our Lord, I've heard a lot of crazy.'

Well, that settles the age thing. He's young looking for his age.

'Please, why don't you take a seat. I can talk for two until you find the words.'

She supposed that would be okay, and sank onto a wooden seat. She slid along to let the Pastor alongside.

'I've done missionary work on five different continents,' he said. 'I've counselled in eight Rehabs to help with addiction, and spent fifteen years visiting prisoners at various correctional and penitentiary institutions. So, yes my dear, I've heard *a lot* of crazy.'

But for the record, the worse thing I've ever done is teach Sunday school to the under-sixes. Now that's a whole world of crazy that trumps them all.'

It was difficult not to smile, he seemed so nice. So friendly. Slimmer bifocals emerged from a case he took from his pocket. He swapped them for his everyday glasses and took a bible from below the seat in front. Joshua sat with the good book on his lap, hands folded together around it. 'You have the eyes of a mother who's feeling pain,' he said.

'What?'

'I've counselled many parents who've suffered bereavement. I see the same signs in you.'

She was nodding, resisting a sudden need to let her eyes burst with tears. *They took my son . . .* A moment later she was sobbing, and spilling everything. Fortune, the clinic, Wild Bill Weldon . . . *Josh*. Every crappy stressful moment was vomited into his lap. Only it wasn't. She daredn't say the words, not after, Milo.

Stop looking at me like I need a Samaritan. Now wasn't the time. But she was grateful that he wanted to listen.

'I expect you'll talk when the time is right,' he said. 'Maybe I can help with the questions that sound, *crazy*?'

She was nodding again. Not knowing where to start, or how much to reveal. 'I don't suppose you'd know anything about the Sabbath Angels?'

'Sabbath Angels? What would you like to know?'

Really? ‘You know what they are?’

‘Of course. We have a *flock* of Sabbath Angels. Most Twitchers call them Cape May Warblers. Beautiful birds that fly all the way to DC from the West Indies. How they manage to find us every year is beyond me, but I count as many as fifty or sixty some years. They make a pit stop in the cemetery on their migration north for the summer.’

‘Sabbath Angels are birds?’

‘Yes, the first Rectors of the church named them Sabbath Angels. They perpetuated a story that the birds would arrive on the first Sunday of every Spring. Personally, I think they may have used a slice or two of poetic licence. Or the birds aren’t nearly as prompt as they used to be. Either way, they always turn up around this time.’

Dare she ask? *What if this is some bizarre coincidence?* ‘Do you happen to know someone called, Jay?’

‘I do, yes. She’s a lovely young lady who volunteers in the church three times a week.’

‘Is she here now?’ Kass asked.

‘If it’s after six?’ He checked his watch. ‘Yes, you should find Jay out in the cemetery, she’ll be feeding the birds. Not the Warblers, you’re a little too late for them. But I think you’ll find her out there enjoying the night air. Sometimes she talks to the residents, some have been here for over two hundred years.’

Why is he frowning? What’s wrong?

‘May I ask, are you a friend of hers?’

‘No, but I know someone who is, or was. He asked me to come and find her.’

‘Ahh, would that friend be away on business? She used to receive a call, every night at the same time. She’s been a bit of a lost soul these last few weeks. I think she’s missing him. It’s been some time since I’ve seen her talking to him on the phone.’

This was like Tetris. The blocks kept falling, all landing in place.

Oh God, it's Spencer that calls her. He must have stopped calling when he was in the clinic. What am I going to say to her? 'Please, I'd like to see her,' she said.

'Of course. Please, follow me.'

Kass rose from her seat as Joshua showed her the way.

'May I ask you,' he said, 'do you bring bad news?'

Kass nodded. 'Yes, I think I do.'

'Then let me ask you to be gentle with her. Jay has a kind, *but* somewhat complex soul. She's far more fragile than she may appear.'

Kass waited, expectant, unsure if he was going to share more. He didn't.

'This way,' he said. 'Through to the end of the aisles, it's the door on your left. You'll find her outside in the cemetery.'

The sweet smell of jasmine hung in the air as Kass left the church. It was unusual to see the snow coloured petals so vibrant, and so late in bloom across the boundary wall. The cemetery itself a smooth carpet of fresh grass.

It wasn't difficult to feel the past here, not with so many head-stones and markers. It was death, but at arms length; the tenants in the ground long since passed on, and seemingly at peace.

Is that her? A young woman throwing bread to the birds? They in turn full of mischief and song as they fluttered up and down to feed. *Is that you, Jay?* Kass took a slow breath laced with anticipation. This was going to be awkward. What to say? Where to start? *Look at her; she's barely a woman. More of a girl passed recently from her teen into her twenties.*

What difference did it make, she didn't know this woman. She owed her nothing. No, there was no need to tell her about Spencer. All that was necessary, was the girl provided her with answers. Kass took the thumb-drive from her pocket.

A stranger, Spencer; he'd given his life for this? He'd risked his life to save her and Josh. Why was it so important?

Oh crap, she's seen me.

As the gap between them closed, the girl acknowledged her. She seemed happy to welcome the harbinger of ill-tidings. How to tell this young, fresh faced woman? Six feet away now and she could see the girl's eyes, they were blue. Her hair long and blonde. The dim-light from

beyond the cemetery caught the angles on her face. “Elvish features” that’s how Josh would describe her. Her demeanour filled with welcome as she pushed her hair back behind tiny ears.

‘Hello,’ she said with surprise.

For crying out loud, how do I do this? Her next words would likely shatter this young woman’s world beyond repair.

‘Hi.’ Kass replied, and raised a smile, more in sympathy than than reception. ‘Isn’t it lovely out here. May I sit?’

Jay nodded approvingly as if keen to share the night air. She lifted a cell-phone from the bench beside her, and seemed to covet it in her hands.

‘Thank you,’ said Kass.

‘Sorry, I’m waiting for a call,’ she placed the bread back in the bag she held, then shrugged.

‘Important?’ Asked Kass.

‘A friend, he tries to call every Thursday. He’s away working in a foreign country,’ another shrug.

Kass sat, unable to take her eyes off this woman. She seemed so, so, nice, and was obviously waiting for a call that would never come.

What the hell do I say?

‘Jay? Is your name, Jay?’

‘Yes, do I know you?’ A more defensive posture, did that mean she had something to hide?

‘My names’s Cassandra. I spoke to Joshua, the Rector. He told me I’d find you out here.’

‘Have you come to feed the birds? It’s nice to know that they sleep with full bellies, don’t you think?’ She pulled out a crust and broke small pieces. ‘I’ve never seen you here before; have you lost someone recently?’

‘Yes, I’ve lost my son.’ Five words that filled Kass with resolve.

‘Oh, that’s terrible,’ Jay sat and put a hand on Kass thigh. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Oh God, she's waiting for Spencer. He's not going to ring. He's not going to call. 'Do you come here often?' The overused phrase came out and she hated herself for it.

'Often,' she replied. I come here most evenings to feed the birds. Are you feeling all right?'

'I'm on the run,' Kass said, 'and I'm looking for answers.'

Jay's hand retracted. As if to show no concern she began to throw bred. 'The closest I get to adventure is made of pixels on my computer monitor.'

Your what? 'Jay, I need your help.'

'Why, I don't know anything. Sorry, but I think it's time I went home.'

No, wait, please,' Kass stood. *Just fucking say it. You're, boyfriend? He's dead. And I don't want to join him.* 'They've got my son,' a whisper was all she could muster.

'I love them, computers.'

'What?'

'They're like babies; so cute, and full of innocence. They need to be looked after. Constantly fed and cleaned. I'm a binary-babe,' she said, 'and proud of it. What's not to love about ones and zeros, they're so . . . Precise.'

'Computers suck.' *Tell her, Kass. Get it over with.* Truth was, a conversation seemed easier than the truth. 'Did you come here alone?' Jay asked, she was looking now, around the graveyard.

'Yes, I'm alone.' Kass edged back a pace. She wasn't too keen on the way Jay's eyes had narrowed with suspicion. Her innocence had hardened to a menacing half-look. She looked down at the phone again, its screen a magnet to her attention.

'It's not going to ring.' *There, I've said it.* It was out there now. Kass waited for a reaction.

'Why would you say that? Who isn't going to phone?'

'Spencer,' she'd said his name with as much sympathy as she knew how.

It was done. She couldn't take it back. Jay's thumb ceased its endless caress of the phone. Sadness transcended to fear as her hands clasped and wrapped it from sight. Her lips opened and her eyes began to water.

'Why would you say that?' She asked. 'Don't you dare say that.'

'You're waiting for Spencer to call you. I'm so sorry, but he'll never call again.'

'No, you're lying.'

'He's never let you down before, has he? He always calls, doesn't he?'

'Yes. He *will* call.'

'Spencer was working in a clinic in Mexico, for some very bad people.' Silence. *I'm going to have to say it out loud. No misunderstandings.*

'They murdered him, Jay.' Now her own eyes were watering. 'And they've kidnapped my son.' *Stop shaking your head, it's true.* 'I don't know who *they* are, but I was hoping you could help me. Help me find Josh. Find my baby.'

Kass let the words sink in.

'He gave me something before he died.'

This wasn't good, she was losing her. Poor kid, her eyes had welled with tears, which fell one after the other from her cheeks. And she'd begun to tremble; a rapid denial from her head. The motion speaking aloud, that it couldn't be true.

'You're lying,' she said.

‘Jay, Spencer gave me something before he died. Whatever it was, he was willing to give his life, to make sure it got to you.’

‘Don’t touch me,’ she withdrew. ‘I don’t know you. Who the hell are you, anyway? What gives you the right to come here and lie to me?’

“My real name is Granville Spencer. Find me. Tell Megatron what you found. Jay feeds the Sabbath Angels. Kst19foggybottom. Please, tell Grace I’m sorry. You must run, take Josh and leave. Now.” That was the message he gave me. He knew what they were doing at that clinic was illegal, and so do you, don’t you? He was at that clinic to find evidence of something, and they killed him for it’

The words were like a hot poker on an open sore to her.

‘I don’t know you.’

Kass held out the thumb-drive again. ‘Whatever’s on this, I need to know. I’m sorry Spencer’s dead, I truly am. But they have my son!’

Jay looked this time, and showed instant recognition of the small plastic memory-stick. The strange scratches on its surface. Her hand rose to her mouth. Now she thought that it might be true.

‘I’m so sorry, Jay. But he saved my life, and this, whatever it is. It could save my boy’s life too.’

She was nodding, trying to make sense. ‘How did it happen?’

‘They shot him.’

‘You saw it happen?’

Sweetheart, I shared a trunk with his dead body.

‘Yes. He didn’t suffer,’ she lied.

‘I don’t say that I believe you,’ she reached out for the thumb-drive. ‘But he hasn’t phoned. I’ve been waiting.’

‘How did you know Spencer?’ Kass asked. It was hard to see the grief that stared back.

‘Spence is my brother,’ she said.

‘I am so sorry; but I need your help. I need you to decrypt the data on this device. The information that’s on this is the only leverage I have to

get my son back. Jay, Spencer sent me to find you. Please, I need what's on this drive. What you do with it afterward, that's your business.'

'What's your son's name?' She asked.

'Josh. He's alone and frightened. This is all I have to bargain with.'

Come on, say the words. Help me.

Jay looked uncertain, unable to take Kass' gaze. The news of Spencer's death; of his murder, it was all too much for her.

'Tell me what Spence told you about Megatron?'

What? Is that a test? 'Nothing; I don't who he is?' She felt like grabbing hold of her, shaking her. 'Jay, I barely knew your brother. I, I saw him, always in the background. He only spoke to me once. To give me a warning. He slipped me a piece of paper to arrange to meet. Jay, he didn't turn up.' *Fuck, what can I tell you?* 'He sent me two texts, that's all. I don't even know how he did that. There were no phones, no satellite signal.'

Jay was full on shaking now, about to burst at the seams. Kass reached out to her, but she stepped away.

'Okay, I'm sorry. I didn't mean . . . Maybe we could go somewhere, yeah? Go get a hot drink? Look, I promise, I'll answer all your questions, if I can. But not here, please, somewhere less exposed, more private.'

Red varnished nails opened up and her palm reached out. She wanted the thumb-drive. 'I knew something was wrong,' she said, 'when he stopped calling. I begged him not to go. This one was too dangerous.'

'He'd done this before?'

'Yes. What's your son's name?'

I told you, twice. 'Josh, it's Josh. He's fourteen and beautiful. I just want to find him; bring him home.'

'Do you know why they took him?'

'No. I don't know. It's all been a bag of lies from the start. Josh has a tumour, up here, in his brain. The doctors said it was inoperable. We only went to the clinic because a man named Fortune came to see us.' *You know him?* 'Do you know who Fortune is?'

‘I’m sorry, what’s your name again?’

‘Kassandra . . . Kass,an,dra. My son’s name is Josh.’ She put the thumb-drive in Jay’s hand. ‘Are you okay? Do, do you need anything?’ *Are you even the right person?* ‘Please, Jay, you have to help me.’

Jay closed her hand around the piece of plastic. Her demeanour hardened. ‘Does the word NEXUS mean anything to you?’ She asked.

‘Sure, yeah. It’s my cell-provider.’ *What? What is it? What do you know that I don’t?*

‘Kass,an,dra, you need to come with me,’ she was drying her eyes on her sleeve. Looking more like a woman than a girl. Nodding confirmation that she wanted to help. ‘We need to go. You need to speak to Megatron.’

It was hot under the lights, but the senator didn't mind. The brighter the better, it was important that people see, could listened to what he had to say. Every movement behind the podium he made was calculated, considered, and designed to increase the crowd's appetite to want more. Joe turned to the camera lens as it tracked in.

'Governor Harry McMurdoch is a fine man,' he said. 'He's an honest man. Hell, he's told us *that* often enough.' The convection's crowd agreed loudly with Joe. Some even hollered and boo'd the mention of his name. 'He's also a gifted man. A man who can calculate, elaborate, and transmogrify his tax returns.' The crowd went wild. They didn't hear Joe when he mentioned what the allegations were, *alleged* by the press.

'Thirty-eight, twenty-six, twenty-eight,' he said. 'The only figures I like to massage.' He pointed to his wife at the edge of the stage. The blonde ex-model curtseyed to the crowd, who turned into a mob. This was red meat to the follower's of Joe Rushmore. 'I will concede, that man is good with children. I have *never* seen a candidate kiss so many babies on prime-time television. Hey Harry, maybe you should run for director of a day-care centre, because you sure ain't getting the nomination for the Presidency.' He held up his hands to feign victory. 'The people of America are all voting for me, yeah, Joe Rushmore. Joe's gonna make America the greatest nation on Earth.' He loved it, the reaction. It energised and pumped his ambition. 'Joe Rushmore will make our country great again!'

Senator Rushmore took it all in. The arc of terraced seating in the stadium that was filled to rafters with voters keen to hear him speak. He played down the applause and the cheers. Waited for the sounds to fade to a ripple. This was his second favourite place to be. Later would his first. Performing to an audience more wealthy than those before him. These were just a means to his end. The hard work was couching the money he needed to win the election. Joe took a deep breath that was filled with the energy of the faithful. They were eating from the palm of his proverbial hand.

‘But, and there’s always a but, when we talk about Harry. He’s a weak man,’ he leant forward, his rhetoric’s intensity building, ‘and he’s not a God fearing man. He’s a man with too little stomach for the ways lie ahead. We are a broken nation; we are a country that needs to be healed from its inside out.’ *Look at them. If only they knew.* ‘In the current economic climate this country must have a leader, not another head-of-state who’s willing to barter, to placate; to give away what little is left of our nation’s wealth and pride. Governor Harry McMurdoch doesn’t have a damn clue about how to heal our great nation, or how to wield the biggest economy on this here, our Garden of Eden.’ Joe directed his words toward each individual in the crowd. He was pointing now. Showing his finger in an arc to them all. ‘How can anyone vote for a man with no military background, who has not experienced the moral solitude that comes with leadership. Who has no grit, and no balls. No stomach for the fight that lies ahead. This great country of ours has enemies,’ he said, leaning on his podium. ‘This country is in a dog fight, commercially, economically, and militarily with regimes around the world. And that means you need a man who will lead this nation, flag in hand, against anyone who tries to take this great country for granted.’

The crowd erupted in applause and cheers. Joe placed his hand on his breast in the time honoured fashion. It was time to go for the throat.

‘Harry McMurdoch is willing to let Europe lead our great country by the nose. Allow our economy to shore up the ailing Euro with our hard-

earned dollars and cents. Well, I say no! I say Americans tax payers should keep their hard earned revenue and have it spent here, at home. Where it can benefit the American people, and not the economies of foreign nationals.'

There it was, the crowd hostile to anything related to McMurdoch.

'I served my country overseas,' said Joe. 'I took up arms to defend our borders. I put my life on the line, with so many other good servicemen and women, who risk their lives each and every day, and for what? So they can *watch* as their fellow Americans are being turned out of their homes. So they can *feel* their fellow Americans lose all spirit and hope. So the Fat-Cats in Washington can earn a buck whilst breaking the back of the American economy?!' *Yes, on your feet. Stamp your boots with American pride. Let the party know who you want as your candidate. Let the country know who you want as its next president. Shout and holler the name of Senator Joe Rushmore. President Joe Rushmore. God, that sounds good.* 'I can't hear you? You need to raise your voice so that Washington trembles at the name of, Joe, Rushmooooor.'

The stadium was his. The audience gobbling up his message. He turned toward the closer of the two cameras that relayed his speech, its red light assuring him that millions were watching. The lens gave Joe a glimpse of his own reflection; it smiled reassuringly back at him. The smooth skin and lightly tanned complexion of a top-executive grinned back.

'It's time we returned to a simpler way,' he said with smooth authority. 'The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations, is in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little political connection as possible.' They were fine words, so apt and appropriate; chosen to bolster his message. 'So far as we have already formed engagements, let them be fulfilled, and with perfect good faith. But here let us *stop*.'

Listen to that; isn't the mob glorious? 'Great words, and written by a great man,' he said. 'Spoken by President George Washington, himself.'

Let the word, president, sink in. Let the sentiment hit home. ‘Thomas Jefferson agreed,’ he continued. ‘Peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations. Entangling alliances with *none*.’ He emphasised that final word. ‘Quotes from our Founding Fathers. The great Americans, our great leaders, the world’s foremost statesmen. Great men who urged that our nation stand alone. That we don’t interfere with what goes on out there.’ *Yeah, you like that don’t you.* ‘I urge that *we* stand alone. I call to you, the voters, and ask, are you really going to vote for a Governor who wants to give your wealth away? Who wants to trade your commerce to fund foreign powers? For a man who has far too much appetite, but no teeth with which to chew.’ More stamping of the feet, it seemed the stadium might crumble from the resonating sound. ‘There is only one candidate you can vote for; the man you know should be the new president of these here United States of America. You are looking at that man, right here, and right now. Senator Joe Rushmore will make our America great again!’

Yeah, rise up, all of you. That’s right, on your feet. Bow your fucking heads to your next president.

They rose, every man and woman. Thunderous energy preceded their nomination. Powerful food for the man. High octane fuel for his ego. It was pure bloody nectar as Senator Joe Rushmore waved his open hands in a submissive appeal. He would accept their nomination. His hands clenched hard, to be held aloft, shaking them as lion-hearted fists.

‘Ladies and gentleman,’ the tannoy announced, ‘Senator Joe Rushmore, your choice for the next president of the United States of America.’

‘They loved you out there,’ Charles handed Joe a towel to wipe away the sweat, ‘they couldn’t get enough of their candidate.’

‘Well, we’d better fucking hope so. Tell me how I looked for the cameras?’

‘You were sick, senator. The public lapped you up.’

‘Get me the tape, Charles. I want watch it. And Charles, get me some iced-water.’

‘Yes sir, whatever the next president wants.’

Charles snapped his fingers for a waiter. His attentiveness as sharp as the Amosu suit that he wore. Charles was on the candidacy train to serve and obey.

‘I’ve got the latest poles for you sir; your speech has set the phone-lines buzzing. We have donations and best wishes flooding in from all over the country.’

‘That’s real good, Charles. Real good. Come, walk with me a step or two.’

‘Best estimates are you’re up by nine points in the vote. This is a cake walk come Election Day. The Governor is going to get his shit kicked all over the park.’

‘Then make sure you bring a real big pooper-scooper to clean up the mess.’

Charles was laughing. He always laughed when Joe made a joke. ‘Yes sir, I sure will. Now if I may. Before you go on to the function; the press

would like a brief photo shoot down in the lobby. The usual suspects are expecting quotes that they can print in tomorrow's early editions.' Charles stepped a little closer, away from the senator's security and any prying ears. 'Mr Fortune is here, sir. He would like a few minutes before you continue. I put him in the stadium's conference room.'

'Fortune? What the fuck does he want?'

'He was clear that it was important, sir.'

'Fine, he can have two minutes; you make sure we're not disturbed. And don't you let the press go anywhere, I'm going to let them snap both of my good sides.'

'Yes sir, I'll make sure they're ready and waiting.'

‘Did you see the show, Fortune? We’re riding on the crest of a wave that’s gonna break across the White House lawn. Right up to the front door of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. God-damn I was good tonight.’

The senator is on a high. That should make my report more palatable.
‘That’s great news, Senator,’ Fortune raised a smile.

‘But you’re just about to give me some bad news, right? Well sit down, we might as well make use of our hosts generosity. You want one?’ Joe offered whiskey from a beautiful glass decanter. Then poured some of the malt into a crystal tumbler for himself. ‘That’s right, you don’t do you?’ He swirled the liquid under his nose. ‘They distil this stuff and don’t bottle it for twenty years, did you know that? A lot of goddamn fuss just for a whiskey. Hmm, spicy almonds with a hint of orange,’ he turned to Fortune. ‘Well, get on with it.’

‘We don’t have the woman yet. Or the data.’

‘But you’re sure she has it?’

‘We had a limited dialogue with her before the kinetic event.’

‘The kinetic what? Talk plainly, Mr Fortune. That was a very expensive missile that you missed the target with.’

‘Yes sir.’ *He’s taking this well?* ‘During the dialogue she did intimate that Spencer had given her something; some incriminating data. She’s threatened to expose the information.’

‘That woman is a suspect in a murder case. Her own kids gone missing. As far as the authorities are concerned this woman’s a psychopath. She knows nothing that can hurt us.’

‘She’s proved to be resourceful.’

‘Are you telling me you can’t handle the situation?’

‘Just reporting the facts, Senator.’ *And now for the bad news.* ‘During the dialogue she mentioned you, Senator, by name.’

The tumbler stopped halfway to his mouth. She mentioned me, my name? Where the fuck did she get my name from?’

‘I’m looking into it.’

‘Mr Fortune, I am a hare’s-head from getting my party’s nomination for the Presidency. I have a fucking destiny to fulfil here.’ The senator downed his whiskey; he was up and walking toward the window, looking thoughtful. ‘No, if she had any evidence she’d have made contact by now. She’d try to screw us to the walls with it? No, Krane is full of shit.’

‘That’s a possibility.’

‘Oh is it? You’re here to report the facts, not the possibilities. Come over here, Fortune. I want you to see this, through my eyes. And I want you to remember.’ Joe pressed a button and the curtain that covered the window retracted, ‘You see that fine example of architecture over there? Well that’s the White House. Now that building used to mean something. It was a shining beacon for American democracy, and for our nation’s strength. It stood for, *we’re the good guys*. And, *don’t fuck with us*. Now every Latino, Raghead, and Nigger, is trying to shake us down. We’re being shot at through every conceivable orifice whilst trying to defend ourselves with moral objection, and liberal complaint. Mr Fortune, I will not stand for this. I will be sworn in as the president, and *I will* make this country strong again.’ He poured himself another glass, this time with a dash of water from a silver topped siphon.

So there it was in a nutshell. The senator revealing what Julius already knew to be true. The great White Hope was nothing more than a

colossal bigot, and a racist. It was white supremacists who were paying for the senator's ticket.

How much longer did he have to listen to this shit? And since when did he care? And why was Rushmore staring up at his drink as if he held the answer to life?

'They say that the water dilutes the drink, but that's not true. It helps bring out the flavours. But whilst that may be true about whiskey, it does not equate with the foreign policies of this country, and I aim to change that.' The tumbler was gingerly sipped from; the fluid seemed to calm the senator's fervour. 'I apologise, Mr Fortune. It appears I am indulging myself. Tell me, how is Doctor Outman proceeding with the vaccine for the NEXUS Package?'

'The doctor is being somewhat evasive, as usual. But he says he has succeeded in synthesising the vaccine. Samples have already been sent to the relevant laboratories for confirmation. If all is, as he says, then full production can proceed within a few weeks.'

'Good, that's good. We're going to make a shit big pile of greenbacks from all of this. What about the kid, the one with the thing in his brain? Tell me, do you think Doctor Outman can deliver with his promise. What's he called it, the NEXUS Web?'

'It's an interesting hypothesis. I'm not really qualified to comment.'

'That's right; you keep your head down. I'm the one that makes the decisions. My mandate as president, Mr Fortune, will be the protection and revitalisation of this country in any and all endeavours. Everyone outside of its borders is fucking expendable. To that end, I will invest in, and fund, any fucking project that can make that happen. And I will remove anyone who stands in my way, do you understand?'

'The Krane woman will be dealt with,' Fortune insisted.

'Good, okay, in your hands then.' Joe sat himself at the large oak conference table. He obviously liked it, and clearly he liked the view. 'My God, Fortune. Imagine the possibilities if Outman succeeds? A technology like that would make this country unstoppable. We'd be

untouchable.' He sat forward. 'You tell Doctor Outman that the vaccine for the package goes into full production, asap. And you tell him, whatever he wants concerning that boy, he gets. Anything he wants, am I clear?'

'I must remind you, Senator. Our backers have a big stake in all of this too.'

'Mr Fortune, when the electorate vote me into the big chair I'll be unstoppable.'

'That's a very dangerous course of action. Our backers are powerful men.'

'So is the president of the United States. One more thing, Fortune, the boy's mother?'

'My men will find her. They'll deliver her to the FBI. Our friends in the Bureau have enough to bury Krane behind bars for the rest of her life.'

'Well, I don't think that's good enough. If she's alive, she can mention my name.'

'No-one will listen. She's on Homeland Security's radar now, so if she turns up dead? They might want to investigate further. Let the situation end with her arrest.'

'I want her gone!'

'That option was best explored prior to her leaving the clinic. You ordered us to stand down in favour of Carl framing her.'

'Well, now I've changed my mind.'

'Senator I . . . Please, excuse me, my phone.'

'Fine, you just make sure that you get it done.'

'Yes Senator,' a courteous nod and Julius retreated. He left the conference room and stepped out into the corridor. Charles scowled as he passed. Julius waited for him to close the door before he opened up the message he'd received.

The text was from April.

"Two men down. Bird has flown. Call me!"

It seemed the Krane woman was becoming a formidable foe.

Be careful, Julius. Chasing problems is a far cry from solving them.

The corridor Fortune stood in ran twenty yards or so, its white walls and dado rail, extending in both direction.

He had to make the call. Rushmore and Outman were pandering to their own personal agendas. They were in danger of undermining the programme. It was time to go over the senator's head; he needed to consult with the committee.

Julius dialled. The call was answered. 'April, update me?'

'We've tracked the Krane woman. She got on a flight to Dulles airport. Julius, she's in Washington.'

Fortune doubted the senator's whiskey would taste so good if he knew Krane was in the capital.

'Why would she go to Washington, Julius? Does she really know about the senator?'

'Unlikely.'

'Unlikely? Julius, I don't like it when you use words like that.'

It came again, that nagging memory of a few rashly spoken words. He wondered if he'd made an error in judgement when he'd used the senator's name in his initial pitch to the Krane woman. And now she was in Washington.

'Until we find her, we have to assume the worst.'

'Agreed. Do we proceed as instructed?'

The senator wanted Krane dead. Fortune disagreed.

'Proceed as instructed,' he said. 'Let the situation play out, at least for now. Focus on what we do know for sure. Do we have an ID on the man yet?'

'Yes, and he's going to be a problem.'

'Explain.'

'We think he busted the Krane woman out of the sheriff's office in Arizona. Carl went to pick her up. Our mystery man turned up and took down two of Carl's men.'

‘Have you fully sanitised the scene?’

‘Negative. We managed to remove the bodies and we’ve taken steps to smoke the crime scene. We’re steering local FBI towards drug cartel involvement. Julius, this is getting out of control.’

‘Tell me about the man?’

‘His name’s John Streemer, and he has quite a resume.’

‘Give me the highlights.’

‘Streemer enlisted in the Corp in seventy-four, aged eighteen. He was talent spotted by Military Intelligence; it gets a bit murky after that. What we do know for sure is he’s ex Delta force, and has strong links to the Agency, mostly in Central and South America. All I’m getting are headlines and whispers, his file is welded shut. I do know he got an honourable discharge after his wife got capped by some black gangbangers, back in two thousand and one. The whispers tell me he left too many bodies on the job, and that a psych evaluation had him two grades higher than Hannibal Lecter, and three times as smart. The specifics on his operational status have been sealed. I can’t get anywhere near them without a signature from a general, with at least three stars. Do we know one?’

‘Not at this short notice. Go on.’

‘He has sniper training, and a penchant for undercover work. But he is *definitely* out of the loop, retired, and I have no idea how he fits into all of this.’

‘Speculate.’ Julius needed more than just the facts. April was his eyes and ears on the ground. She hired and fired, and had an almost empathic feel for the people involved, and for the operations she ran. April knew when to drive forward, and when to step back.

‘I can tell you he’s one dark son-of-a-bitch. I got a bad feeling that pretty soon he’ll know as much about us, as we do about him. Julius, we need to end this, and fast.’

‘Give me a moment,’ he put the call back on hold.

April's worried. That alone is cause for concern. And what possible link could Streemer have to Krane?

More immediate was the question of why she'd come to Washington? It didn't make sense, but was hardly a coincidence. That someone with multiple agencies on their trail would to take flight to Washington.

What are you doing Ms Krane? What do you know that we don't. Any data from the clinic would be damning, sure, but it wouldn't involve Washington, or any of the players involved, not directly. Why, why, why? There has to be a link, and it has to be Spencer. He took April off hold.

'April, was Spencer born in Maryland, or Virginia?'

'Yes, that's the other bit of Intel we have. I got the HUB to get very close and personal with Spencer. He passed a background check with a very clever forgery, but we picked up on a couple of discrepancies and ran them down. It appears Spencer was born in 1987, but not in Kentucky, he was born in Washington. And before you get mad at me, he'd already had a government screening. Outman picked him out as promising. All the checks were done.'

'Tell me what you know,' he said.

'Parents are both deceased, in a car accident. He has a sister, Jaylin, younger by three years. She went off the radar in two thousand and three. A straight 'A' student, but the police have a file on her. She was raped, allegedly, when she was thirteen. Charges against the defendant were dropped due to lack of evidence. But reading between the lines suggests his father had friends in high places. It was probably the stressor for what comes next.'

Jaylin became a problem child, she liked to vent her disappointment by hacking computers, by creating and sending viruses down the internet. Kid never finished school. Tells her foster parents she's going to travel the world. Not been heard of since.'

'It has to be her, April.' *The connection, it has to be. 'Run Spencer's sister down, check on every friend and family member either of them has. I want this Jaylin girl found.'*

‘It’ll take time. Are you thinking she knows the Krane woman?’

‘Find out. And April, Spencer *must* have had further contact with Krane while she was in the clinic. Why else would Krane be in Washington?’

‘That’s not possible, we’d know.’

‘And yet she claims to have the stolen data?’

‘No way. Pullman searched Krane and her belongings before he put her in the trunk. I was there.’

‘We were looking for the hard drive that Spencer removed. What if he transferred the data to a flash-drive?’

‘It’s possible,’ she conceded. ‘We know that Spencer didn’t access the mainframe prior to the comms being shut down. That was after he’d bumped into her at the canteen.’

‘We’re missing something, April. Run a systems check on everything at the clinic. Get the tech guys to earn their money. Spencer couldn’t get a signal out, but maybe he had a way to send messages internally? It’s possible we’ve been looking at this from the wrong angle? Spencer didn’t know Krane, he chose her. Why? Because he had no other choice. It’s because of him that she’s here, it has to be. Find the sister, and work out how he communicated with Krane. We need to stop playing catch-up with this woman and get ahead of her. Whatever information Spencer shared with her, find it.’

Underground parking? Where's she taking me? 'Jay, where are we going?' Kass wasn't too keen on going down into a dark space with a stranger.

It was a small European car she'd got into, that Jay drove down the ramp and into dimly lit parking. A few moments later she'd parked and was walking toward doors below an 'EXIT' sign.

'Jay, please, where are you taking me?'

'To meet Megatron. Now shut up and follow.'

They were the only words she'd spoken. Not that Kass blamed her, she was mourning. She was angry. A short walk brought them away from the high city buildings into a run-down area; half a city block that most sane people would never walk into at night. Jay stopped.

'My place,' she said. 'We go up, mind the steps.'

'What is this, an old warehouse?' She followed Jay into an open elevator. The gate was pulled closed, one of three buttons lit up, the platform lurched in ascension. At the top floor Jay pulled the gate open. A few steps later they were stood by a door.

Jay used a key. 'Please, take your shoes off.' She invited Kass inside.

Wow. This was unexpected. The apartment's interior bore no relation to its run down exterior. *Red and green should never be seen.* That's what her mum always said. But she was wrong, the interior was lovely. 'This is nice.' *Expensive.* 'What did you say you did for a living?'

'I didn't. You must stop asking questions.'

‘Sorry.’ She wasn’t. But Jay was still reeling from the news about her brother. ‘I like what you’ve done with the place.’

Windows stretched the entire far wall. *Split level interior, I love this place.*

Four steps inside and so much to see. Her gaze fell on the bedroom; not that it was actually a room. Two tall metal mirrors hung suspended from steel rope, the bed was a four poster with lush satin drapes. The furniture was wood and leather, that was soft and lush. The four pieces surrounded her bed in an open arc. Red and green were obviously her colours of choice, and prevalent in the bed-covers, the rugs, and the satin curtains that gleamed. ‘Wow,’ she said it aloud this time. The girl had style.

‘We like to live off the grid.’ Jay said.

‘We?’ Kass asked.

‘Questions, you keep asking questions.’

‘Listen, Jay, I’m so sorry about Spencer. But I need answers, and I need your help. They’ve got my son.’ That was the last time she was going to be polite. ‘Who, is we?’ She asked again.

‘There are four of us.’

Kass felt pain. Jay’s realisation that four, was obviously now three. Is she biting her hand? ‘That’s you, Spencer, and Megatron?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can I ask who number four is?’ *Yes, yes, I know. Another question.* From her response she guessed that Jay was fond of number four.

‘Cupcake,’ Jay replied. ‘His name’s, Cupcake,’ she was turning around, not clear what to do first. ‘I’ll take you to meet him, both of them; do you mind if I change before we . . .’ She was backing away, turning to leave through the only other door in the enormous room. It opened to reveal a space filled with clothing.

She’s got a clothes shop in her apartment? So many clothes. I could park a car in there? Shit, look at all the shoes. ‘I don’t suppose you’re a size four?’ She asked. *Oh, of course, get naked in front of me. Why not?*

The light floral dress that Jay wore slipped down slender thighs to create a clump on the floor. She stepped out of it.

Girls weren't Kass' thing, but this one was slim and tidy. She remembered when she had been that demure; or was that just wishful thinking? She couldn't help watching the near perfect body as it walked from the mini-boutique to a glass cubicle. *That's what its for.* Now she realised why there was a copper tank hanging from the ceiling, above a clear-glass-cubicle.

Doesn't everyone need transparency when they take a shower? 'I'll err, take a look around,' said Kass.

This wasn't a loft, it was a railway station. Enough glass and metal beams to house a terminal. The girl showering to her left was a reader too, a small library of books racked precisely to match size and height, set on long shelves at waist height and below.

So what does our Elvish friend like to read?

Mostly stuff on computing, all pretty boring. Plenty of high-brow shit, mostly penned by foreign authors.

What are you hiding behind this silky screen?

Jay was in a fog of steamy spray so Kass decided it was okay to peel the curtains apart, and take a peek.

'What the fu . . .' Not what she'd expected.

Oh my God, is this for real?

Three cinema sized monitors, each bigger than her own oversized TV at home. A computer-stack as tall as a four year old sat below a stainless steel desk, on which two laptops sat closed. Kass was drawn to the small hub of lights that winked and blinked, and occasionally fell like water drops from wet and shaken leaves.

Wow, speakers big enough to awaken the dead. No wonder you don't want neighbours.

Jay's need for privacy was obviously more acute when tapping at her keyboard, than it was taking a shower with polite company?

'Feel free to shower if you like.'

Jay's voice startled her. 'Sorry, I needed to, err, look . . . You were . . . I like your place,' she said. 'And yes, a shower, thank you.' *You're not going to watch?* 'Nice robe, is it Donna Karan?' To change the subject.

'It was my mum's. I'm ready now, I want you to tell me what happened to Spencer.'

'Oh, okay.' *Deep breath, where to start?* Kass began with Spencer stalking her. She'd not realised he was trying to contact her without anyone finding out.

She told her everything in the hope that Jay be able to help her find Josh.

There was no emotion, just the semblance of a smile whenever Kass mentioned Spencer by name. She was strong this one, hanging onto

every word; resolved to hear it all without betraying her emotions. She'd seen the same look on the homeless. It was the same wary stare that never looked you directly in the eyes. All her inner defence systems on a state of heightened alert.

Really? No tears? Has so much happened in your young life that it stops you from crying?

Was that it? Had Jay prepared herself for this day? Had she accepted the inevitable long ago? So what now? God, how she hoped this girl would want to seek revenge.

Kass reached out to touch Jay's hand, only to find it withdrawn again.

'You said Spence gave you this?' Jay held out the thumb-drive. 'I assume the data is encrypted?'

'Yes, very. When Weldon tried to open it the damn thing laughed at us?'

'Weldon? Who's Weldon?'

'The man that helped me.' *No, he did more than that.* 'He saved my life ...'

'Where is he?' Jay walked towards the door. 'Did he follow you?!'

'No, I don't think so. I don't know where he is. But he promised me he'd help us.'

'Us?'

'Yes, you and I. I thought?' *Don't you shake your head at me, not now.* 'Jay, I ...'

'The others will have to agree. It's a consensus; it has to be all of us.'

'Okay, sure, consensus. When do we ...?'

'I'll introduce you to Megatron, and Cupcake. You should change first. I have clothes; sometimes I like them to be baggy. There must be something you'll fit?'

Cheeky bitch. 'That would be great, thank you.'

'Take a shower first.'

That last bit, it made her feel more unclean than she was. ‘Don’t suppose you have a shower curtain?’ *No, okay, glass is good.* ‘Jay, who the hell is Cupcake?’

‘Where are we going?’ She asked, as Jay walked past her, and led the way down the corridor. She stopped at a door that resembled her own. When it opened the sounds of a rock-concert assaulted Kass’ ears.

‘In here,’ Jay offered Kass to go first. ‘I’ve told them we’re coming.’

‘Do I need a ticket,’ she asked, her voice raised. Someone inside was singing about slashing something. If you could call it singing.

‘Meg,’ Jay shouted. ‘Turn it down, we have a visitor.’

To Kass’ relief the sound reduced to a comfortable background, filled with bass, drums, and vocals with a sore throat. She stepped inside.

This room was different, smaller; smellier. A musky man-smell. It looked untouched since the Eighties.

‘Where the hell are we?’ Kass asked. So much paraphernalia to see.

The far wall was a DJ’s surprise. Metal rack upon metal rack of music cd’s. Some cool furnishings from Ikea, and what looked like superhero dolls covering most of the free space. Movie posters were dotted about the walls in glass frames, mostly Sci-fi, they were kinda cool. The Star Wars wallpaper? Not so much.

Okay, no need to stare. A skinny dude sporting a pony tail came at pace across the planked floor, carried by his four wheeled chair. *Easy, not so close.* The narrow face peering at her had a slight acne problem, his gaze well and truly engaged. *Shit, is he checking me out?*

Kass spotted a second figure. *Who's the tall dumpling with the rosy cheeks?* He was seriously overweight and seemed unable to stop grinning.

'Shit, Jay. Who's the old chick?'

Old? Wheelie boy is going straight to hell.

'Don't freak out,' said Jay, 'she's a friend. At least I think she is.'

'We've got no friends, Jay. That's why we live like this, remember? Why'd you bring her here? You're not supposed to bring people here. Cupcake, show the lady out.'

'No,' Jay objected. 'You have to listen to her.'

'No, I don't. We've had this conversation, Jay. We don't like anyone that we don't know.'

'I want her to stay,' she was insistent.

There was something sweet about the way Cupcake leaned in to see Kass. He was the classic build and shape of an opera singer, with a rabbit caught in the headlamps stare. What did it for Kass was the 44DD headphones stuck on his head, the Bongo branding etched in big silver letters onto both cups.

'Gregory, be polite. Listen to what Cassandra has to say.'

'What the fuck, don't tell her my name.' His chair had lost momentum. 'Fine, I'm Megatron, how are you today? Now if you wouldn't mind just fucking off.'

'Meg, stop it.'

'Cupcake, see the lady out,' he insisted.

'No,' Cupcake replied. 'If Jay says she's cool, I want her to stay.'

'No, no, no. What's the point in having a hideout, if we invite people for tea?'

'She's spoken to Spence, Meg.'

'I don't care. Ask her to leave.'

'Meg, she's . . .'

'Leaving.' He clapped his hands together. 'Goodbye.'

'Meg, it's Spence.'

‘Oh really, how is he? Why hasn’t he called? Why the fuck is she still here?’

Cupcake lumbered forward. Kass wasn’t sure whether to back away. There was a simple, awkward nature to the man that made her nervous.

‘Is Spence all right?’ Cupcake asked. ‘Where is he?’ His tone laced with concern.

‘Why is she still here?’

‘He’s dead, Meg,’ said Jay. ‘Spencer is dead.’

‘What? Who told you that? Oh right, it was her.’

‘They killed him.’

Meg was shaking his head. ‘No. Jay, you can’t believe anything a stranger says. You got any proof, lady?’

‘He’s gone,’ Jay said. ‘They murdered him.’

‘Fuck, a complete stranger turns up and gives you bullshit, and you just take her word? Bullshit, it’s bull . . .’

‘Listen you, you, skinny-fucker in a bad ACDC t-shirt. I spent an hour rolling around in the trunk of a Range Rover with Spencer’s body, okay. He’s fucking dead! And my son will end just like him if you don’t help me,’ she realised all eyes were now wild eyed and fixed on her. ‘Jay, I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to . . . I’m so sorry.’

‘Meg, he hasn’t called. He hasn’t logged on. He hasn’t used any of the panic buttons online.’

‘Well, that doesn’t make it so,’ Meg’s tone more submissive. ‘Does she have proof?’

‘She has this,’ Jay held out the thumb-drive. ‘It’s Spence’s, no question. There’s something on it he wanted us to see. That he wanted,’ she hesitated, and pointed gingerly toward Kass. ‘her to bring to us.’

There was something odd about Gregory, or Megatron, or whatever his name was. Both Jay and Cupcake were visibly traumatised, Cupcake especially, he’d begun to pace, his gaze locked onto Kass. Megatron’s focus was on the data-stick that Jay offered up as evidence.

‘Gimme, gimme,’ his tone resolute. ‘Let me see.’

‘Give it to him.’ Kass was too tired, and borderline cranky. Besides, this place intrigued her. Look at it. There were college dorms tidier than this.

Jay was offering her a seat. Kass declined. The leather sofa would have been brown when it was born, before the years of abuse. Megatron, whoever he was, lived in an electronic pigsty; Kass was beginning to appreciate what was really important to this man. It was the electronics that had been assembled by the Borg. It was inventive, puzzling, alluring, as she walked in a subconscious daze toward the three towers; the banks of hard-drives. Above her head was an endless stream of ones and zeros flashing across a screen. He’d been writing a programme, but nothing she could understand. There were monitors everywhere, projecting newscasts from around the world in silence. And who the hell needed *four* keyboards?

‘Hey, it’s pretty cool, huh? Would you mind?’

Mind what? ‘You want me to push you back?’ *Seriously?* ‘I don’t think so.’

‘It’s okay, I’ll do it,’ said Jay, and she pushed him back to his desk.

Meg opened a drawer and plugged the laptop he retrieved into a loose lead. He lifted the screen and pushed the thumb-drive in at the side. He turned the chair around. ‘Seriously, Spence is gone?’

Kass nodded. ‘What is all this?’ She asked. ‘What are you doing with all this, tech?’

‘Jay, you need a friend with a bigger IQ,’ he said. He began typing on the keyboard. The monitors above him went blank. ‘What you are looking at, is a hole,’ he said. ‘Now say hello to Alice.’

‘Alice?’ Kass didn’t get the reference.

‘She’ll never grow old, and she’s always going down the rabbit-hole. The world wide rabbit-hole. You are looking at the holy grail of home-computing. Alice,’ he pointed to the towers, ‘has an Rmax of 1.615 and an Rpeak of 2.1. She has a rising bank of 16 core Opteron processors that can knock most government systems into the stands. What you see, is

most definitely not all you get,' he pointed towards the floor, and was too obvious in his wish that he hadn't.

'Don't worry,' Kass whispered. 'I'm not lifting your floorboards up to take a look.'

'She's not a tech-geek, Meg. Kass is a cop.'

'A what? You brought a cop in here? I didn't do it, lady,' his hands went in the air. 'Whatever it was, I didn't do it.'

'Relax, this isn't a raid. I just need your help. I need to know what's on that thumb-drive. What it was that Spence gave his life for. What's so important they felt the need to shoot a missile at us?'

'A what? Jay, this is bullshit. Spence is still ones and zeros, man. Hey, why are you lying to us? What do you want?'

'I'm sorry, but Spencer is gone. I wish he wasn't, but he is.'

'Jay, don't listen to the cop. They work for the Man; can't be trusted.'

'How did he die?' Asked Cupcake.

'He didn't suffer.' *I hope not.* 'I met Spencer at a clinic in Mexico. He risked everything to give me that data, and to help my son. They still have Josh, so I need what's on that drive.'

'Look, I don't believe for one moment that she's telling the truth, Meg's fingers were dancing across the laptop's keys. 'But, if she is? D'you think *it* is on there?'

'*It?* What's *it*? Can you decrypt that thing or not?'

'Can birds fly? Of course I can decrypt it. Just give me a few seconds.'

No-one said a word. The seconds passed. Meg's fingers finally came away from the keyboard.

'Wow,' he said, sitting back in his chair. 'Spence used Shoot-bolt to lock this down. Why would he do that?'

'Shoot-bolt? What does that mean?' Kass asked.

'It means, Madam-Cop, that if you don't have the key, you can't get in.'

'But you said you could.'

‘Did I? I might have spoken too soon. Which doesn’t mean I can’t, okay? It just might take a while.’

He began typing again. On the middle screen a strange kind of coding was being typed. Like nothing Kass had never seen before.

So, Megaphone, your talents aren’t as big as your mouth. She moved closer to the screen.

‘Shhh,’ whispered Cupcake. ‘He’s talking to Alice.’

Megatron spun his chair round. 'This will take Alice, a while?'

'I thought you said you couldn't get in without the key?' Said Kass.

'You can't, but I know Spencer, and I know his style. We'll work it out.' With that he turned to Jay. 'That key is as hard-core as it gets,' he was shaking his head. 'Is it possible he found it? You think they killed him for it?'

Kass wasn't listening. The last few days had not been blessed with sleep. She'd found Jay, a computer called Alice, and two oddballs who liked all things Sci-fi. She was too tired to do anything but stare around herself, and wonder, who the hell were these people? And why amongst all the posters, cd's and figurines, she could see a certain species of soft-toy?

Please don't let that be a stuffed-one behind the door. 'Penguins? You have toy penguins all over your room?' She said aloud, and then wished she hadn't, as she slumped down into the sofa's remarkably soft leather. Her body fast succumbing to the effects of the last few days; she was shutting down, but refusing to give in. She wanted to know more about them, not go to sleep. *Oh no.* The slow advance of wheels across the wooden floor.

'You got a problem with my penguins, cop-lady?'

'Look, I just wondered . . . Forget it.'

'No, please, continue. We all want to hear how the long arm of our totalitarian government thinks we should decorate our lives.'

‘Meg, stop it. Stop it now.’

‘No, it’s okay Jay. I was wondering why there are so many toy penguins in your room? It looks like a kindergarten for superheroes in here?’ *Let it go. He’s an asshole with a disorder.* She was crashing, and getting cranky. Images of Josh being pulled through that door, calling to her. Her hands were shaking. ‘It doesn’t matter,’ she said.

‘It matters to me.’

‘Meg, she needs to sleep, that’s all.’

‘Fuck you, Jay. You bring a cop here demanding for help, and then she disses the way I live? No, no fucking way.’ The wheels came closer. ‘*Aptenodytes forsteri*,’ his voice filled with anger, ‘that’s the Emperor Penguin for those who don’t know. The most awesome species of animal on the planet.’

Does he really want to do this? Her fuse was lit.

‘It’s the stamina and the will of the individual . . . it’s the power of the huddle. And that’s what this is, right here. The Emperor will trek up to a hundred and twenty kilometres just to breed: copulation in temperatures below minus fifty. The Emperor can dive below five hundred and fifty meters. That’s a bomb. Okay, lady? It’s pure fucking adrenaline.’

His voice? He had tears in his eyes. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

Megatron’s hands kept moving, and then clawing as if trying to make shapes they couldn’t. Jay put her hands around his.

‘He’s trying to learn how to Sign,’ she said, and raised a smile. ‘It’s hard for him.’

‘It’s hard,’ he said, his voice emotional. ‘Not my fault my brain works better than my body. If it hadn’t been for the kids, I’d have passed the course?’

‘The kids?’

‘They were all over my chair, man. Little-shits, they thought I was a Dalek, or something.’ Meg’s hands were above his head still trying to form shapes. Jay trying to hush him and bring them down.

She embraced her friend. ‘Shhh, it’s all right.’

‘He’s dead, Jay. It’s not all right.’ Tears leaking from his eyes, his hands back down on his lap.

‘Kass, we should leave,’ Jay turned Meg’s chair around. ‘Shh, it’s okay,’ she parked him below Alice.

Meg, I’m sorry. I didn’t realise

‘She’s sorry? Why, because I need wheels; don’t bother.’

‘No, I’m sorry I wasn’t more understanding.’

‘Save your symp, penguin-power comes from the head, and from the heart. Not the legs, okay. Am I right, Cupcake? Am I?’

The oversized, rosy-cheeked, tenor was nodding. ‘Megatron knows,’ he said, and now he was getting tearful to.

‘Kass, please, you should go. We’ll come back when they’ve settled.’

‘Sure. Err, of course.’ She was happy to be led out. Keen to understand when the door closed behind them.

‘Does he think he’s a penguin?’ She asked.

‘No, he watches a lot of stuff by David Attenborough.’

‘Jay, penguin or not, we’re up against a pack of killer-whales, and time is short.’ The door opened to Jay’s apartment. *I’m going to regret this.* ‘Why do you call him, Cupcake?’

Jay’s smile was reassuring. ‘He likes to bake.’

‘Oh, okay.’ *Penguin-power and flour power; what the hell have I got myself into?*

All Kass could see were long walls, sharp turns, and penguins. They were everywhere.

‘Mom, where are you?’

‘Oh God, Josh? Josh!’ She could hear him, but she couldn’t find her boy, as one wall turned and she found another. Penguins hobbling by, one with a fish in its mouth. ‘Josh, where are you?’

She ran, turned, and ran again. All the time she could hear him, Josh, calling for his mom.

Kass hit the wall of another turn, she slipped and fell. As she rose to her feet she realised she’d found the centre. ‘Josh . . .’ she could see him. ‘No!’ Two men in suits, they had no faces; and were pulling her son towards a door.

‘Mom, please, help me.’

Kass ran hard. She could almost reach him.

‘Josh, take my hand,’ so close she could almost feel his presence. And then he was falling, being pulled away by the faceless. A moment later he was gone, a door slammed shut to block her advance. *No . . .*

Kass opened her eyes. *It was a dream.* She could feel her heartbeat slow, return to normal. A pretty girl knelt at her bedside. Kass looked down, she was holding her hand.

‘You were having a bad dream,’ Jay smiled. ‘I didn’t know if I should wake you.’

‘I’m fine,’ she said, and for a moment found herself at ease. She liked the way Jay smiled at her. The flawless colour of her skin. The way the light reflected above her cheeks. ‘You’ve got lovely eyes,’ she said, not meaning to. So white, with a perfect green . . .

‘Is she awake?’ Megatron’s voice.

Kass pulled her hand away from Jay’s and scrambled to sit up. The view she got, well, it was rude. Cupcake was staring from the foot of the bed. Megatron was steering his wheelchair around as Jay stood up.

‘I’m awake,’ she said. Kass was checking she was dressed below the covers. ‘What do you want?’

‘To explain,’ Meg stopped his electric chair; he turned to face her.

There was a lack of bedroom etiquette being shown. It was probably a waste of time to point it out.

‘Oh, I brought you coffee,’ said Cupcake. His hands wrapped around a steaming mug. ‘It’s Columbian, I hope you don’t mind?’

‘No, that’s fine,’ she took the cup. ‘Is this some kind of intervention?’ She asked, whilst taking a sip. *God, this tastes good.* ‘What?’

‘We’re part of a huddle,’ said Megatron.

‘Huddle, okay, what’s that?’

‘It’s when penguins group together against the wind and the cold. That’s us, we’re the huddle. We make a difference.’

She was looking at Jay, who spoke volumes with the grin on her face.

‘Okay, I’ll listen. And then you get out of my, of her bedroom, okay?’

‘We attack the bad people,’ said Cupcake.

‘We hack them, then we leak what we find to the Press,’ Megatron added. ‘If it’s really bad, we’ll send it out there.’

‘Out there.’ *Something’s out there.*

‘The Web,’ he said. ‘We’ll expose them globally.’

‘Sometimes we bomb them.’

‘Bomb them, Cupcake?’

‘Viral bombs, they make a mess. Sometimes we just shut down their servers,’ he was grinning too. ‘I like it when Meg over-inflates their invoices on a chain supplier’s payroll. They get really upset.’

‘So, if I’m following this correctly. You guys are Data-Terrorists.’

‘We prefer, Hacktivists,’ said Megatron ’

‘Of course you do.’ *Hactivists?* ‘Is that why Spencer was at the clinic?’

Megatron directed his chair to the bedside. Anger glared from his eyes. His narrow features carved out by years of cynicism and combat directed at the establishment. Plus a poor diet.

‘For a cop, you don’t know much. The Foundation was just a cover, a way in, so they could get to you, the parent. No-one ever checks. Why would you? They’re offering your kid his life.’

‘Spencer was, what, gathering evidence? Of what? Who are they?’ She threw back the bedcovers and lifted her feet over the edge. ‘You tell me what was going on at that clinic? I want to know why they want my son? No, don’t you look at her, look at me; tell me what’s going on? Why have they taken my son?’

‘We had some friends; we only knew them by their call sign, Broadsword,’ said Jay. ‘They were hackers, like us. But they liked to sift through digital-trash. The stuff company’s purge, only it never is. It was their thing.’

‘Broadsword, what does that mean?’

‘It means they were data-miners, but with a twist. Jay, you brought a stoopid cop to the loft. Cop-lady, they were super smart guys who created beautiful software, that was designed to sift through hard-drives, memory, anything redundant or offline. They created tactical viruses that could sift through data that was dormant, or deleted. It’s like cosmetic reconstruction, binary style. Most companies excel at defending their data, not their trash. You’d be amazed what you can find in the trash of a bank, or pharmaceutical company. A military contractor?’

‘And then what, they send it to you?’

‘Not directly, let’s just say they were very specific on the things they liked to search for, and more so about what they posted online. They loved anything that would cause a hot debate. Not everything comes from Wikipedia. There *are* people, like us, who are looking for the truth.’

‘The truth?’ *Oh no.* ‘Are we talking about, a conspiracy website?’ Kass felt her adrenaline drop a few millilitres. This didn’t sound good. Was she holed up with a bunch of conspiracy nuts?

‘There it is, right there in her whites, a disbeliever. Why’d you bring her here, Jay? That’s why we have rules.’ He thumped the arm of his wheelchair. ‘No disbelievers, no-one outside of the huddle.’

‘Concentrate on the thumb-drive, Meg. Try not to get upset, it’ll bring on your asthma.’

‘Screw the asthma, man? They got Spence. What if they followed the old-chick? What if a SWAT-team is preparing to blow the doors, right now?’

‘We’d know, Meg. That’s why we scan their database and phone servers.’

‘Right, sure. But she shouldn’t be here,’ he was pointing at her. ‘Jay invited you in, and that’s the only reason I don’t kick your fat-ass out the front door.’

‘That’s it, you smart mouthed, *Dalek*.’ Kass’ hands gripped the wheelchair, pushing its wheels into reverse. Instant acceleration until they thudded hard against the desktop.

‘They have my son, Josh. They took him from me, and now you’re going to tell me everything you know about that clinic or so help me I’ll stuff your balls so far up your usb slot your hard-drive will fry, capiche?’

‘Can I get you some more coffee?’ Asked Cupcake.

She let go of his chair, the motor whirled as Megatron retreated.

‘Crazy-cop-bitch. I told you, it’s not the Foundation.’

‘Turn it down, Meg. Spence sent her here, he must have had a good reason.’

No, he didn't. He had no choice. 'Long story short,' she said. 'Josh, my son, was diagnosed with a tumour. The doctors, they didn't predict a healthy prognosis. A man named Fortune gave me hope, and a one way ticket to a clinic in Mexico. Which, by the way, we thought was in Colorado. They kidnapped my baby, and they, they killed Spencer. I killed a man in the desert to survive, and a man named, Weldon, he saved me . . . This is where it gets weird. He looks like a hobo and talks like one. Turns out he's some sort of retired assassin. And like everyone here it seems, he's got his problems. Then a missile goes bang, dog goes woof, mother gets nailed in tuna-tin to cross the border back into America. Since then I've been arrested . . . accused of murdering my boyfriend. And there's a pack of sons-of-bitches who want to kill me. Oh, I forgot. By now I'll have a warrant out for my arrest, for the killing of a sheriff's deputy in Ajo, Arizona, and then I meet you, Spencer's friends, and I give you the only thing I have, that could help me get my son back.'

'Tell her, Meg. She needs to know everything.'

'Okay, okay. But cop-lady needs to chill, and keep her hands of my wheels.'

Kass showed her open palms. 'Sorry,' she said. 'Please, tell me about Broadsword.' *Stop looking at her; at me.*

'Broadsword had information,' he said, 'about some very bad people. They only knew them as, The Board. They claimed to have found evidence about experiments being done on kids; they were screening for certain types, and they were being sent somewhere. That's all they knew.'

'It was the clinic.'

'We didn't know at the time. And then it got kinda weird. You see, Spence was working for the pharmaceutical company, Beiman; he was trying to find dirt on them; you know, misappropriated government funding, evidence of rigged drug trials; that sort of shit. Happens all the time, just no-one cares enough to catch them out. Spence liked to go undercover, it made him feel . . .'

‘Alive,’ Jay said. ‘It gave him purpose. He wanted bad people, bad companies, to be accountable.’

‘He was a superhero.’ Added Cupcake.

‘And where did that get him? Oh yeah, dead, apparently. Oh, sorry Jay. I didn’t mean . . . Aaargh!’ He slapped his head half a dozen times. ‘Engage brain, cleanse oral rhetoric. Jay, I’m sorry. Spence was the man, okay. Serious penguin-power. He was the heart of the huddle.’

‘Anywaaay,’ *Is there a psychiatrist in the house?* ‘does Broadsword know what’s going on?’

‘No, of course not. But in their last online post they said they were being watched, and followed. They were scared, and then they went offline. Their website crashed out and we never heard from them again. They disappeared, man, like they’d never existed. They were wiped from the Net. But they’d passed on a name before they, you know, disappeared.’

‘What name,’ asked Kass.

‘Some psycho-doctor named Outman. You know, death-camp doctor, that sort of thing. He was on the wanted list at the Hague, Interpol; heavy shit. Bad connections with the Chinese, or the North Koreans, probably both. A bad-ass ego with no moral compass. But the really weird thing was, a few weeks later a doctor *named* Outman, approached Spencer. He needed a talented chemist for work over the border. Said it was a government project, hush hush, official secrets and all that. You couldn’t write this shit. And we couldn’t stop him going.’

‘I’ve met him, Outman.’ Kass said. The smug bastard’s face would haunt her forever. ‘Tell me why he wants these kids? Why he wants Josh’

‘It’s the growths in their heads,’ said Jay. ‘The last report that Spence . . . That he sent us. We think they’re causing it to happen.’

‘They’re what?’ *Making kids ill?* ‘How is that possible?’

‘Cop-lady, have you never heard of NEXUS?’

‘I don’t understand, what’s my cell-provider got to do with all this?’ Kass looked to Jay to clarify Meg’s statement. ‘Tell me what’s going on.’

‘Tell her everything, Meg.’

‘One last time, she’s a cop? Okay, fine, let’s build a camp-fire and sing Kumbaya. Jay, this is not what we do.’

‘Spence is dead, Meg. That changes everything.’

‘So *she* says.’

‘Spence isn’t gone,’ said Cupcake.’ They all turned to listen. He was patting his chest. ‘He’s in here, always. The heart of the huddle.’

‘Always, Cuppy. He’ll always be in here.’ Jay took Cupcake’s hand in her own. ‘Meg, Spencer would never have given Kass his thumb-drive, let alone have tell her about the three of us. No, not if there was any other way. So you tell her. You tell her everything.’

‘Fine.’

Is he sulking? He is, he’s sulking. ‘Hey, Megatron, over here.’ *Christ, it’s like a mentally challenged play-group.* ‘Tell me what’s going on.’ *Stay calm.* ‘Well?’

‘Spence went to work for this, Doctor Outman. We all said it was stoopid. Way too dangerous. After what Broadsword had posted.’

‘Well, what did they post? What’s NEXUS got to do with all of this? And why does it involve Josh?’ *Stop looking at her. Focus on me.* ‘Will you spit it out.’ It was time to draw a straight line between the theory and the

facts. 'What does this have to do with the Foundation? What does it have to do with Josh? And who are, The Board?'

'Do I have to join the dots for you?'

'Yes, please.' *You sarcastic little shit.* 'Keep it simple. Us cops, we're not renowned for having lofty IQs.'

'Beiman,' he said. 'They've been using their reps to canvas clinics and hospitals across the country. They're looking for kids with brain cancer. Coincidence, not!'

'Brain cancer. But why?'

'That was the question that Spence wanted to answer. He knew what they were up to, but not *why*. Beiman were being clever sneaky. They'd pass on a few incentives to any GP, or hospital that could pass a patient's name their way. Just another unlucky kid with a tumour, no big deal. Not unless you can see the bigger picture, and they weren't advertising.

But Spence saw it. He found out that Beiman were building a vast medical data base from these kids. Look, it goes like this. A private consultant turns up on your doorstep after you've found out your kids gonna die. Oh, and sorry about, you know, Josh. Anyway, said consultant offers a life-line to the parents. A well known charity is willing to stump up the medical expenses; it offers to take care of your kid. What else can you say, other than yes please, and where do I sign?

Well, according to Spence, no-one ever reads the small print. Why would they? The Foundation gets to keep all the samples, all the bits they cut away. You know, blood, DNA. Hell, most of the kids are terminal anyway; those that aren't can always have . . . complications.

Spence was real good at sniffing out the details. He had a gift for seeing patterns that no-one else could. Shit, when Outman came along, he saw the link between NEXUS and the Foundation.'

'What link? What the hell *is* NEXUS?'

‘Do you live down south in the swampy zone, cop-lady? NEXUS is, it; the holy grail of Data Transmission. It’s cooler than Apple-tech, and more powerful than a Sith Lord. NEXUS goes beyond wireless downloads, or streaming. You don’t get a big fat pile of data flowing from provider to server, and then onto consumer. NEXUS is a single package, real-time data dumping, and done in less than a heart beat. High frequency bandwidths are about to be made redundant. Its VHS video versus Blu-ray. It’s penguin-power via a satellite.’

Are you getting a hard on for all of this? ‘Dumb it down Ironside, I’m a cop remember.’

‘Fine,’ Meg turned his wheelchair a hundred and eighty. ‘You got a TV, cop-lady? Like to stream a movie now and then? In HD, or super-doooper HD. Sure, your server can handle that, most of the time. Same with the phone, and broadband, but your always reliant on their signal strength, their bandwidth. NEXUS isn’t like that. It can dump the entire Congress library in a heartbeat. That’s thirty-four million volumes before you’ve put the handset down. Man, that’s awesome tech. It’s a revolution in binary. And the really clever part, it can’t be faked, or copied. You need the chips to send and receive. Source and recipient that mate for life. It’s speed of light stuff. No more piggybacking, eavesdropping, or hacking. It’s New Age Relativity. Einstein on amphetamines. It’s SAD all over again. $\text{Speed} = \text{Application} \times \text{Distance squared}$. It’s also sad for your

existing provider. The minute NEXUS goes fully operational, everyone else is out of business.'

You're giving me a headache. Kass looked to Jay for help. 'Please, just tell me what I need to know.'

'Kassandra, you need to understand,' she said. 'It's no secret that NEXUS has been working for the US Military for nearly a decade now. The Military want to communicate with their troops quicker, send more explosive bursts of data, more securely, and infinitely faster than any other SatCom in space.

If they succeed, they'll forge ahead in all areas of computing. In unmanned military hardware. And perhaps more importantly, it will also relieve them of any issues pertaining to 3G and 4G communication. Law suites will be expensive if the medical establishment ever joins the dots. So they've spent billions on developing NEXUS. But there's one big problem.'

'Yeah, a big problem, man.'

Are you speaking again? 'I don't care,' she said. 'Just tell me how it involves Josh? Jay, please, spell it out.'

'Spence had a theory,' said Jay. 'He reckoned the NEXUS was the cause of young children developing tumours. Kassandra, there's more danger flying around our heads than from anything here on the ground. It's everywhere now; all around us. We can't see it, we can't feel it, and we are already living with the consequences. I think that's what's on Spence's thumb-drive. Spence may have found the proof of those consequences.'

'And NEXUS? Are you saying I've given my son cancer?'

'You couldn't have known, Kassandra. NEXUS bursts data from the source, the satellite, directly to the recipient, the handset. It comes in a focused beam of light.'

'Like a laser?'

'I suppose that would be the simplest analogy. But the truth is, it's more like a bolt of lightning. It's a very aggressive surge of light issued by a

satellite. It's attracted to a recipient-chip, a mate, no two pairs are the same. Spence theorised that NEXUS was actually a form of artificial intelligence. It's just too damn stupid to understand the difference between the hardware it was designed to mate with, and a child's brain.'

'How's that for ironic, cop-lady. When NEXUS takes a dump, it passes through any and all kinds of matter, that's why it's so good at what it does. Nothing stops it, and it travels at the speed of light. Tell her what that is, Cupcake.'

'The speed of light travels at one hundred and eighty six thousand miles per second; that's six hundred and seventy one million miles per hour. It's really fast.'

'That's right, it's fast. NEXUS can transmit terabytes of data quicker than you can blink your eyes.'

'Physics isn't really my thing,' Jay added. 'But Spence was into all that stuff. It's just light, pure and simple. A SatCom carrier capable of sending massive packets of data, at unsurpassable speeds. Scientists have been messing with the stuff for years.'

'Light? That doesn't make any sense.'

'Well neither does taking a photo,' said Meg, 'but that works. Exposing light through a lens with insanely fast shutter speeds gives you a means to send visual communication around the planet. Have you any idea how much data a photo contains. How about a film, or a live concert, being beamed to your TV from the other side of the globe? That was crazy shit seventy years ago. Just light and mirrors, something we take for granted these days. Think about it? Light is all around us, and it's very aggressive in nature. It bombards us every day in a host of different wavelengths.'

It's all about the light, man. Light. It's just different waves of magic. Use an x-ray and you can see through things. Switch on the infrared and you can see at night. This is just another wave of light, but it can pass through rock and steel; it's in its nature to do so. But on the way it delivers the mail. How cool is that? Capture the data in light, just like a

photo. A billion photos. And send them off at the speed of light, on a wave of light. Hello, it's like microfiche in the eighteen fifties, but a trillion times cooler. Its light Jim, but not as we know it. Man, if you can understand the science, it's pretty damn beautiful.'

'It's killing my son, you freak. There's *nothing* beautiful about that.'

Wheel's had retreated to his room. Kass got dressed, calmed down; tried to take it all in. The crux of it all as always, came down to money. NEXUS was a trillion dollar asset, if and when it went mainstream, not just in the US but globally. Worse still, it flew the American flag, and that explained a lot. Her own country was hunting her, and she had no doubt they would catch up, sooner or later.

'I thought you might be able to think better in here,' said Jay.

She'd brought Kass into Cuppy's room. "Neutral territory" that's what she'd called it.

'Meg's gone to his room. I apologise, he can be . . .'

'Lacking in compassion, sympathy; oh, let's not forget insulting.'

'Pretty much, I guess. You'd like him if you got to know him, honestly.'

'Is he really as clever as he says?'

'Much more,' she said. 'But sometimes his mouth works quicker than his brain. It's a reflex really. And he's not good with strangers.'

'I hadn't noticed.'

'Meg has an IQ in the one eighties. But his self-esteem is in the basement. An accident took the use of his legs when he was six, and the world has given him a hard time since. Sometimes he likes to dish it back. I suppose its what we have most in common, we've all been abused by society.'

'Can I get you some tea?' Asked Cupcake.

‘Coffee, please. And lots of it.’

‘Coffee’s not good for people who are stressed.’

‘Yes, it is. Trust me.’

‘Okay.’

One hundred and ninety pounds of prime tenor was packed inside the five foot nine frame, who shuffled from the room.

‘He’s not sneaky enough to bring me de-caf is he?’

‘No, not our Cupcake. He’s honest, sweet, and smarter in some ways than all of us.’

There it was, the same smile whenever she spoke his name.

‘Are you two related as well?’ *You’re not sleeping with him?*

‘No, I met Cupcake when I was fourteen. I was living rough, my head was in a bad place. He took care of me when no-one else wanted to know. I had lots of issues back then. But even so, I think Cuppy had more. People thought he was dumb, or stupid; because he was big, and clumsy. Other things that mark you out as a target for spiteful mean people. I guess we looked out for each other. And here we are.’

‘It’s odd how life can throw strangers together.’ Kass was recalling the desert, and Weldon. *Where the hell is he?* She couldn’t help a peek out of through window as she crossed the room. He’d shadowed her before? ‘This is a really nice place,’ she said. Red and green everywhere, mostly in pastel. It was easy on the eye. She wasn’t sure about the big man’s fetish for glass bowls.

Numerous surfaces in the room had transparency on full display. It was obviously a passion; there were even glass bricks set in the dividing walls. There was something else about the room too. Kass couldn’t recollect being anywhere so, well, ordered. There was more than a touch of OCD’s going on in here.

‘I thought you might like Brazilian?’ Said Cupcake, mug in hand.

‘Fantastic,’ she replied, accepting the mug. ‘Hmm, smells divine. Hey, I really like your place, and that music too, who is it?’

Obviously from an opera; two women were singing soprano. The music playing faintly in the background since they'd entered. It gave Kass her first feeling of tranquility in a long time. 'It's lovely,' she said. 'Thank you.'

'One of my favourites,' Cupcake replied. 'It's the flower duet, from the opera, Lakmé. I thought it might help relax everyone.'

'Good call,' said Kass, her eyes exploring his home. Basically the same layout as Megatron's room, but not a superhero in sight. 'You really like opera,' she said, fingering his cd collection. 'And country music too.' *Oh my God, he has Michael Bublé.* She ran her finger along the CD spines. *One, two . . . Oh wow, he has all of Michael's cd's.* 'Can we put this one on?' She asked.

Cupcake was nodding. He seemed pleased with her choice as she opened, and then closed the tray with the new cd. Bublé's slick tone. It was odd what could make you feel good, and Cupcake's next question left her feeling tearful.

'Are you hungry?' He asked

This wasn't how she wanted to feel. It wasn't right. But the anger and guilt were gnawing away at her sanity. 'Yes,' she replied. Truth was she couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten. Back at the Café, before Milo had turned up, she'd left her cake half-eaten. Since then her stomach had been tied in a permanent knot.

'I have cake?' Said Cupcake.

You do?

The sound of Bublé's voice, and the offer of cake. She felt her stress levels hit an all time low.

'I have apple, or cheese-cake. Oh, and some brownies,' he added, as if they'd been forgotten. Quickly followed by a thoughtful face levelled up at the ceiling, before he left to gather his supplies. 'I thought so,' his soft voice calling from the kitchen. 'There's still some chocolate and orange sponge. Oh, and a few slices of fruit-cake. I have cookies in the fridge.'

I have cookies in the fridge? The man was a poet.

She felt Jay's hand on her shoulder. 'I recommend the chocolate and orange sponge,' as she leaned in closer. 'Now you know why we're such good friends.'

With a figure like that, I don't think so.

Kass smiled. She guessed it was the same happy grin she'd seen Jay wear whenever she mentioned Cupcake's name.

Just one more slice of the chocolate and orange cake, she'd make room somewhere. Washing the delightfully light sponge down with more Brazilian.

'Go on, Jay,' she said. 'I am listening. I want to know why this has happened.'

'So you remember the headlines, yes? In the eighties, when newspapers were filled with stories about cell-phones being responsible for cancer?'

'Hmm, yeah.' God this is good. 'Something about radiation from our cells, or was it the towers?'

'That's right. Only the problem was, they got the wrong symptoms, from the wrong source. It all began when the government sold the first bandwidths to carry the signals. The effects were pretty sporadic at first,' Jay shrugged, 'no-one noticed, so no-one cared. There was a brief concern that microwaves from mobile phones caused cancer, but nothing proved.'

'A bit like smoking causes cancer?'

'A lot like it. When test-cases were brought to link illness with cell-phone they blamed the frequencies projected by the masts. But with billions of dollars at stake it was all smoked over. Nothing was proved. So, just as it was with cigarettes, we were told there was insufficient data, and no reason to be concerned. The phone companies carried on, it

was business as usual. I'll bet you didn't know that brain cancer is the fastest growing form of cancer in the world today?'

'No,' she teased the last piece of sponge into her mouth. 'Is it really?'

'Yes. But that's not the problem we should focus on.'

'If not cancer, then what?'

'It all started with 1G, and then 2G, and then came 3G, the Universal Mobile Telecommunication Systems, or UMTS, went global. Of course the US military had been using it for years. Three megabytes per second of data passing through anyone that got in its way. It was followed by 4G, the fourth generation of mobile communication, generously flooding the airways with super-speed digital-data. Kass, two-thirds of the Earth's population is exposed to Wi-Fi. So ask yourself this; what happens to us, or more precisely, what happens to the biological material that gets stuck in its way, day after day, after day?'

I'm not sure I want to know. 'Cancer is inherited in the genes, isn't it? A flaw that can be aggravated by exposure to radiation? Jay, are you saying that cell-phones *do* cause cancer?'

'In a tiny number of patients, probably, yes. But not enough for any government to get serious about. But what our government, and others, now realise, is there's been an explosion in mental disorders. Conditions that are mostly concentrated in the young, but with serious numbers now reflecting in the more elderly.'

Where are you going with this? What's this got to do with Josh? 'What sort of mental disorders are we talking about?'

'ADHD, Tourettes, Bipolar behaviours, Kass, we're talking everything from eating disorders to mood variations. There are hundreds of symptoms, and many more being diagnosed every year. And there's a single cause for them all. Name a mental disorder, and it's most likely linked. Even anxiety has risen four hundred percent on average. Did you know that suicide is the fifth most common cause of death in five to fourteen-year-olds, and that's the government's own statistic. Attempted suicide makes the number far more substantial. And get this, in Great

Britain, the charity, Mind, is calling for their government to include mental health lessons into the curriculum of all schools. The charity's stats show massive numbers of teenagers suffer everything from anxiety to depression. They believe that one-third of all British kids, by the time they've reached the age of sixteen, have thought about, considered, or attempted suicide.'

'That's a lot of kids?'

'Can you imagine? And over eighty-five percent of them own, or have the use of, a mobile-phone.' Jay was becoming animated. Concern etched in her already serious features. 'It's all across Europe and the US, Internet Health Services are springing up like online fountains, whilst governments worldwide downplay the issue. In some cases they are wilfully, and *criminally*, suppressing the truth in favour of the huge tax benefits they receive. They're blaming it on negative social skills, on poor diets. Even the Xbox and Playstation? Kass, in ten years time we'll have an entire generation of children growing up on Ritalin because they can't communicate properly, and it's all because of wireless communication, how fucking ironic is that?'

'Are you serious? I had no idea.' *Can it really be true?* 'Can you prove it?'

'We think the proof is on Spencer's thumb-drive.'

Suddenly the last few days made sense. They didn't just want her dead, they wanted what was on Spencer's thumb-drive. The resources they'd committed so far were off the charts.

'Think about it, Kass. The last few decades have seen governments around the world look the other way. They're actively blocking negative research into mobile communication, poo-pooing scientists that dare to take a stand. They've even made people disappear whilst pampering to Mobi-Com Corporations. My God, Kass, there are over six billion phones in circulation on the planet right now. Six billion! And how many of them do you think are owned by kids? Spencer knew. That's why he went undercover. It's the reason they killed him.'

‘Jay, I’m sorry about Spencer, I am. But cell-phones causing the growth in mental disorders?’

‘No, it’s not the phones, not even the frequencies. Cassandra, it’s the raw data. The stuff that flies through the air; through you and me every second of the day. It’s in the air, and it’s all around us. Passing through us, accelerating and accumulating; becoming more aggressive in nature. Data-streaming from modern satellites has immersed our world in a sea of data. And we swim in that sea daily. Kass, it’s attempting to re-map our brains.’

‘Are you serious?’

‘Yes. Kass, what’s up here. This spongy thing we call a brain, it’s basically a computer. It takes raw data through touch, taste, smell, sight and hearing; and turns that data into thoughts, memories, and cognate skills. The different levels on which we transmit, transfer, and process data is extraordinary. The transfer rates are, well, unquantifiable. Kass, there are transmitters and antennae on every street corner. Satellites in geosynchronous orbit. We’re being bombarded from all directions by mobile communication in it’s raw form. Data information being sent via radio and microwave. Is it such a leap to believe our extraordinary senses are starting to pick on data that is designed to find more eloquent, sensitive, and responsive receptors?’

Jay slumped to the edge of her bed.

‘So many elderly now, their brains unable to defend against a world that craves faster and more elaborate form of data transfer. And it’s begun to affect our kids. Each new generation exposed to smarter, more aggressive upgrades of communication. Kass, some of that data is starting to stick, it’s begun to interrupt the signals in our brains, both young and old. It’s like the air we breath now; we’re immersed in it.’

‘Shit, Josh’s tumour?’

‘Yes, Josh’s tumour. I think NEXUS is why they took your son. The US Government has been secretly researching the effects from NEXUS. They’ve even given it a name, SinRem. It’s short for Synapse-Remap. I

kid you not. We are born into it. We live our lives encased in a data download. It's taking an increasingly heavy toll.'

'Is all this true?'

'Open your eyes, Kass. All we lack is the evidence. The clinic you took Josh to, it's really a research centre for NEXUS. Their communication is revolutionary. It will literally take-over the world, by rendering existing communications obsolete. The government wants it online before the effects of mobile communication becomes known. Mental disorder is the most aggressive medical-phenomena ever known to Man.'

'So NEXUS means no law-suits.'

'And world-wide communications dominance.'

'So what's on the thumb-drive? She asked.

'Evidence of what I've just told you. Spence said he was close. And he'd found out the truth about NEXUS. It has a terrible side-affect. NEXUS has a habit of trying to mate with young Human brains.'

'Oh God, Josh? Has this thing caused my son to be ill?'

'In an effort to stop Sin-Map they've managed to create something more deadly. It didn't occur to them that Top Secret Military posts don't tend to have children based on them. Kass, we couldn't believe the information that Spencer was passing on to us. I wanted him to leave, get out, it was so dangerous for him. But he refused. He was sure that he could get the proof; data we could publish online. He wanted to put a stop to NEXUS. He wanted the world to know their lust for communication was killing them.'

Images popped into Kass' head, most involving the dollar sign. How could she have been so stupid? NEXUS had lured her into accepting its gifts.

'Oh God, NEXUS caused the cancer in Josh's brain. I'm responsible for all this?'

‘I’m so sorry Kass. You couldn’t have known, but NEXUS caused the tumour.’

‘It seems that in trying to solve one problem, they’ve caused another. NEXUS is aggressive, invasive, and it’s hurting kids. From what Spence told us, they’ve got no idea how bad the problem could get. But they may have a solution.’

‘I did it?’ *Oh God, Josh?* ‘Solution?’ Hope jumped into Kass’ heart. ‘They have a cure? Are you telling me Josh is in the best place to get help?’

‘No, not with that man. Josh knows, or at least, he’s seen too much. And he’s your son.’

Dark; she felt the dark descend in her heart again. This was all her fault. *Why did I sign . . . What have I done?*

‘Would you like more cake,’ asked Cupcake.

‘No, I don’t want any more fucking cake. And I don’t want any more bullshit from any of you!’ Cupcakes face? She shouldn’t have shouted. ‘I have to find him,’ more a plea. ‘Please, you have to help me.’ He smiled; began nodding in agreement. *And you, what about you?* Jay was thoughtful, not as quick to toss her hat into Kass’ ring. ‘Okay, tell me more,’ she said. *Engage with her. Show empathy. Form a rapport.* The first three stages of hostage negotiation. She’d done the course two years ago, hoping it would get her out more. She was wrong. *They killed your*

brother, and I'm sorry, but that's the leverage I need to get your help. Step five, influence. 'I want to understand,' she said. 'Help me understand.'

'I'll tell,' said Cupcake.

'Thank you. Shall we sit down?' Kass offered Cupcake his own couch. 'Tell me exactly what it is that NEXUS is doing. And I want to know what Spence discovered down there, everything. He must have been so brave.' Cupcake was nodding. About to sit down.

'Cuppy, will you make me a nice cup of tea, please.' It was Jay who sat; encouraging him to leave. 'He's not your friend, Kass. He's vulnerable, so don't fuck with him.'

'Then you tell me everything I need to know. They murdered your brother, don't you want to do something about that? I spent half an hour rolling around with his corpse in the trunk of that bastard's car. They have my son!' *Dial it back, it's not her fault.* 'Jay, don't you want to get justice for Spence?' *Don't think about it, just do . . .*

'A child's brain,' Jay said. 'It has a very similar design to the recipient chips. The organic circuitry up here, it responds to light and electricity to do its thing. It's enquiring, analytical, always ready to engage. It tries to make sense of everything it encounters. It's young and eager; craving to learn. It's yearning to expand with new, more profound knowledge. A virgin processor programmed to accept and conform. Just waiting to be hijacked by an exterior influence that's compatible,' she stood, her demeanour surprisingly angered. 'Hello, come check me out,' her voice raised. 'Big juicy ball of brain-matter waiting to play host to whatever nasty influence is passing by.' Jay knelt, she took Kass' hand. 'NEXUS gave your son cancer, okay, you're not responsible. It tried to reprogram his brain. It got inside his head and fucked with the wiring, and it failed. Is that understanding enough?'

Kass pulled her hand away.

'Sick, isn't it,' said Jay. 'Sick and sad that some children grow up to be monsters. That's how Spence got involved, the same way as the rest of us; through Broadsword. All this chatter about some phantom group

called, The Board. And their involvement with a doctor named, Outman. Spence was fascinated by it all. And then, when NEXUS turned up offering to recruit him. The head of the clinic was a doctor named Outman? Fate, that was how Spence saw it. A chance to find out more. To find out the truth. Spence had no idea what he'd uncover. It didn't take long after he was recruited to begin to put the pieces together. What they were doing. How it involved NEXUS. He couldn't believe it. So he hatched a plan to search the clinic's database. Hack whatever he could, safely. It turned into, a conspiracy that hinted toward the highest levels of our government. The whole damn thing began to consume him; he even began to admire the creative genius behind NEXUS.

Spence even suggested that NEXUS was attempting to evolve. Sounds crazy, right? With what he managed to send us, Meg began to agree. Kass, I am truly sorry, but NEXUS is causing the growths in children's heads, in Josh's head. It's mistaking their brains for the recipient chips. Its trying to upload itself. Maybe it really is trying to evolve?'

‘You have proof?’

‘No. That’s what Spencer was trying around to get. That’s what we’re hoping is on that thumb-drive. Evidence of the damage mobile communication has inflicted, and is inflicting? Proof that it’s damaging the behavioural patterns of hundreds of millions of people worldwide. It’s what they were studying, in the hope it could help with NEXUS. We’re hoping there’s proof of what NEXUS is doing.’

‘But even you can’t break the encryption?’

‘Meg’s working on it. He’ll find the key. Spence used something, and we’re missing it at the moment.’

‘Okay, but why did Outman want Spencer?’

‘He says they’re trying to create a cure for the cancerous growths. They intend to cash in on both ends of the market. NEXUS will go live regardless.’

A cure? ‘So there is a way of curing Josh?’

‘I don’t know, not for sure. Maybe? In his last message Spence told us that Outman was happy with the test results at the clinic. But that the “doctor wanted to take NEXUS to the next level.” He believed that the NEXUS Web could be encouraged to expand much further.’

‘What the hell for?’

‘I don’t know. I hadn’t heard from Spence in several weeks. He kept missing our . . .’

‘Hey, hey, it’s okay,’ it was her turn to take Jay’s hand. ‘I wasn’t messing when I said he was brave. Spencer didn’t have to try to help us, he could have tried to leave on his own. Jay, he gave me a chance to save Josh. Please, help me find my boy; let’s finish what Spencer started.’

It was a chilled evening, the last of the sunlight not yet surrendered to the dark. Across the road, three storeys up, the figure of a female stared down. Peering cautiously down as a grey Trans-Am passed by, the warble of its V8 briefly filled the empty street, and then faded as the car turned away. In the shadows of a doorway a figure watched the girl snap the window's drape closed.

You clever girl, you found them. A gentle hum and a phone was slipped out from his pocket. 'You're late.' Weldon said.

"What you asked for wasn't easy to acquire," the caller replied.

'I'll deposit the money as per your usual terms,' said Weldon as he stepped back into the doorway. His gaze carefully checking the windows and doors in similar buildings along an empty road. It was an old warehouse neighbourhood, most of the premises for an entire block were disused and run down.

"It's been a while," the caller said. *"I thought you'd retired."*

'What do you know?' Asked Weldon.

"That you're fucking with the big-boys, and this isn't officially sanctioned," the caller paused. *"Okay, I'll send what I have. The highlights are as follows. Dr, Steven Outman, he's an interesting character. The world would be a more pleasant place to live in if he were no longer around. The woman named April, she's CIA. Her real name is Simone Beuchert, a Swiss American hybrid. She works for us, and is most definitely a patriot. The Company gives her a lot of latitude to run operations on their darker-side. I*

have no idea what activities she's involved in right now, but whatever she's running, it's waaaaay outside of the box, and as black as it gets."

'What about Carl?'

"He's your biggest problem on the ground. Ex-Navy Seal, a real creepy crawly. Full name's Carl Peterson, a privateer, he hires himself to whomever, whenever, and for whatever. The Company uses him for the bad deeds, as do various other Agencies. He runs a four man team."

'Not any more. He's a duet now.'

"Oh dear, what a shame. I'm guessing one of them talked before his eventual demise, hence all the interest?"

'We had an interesting chat. What about the front-man, the elusive Mister Fortune?'

"Hmm, I'm going to have to disappoint you there. Fortune's a ghost, and a damn good one because I can't find him. But to make up for that, I have the latest on the current FBI investigation.

Special Agent in charge is a twenty year vet named Paul Santini. You'll love him; he's an obtuse character with a hair trigger. Take away the rough edges and he's one of the Bureau's finest. I'm sending what I have in ones-and-zeros. Where do you want it sent?"

'They call these things Smart-Phones for a reason. Send it to me at this number.'

It's done. John, don't underestimate Simone, or April, or whatever name she's using. That woman is highly trained, very efficient, and she has access to Intel that's way above both our pay grades. Oh, and did I mention your mug-shot is already doing the rounds.'

'Then I guess what you just faxed me will even the playing field.'

"John, I hate to break this to you, but faxes don't exist anymore. If it isn't prefixed with the word Smart, it isn't safe, and it sure as heck isn't sociable. What's your interest? Why are you involved with these people? Last time we spoke you were off to the forest for hibernation."

‘Yeah, well, I guess someone just woke the bear. Thanks for your concern.’ Weldon hung up. ‘Now then, where were we? What do you intend to do now?’

Weldon adjusted his earpiece, and tapped the pause icon on his screen; the two women were still talking. The two men from the other apartments had joined them.

Moody was an understatement, you could cut the air with a knife. Jay was agitated, her mood had sunk. She was angry about her brother; angry with this woman, Cassandra, who'd brought such terrible news.

Spence, I knew something was wrong. She couldn't help thinking it was so unfair. *Such a tale you've told. Why were you fated to walk away and not Spence? Why did you survive?* A lot had been said, and been left unsaid. *Look at you, so impatient to find out what's on my brother's thumb-drive.*

'Tell me about him,' Cassandra asked.

What? No. Jay turned away. *I can't.* She put her hand against the window's glass. *He might still be out there?* Nothing but a car driving to the end of the block. *You don't deserve to know him. It's your fault he's dead.*

'Jay, tell me about Spencer, please. What was he like?'

Spencer was everything. She could see him, clear as the night sky outside, his reflection in the glass. *He came back for me.* She spun around; only Cassandra was in room.

'Are you okay? Can I get you anything?'

'My brother?' *No, that's unfair.* 'I'm sorry.' You've lost your son; I can't imagine . . . She closed the drapes to block out his reflection. 'Spence brought the light back where only darkness had been,' she said, and shrugged. She wanted to talk, she just didn't know how.'

'You were close, I can see that,' said Cassandra.

‘When mum and dad died,’ she said, ‘it was just Spencer and me. No living relatives, no-one to take us in,’ she flopped defeated onto the edge of the bed. The urge to shout and scream damn near undeniable. But it wouldn’t help, it couldn’t. Nothing would bring Spence back. And this woman, this cop. Who was she? Why had Spence chosen her to find them? There had to be a reason. She couldn’t help herself. She wanted to talk about Spence.

‘When Mum and Dad died . . .’ *Tell her; someone should know.* ‘It was an accident, a fire. One day they were doting, loving . . . Before they we’re in the ground, the State came for us both. They took us into the system, and they treated us like criminals. They took us away from everything we knew, and they put us . . . they put us into *care*. That’s what they called it. No iron bars, just locked doors, in a home for orphaned children. Cassandra, we were kids.’

‘Kass, please. Call me Kass. I’m so sorry. I’m sure they wanted to help.’

‘And you speak from experience? No, I didn’t think so. I’ve been in *care*, and I know how they treat kids. One home to another. Six in two years. They told us we had no rights at that age. No voice, and no chance of staying together,’ she gave Kass a wry smile as the memories resurfaced, not that they ever really sank too deep. ‘I suppose I was the lucky one. The State found me a foster-family up in Maryland. My caseworker told me straight, the younger you are, the easier it is to get rehomed. Dumped off in a small rural community, more like. They refused to tell me where they’d sent Spence. Said it was best if I just moved on. How can that be? What for the best? They took our home. Kass. They sold it to pay for our *care*. They tore Spence and I apart. Fuck, I hated them. And everyone else concerned. I still do . . . Crazy right?’

‘No, not crazy. I’m sure they did what they thought was right.’

‘Are you?’ *And what would you know about it, cop-lady?* ‘It’s not a nice thing to suddenly find yourself alone. Thrust so deep inside a hole that you can’t see the sides, let alone the top. Everything was dark. The world went black and cold. I was eleven, Kass, and I was already lost.’

Stop it. You know what happens when you bring this shit up. Remember the therapist, the bloody nose you gave her? She didn't give a shit, so why should you?

'You know what, I actually blamed my parents for dying. Is that dumb enough to be classed as crazy? I mean, it was hardly their fault. And I blamed Spence for not sticking by me. Not that he had a choice. I blamed everyone. I blamed them then, and I still do now. Those are the headlines, in case you were wondering. That's the reason I get the headaches, you know, the really mean ones that come with a bloody nose. I actually thought it was me, up here, trying to get out?'

Fuck this, it doesn't matter. It never really did. Oh Spence, please don't be gone. I can't handle this without you.

'Jay, are you sure you're okay? Can I get you a glass of water, anything?

'Why, to take my pills?' *I should take my pills. Bedside drawer, go take your pills.* 'The doctors said I needed chemical help. I still take them. I don't do the therapy, not any more. Ha, ha, ha, my foster-parents considered me damaged goods, how about that? "Not right up here," that's what they said. Good and loud when they thought I couldn't hear. They got so scared of the angry kid. Can't really blame them I suppose. They probably thought I'd do them in their sleep.' *Fuck, fuck . . .* 'I must sound like some crazy-psycho-bitch?'

'No, you're hurting. And I can't tell you it'll be okay. But we have a common goal now. We need to find the truth, it will help us both.'

'You want the truth, cop-lady? Truth is, it crossed my mind more than once. Do them, and then do myself. Do every mother-fucker that ever looked at me the wrong way. Ha, ha, ha, that's me, damaged goods. In the end I ran out of people to blame, so I just learnt to live with it.'

'I'm so sorry,' said Kass.

'So you should be. It was people like you that came for us. Two bitches in cheap suits, and a cop with a gun. I was scared shitless. They brought a cop with a gun, to pick up two kids?'

Jay picked up a brush from the bedside table. She began to brush her hair. Felt the regression slide her back into old feelings as she combed through her hair with slow deliberate strokes. 'The one good thing about my fosters, *the Doherty's*, was their subscription to the internet. I found a new way to amuse myself. *Computers*. I had no idea they could be so much fun. I found the hieroglyphs on that keyboard were all the friends a girl needed.'

Blinking didn't help, nor did looking away. And she was dragging too hard on the brush. *Fuck, she must think I'm crazy. I need my pills. Take my pills.* Jay opened the drawer; saw the bottle and the foils. Cop-Lady was staring, she felt exposed, embarrassed even, but picked up a foil anyway. 'I got trust issues too,' she added. *No, I shouldn't have said that. Why bring that up? The past is in past, right? That's what the fucking shrinks always said.* She grabbed the bottle of water she always kept by her bed. Took a shot, and then threw in some pills and swallowed. *Why should taking these embarrass me?*

'You're a cop, right?' She asked. 'You're supposed to help people, right?'

'We try, Jay. We really do.'

I believe you. That's strange, but I really do.

'I met someone when I was thirteen,' she said. 'He was older, much older. He was so handsome, and kind . . . He . . . motherfucker.' *Still can't say the words can you?* 'Son of a bitch was an adult; he said he would take care of me. I don't know what that word means anymore, Kass.' She forced a smile; just like the ones *he* used to give her. *Look at her, listening, looking like she cares. Does she? Shit, shit, she's got problems of her own, missing kid and all. This woman doesn't need to hear about my Greek tragedy.*

'Spence came back for you, didn't he?' Said Kass. 'He found you, didn't he?'

No, no, do not cry. Her eyes were welling, swimming in fluid that threatened to breach. *No, I won't do it. No tears, not even for Spence. No tears, not ever again. I'm not a victim!*

‘He turned up out of the blue one day, after seven years. Said he'd never stopped looking for me. Kass, I barely recognised him. But I hugged him for, what, twenty minutes?’ *I'm not going to do this, I'm not.* Too late as the first tear ran down her cheek. ‘He took me to MacDonald's, said I looked waaay too skinny, that I needed fattening up. He told me how he'd been to school, to college; how he'd never stopped thinking about me. That he'd never stopped looking to find me. He's gone, isn't he? I can't find him . . . I don't even know where to look.’ It was done, the tears rolling down her cheeks. ‘He's not coming back for me, is he?’

Oh my God, you poor Kid. Maybe it was Kass' maternal instinct, but she felt drawn to cross the space between them, and to reached out for her hand. It shied away from Kass' touch, just as it had done at the graveyard. And then something strange, something wonderful happened. Jay reached out, and Kass wrapped the poor girl in her arms.

‘Spencer knew,’ she said. ‘He knew that his life was in danger, yet he still reached out to help Josh and I. Cupcake was right. Spencer *is* a Superhero. I'm so sorry that I didn't know him better.’

‘Why, why are you sorry? Spence just wanted you to get the data out.’ Jay tried to pull away, but Kass wouldn't let her.

‘No,’ her voice hushed. ‘He could have found a way to get it out without trying to save us. We just made it harder for him.’ She felt a cold flush. *Oh God.* She could feel the tarpaulin pressed hard against her as the car had turned. She'd embraced it unwillingly, and now she embraced his sister. *I can't breathe.* She kissed Jay, on the side of her face, her lips lingered for a moment in the salty residue of tears. Then she pulled her tighter still. ‘Spence gave me a chance to save my son,’ she whispered. ‘I won't waste what he gave me. Please, help me find Josh.’

Kass was pretty certain this was the first time she'd opened up to anyone in a long time. She understood now, what she'd shared with her brother. It was a window into how this girl had spent her entire childhood. And she'd hinted at worse still.

You poor kid. 'This man,' she asked, 'the one you met?'

'I don't want to talk about him. Not to you, or anyone else. I don't even know you, cop-lady.' Jay tried to break the embrace again, Kass took her face in her hands. Make-up spread across her skin. She looked so defiant.

'I know you,' she said, 'at least a part of you.' She wiped at her cheek. Old feelings stirring inside, memories being re-awakened. She too felt the need to share. 'I know what it's like, to be violated by a man,' she said. Her own eyes bulging with tears now racing out and in free-fall.

She was shaking her head. Jay's hands closing around her own. 'He said he'd take care of me too . . . God, I fucking hate him. You want to hear crazy, I'll tell you crazy. When my husband lay in a hospital bed with a gun-shot wound, I sat by his bed and willed him to die! I wanted him dead so badly I took hold of the tubes that were keeping him alive. I wanted to pull them out and let that bastard die. But I knew if I did, I'd lose Josh. So I welcomed him home, and I dug a hole. I put myself in a place where his fists wouldn't hurt, and where his hateful words would only fall on deaf ears. I endured because of Josh. Because I knew that bastard would try to take him away from me,' she was wiping the stains from around Jay's eyes, knowing her own were smudging fast. Where's a hankie when you want one?' She tried to smile. 'I didn't want Josh to grow up without both parents, so I kidded myself that he didn't know what was going on, not until . . .'

'He saw it, didn't he? Your husband beating you . . .'

Kass nodded, trying to smile. 'He put me in hospital, and Josh watched every blow he landed. I saw him standing there, and I let it happen. I stopped trying to defend myself, and I let him break my cheek

and two ribs. In that moment, I knew Josh needed to know, and I had to face the truth myself. Now that's crazy, right?

‘So we’re a pair of crazies?’

‘Yeah, I reckon we must be.’

‘Hey guys.’ The door flew open and a wheelchair trundled across the threshold, Cupcake’s hands on the tiller. ‘Get me through the door, man. Come on, push it together. Shit man, your steering is . . . Hey, two girls on a bed, what did I miss?’ He stopped the wheelchair. ‘Sorry,’ he added. ‘Mouth, brain, don’t say things out loud.’ He flapped Cupcakes hands away and wheeled himself forward. He was excited; keen to get inside. ‘Guys, I did it. I cracked it. Jay, it’s true. Spence got it all. He got everything that NEXUS had and more. Jay, Cop-lady, Spencer hit the fucking jackpot!’

Kass felt Jay's arms slide around her. Her wet face grace her neck. 'He was a good brother,' she whispered.

'I know,' her own voice hushed, as she eased Jay away, taking her face gently between her palms. *I'm so sorry*, she mouthed. This young woman; such a tough exterior, and yet so vulnerable when you got beyond. Kass felt she was staring in a mirror of her own past. She couldn't break eye-contact. For a moment she didn't want to.

'Should we come back?' Asked Cupcake.

'Hey, when you've finished. I'm telling you, I broke the password. Shit, it was so obvious.'

Kass was the first to turn. She squeezed Jay's hands and left the bed. 'What is it?' She asked. 'What did Spencer ask me to deliver?'

'Only the fucking Holy Grail, and the Knight Templar's treasure. The whole fucking . . .'

'Meg, just give us the highlights. Whatever we've got, it's value is Kass' son, Josh.'

Kass tried not to look smug, but it sounded like Jay was back in the game. What she struggled to hide was a sudden rampant spike of electrical response as Jay's fingers grazed down her arm unseen as she passed by towards the door.

'Show us what we've got,' she said.

'Hey, wait. Jay, Cupcake, someone push this damn thing. Mush, Cuppy; get me to my keyboard.'

‘Are you okay?’ Cupcake’s words carried genuine concern.

‘Hey, let’s get some penguin-power over here. I, I can’t, Cupcake, door?’

‘I’m fine, really,’ Jay said. For the first time in days, she was. A strange feeling of calm had beset her. ‘I think Megatron needs some help.’ She shared a smile. ‘Come on, let’s see what Spencer . . .’ She almost said, ‘died for’. It was okay, Cupcake was nodding.

The Tenor lumbered back and heaved his friend’s chair away into the corridor. Kass took a breath. She had an ally. No, she had allies. The three of them; where Jay led the others would surely follow. Hope had turned into something more tangible, more positive. And Weldon, wherever he was, and she had no doubt he was close by. Knowing that gave her strength. *Thank you, God.* Kass followed then across the hall and re-entered Megatron’s Man-cave.

‘Spence got it,’ Meg was dabbing at his keyboard. The huge screens above him, the same deathly face pretending to laugh on all three. ‘It was as easy, as this.’ One last overly acted dab.

The picture faded.

‘He got the proof; he got everything that was ever classified by the government. It’s their entire research into Sinmap. Twenty years of bastards lying about how safe mobile data is.’

‘Show me. I want to see what my brother died for.’

‘Ah, that was just the good news. The bad news is it wasn’t actually on the thumb-drive. Spence stored everything at G’co on their last upload. The flash just has the passwords, the key passes, everything we need to get into the building, and open up their security. Err, we have to go there and get it.’

‘Go where?’ Asked Kass. ‘What the hell is G’co?’ *Are you getting a hard on again?* His grin suggested he was.

‘G’co, cop-lady, is the weapons platform that hides behind the smiling face. G’co is a Washington based security firm. They provide heavy duty mobile security all over the world. Big-shit heavyweights with government contracts. They’re into everything from Syria to Afghanistan. Everything from Iraqi mission details to Embassy memos gets backed up daily at the G’co HQ. Look, they have a server at their HQ that encrypts all the data. It’s a pie-storage-bunker.’

‘A what?’ Asked Kass.

‘Everyone buys a slice,’ said Jay. ‘Spence piggybacked what he found on the clinic’s daily uploads so he could keep it safe. He hid it all right under their noses. Everything he found out about NEXUS and the mobile pandemic is stored in the vaults at G’co. Which just so happens is here in DC.’

‘Well, yeah. Steal my thunder. And there’s more . . .’

‘Are you saying that we have to go there to get inside their building?’

‘Yeah, that’s right. But we have their codes, and penguin-power. Jay, there’s something . . .’

‘The facility is a deposit scheme,’ said Jay. ‘Data comes in from the outside via all the usual mediums, but it can only be released from the vault from a central terminal *deep* inside the building. You can’t access the server from anywhere else.’

‘Which is a bloody obvious security feature, and a pain in the ass. Jay, there’s . . .’

‘They’re bad people,’ said Cupcake. ‘We should go to the authorities.’

‘Oh, wow, good advice. Let’s go to the cops. Tell them our government is trying to kill American children. That we got all the dirt on them from a wanted felon? Who by the way, I looked up on the internet. Cop-lady, you are leaving a trail of bodies in your wake. You are one bad ass mother of penguins. Utmost respect.’ He thumped his chest in salute. ‘Anything I said earlier, I’d like to apologise.’

‘Shut up Meg. Cupcake may be right.’

‘No, Jay, the Megatron is correctomondo. They’ll bury us all and then throw away the key. That’s if they don’t kill us first.’

‘I’m going inside that facility,’ said Kass. ‘If it’s the only way that I can get him back? Just tell me how?’

‘I’ll go with you,’ said Jay.

‘Jay, people are trying to kill me. I can’t let you . . .’

‘They killed Spence. I want to help,’ she stepped up close to Kass. ‘I’m going to help,’ she said.

‘I want to help too. Spence was my friend.’ Cupcake wasn’t built for speed, and he didn’t seem to have an angry bone in his body. But there was no doubting that he meant what he said. ‘I can help,’ he repeated, ‘I know lots of things that can help.’

‘I know you do, Cupcake. But bad people want to hurt me, and anyone else who gets involved. Meg’s right, there are too many people who are dead because of me.’

‘Ask me,’ he was getting excited. ‘Go on, ask me, ask me anything; I know lots of things. I can help.’

Kass loved him for wanting to help. But sure, she’d ask a question. ‘Tell me where I can get a gun?’ She asked.

‘I can get you a Glock G30S,’ he said. ‘It’s built from the G30 frame with a G36 slide. It combines the full capacity .45 auto round count with reduced slide bulk. This pistol is a light and easily concealable option.’

‘I’m sorry?’ Not the reply she’d expected.

‘Would you prefer a Glock21, it’s fourth generation. Those puppies are legendary for their stopping power. I can offer a choice of ten, or thirteen round magazines. I can even get you a customised grip.’

‘What am I hearing here?’ *What are you, an agent for the company?* ‘You can’t buy these things at Walmart,’ said Kass. Then wished she hadn’t. His chubby face reacted to her scorn.

‘I have friends,’ he said.

‘Cupcake, you have friends that can get you guns?’

‘I can get an M16 if you want something bigger?’

‘Jay, I think you need to explain.’

‘No, I don’t. But I will because he likes you. We’ve done favours of a, *technical* nature. For let’s say, dubiously affiliated acquaintances. Some of whom have access to weapons.’

‘Hey, Jay, we’ve got secrets?’ Meg wheeled himself around. ‘Who’s made cop-lady a member of the club?’

‘I have, now shut up. We can trust her.’

‘Yeah, sure, why not. It’s not like we only met her five minutes ago.’

‘Guns, Jay? Somehow that’s not a picture I get from Cupcake.’

‘You’re in DC. Politics is power here and that eats a lot of cash. People need to find, and lose, the dollar in electronic form. We can help with bank accounts. Sometimes we help our friends by legitimising new identities. Between us we can hack most things; social security, driving licences are popular from the DMV,’ she shrugged. ‘We’re picky about who we help, but this is the Capital. Guns are currency as well.’

‘Jay, again, spoiler alerts! We don’t know this woman.’

‘Be quiet, Meg. Cassandra, most of the clients we deal with won’t leave home without a weapon. Sometimes they let Cuppy, well, he likes to shoot the guns.’

A smile that suggested shock, almost turned into laughter. ‘Cupcake? He shoots guns?’

‘I’m a good shot,’ he said.

Dare I ask? ‘What other talents do you have?’ And you know something that’s going to impress me, don’t you. You can’t disguise that grin. Miss Galadriel and her friends are coming out to play.

‘Like Cups said, ask him something. Anything, first thing that comes to mind.’

‘Yeah, go ahead and ask. Just because he’s fat, don’t mean he’s stupid. I say that with love. Well go on, ask him.’

It was becoming evident she’d be rude not to. ‘What are the first twelve digits of Pi?’ *I hated maths at school.* It was the first question that came to mind.

‘Pi is a mathematical constant that is the ratio of a circles circumference to its diameter. 3.14159265358.’

‘Really? Is that right?’ She asked. ‘The first ten presidents of the United States?’

He responded with a rapid rate of words.

‘George Washington, who held office from April thirtieth seventeen eighty-nine to March fourth seventeen ninety-seven. John Adams, march fourth seventeen ninety-seven to March fourth eighteen hundred and

one. Thomas Jefferson, March fourth eighteen hundred and one March fourth eighteen hundred and nine. James Madison . . .’

‘Okay, okay, I believe you.’ *Lucky guess.* ‘What’s the square root of Nine hundred and seventy eight?’

‘Thirty one, point two seven, two nine, nine one, five.’

‘Wow, I have no idea if that’s right.’ *But I’m impressed.* ‘Are you wired into the internet with those things?’ She referred to the bongos still perched on his head.

‘We like to think of Cupcake as, gifted,’ said Jay. ‘And for the record, Cups can do the maths quicker in his head than Meg can tap it out on the keyboard. And that annoys the shit out of you, doesn’t it?’

‘Up yours, *collaborator.* Now, as I said, there is something else . . .’ Megatron spun his laptop around for all to see. ‘Spence left something, for you!’ He was staring at Jay.

Up on the three screens, the same picture; a man and a woman kneeling in the grass with two young kids. The four of them smiling. No, it was more than that. They were a beautiful unit, all smiles and hugs. A wonderfully happy family.

‘Oh my God,’ Jay walked closer to the screens.

‘You know them?’ Kass asked.

‘It’s Mum and Dad, and that’s Spence and me.’

‘There’s a short message,’ Meg pressed another key and a line of text typed out.

“Jay, if you’re reading this, it means that Cassandra and Josh are okay. That they found you. That I can tell you how much I love you. How sorry I am that I must leave you again.”

‘There’s a, err, letter. I thought it best not to put, you know, up on the screen. I haven’t read it,’ he insisted. ‘It’s just, separate, and err, addressed to you.’ He looked at everyone, and then back to his keyboards. ‘Err, does anyone want to see the blueprints for G’co HQ? It’s on New York Avenue. They got a big data storage facility in the basement. All we need to do is, err, get down there.’

Jay was staring at the image on the screens. Cupcake looked like he wanted to cry. Meg looked uncomfortable.

‘Won’t codes need to be on a swipe card?’ Kass asked

‘I’m glad you ask, because this is another service that we provide for our clients. All I have to know is whose face needs to go on the ID?’

‘Mine,’ said Jay.

‘No, I can’t let you do that.’

‘No? What’s no, Cassandra? I wasn’t asking for a debate. Meg, can you hack their firewalls and get us access to the G’co personnel database?’

‘Sure, no problem.’

‘Do you know how to find what you’re looking for when I get in? However Spence hid that data, I can guarantee it’s deep. Knowing a password is one thing, getting the data out undetected will be something else.’

‘Jay . . .’

She ignored Kass. ‘Whatever security they have will be state-of-the-art, they’ll have sleepers embedded in the coding, you won’t know you’ve woken one until its fried your keyboard and triggered the alarms.’

‘Jay, you need to slow down,’ Kass cautioned.

‘There’ll be binary burners waiting to flash our hard-drives. Trip wires, Goblins, they might even have Norton anti-virus, or heaven forbid, McAfee Total Protection.’

‘Ha, ha, ha, yeah, good one. Norton, wooooo. McAfee, grrr, that’s scary stuff.’

‘The point is,’ Jay turned to Kass. ‘We get one chance at this, so unless you are seriously clued up on how to sift through government protected servers, it has to be me.’

Kass knew her way backwards and sideways around the LAPD network, but this was something else. This was cut-throat and scary. This was the world in which they survived.

‘Then I’m coming with you. The Oracle here can magic up two ID cards, and no, that’s not up for debate either. He can find us a way in, and then we will take care of the rest. Agreed?’ She was nodding, that was enough.

‘This is some crazy-ass shit, Jay. Are you really sure you want us to get involved?’

‘We’re already involved, Meg. I want to know who killed Spence. And I want to help Cassandra get her son back. Do either of you have an objection?’

‘No, I can’t wait to open them up,’ said Meg. ‘Just promise me I won’t end up dead.’

‘Penguin-power, remember?’ Said Kass. ‘This one’s for the huddle.’

‘Cupcake?’ His face reminded her of emoticons. ‘I want you to get me a . . . Jay, can you shoot a gun? Okay, make that a pair of Glock21’s, don’t bother with the fancy grip. Make sure we have at least four clips each.’ He was nodding furiously, a smile from ear to ear. ‘Meg, print Spence’s message.’

‘What are you doing?’ Jay took her gaze from the screens. ‘Meg, no . . .’

‘Yes, and do it now.’ The sound of air as paper rose up from a slot in his desk. ‘Give it to me,’ Kass took the message, she grabbed Jay’s hand. ‘We’ve got time,’ she said. ‘Listen to what Spence has to say.’ *Don’t look at me like that. Shit, no, I’m not gonna blubber like a baby.* ‘We’ll sort everything,’ she said, ‘It’ll be fine.’ Kass pulled Jay’s hand and encouraged her to follow. ‘One last moment with Spence,’ she said, and squeezed Jay’s hand around the note. ‘Let him say goodbye.’

Kass tapped on Jay's door. It had been an hour since anyone had seen her, time well spent with the super-nerds. She'd had her photo taken and turned into a new driver's licence, and ID.

Cupcake had followed through on his promise to get guns and ammunition. It was sixty minutes of empowerment, and more importantly, hope, that she would soon take the fight to Outman, and Fortune, and that bitch, April. Cupcake had even made her a badge, the name Super-Cop emblazoned on the small plastic tag.

She knocked again, a little less gingerly this time, and opened the door without an invite.

'Jay?' She was sat on the edge of her bed. She'd been crying, that much was obvious. Even so, she raised a smile and bid Kass to enter. 'How you feeling?' Kass asked.

'Shit,' she replied, and patted the bed beside her. 'Not every day you lose your best friend and brother,' her smile faded. 'Im not going to see him again, that's horrible.'

'Is there anything I can do?'

The slow shake of her head, she seemed determined not to leak more tears. 'He left me something,' she said, as Kass sat beside her. 'A safety deposit box.'

'Really? Sounds intriguing,' she took Jay's hand. 'What's in it?'

'Everything he could claim from our life before, she showed Kass the paper Meg had printed. 'He says he found Mum's wedding ring, it was in

storage with a load of other stuff. That's where he got the photo. There's loads more, apparently.'

'Oh, Jay. That's gold. You must be . . .' She nearly said, happy? 'Mixed feelings, eh? Oh sweetie, I don't know what to say.'

'He left something for you.'

'What? What did he leave?' Sudden guilt, that now she knew exactly what to say. Kass eased away the paper Jay offered. 'Tell me when you're ready,' she said, desperately wanting to know more. 'I'm so sorry, Jay.'

'He said goodbye,' she screwed the paper tight in her hand, then let it fall to the floor. Both her hands on Kass' now, her gaze locked with a new intensity. Such brilliant green eyes, so beautifully enhanced by residual tears. 'He was saying goodbye,' she said. 'Even if he'd got out? He knew they'd never stop hunting him.'

Now Kass really didn't know what to say. Spencer's death had ensured Jay's safety, and she was glad of that. But her presence here, her intention to suck them back in; she had no choice.

'There was something else, about Josh.'

'Josh?' Now she wanted to know. 'Tell me,' she barely managed to utter the words. 'Jay, what about Josh?'

'Not much, I don't know where he is or anything like that. Spence said that Outman was excited about your son. He didn't know why, but Josh had changed the direction of Outman's research into NEXUS. That's why he had them try to kill you. That's all he knew.'

Why keep Josh? Why? The weight of guilt bore down. The decision to change her phone provider, just to save a few bucks. *Why did I do it? So so stupid!*

Jay nestled her head and put her arms about Kass. The present pulling on the past. Her instinct was to push her away. She wanted to be angry, not to console. But the truth was simple, it felt good to have Jay in her arms.

Kass shuffled out onto the bed, she held out her arms to Jay. Moments later the young woman had wrapped herself in embrace.

A short ride in the elevator and Santini reached the third floor, the door opening with a sluggish groan.

He stepped out into a corridor framed with crimson coloured walls. *FBI budget isn't what it used to be?* The flight into the capitol had been uneventful. His badge had got him VIP through the terminal. Facial recognition had the trail only a few hours cold. Krane was here in Washington, he just didn't know why.

Maybe its time I hit the private sector and made some money. Mrs Santini would be happy. A few years and I could make enough to buy an apartment with a pool and guaranteed sunshine. He stopped outside room three-twelve.

The green light on the lock flashed with the second swipe of his card. The door clunked closed and he headed straight for the mini bar.

Vodka or Scotch will do nicely. Urgh, red wine? 'Who the hell fills a mini bar with red wine?' His hand reached out in disappointment, and then froze halfway to the airline sized bottles. *Why hasn't the light come on? Shit, why do I have the feeling I'm not alone?* 'Oh well, red it is then.' Santini lifted a bottle and pretended to check it's colour; he reached slowly inside his jacket with his other hand. As his fingers felt about his gun, he heard the familiar click of a pistol's hammer being cocked. His blood went cold.

Colder still as he felt the unseen weapon's muzzle placed against his neck. Followed by a practised hand sliding inside his jacket to unclip and remove his Colt.

'I'm only guessing here,' said Santini, 'but if you wanted me dead, I wouldn't be feeling this happy about red wine. Do you mind?'

No response, but the gun in his in his neck was retracted.

Santini pulled unscrewed the bottle's lid. 'You want one?' He turned and offered the bottle. 'I'm a Fed; you do know that. This could get you twenty to life?'

'Take a seat on the bed,' his captor said. 'Slowly; don't do anything you'll regret, I'm only here to talk.'

'Okay, I like a good chat,' he lifted the bottle to his lips. 'Cheers,' he said. The bottle was emptied, lifted as if in salute. 'What can I do for you?' He asked.

'I need your help.'

'You have a gun on me? Most people make an appointment and ask without duress.'

'I decided this course of action would get your attention.'

'Oh yeah, you have my attention. You mind?' He reached for another bottle. Cracking its lid. 'So, what is it I can help you with?' Paul sat on the bed's edge, eyes not adjusted to the dark yet. The man sat in his chair still a shadow, but getting clearer by the second.

'You sure I can't entice you to . . . a Peruvian Cabernet?' Two words that shouldn't be put together. He tossed the second lid and took a sip.

'You might want to check the price before you drink them all.'

'That's a joke, right? These are going on the Bureau's tab.' So was anything else he could fine that contained alcohol. 'So, you want help?'

'We have a mutual acquaintance, she's the one in need of our help.'

'Our help? Are we like Batman and Robin? Laurel and Hardy?' *She?* He could just ask. *She, she . . . She?* 'Wait a minute.' *Please say it's not.* 'Our mutual acquaintance? That wouldn't be a fugitive named Cassandra

Krane?' *Oh, the slow hand-clap, how droll.* He lifted the bottle, and emptied it.

'Your file said you were smart.'

'You have access to FBI personnel files?' *And you knew where I was staying?* 'The floor is yours,' he said.

'Paul Santini, badge number 486. You have a quick-fire temper, and a big problem with authority. If you're drinking that shit, you may have an alcohol problem as well.'

'Ha ha, funny. If you offer to share, it's not a problem.'

'Your file also suggests you're an honest Fed.'

'Really? Well don't tell anyone, I have a reputation to protect.' He took a deep breath. 'What's your interest in the Krane woman?'

'She's an acquaintance.'

'You said that. So what, you're a childhood friend? Is Krane employing you? Is she blowing you?' The man sat forward. *Ahh, not the latter then.* Santini could see him more clearly now. Tall guy with dark hair, a hint of white coming through. Early fifties, and a fit looking fucker for his age. And there was something about his gaze that suggested this wasn't the first dark hole he'd entered bearing firearms.

'Okay, so here's what I know. Your ex-military; derr, obvious. You have that, *fire-in-the-hole*, thing going on behind your eyes. Specials ops was it? No, wait, ex-Delta; yeah, you're a frosty son of a bitch.' He grabbed another bottle, wishing they put bigger ones in the fridge. He threw the empty into the mesh-bin. 'Okay, so we have a mutual interest in Krane. I know mine, what's yours? No, wait, got it. You're going to tell me she's innocent. I'm right, aren't I?' Paul sat forward. 'She's killed a lot of people lately,' he said. 'Allegedly, of course. So I'm going to need more than a gun pointing at me to convince me otherwise.' *Oh you've brought a tablet as well?* Some agent he was, it had completely escaped his attention. It was tossed onto the bed beside him.

'Well, that's not an iPad.'

The tablet was encased in rubber. Thick hand grabs on each side, and some aggressive looking venting along the top.

‘Press a key,’ the man said, ‘any key. And then start reading. Oh, and cheers. This should go on the Bureau’s tab as well.’

Son of a bitch, that’s where the vodka went.

‘I don’t understand any of this?’

‘Then you’re not as smart as your file suggests.’

‘Correction, I do understand. I just don’t believe it. I mean, what is this shit?’

‘You’ve just been made privy to the files on the main protagonists in this saga. The communications you’ve just read are between a CIA HUB in Virginia, and its field operatives who are chasing Krane around the country. It’s complete from midday on the fourteenth of this month, up to yesterday. The female, April, she’s running the Operation. It’s a CIA Black-Op, being conducted on American soil.’

‘Which is highly illegal.’

‘They want the Krane woman, and people are being murdered to make that happen.’

‘So you say, but why? What’s Krane to them?’

‘They have her son.’

‘And what, Krane is a loose end?’

‘They took Krane’s son at a clinic in Mexico. The details why are still unclear to me. But it involves NEXUS, cancer, and a senator named, Joe Rushmore. You’ve heard of him I take it?’

‘Who hasn’t? A big-mouthed Texas Billionaire who wants to run the country like a business. Who thinks the stars and stripes look best fluttering from the turret of a tank. Uh-uh, not getting my vote.’ *Dead bodies, Krane . . . the CIA?* ‘I need to think about this.’ The man raised his

gun. 'Okay, thought about it.' *It's not like I don't have my doubts.* 'Can I assume you don't want this information broadcast by CNN?' *Hmm, thought not.* 'Why come to me?' He asked

'Like I said, you're an honest Agent.'

'Really; well honest is one thing. Putting a target on my back is another. You mentioned black-ops, and murder; Mrs Santini would not be happy if I end up dead. She has an idyllic retirement set up for us which includes Florida-sunshine, a warm pool, and trying to get our handicaps down to single figures.' *Stop tapping the gun against your thigh.* 'Look, let's say I'll keep an open mind where Krane is concerned. How's that?'

'A start. But there's more.'

'Of course there is, you haven't left yet.'

'Kassandra is going to do something, crazy.'

'Crazy?' *She's done a whole lot of crazy lately.*

'She's going to break into G'co HQ.'

'What, why? Is that why she came to Washington? She'd have more chance breaking into the Federal Reserve.' *You're serious?* 'They'll kill her.'

'Exactly. That's why I need your help.'

'What could possibly make you think I'd get involved in all this, any more than already I am. I'm no Spring Chicken; not fresh out of the academy. I've done several tours in the Capital, and all I've gotten so far is the Brass threatening to cancel my pension. For all I know you're a psycho, and Krane, she's running decoy for some nefarious . . . Bond plot?'

This isn't going so well. Santini is FBI, the CIA are operating on US soil. He should be outraged. Maybe I've misjudged him? 'The CIA is running a Black-Ops mission on US soil, doesn't that bother you?' Weldon asked. 'They've sent an operative named Carl, with orders to kill anyone who interacts with Krane. Agent Santini, someone needs to cancel this man's contract.'

‘And you want me to do it? Ha, ha, you’re shitting me? Okay, obviously not. Why, why me? No, wait, it’s the badge. That’s right, you want my badge?’ *Why, why, why?* ‘You want me to deputise you?’ He wasn’t sure he’d said that out loud.

‘It’s very probable that a United States senator is heading this up, so I’ll be doing what you can’t. What, did I say something funny?’

‘Several things really. One, there’s a big building in Washington that’s full of corrupt politicians. Two, our country is full of psychos. But here’s the thing, the FBI works within the law. We find proof of misdemeanour, murder, and sometimes mayhem. We use a thing called, due process, which doesn’t include *cancelling* anyone.’ Santini fingered the tablet around on the bedcover. ‘These communicates, they do come across as damning, granted. And I accept that the Krane situation, whilst coming straight from the brothers Grimm, probably has less substance than her wanted poster. But I took an oath to uphold the law, not to bypass it and get involved with people like you. Who by the way, hasn’t even told me his name. Whoah, easy, no need to point guns.’

Weldon took Santini’s weapon from his belt. Maybe it was time to offer an olive branch. He threw the FBI Agent’s weapon onto the bed beside him.

‘You’re giving me my gun back?’

‘Call it a measure of trust.’ *Unfortunately I can’t do this on my own.* ‘I’m giving you the opportunity to catch a killer, and expose a conspiracy. All the evidence your team has acquired up till now, it’s been spoon-fed to them by the other side. It’s not only Krane’s life at stake here, but her son’s too, and whatever collateral get’s in their way.’

‘Krane’s son? You’re telling me that Josh is alive?’

‘And well.’ *I hope.* ‘His part in this I haven’t worked out yet.’

Well, I’m struggling with all the parts. ‘I don’t suppose there’s much point in me asking *where* you’re getting your intel?’

‘Initially from the Krane woman, and believe me, I had my doubts. Until a Hellfire took out my house.’

‘Hellfire, as in missile?’

‘As in big-bang, yes. Since then I’ve had some old acquaintances verify a lot of what she claims. The communicates on that tablet are still live. They’ve been quiet for a few hours now, but they’ll be back online when their assets are ready in DC. The hardware you’ve been reading from was appropriated from a very reliable source. He’s dead now, so won’t be standing trial.’

‘Ah, would that be the body we found in a charred-grilled sheriff’s car?’

‘I swapped my tablet with his. If they find out, they’ll go offline.’

‘Or lure you, *us*, into a trap. Wait, so it was you, not Krane, who was involved in that shoot-out. Where’d the bodies go? Oh right, the Agency cleaned up. And the deputy; you kill him?’

‘Not me. And for the record, Cassandra said they turned up with badges. Real ones.’

Santini lifted the third bottle in as many minutes. The last drops passed his lips. ‘Great, so you’re saying the FBI is compromised. Okay, let’s just recap. Krane is innocent, her kids been kidnapped, but *is* alive. But for reasons yet to be exposed.’ *That’s interesting.* ‘I can’t use any of the evidence you’ve shown me, and if I tell anyone about you, I’ve got no proof. Oh, and you want me to help you stop a conspiracy that involves lawmakers in the Senate.

‘Now you know as much as I do, Agent Santini. It’s time to make a decision.’ *The correct decision. It’s the only way you’ll leave this room alive.*

“Where have you been, Julius?”

April sounded agitated on the phone. ‘Apologies,’ Fortune replied. ‘I’ve been in a meeting. The Board have brought their concerns to me.’

“You met them, in person?”

‘Yes, it was necessary.’

“What did they say?”

‘That we may be forced into a change of direction. Update me on Krane.’

“It’s not good. We have the message that Spencer sent Krane. Clever little Spencer, he had a few tricks up his sleeve. We know for sure now that she’s in Washington. The rest is starting to make sense. Carl has an address.”

‘You’ve found the sister?’

“We’ve found a paper trail. Money left by the parents. It took us round the world a few times but we have a bank account. The HUB opened a backdoor to the bank’s mainframe and got an address. Figured it would be quicker than a warrant, and less questions would be asked. She has a loft in Columbia Heights. Carl is en-route; eta two hours. If Krane’s there, we’ll find her.”

A few days ago all of this was justified; mission protocols were firmly within the country’s interests. The end justified the means. Something had changed.

‘How’s Josh, April?’

“The kid? He’s a pain in the ass. The boy eats like a horse and won’t keep his music down, but he is cooperating. Outman wants to keep him sedated. I said no, just to piss him off. Why are you asking?”

‘April, things have changed. Our employers are reconsidering their strategy. Leave things as they are, but stay close to your phone. Where are you now?’

“I’m on the jet heading toward Dulles airport. ETA is forty minutes, why?”

‘Stay close to your phone, April. When things change, it will happen quickly. I’ll pick you up at the airport. We can talk then.’

I can't believe we're doing this. Kass sat in the back of the panel van, she was agitated. Hadn't this been what she'd always wanted? To get out in the Field.

She'd been wired for sound. A tiny transmitter hidden in her ear. On her shirt a small moon-shaped broach; high-tech kit that housed a microphone and a camera. She wore an Armani suit, courtesy of Jay, though it was a bit on the tight side.

'Are you really going to leave Cupcake sat up front?' Asked Kass. 'Will he be all right waiting for us out here?'

The sound of the handbrake set her teeth on edge.

'Cupcake, switch off the engine and come back here. Make sure that Megatron has everything he needs whilst we're gone. Can you do that for me?'

'Sure,' he was smiling. The van rocked as the Tenor crawled through the tiny gap between the seats. 'Hi Megatron.'

We shouldn't be doing this. *They're not trained. I'm not trained.* She felt a hand on her shoulder.

'We'll get Josh back,' Jay's voice, it was calm.

How can she be so calm? 'Have you done his sort of thing before?'

'Cupcake knows what to do,' she said. 'Meg's ready back at the loft. It's up to us now, you and me. We can do this.' Jay lifted a laptop onto her knees. 'Meg, you know what to do, right?' Kass asked. His face filling the screen.

‘The penguin must first mark its territory,’ he said. ‘Only then he can begin the dance of the Happy Feet.’

That wasn’t what Kass wanted to hear.

‘Are you ready, Cuppy?’ He was nodding. ‘Don’t let the screen time-out, and don’t leave the van. Now do you need to relieve yourself?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I’ve brought supplies,’ he opened a plastic tub, it was filled with sandwiches and fruit.

‘Now remember, we may come out running. If we do, make sure you’re ready.’ If the broad grin he wore wasn’t enough, the bandana he tied around his temple set the scene. ‘Good man,’ she said. ‘Kass, take this.’ Jay slipped a lanyard over her head. ‘Now we work for the Company. Meg, are you in yet?’

‘Megatron is priming his plumes as we speak. The bomb is ready.’

‘Bomb? Jay, did he say bomb?’

‘He did. And it will make one hell of a mess when he pulls the pin.’

‘Don’t forget these.’ Cupcake handed them both a handgun.

This is madness. The Adams family turned al-Qaeda.

She took the Glock he offered. ‘Thanks Cupcake.’ The lightweight weapon helped calm her fears. ‘Promise me. You promise me, if things go wrong. If you hear shooting, or our cover is blown, you’ll drive away and you won’t look back. No, don’t look at Jay, look at me. Look at me Cupcake. You’ll have to leave, am I clear?’

‘She’s right, Cups. Promise Kass. And you promise me too. You drive away. Go get Meg, and don’t come back. Okay? I want to hear the words.’

Nodding would have to suffice. He looked so sad.

‘If I may interrupt?’ Meg’s voice from the laptop. ‘The bomb has been well and truly primed.’

‘Jay,’ Kass whispered, ‘it’s not a real bomb?’

‘Would it matter? These people are bad.’

‘Some of them might be innocent.’

‘Then it’s a good job the bomb is digital. We delivered it last night through their broadband, one digit at a time. The good thing about computers is a one, or a zero, will never look out of place. By the time all the bits re-attach themselves, it’s already snuck behind their firewalls.’

‘Tell her about the eggs, Jay.’ Cupcake’s enthusiasm had reignited. ‘Tell her which penguin laid the eggs.’

‘That would be you, my amply proportioned side-kick. You laid them, and they will hatch on command.’

‘Eggs?’

‘One of Meg’s inventions. Pop an egg or two in an email. Post it to the guards. They peak, and we’re in. Cup’s delivered them last night as well. They’re viruses that hold an activation code for the bomb. The bits will grow and grow, and when they crack, chicks are hatched. The host will feed them with all the data we require. We’ll be good for a few hours before the system catches on.’

‘And you’re sure they were opened because?’

‘Please, Kass. We’re talking the male of the species here. I made sure the mail came dipped in honey. Don’t know who the woman was, I borrowed her from a porn-site. Three of the seven opened up within five minutes. I’m not saying they’re predictable, but . . .’

You’re enjoying this.

‘Meg, are you ready to start infiltration?’ Jay asked.

‘Are you shitting me? The chicks are feeding as we speak. I can pick their security quicker than my nose. Cop-lady, I got you some backdoors, some trapdoors, and some god-damn droopy-drawers. This huddle is armed from the analogues up; it’s digital death-ray time. We are the . . . Oh, crap.’

That didn’t sound good, and just as Kass was about to open the van doors to leave. ‘What is it, Meg?’ She asked.

‘Awkward problemo, one moment please.’

‘Meg, talk to me,’ the calmness evaporated from Jay’s voice. It seemed to put Cupcake on edge.

‘Jay, their system is running an ‘A’symmetrical, three twenty bit security algorithm. It’s carousing the data. Tricky.’

‘Did we trigger an alarm?’

‘No, it’s been scheduled. Sorry, one momento.’

Shit, what? ‘Are we fucked?’ Kass released the door’s internal handle.

‘Meg, you can still get us in?’

‘Err, you may be asking the impossible; for mere mortals that is. But *I* am the Emperor Penguin. Please excuse me whilst I adjust my eggs.’

As disgusting as that sounded, Kass kept her hand on pause. Fingers waiting to roll the door back and leave.

‘It is done. I’m in. We are good to engage the enemy.’

‘As always, should you or any other member of the huddle be caught, or killed, this penguin will disavow any knowledge of your actions. This message will self destruct in, five, four . . .’

‘Shut-up,’ said Kass. She didn’t need Meg’s rhetoric in her ear. ‘We’re approaching the doors.’

‘I know, I can see.’

Each step taking her closer to the massive glass entrance. Inside she could see two guards in uniform sat behind a desk.

‘I can hear my heartbeat,’ whispered Jay.

‘Josh plays games online,’ she replied. *Now is not the time for you to need a pep-talk.* ‘Shoot-em-ups,’ she added. ‘Gears of War, Call of Duty. He loves them.’ The doors were just a few paces away. ‘He’s real good. What about you? You do that sort of thing?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Then consider this your first real-player experience. Just look them in the eyes and let me do the talking.’ Kass went first to the glass portal.

A tall curly-haired man in uniform came towards the glass to intercept. His older partner remained watchful behind the counter.

‘Can I help you?’ He asked.

‘We’d like to come in,’ said Kass.

‘I’m sorry ladies, this facility is closed.’

‘Jessica Payne,’ she said, and pointed behind. ‘That’s Jay Wiley.’ Kass held up her ID to the glass. ‘We need access to level five. You’ll find an

order from your COE logged on your computers calendar. It's time activated.' She lifted her watch and tapped on the glass. 'You're being audited, so open the door please.'

Butterflies; they were doing a merry jig in her stomach. Probably tossing the acid about which was causing her heart-burn. Kass narrowed her eyes and turned her lip with impatience. 'Check your screen,' she instructed. 'Any attempt to delay, stall, or hinder us will go badly for the employee responsible.'

Why isn't Curly opening the doors? She'd played this out in her head a dozen times or more. He should have allowed them entry by now. It took an age before he even bothered to look back at the desk.

'Hey Jake, you need to take a look at this.' The older of the two left his seat, his keys in his hand. 'It's up on both monitors, they're for real.'

'Gentlemen, your jobs now depends on your cooperation,' satisfying words as the key turned and the heavy glass doors opened.

Curly still wasn't convinced. With one hand on his sidearm he backed away to the desk; he glanced down at the monitors, and then up at his partner.

'Is this for real?' He still looked sceptical.

'You'll recognise the personal access codes of your security chief, and Dr Hartman, he's your chief-exec. The email was authorised from The doctor's personal work-station at exactly nine-thirty this morning. You're now being officially audited.'

'Yeah, sure,' Curly took his hand off his gun. 'I just . . . Is there a problem? Are *we* in trouble?'

'Have you done anything wrong?'

'Err, no Mam. I just wasn't expecting, well, you. Please, just one more moment. I have to confirm your IDs,' his hand was extended. 'Thank you, and thank you. Can I ask why you're here so late at night?'

'If we told you we were coming, you'd have time to hide the silver. Do you have something to hide,' she exaggerated a look at Curly's name-

badge, 'employee, Jake Parker?' Following up with a hard stare seemed to do the trick.

'No Mam,' he looked down at the swipe machine. Two beeps later, he took a step back. 'Shit, you check out. Straight from the old-man's office, just like you said.'

'My card?'

'Yes, of course, and thank you, Mam. And, Mam. Err, okay, what do I do now?'

'For the record gentlemen, the company is now monitoring your switchboard and mobile communications. That means no naughty phone calls in, or out. And as I previously specified.' Kass looked him straight in the eye. 'Your jobs are now reliant on your full cooperation,' she gave Curly a smile. 'Tick-tock, Jake. Or are you attempting to delay, stall, or hinder us?'

'No Mam. Err, please, elevator four; this way.' Curly swiped his card and the doors opened.

'We'll find our own way from here, thank you.'

'Huh, oh, erm, swipe your card to go up.' He backed off. 'If you need anything, just call down to the desk.'

The lift doors closed.

'Oh my goodness, I thought I was going to poop my pants. Kass, have you done this before?'

'I'm a cop, remember.' *That's how I did things like this at every coffee-break. In my head.* 'You don't think I overdid it, do you?'

'Shit no, I believed you.'

Good, that means I can breath again.

'So far so good,' she said. 'I'm not going to ask how you fudged that man's computer.'

'I told you, we're hackers. A dedicated team, on the clock, hoping we didn't miss anything.'

That last bit Kass didn't need to hear as she swiped her card, then pressed for level seven. Nothing happened.

‘Jay, this does actually work?’

‘Jay swiped her card. ‘Meg, the elevator isn’t moving. Meg? Meg, can you hear me?’

‘Chill out ladies.’ The lift began to rise. ‘As soon as he swiped your cards I was privy to a land of milk and honey, digital style. Apparently if you press level four and hold for a count of three, you’ll go down to the basement. And that’s where we need to be.’

Kass swiped again and pressed for level four; she held for a count of three. The lift’s buttons lit one at a time to show the lift was going up. In reality it was going down.

Jay took Kass’ hand.

‘Did Josh ever finish all the levels on Gears of War?’ She asked, as the elevator gently bottomed out in the shaft.

A loud ‘ting’ from the panel sent a chill through them both, the elevator loudly announced that the doors were about to open.

Kass' anticipation heightened as the doors slid back. It peaked, and then dipped as she took in her new surroundings. No guards outside. Nothing to see but an empty corridor leading away.

'Hi there, this is Megatron. I will be your guide for the duration of this mission. Please follow the long corridor and at the end take a sharp left. Above you on the right you will notice the lights on the camera.' She looked up to see the device. A threatening red light on the lens, that blinked twice and went out. *'Surveillance is now stuck in a loop. The same moment in time will continue forever. I'm also pleased to announce that all exterior defences have now been breached. Our chicks are feeding, they are fine and healthy.'*

'Meg, we don't need the pageantry.' Kass whispered. 'Which way now?'

'Take another left, and then your first right.'

They complied and walked toward an ominously impenetrable metal door that barred their way. A glass panel on the wall beside.

'Meg?' Concern in Jay's voice.

'Please wait whilst I circumvent the floor sensors and the air movement system.'

'Meg?' She repeated. Silence over the comm.

'Okay, in front of you is the first gateway. Look into the lens, it's going to take a picture of your retina.'

Kass placed her eye in front of the lens, and flinched at the bright light that greeted her. A swish of air behind them as the wall opened behind them.

‘Wow, I thought we we’re opening this door?’

‘Which is what they want you to think. If you’ll please pass through the aperture, I will guide you to your destination.’

On the other side the light was dim. Jay seemed happy to let her go first. As Kass’ foot touched the floor beyond a small section below her boot became illuminated. Each subsequent step initiated more flooring light until the passage they walked down was well lit.

‘Meg, there’s nothing but wall; it’s a dead-end.’

‘Touch the wall to your left, and may the chicks be with you.’

‘He gets a real hard-on for this shit, doesn’t he?’ Kass put her hand to her ear. ‘This isn’t a fucking game, we’re trapped in here.’

‘Touch the wall, about four feet from the floor. All will be revealed.’

‘I swear, when we get out?’ She put her hand on the wall. It glowed and became transparent. ‘Is that a palm-reader?’ She asked. ‘Where are we, fucking Wonderland?’

‘Think of it as a maze,’ Meg said. ‘To keep the unworthy at bay. Please place your palm upon the glass, and let me say the magic . . .’

‘Meg, cut it out!’ Jay pressed her right hand on the reader, which reacted with an unnervingly red glow. ‘Oh shit, Meg? Meg, I can’t let go. Meg?’

‘It’s gone red. What does red mean?’ Kass reached for Jay’s hand.

‘Don’t touch, student being tested. Myagi stay one step ahead, teach computer new things.’

Kass lowered her hand. Jay looked as frightened as she felt. ‘Does he ever stop?’ She asked.

Jay gave a slow eye-roll that suggested not. ‘Meg, make it let go.’ The screen melded back into wall, she pulled her hand slowly away. ‘Now what?’ Her gaze startled suddenly to her left as part of the wall slid back. ‘Wow, I didn’t even see that?’

‘That, is the idea. Please, will all little penguins enter the inner-sanctum of G’co Death Star.’

A short walkway led them to a vast open chamber.

‘Wow, this is a big room for a computer,’ Kass was looking upward. ‘Meg what’s that noise?’ The murmuring of something large above the slick grates.

‘We’re in a cold storage unit.’ Jay had moved ahead, walking toward a flat topped table. ‘Some big fans are keeping the temperature down,’ she said, ‘or it would get really hot in here. Meg, there must be several exabyte’s of data being stored down here.’

‘That’s a lot, right?’

‘Maybe half a billion DVD’s worth of government and private data. Most of it secret-shit. Are you getting all this, Meg?’

‘Penguin sees everything. It’s so beautiful. I wish I was there with you guys so I could touch it.’

The data banks were black, tall; one column after another of towered architecture, each filled with light, all linked by the gracefully rounded archways that rose to form a vaulted ceiling. As Kass stepped below the heavenly light-show she understood why Meg was feeling left out.

It was all so, shiny. So wondrous. If a time-lapsed chronicle of the cosmos existed, then this was surely what it the images would be.

‘It’s beautiful,’ said Kass.

‘It’s a repository of bull-shit that people get killed for,’ said Jay, who obviously wasn’t as impressed. ‘Come see this,’ she urged. ‘This is the main terminal. Nothing gets in or out without manually accessing this. There are no remote nodes or phone-lines connected to this room. It’s cut off from the outside world.’

It looked like the world’s biggest tablet stuck on top of an oversized lectern.

‘Can you work that thing?’ Asked Kass.

‘Yes, but we need to be quick. We’re messing with cutting edge software that will be boobytrapped at every turn. I don’t want to spend a second longer in here than necessary.’

Jay’s fingers danced across the glass surface, her touch bringing it to life. She plugged a flash drive into an empty port and things began to happen. The storage lights were no longer independent, chaotic, and cool. The cosmos became a more ordered and sequential place. Streams of lights that ran in all directions, reflecting all the colours of the spectrum.

‘Jay, what are you doing?’

‘I’m using the unit’s main processors to search for Spencer’s logs. He told us what to look for, but it still needs to be found. Kass, this place is mined with software designed to catch out anyone who shouldn’t be here. We’ll trigger an alert somewhere, it’s inevitable.’

‘Okay, so work quickly.’ Her eyes suggested an apology. But for what? ‘Jay, what’s wrong?’

‘Time, that’s what’s wrong. We don’t have enough of it . . . so I’ve uploaded a tsunami into the system.’

‘You’ve done what?’

That wasn’t what Kass wanted to hear.

‘Jay, that’s a bad idea.’

‘Why? Why is it a bad idea? Meg, what’s she doing?’

‘It’s not a bad idea, Meg. It’s just not ideal.’

‘Again, why is it not ideal? What’s going on?’ Kass couldn’t help herself, she’d maxed out on bravado; only worry and concern were left.

‘Meg, this isn’t part of the plan, is it?’

‘Err, not really.’

‘Someone tell me what’s going on? Jay, what’s a tsunami?’

‘I’ve uploaded a Cipher-Key.’ Now she looked plain guilty. ‘It’s Spence’s key. I press this, and it goes live into the system.’

‘Don’t do it, Jay.’

‘Don’t do it? What the hell does that mean?’

‘I send in the key, and it multiplies. It expands exponentially and searches all of this, until it finds a match. But with this much memory, even a tsunami could take too long.’

‘Actually, it’s more like a balloon. I said we should have called it a balloon. Jay, it’s really not a good idea.’

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake.’ Kass pressed the flashing key on the table’s screen. ‘Let’s just get this over with.’

The pulse and mood of the room took her by surprise. All its positive energy changed; the cosmos went dark. Then returned in small patches, that slowly began to spread. More lights came on, they were all red. No pulse, no pattern, just red blobs. And they were spreading.

‘Uh-oh, you shouldn’t have done that.’

‘Why? Why shouldn’t I have done that?’

‘There’s a problem with the balloon. A wave dissipates and is re-absorbed. It’s aggressive, and then it’s calm. A balloon isn’t like that, it just expands. Keeps inflating until it reaches its limit . . .

‘Then what?’

‘Like all balloons, it goes bang. That’s why we should have called it a balloon. Jay, it’s a balloon.’

‘Shut up, Meg. I need to concentrate.’

‘Why, why is she concentrating?’

‘When what we want is highlighted, she gets about half a second to grab it before it gets caught up in the balloon.’

‘Which will go bang. Oh. Oh-shit?’

‘Shhh, I need some quiet in here . . .’

The silence was deafening, or was that the fans overhead? Kass could feel her heart rate rise on a foreboding that she shouldn’t have touched anything. What if Jay missed it? Got distracted at the wrong moment? Her fingers were poised, ready, not a hint of movement. Her hands so steady, despite the hot-spots popping up everywhere. Closing in on the unlit spaces; they were expanding outward at a scary rate. Half the towers were now red, more of the tiny lights flashing on.

Please don't miss it. Please, Lord, if you've ever loved me, now is the time to show it.

'Found it,' she said. Jay's fingers dabbing at close to a hundred words a second. Then they stopped, were pulled away as if frightened to do more.

'Well, what happened? Jay, did you get it? Jay?'

'It's Spence's files. I'm downloading them to the thumb-drive; it'll just take a few seconds. Nearly there. Meg, find us the quickest way out. Now, I've got it!' She pulled the drive from the table. 'Kassandra we need get out of this room. Keep ahead of the wave.'

'It's a balloon. It's a . . . oh fuck, there is so much shit gonna hit the fan, and just about, now.'

The cosmos flashed once, and then the room went dark. The fans overhead began to power-down with a long drawl of mechanical dismay. A second later the room began to flash and swirl with military precision. Electronic alarms began sounding off. It all went crazy.

'Get us out of here, Meg.' The door to the control room slid shut behind them.

'Follow the Yellow Brick Road, my lovelies.'

'On my God, is he's laughing like a witch?' Kass was running like an Olympic athlete.

'I told you, he's eccentric. Fuck, fuck, we need to go. Come on, Kass, keep up.'

'I can only stay a step-ahead. Move yourselves my lovelies, the system is catching up.'

'I'm, fucking, running,' Kass was keen to impress the point. One foot was definitely trying to outrun the other.

A storage door opened with a hiss.

'You've got less than a heart-beat, step on it.'

Jay was through. Kass not really, as the door began to close. She hurled herself, got caught between wall and door. 'I'm stuck!' She felt Jay grab her arms and pull her through.

'Follow the lights, my pretties. Follow the lights.'

‘Come on, Kass.’ The floor lights were flashing, guiding them in their escape.

‘I’m gonna, fucking thump . . . aargh, when I get out of here.’ Kass was through the next door before it closed.

‘Service elevator to your left. Get on board, I’m working overtime to stop the computer from shutting it down. Penguin-power to the rescue. Only when the harsh winds blow can the huddle truly come together.’

‘Kung-Fu-Panda needs to open the fucking door!’

The elevator opened, and Jay hit the back wall. Kass tumbled inside as the doors hissed themselves closed.

‘We’re in,’ Jay was pressing the button marked loading bay.

‘Meg, move it. Get this thing going upward,’ Kass picked herself up. ‘Meg? Meg, why aren’t we moving?’

Jay jabbed at the button. ‘Meg, get us elevating. Meg?’

Kass slammed the panel with her palm. ‘What’s wrong? Meg, talk to me?’

‘Uh-oh. Danger, Will-Robinson. Danger!’

‘Uh-oh? Oh, for fuck's sake . . .’

‘You sure this is the address?’ Santini looked doubtful as he leant out of the car window. ‘Looks like an empty warehouse.’

‘This is the place,’ said Weldon. ‘You ready?’

‘Not really. It’s not too late to call for back-up?’

‘Yes, it is. Our CIA friends have given the order to breach via the south-east corner.’

‘How many?’

‘How remiss, they’ve neglected to supply names and ordinance. Come on, we need to go.’

Sarcastic . . . What the fuck am I doing here? ‘Hey, wait a minute.’ Santini clicked the Colt’s safety off; he exited the car and moved double time towards the building. ‘We’re going in blind.’ *This is stupid.* ‘Hey, do you even know which entry is southeast?’

Santini was still strapping on his vest whilst running blind into a probable combat zone. This was not good; not at all sensible. Potentially deadly to say the least. With surprise as their only advantage.

Santini followed Weldon through the door, gun poised, muzzle checking the stairwell up, and then down. He jumped the steps two at a time trying to keep up.

‘Err, guys. I think someone’s in the building?’ A red flashing light drew Meg’s attention up. The words ‘Alarm’ pulsing silently on the screen of the central monitor.

‘Guys, we have a break-in?’

‘Yes, it’s us. Meg, we’re stuck in here. Get this elevator moving.’ Meg reduced the volume of Jay’s voice.

‘Shh, not so loud,’ he said. ‘I can hear boots on the stairs.’

‘Meg, get us out of here?’ Kass was staring into Jay’s camera. ‘Move this elevator up.’

Seriously guys, keep it down, there are people in the building. Oh shit, they’re on the monitor. They’ve got guns.’

‘Guns? Meg what are you talking about?’

‘I’m being invaded. Guys, they’re wearing tactical gear; did I mention they have guns? Err, one moment, please,’ he wheeled his chair to another keyboard.’ Two more cameras came-on-line. Images of gunmen filled the two flanking screens above him. ‘Shit, they’re coming up the stairs.’

‘Meg, you have to get out.’

‘Yes, no. Jay, I can’t leave you like this?’

‘We’ll be, fine. Meg, stay calm. You have to leave. Go out the back, remember, we practised this. In case the cops ever found us.’

‘Err, not possible. Two more guns coming up from the road-side. Papa penguin is surrounded. Huh, huh, going into penguin panic-mode.’ He wheeled his chair back.

‘Get out.’ Jay shouted. ‘Meg. Get out, now!’

Her words ended with something metallic hitting the floor behind him. He didn’t dare look as the sound of something cylindrical was rolling toward him.

An ear-singeing-crack. A mini clap of thunder. The shockwave from the stun-grenade threw Meg’s chair across the room, hitting the table caused his backside to part company with the firm cushion. Megatron was spilled to the floor as the room went all woozy.

He’d felt the air get sucked from his personal space. He could see twinkling stars as he lay staring out into open space that was now filled

with smoke. His ears tingled to a loud ringing sound. He did get a buzz from the lasers that crisscrossed each other through the smog.

Run, she'd said, run. Men were shouting in the background, shuffling feet that he couldn't see. A sudden and rampant fear surged up to override his need to lay still and chill; listen to the birdies twitter back and forth in his head. Meg grabbed the table's leg and pulled himself behind to adopt a foetal position.

Shh, don't take a breath. It was like that party they went to last year. No fucker talked to him, so he drank too much, and woke up under a table. *Boots?* He could see them now. *Shh, maybe they'll go away.* Voices, he could hear the actual words.

'Cover the doorways. Search the other rooms. We're on the clock, ladies. Move!'

Bad people, stay quiet. Don't make a sound.

A pair of boots stepped closer through the fading mist. He saw a hand lower with a small gas-mask clutched in its fingers. The barrel of what looked an assault rifle dangled on the other side. Meg looked up but only saw the top of the desk.

Quiet as a mouse. No eek-eek, just lay here and be dormant. The boots turned. *Yes, that's it, keep going. Leave the room.* They walked slowly towards the door. *Please don't stop. Pleeeeeease, don't stop.*

'Meg? Meg?' Jay's muffled voice from the speakers. The boots stopped. The owner was listening.

Oh shit, the boots are coming back.

Weldon tried the stairwell door; it opened a crack, and he let it close. 'Probably their point of entry,' he whispered, 'they won't be expecting anyone to follow.' He had eyes on two intruders through the small pane of glass in the door. Another man came out into the hall from one of the apartments. He initiated a brief conversation, then returned to the room.

Weldon raised three fingers, they pointed through the glass. Then indicated he was going through the stairwell window.

Santini signed back with a single finger of his own. Not the one, he suspected, that Weldon would appreciate.

'We should have called for backup,' he said in an angry hush. 'Look at me, I'm past my prime. Not passed fit for fire-fights with armed mercenaries.' *What the fuck am I doing?* 'Hey, you'd better be good at what you do?' *Okay, that look is mildly encouraging.* The man showed no sign of fear, just malice. Malice was good; he'd take malice. 'Fuck you,' Santini's back went against the wall as he peered through the pane to see two men, both wearing dark combat fatigues. *Shit, are those grenades hanging from his belt?* 'Hey, hey,' he was holding his Colt for Weldon to see. 'I'm feeling seriously inadequate here.'

'I'll distract them. You shoot them in the back. If it waves a gun in there, you kill it.'

'Yeah, well, don't get in my way then.' *Bad time to mention I usually wear glasses?*

Santini watched as Weldon opened the stairwell window. 'I'll come in from the far side,' he said. 'You find Cassandra, and get her to safety.'

'What if there are other civilians in there?'

'Be ready!' Said Weldon

'I'll check my diary,' Santini slid back to where he could view the hall.

Only one man out there now. *Fuck, where did he go?* He checked his Colt, eyes on the hallway. Then felt for the two clips in his jacket, just to be sure, before a sudden unwanted memory of the sheriff's office caused his blood pressure to bomb. *A lot of bullet casings out there?* He found himself hoping two clips were enough. 'Hey . . .' Weldon was gone, the window open. He was on his own.

Weldon stepped out onto the fire-escape, out into the night air. He hopped up onto the decorative ledge that ran the entire length of the building, moving quickly as he hugged the wall. A check of each room through their windows as he passed. The interiors had been ransacked; looking for the thumb-drive no doubt. So far he'd spied one man talking on his cell, and two others. That made three plus anyone out of sight. These type of operations would normally proceed with at least a four man team.

Weldon stopped where the curtains had been drawn the previous night. A heavy handed search of the fabric had left one hanging, and a clear gap to see inside. From the state of the place and the fact that they were still here, he guessed they hadn't found what they'd come for. Also a good sign that Kass and her new friends weren't at home.

He needed an entry point, but it wouldn't be the window. They looked old, but were modern; the glass was too thick. And the ledge ended before reaching the opposing fire-escape.

No choice. Weldon jumped; gave it all he had. His hands reaching for the metal bar atop the railing. He hit the fire-escape hard.

Hands, not finger-tips. Fuck, hold on. For the love of . . . Twenty years ago this shit was a lot easier. *Stretch John, stretch. Christ, do not let go!* He

reached up with his leg, tried to wrap it round, well, anything. Gravity forced it down again. *Shit, shit . . .* Finger tips slipping. Every muscle in his arms responding to the call, only two fingers left holding on. He let go with one hand, swung it up and got his fingers fully around the metal. His other hand followed suit. Go, on, a, diet! He pulled himself up and over, falling against the steps, the Glock unholstered and raised before his back found the gantry. *You're getting old, John. Either that, or I'm shorter than I used to be?* He was up, one long inhalation followed by another, gun aimed at the door. He needed to get his Ying aligned with his Yang. Time to start a distraction.

One boot moved forward, and then a second; the third separated the door from its frame. In the hallway three faces turned toward the splintering wood. Three weapons were raised as their training jolted them into action. They separated, moved fast, but not before the Glock opened fire to take the closest man down. His nearest compatriot reeling from a third bullet shot from the Glock. The man nearest the door fired twice as he rolled around the doorframe into the safety of Jay's room. A hail of bullets began splintering plaster from the walls around Weldon.

Find cover. He ejected the spent magazine and quickly slapped another in. *No way.* The bodies on the gory red carpet were moving, rolling away and firing blind to their rear. The dead men were shooting back.

Body armour? They're wearing body armour under their clothes. Fuck, fuck!

He charged them, screaming; discharging bullets in rapid succession at the door, its frame, at the floor. Hundreds of splinters, several hits, but still they ran and stumbled together through a second doorway. Weldon threw himself into the same room as the one who'd initially got away.

Another change of magazine and three more shots expelled. The wall beside him took multiple hits. He opened up towards the muzzle flash. *Head down, John. Head down.* The clock on the wall exploded into wood and springs. Projectiles being fired from the upper lever; from behind the bed. The doorframe taking multiple hits from the two shooters outside.

Where the fuck is that Fed? He shot three rounds that tore the duvet apart as his knees slid across the wooden floor and he crash-landed behind a vanity-table. As lipstick, powder and paint exploded in all directions. The bed-side shooter was shooting back. Worse still, he saw movement by the door. He was about to be caught in a cross-fire.

Another weapon fired in the hallway. One man went down with a shriek of pain, the other returned fire. *What took him so long?* It seemed the cavalry had finally arrived.

Weldon was up, weapon outstretched in his hands, heading full throttle toward the bed. This would be his only chance, whilst Santini had them distracted outside. He leapt onto the mattress and fired down at the man cradled in the corner of the room, reloading. His surprise more than evident before two shots from the Glock, found his throat, and then his head. Unmissable targets at such close-range.

Weldon's weapon moved to eye level, retrained toward the hall. He took several quick breaths as he closed in on the doorway. One man was already down, he could see him; a gallon of blood on the floor around his head. The other was firing from a doorway opposite, a few feet to his right. Two 9mil slugs hit him in the back of the head and neck. He died without knowing how death had been delivered.

'Clear!' Weldon shouted. His head bobbed a quick look around the doorframe.

'Clear!' Santini replied.

Three down, how many more? He took a step outside and into the hall. Santini moving towards him, his Colt at eye-level, his gaze wired, his body pumped with adrenaline. Weldon signalled first at his eyes, and then to the third doorway in the hallway.

Both ends cleared. He ejected his magazine and slapped in another. *Now for the middle.*

The body crumpled on the floor was male, he looked barely old enough to drink. A blonde, athletic, young man who was too young to die. But Weldon knew all too well the risks involved in the business he'd chosen. Or had *it* chosen him? A lifetime of walking that same line, somewhere between being lucky, and doing the job well.

Santini slumped against the wall on the other side of the doorway. He was staring down at the dead, holding his gun to his chest. That same look Weldon had seen so many times in others. Men who'd conquered their fears to come out on top; a hairs breadth from throwing up.

Weldon bobbed a quick look inside. He clicked his fingers to get Santini's attention away from the dead. He raised two fingers to the Fed, followed by a single digit and a simulated gun, before putting it to his own temple. Santini nodded understanding.

Two people, one a combatant, the other was a hostage. The former had a gun pointed at the latter's head.

'Drop your guns, or I'll kill him.' A man shouted from inside.

Kill who? And why does he think I give a shit?

'Please, Penguin doesn't want to die.'

The two men shared a look. The hostage was scared, and he seemed to think he was a penguin?

'Wrong place; wrong time.' Weldon called back. 'He's collateral damage unless you throw the gun down. It's the only way you live through this.'

‘Nobody else has to die today,’ Santini added. He didn’t look very happy about Weldon’s hostage negotiations. ‘I’m FBI,’ he said. ‘You’re surrounded, so let your hostage go.’

Weldon lowered his weapon. An open hand indicated Santini was free to try his luck. So long as he did it quickly.

‘I’m coming to the door, and I’m unarmed; don’t shoot. We can find a way out of this.’ Santini dangled his gun from a finger. ‘Hi, you okay?’ He asked. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Name? Megatron, my name’s Megatron.’

‘Okay, let’s shorten that shall we. Do your friends call you Meg? That sound okay? Okay, good, now trust me, we’re going to get you out of this safe and sound. No-one else is going to get hurt.’

‘*He is!*’ The gunman jammed his gun into Meg’s neck. ‘If I go down you’re both coming with me. You hear that Weldon?! Yeah, I know who you are. This won’t end if you kill me. All we want is what Spencer gave Krane. Hey, easy Fed. Don’t come any closer.’

‘What’s he talking about, Weldon?’

Weldon smiled. He stuck up two fingers. ‘*You got two minutes,*’ he mouthed.

‘Don’t know what that is,’ Santini shrugged. ‘What else can I do?’ He asked.

‘You got a million dollars? Oh, and a fast car.’

‘Maybe, might take more than a couple of minutes though.’

‘Do I look like a fucking idiot? Maybe I’ll put a hole in this dirtbag’s head just for fun.’

‘Give him a car,’ Meg squealed. ‘Please. Penguin poop on the way. I don’t want to die. Give him anything he wants.’

‘Where’s Cassandra?’ Weldon asked, his face leant around the doorframe.

‘Cassandra? I’ve got a gun to my head. Focus on me.’

‘He won’t shoot you.’

‘Really?’ The gun forced Meg’s head forward. ‘It would be worth it just to stop him crying.’

‘I’m not crying.’ He was. ‘I, I, have the power of the, huddle.’ He was borderline sobbing.

‘Meg, where’s Kassandra?’ Weldon more insistent this time.

‘Yeah, where is that bitch? She’s the one with the data. Go ahead, answer the man.’

‘She went with the others. They left me here, on my own. I don’t want to die.’

‘That’s okay,’ Weldon grinned. ‘Try not to move too much,’ He lifted the Glock to his eye-line. ‘Maybe I can put a bullet in his eye, without taking your ear off.’

‘Whaat? No, no, not my ear. Don’t shoot. I don’t want you to . . .’

‘Stop crying!’ His captor ordered

‘I know you,’ Weldon said, dropping the gun down. ‘You’re the jerk-off from Ajo who ran off and left his men to die.’ He was taking inventory of the room. ‘You’re Carl.’ A fallen wheelchair, broken computers, several monitors that looked fried. And smog that was taking its time to clear. ‘I had a lovely chat with one of your men,’ he added. ‘You left him behind back there in the desert. What happened to never leaving a man behind?’

‘This ain’t the Corp. He was sloppy, they both were.’

‘That’s not the way I remember it. You were the one that ran out. I remember Krane trying to put a bullet up your ass.’

‘Fuck you. Give me what they stole, now!’

‘You look nervous, Carl. Guess that’s how it is when your failure rate climbs . . . Huh, there it is.’ The Glock came up again. ‘If you poke your head just a little more to the left. Stop hiding it behind the cripple. Isn’t he heavy?’

‘Fuck you, both of you. I get out of here, or I kill him.’

‘It’s a paradox,’ said Weldon. ‘If I kill the cripple, he’s no longer a bargaining chip. If you kill the cripple, well, not much of a bargaining chip either way. Both ways you end up dead.’

‘Hey, enough with the cripple. I’m a US citizen, with all the rights accorded. Mister FBI, tell him. Tell them both they can’t shoot me. It’s illegal.’

Meg’s getting heavy, isn’t he? I can see the effort, you can’t hide it. ‘I know all about you, Carl. About April, and Mister Fortune. The man you ran out on was very informative, if a bit hazy on the finer details. Tell you what, you talk to the gentlemen beside me. He really is a Federal officer. Show him your badge. Go on.’

Santini gingerly reached for his pocket, his firearm still dangling from a finger.

‘See, he’s the real deal, and the only chance you’ve got of staying alive today. You talk with him, or you deal with me. Either way, you don’t leave this room. And apologies to the disabled in the room, but I don’t give a fuck if the cripple lives, or dies.’

‘There, see. A way out. Please talk to the cop. Please, I don’t want to die. I’m too young to meet the great huddle in the sky.’ Meg started to cry, full on, and unashamed. His subtle movements weighing down on Carl’s arm.

‘Will you stop . . . I’ll fucking shoot you if you don’t stop crying.’

‘I don’t want to die!’

Weldon stepped into the doorway. He raised his gun.

‘Oh really, your gonna shoot him. I’m quaking. Now get out of my way, or I *will* put a bullet in his head.’

‘I’ll shoot through that fucker’s face to stop you.’

‘No, no, not my face. Not the face!’ Meg’s hands lifted, he was trying to hide his face. ‘You’re the good guys. Bad boys with a badge. Not the face!’

‘Do you have a shot, FBI?’ Weldon whispered loudly.

‘No, not without taking the kid’s face off.’

‘If we let him go he just starts up somewhere else; more people die. I’m sorry Fed, but this has to end here.’

‘Fed, no, wait. No, don’t shoot, it doesn’t have to end. Don’t say end. Please don’t say END. O’oh say can you see, by the dawn’s early light. What so proudly we hailed, at the twilights last gleaming . . .’

Well, this is different. ‘Hey Fed, you ever heard someone sing the national anthem like this?’ *Obviously not.*

The anthem was belched with pride, its volume raised to full. Meg sang as if his life depended on being heard.

‘Whose broad stripes and bright star, thru the per-il-ous flight. O’er the ramparts we watched, we so gall-an-tly stream.’

‘What’s wrong with you?’ Carl grabbed Meg’s hair. ‘Shut your mouth or I’ll pull the fucking trigger and paint the wall with your head.’

Megatron sang louder. ‘And the rock-ets red glare, the bombs burst in air. Gave proof through the night, that our flaaaag was still there.’

‘The kid’s lost it.’ *And he’s making up his own words?* ‘FBI, we need to take Carl down, now.’

Meg’s left hand rose and rested on his chest. ‘No, don’t shoot.’ He cried out. ‘Oh, thank God. The fat-guy’s with me.’

I don’t remember that in the song?

Meg raised the volume on the song, he was almost shouting. ‘O’oh, say does that star spangled ba-anner wave, o’er the land of the free, and the home of the brave!’

‘Let him go.’ A voice from the hallway that surprised them all. Three weapons were instantly pointed outside. ‘Let him go,’ Cupcake repeated.

‘What is this, a fucking circus?’ Carl shouted. ‘Who the fuck is the fat-guy with the gun? Get the fuck out of here, all of you. Or so help me, the nerd loses his head.’ He hit Meg on the ear with his gun. ‘Stop fucking singing.’

He did. ‘I love you, Cupcake.’ Meg spluttered. ‘You’re my bro; the embryo I never had but always wanted. If it has to end, I’d rather it was you. Hey, Cups. Think fast, think dirty. It’s Top-Gun-time. American

fucking Sniper. I want you to feel the Force, Bro. Hit that tiny manifold and the Death Star goes boooooom! So go on, do it. Do it quick, and do it dirty. I love yo . . .’

A single shot rang out.

No-one said a word. Carl looked stunned, the hole between his eyes began to bleed. He fell back with Meg still in his arms.

Cupcake rushed forward, smoking gun in hand.

‘I could have made that shot,’ said Weldon. *Fuck, that was a good shot.* ‘Keep your weapon on him, FBI. I don’t want that mother-fucker going zombie.’

Cupcake was down on his knees. ‘Don’t die, please don’t die. I didn’t mean it. Meg, please don’t die.’ He pulled his friend into his arms, tears streaming down rosy-red cheeks. Meg was stiff; pale as a ghost and limp. Then he stirred under the force of Cupcake’s rocking motion.

‘I think I just made a penguin-puddle,’ he said, eyes opening slowly.

‘Son-of-a-bitch, you’re still alive.’ Weldon reached down and hauled Megatron up by his hoody. ‘Clean panties later, we have work to do.’ His chair, get him in his wheelchair. And no more singing, you hear me? No more singing.’ He hauled him into his wheels. ‘Now where’s Cassandra? Where is she?’

‘No really, I’m fine. Just dump the cripple back in his wheels. It’s my legs that don’t work, not my feelings.’

‘You’re right, I’m sorry, are you a little emotional?’ Weldon spun the chair toward the desk. He slammed the Glock on its surface. ‘Would you like me to examine you, check for wounds, bring you some sweeties?’

‘I’m detecting sarcasm.’

‘Smart guy.’

‘I think he’s angry.’

‘Yes, I got that Cupcake. I’m disabled, not stupid. Oh, not good, I detect a very serious problem.’ Meg pointed to the small black box on his desk, a rubber antennae protruding from its surface. Weldon picked up the smashed box.

Meg shrugged, ‘The radio’s dead,’ he said.

‘Shit, Jay? She’s with the cop-lady. They went to G’co.’

‘And they’re on their own.’

‘Wait a minute. You knew Krane wasn’t going to be here, didn’t you?’

‘I told you, FBI. I couldn’t be in two places at once. I figured she had a better chance with the nerd here opening doors for her.’

‘Wait a minute, you used me?’ He turned his wheels. ‘This penguin is not for public utilisation, or manipulation for that matter. FBI man, arrest him. I could have been killed.’

‘I could have missed out on retirement,’ Santini replied. ‘Missus Santini would not have been happy.’

‘Who’s Missus Santini? And for the record, how did you know where we were? And what we were doing?’

‘The problem with cops, and nerds. Neither of you are as smart as you think.’ Weldon had the box in hand. ‘Has penguin got a screwdriver and a soldering iron?’

Where's Meg? Why's the comm sending a deathly shade of static?

'Meg, open the doors. We'd like to leave now.' Kass gave a suitably short pause. 'Open the frigging doors, you, you, retard.' Static still the response.

'He's in trouble, isn't he?'

'We don't know that, Jay. Meg's not stupid, he'll have left the loft. He has a back up radio somewhere else, yeah? Please tell me you guys have a safe house; more radios?' *Please don't shake your head like that.* 'You're smart, bypass the control panel. Get the lift going up.' *It looks simple enough.* 'They do it in the movies all the time,' she said.

'Not unless you have some clips, a screwdriver, and a length of wire?'

'I really must remember to pack my tool kit,' she said. 'For Christ's sake, you're the techie, do something.'

'I've never done this before,' Jay slumped against the metal wall. 'I didn't think . . .' She slid her back down until her bum hit the floor. 'They're going to kill us all aren't they?'

Shit, you poor kid. You stoopid kid!

'No,' Kass knelt, 'not this time. They're not going to win.' She took Jay's hands. *Poor love, she's trembling.* 'Meg's a smart guy. He's had to abandon the loft, that's all. He's wheeling his way to safety as we speak. Penguin-power, remember?' *Oh my God, you're shaking.*

Jay reached out and put her arms around Kass.

‘We’re okay,’ she said. *We just have to wait.* ‘We’re safe for now.’ *We’ve got time. We’ll figure this out.* She felt Jay’s arms jerked tightly. It was the roar of a klaxon that startled them both. ‘You’ve got to be joking?!’

Hidden lamps in the ceiling above began to pulse red light around the metal walls of the elevator. It seemed their time had just run out.

Kass stood. She struck the inert panel. 'Oh this is just great.' *Stay calm.* 'Was it the wave?'

Jay nodded, her face on full-flood-alert. 'Meg was right.' She said. 'We should have called it a balloon.'

This isn't happening. Somebody please tell me that this isn't happening. She pulled her gun and looked for anything that could help. Nothing but metal walls. No emergency hatch above or below.

'Meg, please, get us moving.' The comm was silent.

Wherever Meg was, he was obviously in no position to help.

'Kass, I can hear them,' Jay's ear was to the door. 'They must have sensors in here?' She was looking around.

'Can't you do anything?' Kass could hear them now; footsteps getting closer. Several men coming fast.

Think girl, what would Weldon do? He'd pull a crowbar and a grenade out of his backside. She was pretty sure she'd have noticed having either. *So what then?* Caught like rats in a trap.

'Meg,' her voice strained but calm. 'Please, if you can hear me, open the doors.'

'If we surrender, they may turn us in to the Police?'

Kass shook her head. She doubted they would let them live. It seemed the first time she would ever discharge a weapon in anger, would probably be the last. She stepped in front of Jay. Protect and serve, it was all she'd ever wanted to do.

Oh God, Josh?

Boots tramped the metal floor outside, and came to a halt.

The elevator powered up. Two tones from an unseen speaker, and a female voice. “Stand back, the elevator doors are opening.”

Fuck, fuck . . . Kass took a text-book stance. Her once a month evaluation with a hand-gun, had come early. But this wasn’t the range. On the other side, she wouldn’t see a paper target. Her hands trembled as she raised the gun. A deep breath followed as she aimed the weapon at the doors. She found new courage as Jay mirrored her actions, stood by her side.

‘You want to be Butch or Sundance?’ *That’s not funny.*

The doors cracked open, began to move, and then stopped.

“Warning: elevator doors closing.”

‘*Going up.*’ A familiar voice in her ear.

‘Meg? Meg, is that you? Where the hell have you been?’

‘*Trouble with the huddle,*’ he said. ‘*But your package is received, and normal service has been resumed.*’

‘I’m gonna kiss you,’ said Kass.

‘*You may want to press the up button first.*’

‘Weldon, is that you?’ She hit the upper-most button on the panel. Happy to see it illuminated at last. ‘Weldon, what are you doing there?’

‘*Kass, when those doors open again, run like hell,*’ he said.

‘Jay, I left the keys in the van. It’s in the same place, be quick.’

‘Cupcake? Oh sweetie; it’s so good to hear your voice.’ Jay wiped at her eyes. She seemed shocked that she held a gun, but couldn’t stop grinning. ‘I thought they were going to shoot us,’ she said.

The elevator came to a smooth stop.

“Warning. Elevator doors opening.”

The shiny metal barrier cracked in the middle as the two parts began to separate. Nothing was going to stop them, not now. All they had to do was get to the van.

Kass stepped back, her adrenaline levels in a sudden in a free-fall. Four men with weapons drawn stood in the open space beyond.

They were shouting, making demands.

‘Put your hands on their heads,

‘Get down on your knees.’

Nothing to do now, but comply.

The moment Kass knelt, rough-hands grabbed at hers, yanked them from her head, forced them down behind her back. She felt the harsh pressure of a zip-tie yank into her wrists.

‘Hey, hey? Get your hands off her. Jay? Where are you taking her? Jay?!’

‘Shut your mouth,’ he had her hair, pulling her head back.

Kass felt a blow against her back. More hands keen to violate her body, as they manhandled her face to the concrete.

‘Jay?’ She couldn’t see her. ‘They’re hurting kids,’ she said. ‘Please, stop this. Help us . . .’

They weren’t listening; her words shuttered out by a hood being pulled down over her head. Kass felt her breath caught in the fabric. Only the outline of boots beyond, some flashes of torchlight, a numbing sense of fear. She shut down, stopped struggling. Resistance, it seemed, was futile.

What’s that? She heard the crackle of electricity. *No, no . . .* She felt an overwhelming surge of pain as her body went into spasm. A moment later the world went black.

It was dark. *Arrgh, my head?* Why couldn't she see? *Where am I?*

'Hello?' she whispered, her mouth too dry to speak.

Water, I need water? She remembered the hood; she was still wearing the hood. *Oh my God, it smells second-hand.* 'Hello!' Much louder this time. *Oh, fuck . . .* A hand on her shoulder.

Kass tried to withdraw, but couldn't. Why wouldn't her arms move? It took a moment to realise some bastard had tied her to a chair.

'Not feeling so well?' The hood was pulled up and away. 'I hope the boy's weren't too rough with you?'

Soft hands, not so gently tapping at her face. Clearly insistent that she pay attention.

'Hey, Krane, snap out of it.'

Oh no. She recognised the woman's voice. 'Where's my son you fucking bitch?!'

'What, no hello, how are you? I thought we were besties?' April slapped Kass hard across the face. A stinging reminder of how bad the situation had become.

I am gonna . . . 'Where's Jay? What have you done to her?'

'Relax; I haven't done anything to her. Not yet at least. In fact, her health depends on everything you tell me in the next few minutes.'

Adrenaline surged. A shot in the arm that woke every cell in Kass' body. She wanted to lurch forward and rip that woman's throat out.

‘Where’s Josh?’ *Please, tell me he’s all right.* ‘Where’s my son you bitch.’ She felt another smarting whip of April’s hand.

‘That’s enough, April.’ A man’s voice from behind.

Kass couldn’t see him. She didn’t have to. ‘Fortune, you bastard.’ *There’s someone else, who’s that with you?* She rocked the chair back and forth until she could see Fortune stood by the door, at least most of him. ‘Where am I?’ She asked. ‘Why the fuck am I tied up?’

Her surroundings resembled one of those out-of-town motel rooms. Big bed, lousy colour scheme. The window had its blinds closed. She was sat in the chair. April perched now on the bed’s edge. Some kind of vanity table with a big mirror above, someone’s reflection held in the glass.

‘I know you,’ she said. Then wished she hadn’t. Kass looked away. She’d seen enough films to know, you don’t want to see their faces. And she had no doubt whose face was in the reflection.

‘Miss Krane, you are surely a conundrum,’ the new voice laced with drawl that could only be found in the deep South.

‘Senator Joe Rushmore,’ she said as her head slumped.

She knew the face, and she recognised the voice. She’d seen him enough times on the television. Dressed up for a black-tie dinner in a smart, expensive looking suit. Not really in keeping with the shiny black cowboy boots with silver stitching. He was sucking on a peach, or something?

‘It’s been a hell of a few days, has it not? You have confounded and outwitted some of *the* smartest operatives this country has to offer.’

‘Don’t talk with your mouth full,’ she said. ‘It’s bad manners, even for a senator.’ *Go fuck yourself.*

Fortune half-smiled, then shared a look with his eyes towards April that Joe didn’t see. She could see the cogs turn in that man’s head despite the dead pan face that returned.

‘I don’t think April is very happy with you,’ said Joe. ‘Personally, I congratulate you on getting this far.’ He sighed, as if in disappointment.

‘Tell us where you’ve hidden the data-stick that Spencer gave you.’ He rounded the chair behind her and whispered in her ear. ‘We know he gave you something. What else could it be? How else could he get it out?’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. Where’s my son? Tell me where Josh is, you, you Hillbilly.’ She saw it again, a slip of Fortune’s mask. He didn’t like the senator, no, it was more than that. ‘Why are you working for this monster?’ She asked.

‘It’s called loyalty, Ms Krane.’

I don’t think so. The way Fortune’s eyes glared at the presumption. *No, he despises you.* Fortune looked down, at the phone in his hand. It was the third time he’d done it.

‘You’re a fucking worm,’ she said, staring back at Joe. ‘You’re a parasite, a paedophile, and a fucking low-life criminal. What are you doing working for this man? He’s a sick lawmaker who likes to pick his girls up from school.’ *Fuck, his phone’s more important than my life?* ‘Fuck you,’ she said to Fortune. ‘And you too, you sick, fucking, senator!’

Kass knew all about Senator Joe; she’d read enough headlines. The alleged dalliances with girls who were too young. A man who’s voting base held dear their medieval beliefs. Parents who serve their young teenage daughters up to men like Joe. “Protecting their purity”, that’s how they justified it. This man made her feel sick.

‘This isn’t about “making the country great again”, she said. ‘How much, Joe? How much are you getting for allowing American kids to die?’ The money scandals that had dogged Joe’s career were legendary. And yet here he was, an elected official of the Senate. Smiling as if no-one could touch him. And he was probably right.

‘Are you finished?’ He asked. ‘I really don’t have the time for your hysteria. As you may have guessed, I should be on my way to dinner, to meet some very important people. I have to discuss the future of this great country of ours.’ He leant against the table blocking the mirror. ‘Give me what I want, and you can go. I’ll even have your son returned.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ *You lying pig. You’re not letting anyone go. Josh? Oh God, I’m so sorry.*

‘I told you, she knows nothing. She’d be begging for her life, and for her sons. You have no idea what you’re involved in do you? Years of painstaking work and endeavour put at risk by a dumb-shit cop, and her kid. Who would have thought? I might add, that you’ve embarrassed Mr Fortune here. That man is supposed to be the very best at what he does.’

‘Go fuck yourself, both of you.’ *What, did I say something funny?*

‘She is a fiery one, and tenacious too. Ms Krane, under other circumstances, I’d offer you a job on my staff. No, really. You’re a handsome woman. You’d give my older voters some fine titty to gawk at.’

‘You sick bastard.’ She wanted to cry, but wasn’t about to give him the satisfaction. She knew no amount of horse-trading would save her, or Josh.

Joe stepped forward, he leant down and looked Kass in the eye. ‘Personally, I regard you as something I would scrape from my shoe.’

‘That would be something that came out your mouth then?’

‘My, she’s as prickly as a porcupine. If you don’t care for your own safety, then perhaps you will give more consideration to, what’s her name?’

‘Jaylin Spencer, senator.’ April replied.

‘Hmm, Spencer’s sister. She’s a pretty one. I might have the others leave the room whilst I interrogate her.’

‘Really? That should take less than five minutes.’

Joe slapped her; he nearly took her head off. Within seconds Kass’ lip was swelling, she felt blood leak down her chin. April looked away, Fortune took a step from the door. Neither intervened.

‘Ms Krane, I bid you goodnight. You’re a loose end that has been well and truly tied. You see Mr Fortune, she’s not so tough after all.’

‘Give me back my son, you, fuck-head. You simple minded paedophile.’ She was straining at her bonds. Desperate to get her hands around this man’s throat. ‘You kidnapped my son, you, bastard.’

‘And for good reason,’ Joe’s voice was raised for the first time. ‘Let me be clear, Ms Krane. Your son has the opportunity to help make our Nation strong again.’

‘He’s fourteen years old,’ she turned to the doorway. ‘Mr Fortune, please, at least tell me that Josh will be okay?’ *You son of a bitch, please. Just a word, a nod . . . anything.* She willed his stony gaze to give her hope. He only had eyes for his phone? And now Joe had noticed too.

‘Are we keeping you from something, Fortune?’

‘No sir. It’s important, sorry.’ He offered the senator to continue. ‘She was asking about her son?’

‘Yes, she was. Let me tell you how important your little boy is to me, Ms Krane. The good doctor has seen incredible potential in him. But I’ve run out of time. Fortune, call for ma car. I need to get to my dinner. Oh, an before I go. I wanted you to see this.’ Rushmore pulled Jay’s thumb-drive from his pocket. ‘It’s all over, for you, and for your associates. Oh, I thought I’d save you the trouble, Fortune. I sent Carl on a little mission of my own. Her friends, I’ve had them dealt with.’

‘That wasn’t your call, Senator.’

‘Well, it’s been made. And they’ve been terminated. Good day to you, Ms Krane.’

‘You bastard,’ her eyes were filling. She’d tried to bluff, but had been called out. *Meg, Cupcake?* ‘Don’t hurt Josh, please.’ No stopping the tears now. ‘I’m begging you, please?’

‘You see, I told you she’d beg. You were wise not to take the bet, Fortune.’

‘Don’t do it, Fortune. Don’t hurt Josh. This man’s a traitor to his country. You’re a filthy traitor!’

‘Traitor? You have me confused, Ms Krane. I am a patriot. A man who is unafraid to get his hands filthy in the defence of his country.’

‘By kidnapping children? By murdering American citizens? What’s that got to do with patriotism?’ Her voice was fading, she didn’t have the words. ‘Josh? Don’t hurt him, I beg you.’

Joe was smiling. 'The end justifies the means, make no mistake. I aim to make this country great again. Mr Fortune, I asked you to call ma car?'

He was looking at his phone again.

'Be assured that your son is a hero, he will die in the service of his country. But I am a compassionate man, so I've instructed Doctor Outman to cause him as little pain as possible. He'll take what we need, and he'll burn the rest. No more loose ends.'

'No, no . . . You're a fucking monster. God strike you down for the evil you are. You, fucking, bastard.'

'This is pathetic. Fortune, call ma car.'

'We copied Spencer's data. We sent it, to the, to the FBI.' One final lie. One last try. 'They know all about you.' She shouted. Then cringed as the ageing senator came closer.

Joe teased the hair from her face. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and tried to dab at her eyes. She didn't want him anywhere near. Kass spat in his face.

Joe stepped back and threw the thumb-drive to April. She clicked it into the portal of a small black box. A red bulb blinked several times and then went green. She pulled it out, wiped it with her shirt, then threw it onto Kass's lap.

'Burned,' April said. 'Irretrievable. As is the data you copied at G'co.' April took a gun from purse and began screwing a short black silencer into its muzzle.

Oh shit. They were really going to do it. Kass closed her eyes, she didn't want to see. *Dear God, please help Josh.* She was going to be brave, not give them the satisfaction. *Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Please Lord, save my baby-boy. You take me, but don't you dare let them hurt Josh.* Kass was going to look that bitch straight in the eye.

'As soon as I'm clear of this place, you put her down. April, call my car?'

Joe had become impatient. April was unsure as to why Fortune delayed. Then she saw it; barely a movement of Fortune's head. Enough to slow April's hand on the suppressor.

You're stalling him? Oh God, is there a chance for a reprieve? Whatever the reason, she decided to help out.

'He's coming for you,' she said. 'He's your worst fucking nightmare, and he's coming. You won't be able stop him. He'll kill you all, but especially you.' She wished she could be there when Weldon caught up with Joe. 'When it happens *Senator* you won't see it coming.'

'What's she talking about, Fortune?'

Julius feigned surprise and shook his head.

'I'll die knowing you'll be next,' she said. 'Tick-tock, Joe. The clock's counting down!'

'Sorry to interrupt, Senator. I have to take this call. I'll buzz your car the moment I'm done.' Fortune turned away.

Kass strained to hear, as did Rushmore. Fortune didn't say a word, he listened. April sat on the bed's edge, gun tapped incessantly against her knee. It was obvious Joe was sensing something was wrong. Unbridled contempt showing for the man on the phone. Fortune hung up.

'About fucking time,' said Rushmore.

'Apologies, there's been a change of plan.'

'What change? Who were you talking to?'

Fortune held out his hand to April. Her absolute trust in him overrode any uncertainty as she handed him her weapon. He turned it toward Kass.

Shit, no, please don't. Kass tried not to close her eyes; she couldn't help herself. Nor the compulsion to turn away, it was undeniable. 'Fuck you,' she said.

No, those wouldn't be her last words. She lifted her head and stared at Fortune. His image glazed, washed over by tears.

'Please,' she said. 'I beg you. Tell Josh that I love him.' It was too much; she scrunched her eyes tightly shut.

‘I’m genuinely very sorry,’ he said. His voice closer now. ‘But these stories, they don’t always get the ending that we’d like.’ Fortune squeezed the trigger.

Kass felt her body jolt. The bullet’s impact had outrun the muffled sound of the gunshot. At least that was how it seemed.

Being shot wasn't as bad as she'd expected. The following few seconds held her life's-journey with an eerie pause. Was time poking fun by delaying the impact?

Kass began to pant, she was starting to panic; getting angry at this infernal wait. Had the rats arrived to tug at her bonds.

'That's another one of your nine lives gone.' April's voice from behind her, and she sounded really pissed.

Kass' heart was racing like scooter's engine. She was confused, befuddled; this moment, it had to end.

'Fuck you all!' Three words that shed all the doubt. Kass opened her eyes. *Fortune, where is he? Oh my God . . .*

Senator Joe was slumped on the floor, his back against the wall, his head drooped against his chest. He had a crimson stain in the centre of his chest.

'Shit, what's going on? . . . Hey, hey that hurts.' *What the fuck?* April was tugging at the rope, trying to free her hands. Panic began to rise in her throat again. 'Is he dead?'

'An unfortunate suicide,' said Fortune, stood over Joe's body. He was wiping April's gun with a handkerchief, the silencer already removed. Fortune placed the weapon firmly in the senator's palm and wrapped his fingers around the grip. He lifted the gun in Joe's hand and pressed it against the senator's chest. Then let the hand fall, the gun clunking heavily as it struck the ground.

‘What, what just happened?’ Kass’ breaths still short, racing, her need to understand all consuming.

‘Ask him?’ April replied. ‘It seems I was out of the loop.’

‘We’ve been directed to follow a different course of action,’ said Fortune. ‘The senator is no longer included in our plans.’ He was wiping his fingers on the hanky, his attention fixed on Kass. ‘Ms Krane,’ Fortune offered Kass his hand.

‘No,’ she shook her head. ‘No, no . . . You let me think you were going to kill me.’ *I don’t want your help.* ‘I felt that thing pass by my head. I thought I was dead.’ *Fuck you. Fuck you. You son-of-a-bitch.*

‘It’s important that you understand; that you remember,’ he said.

‘I’m not fucking likely to forget. Hey, get off pause back there, I need my hands unwrapped.’ She was eager to be free of her bonds.

‘Julius, we’re not going off script here?’ April sounded concerned.

‘Just untie me, okay?’

April raised a fist in threat. Her attempt to free Kass was obviously under protest. ‘What’s going on here, Julius?’ Her tone demanding.

‘The NEXUS programme, it’s being shut down,’ he said. ‘Such a great tragedy when a public figure like Joe, chooses to end his life this way. It seems there are compromising images of the senator and underage children. They are about to be found on his laptop, and at his home.’ Fortune took something metal from his pocket. A short blade flicked aggressively out, and Kass backed into her chair. ‘Our employers value anonymity beyond profit,’ he said, then passed the knife to April.

She pointed the blade at Kass, who gave her best, come-and-get-it-you-bitch face.

‘You could have told me,’ April cut through the rope; she closed the knife. ‘I’d have done that smug bastard for you. Now, you want to tell me why?’

‘The senator was working his own agenda. This was unacceptable. The Board felt it unwise to continue their support for a presidential candidate they couldn’t control.’

‘What about her?’

Kass didn’t like the way she said it. She wasn’t too fond of the way they were both gazing at her either.

‘Ms Krane, I’m going to give you a choice. Carl is down, as is his team. The murder of Pierce Reeseaman will fall on him, as will the abduction of your son. Senator Joe Rushmore has murdered to keep his *secret*.’ He looked toward April. She was shaking her head as if privy to what he’d say next.

‘An unknown source provided Assistant District Attorney Reeseaman with shocking evidence that the senator was a paedophile. That’s why he was murdered. That’s what you witnessed. Your statement to the Federal authorities will give this account total credibility. You will of course leave out anything connected to myself, or to April. The truth is that we don’t existed. We never have. You won’t find us on any data-base, or in any government file. We’re ghosts, Ms Krane.’

‘What the hell makes you so sure that I won’t tell everyone?’

‘What would you tell them, Ms Krane? What evidence do you have to substantiate your absurd claim? I understand that the clinic in question will be mysteriously burnt to the ground later tonight. The Foundation itself knows nothing; it never did. And the public will continue to extol its extraordinary deeds.’ He took a step closer to Kass. ‘Can you see where this is going? I’ve also been informed that a statement will be issued to national news-agencies within the next few hours. It will confirm that NEXUS is ending its communication programme due to unforeseen complications, and crippling expenses. The company will cease to trade, and will subsequently file for bankruptcy. Another corporate victim of a global recession. Ergo, the project is now dead. As for the senator, he just wasn’t able to live with his shame. The Secret Service will want to keep most of the details a secret. They’ll do most of our job for us.’

‘You’ve got it all worked out, haven’t you?’

‘There is one other safeguard we will employ, Ms Krane. We’d all like to see Josh grow up into the fine young man that he promises to be.’

‘You bastard. Don’t you touch him.’

‘As I said before, it’s important that you understand; that you remember. Call it an indemnity-clause.’

If her heart beat any faster it would fly solo from her chest. ‘Fine, okay, I get it. But why? Why not kill me and walk away.’

‘Yeah, why don’t we?’ Asked April

‘Why give credence to conspiracy? This way we contain all of the variables. The people that we work for cherish their anonymity above all things. We’re all very small cogs in a much larger wheel. Ms Krane, the price for your life, is your silence. And your cooperation in the coming investigation, is the condition of your son’s return.’

‘Josh? Where is he? Where’s Josh?’

‘Go to the window,’ he said.

‘Window, why?’

‘Please, the window.’ The offer buoyed by his hand

Kass looked outside. She was in a residential neighbourhood, not a hotel. This was a tall town-house like all the others up and down the street. ‘Where am I looking . . . ? Oh my God, Josh?’ Sat on the steps leading up to the house. ‘Josh?’ He couldn’t hear her. ‘Is he all right? I want to go down. Please, can I go down?’

‘Kassandra, do we have an accord?’ Asked Fortune.

‘Yes, yes . . . of course we do,’ her hands firmly on the pane; face pressed so close to the glass she could feel her own breath. *Hey, are you eating McDonalds down there?* She couldn’t stop the smile from spreading; grabbing hold of her entire body. *Josh!* It was really him. He looked good down there, stuffing his face with a burger. A huge shake on the step next to him. ‘Josh,’ she wanted to call out his name.’

‘One last thing. As Doctor Outman is no longer an employee of ours. We, I, would like you to have this.’ He offered up a small metal box, no bigger than a pencil case.

‘What is that?’ Her attention back inside the room. She wasn’t leaving the window, no way. Not taking her eyes of Josh, not for a moment.

‘Inside are several phials; the cure for the NEXUS web. As the service is no longer viable, neither is the drug. It will doubtless be placed in a facility somewhere, and forgotten. I doubt these will be missed. Taken correctly, there’s no reason Josh won’t make a full recovery.’

‘What? Are you for real?’ *You have a cure?* The cancer, she’d almost forgotten. ‘Give it to me.’ She stepped towards him. *No.* Her gaze was back out the window again. *Not for a second.* Bitch-face was shaking her head as Fortune came to the window. Kass reached out and grabbed the box in his hand. He resisted. ‘Don’t you fuck with me,’ she said.

‘Let me be *very* clear. This is an incentive for your total and uncompromising cooperation in what is to come. Don’t give me any reason to regret this course of action.’

‘No,’ she whispered. ‘Whatever you want, I swear.’ *This will save Josh?* ‘Thank you.’ She was heading towards some serious leakage from the eyes. ‘Now who the fuck’s responsible for leaving my son alone down there on that street? Anything could happen to him.’

‘Keep our arrangement, and nothing ever will,’ said Fortune.

EPILOGUE

Weldon? Kass had texted him the time and location. *Is that you I can see down there?* Between the trees; it was so difficult to see from such a distance. The outline of the man down there was familiar. She lifted her hand. *Hey Weldon. Or is it John?* She realised she didn't know. How could she? The man who'd saved them was a ghost, like Fortune, and Bitch-face.

Everything he'd told her, it was probably a lie. She supposed she'd never know, not for sure. But one thing she would never doubt; his heart. There was truth and honour in his actions that spoke volumes about what was in his heart. That was true! Somehow she'd awoken those feelings, and that's why he'd gotten involved. He was a good man, he just had to be reminded, that was all.

From the grand terrace of the park Kass could see everything for several miles, except the shadowy figure stood below the distant trees. *He's gone?* She put her hands on the stone capping of the balcony that ran the length of the terrace. *Will I ever see you again?* She doubted she would. But that was okay, as she watched Josh fooling around down on the grass; sharing the joys of soccer with his besties, Matt and James. With his new-found-friends, Cupcake and Meg, who was wheeling himself away with the ball perched on his lap. The others shouting for him to bring it back. Boon trying to bite the rubber away from his wheels; barking happily as if there were no tomorrow.

Thank you, Weldon. There, she saw him again, walking away. Did you just blow me a kiss? Christ, that man really does love himself.

She blew one back, fighting the urge to run down there and give chase. To embrace him before he vanished forever. Kass looked at the phone she'd used to send the text. The burner he'd given her. On it's screen the words, "Service unavailable." Somehow the phone felt precious, but she knew what he'd say. Kass walked to the litter-bin a few steps away, and let it slip from her fingers into the trash.

Leave him be, Kass. He'll be someone else by tomorrow. Who knows what lies ahead for him, but he'll be living his life in the shadows. It's where he wants to be.

'Cupcake said he was kinda cute for an older guy.' Jay's voice from behind snapped Kass back from her thoughts.

'Cute? Who, Weldon?' She pursed her cheeks as if thinking. 'Sure, I s'pose . . .'

'Oh come on, you wanted his babies.'

'What? No, don't be silly.'

'Really, so the little kiss; the one you just airmailed across the park. What was that?'

'Me, shaking ice-cream from my fingers, obviously'

'Oh, you are sooo busted.'

'Am not.' She took Jay's hand; kissed her with welcome on the cheek. 'You'd have liked him,' she said.

'Yeah, sure. Nothing cooler than a guy who kills people for a living. Now that's what I came to see. Look at Josh down there, being eaten by a shaggy dog.' She laughed aloud. 'After everything he's been through, you know . . . Wow? Are you sure there's no sign of, you know?'

'The doctor's are at a loss for an explanation, but he's fine. Jay, it's such a relief to know that Josh has his entire life still ahead of him. Life's good, you know. Thank God.'

'Thank Fortune. Hey, and just how old are those hunky teenagers he's kicking ball with?'

‘Who, Matt and James? Jaylin Spencer, you’re old enough to be their, well, big sister.’

Jay put her head on Kass’ shoulder, her arm about her waist. They’re cute, but I’m fine as I am. How much have you told them?’

‘No more than anyone else. We were hoodwinked, kidnapped, and then lots of shit happened. I’ve had, what? A thousand cards from people well-wishing us. They’ve come from all over the country. It’s been pretty surreal.’

‘A bit of an emotional rollercoaster? Last time we spoke you said you hadn’t been to see . . .’

‘Pierce?’ Kass’ voice lost its zest. ‘I’ve been to the cemetery, and spoken to his mum. Jay, he didn’t deserve any if this.’ Deep breath. ‘The District-Attorney told me they found evidence on his laptop. Apparently Pierce was building a case against Senator Rushmore. Collateral damage, that’s what they said.’

‘I’m sorry for him, I am. But you can’t look back, Kass. You have to look forward. Move on for Josh’s sake.’

‘I know. Onwards and upwards, eh?’

‘Sure, yeah. Sooo, anyway, you had any thoughts?’ Jay eased away, her excitement obvious. ‘Got any ideas about what you’ll do now?’

‘I’ve talked to Josh, and he agrees. I’m leaving LAPD.’

‘Oh wow, really?’

‘Yeah. I Guess I feel *tainted* by the deal I made.’

‘I get it. And I think it’s great news, by the way.’

‘You do?’ *Why?*

‘Yeah, defo. Things change, Kass. I mean, look at the Loft? Waaay too many Feds nosing around. And the bullet holes do nothing for the décor. It’s just not the same any more.’

‘Did they find anything they shouldn’t have; the Feds? Some of your former acquaintances were pretty questionable?’

‘Nah, the Feds aren’t that clever. Besides, the papers tell the story, don’t they? Joe Rushmore, the conspiracy. Oh come on, you know more. I know you do.’

‘You’re right, I do. I wasn’t going to vote for him.’

‘Ha ha, yeah got me. Well, anyway, after the Feds gave us our gear back, Meg did a bit of digging. It seems that Broadsword were about to expose some dirty rotten secrets about Rushmore. A paper-trail that proved tax-evasion, and something about taking Russian money to lobby Congress. I tell you, I didn’t see the other stuff coming. Kids? What a sick fucker!’

Anyway, that’s why Broadsword went offline. And I guess that’s why we had visitors with guns at the Loft. Guilt by association, I suppose; unless you know differently? Kass, how can you keep a straight face? Fine, okay. Oh hey, I saw you on tv. The Congressional hearing. Wow, what a circus. Will they want you to testify again?’

Wow indeed. The history of everything, as directed by Julius Fortune. All the dots conveniently left for the Federal authorities to join. Our country in their hands?

‘Kass, you okay?’

‘Hmm? Oh, a bit sad I s’pose. Happy too. I mean, look at Josh down there. You wouldn’t think the last couple of weeks had happened. He’s bounced right back.’ *Thank goodness.* ‘Having the hots for his counsellor helps.’

‘I bet it does. Mine were always . . . Well, I never fancied any of them.’ She was leaning on the parapet. ‘Kass?’

‘Don’t get serious, Jay.’

‘No, I don’t want to. I’m sorry, I have to ask. You really have no idea what was on Spence’s thumb-drive?’

‘No, I swear. They wiped it. And now the clinic’s gone, and they’ll have cleared out G’co as well.’ *I wish I could tell you what Spencer died for.* ‘I don’t know about you, but I need a hug.’ Kass wrapped her arms around Jay. Her voice a hush. ‘We talked, remember. We all agreed that

there are some things we'll never talk about.' She squeezed Jay. 'I promise you one thing. It was Spence who brought NEXUS to their knees. He was, he *is*, a Superhero. Aww, you're not getting squiffy on me are you?'

'No. No more tears. I just wish we knew where his body was. I know somewhere he'd love to be laid to rest. A place where some beautifully rare birds would come visit him every year.'

A terrible image posted itself from Kass' memory. 'He'll always be in here,' she said. 'Right here, pride of place in our hearts. But we're not looking back, remember?'

'Sure, onwards and upwards.' She'd lied, her eyes were wet as she wiped them. 'And to that end,' she said. 'I have an announcement to make.' She took a deep breath. 'Meg, Cupcake, and I, we've decided to make a fresh start for ourselves. We're leaving the capital and never going back. We've talked it over and we'd like to buy a place here, in LA. We're bringing sunshine into our lives.'

Okay, good for you.

Jay was arms out, face up in the sunshine. 'California is sooo nice,' she exclaimed. 'We want to buy a beach-house. You don't mind do you?'

'No, of course not. Why would I?'

'Good, because I think we make a great team. You, me, the boys. NEXUS isn't the only conspiracy out there; there must be loads of them just lining up to get exposure. Granted they might not be on such a grand scale, but we can slum it for a while. Turn over a few rocks. Oh, and start a website to let people know we're open for business. What do you think?'

'What do I think?' She smiled. 'Ohh, you want *us* to be superheroes. Is that it?'

'Yes, yes,' Jay had her by the hands. 'Kass, we can help people.' She was pulling her along the terrace. Park-goers smiling as they got out of their way. 'Please say yes, we'll work on the details. Obviously work on a more localised scale than our last job.'

‘Whoah, easy, mind the kids.’ Kass pulled her reigns to slow Jay down. ‘You want us to be, what, private-eyes?’

‘Nothing so mundane; we’ll be investigators. You, me, and the boys. Fighting for the little-people. Please say you’ll think about it.’

The brakes finally stopped Jay’s exuberance. ‘That kind of thing, it needs capital to start. I’m unemployed now . . .’

‘We’ve got plenty of money, not a problem.’

‘You do? Do I want to ask its source?’

‘No, definitely not. But we’ve been cleared by the Feds. Hey, we could get Santini on the team. I bet he has a bucket-full of contacts. Kass, say yes.’

Investigators? She looked about the large terrace; at the people, their children. *What goes on behind all those smiles?*

‘I suppose it’s similar, and not the same as being a cop.’

‘No, not a cop. Not cops! We’d be a different brand. We’d wear a different kind of badge. Meg said he’d make one for us. He said something about integrating the Avengers logo, but we can talk about that.’

Thank goodness. She linked her arm through Jay’s and encouraged her to walk *slowly* towards the steps. *It’s what I’ve always wanted to do, help people.* ‘Let’s talk about how the Avengers *don’t* get involved. How does that sound?’

‘Great, really. And no Wonder Woman t-shirts, I promise.’

Wonder Woman?

‘Oh, and I thought we could call ourselves, J&K Electronic Eye. Pretty gritty, with a modern touch. What d’you think?’

‘You’ve already got a name for us?’ Wow ‘Tell you what, let’s go get some coffee.’ *A lot of coffee.* ‘I think we need to hose this down a little. But you know what . . . ? I think K&J Associates might sound a touch more professional.’