

Washington

This aspect of the job Julius Fortune was glad to have no role in. What happened inside room S127 would not be written down and only an elite few would ever know it took place. The meeting was in its second hour.

Fortune closed the waiting room's door. *This is taking too long; things are obviously not going well.* His phone rang.

'April?'

'Is the Senator out yet?'

'No, not yet. Please tell me you have good news.'

'I've just spoken to the Doctor. It's bad. The patients have all shown negative test results. Pause. Are you going to tell him?'

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

'He won't be happy if he finds out you've gone over his head.'

'Timing, April. It's what oils the machine. Hold on, the Senator's coming out.'

The sixty seven year old Senator wore a dour expression; his facial wrinkles far deeper than usual and those famous hawk eyes scoured the hallway for someone to vent his bad mood on.

Recent events had seen the Senator flying high... riding the wave. He was up twelve points in the polls and receiving more fan mail than a movie star, not that he took the time to read them. The man was somewhat removed from the campaign image. Hardly the billboard Patriot he portrayed. Nor the caring, sharing, self made millionaire who wanted nothing more from the world of politics than to help out his fellow American. What the Senator did best was make the American public feel good about itself, and more importantly, about him. Joe Rushmore was promising to make America strong again, and who didn't want that? In reality he was a political tyrant; a coiled viper who savaged his opponents in political cage fights inside the Senate. Woe was the man who became indebted to, or ever crossed Joe's political path. But even powerful reptiles like Joe had to answer to someone for their funding. And the Senator was always eager for funding.

Fortune had to ask himself, did the American people really want this man as their President; his conclusion was an unfortunate but resounding, *aye*.

‘Wait outside Charles, and close the door.’ His aide did as instructed.

‘Problems Senator?’ Fortune asked.

‘Problems? They just chewed my fucking ass off in there. SOB’s, who the hell do they think they are?’

‘Did they decline the new budget proposal?’

‘No, they want to think about it some more.’

‘What’s the problem?’

‘The problem is, *Fortune*, that I refuse to cow tail and beg for every dollar and cent to fill a bowl that is spent wholly in our Great Nation’s best interests.’ He wrestled to release the knot of his tie. ‘Do you know what they asked me in there? They actually wanted to know how the money was spent. Oh, and they want to know why NEXUS isn’t online yet. Those sanctimonious bastards want to know if we have problems that they should be aware of. Hah, if only they knew.’

This is interesting; the senator’s extremely agitated, nervous even. And all because they refused to say, yes.

‘Problems are just puzzles,’ said Fortune, ‘conundrums that require a solution. The important thing is 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 NEXUS’ problems?’

‘No. We’re scaling back the free service trials, just to be cautious.’

‘And Outman, has he found a cure yet?’

‘The Doctor... his vaccine is showing excellent potential.’

‘Potential? Don’t bullshit me, Fortune? What about the kids that we got for him, weren’t they any better than the last bunch? Well?’

He’d been asked directly, he had to tell.

‘April has just updated me. The Doctor says he needs more time.’

‘Time... so all he needs is time. Let me tell you about time. That Oversight committee has just sautéed, grilled, and then fried me on a hot flame as to how I have been spending their billion dollar budget. Maybe I should go back in there and tell them what those tax dollars are doing to the health of our American kids? Hell, maybe they’ll understand, maybe they’ll give us more time. Maybe they’ll give me a bigger budget.’ The tie finally came loose. ‘Now you came to me with a diamond cut reputation for getting things done. And you haven’t done that

yet, have you? You make NEXUS work, or find a fucking cure. I don't care which. Or you'll be the one who's run out of time... do we understand each other? Charles.' The door opened. 'Get the car out front, I'm leaving.'

'Right away, Senator.'

Fortune waited until the footsteps fell silent on the marble floor outside. He engaged his earpiece.

'You heard all of that?'

'*Difficult not to.*' April replied.

'The children that Outman has at the clinic, is there any hope for them?'

'*None, the NEXUS Web is a hundred per cent fatal.*'

Words that were difficult to hear. For forty years he had diligently cleaned up one mess after another to protect his country. To be associated with the deaths of American children, despite the importance of the programme, it was a new low. The fact that he and April were trying to save them... it didn't help.

'Cut them loose,' he said, 'put them through the health programme. It's all anyone can do for them now. April, I want you to run the net again. Check every hospital with links to the Pharmacy. Find the Doctor more candidates.'

'I'm on it. But Julius...'

'Yes?'

'Julius, are we in too deep that we can't get out?'

‘Ms Krane, please can you stop your kids bombing in the pool, people are complaining. If I have to blow my whistle again I’m gonna ask them to leave.’

Who... What... Whistle?

Kass squeezed a peek through sleepy eyes. *Hmm, I forgive anyone who has a six pack like that.* Her gaze rose to find chiseled pecks and broad tanned shoulders. A well sculpted body topped off with a cheeky grin and a mass of blonde curls. *Aww, and he’s wrapped up tight in a skimpy pair of bright red Baywatch briefs.*

So why are you frowning at me?

Kass fingered the bug-eyed D&Gs away and unscreened daylight assaulted her optics. *Urrrgh, why was the sunlight so... sunny? Surely she hadn’t drunk that much last night.* Whoa, flash back, yes she had. *Glass, cup, bottle, and then there was that pitcher. Uh-oh, wait a minute, images assembling. Oh please no, she hadn’t jumped on the desk and done... ‘the superman.’*

Reflex caught the vomit just in time before she shared it with the young Adonis staring down at her. *No... wait... wait...*

She was having a reprieve; it wasn't her, it was Hendowitz, the pint size blonde from accounts. *Thank goodness for that, it was sooo much better watching someone else make a complete idiot of themselves.* Perfect timing too as gorgeous Pierce had just decided to turn up.

Mmmm, Pierce.

She'd been all over him like a rash. Oh my God, not on the Captain's desk, they hadn't... Time out... Time out.

'Hi.' She said, reading the name tag on the young man's vest. J.. A.. S.. ON. *Jason?*

'Lady... Please... Kids?'

Kass had focus now. She wasn't going blind it was the bright Californian sunlight reflecting off the surface of the pool. But what *was* that dreadful noise? No, not lost souls screaming in purgatory, it was kids, hundreds of the little buggers all shouting and screaming and splashing about in the pool.

Okay, focus girl. Get a fix on Josh and his friends? Somewhere in the blur, ah, there they are, hurling themselves off the poolside. It seemed the lifeguard did have a point.

‘Come a little closer will you, honey.’ He did. She reached for the whistle hanging from the young man’s neck and popped it between her lips. A long sharp shrill pierced the air.

Josh looked at mom.

Everyone looked at mom.

‘Lay off the tsunamis’ darling. Mummy’s trying to get some sun.’ *And some sleep.* She wagged a stern finger. *There, sorted. Now, who was this young beefcake... what was his name... Jason?* He looked impressed. ‘They won’t bother you anymore, promise.’ She let the whistle drop against his chest.

Such well-developed pecks. Where could she get a tan like that?

‘Thanks Lady.’

‘Please, Jason. Call me...’ Oh crap, vision impairment gone. She was old enough to be *his* mum too. ‘...Call me if you have any more problems?’

Kass resumed her prone languish on the sun-bed. Bugs were re-engaged, and her eyes strained to keep track of the tightly covered backside as it walked away. Hardly her fault; 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.’

‘Argh Josh, stop it you’re getting mummy wet.’

‘Head shake causes waterfall. Oh yeah, mom acts like sponge.’

‘Goddamn smart kid. Please pass me the towel, darling. No, wait, mum needs a hug. Mum goes SWAT, uses towel to take punk kid down.’

‘Help, someone help me. Crazy old bag lady kidnaps handsome teenager.’

‘Hey... less of the old.’

She wrapped her arms around Josh and kissed him, then did it again, and again. Kiss, kiss, kiss. She knew how much he loved her showing affection in public. She could see Matt and James from the corner of the Bugs. Both boys happily wetting themselves with amusement as they’re feet dangled in the pool.

She meant it though. 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 Dean, his dad, but that was where the similarity ended. He had inherited none of

his father's demons, none of his father's aggressive tone. He was sweet; beautiful. She couldn't hug him tightly enough.

'Mom, people are watching. Arrest me, but stop kissing me.'

His dad was a cop too. A pig in every sense. Two years of verbal and physical assaults until she had finally drawn her Glock and shoved it in the bastard's face. That moment was the closest she had ever come to killing another human being. Dean knew it too. He was smart enough to understand that it was time to leave.

'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 ask me that again. I'm not feeling pretty under here'

'Did you get wasted last night?

'Wasted? Well, maybe, just a little.' Who was she kidding; the world hadn't stopped spinning since.

'So, who was the guy that brought you home?'

Oh shit, you saw that? She needed a cover story and fast.

'That was Pierce, a friend from the DA's office. He was the designated driver for the night.'

Ha, that covered her ass.

‘Is he the guy you were having coffee with in Starbucks on Friday?’

What? Has my son got me under surveillance?

‘Matt’s dad saw you in there with him. He told his mom, who asked his sister who he was. Sam mentioned it to one of her friends at school, and hey, now I know. It is okay, you’re allowed to have a life.’

Her cover was blown. Busted by the freaking grapevine.

‘It’s nothing serious. He’s just a friend. Okay... we might have dated a few times. He even kissed me... twice. It was lovely, hmm, big sloppy ones.’

‘Err, mom, building pictures here. Nothing a teenager needs before he has lunch.’

She probably should have told him anyway but Josh hadn’t had a father since he was six. The dirt-bag never sent him a card for his birthday, not even at Christmas. She knew that hurt Josh but he never complained. He was a child witness to spousal abuse, so he understood. Even so, Kass knew it got harder for him with every passing year.

‘Why don’t you bring him home, I won’t bite him? Best behaviour, I promise.’ He did the Scout sign. ‘We can shoot

some hoops. I'll take him bowling with the boys and get to know him.'

He would too. But it wasn't necessary. She and Pierce, they had something, she wasn't sure what. They had moved beyond just great sex, but it would never get in the way of her being a mum. Kass lifted the D&G's away.

'Josh, baby. Are you feeling okay?' He was looking pale, a little bloodshot in the eyes.

'I'm fine mom, just a bit hot. It is like, twenty five degrees out here. Ahh, wait a minute, not so fast. This is classic interrogation deflection technique. It's okay; mom's allowed to have a boyfriend.'

'Seriously?' Sitting up was harder than she remembered. 'You look a bit peaky. Sit down; take a break from hogging the pool. Stay here with mum for a bit.' She touched his brow confirming he *was* a bit clammy.

'Mom, I'm good; it's just a bit of a headache. Probably all the noise from the kids round here. That's why I came over. Jeesh, mom, you're smothering me.'

Cheeky sod.

But he was looking pale, a little bloodshot in the eyes. Still, it was hardly surprising with all the noise; she had a

banger of a head herself. Okay, maybe that wasn't just down to the noise. Kass reached into her handbag. 'Here, take two of these.' She handed him the Tylenol and a bottle of water from beneath the sun-bed. 'You sure you're okay? You do look pale.'

'Mom... I'm fine.'

Both pills went down the hatch, washed away with a long gulp of warm Volvic.

'Alright, but let me know if it persists. And don't go upsetting the Lifeguard again.'

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

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

'Mom, he just wanted to check *you* out. Jason's got a thing for older women.'

Older women?

'That's a joke, right.'

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

Holy crap, some detective she was. Checked out by a pool guy with a hard on; oh no, she'd looked at his pants. Dear God, she was a pervert.

Please don't let him be looking at me. Please don't let him be...'

'Hey... Jason. Look mom, Jason's waving to us.'

He is now darling.

‘Don’t be shy, wave back.’

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. *Okay smart kid, I can be patient. Boy are you gonna get it later.* And he was. She almost burst out laughing.

What to do about Pierce?

There had to be more to the relationship than bonking his brains out whenever their schedules allowed. Pierce was sweet, intelligent, one of life's nice guys. At thirty six he had never married. He was trim, athletic, and boy was he hot, in or out of those impeccable suits he lived in. If he had any rough edges they hadn't snagged her yet. The lifers down at the precinct made him 'odds on' to become District Attorney before forty. *Oh God, forty?* Only two more years before *she* reached the dreaded four O... Oh no, oh no.

Heads up, there'd be no maudlin in this fantasy.

Ms Cassandra Stonegate. It sounded like some rich bitch from a Clive Cussler novel. *Yeah, tough but sexy. She'd be the wife of an LA, ADA. Maybe she could be his PA? Hey, this alternative universe shit was sounding pretty good. No more six in the morning starts to file other people's shitty reports. She could kiss her crappy desk in 'The Cupboard' goodbye. A big two fingers up to Sergeant Carol Madowski, aka 'Fat Carol' aka 'The Mad Cow.'* To Kass she would always be 'the Troll Bitch.'

That was it then, the big plan, her and Pierce. *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...* she really liked cakes.

Who the hell is dripping all over me now?

'Ms Krane. Quick, you have to come? It's Josh'

'Josh?' The Bugs were whipped away. 'What is it Matt?' The dark haired boy looked shell shocked. 'What's wrong Matt. Where's Josh?'

The bronzed teenager had her hand in his but didn't need to pull. Kass was up and heading toward the crowd that had gathered around the poolside.

'Josh? Get out of the way. Get out of the freaking way. Josh... Josh.' Her heart froze. Her beautiful son was lying on the grass, blood painted across his soft cheeks. Had someone beaten on him?

'Call an ambulance. Has anyone called an ambulance? Get out of my way, he's my son.'

Gawkers made a reluctant hole as Kass found the grass beside Josh, her fingers trembled as they checked for a pulse. Thank God... he was alive. 'Has anyone called for an

ambulance?’ If she had to ask again this would get ugly, real quick.

‘I have.’ A tall lean woman offered her phone as if to prove she wasn’t lying. ‘Three minutes, they said.’

‘Good, thank you.’ Three minutes meant they’d got lucky; there was a wagon in the area. *What the hell happened?*

Pulse was strong. She checked his pupils. Small, they were small, like tiny pin pricks. ‘Josh, baby... can you hear me? Squeeze my hand, let me know you can hear me.’

Nothing.

‘It’s all right baby boy, mummy’s here. You’re going to be alright.’ There was no sign of a struggle, no bruising on his arms or body. Blood looked more than it probably was, but he was pale. Shit, was Josh bleeding internally?

Where the hell is that ambulance?

‘Matt, what happened?’

‘We were talking, about the girls by the changers.’ His finger just pointed at the crowd. ‘Josh was laughing.’ Poor Matt, he was frantic. ‘The blood, it ran from his nose, went everywhere. He looked really scared, Ms Krane. It just happened. Josh stared at me, he was scared, and then he fell to

the ground. I came and got you straight away. Is he going to be alright... he is going to be alright?’

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

Three were offered. She took the closest and covered him, then another to place under his head. *God, he’s so pale.* His hair had dried in the heat and his lips were slightly chaffed.

‘It’s alright baby boy.’ Kass cradled Josh’s head in her lap and gently wiped the blood from his cheeks. She checked his pulse again... no change.

Why was it so slow? What the hell was happening?

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

A siren whooped angrily in the car park unseen.

Kass struck the coffee machine. It was more a slap than a punch, a means to vent her frustration. *Why had this happened? What was going on behind those closed doors that they didn't want her to see?* 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. That's when things went really crazy. The flashing lights, the kind that send you crazy, red twisters dancing across the hospital's walls of glass. Frantic calls as the gurney was wheeled down a faceless corridor, men shouting words that she didn't understand, technical, medical... frightening. Men and women gowned in blue and white that scared her half to death.

Don't let go of his hand. As if losing touch would allow him to drift away. *Don't let go of his hand.* It was all she could think of. She would never let go of his hand. A Doctor gave brief concise instructions and his nurses obeyed. How could

they be so calm? Josh already had lines in his arm, an oxygen mask on his face. They were puppeteers; it was a scene from ER. Only the TV had been replaced by real life. Josh's life, as the gurney raced down yet another faceless corridor.

She struck the machine again. Extra sugar, she'd pressed the button for extra sugar. The crap in this cup needed sugar. Her mouth was so dry a bucket of the stuff would probably go unnoticed. She sank into one of those ghastly metal chairs, the ones the big factory delivers to all the waiting rooms across America.

Why couldn't she be in there with him?

'Mrs Krane?'

'Ms... It's Ms Krane... Sorry.' She was up, the cup left on the arm.

'Apologies, *Ms Krane*. But if you would like come this way.'

Of course she would, he didn't have to ask as she followed the doctor, a man in his mid-sixties, well groomed, with overly dyed hair. He looked experienced, his voice remained calm. That was good, calm was good, wasn't it? He was smiling. He wouldn't smile if it wasn't good news.

'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...’

No, no buts. You were smiling, that means you can’t throw a ‘but’ in at the end.

‘But what?’

‘Josh is in no immediate danger, he’s fine.’

Okay, so why the, but?

‘Before I take you in I’d like to talk to you about the MRI scan that we gave Josh.’ 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...’ She focused on his name tag. ‘Doctor Sheefan. What is it that I need to know?’

Kassandra’s adrenaline surged, or did it drop? The waiting room got smaller, and she had a sudden urge to cry. Then she got angry. Doctors don’t get coy about brain scans unless... *Oh my God.*

‘What do I need to know?’

Whatever it is, say it, and say it now.

‘It would be easier if I showed you. Please, just in here.
You’re a police officer, yes?’

Why, does that mean bad news is easier to take?

‘Yes. LAPD.’

*I’m not a street cop, just admin. I’ve only ever shot my
weapon on the range. I gave out tickets before they put me in
the cupboard. Why are you closing the door?*

Kass didn’t like this new room. It had a sterile look and an antiseptic smell. All she wanted was to see Josh. Bright lights flicker on the wall, obviously where they put the x-rays. She’d seen *them* on ER as well. Dr Sheefan slipped what looked like large negatives from a camera and clipped them over the lights.

That was it. That was the look. It slipped out from a chink in his professional armour. A glance back followed by a drop of the eyes. It told her that this *was* going to be bad.

‘We’ve found abnormalities in Josh’s MRI, just here in the Frontal lobe. 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?’

Don’t be stupid; of course he doesn’t have a tumour. That’s impossible. For crying out loud he’s fourteen years old with his

entire life ahead of him. If there were any tumours going round it should be me that has one, not him. Not my baby boy.

‘As I said, we will have to do more tests. But with luck it will be a meningioma. They’re quite common tumours, and in most cases they can be operated on. They are *very* often benign...’

Dr Sheefan’s voice faded. Drifted off to a whisper she could barely hear. She did hear the words, surgery and insurance, harsh words, not the sounds a mother needed to hear like, love, and beauty, courage and hope.

‘Ms Krane? Josh is stable, he’s fine for now. I would 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, are you alright. Ms Krane?’

‘Yes... I’m good.’

That was a lie. Unless a lack of blood pressure, fear and foreboding, and the urge to start screaming was a healthy response. She supposed that it was. There really wasn’t anything for her to compare this to. She supposed this was how ice felt at the point where it started to melt. Everything that it

is, and was; everything that it had ever aspired to be, begins to drain away. There's nothing it can do but wither.

She had no intention of withering.

'I want to see Josh.'

It was a nice room; the window sparkled with a lovely view of the tended grounds. Outside the world was carpeted with perfect grass and bursting with fresh floral arrangements. From his bed Josh could see the trees, and a perfect Californian sky, hardly a cloud to be seen. Kass turned back to the peach walls and maple furniture, and the king size bed in which her baby boy slept. Fact was, this hospital was nicer than any of the hotels she and Josh had ever vacationed in; bloody ironic really. When her granddad had died, that was the first he'd got a ride in a Mercedes.

Josh's hands were cold. She cupped them both between her own hands and tried to warm them.

'Mum?'

That was the most precious word ever spoken.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you.'

'I wasn't asleep, just resting my eyes.'

'Hey, you're looking better today. No, really. Your colour's back to normal. Hospital life obviously suits you.'

He looked disappointed.

'Does that mean I'm not going home today?'

‘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.’

‘Mum, it’s been a week. I have to get out of here.’

‘I know, but I do have *some* good news. Matt’s coming in later and he’s bringing someone with him. Some girl’s been hassling him to come see you.’

‘Girl? What girl? What’s her name?’

‘Have you found anything good to watch on this yet?’

‘Mom, put the remote down. What girl, this is important.’

‘Any sports?’ The flat screen on the wall glowed to the touch of the *on* button. ‘Shall we watch some men kick a ball around a field? No, wait. What about the one with the stick and the little white ball.’

‘It’s called golf, mom, and you hate it more than soccer. Mum, what girl?’

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

‘Mom?’

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

‘No, she’s just a friend.’

Now here was some karma. It needed investigating.

‘Is she a hot friend?’

Josh was grinning from ear to ear.

‘Mom, do you think I should change my t-shirt?’ He sniffed his pits. ‘I should probably take a shower. Do I look weird sat in here?’

‘No. Not if she finds IV lines and turbans attractive.’

‘Oh crap, the bandages. I look like the Mummy on a bad hair day.’

‘Really, I hadn’t noticed. Honest.’

The door opened.

‘Ms Krane.’

‘Oh hi Crystal.’

Crystal was one of the day nurses. Kass liked her, so did Josh. She was slim and demure. She didn’t actually look much older than Josh.

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

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

‘Mom?’

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

'You'd better take his blood pressure too. Heaven knows what else will come up when she gets here?'

'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 one.

‘Enter.’

Enter? It was like being at school.

‘Ah, Ms Krane. Please, come in. Take a seat.’

She did.

He really did have a magnificent office. The furniture was oak, old and loud, a bit like the man himself. The window held one of the best views in California. The walls were a library of medical books and manuals, and she’d bet a dollar he’d never read any of them. Crap, she’d lived in apartments smaller than this. At least this time he bothered to get up and greet her.

‘I’ve been going over Josh’s notes and there are one or two things that I feel the need to discuss with you.’

‘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 did that mean?

‘I thought Josh was out of danger?’

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

Don’t pause after saying that, just tell me what it is.

Her mouth was too dry to ask.

‘To put it simply, the growth is getting bigger. We’re not sure why at the moment. It will mean more tests, I’m afraid.’

Kass bit her lip, she didn’t like this. Brutik had taken his glasses off and put the hook in his mouth. He began tapping it against his teeth and was breathing way too heavy even for a fat guy. He poured over 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 may need further surgery. We cannot *remove* the meningioma. It’s already covered too big an area of the meninges. That’s the membranes that cover the brain. But it can’t be left to grow unchecked in his head. It’ll just keep getting bigger, and he’ll develop all sorts of complications. The eventual pressure will affect his reasoning, coordination, and his speech. It will require several more visits to the table and then there’s the recovery time. Surgeons, nurses, and drugs, you do understand.

Not really.

I like to think of our hospital as a bespoke garage. All of our customers are highly tuned Ferraris, in need of repair and fine tuning from time to time. We've got all the right mechanics and an abundance of the right tools. The foods not bad either.'

What... Why is he talking like this?

This wasn't about the medicine, it was about the bill.

'I think I understand.' She said. 'And I assure you that my insurance is fully comprehensive, and that all the payments are up to date. You'll get paid.'

'Yes, yes. I have absolutely no doubts.' He opened the folder again. 'The problem is we have been informed that you just don't have the required cover.'

'What?'

'It's the insurance. Apparently they have told us that your policy cannot.' He paused. 'That it *will not*, cover your stay.'

'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. 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 sorted out.' She didn't like it when he

sucked a breath. 'But at this precise moment, well, you understand, it's not me. It's the accountants.'

'Look, this can't be right. I don't understand why we have a problem here.'

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, one hundred and ninety four thousand dollars. Give or take a cent or two.'

'This is a joke, right?'

'I assure you this facility does not joke about its finance, Ms Krane.' He actually 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.'

'I don't understand what you're saying. 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. I'm sure that you'll sort it out and we won't have to

take this any further. Please, be seated again. I've forgotten my manners and not offered you refreshment.' He pressed a button on the com. 'Charlene, will you be kind enough to bring coffee. Cream and sugar Ms Krane?'

Try valium, and maybe some arsenic for you.

Brutik's words had reached out and crushed her like a dry cigarette.

What did he say? A hundred and ninety thousand dollars, give or take? No, he hadn't, he couldn't have done. What did money have to do with Josh's health?

She watched the bill slide across the desk. It felt like someone else's hand as she picked up the thick embossed sheet. 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.

The numbers didn't lie.

'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. Forget the coffee, she couldn't afford it anyway. Brutik got up from his chair and followed 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 is no mistake, Ms Krane.’

Of course there wasn’t.

‘I’ll get it sorted.’

‘I have absolutely no doubt that you will.’ Brutik replied, and then turned to his approaching receptionist. ‘Charlene, Ms Krane is leaving, be a dear and just bring coffee for me.’

He closed the door.

As one door closed another opened on the opposing wall of the office. A tall gaunt looking man entered, he had the bearing of a praying mantis. Brandishing a satisfied grin he moved slowly toward the centre of the room with the use of a cane.

‘You heard the conversation?’ Brutik asked.

‘I did.’

‘And you’re sure that Josh is what you want?’

‘His test results do not lie. Apart from the mother is there any other family to concern us.’

‘She has told one of the nurses that there is a father, but he hasn’t been around for a good few years. There is bad blood between the parents’

‘Good. I think that we have found the perfect candidate for our program. You’ve done well, Hans. Well played as usual.’

‘Can I take it that his mother is in for, a rough few days?’

‘Indeed she is. The appropriate measures have already been taken. Our contact at Medicare will confirm the bad news for her. Apparently she neglected to tick certain boxes on the policy when it was taken out. It’s a most unfortunate situation for her and the boy.’

The man stopped by the window to enjoy the vista.

‘We’ll give her a few of days to get angry, and when that dissipates into despair, we’ll make our approach.’

‘Look, Julius, 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 sixth in three years.’

‘Hans, you are a small cog in a very large wheel. Lift your head to see more, and... well, curiosity can be a very dangerous thing. Besides, I’m sure your interest will be suitably distracted by the new equipment when it arrives. The usual gratuity has already been deposited into your account. As Josh is so special, I have authorised something extra by way of gratitude.’

‘Julius, you shouldn’t have.’ The fat man sat and stretched himself with contentment. ‘There, you see, now I feel absolutely no interest in your business at all.’

The door was knocked from the outside.

‘Ahh, that must be my coffee. Be a dear Julius and let Charlene enter will you.’

Fresh was an understatement. There was no escaping the moment. Every time that Kass closed her eyes she saw Josh lying there on the grass. The crowd of onlookers apathetic, but gathered tight in morbid fascination, their voices chuntered ever louder.

‘An ambulance, for God’s sake has someone called an ambulance.’ *Why are they just staring at me?* She cried again for their help? ‘Hold on Josh. Don’t leave me. Please don’t die. Please don’t die.’ Lights flashed close by. Bright lights that swirled and filled the sky; brighter than a flash from a camera as it hopped one way and then the other across the mass of onlookers, like a frantic scene from the Twilight Zone.

‘Over here. Please, stop staring at us and get out of their way. Over here.’ *Why were these people just staring, why wouldn’t they help.* The lights blazed and the siren echoed as if it had come straight from Hell.

‘They’re coming, Josh. I can hear them, they’re coming.’ The crowd parted reluctantly as two figures pushed their way through. ‘Here, help us, please. No, what are you doing. Get off,

I can't leave him. Get off me.' *What was happening?* It's not me, it's Josh, please... help him. You have to help him.'

'You should have paid your bill. It's not nice to take and then not to pay.'

'Dr Brutik?'

Why were all the people holding out there hands?

'What? I have nothing. *Josh.*

Why were they taking him away?

'Get off me; get your filthy hands off me. Josh. Let me go... Josh.'

Kass, wake up.

'Get off me.'

'Easy, easy. Take it easy. It's just a dream.'

Dream my arse, it was freaking nightmare.

'Pierce... What are you doing here?'

'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, she liked that, she liked his smile. His eyes wrinkled in a way that showed deep sincerity. He had the young

face of a chat show host. No doubt an advantage when performing in court, playing to the jury.

‘Sorry.’ She said. ‘My head’s a bit messed up right now.’

‘It’s fine. Do you always sleep on the couch?’

He sat next to her.

‘Mmm, I do lately.’

That’s what she needed. He felt sooo good as he wrapped her up in his arms. For a moment she felt safe. Then she remembered.

‘Josh?’

‘He’s fine. Josh is fine. I checked on him before I woke you. Your boy’s snoring away. It sounds like a tractor roaming 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.’

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

‘Yeah, for the millionth time. They’re adamant that when I signed, I omitted the family cover. It’s only for me. I mean,

what parent would sign a form like that? It's got to be a mistake.' She unpeeled herself. 'They took the payments and now they're refusing to pay. 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.'

Did he doubt her?

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

'You're shitting me?'

'What, you don't believe me?'

'Yes, I believe you. I'm just saying that mistakes can be made.'

'No... Not with me. That's why they stuck me in the *Cupboard*. Someone noticed I was good with figures, computers too. Things just stick, up here. Hey, 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 frigging digitised and stuck on the system? Extension three one two, good old Kass will do it.'

'Easy there girl. Is this something else you need to talk about?'

‘No. Forget it. Josh is the only thing I need in my head right now.’

Truth was her head was brimming with hurt and pain. The type that goes around and around, that builds up the heat and tension until you just want to lash out at whoever happens by.

‘I put in for compassionate leave yesterday. As of today, I am officially stressed.’

‘They should put you on the streets. You’d clean up half the gang crime before the day was done.’

She managed a grin.

‘Pierce, this is a stitch-up. It’s bullshit. I’m going to see my union rep on Monday. She says that the Department’s policies are usually bullet proof. She doesn’t understand why the cover is short. It’s standard policy.’

Kass nestled into him again glad that he was here.

They were such simple acts, feeling his lips against her forehead, the soft touch of his fingers as they stroked her hair. She breathed in the Chanel Homme that he always wore and bathed in the warmth of his body.

‘Mom?’

The spell was broken. Kass broke free.

‘Josh, baby. Are you okay?’

‘Yeah, I heard voices. Hi Pierce.’

‘Hey kid.’

She looked at them both. *Since when did they know each other?*

‘Josh, you need your sleep. You need your eyes examined too; you’ve got your t-shirt inside out again?’

‘Huh? Oh yeah. I’m trying to start a new trend.’

‘Too late, love. I think we did them all back in the nineties. Pierce, there’s some wine in the fridge.’ *A large one.* She mouthed silently. ‘I won’t be long.’

‘Sure. Sleep tight Josh.’

‘Later, Pierce.’

‘Sorry, it was the biggest glass I could find. I could have used the vase?’

‘Don’t tempt me.’

Kass pulled a stool from beneath the breakfast bar. She’d always liked her kitchen. It was modern, sharp, a cut above most. All of the fixtures in the house were. She especially liked things that were modern and elegant, and absolutely loved the prints of the orange squares on yellow background that hung above her fireplace. Say what you wanted about the ex, and she usually did, but he was never afraid to spend money on tasteful things. She never asked him where it came from.

He was ‘Mr DIY’ when it came to a hammer and a saw. She’d often wondered if he’d ever ventured *either* tool out in the Line of Duty. He had a well-earned reputation for being hard out on the streets. Too hard it seemed, the reputation placing him in the crosshairs of Internal Affairs on more than one occasion.

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

‘I’m sorry. Will it be enough?’

‘Good question.’ She really wasn’t sure. ‘Maybe five years ago it was. Before the Banks shafted everyone.’

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

That was so sweet; she hadn’t expected him to say that. He was willing to run up his credit for her, and for Josh.

‘No... thank you... honestly. But it’s my problem. Maybe his dad can help?’

That thought alone was enough for her to neck the rest of the glass. Maybe the vase was going to come in, after all.

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

She shrugged.

‘No, but his grandma has... The old cow hates me, but she’d do it for Josh.’ *She would do it for Josh, wouldn’t she?*

‘When was the last time you saw her?’

That was an easy one. The memories came surging back.

‘At the court hearing. Christ that was nearly eight years ago. Believe me when I tell you that it wasn’t pretty. I let rip with a few home truths about her *darling grandson*. I think I

might have bombed a few at her too. Things were, kinda said. Stuff that can never be unsaid.'

She listened to the bottle unleash a smooth flow of liquid and was disappointed when it maxed out at the rim without emptying. Probably wasn't a good idea to slurp it shy of the top, not in polite company.

'Josh told her he never wanted to see her again. He meant it too. He's got a big downer on both of them. It's deep.'

Of all the people in the world to grovel to, Grandma Jezebel was top of the list? Bitch was vindictive and spiteful... the wicked witch of the west. But what choice did she really have? For Josh, she'd mind the old cow in her ancient years, even if it meant wiping both her chin and her ass. Anything... if it could save Josh.

'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.'

'You sure?'

She nodded.

The truth was she wanted to scream at someone, and being civil to anyone just wasn't on the agenda. More booze and cake was what she really wanted. Some free space in which to think.

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 were making her stomach so sore. Tomorrow, she would spend it in bed. In an alcohol induced coma with any luck.

'Do you mind? I just need some sleep and I'll be fine. Check me out in the morning. We'll do skinny and extra shots at Starbucks.'

'If you're sure?'

'Yes, honestly. I'm sorry Pierce; I just need some time to myself.'

'Starbucks then?'

'That's a promise... but not too early, eh?'

It was awkward as the front door closed on silent hinges. Pierce had just declared himself for them, and she knew that he had wanted to stay. *She* wanted him to stay... she did. But the need to push him away was stronger. The sound of the latch jutting into the bolt hole confirmed that she was alone. Its sullen clunk was the catalyst that ushered the tears. A steady unstoppable flow as she sank down to the floor to the sound of Pierce's sedan reversing back off the drive.

It was happening again. The darkness was coming; it was shrouding the woman and squeezing at her to become a child again. She felt the overwhelming urge to shrink and hide. Kass pulled her knees up tight and wrapped herself into a ball. Tighter and tighter as she tried to find found her special space, her own meagre pittance of the world. This was where *he* had left her so many times before. The end result of another physical battering. *Find a corner somewhere... anywhere to hide.* Her eyes were shut so tight they might start to bleed. Make a noise, sing, look anywhere but straight at him. Build a shield that make the harsh words, the fists, bounce away.

Kass knew that Dean had gone; the courts had forced him to leave. So why was she shaking. Why had the past taken a grip? It seemed the time in-between had only been a dream.

No, not this time.

Take a deep breath Cassandra. It serves no purpose to withdraw, don't let the past drag you back.

It wasn't Dean this time. It wasn't the helplessness, or the knowledge that she could have taken a different path. Josh was ill. Josh could die, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Deal with it. Get up off the ground and grow some balls.

Tomorrow. She would hammer it out with the Union rep tomorrow. Maybe they *could* help? 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 the bitch's help. She'd whore herself or take a beating from Dean. Whatever it takes.

Whatever it takes.

Kass rose from the floor and walked to the bedroom, she watched through the doorway as her baby boy slept. What was all this doing to him? He was fourteen and staring down the barrel of a gun. He faced a long drawn out death sentence unless a solution could be found. She walked on eggshells as she crossed the room. She pulled the Star Wars duvet away and slipped below the cover. Spooning, that was what the kids called it nowadays. No, it was a mother creating a shield for her child. She nestled close and slid her arms around Josh.

Whatever it takes, baby boy. 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 was possible.

‘Josh, are you ready? You’ve got five minutes and I’ll drop you at Matts. His mum’s taking you to school today, remember. Oh, and remember to take your meds, all of them.’

The doorbell chimed again, for like the tenth time.

‘Either wait or get lost.’ *I swear, if the owner of that finger rings my bell one more time. I’ll shoot it off.*

‘Mom, just answer it. It might be my parcel from Ebay.’

‘Ebay? What the hell have you ordered this time?’

She knew back then that twelve was too young to have a PayPal account. Or any account come to think of it. But like the mobile phone, which she did have to admit was a good thing; all the other kids had one, or so Josh had assured her. How did 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. ‘Oh my god... I said I was coming.’

Kass pulled open the front door to be 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. Just look at the pale blue sky with only the merest hint of white cloud, stitched in for effect.

Not the mailman then. Paperboy had overshot the porch again. So who was the idiot ninja stabbing at her bell?

‘Ms Krane?’

Holy shit, he was a ninja. She hadn’t seen him coming.

A tall man, thin, mid-sixties approached from the side of the house. 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 repeated. She could play this game all day long.

The stranger offered a well-practiced smile. Despite this he had the air of a sullen man donned in an expensive older style suit. The old family attorney allowed out for one last hurrah. One hand had the use of a walking stick which seemed to offer

support; the other held the well-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. My name is Julius Fortune. I am here representing the Quantrell Foundation.'

He placed the briefcase on the ground and took something from his jacket pocket. In his hand he offered a business card which she cautiously accepted.

Nice card, obviously expensive, and it confirmed everything he had just said.

'Can I help you?' She asked him again.

The smile returned. A bit less frosty this time. Ancient ninja man with briefcase had a sense of humour.

'As I previously stated Ms Krane, I am here to represent the Quantrell Foundation. We are a charity affiliated to the Saffron Action Foundation for Earth. Have you heard of them?'

'Sure, who hasn't heard of SAFE? A big charity set up in the nineties to represent the planet.'

She'd heard of the Quantrell Foundation too. The Foundation was growing in stature throughout America. Everyone that was anyone seemed to welcome the opportunity

to associate themselves, from Rock stars to politicians. But the charity was picky with whom it linked arms.

What was a massive charity for the wellbeing of sick children doing here on her doorstep?

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

‘Ahh, this must be Josh. Good morning, my name is Julius 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.

‘Josh, this is Julius. He’s just leaving.’

‘Okaaay. Nice to meet you, I think.’

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

‘Sure.’

She 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 was a little warmer 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 happy to go over the finer details with you.’

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 held up the card. ‘Err, can I call you later?’

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

‘I’m telling you. He stood on my porch, and bold as brass offered to pay Mercy their freaking blood money. It’s got to be a con, right?’

‘Con men usually try to rip off wealthy people. You ain’t wealthy, Kass.’ Christine raised her glasses as she looked up from the card. ‘That is unless you got a big inheritance you haven’t told me about.’

‘I wish.’

The moment she’d dropped Josh at Matt’s house Kass had got on her Cell to Chrissie. She wanted to know who, what, and why the Quantrell Foundation had targeted her. For all things financial Christine Gemka was the girl to find out. They’d been besties since the Academy, though Chrissie was what Kass termed a *real time* cop. She ran a mobile unit of three that investigated fraud and money laundering. She used her laptop to fight crime, instead of filing it.

‘I’ve been on the phone since you called me, Kass. Obviously I can’t check out your Julius Fortune character because there’s no active investigation against him. That would land me in trouble. 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 was a 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, break them up and sell off their more lucrative assets. The guy was a financial pariah. He started the foundation when his kid died of cancer in eighty five. The man himself dying some twelve years later, back in ninety seven. Charity has been growing ever since; pulls in hundreds of millions of dollars a year, it's even got a dedicated cable channel. And that is just about everything Google has to say on the subject.' Christine closed down the browser. 'As far as I can tell through my *unofficial* conversations, the Charity has numerous heavy weight backers, both corporate, and political. But they're clean as a whistle.'

Chrissie put her glasses on the table and wheeled the chair closer to Kass. 'How are you doing?' She asked. The stony faced

detective dropped her work masque and took Kass' hands. 'If there's anything that Mike and I can do?'

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

'Sure, I know it will. And we'll pray our hearts out for you both, you know we will. How's Josh, what's *he* feeling? Is he talking to you?'

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

'He's strong and he's so gorgeous. You tell him Mike and I will call round later in the week and take him shopping. We'll take you both shopping.' She winked. 'Buy you ice cream too.'

'Rather have a Prada handbag, but I'll settle for a mint choc chip.'

'You can have both. Apparently you can get Prada on Maine, for twenty bucks, but that didn't come from me. Now tell me, how's the hunk? You and Pierce still getting all hot and sweaty?'

Out came a deep sigh.

'Oh, he's been great. We've been a bit cool on the *s e x* side of things. Since the hospital really. But he understands. He's a rock, Chrissy.'

‘What?’ Barked Chrissie as the door to the office was knocked

The bustle of the Department broke through the opening door. Ringing phones and broken conversations that were previously muffled by the thin walls pitched into life. Outside a dozen uniforms strolled about their business, half as many plain clothes firmly parked behind their desks, most caught in the act of sipping coffee. The rampant caffeine was probably the only reason that anything ever got done.

‘Sergeant Beany, 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 it was still official office policy. Beany was a prick. She watched as Chrissie left the room, was that girl putting on weight again? And had she really left her computer logged in?

Go Chrissie, go.

Kass changed chairs and toed the door closed. Nimble fingers dabbled at the keyboard. 'Nice one Chrissie, 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 records he had 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. That was a strange place to change your mind. 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. He was squeaky clean.

She scrolled down.

Fortune's place of birth was recorded as 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, who received the Navy Cross. The mother's occupation was unstated. Address at time of arrest 433 Pistina Road, Malibu.

Very nice.

Occupation at the time of arrest was stated as, US Marine.

So, Mr Julius Fortune was as squeaky clean as the charity he worked for. Kass was almost disappointed. She logged out and powered down. She took Fortune's card in her hand and picked up the phone. It only rang twice.

'Hi,' she said, 'it's Kassandra Krane. Where can we meet?'

Why was she nervous?

Most people would probably jump at the chance to meet a man that offered as much as Julius Fortune. Problem was she didn't know anything about the Foundation beyond its advertising and Chrissie's hearsay. The wind suddenly rising did nothing to calm her suspicious nature, nor did the rustling umbrella above her head.

Bad omen or what?

'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. A very smart fifty something, a smart white cotton shirt and pristinely ironed black apron for a uniform.

Please Lord; give Josh the appetite of a lion when it comes to learning at school. Gut rot again. It was increasingly difficult to think of a positive future, not under these circumstances. Please Lord, just allow him a future.

And what was this? She hesitated to think how much they were charging for this *egg cup* of a coffee she had in her hand.

Hey, Rene. Her hand waved for attention, got it, and then pointed at the cup. Thumbs up, she'd need more than a thimble full of caffeine to get through today. He responded with a nod and she sat back to take in her surroundings.

This was a nice place; an oasis of Mediterranean simplicity built on red bricks and dressed with gaily coloured shutters. Real vines grew from large clay pots and covered just about everything. Outside was nice too, the decked veranda just a few feet away, and the private beach where hardly a soul had disturbed the pristine white sand.

Mr Fortune was clever; he'd picked a beautiful place to meet. Though judging by the size of the coffee, Starbucks would have been better. She'd barely mentioned her name and the concierge had welcomed her like an old acquaintance. A brisk snap of his fingers had brought instant attention from *Rene*, who was returning, *thank God*, with more coffee.

'Thank you.' She said. 'Have you got the time?'

'It's twelve twenty nine, madam.'

That was very precise. Was he psychic, he almost answered the question before she'd asked?

‘Will there be anything else, madam?’

You tell me?

‘No, I’m expecting someone...’

‘I will show Mr Fortune to your table the moment he arrives.’

Okay, this was spooky.

‘Enjoy your coffee, and the lovely view, Madam.’

I will.

She would also take the opportunity to text Josh. Okay, so it was the fourth one 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 did that, along with everything else. It rarely left her hand when not at work. Her entire life was on the phone that was loitering in her purse... somewhere?

Got ya.

Great signal, as always. Ever since she’d signed up to this new service the reception was, well, unbelievable, compared to her old providers. It downloaded data almost before she’d requested it, a bit like the waiter.

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 the heavily subsidised package. Nexus were big in Military communication. Everyone knew that. They'd approached her through a survey sight she'd been a member of for years. Points and dollars were on offer if you had the time to fill 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. Nope, it was just mum skinny dipping in the suds and performing CPR on her CPU.

The text beeped twice as it left the handset. As she looked up she saw him, Mr Fortune, and he was right on time.

‘May I sit?’

‘Please do.’

‘Thank you.’ Fortune motioned to Rene. ‘Coffee, please. A re-fill Ms Krane? Just the one then. Black, strong, and no sugar.’

He found space for the old 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.’

‘Ah, yes, apologies for that.’

‘Not necessary, I assure you. It would have been prudent to have phoned you first. Are you hungry, may I order you some lunch?’

‘No, thank you.’

Fortune was different this time. Gone was the poe face of the funeral director, replaced now with a warm smile and charm. She watched his hands move with dexterity through the papers. They were soft skinned and 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.

Typical salesman, he was aware that his product was what she wanted. He was laying it all out on the table and about to deliver his pitch. If she wanted the truth it was time for a game changer, get in quick before he told her everything that she wanted to hear... and said yes.

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

He sat back. She could see his mind re-calculate and prepare.

‘Josh’s life, Ms Krane. Pure and simple.’

‘What?’

‘Your son is dying. I believe that our Foundation may be able to save his life.’

Shit, round one to Fortune.

‘And you. What about you, Mr Fortune? Forgive me. But you arrive on my porch and offer up hope like sweets in a paper bag. What’s in it for you?’

‘Salvation, Ms Krane. That is as simply as I can put it. Through helping others, I hope that I can eventually help

myself.’ The smile faded to a look of regret. ‘I shouldn’t be telling you this, but... As a younger man I spent a good many years serving my country. They asked a lot of me, things that I cannot talk about. Things that they should not have asked me to do. We all have history, Ms Krane. Some are a little more checkered than others. Some of us have things that we may wish to have done differently. I think that the future should be a far more optimistic place than the past. Don’t you? As for me, personally, that change came solely from the love and care of the Foundation. They take care of me, and *we* hope that we can care for you, and 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. We are not privy to that person’s name. Information, such as yours, usually comes as an anonymous donation, for obvious reasons of legality.’

Anonymous? Could it be that Dr Brutik passed Josh’s name to the Foundation. And she thought he was just a fat git with absolutely no empathy. No, he was. The doctor was only concerned with getting the hospital paid. Maybe it was Crystal, then? Hell, I’ll send them all a card at Christmas just to be sure.

‘I will be frank with you, Ms Krane. Josh has a very particular meningioma that is of interest to our studies. It is affecting a part of the brain that deals with the correlation of new data. Fresh input downloaded from the senses. As the doctors have already explained, it cannot be operated on 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 would mean that Josh would never be the same boy again. Unfortunately, if the growth is left unchecked the tumour will 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.’

Okay, okay. You’ve done your homework.

‘I am aware of the prognosis.’

‘Of course, but it is my job to ensure that you are made aware of *all* the facts before we proceed. We are at the cutting edge of cancer research and treatment. Obviously I cannot promise you anything, but there are treatments 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 settle your finance 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 that if you sign up with the Foundation, all and any technical or medical data relating to Josh's care will *belong* to the Foundation. It's a small thing, but we are small cogs in a very large wheel. That said, we hope that the research obtained by helping thousands of children like Josh around the world will lead to a better understanding of cancer, and hopefully one day, to a cure for all types of cancer.

'I do understand your apprehension, Ms Krane. But 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 many abroad. You have heard of Senator Joe Rushmore? He is one of our staunchest patrons in the US. He may even become the next President of America.'

So now he was name dropping. No need, he had her attention at paying off Mercy Memorial. This really was like

winning the Lottery. Maybe she should ask him to leave and then pinch herself. Check that this wasn't a dream.

‘Thank you.’ His coffee was placed on the table. ‘Ms Krane, we would like to invite Josh to the Foundation’s Hope Clinic in Colorado. It is 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 hospital and research interests. Last year alone the Foundation spent over one billion dollars on the research and treatment of cancer.’ His eyes never left hers. ‘Ms Krane, if it has ever been written about, experimented on, or practiced; the Foundation has researched it at one of its Hubs.’

*There it was, the big sell. What choice did she have?
Where did she sign?*

Julius watched Kass leave. He had to admit that he found her an interesting woman. This was the first time he had actually found it necessary to *sell* the Clinic to the parent of a child. Show them the brochures and most were understandably desperate to gain access. He took his phone from the briefcase and hit speed dial one. A moment later the call was answered.

‘She has agreed.’ He said, still watching at the glass door.

‘I think we have our best subject to date.’

‘No, 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. More importantly she is hyper aware of outsiders where her son is concerned. 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. If Ms Krane ever gives us cause for concern, both her, and her son will need to disappear.’

‘No, I am not worried. I just think it prudent to be prepared. That is what you pay me for.’

It took an hour to get to 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 RX 350, but had absolutely no idea how to use it.

‘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, other peoples?’

What a dumb shit answer. Why would anyone buy a car for someone else’s kids? And why was he looking at her like that? Huh? Huh? Oh. Uh oh, change the subject. Hey wait, no, let’s talk some more about this.

‘Are you sure you want to do this? On your own I mean. I could tell the DA I need time. I must have at least a year’s

worth of vacation 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 every time of year.'

'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.'

'Mum, tell him not to do that with his arms, I'm fourteen, not four.'

'Hey, don't forget to go see Pikes Peak, 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.'

'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.'

'Pierce, they were film stars, not cowboys. And if you think I'm going Line Dancing when we get back. Think again. Oh, and

White water rafting, from his hospital bed? Is this why all the bad guys go free from court?' She laughed.

Bless him, he wanted to go, wanted to be with them. That was so sweet.

'Hey, Line dancing? That's not a bad idea.'

'Yes it is. Forget I mentioned Line dancing.'

'Is Pierce being disgusting again?'

'No, wait, listen. This is good. I've got a checked shirt, and I can find a Stetson from somewhere.' He poked his thumbs bolt upright toward the windscreen and rocked his shoulders.

'Pierce, stop that right now. Josh, ignore him. Mummy's here and will protect you from all things country and western.' She paused until Josh's iPod came to save him, the sound cranked to 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. Long gap between music tracks. You guys need to get a room.'

'Don't worry Josh; mummy only wears uniforms at work.'

Like that made the conversation right.

'Kass, I'm missing you already.'

‘Eyes on the tarmac, Mr assistant district attorney, and take a left toward the little runway. I think we need to be in that hangar over there.’

‘Are we going in one of those, Mom?’

‘Wow, Kass. Is that a Lear jet?’

What am I, the font of all airline knowledge? But really, were they going to Colorado in a private jet?

The car pulled up and Josh was the first one out, iPod retracted and attention fixed firmly toward the runway. ‘Mom, look.’ The roar of a Lear 55 burst from its jet engines as the aircraft rolled forward and began gathering speed.

‘Mom, look. It’s taking off.’

‘Yes, I’m not blind dear.’

And I’m not deaf either

Decibels were off the scale this close to the sharp end of runway life. In the distant sky she could see several larger planes, Big Boeings, racked and ready for landing on the far side of the airport. She could only imagine the hive of activity going on in the Iconic Tower.

‘Mrs Krane?’ A stranger in a uniform, more of a suit really, was calling out to her.

‘Ms.’ She called back. ‘It’s, *Ms Krane.*’

‘Apologies, *Ms Krane*. My name is Ed. Would you and Josh like to come with me?’

Actually she would. All this noise and the smell of hot engines were making her quite giddy with anticipation. Josh was ready for a moon landing by the looks... and Pierce... poor Pierce. He was looking sad and lost.’

‘Thanks for the lift.’ She hugged him.

‘It’s my job, madam. I’m here to serve the people of Los Angeles.’

That had to be the worst impression of Christopher Reeve’s Superman. But right now she would like very much for him to lift her into his arms and fly them both away. Her stomach was doing cartwheels. Kass threw her arms about him again.

‘I wish you could come.’

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

‘Pierce, he was an actor too. Listen, when I get back.’ She lifted her eyes to meet his. ‘We’re going to explore this uniform fetish of yours, big time, okay.’

‘Well, only if you insist.’ He saluted her.

She thought there was going to be tears, and not just from her. God, Pierce was a real wuss. They settled for smiles and a

soft lingering kiss as big wheels bounced a squeal of hard rubber and the wind began to pick up.

‘Mom... Private Jet. See you later Pierce.’

‘Bye Josh.’

‘Guess that means I’ve got to go. It’s just a few weeks, I’ll be back.’

‘And I’ll be waiting.’

‘Mom, hurry up will you.’

So this was what the inside of a private jet looked like? It was nicer than most hotel rooms. Three space shuttle chairs, the type that spin round. And lots of oak and stainless steel? She'd never seen so much leather and padding. The co-pilot closed the door on the outside noise and smells. He turned, slipped his shades off, and smiled.

'If you'd like to take a seat we'll be ready for takeoff as soon as the tower clears us.' He flashed his Tag Heuer. 'About ten minutes or so, which gives you plenty of time to get comfy. When that light comes on,' he pointed to the wall, 'buckle up, sit back, and enjoy the ride.'

He was doing the flight attendant thing with his hands as he spoke.

'The fridge is fully stocked.' He winked at Josh. 'Big TV comes out of the wall, hundreds of channels, it's pretty cool. You have full HD, and there are 3D glasses in the seat box just here. May I also bring your attention to the cabin ICE which is controlled from the touch screen glass on the table, which I am turning on right now. The digi-library holds more DVD's and CD's than an HMV store.'

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

‘Oh yeah kid, it’s just like the one in the movies. Please find the washroom to your left, the galley is aft. If it’s out on show, it’s good to go. I hope you enjoy the flight.’

‘Mom, did he say 3D? How long does it take to get to Colorado?’

Kass shrugged her shoulders. Not long enough she was guessing. Ten minutes later the undercarriage lifted, and the Lear Jet headed up into the skies above Los Angeles.

Josh didn’t look like a kid who had a tumour growing inside his head. Kass had to wonder at the remarkable powers of youth to just *get on with it*. If it was her, she sure as hell wouldn’t be slouched, feet up, bopping her head to some crappy music video on the wall. Maybe it was an age thing? She had a theory that the older you get the more you have to reflect on. There is more time in your personal past, so there’s less left for your future. Hence the harder it is to ignore, especially when it was bad. And this was bad. It just kept going around and around in her head as she sipped cool water from a chilled bottle.

Josh was right. Get on with it and stay positive. This was milk and honey; they were on a trip to the Promised Land. It

was true, and she felt good for the first time in weeks. Sit back and enjoy the ride, why not? This Clinic in Colorado, it was the best place for Josh to be. Julius Fortune had made the sale. God help them if he didn't deliver.

You're going to be alright, Josh. God, please make my boy alright. Please watch over him and protect him. Please be alright. And who the heck is that gyrating her ass and stomping in big boots all around the screen?

The light on the wall came on at last; she'd been staring at it for over two hours.

'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 two and a half hours.' It had felt like double that. 'Take the headphones off before your head shakes loose. What *have* you been listening to?'

'My own compilation and all downloaded to my iPod. Check this out.' A dire screech whined from the headphones as he dabbed at the screen like a pianist. 'How about some Acid Bath, or some Rammstein. Maybe you'd like the soulful tombs of WolfHammer?'

Surely he meant tones? No, probably not.

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

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

‘Justin Timberlake, then?’

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

‘Fine, put some Rammsplein on. Give mummy a headache.’

Just what she needed, Instruments played with sledge hammers, by men who shrieked like women who’d missed their period.

Is that Celine Dion coming from the speakers?

Wow, flashback. She and Chrissie had gone to see her at Caesars Palace in Vegas last year.

‘You have *Celine* on your iPod?’

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

She raised her water bottle and mouthed the same words,
just as the tyres groaned to the friction of tarmac.

Heat wave or what? It was a good ten degrees hotter than LA as they walked down the steps. The first thing Kass noticed was how small Denver airport was. She saw a hut with a viewing tower rising above, or was it falling into the building below. Surely Denver had a terminal. Where was arrivals? Where was duty free?

Dry dust stuck to her tongue courtesy of a hot breeze.

‘Where are we?’

‘It’s a small airport north of Springfield. It’s the closest we can get to the Clinic. Foundation hires it; they may even buy it and develop the site. Sorry it’s not much to look at but, if you’ll just follow your bags over to the car.’

He did the hostess thing with his hands again.

Definitely no shopping then?

‘So this is Cowboy country? And Pierce wanted to come with us... why? Can we get back on the plane?’

‘Follow the bags, Josh.’

‘You sure?’

‘Positive.’

Somehow she'd expected the landscape to be darker, and where were the table top mountains, and the tumble weed? The breeze brought the scent of something sweet and fragrant.

'Josh... car... Now.' *No you can't take the plane with 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 door.

'Sorry Kid, just a standard CD player in this one. But it's got big comfy seats.'

He closed the door behind them and then got into the front. Seemed he was a driver as well as a co-pilot. The throaty engine throbbed into life at the push of a button as Kass watched the Lear turn around. Its engines whipped the dust around the runway making the plane hard to see. It taxied, accelerated, and as the plane hit full throttle its wheels left the ground. Somehow the plane leaving made everything seem real again.

'Where's Pikes Peak?' Josh asked. One earphone left lingering short of 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.'

Didn't look like the Rockies out there, more like the Hillies. There was dust, dust, and more dust, the earth outside was dry. The landscape was hills overlooking parched wasteland. Only cactus flourished alongside solitary sad looking trees. Thankfully the air-con in the car worked perfectly.

The lack of scenery in Colorado was the least of Kass' concerns. At least they were here now. It hardly seemed possible that all the kids got this sort of treatment. Nah, she doubted it, she didn't really care. The Foundation had been absolutely clear that Josh was *a special case*. His illness was the perfect candidate for their research 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. Josh was beaming rays of gold as he watched Colorado go by. They'd been so lucky that Mr Fortune had found them. Lucky... it was a bitter sweet word.

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

'Cowboys?' Replied Ed.

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

Silence from the driver’s seat.

‘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.’

‘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 tops?’

‘I guess they’re all on the other side of the State.’

‘Oh, okay. But did you know that Colorado means, *coloured red*. It doesn’t look very red to me.’

Josh did have a point. This wasn’t what Kass had expected either. It did look like the Wild West, sort of. It was just the hills, that seemed to be everywhere, they were a bit lacking in the stature she’d become accustomed to in the iconic westerns.

Heck, if you can’t trust Hollywood?

‘Ed, I bet you didn’t know...’

‘Is there anything that you’d like me to arrange before we get to the Clinic, Ms Krane? 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. You just

let me know. Sorry, I have an incoming call. We'll be there in ten.'

Ed put his hand to his ear.

Josh pulled a long face.

Kass doubted he had a call, but sympathised.

'He's not a tour guide.' She whispered. 'Don't think he comes from these parts. Probably lives in Beverley Hills.' She pulled a face. 'Wouldn't know a wolf from a wedgie up there.' It got a big smile from Josh.

'Can we go to a rodeo while we're here?'

'If the doctors say so. 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. The frequent headaches were a rising wind before the storm. No, the Cowboys would have to wait, at least for now. But look at him. His nose was pressed against the window. Oh what the heck. She scrunched her nose and nodded.

'Rodeo's rock, let's do one.'

Just so long as *she* didn't have to sit on the horse.

Kass pressed send on the iPhone. A quick text to let Pierce know they had arrived safely. Even out here, surrounded by all these hills, with no sign of civilisation, or a phone mast, her Cell still had a full signal. The Nexus logo flashed with pride. Who else could she phone, text, email?

‘Mom... Mom, look. Is that where we’re going?’

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, and set between two further hills, was a white structure that brimmed with the sparkle of glass. The building’s flat top curled like a musical note through lush green gardens.

Were those palm trees?

‘Mom, look, can you see the size of that pool? No waaay, is that a snake slide? That’s sick.’

Strange choice of adjective but there did appear to be an Olympic sized pool underneath the glass dome? 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, its suspended lights arcing from ultra-modern poles, with shades

on top? The canvas style curtains that criss-crossed the tarmac were whiter as snow. Kass fell in love. What a vision to find out here in the middle of no-where. This was a scrubland, nothing but sparse vegetation and haggard trees. To come upon this oasis, was nothing short of inspirational.

It was a sign.

‘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, and I hope you enjoyed the ride.’

He exited the vehicle and opened the door for Kass exposing her to the sudden heat as she left the air-conned environment. On went the Bugs as she got a full view of the building that rose before them. It was big, really big. The ultra-modern design, in glass and steel, filled her with a sense of excitement, and dread, as did the three figures that approached. Two men in white coats were being closely shadowed by a woman in a sharp suit.

Was she wearing Jimmy Choo heels? Cosmic pumps? Lucky bitch. She had style as well as sultry looks. A moody Angelina Jolie.

‘Ms Krane.’ A fifty-something man approached with his hand extended toward her. ‘I’m Dr Steven Outman, and I’m very

pleased to meet you. This is my head of research at Hope Clinic, Mr Spencer Koch.

Head of what? He looked like Joe 90 with those glasses, early twenties at best. They could be father and son with the age difference.

‘May I introduce Senior Nurse Technician, April Chimes. That’s SNT for short. She will be your liaison with the Clinic in all things during your stay. Anything you need, ask April.’

Kass shook his and Spencer’s hands. Jimmy Choo feet remained out of reach. *Was the suit eyeballing her?*

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

‘Hi.’

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

She was, the suit was eyeballing her. Talk about frosty. Obviously the Jimmy’s were compensation for having a chest like a little boy, and being the wrong end of thirty something. Really love, freckles and a ponytail? You’re about a decade too old to be seen like that.

Frankly she just hated anyone that was slimmer than she was. It was standard protocol, nothing personal. But for Choo Girl she was considering making an exception. There, she was beaming it telepathically. Frosty cow had a frighteningly lean and fit look. She was obviously ferocious in the gym.

‘Thank you.’ Said Kass, moving toward the big glass entrance. ‘This is a wonderful looking place that you have here.’

‘We *are* 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 I give you the tour?’

‘Can I check out the pool?’

‘Josh.’

‘Can I check out the pool, *please?*’

That wasn’t quite what she had meant.

‘No pool, not until the doctors say so.’

Dr Outman pulled a long face. ‘Guess we’d better check you out and authorise some pool time, and pronto.’

He seemed 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 is just one thing that I must mention before we enter.’ He held the door half open. ‘The interior of the facility is essentially a clean room. No dust or microbes allowed. Once you are in, you will need permission, and one of these, to leave.’ A smart card was produced. ‘Security will always be on hand to help.’

‘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 will check back with you in say, two hours? Good, until later then.’

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

‘Unit twenty.’ She sounded like a woman used to giving orders. The burly orderly was obviously used to taking them. He complied and Kass watched him lift both bags with ridiculous ease. She naturally started to follow him.

‘No, Mrs Krane. If you’ll please follow me.’

‘It’s Ms, not 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 TK Maxx, you only buy the best. Not to mention very expensive hair straighteners that were totally irreplaceable.

They entered the facility behind April.

‘This is the meet and greet area of the building, *Ms Krane*. All our residents get the tour.’ She looked like she meant it too; at least she was attempting a smile. She needn’t have bothered. ‘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, and it’s a bugger to clean. No? Well moving on. In the tall building to the side of the clinic we create all the wonderful techniques and technology.’ She paused 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 have one hundred and four patents and over two hundred more yet pending. We have the brightest minds working for you,

and our facility has very close links to the Foundations cutting edge laboratories.'

'Which way's the pool?' Asked Josh.

'The pool? The pool is in 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 lifts. Of course the fire stairs can be used for the more adventurous, though some of our older parents do tend to struggle.'

Why was she looking at me when she said that? What the heck was that supposed to mean?

Josh rolled his eyes and moved his hand like a glove puppet. It jerked up to scratch at his head as SNT April spun on her heels. Her hazel eyes narrowed and lingered on Josh, who looked horrified. They flitted up to mum.

'I'll show you to your rooms shall I?'

Kass pinched Josh's bum. 'Glass reflects, idiot.' She whispered.

'A suite has been prepared for your stay. 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 you 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 SNT April opened the doors to the lift. She invited Josh to enter but Kass found her entry blocked by April's half a step forward.

'As a police officer I'm sure you understand the need for privacy, 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, 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 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?’

Kass stepped around the taller woman. It was childish but she kept the eye contact as she entered the lift. 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 was unusual; not like her to visit the Security suite. Hobnobbing with the paid help wasn't her thing.

'Give me room twenty, I want a look see.' His eyes followed her jacket as it was thrown across his desk. The Ice Maiden unclipped her hair. 'Now?'

Buttons were pressed and one of the ten screens on the wall received a camera view of the Krane woman. *What was the deal? She was just moving clothing from her bag to the drawers.*

April moved toward the screen almost yanking the top button loose from her blouse.

'Big screen.'

'Is there a problem?' He asked, familiar fingers working the consul.

All ten monitors worked in harmony to create a single flawless picture. Childs' shorter, darker colleague stood. The tag on his uniform read Pullman.

'Nice Milf... I like.' He said.

‘Shut up idiot. Did you search her bags Childs?’

‘I did. Found nothing but some very nice underwear, which my younger colleague Mr Pullman here, checked personally. I put the bag through the x-ray as per protocol, and nothing was flagged. Kid’s got an iPad but it came back clean when I hooked it up. What’s the problem?’

‘*Her...* There’s something I don’t like about her. She’s going to be trouble, I can feel it.’ She rounded the consul, eyes hawking the screen. ‘I want a camera feed on that woman whenever she leaves that room, clear?’

‘Sure.’

‘Feed it straight to a hard drive so I can pull it to my phone.’ 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... 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?

‘If she so much as looks at building three, I will seriously fuck her up.’

Childs cringed as Pullman hinted a smile in her direction.

‘Please... Is there anything else that goes on inside your head?’

‘Hey, you want to sit in here looking at screens for eight hours without a PlayStation?’

‘Eyes... on her.’

‘Yes mam, Childs interceded, ‘it will be our pleasure.’

Dinner was good, compliments to the Chef. And what was not to like about the canteen, very pleasant, if a little Spartan. They'd found a table away from the white coats that seemed to be congregating before starting a night shift. Josh had mauled his burger and fries and was leaving with half an ice cream sundae still stuck to his face.

'Hey mom, how did you and Pierce hook up?'

Hook up? What were they, Velcro?

'Not that it's any of your business, but we met at the Department's Christmas social event. It was a posh; ticket only Soiree, posh frocks and jackets. A benefit laid on for a well-known charity.'

'Does that mean you met at a party?'

'I suppose.'

'So you were drunk then?'

Really? Where was this line of questioning leading?

'I may have had one or two.' She said, wondering if she going to have to quote the fifth.'

'So... you, booze, party... Oh mum, you didn't?'

'Didn't what?'

‘Oh my goodness, you did.’

‘Josh?’

‘You did the Superman, didn’t you? You always do the Superman.’ He started doing the moves ahead of her. ‘I am so glad you don’t take kids to these things. Pierce saw your moves and he felt sorry for you.’

‘I did not do the Superman.’

‘Different tune, same moves, that’s you mom.’

‘I do not do the Superman.’

Why was he laughing? Correction, why was he crying? She had nothing but hot moves on the dance floor. Oh boy, she was hoping this was a hot flush. Nope... then it must have been acute embarrassment at her child knowing her better than she knew herself.

‘I... was dancing, yes. I don’t remember any superhero moves.’

‘Eurgh, mom. That’s so sad.’

Busted again.

‘Fine, so I got a little drunk and let my hair down. Hey, I *hooked up*, didn’t I?’

How long was this corridor? Hellooo, find me an elevator.

‘Sad or not, it’s okay, I still love you, and my love is unconditional. No wait, there is one condition. You never wear a cape and red pants when in public with your son.’

He was such a smart ass. Still, it was a uniform of sorts. Maybe Pierce would go for it? Oh my God, it’s been 24 hours and I miss him.

‘Okay, deal. Time you hit the sack.’

Kass checked her phone. Sure enough it was ten fifteen. It had been a long day.

‘Josh, have you got a signal on your Cell?’

‘Hmm, no.’ He shook it, like that would help. ‘Not for a while now. I thought you said that couldn’t happen? “Nexus is the latest, bestest, hottest sign up in town.” They’re your words.’ He cuddled his phone like a bear. “We’re so lucky to be chosen.”

She didn’t remember putting it quite like that, but that *was* what Nexus had promised. It seemed that their freebie Sims weren’t as infallible as the company had led her to believe. She opened up the, ‘My Connection app.’ The signal was flat as a pancake. ‘NO CONNECTION’ the two words the company had promised she would never see.

‘I’ll get on to them as soon as the network comes back up.’

Maybe the building was shielded in some way. That must be it. Though it suddenly struck her how out there, and cut off, she felt without the use of her Cell. For the first time she felt a very long way from home.

Kass checked her hair one more time, it was straight...ish. A dab of powder helped, so did a touch of pencil and paint. But nothing was stopping the dark circles growing beneath her eyes, or the deepening lines etching themselves across her brow. Oh dear God. She was nearly forty and could feel the ship sinking fast.

Stop it.

She was doing it again, staring at her reflection. It was becoming a habit in this edifice of glass. Josh had noticed too. For crying out loud, Josh was starting to worry about her now, and that wasn't the way it should be. No, today was going to be different.

That's it Kass girl, put a freaking smile on that face. Maybe a touch more lippy would help. Big smile girl, let it spread to the eyes... and action.

Be strong for Josh, Ms Krane. Be strong for yourself.

She downed a deep breath and released a long sigh. This was the big day. It was time to see the head honcho, Dr Outman. Three days of testing and scans by men and women in white coats would now culminate in one brief conversation. Dr

Outman talked big, now she would find out if he could back his words up. She stood and checked the full length mirror in front. Today's look was loose blue jeans and a hillbilly coloured shirt. She wore her lucky grey Vans. The ones 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 arrived. Divorce finalised and legal. She'd been wearing them the day that Pierce had asked her out.

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 and kept cheery was beyond her. He'd been keen to get to the pool area early. That's where he was now. "Getting some wet time" with another of the patients. A boy Josh's age that was diagnosed with a terminal brain cancer.

Shit, she didn't even want to think about that.

Phone check. It was 09:40. Meeting with Dr Outman was in twenty. She took one last look at herself. Who was she kidding, as her stomach tied itself with yet another excruciating knot.

Glass, glass and more glass, she found herself staring at the carpeted floor as she walked. She noticed that man again. Mr Spencer. He always seemed to be watching but was never tempted to come and talk. Good looking lad, if a bit Geeky. She smiled and he looked away. He really should get out more.

One long corridor followed another and then a quick descent by elevator. There he was, her gorgeous boy, down in the pool with... with? Oh shit, how awful. Poor kid, he'd lost all his hair, and now she really felt like crap unable to remember his name. Stomach tightened again. Best smile on as she waved down to them both and blew Josh a big kiss that he reciprocated.

Here it was, Building number Two, as Bitch Face called it. A small bridge led over to Building Three. Must be where they did the science stuff. No guards, 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 the doors and press all the buttons. SNT April, Bitch Face, would wet her pants. A thought that brought the first genuine smile to her lips in days.

But enough of that, as she entered through Building Two's main door and let it swing closed. Deep breath. Now this was

more like it, proper walls. Décor was a bit bland unless you liked white and aluminium. It was nothing that the healing patterns of Laura Ashley couldn't put right. She made the same walk she'd been doing for days.

What's behind door number one? Could it be X-ray?

Yaaay, you've won a new car. Good girl, keep moving on down the tunnel. Here's another one, this one's a little tougher; they get harder as you proceed. What could possibly be on the other side of door number two? Wait... wait... could it be... Oh my God your right again, its CT and MRI. That's the holiday to Hawaii.

Yaaay, the crowd go wild.

One more correct answer and you've won the house in Malibu. Think carefully now, you've chosen this door amongst all the others. What's going on behind door number Three? Think carefully, don't rush your answer. No, it's not the entrance to Narnia. Not the gateway to the Twilight Zone, its, its, its....

'Ms Krane, thank you for coming.'

Oh shit the door had opened.

'Yes, I was just going to knock.'

No house in Malibu then. He was kind enough not to ask why she was knocking with both hands above her head. I'm stressed, okay. Its official, the Department shrink signed a bit of paper to prove it.

'Please,' invited Outman, 'come in. Take a seat.'

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

‘He likes the pool. You’d think he was on holiday.’

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

He was doing the Doctor thing again. Glancing up at her whilst reading the paperwork. Surely he already knew what was printed on the sheets. Kass rolled her eyes around another sterile consulting room.

‘I’m fine.’ She said. Her reply greeted with silence, interrupted by the crinkle of turning notes. What was it with white coats, wasn’t there enough freaking drama, he didn’t need to add to it.

‘How’s Josh?’ She asked.

‘Ms Krane...’

Here it comes.

‘I’ll be frank with you.’

I wish you would.

‘Josh is very ill. The tests are giving us a worst case scenario. It will be easier if I show you.’

She wanted to say something, but her lips remained still as Outman slid several images out from the file onto his desk and then stood. Three steps and he opened an inner door.

‘If you would follow me.’

What else was she going to do? She wasn’t leaving until she had the results of every test and scan the Clinic had levied on Josh. *What was the hold up? Get on with it.* Time was rushing full steam ahead for her; it was on a go slow for Outman. She watched him clip the images to a light board in the next room. Yet another generic box with white walls, its décor a single cabinet and a couple of wheelies stuffed full of medical supplies. She wondered if the gurney parked against the wall was where he banged SNT April. It was just big enough for one; she would doubtless be on top.

Get on with it.

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 our verbal skills, how we talk, read, and listen. Unfortunately I

have to confirm that despite the current drug regimen, the tumour is still growing.

So much for prayer then. Since the first doctor she had been trying to pray the growth into submission.

‘What does that mean... exactly?’

‘If it continues to expand, Josh’s nausea and headaches will continue, they will become more and more severe. As the tumour enlarges it will start to interfere with the normal electrical signals in his brain. Your son will experience difficulty with speech and concentration. The invasive nature of the growth will eventually lead to seizures, and eventually result in complete changes of behaviour... and personality. The pressure will build to a critical point where if the growth is not suppressed, Josh will die.’

He said it. He’d actually spoken the words.

Josh will die.

It was a knife in her heart. Shock set in and the world went silent. She could hear him speaking, but not a word registered, not a single syllable. Why should they? Those were the words to end all conversation.

Josh will die.

‘Ms Krane... Can I get you some anything, some coffee perhaps?’

No you can't get me coffee. Coffee doesn't make everything better.

‘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. Surgery?’

‘No. Conventional surgery 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.’ He started pointing. ‘It seems that the tumour has spread outward, to 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. She was looking at the wall whilst he harped on about the scans as if they were a renaissance masterpiece.

‘The truly remarkable thing is that 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. The growth is attached by an umbilical no thicker than a strand of silk, and has reached out to the frontal lobe where it is expanding. From a medical point of view, Josh's tumour is extraordinary. Quite unique.'

His words ceased as he waited for a response.

No, now it was *her turn* to be silent. Outman craved something from her. She didn't know what, but she could feel it. Josh was dying and Dr *freaking* Outman had a hard on for the thing that was killing him.

'Mr Fortune was correct to send you to us.' He said at last. 'Believe me when I tell you that there is nowhere else in the world you would wish Josh to be right now.'

There it was, the Simon Cowell smile. He knew something and was letting the moment linger. There was a Jekyll and Hyde nature to this man. The nice, friendly doctor had changed. He was licking his lips now. She was on the floor and ready to beg for mercy, his mercy, and he knew it.

'There is a chance.' He said, and let the words hang.

'There is a treatment that we can try for Josh. Here at the Hope Clinic we have been developing a new procedure for cancerous brains. It is so cutting edge that we haven't given it a

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

She hated Dr Outman's smile. You buy one, you get one free. She wondered if he realised that he was doing it. Of course he did. He was doing it again.

'This is a wonderful piece of technology.' He was into it full blown now. 'We borrowed the blue prints from the military. Very hush hush. 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. It looked like a hat from Hellraiser. The sinister tool hovered above a bed constructed by the Inquisition. Whoever lay down on its mattress was never intended to move.

'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. One of these cranial bowls you see here will then be fitted over the patients head and adjusted to size. When the growth is ready our surgeons

will drill microscopic holes into the cranium with the use of the lasers over there.’

They were disgusting things to look at. They looked like the Replicators from Stargate; each one in hibernation lying on its back.’

‘The lasers are unavoidable as 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 onto 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. Look at it this way, your son gets to keep all of his hair.’

Was that an attempt at Levity... really? Probes... Lasers, drugs injected into the brain? Just the thought of it all made her queasy. It was some like a crazed B movie on the Sci-fi channel; surely these things didn’t really exist.

He must have noticed the drain of colour in her face. The wide eyed stare at all the equipment.

‘I promise you the procedure works, and it’s 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. Josh is in the best and most capable hands in the world right now.'

'I understand.' She said. 'It just frightens the shit out me.'

'Of course, I understand. You'd be the first parent I'd ever met that *wasn't* worried before a procedure. And if I make it sound over simplistic, I assure that it is not. But please, try not to worry; it's not as invasive as it sounds.'

Sonic lance... lasers? Yeah right.

But it was hard not to believe in Dr Outman, the man had so much confidence. All backed up with the smile of a politician. She wanted to believe, she wanted so very badly to believe in everything he said. But this was Josh they were talking about. This was her baby. Why didn't she trust him? Why did she feel embroiled in a secret nightmare? What was it that they weren't telling her?

She had an itch and Outman wasn't helping her scratch it.

'Have you got something that I can read through, maybe a laptop that I can borrow, have a trawl on the internet about the basics? Look, 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. 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. With the risk of insulting you I hardly think that it would make a good read. You wouldn’t understand the half of it.’

Campaign smile was bolted back in place.

‘Sorry. Blind faith, it was never a forte of mine. Help me out here, Doc.’

‘Would it help if I showed you some video of the procedure? Perhaps some film of a smiling child, fully recovered after the surgery?’

Kass nodded.

Yes it would.

‘Good, I’ll get April to sort that out. It’s coming to a monitor near you, soon as I can.’

‘Okay, yes, thank you. Dr Outman, there’s one more thing. Can I get a phone call going somewhere. 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 might be a bit difficult. Apparently we’re having problems with our dish. I don’t understand the technical issues; I just know that I can’t get the sports channel at the moment.’

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 room, remember? We discourage leaving the facility for the sake of the children. Some of them are very delicate and the merest hint of an infection... you understand?'

Shit, what was she doing? Trying her best to alienate the only doctor in the world that could save Josh? Was she stupid? No, something just didn't sit right, this whole situation. Four days ago she was sat on the beach drinking coffee with the stranger, Julius Fortune. On his word she had taken Josh across State, been treated like Royalty, and were now, she hesitated to think the words, willing prisoners in Dr Strange's 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.

She thanked him, left the room, and ran down the corridor face in hands trying not to throw up.

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

‘I wouldn’t be very good at my job if I hadn’t.

Eavesdropping is an occupational necessity, Dr Outman.’

‘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. She’s already asking awkward questions, and I’m hearing that April has concerns.’

‘April is paid to be cautious, I’m the one who decides what is of concern. As for Ms Krane, I suggest that you do what you always do. Give her your best smile and make promises that you have no intention of keeping.’

‘That’s not funny, Fortune. This is serious. Josh is a special case. The network has never attempted to map so intensively inside any of the other patients before. It’s always the same, cancer... more cancer... and then death. This time it’s

actually starting to leave markers. Julius, that boy is a bloody miracle. Nexus has found a way to graft itself onto his brain.'

'Am I right in thinking that it's not supposed to do that?'

'You know full well that's what I'm saying.'

'Am I right in surmising that it wasn't supposed to give kid's cancer, either?'

'Being glib doesn't suit you, Mr Fortune.'

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 recalled Outman's file, grim reading prior to actually meeting the man. Regimes from the Iraqi's to the Chinese 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. His hands were covered in blood from four continents. Julius found it difficult not to draw comparisons with his own career. That sort of thinking wasn't going to help.

He'd see how this one played out. Dr Outman seemed keen to talk, so he would 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 you backers.'

'Explain.'

'The Nexus web is very adept at causing the unexpected; things that it's *not supposed to do*, but I assure you that *this* is actually happening. Do you have any idea what this boy's brain is doing?'

I have a good idea Doctor. It means more complications.

'You tell me, Doctor.' He asked.

'It means that without the mother hanging around we have an opportunity to study and understand a process that is biologically impossible, yet appears to be happening. My God it would be worth billions in military applications alone. Fortune, are you listening? Nexus is grafting itself onto his brain.'

'Here's what I know, Doctor Outman. You're being paid to find a cure for the side effects on children caused by the data transport within the Nexus package. *That is the priority* unless my employers tell me different. They have outlined their requirements to us both, very clearly.'

‘It’s 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, as always. Look, when Nexus goes global the money train will start to pour. 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.’

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

Outman was fidgeting, sparks were obviously flying inside his head.

‘This is huge, positively megalithic. This kid has done something that none of us could ever have expected. This 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?’

‘What am I suggesting? Really... you don’t get it. Knock off that dour thoughtful exterior and get some military kickass going here. Here it is in layman’s words. Get rid of the mother and find me somewhere suitable to take the boy. I want to open to him up and study his brain.’

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

'And your reasoning for such an extension to your employment, in Laymen's words.'

'Fine, so you can understand then. What if I could surgically implant a chip into a soldier's head? 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, as much as thirty three. Give the recipient instant recall and photographic memory... and give you absolute control over *all* of their actions?'

'Can you do that, doctor?' He already doubted the proposal but it didn't hurt to listen.

'No, of course not, no-one can. And that's the point. What if Nexus can? Think about it. If the package that's infiltrated that boy's brain can actually succeed in re-mapping itself, using just the hardware in his head. Then whoa, you have a revelation. And you also have a revolution in Military application. We're talking small step for man, giant leap for Military-kind. You can make a phone call to his brain, switch him on and off, plug him into the internet at will. Make the call, Fortune.'

Perhaps it did merit further discussion.

‘I caution you to be careful with flights of fancy, doctor. You are just a small cog, in a very large wheel. But I *will* make the call.’

Everywhere Kass looked there were armed guards. She wanted to communicate with someone, anyone, but her Cell was useless. The super reliable Nexus was dormant with no signs of waking up any time soon. It had left them stranded. And the thought of that terrifying equipment being used on Josh, by some faceless surgeon, it was almost too much to bear. In her desperation to save him, what had she gotten them into? A shake of the head didn't help. Crap, she was losing it big time. She had to talk to someone. Pierce, Chrissie... anyone.

From the gantry she could see the front door. Just the one guard on the inside; he was armed and seated, watchful. There was definitely something wrong with him, with all of them. They didn't strike her as the kind of security you got wandering around a shopping mall. They stood and moved with the prowess of ex-military. Whatever secrets they had here, they were super keen to keep them protected.

Was this first stage paranoia? Or did she just need to get drunk?

Kass took to the stairs. Maybe she could talk one of the guards into letting her outside. Stick her head out of a window,

anything to free herself of this greenhouse, even just for five minutes. Drastic action was necessary, Pierce would understand. The two top buttons on her shirt were released as she descended the stairs.

‘Hi.’ She checked out the guards Tag. ‘Hi Smitty. Is that your real name, Smitty?’ She sat herself on the edge of the desk wishing she’d worn a skirt. ‘Looks nice out there today, shame to be sat inside and missing out.’ She flipped his name tag and applied an open mouth smile as she leaned a little closer.

‘Really... Smitty?’

Oh yeah... Gotchya. She allowed nature to intervene. He was a man after all, and a young one too. All buzz cut and pimples. His pale green eyes locked in with laser precision drifting down toward her cleavage. It was inevitable.

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 lifting her arms and pretended to pull her hair back. Hardly her fault if it caused her breasts to accentuate. ‘What about you, Smitty? You like the warm feel of sunshine on your body?’

No response.

Sure, he was allowed to resist, just a little.

‘Look, can I be honest with you. There are two things that a girl needs, both of which I am being deprived of in this Palace of Glass.’

Here we go, let the tongue touch the lips, and add a dash of innocence, if she could still remember how. ‘A nice glass of red wine and some good male company.’ She 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’d 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. They do worry so,’ another sigh, ‘I’d use a land line but apparently your dish needs servicing.’

Wow, suddenly that did sound like a feeble excuse.

‘Maybe I could borrow your Cell, just for a minute.’

‘Sorry mam. No Cell phones allowed. Is there anything else that I can help you with?’

Really, you’re denying the strategic deployment of my cleavage? He was so clearly gay. Or was it worse than that?

Had she lost her allure? For crying out loud she couldn't even persuade a bloody teenager to open a freaking door. Is this what happens when you approach forty?

She felt like that painting, the one in Europe somewhere. Oh yeah, *the Scream*. First chance she got she was checking her cleavage for wrinkles.

‘Is there a problem here?’

The moment intensified its downward spiral and Kass dropped her head at the interruption, at the recognition of the woman’s voice. *Bugger. The Bitch Queen cometh.*

Kass removed herself from the desk hiding the return trip of the top buttons.

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

‘Security are very busy, Mrs Krane. Perhaps you could confine yourself to specific questions, and let them get on with their job.’

Ms, Ms... its Ms.

‘Fine, I have a specific question for you. How about opening the door so that I can get some air?’

‘I’ll take your request to Dr Outman. But may I remind you 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 the building.'

'Stupid freaking contract.'

'I'm sorry Mrs Krane, I didn't catch that.'

'Just leaving, and going back to my room.'

Mummy needed to find Josh, and quick. She needed to get some good old fashioned bitching on the go. She needed to find some booze, and some *goddamn frigging cake*.

Canteen was busy tonight. At least twenty people, most of whom had opted for the vegetarian dish. Kass had never seen so much lettuce on a fork as she cut into her well crisped steak.

‘Seriously, Queen Frosty told me to do one.’

‘I’m sure she didn’t, mom.’

‘Oh really, then why was I was this close to bitch slapping the mare.’

‘Now *that* I would have paid to see.’

Josh eased far too many chips into his mouth; they hung like spaghetti before being dropped or devoured.

‘So let me get this straight. You’re hot for the security guard, but he rejected 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 alright. Are you going to eat that meat or just play with it?’

Who could eat with so much emotion in the air? She slid the plate across to him.

‘I’m going stir crazy, Josh. Tomorrow I’ll see if I can arrange a day out for us. Denver is a big place; we must be somewhere close to it. Mummy needs to do a little retail therapy. And you need some sunshine and fresh air.’

‘Is that your medical opinion?’

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

‘Wow, that April really does bitch you out. I think she’s 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 to bury the body.’

It was good to see him laugh, even if the smile came laced with bits of potato and red sauce. How many times had she told him not to speak with his mouth full? It didn’t matter. He could spray his food all over the table, it just didn’t matter.

I love you Josh, please don’t leave me. Fight this thing and stay alive.

The thoughts that she was trying so hard to reject began to knock hard in her head again.

What if this was the last chance they had to be together. What if the surgery went wrong, you hear about these things all the time? What if Josh died? What if... What if... What if?

‘Come on, I need a drink from the mini bar.’

‘Mum... chips?’

‘Bring them with you. And keep them on the plate and not in your pocket. And why can’t I get a bloody signal on this Cell phone? I swear, your mother believes every bit of crappy advertising she...’

It was hard to finish a sentence when you were being body slammed by a passer-by. Kass dropped her Cell. Falling papers tumbled from the idiot’s hands and smothered it from sight.

‘I’m so sorry. My fault, wasn’t watching where I was going.’

Too bloody right it was your fault. What if I’d had cake in my hand?

Good job that didn’t come out loud. Maybe *she* should have been paying more attention. Who was he anyway? A doctor? He wasn’t wearing a uniform. He was young, maybe mid-twenties. *Weren’t they all?* Short hair, a bit stringy, and he wore glasses too big for his face. It seemed she had been body swiped by Joe 90.

Yep, it was Spencer, was he stalking her? And now she had to help him pick up all the papers he'd dropped.

'It's fine.' She said. 'I was doing the phone thing and not paying attention. 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 them up. I'll even try and find your mobile phone while I'm down here. Least I can do? My name is Spencer by the way.'

Hmm British, by the sounds of the accent. Could be Australian?

'Kass.' She said as she helped shift his papers into a pile.

'Hello Kass. You're the police officer aren't you?'

'Hmm, that's right.'

'Would you do something very important for me, Kass?'

'Sure, I guess.'

'I've just put a piece of paper in your pocket. Please, don't be alarmed, and do not look at it now.' He smiled, but there was no disguising he was nervous. 'Wait until you get back to your room. Preferably in the toilet, as it's the only place they don't watch you.'

‘What? Who’s watching me?’

‘Shh’ He took the last paper from her hands. ‘Please don’t stare at me like that.’ He stood. ‘Well, thank goodness that’s all picked up. Once again, I do apologise. And please, don’t look in your pocket until its safe, and then flush. You’ll understand why.’

‘Okaaay?’

‘Sure, she’d play along. That’s what you do when you’re bored. Oh crap, please don’t let it be a love letter?’

Still, he did look really nervous, like a puppy caught mid wee on the lounge carpet.

Spencer smiled, a little too hard, still trying to hide his nervous disposition. Papers secure he nodded and backed away.

‘Hey, and watch where you’re going next time. Idiot.’

‘That’s a bit harsh, mom.’

‘Really, I hadn’t noticed.’

‘I think he did.’

Was Josh taking his side? She could have been bruised, or even got a paper cut.

‘Do you think he was British, mom?’

‘Yeah. James Bond, apparently.’

Guess she’d find out later.

Childs sat back and sucked a deep breath. If he hadn't been watching so keenly, he may not have noticed.

Noticed what? It was probably just an innocent bump. No harm done. Besides, Spence was harmless enough. Computer analyst and all round geek.

Still, April had left strict orders to watch Krane closely. Report anything suspicious no matter how small.

Just then the door opened. Name Tag read Pullman. Tall beefy man, generic security type.

'Times up buddy, it's a shift change. Anything I should know about, and will I care if there is?'

Maybe? Or maybe it was just late and his head was messing with him. Screaming out for a quick beer and then some sleep. Staring at monitors for eight hours messed with the eyes. The pillow normally came with big round blurs circling beneath his eyelids. Maybe he could claim industrial injury? Yeah right, fat chance with this outfit.

'No,' he said, it's all quiet out there. Last delivery's been and the proximity alarms are dialled in for the night. Main doors are on lock down. Nearly forgot, there are a couple of the Latino nurses in the pool that shouldn't be. Carmen, you know,

the nurse with the nice butt. The other ones had a few too many donuts, but each to their own.'

Pullman sat.

'Ooh, warm chair, nice one Childs.'

'April wants us to keep an eye on suite twenty. Check she don't go walk about, anything like that.'

'I can do that and you can consider yourself officially relieved. See you in the morning.'

'Remember, suite twenty.'

'Yeah, yeah. Suite twenty.'

The door closed.

'Now then, did he say Carmen in the pool area? Is camera forty seven calling out to me... is it, is it. Yep, there you are. Hi girls, are you waiting for me?'

‘Get some sleep Josh, you’re looking tired. As of tomorrow we take things easy. You’re not man from Atlantis.’

‘Aww, mum. The pools cool. It’s where everyone hangs out.’

She scalded herself for thinking of it as a walking graveyard.

‘And I will demand they let us off the ranch for a few hours. I’m gonna bust a window if they don’t open the door.’

‘Are you talking jailbreak? I’m well up for that.’

Kass pulled the quilt tight to his neck.

‘It may come to that, I’m getting seriously stressed.’

‘Hey, I’m the one that’s gonna have things stuck in my head.’

‘I’m sure they’ll warm them up first.’

‘They’d better. Hey, maybe I’ll have super powers when they’ve finished poking around in my brain?’ Josh waved a hand. ‘These are not the droids you are looking for.’

Kass had no idea what that meant but couldn’t help smiling.

‘Maybe you’ll grow dishcloths on the end of your arms. Hmm, or become Super Straight A’s student at school.’

‘Jees mum, I was thinking Wolverine or Captain America. Now I’m gonna have nightmares.’ Josh reached up and kissed her. ‘You’d better leave before I suffer permanent damage.’

‘Sweet dreams, Josh.’ She managed another hug before he turned over.

Kass switched the light out, pausing before she left. 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 on either occasion. But he did. Resilient was an understatement about that man. She closed the door and rested her head against it as the memories ran cold in her blood.

The last time hospitals had been prominent in her life it was Dean. Kass could see him clear as day, lying there, monitors bleeping mercilessly. He looked like a fallen Borg drone with all the wires and tubes protruding from his body.

What sort of a person stands over their fading husband and wills him to die?

Whoa, time out. Wipe those tears and get your head straight. This wasn’t about Dean; this was Josh, sweet, beautiful Josh. She needed to man up, get a drink inside her. Start smoking again.

Hmmm, that came on strong and sudden, the smell and taste of a Marlboro light. Two years of abstinence and she still heard the call. Still felt the desire. Kass' hand touched the door as if she could feel Josh's heart beat through the wood.

Deep breath, Kass. Take a deep breath. Grab something from the minibar. Shit, Spencer?

She'd forgotten about 007 back at the canteen. Instinct moved her hand toward her pocket.

What was it he said? "Preferably in the toilet, as it's the only place they don't watch you." *Watch me?* She couldn't help glancing about the room but saw nothing out of the ordinary. It was pretty generic as rooms went, just a couple of dressers and the bed. A mirror hung above the vanity that she now felt uncomfortable looking at. No grills in the walls just a couple of scenic pictures hanging in frames. This was silly, but the thought of someone watching?

Toilet door clicked closed. Her hands went deep into pockets. There it was. Spencer really had slipped her a note.

Why? What on earth was he doing? What was she doing?

You could cut the air with a knife as she unfolded the single sheet. This was way different to what normal people did in a toilet. Part of her hoped the paper was blank and this was

just a joke. She was twelve again and smoking in the school bog. Scared shitless and hoping that the monitor was trawling another part of the school, not about to walk in and catch her.

She opened the page and read.

My name is Spencer Koch. Please take this very seriously as 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 you but our time is short. They will soon know what I have done. And they'd do anything to get it back. Please, meet me in the staff smoking area, Southwest 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 could always see more with her eyes closed than when they were open. It was something to do with her subconscious awareness. Something like that? She replayed the events in the canteen, step by step.

Yes, he had definitely instigated the incident. The man, Spencer, when he first looked at her he couldn't disguise the fear in his eyes. That was genuine enough.

No, come on, really? She was actually taking this seriously?

Either way the toilet seat went up and the paper note went in, and then downward on a swirl of water. Where was her phone?

It was in here somewhere. She grabbed her bag dropping it on the bed.

Sodding handbag, always has way too much crap in it.

Most of the contents spilled onto the covers but there it was. She turned the screen on, still no signal. The clock was in big mode as always. 10:28. Where was Nexus, her super provider? Gone, vanished, since the moment they'd sighted the Clinic. She couldn't leave, and there was no way of contacting the outside. Those facts alone seemed a damned sight more disturbing now.

Was she really going to meet this, Spencer? Why was she pacing the room and which way was northeast anyway? She was trying to answer one of the great mysteries of Hollywood, how did the heroes in the films always know where the door on the 'southwest corner' was. Wait a minute, the iPhone had a compass. What do you know; there was an app for it on the screen. Hollywood mystery solved.

Southwest... southwest... ah, there you are. I can't make a phone call but I can circumnavigate the world. Maybe this smart phone isn't so dumb after all.

Good job upstairs wasn't as transparent as the rest of the building as she made her way down the numerous corridors. White wall... white wall... careful of the glass. She couldn't avoid the cameras fixed at intervals but hey, she was just out to stretch her legs. It was entirely possible that Spencer Bond was pulling her leg. God, she hoped so.

Kass avoided the lifts and took the stairs. Up two floors, in through the fire doors, down another faceless corridor. This was fun. So why was her tummy doing cartwheels? She found the door.

Staff only.

Let's hope they're not all in there having a party.

The outer door opened into an airlock of sorts. As the first door closed the next one slid silently open, and the sound of strong fans gave the interior an ominous tone. By the smell of things this was where she was meant to be. It looked comfortable enough, all the chairs were padded. She counted half a dozen tables and at the end of the room a huge window with a view of darkness.

Now what?

Something else caught her attention. There, on the table closest to the window. *It couldn't be, could it?* Her heart leapt and there was a sudden bounce in her stride. *Please don't let it be empty.*

The carton was in her hands and the lid flipped. 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 emerged. There was even a lighter next to it. The last few days had been screaming out to her. Spark one up. *When in Rome?* That was all the convincing she required to throw the last two years of sobriety into an 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. *Oh my goodness that's good.* As the smooth swirling vapour was sucked into her lungs, and then ejected in violent spasms she tried to quieten. Maybe she'd overdone it, it had been two years. It didn't matter, nor did the watery eyes. She needed this, she goddamn deserved it. The pleasure of the fumes gave her such a rush her backside fell into the nearest chair.

Even if this was some sort of wind up, sucking on a... Faros Clasica... was worth the walk. She 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 all the print in Spanish? And since when were galleons in full sail popular in Colorado. Last time she looked it was a land locked State.

Spanish or not, the dirty disgusting smog that pumped from its tip was a wondrous experience.

She spotted something else; the girl was on a roll. Someone had left a newspaper on another table. She grabbed it, opened it, and found the sheets... *impossible* to read. More Spanish text

below the paper's bannered name, El Universal. She'd 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 was abruptly ended and her heart missed more than a single beat. She heard music, a singing voice.

"I just haven't met, you, yet."

Michael Buble?

This was getting weirder and weirder.

My phone? Oh my God... Someone's sending me a text. Get this bloody compass off the screen.

It was true, that sweet little icon was confirming that a text had been received. But how, there was still no signal? No Nexus motif, all the signal bars were absent.

Open it.

"I just haven't met, you, yet."

Shh, stop it.

She nearly flipped the Cell out of her hands as the number on the screen changed to a two. There was no signal. Who and how was someone sending them? No return number on the icon didn't help. She pressed and opened the first one.

It was him... Spencer.

Ms Krane, I have sent you this via the Clinics Wi-Fi. I don't have much time. I cannot help you, they 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 sorry. You must run, take Josh and leave. NOW.

What's this guy on? And why am I creeping around the Clinic at midnight? This is crazy.

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 mud back on their shoes? Sorry, no phone lines because the fuse in the dish has blown.” What was she, stupid? Had desperation turned her blind? Oh God, did Josef Mengele smile at his patients like Dr Outman. This was wrong, wrong on so many levels. No hospital needed a private army at the 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

Look at me? Sat on a chair edge, shoulders hunched, and a stupid cigarette in my fingers?

Kass inhaled a deep one, arched her back, and flicked the smoking crutch across the room.

She opened the first text, 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.

There were three chairs in total, she checked the first one, and found nothing. Both hands felt below the second chair, and came back with nothing again. Last one. Half of her didn’t want to look; the other half already had her down on both knees, fingers feeling for... she’d found it.

Felt like a small object taped to the underside.

It came off with a tug.

Kass peeled the tape off a flash drive. Okay, now she *was* paranoid. It may have been a bit late but she checked the walls and ceiling for cameras. There were none that she could see. So why was her heart bumping a hundred and twenty beats a minute, and why had a wave of perspiration just dampened her clothes. Just as she wondered how things could get any weirder, she heard voices outside in the corridor. They were getting closer, and fast.

Two women in nursing whites entered through the door. Their conversation excited and boosted by girly giggles. Secrets were being passed, the gossip was ripe. Confidence faded into quiet surprise as they saw Kass.

‘Hi.’ What else could Kass say as she 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 were yours.* Hand and cookie jar jumped to mind. It was a good job that looks couldn’t kill.

‘I was just leaving.’ She blew a large cloud of fumes that offered the limpest smoke screen. Six strides later she was out into the corridor and moving fast toward the stairs, completely unaware of the camera that turned to follow her path.

Pullman switched to camera forty.

Now what was one of the parents doing on level three? Last time he looked it was staff only up there. He worked the joystick and followed her. Lenses in the ceiling domes discreetly revolved as he switched from camera to camera.

‘Let’s have a look at your face. Heads up, can’t take a picture if you stare at the ground. Come on, look up.’

They really should put cameras in the base of the walls, in the bloody stairwells too.’

She was gone. Pullman was left watching the fire door swing slowly closed. 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.

The ground floor door flew open.

‘There you are.’ He raised a hand keen to engage. ‘Wait for it, wait for it. Smile for me... aaaand... Action.’

There she was, framed on monitor four. His fingers typed at the keyboard.

‘Face recognition... female entry... last seven days. Well hello there, Ms Krane.’ Pullman didn’t like the way her name was flashing, then it twigged. The woman 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 com was opened.

‘April, it’s Pullman. I think we’ve got a problem.’

He waited.

‘*Another one?*’ She responded.

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, 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, and unattended?*’

‘Err, that’s a positive.’

The stream of expletives down the Com confirmed he’d dropped the ball, and big time.

‘I want this facility locked down. No-one gets in or out, no matter who they are, unless I tell you otherwise.’

‘Yes mam. Consider it done.’

Pullman lifted a large plastic cover and dropped the switches below. *Executive decision, not good. Surely it wasn’t because of Krane?* His palm hit the oversized button below. All over the facility titanium dead bolts snapped into place, on every door and window. Silent alarms activated and sensors glowed.

The Clinic was now in lock down.

April looked like her head might explode.

‘What do you mean she went walk-about? I gave instructions to watch her. What the fuck are we paying you for?’

‘I was running a systems check, it was way overdue.’

Pullman lied through his teeth.

The door opened again and Dr Outman entered with Childs by his side.

Nice one. Childs mouthed to Pullman.

‘What’s going on Fortune?’ Demanded Outman. ‘Why am I here, what’s going on?’

Hmm, this was going to get ugly. ‘We’ve had a security breach.’ Fortune answered calmly. ‘The mainframes security was circumvented twenty minutes ago. We’re not sure what files were accessed, but I think I can guess.’

‘By whom?’

This was the interesting part. A most unexpected variable he hadn’t foreseen. ‘There was an attempt to hide the initial access,’ he said, ‘the key card used to initiate the theft was Spencer Koch’s.’

‘Spencer? But why would Spencer... why would he?’

‘Money... Blackmail... We are not yet privy to that information. I have men on every floor searching the facility. We’ll find him. And then we’ll get the answers. Dr, are you feeling all right?’

‘Fortune, what if Spencer took the medical data? You know what would happen if that got out?’ Outman needed to sit. ‘I shouldn’t have kept them here. There’s over two decades of... If that gets out *it will* start a panic. Fortune, we can forget about NEXUS. Every user of a mobile phone will be trashing it and taking out a law suit.’

‘Leave the security to me, doctor. No-one is leaving this facility.’ *He might as well bring this up now, it couldn’t make things worse.* ‘There was however a secondary incident. One of the parents was loose near building three when the breach occurred.’

‘What...which one?’ Outman was up from the chair, he was outraged.

‘It was the Krane woman.’

‘Krane? The Police Officer that security is supposed to watch twenty four seven. Oh this just gets better.’

‘Krane is just a patient’s mother. We have no reason to believe she is implicated.’

‘Oh really, Mr 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 unlikely.’

‘She’s a cop. There *has* to be a link between the two of them.’

‘Krane is LAPD, an officer who works in human resources? FBI, or CIA, those I could stretch too, but LAPD? No. Or do you think she just happened to have a child with a tumour that she could take undercover?’

‘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.’ April went on the offensive. ‘They’re DNA’d down to their toenails.’

‘Really? Well I find it a bit of a coincidence, don’t you? Anything else you want to tell me, Fortune. Any more surprises?’

‘All we know is that Spencer infiltrated the mainframe. We’ll know exactly what he got in less than an hour. There’s no way in or out. He cannot communicate with the outside, we’re on lockdown. Spencer is *still* in this facility.’

‘This Clinic is welded shut.’ April added and turned her hostility toward Pullman. ‘Whatever Spencer had, is still here. As is Krane. We’ll find out why she went walkabout and whether she had any further contact with Spencer.’ She calmed, turned to Fortune. ‘Maybe now you’ll let me deal with this *my way*?’

‘Look, I don’t care what you do with the woman, I don’t need her, she’s just become a liability. But nobody touches the boy. Fortune, make that clear to her.’

How much longer was he going to have to take orders from this man? Still, this was an unexpected turn of events. Was there a link between Krane and Spencer? No, there was something happening 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.

‘We have no further information but the leak is contained. I understand, one hour. Yes of course. However, I will need a decision on our previous conversation. Dr Outman is instant.’

There was a pause as he listened.

‘I understand. Yes, the Doctor is here with me. Very well. Yes, I have already made the arrangements.’

Fortune snapped the phone shut and turned to Outman.

‘You have been instructed to proceed with the boy.’

‘Was it ever in doubt?’

Julius redialled. The dialling tone pitched three times on the other end and was answered.

‘You may proceed.’ Fortune instructed, and then hung up.

‘What about the mother? I don’t need her hanging around, I just want the boy.’

‘As of this moment, Doctor, life as Ms Krane understands it is about to end. April, you will find Spencer and bring him to me. When you find Ms Krane, you know how to proceed.’

‘Oh, it will be my pleasure.’

Kass opened her second 'airline' vodka from the fridge. So many scenarios were going through her head. Should they leave? Ask for a car in the morning. They'd walk home if necessary. Was this all a sick joke?

She needed to be a cop and not a mother right now. This whole situation stank. Why had she allowed them to entice her here? What other choice could she have made? No, no, no. It didn't matter; the entire Clinic could be involved in illegal activities for all she cared just so long as they could help Josh. Tomorrow morning, she would demand to use a phone. Talk to Pierce, that's what she needed to do.

The glass stopped at her lips to the sound of soft knocking on the door.

It was past midnight who the hell was calling at this time of night? Maybe it was Spencer, yes, who else? He had a lot of questions to answer. She pulled at the handle and the door opened. Uh-oh, it was the Ice Queen. Why was she smiling like that? April's hand lashed out with frightening speed and caught Kass in the throat. She went down unable to breathe.

'Take the boy.'

What... no. Why couldn't she breathe?

'Don't worry, *Kassy*. 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, help him. 'Let him go.' Get your hands off him. Kass tried to stand but failed, falling instead against the wall. Air, she desperately needed to take in air. *Breathe Cassandra, Breathe.* It came with long wheezing gasps as the gas finally seeped down into her lungs.

Get up, must stop them taking Josh. They're hurting him.

'Get off me... Mom, help me, please.'

She was up to her feet but pushed down again by the heavy hand of April. She had to stop them taking Josh, but hands grabbed her. Strong grips that yanked her hair and forced her down onto bent knees. That's when she felt the cold press of the handgun forced against her cheek.

No, not my baby... 'Josh.'

'Mom? Stop them, help me.'

His eyes pleaded with her, so much anger and fear. She could barely see through her own tears as two uniformed thugs

manhandled him from the room, as his fingers were pried from the frame of the door, as his voice faded, and he was gone.

‘Now now, stay calm, no-one’s going to hurt Josh. Stand her up, please.’

‘Why...?’ What else could she say as rough hands lifted her, smug grins in place of words.

‘Why are you doing this? Where are you taking Josh?’

‘He’s going to take a nice holiday from his overbearing mother. By the time you wake up Josh will be a long way from here, and from you.’

‘You bitch.’

‘Hey, it takes one to know one.’

April’s head came as fast as the fist had done. Impacting on her brow it stunned Kass into unconsciousness.

Carl Gapple closed his phone and turned to the other members of his team who sat patiently in the blacked out Ford Voyager. Carl knew them as Two, Three, and Four when they were working. No names, just numbers, it was more efficient. They were a good team, highly trained professionals to a man. They had always worked well together.

‘We have a green light.’ He said. ‘Please unpack your tools and Two here will take us to the drop off.’

He nodded to the blonde twenty something behind the wheel. ‘You have the address, there’s no hurry.’

The car’s lights indicated and then pulled out into traffic. In the back seat the familiar sound of ammo clips and slides being pulled as Three and Four checked their hand guns. This was the good bit, the adrenaline was building, Carl could feel it. That was how it was, how it had always been. This was the life that Carl had chosen; it would presumably end in the same way.

But not tonight.

The Galaxy 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 typical wealthy suburb in the city of LA. Carl zipped his jacket to hide the Glock holstered from his shoulder.

‘Two and Three, stay with the car. Four you’re with me.’

Barely a sound came from the closing doors as Carl checked the street. He checked his watch. Two thirty in the morning, not a light or a movement as far as the eye could see. This was long after the witching hour; only cats, rats, and loose women wandered the streets, but not in this neighbourhood. He gave Four a nod and then crossed the road to walk up the closest drive. Mail box had two twenty seven written down the pole, confirming that this was the right house. Carl approached the porch and indicated to Four to keep watch from a dark spot at the side of the house.

No need to pick the lock, when the client had supplied a copy of the key. It slipped inside the well-turned barrel and the door opened inside. An alarm was blinking incessantly on the wall. It relented as his gloved hand entered the correct sequence of numbers.

Nice place.

He used to own one just like it, a suburban castle, but not now. These days he preferred to live out of motels, a more fluid

way of living, much easier to be anonymous considering his occupation. Carl freed his Glock from its holster and crossed the carpet.

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 wasn't a thing out of 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.*

He checked the kitchen. *Much better taste.* He bet himself the cupboards were well stocked, all the cans neatly lined in rows. He passed it by and opened the closest door. Bedroom one was revealed to be a good size, double bed, plenty of room. Nice furniture, but 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, and 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.

Carl opened the closet and moved hanging clothes, his eyes checking for boxes, there were two on the floor and 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 any contents. Just tweak a little at the edges as he felt his way through the smalls. *Beside drawers, maybe you keep it with the condoms. No, from what I'm seeing you don't bring the boyfriends home, do you?*

Top drawer, bedside, it was locked.

Found you.

Locks were never a problem. Several seconds later a flat hook and a rake were teasing the inside of the simple tumbler. He pulled the drawer open and smiled at what he found inside. Home owner kept two guns, a standard issue Glock 22. Nice

gun. Then reached in for the Berreta, which was her back up weapon. LAPD hadn't issued them since 2002. Carl lifted the shiny badge out; its weight surprised him.

Officer six seven seven, sorry love, you're just about to have a bad life.

Carl locked the drawer and clicked the com on his collar.
'Heads up out there, I'm coming out.'

At least *Childs* had done his job properly. The underground garage was deserted as April checked the last camera between her and the car. Good, the light was out. The last thing she wanted was more unwelcome attention.

‘Pick it up Pullman. Get her in the boot.’ At least she’d found the muscular hulk fit for something. He’d dropped the ball and he knew it. She wasn’t going to let him forget as he popped the boot lid of the Range Rover, its blinkers flashed twice.

‘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 talk?’

Good decision. She had half a mind to put him in the back as well.

‘Make sure *that* isn’t found.’ She indicated the wrapped tarpaulin already inside the boot. ‘As for her, you know what to do.’

‘Affirmative.’

The boot lid swung down. Blinkers flashed again as the front doors were unlocked.

Frankly, Pullman was just glad to get out of Dodge for a few hours. April could be a bit full on at times, and he had to admit he *should* have been paying more attention. What were the chances? The first time he took his eyes off the ball and everything went tits up. All the good work in the past had doubtless just saved him from a fate worse than a long drive out into an empty desert. He could still see Childs face, the smug bastard. And they were *supposed* to be friends?

Full beam flashed at the garage doors and the heavy rolling shutters lifted in response. Pullman hit the gas and the V8 growled; Four Pirelli tyres squealed their empathy for his frustration as the Range Rover bolted from the underground garage out into the night.

Music, Kass could hear music, faint and comforting. She was a child again, jumping and falling, running across the bouncy castle. This was how birthdays were supposed to be, gay and happy, full of spring. It didn't matter that it was dark or that the air stank of... of... cinnamon and apple? Kass bounced again and landed awkwardly. The impact hurt her head because *it* didn't bounce. No fair, she wanted to cry.

What the fu... Where am I?

Kass' head and half her body was lifted and then grounded with a thud. *What's going on?* Panic, confusion, desperation, nothing else to do but cry. She put it on hold as a large heavy parcel shifted across her floor space to crush her up against a wall. They started bouncing together until the floor finally found some level time.

Where am I? It wasn't easy to move whilst jammed by whatever it was sat on her head. *Get off me.*

Freedom came as the lump shifted again. Her space brightened to a sultry red glow which kept moving, or was that her? *What the hell was going on? Where was she?* Last thing she remembered was Bitch Slut's head moving in like a hammer.

She must have passed out? And why did she feel sick. That normally only happened when she was sat in the back of a car.

Patience brought the answer. The confined space had red lights in each corner. Her head was chaffing on a carpet that had been recently detailed, hence the apple and cinnamon. No doubting it now, she was in the boot 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. *That bitch, April. If it's the last thing I ever do...* She was squashed between the heavy weight and the wall again. *What is this?*

It was like pushing an anvil uphill. It was stupidly heavy and wrapped in a cheap tarpaulin. She pawed at the wrapping to give up more space. One thing was for sure, no good ever came to anyone being taxied out into the wilds in the boot of a car. She had to find a way out. At least find something to use on the driver when they stopped. *Maybe the contents of the tarp?* Kass worked her hands into the folds, searching for a way in, desperate for something to grab.

Come on, open up for Kassy. For all she knew their journeys end was imminent. *For Christ's sake who wrapped this thing? Come on get it open.*

She was in. Clothing, she could feel clothing, and it was wet. What was this, laundry? She groped deeper inside.

Oh my God, oh my God. It's a freaking body.

She barely contained the scream, rolling away just as the car lifted on its springs and sent the deceased rolling on top of her again. Panic screeched through her veins and the sudden flood of adrenaline threatened to explode her head.

Why was this happening?

Kass closed her eyes and urged the dream to return, tried to pretend that *this* was just a dream.

Josh. They've taken Josh.

No dream then.

Get off me you piece of shit. A dead body was no use, but maybe there was something else in the trunk.

Carl was good at picking locks. They were a challenge and he like to be challenged. The owner of this apartment had gone to great expense to choose these particular locks.

Expensive, but futile.

He whispered into the collar mike.

‘Two and Three, eyes on the road and the front door. Four, the stairwell and the lift.’

‘Roger that.’

Now for the fun bit. Ever since he was a child he’d enjoyed breaking and entering. It was a buzz to sneak around someone’s house in the night. He’d never done it for the money. No, never the money, it was just for the crack, for the high. You had to experience it to understand it. He was the Watcher at the bedside. And they would never know that he was there.

They say thing always happen for a reason. And so it was with him. His parents just wanted him gone, out of sight was out of mind after all. They made him sign up for the military. Poor Carl, only seventeen years old and only the army would

take him in. Well good for Carl because the army taught him purpose. They taught him how to use his gifts.

Your locks were a waste of good money. He was in; the door was eased quietly open.

Nice place, too big an apartment just for one man. Still, he supposed it was expected of the high flyers.

Carl checked each doorway, watchful, as he moved with fluid ease 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 zeroed in on his prey. Only one door left to open.

A single gloved finger eased back the bedroom door as Carl slipped into the room. *Tasteful furniture, hmm, it smelt like... Chanel? Yes, definitely Chanel.* There was always time to pick out the scents in a bedroom as you watched. It was good that the man was asleep. It was for the best, he wouldn't wake him.

Carl stepped forward to the bedside. The man had a good body; he obviously worked hard to stay trim. He'd use the spare pillow rest it against the back of the man's head. What little light there was glinted from the barrel of the Beretta as Carl pulled it from his jacket.

'Sweet dreams.' Carl whispered. He pressed the Beretta tight to the man's head. It was unfortunate that he opened his eyes just as the muffled shot rang out. In an instant the bed and wall were sprayed with organic shrapnel. A pool of dark blood flooded out onto the pillows as another muffled shot rang out.

Carl walked from the bedroom. *Someone has to take the blame.* He let the Beretta fall casually from his gloved hand. *You just can't let a homicide go unsolved.*

He left the apartment.

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 beyond surreal. Somewhere in this claustrophobic cave was a weapon she could use. *Please God, let there be something. Anything.*

More lurching from the car through the rough terrain as each bump got 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 her bile closer to expulsion. If she leaned any harder away the parcel shelf would flip and the driver would know she was awake.

Yes, got something, fingers... reach. It was metal that had brushed against her searching hand. *If I can just, reach, around its base, and pull.* Some sort of lever found her hand just as a voice from inside the car seized at her limbs. *Was the driver talking to her? Did he know she was awake?* Kass listened, what else could she do.

'Where are you?' A woman's voice demanded.

'Done in five. I'll drop Krane off afterwards.'

‘Speed it up Pullman. Then get out to 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, got it?’

‘Yes mam. I’ll be at the airport in two hours.’

A pause was followed by music playing again. Mexican country style, lots of trumpets. But Kass had recognised the voice through the Bluetooth. April. There was going to be a reckoning, that was for sure, but first things first, she had the slight problem of getting out of the car?

Got it. Move damn you, move. Why won’t you...

The harsh crunch of chassis on ground threw Kass back. The object came free in her hand as she slid up hard behind the rear seats with involuntary contortion. The car was slowing fast; it stopped. The engine continued to purr on idle, and then went silent. *Is this it, is he coming for me?* The driver’s door opened and then slammed as footsteps came around to the rear. *She wasn’t ready; too soon, she wasn’t ready.* Bright flashers lit up the boot to the bleep of the remote. *Tight, grip it tight. I don’t want to die out here.* The tailgate was lifted.

As the tailgate raised and the interior lights came on, Kass' world became real again, the freedom outside was blocked by a dark looming figure who 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.

Fingers gripped and her arm swung. It was cause and effect, and proved an instant success. Groan followed thud as metal impacted on face, the figure went back and over. She could see it now, with big words written along its length. The canister read... FIRE. Instinct and recognition worked in tandem as the slim red fob was ripped from the handle. Kass didn't know what it was that hissed from the container but the fluid erupted into Pullman's eyes. He'd tried to stand but instantly backed away as the spray was forced into his eyes. *Get up Kass Get up.* One of them had to. Second place wouldn't get a prize, and Kass wasn't going to be last as she fell out of the car, the spray circling above her head.

'Have it all you mother...'

Shit, was that a gun?

Pullman couldn't see but his reactions went into survival overdrive. The weapon exploded with angry flashes of light that exposed his face, eyes creased closed, mouth cursing in blood curdling anger.

One, two, three flashes as bullets hissed through the air. No time to hide, Kass fell on him, the metal cylinder crashing 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.

She hit him again. That last one was for Josh. For the second time in as many minutes Kass rolled off a dead body.

'You bastard, I don't bury in the dark so easy. You hear me April.' Kass was a she wolf barking at the moon.

She dropped her 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, frightened and angry. Battering the life out of someone evokes every emotion, focuses them into a single point, and when you're done they leave you drained. Now she started to cry, it was all

she had left. The man's face was gone, just blood and flesh in a mangled mess. It looked like the vomit she now spewed on the ground.

Self-defence, it was freaking self-defence. No court in the world would convict her. It was okay to bludgeon a Perp whilst actively engaged in the act of murdering and burying you.

She had to stop staring at the body. Stop staring at his face. *He deserved it, every vile impact, he deserved it all. That's it, get angry again.*

'You son of a bitch.'

Kass dropped the cylinder and wiped her hands down what had been her favourite shirt. No way was this mess going to wash out. For crying out loud she could still remember the price. Forty dollars for an All Saints was a bargain. The jeans had cost her double that.

The gun, where was the gun?

It was like exiting a trance as she picked up the weapon. A Smith and Wesson P40 compact. It had a nice feel. The Smithy's grip gave her a sense of power. She wasn't frightened anymore as she checked Pullman for a pulse. Bastard really was dead, nothing she could do about that now as she turned back to the

car. Killing was thirsty work, maybe there was water in the front.

A thermos from the passenger floor remained well fixed to her lips until the cool water inside had half emptied. There was a bag she rummaged through. Clean shirts, a razor, and bath room goodies made for a man, nothing else on the back seat. *Oh God.* She remembered the tarpaulin in the boot. *She had to look, had to know.* Kass circled the car fingers flexing on the trigger of the Smithy. Just in case the dead came back to life.

Dead was dead, remember.

It was the first good look at the package she had shared her ride with. She teased at the edges.

Pathetic. Just open it, see who's in there?

Kass yanked at the thing and pulled it out to land on the hard ground, the Smithy at the ready as her boot rolled the tarp over.

‘Oh my God... Spencer.’

She nearly put a bullet through the back seat as the radio started to play. She needed to get out of here, wherever here was? She checked the bodies, neither had ID or a phone. Pullman had a spare magazine for the gun and loose cash, about three hundred dollars, and change. It wasn't going to do him

any good so it went into her pocket for gas money. First thing she needed was a direction; there were no maps or satnav in the Rover. On the dashboard she saw a lifesaver, a digital compass above a Teletubby shaped clock that glowed with big idiot digits. Looked like something the kids would buy you for Christmas.

Did Pullman have kids?

The nausea returned along with the image of his battered face. *No way, not going there, it was him or me.*

With no sun in the sky the digital compass could be a life saver. There was no road to follow out here, just a vast expanse with rising hills in every direction.

Kass jumped into the leather seat. She fired up the V8 and hit the volume on the radio. One of her favourite sounds boomed out through the speakers. As did another from the four wheel drive as the tyres wheel-spun the two ton Range Rover off into the darkness. She was LAPD, and these fuckers had just messed with the wrong Officer.

The raunchy tomes of Ricky Martin's 'livin' la vida loca,' blared out into an empty desert.

Such a beautiful clear night sky, a postcard night, as the powerful SUV forged ahead of a tyre fuelled cloud of dust. Nothing but no-man's land lay ahead and below the hard working suspension, road tyres worked furiously to find traction on a gritty terrain. She didn't notice as the speedo crept past fifty and the massive projectile threatened to leave its wheel behind. She'd expected a smooth ride.

Laa-laa, or was it Tinky Winky beamed 03:41. Sooner or later she must find a road. Until then, this was no different to the off-roading experience at Palm Springs two years ago. Corpse's excepted. Oh, and Josh had been in the back seat, not kidnapped by monsters.

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 else that got in her way. It was a perfect plan. Perfect if it wasn't for the little yellow icon that began winking at her from the dashboard.

'You have to joking.' She punched at the wheel.

Had Pullman driven out into the Colorado Desert without filling the tank? No way.

Moments later the yellow light stopped winking and gave her a hard stare in red. The V8 juddered, punched hard again, and then coughed twice. The dashboard lit up like a Christmas tree as the speedo slipped into regression.

‘No, no, no.’ Hitting the steering wheel didn’t help much. ‘This cannot be happening.’ Thumb and start button got personal. ‘Start you piece of shit.’ Engine turned but wouldn’t fire? ‘Come on... Come on.

Shit, shit, shit. Power steering had gone. ‘Whooa.’ Range Rover turned bucking bronco.

Brake, brake, brake.

No brakes.

No control.

Please slow down.

Veering left she saw them, oncoming boulders at eleven o’clock. *Ohhh shit, hold on tight girl.* There was no way to miss them.

The seatbelt stopped everything but her head from lurching forward. It was the crunch and grind the Titanic received as the Rover was well blocked and tackled. Speedo died from forty to zero in the blink of an eye and the front end was launched upward leaving the ground. She felt nothing for a few seconds;

she was an astronaut, weightless, as the world span outside the glass.

Touch down.

A perfect body slam against the canvas as the force unleashed tore the windscreen away and half the roof away. Eat desert, as ground crunched below fender spraying dirt across the front seats. She was a crash test dummy and this was the world's biggest tombola.

Helpless, and with no time to pray, she closed her eyes and waited for the end.

Am I dead?

She supposed that asking the question suggested probably not. Besides, the groaning metal and the sudden pain in her shoulder, in her back... just about everywhere, confirmed the diagnosis. She was still alive.

‘Son of a ...’

Kass unclipped the belt and shouldered the driver’s door. It resisted, it hurt, and it refused to give way despite a third attempt. Seeing as how the windows were all missing she’d use one of them instead. Or at least try. Crawling through the bent opening she felt like a ninety year old, every bruise and bash felt fatal. As standing wasn’t an option yet, crawling like a baby would have to suffice.

Oh yeah, can’t keep a good cop down.

She’d just proved she was tougher than a Range Rover. Harder than a desert rock. Okay, it was just the shock talking but Kass managed an ape-like stand and staggered away from the wreck.

A small boulder wasn’t as comfy as the car’s seats but far enough away to be safe from a sudden explosion. Close enough

though to survey the damage. A hundred thousand dollar motor had a lot of parts, most of which were scattered across the desert further than she could see. It was totalled. She was walking from here on in. That's when she saw them.

'Why... Why?'

How could she be that unlucky.

Pullman's parting shots, the two large bullet holes in the side of the car, and the exit wounds in the fuel tank now facing the sky.

'Aaaargh.'

Kicking the rock didn't help either.

Dry, everything was so dry. The gritty ground her boots scuffed over was parched beyond belief. What flora there was... was dry. Everything was dry. Brownd off by the harsh sun of the day, and parched by its incessant heat. Bushels of long dry grass and hot rocks, there were lots of sizzling stony leftovers from the bitter cold of a long perished glassier. And as for the dust, it got everywhere, settled in every crease of her clothes and coated her skin. The temperature was sucking the moisture from her hands, from her face; she knew she was still in shock when she worried about the damage it was doing to her hair. She just had to keep going, on toward the sun that was now high and spiteful in its glaring stare. Stagger up one more rise, another 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 stumble. Gravity did the rest. She'd stop here then, just for a moment. Take a breath and decide what to do. Nothing came to mind, just the overwhelming desire for sunglasses and ice chilled spritzer.

For all the pain it caused, there *was* a charred beauty to these surroundings, a gritty splendour to this desolate land.

Frankly it was a miracle that anything grew, let alone bloomed from such a hard pastry coating. If it wasn't for the fact she was going to die out here she could almost appreciate its desolation, its barren appeal.

The call of a coyote in the distance ruined the moment. *They didn't eat people did they?* Her hand slipped down to the Smith and Wesson for comfort.

That was it, the last of the water. Good riddance, she was tired of carrying the thermos. Was she going to die out here? No, that was uncalled for; she'd promised herself she wouldn't accept that. Wouldn't let it happen. But the buzzard's, way up there, circling on the thermals. They might have a different idea. Was this how a Big Mac felt after a good grilling, and before the big fat hungry kid took a mammoth bite?

Come on Cassandra. One more effort, just to the top... please.

It was over there, somewhere, civilisation could be just over the other side.

Josh...

They worked, her legs moved. The thermos was kicked and rolled away. She was moving, at least she was trudging. Every muscle in her legs screamed at the lactose to *back off*. She was

drunk, delirious, worn out but moving on. She was freaking Iron Man.

Josh...

Down below the world opened up into another massive plain. Nothing, there was nothing. *Josh...* It was over then... *Josh...* Or was it?

Please God, don't let that be a mirage.

No, it is a road, a glorious wonderful piece of tarmac cutting through a rugged wasteland. A road means cars, which means people, which means that I'm saved.

More dust as Kass scuttled down the embankment, her excitement building.

Sure, it wasn't a highway. Just a stringy single lane, but something would come. A car would come, right? A truck maybe, with Perrier emblazoned along its trailer. And ice, there'd be ice by the bucket. Right now she'd blow a saddle sweaty Cowboy if it meant two Tylenol and an ice cool drink.

Stop Kassy, slow down. She wasn't listening.

The last part of the descent left skid marks on her jeans and nearly ripped the blood soaked shirt from her back. Not that she cared, she was heading for salvation. The road ahead

was her way out of this parched and torrid desert. She just needed a car to actually use it.

An hour sat by the roadside was a day roasting at the beach. It had become unbearable. In her mind she had built an umbrella that was now fully opened above her head. The shade was quite nice really. She could hear milk bottles rattling in the fridge that drove by... Why wouldn't it stop?

Time to go Kassy, find a shower and cool yourself down. Oh, and 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. J A S O N, she remembered his name... he was cute.

Kass no longer felt the heat of the ground scorch at her buttocks through her jeans. Her shoes purposely flung onto the road to stop traffic passing by.

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 first, but sleep seemed intent to intervene. It seemed necessary for her, almost insistent that she roll herself into a ball, allow herself to drift off. She welcomed the darkness and listened to the water in the pool lap

against the edge. There was calm, and order, until someone started to play music. She heard it again, away in the distance. A casual peek. Something small cut through the haze. Hey, it was red and had big bright eyes. She lifted her head to see more.

Get up Kass, it's a car.

That was confusing. *What was a car doing in the pool... did it have ice cream?* Against her better judgement she lifted her weary body and got up. *Sanity Kass, Sanity.* She stepped out onto the tarmac. She felt punch drunk, not sure which direction the sound was coming from.

Car, road, concentrate. Maybe it wasn't real, Oh God, please, not her imagination again? No, don't go there.

The image was getting bigger. The sound was louder now, definitely coming closer. No mistakes, that was the growling sound of a motor vehicle; she just couldn't make out what make. The more she stared, the more the heat from the tarmac blurred everything.

Come on, come on, I can see you.

Big headlamps glared out of the haze. A red bonnet followed with the windscreen still intact. She started to wave,

both hands above her head. She wasn't going to miss this ship.

It had to see her; it had to change direction.

A sixties Ford pickup slowed with brakes that squealed their displeasure. Music thumped from the cab and then ceased.

Her hands palmed the bonnet to make sure it had stopped;

nothing was going to pass without picking her up. It was

Lancelot come for Guinevere.

Two steps toward the passenger door, and Kass fainted.

Dry eyes opened and found it hard to focus. She was flying, the wind in her hair proved it. No, wait, she was in a car, the window was half down and the cool air was tangling her hair.

‘You’re awake then?’

Who the hell was that?

Owner had a rough voice, sounded ticked off.

‘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 was a troll of some kind. No, image clearing now, it was definitely a man with a beard. And he stank. Why was he licking her?’

‘That’s Boon, don’t mind him, it’s just his way of saying hello.’

‘Eurgh, it’s a dog.’

Please let it be a dog.

‘He was the last time I looked. Boon, get off the lady. Down boy. There’s water in the glove box, help yourself. I managed to get some in you bout an hour back. But you still look a mite dry.’

‘Thank you.’ Hands were a bit shaky but she found the water, and drank. It was warm, bland, glorious nectar. ‘Don’t suppose you have a smoke?’

‘There’s a couple made up in the tin. Up there on the dashboard, lighters in there too.’

Hands were still shaky but managed. The smell unleashed as she opened the lid was dark and sweet. It had been over twenty years since her last roll up; it didn’t matter as the lighter clicked. The flame was a dodgy little bugger, it wouldn’t stay still. When it finally met the paper it was good, so good, the scent followed quickly by the taste; the feel of the smog as it descended into her lungs. She felt a calm descend. Such a dirty filthy habit. She loved it. Why on earth did she ever give it up?

Because she was pregnant with Josh.

‘Are you gonna tell me what you’re doing out here. And my name’s Welden, not Lancelot.’

Had she really called him that?

‘The sun hit you hard out there. You’re lucky I came along when I did. This is a quiet road; we don’t get many tourists in this area. My personal opinion is it’s the lack of a beach. Are you looking for a beach?’

‘No. I...’

Could she trust him? Would he try to take her back?

Weldon? It was a bit old fashioned, but then he was... old. He had that old timer, gold miner, kind of thing going on. Kris Kristofferson on a two week bender. *Eurgh, did he live in that cotton t-shirt? And the jeans, they had to be stolen from a fifties bizarre.* Crap, the dog must have been at least a hundred years old. What breed was it anyway, Shaggy bad breath? If it was, this pup was a thoroughbred. Now that her senses had revived she wasn't sure if the smell was him, the dog, or her?

It took both hands to wind the window fully open. She scowled at the mutt who tried to muscle in, get back the spot that she had taken. It was a eureka moment. An understanding why canines stuck their heads out through the window, let their heads be buffeted by the breeze.

It was wonderful.

‘Where are we?’ She asked.

‘Just south of Caborca.’

‘Caborca? How far is that from Denver?’

‘Denver? I should say, ooh about, maybe a thousand miles. Give or take.’

‘Wow, I didn't think Colorado was that big?’

‘What? Lady, where do you think you are?’

Was he deaf?

‘Colorado.’

‘Lady, the last time I checked, this was Sonara province south of the border. You’re in Mexico.’

‘What?’

Either Kriss was still on a bender, or the sun had hit her harder than she thought.

‘What are you talking about? They flew us to Colorado.’

‘Then they got themselves lost whilst they was in the air. I promise you, unless I got moved by aliens last night, we are most surely in Mexico

‘Oh my God, Josh?’

‘Josh? You lost a boyfriend as well your country.’

‘No, my son.’

She'd said enough. Staring out the window seemed the only thing to do. The people at the Clinic, whoever they were, they'd be looking for her by now. She'd seen the films; they probably had helicopters roaming the countryside, whichever country this was. At least Weldon had stopped talking. Where the hell was he taking her anyway?

Kass pretended not to notice as Weldon turned the big sound button on the archaic stereo down. She hadn't noticed the other box by the driver's door. It was a CB of some kind, or maybe a scanner. Either way, the music had stopped and a Spanish voice was chirruping words like a 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 that name, it was Spencer Koch. Twisting anxiety now turned into full blown foreboding. She could help turning her head but her eyes refused to obey as they flitted toward Weldon. Now her voice refused to stay quiet.

'What... What is she saying?'

‘That’s just Juanita; she works the local Police radio Mondays and Thursdays.’

No, no. You can’t leave it there. That was Spencer she mentioned. What the heck was she saying?

‘You *listen in* to the local Police?’

‘Sure, always good to know what’s going on with local law enforcement.’

‘Really? Do you run guns... *drugs?*’

‘Not in my truck, lady. Sometimes I like to help the locals take a holiday, that’s all. Just now and then.’

‘That’s nice, so you’re a vacation planner?’

‘Yeah, that’s right. Are *you* looking to take a break?’

Weldon turned the scanner down and the music retuned to the background.

‘What was she saying, the Juanita women?’

‘You feeling okay? Want some more water, another cigarette maybe?’

‘I want to know what Juanita was talking about.’

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’s wrong... What are you doing?’

Why was he looking at her like that?

‘The local law have a BOLO out for an American woman. Juanita says she’s wanted for a double murder, and is on the run in this area. They’re saying the Senora 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.

‘Aw shit. A hundred miles of desert and you hitch a ride with me. Juanita is talking about you?’

‘No, I mean, probably, yes. Look, you have to help me.’

‘Listen lady, I don’t want any trouble. Whatever it is you done or ain’t done, I don’t want to know. You get that.’

‘Please, they took my son.’

‘No.’

Kass raised the Smithy and pointed it at him.

‘Please put both hands on the wheel. You need to help me.’

‘Godamn, you need some help alright.’ The truck started and the stick was thrown upward. Tyres left a trail and a cloud as Weldon slid back onto the road. ‘Only I could take a drive in an empty desert and find... You.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘And I’m sorely pissed.’

‘Give me your Cell phone?’

‘I don’t have a Cell.’

‘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, with no sudden movements.’

Boon yawned and licked his lips as pockets were emptied onto the bench seat.

‘Is that everything?’

‘You wanna frisk me?’

A few coins, some monopoly money, and some gum. Weldon hit the throttle as another gear went grinding into place. Then he started muttering, she couldn’t make out the words.

‘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?’

‘No.’

‘Then put the gun down.’

‘No.’

‘Then shoot me.’

‘No.’

‘Then put the gun down.’

‘What...No?’

‘Lady, I can do this all day. But I’m guessing you want to get off this road and find somewhere a bit more private. Somewhere we won’t run into the local Federales.’

That sounded acceptable.

‘Yes.’

‘Good, now we’re making progress. Tell you what, you put the gun down and I’ll take you somewhere safe. We can be there in twenty.’

That sounded better than acceptable.

‘Okay.’

‘Good, I got a small place, just a few miles east of here. It’s a bit 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, I promise.’

‘Only me, this could only happen to me.’

She'd explained everything that had happened, as best she could. It all seemed so fantastical when she relayed it out loud. She could hardly blame him if he didn't believe her. But he had to believe. Kris Kristofferson just had to believe her.

Another violent crunch bounced foully at the trucks springs. It was like white water rafting... without the water. The Range Rover landing from its flip was more comfortable than the Ford. She wasn't even sure the truck would make it. If the old pick up had groaned and whined on flat tarmac, it had flat out cursed when Weldon took the tyres off road. It was spine tingling relief when the brakes finally squealed its intent to stop.

'You live here?' She asked.

'You got a problem with my house now.'

House? It's the shack the Beverley Hillbillies moved out of.

'No, it's nice.' She lied.

'It's home, lady. If you like I'll get some coffee brewing, and you can tell me some more of that bullshit tale of yours.'

He'd smiled when he said it but slammed the car door and left her sat staring at the panting canine. *God, that dog needs a bath.* She'd found the other reason for sticking a head out of the window.

'Do you have a shower?' She called out.

Weldon stopped.

'Sure. But you'd be quicker jumping in the pool out back. Boon, here boy.'

The wiry mutt was out through the window and high tailing after his master. They both disappeared into the shack.

'You want coffee?' Asked Weldon as he lit the stove.

'There is no pool out back.'

'There's no shower inside either. And you're still wondering why you're in this situation?'

'Up yours. Is lying just a compulsion for you?'

He seemed to think about that, and then blew gently on the flame in the old pipe stove.

'It was once, I guess. I do it now for the kick. Does that bother you?'

Was he serious?

'So, you said this *Spencer* fella tried to warn you?'

'Yes. Look, somehow Spencer managed to mate with my Nexus chip. He probably scanned for me on the clinics WiFi Pod, and then sent a data package direct to my Cell. You don't know what I'm talking about do you?'

Wow, he really is lost in time out here.

'He sent me a text.'

'Right... why didn't you just say so?'

Okay, dumb it all down, that's what she had to do. Keep it simple for the old timer. He had to help her; there was no-one else.

She watched Weldon slide an old tin kettle over the larger of the stoves two grates. His foot closed the door on the growing flames inside.

He actually lived here? The place was old, soiled, crap. Wooden boards and timber shiplap were the height of the shacks décor. There was no radio that she could see and no stereo, *wow*, no television. *He must take long walks with the dog.* She craned her neck to see into an adjacent room. A large bed, unmade, clothes on the floor. She could make out a picture in a frame, the only thing that personalised the room. *Was that a woman, and a child? Yeah, a young girl was hugging her mother. Did Kris have a family?*

'They have my son.' She said staring at the frame.

'So you said. You want milk and sugar?'

'Yes.'

'I'm out of milk.'

'Really? Don't tell me, you're out of sugar too.'

'I got sugar. Just aint got no milk.'

Was he being deliberately pedantic? Didn't he understand the gravity of what she'd told him?

'They have my son.' Those words should be enough.

'And I am truly sorry for that.' Weldon sat himself on the big sofa and offered her the small one. It looked like the dog owned the small one. Boon jumped up and settled with his master.

'Help me, please.'

'The pots nearly boiled. I'm making you coffee.' He opened his tin. 'You want another smoke?'

'I want you to take me to the police.'

'You heard the scanner. The Federales are looking for you.' He shook his head, more intent to roll than listen. A quick lick of the gum on the paper was followed by a flame igniting its end. Boon yawned. 'The police in these parts are, how shall I put it, bent as a six dollar note. I'm guessing your alleged kidnapers have deeper pockets than you do.'

'Then take me back to the Clinic. It's a big white building the size of a Mall.'

Kass pulled the gun from her belt and waved it in his general direction. 'I'll make you.'

'You could.' Weldon arched his back. He was either scratching his butt or reaching for something uncomfortable beneath him. A cloud of smoke from the home made billowed out from his nose.

'But not without these.' He opened a red hankie on his lap.

'You son of a bitch.' Kass ejected the magazine from the Smithy. It was empty. 'When?'

'You were out cold when I picked you up.'

'You frisked me whilst I was unconscious?'

More smoke.

'Damn right I did. You never know who you're picking up in these parts.'

Bastard. She could *throw* the gun at him. Maybe he'd pull a muscle or two when he ducked out of the way. *Smug SOB.*

'Kettle's boiled.'

She didn't take her eyes off him as he moved toward the steaming antique, plucked it away and crossed to the tiny kitchen. Why wasn't she surprised to see a hanging cupboard, oh and a massive sink, badly stained, a single tap at an angle. The whole shack was open plan and she could only guess what the bucket in the corner was for.

'You want sugar.' He asked

‘Yes.’ She said reluctantly.’

‘Damn, I aint got no sugar. Why don’t you just sit?’

No chance. The sofa was heavily worn and likely to have more wildlife than the desert outside.

‘Is there anywhere the dog doesn’t sleep?’

‘Not much. 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 would even touch anything. Best put 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. At least Weldon hadn’t frisked her down there. Had he?

‘Don’t suppose you have a computer in here?’

‘Err, no.’

‘A smart phone?’

‘Nope.’

‘A hamster in a wheel?’

‘Can’t say as I got any of those things.’

‘What, do you live in the eighteen sixties?’ She paced back to the door. Maybe there was a town somewhere close, a payphone. She had to contact Pierce; he’d know what to do.

Wonderful Pierce, he'd send the cops, send the military. He'd send the freaking cavalry.

'Lady, would a Laptop be of any help?'

What?

Kass marched back into the shack.

'Are you messing with me?'

'May I remind you who pulled a gun on whom?'

'I said I was sorry, okay. Now laptop... Where? Please?'

'I put it somewhere. Where did I...'

'Don't you mess with me? Don't you dare mess with me. I've been lied too, manipulated, drugged and kidnapped. I've been shot at, thrown through a windscreen and nearly died out there in the desert. My son... my son is God knows where. He should be with me. He should be right here with me. I should have protected him. I should have looked after him. I should have...'

'Lady, Boon's got some pills the vet gave him last year. I can get some for you. They might help you to calm down.'

'Calm? No, I don't agree. I think a healthy dose of pissed off is just what I need right now. Give me back my bullets, give them to me.'

'I don't think so.'

‘Oh really, you don’t? You listen to me. I don’t know where my baby boy is. I don’t know what they want with him, or what they plan on doing to him. He’s alone out there, afraid and confused.’ Her hands began gesticulated wildly. ‘Right now I need to spit, swear, and wave this freaking gun in someone’s face.’ She stopped. ‘No, not just at someone, I need to point it at that cow, April. I need to point it at her skinny bitch face.’ She raised the gun toward Boon and jarred back the slide. ‘I’m going to stick this in her eye and squeeze one off. Give the bitches head some air conditioning.’

Boon hang dogged it down off the sofa and sloped off behind. His big eyes squeezed to the top of their sockets peeking above the arm, all too aware of the negativity flowing in his direction.

‘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 a dog? She turned the weapon toward Weldon.

‘Are you frightened Prospector? You, the dog, every mother’s son at that facility should be frightened, scared shitless in fact. I want my son back. I want my baby boy in my

arms right now. Josh should be with his mother. Don't you think my 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 slipping the safety back on as we speak.'

Kass felt Weldon's hands on hers as he slipped the Smithy away from her grasp. Empty, her fingers were empty. The power was gone, and the anger followed, drained away, the plug well and truly pulled. Then came the tears, pooling at first to blur her vision, and then a steady stream that she couldn't resist.

'It's okay, I've got you. That's it, sit yourself down.' The Smithy's slide clicked and the bullet surrendered itself. 'You got a bit testy there, girly. Boon, where are you boy?' He peeked gingerly out from behind the sofa. 'It's alright boy, she didn't really want to shoot you. Come on Kass, let's get you comfy, and then I'll go get you that laptop. Shit, I'll even put some sugar in your coffee.'

What?

Weldon stepped back into the kitchen. Well practised fingers briskly dismantled the Smithy onto the drainer. 'Hell,

I'm not sure if the Federales didn't get that BOLO right after all.'

He didn't think Kass heard, but she did.

‘You feeling better now?’

No, she wasn't. Something had happened whilst she was sat blubbing in dog hairs. A reality had set in, a chance to absorb the situation. She realised now that she had allowed all of this to happen. She could see it all so clearly, the way that the doctors, and that man, Fortune, had manipulated her. It was concern that had prompted her decisions, fear that had sucked 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.’

‘Fine, I'm sure *he* appreciates the sentiment. But it wasn't your couch he pissed behind.’

‘Take me back to the Clinic.’

‘Sure, and I'll give you your gun back too. You can walk in there and 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.

That's not gonna help Josh.’

He said his name. Does that mean he believes me?

‘Listen, if what you say is true, and you’re not some psycho from the farm. You’re going to need to get back over the border. The law enforcement in Mexico runs like an auction, and from what you’ve told me, you’re going to be the lowest bidder. You need to find friendly ground and contact the State Department, or the FBI.’

‘Pierce. I need to talk to Pierce.’

‘He your boyfriend?’

She nodded.

‘He’s an Assistant District Attorney in Los Angeles.’

‘Well 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. We’re not talking about a bunch of paedophiles here. You have to ask yourself what people with this sort of finance and clout are doing with a clinic full of kids?’

Kass pulled out the flash drive.

‘Let’s find out shall we?’ She pulled Weldon’s laptop onto her knees. Data stick was inserted.

‘It’s got some interesting scratches on the side. Know what they mean?’

‘No idea. I guess Spencer was in a hurry. All I know is they killed him for giving me this. Okay, here we go, import... load... and open. Or not? What’s wrong with it... is it broken?’ God, this thing is older than you. Ahh, here we go. Open the file, hope that it isn’t password pro... We’re in?’

‘What is that? Some sort of game?’

The screen was full of letters and numbers and they kept changing, moving randomly. *Whoa, a skull and crossbones.* Was it laughing at her?

‘It’s encrypted. Let me try.’

‘Really? This is what we call modern technology. Unfortunately it doesn’t run on gas or coal.’

Hello, Hobo prospector man is dancing his fingers across the keyboard like a hundred words a minute secretary. But he said...?

‘Nope, can’t get in. You’re going to need the key, and a processor with more power than this one.’

‘You know about computers?’

‘I can write my name and scratch my arse in four different languages as well.’ Weldon put the laptop down and pulled out the stick studying the symbols scratched into the plastic. ‘Did

he say anything else to you? What about the texts, can you remember how they read?’

She wanted to cry again. On the bright side it looked like he was going to help. Kass closed her eyes and re-focused on the words.

‘Spencer sent me two texts.’ She said. ‘The first text was personal; the second more abstract, it didn’t make any sense to me.’ She recanted them both to him, word for word.

‘That’s quite a memory you have there? Now tell me what they meant?’

‘I don’t know, that’s why I need your help. Maybe he was desperate; maybe fingers and brain got out of synch. He panicked, it happens.’

‘I thought you said you were a cop, Cassandra, start thinking like one. Spencer is a smarter cookie than that. You need to think.’

‘About what? This isn’t the Times crossword. A stranger sends me two texts and my life turns into a PlayStation classic. There are no dragons or wizards, no secret scrolls.’

It’s just us. Kris Kristofferson, Benji, and me.

She wanted to cry again. The rollercoaster of emotions plummeting fast.

‘No wait. There is something.’ She’d missed it. ‘Both texts were the same. Both texts had exactly 192 characters and spaces. He was restricted by the size of the package.’ She looked to Weldon for ideas. ‘Why would a man so scared, send precious words that meant nothing?’

‘Sounds more like a smart guy to me, so I’m guessing he wouldn’t. The meanings in the words, even if the words have no meaning.’

‘You’re right, it is a frigging scroll. Smart guys send smart messages. Get me 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? Dare she? Yes she did. Finger slid across pad redirecting the pointer over Firefox. Two taps later the icon had opened.

Son of a bitch.

‘You have internet?’

‘Sometimes.’ Weldon called back. ‘Signals a bit crappy in these parts but if you’re lucky it works.’

This was the first good news she'd had in days. Kass' fingers did the keyboard dance and logged onto her email account. A couple of dozen spam, typical. The pointer fell over 'NEW' and she was typing. Pierce.LawgiverDredd@Google.com. Time to go on the offensive and bring in the Marines, find out why and where the Foundation had taken Josh. Time to hit back.

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. And if they have the Mexican authorities out looking for you, they're 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 two simple words highlighted on the screen.'

EMAIL SENT.

Oops

Special Agent Paul Santini was tired. Up until 30 minutes ago he was asleep in the marital bed with Mrs Santini. She'd grunted when the phone had rung but two decades of marriage had built up her immunity to late night calls. She'd refused to stir, and he sure as hell wasn't going to wake her.

So much for suspension then? He'd thought they might try to make it permanent, but the phone call had magically reinstated him. Back on the job with a chance to clear his name, to collect brownie points with the Director, something like that. It was probably best not to think about it as he exited his car to trademark blue lights and cop uniforms everywhere. He knew most of the faces; he'd liaised with homicide many times before. But not the fresh faced newbie that approached him, a takeaway coffee outstretched in his hand.

'Courtesy of the sergeant.' The young officer said.

'That had better have an extra shot, triple foam, with a squirt of hazelnut... And three sugars?'

'Err, no. I got it from the machine next door...'

'It's fine, I'm joking. Hmm, tastes good.'

It did too.

‘Sarge is up on the third floor, he’s waiting for you.’

‘Okay. Were you the first responder?’

‘Yes sir, took the call thirty minutes ago. Victim’s maid, err, one 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, found the victim in the bedroom.’

‘Did she do it?’

‘Who, the maid? Err, I don’t think so.’

‘Okay. Now tell me something you do know.’

‘Err, victim was shot twice. Apartment was trashed. The Maid doesn’t think there’s anything missing. But she is a bit traumatised.’

Santini faced his first choice of the morning. Stairs or lift? He’d take the stairs. Be like a workout down the precinct gym he’d never been too. Come to think of it, he didn’t actually know where it was.

‘CSI’s here yet?’

‘About fifteen minutes ago. They’ve been doing their thing since.’

He was impressed. The circus was already in full show, he wondered what was so urgent that his reinstatement was

required. Several more uniforms greeted them at the third floor landing. That was it, three flights of stairs and the lactose was squeezing at his thighs.

‘Officer...?’

‘Simpson, sir.’

‘You’ve done a good job son. I have a very important assignment that I think you can handle.’

‘Absolutely sir.’

He seemed eager, that was good. Santini handed him the empty takeaway. ‘You know how I like it; a good cop remembers every detail.’

‘Err, yes sir.’

Good, that had put the pin in that young man’s bubble. Someone had to pay for the four thirty wake up call.

‘And hurry up.’

‘Agent Santini, I thought you were taking a holiday?’ A new voice was raised from just inside the door.

‘Hey Beany.’ He answered, and entered the apartment.

First impressions were good. Nice place, the deceased had a very nice apartment.

‘What do we know, Beany?’

‘Not much. The holes were made by a 9mm. Weapon was found on the floor, looks like it was dropped in the hurry to leave. Victim got one in the face, and the other where you really don’t want it, made a mess of his shorts.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Oh yeah, and apparently neither shot killed him. Medical examiner said he bled out, took less than a minute.’

‘I find that hard to believe.’

‘There’s a lot of blood.’

‘No, that the ME’s been here already? Am I missing something, has the ATeam been employed whilst I was gone? Where are your homicide detectives?’

‘Sulking, because they put you in charge. You do know who’s in there?’

‘No. I just got a call telling me to get here, yesterday.’ It was a definite no to the ID, but Santini was already gathering information from the victim’s apartment. Whoever he was, he liked his classical music. Must have been a hundred or so cd’s. And he had a nice system to play them on, Bang and Olufsen brand. Nice big buttons and a sleek black outline with super skinny speakers that rose like the twin towers. He obviously liked the arts too, but couldn’t afford the real thing. Some nice

prints hung on the walls. This was interesting, a row of certificates from Berkeley Law School. Top student by the name of...

‘Pierce Reeseman? Is that Assistant District Attorney, going to be Mayor someday, Reeseman?’

‘Surprise.’

Great... The press would be all over this in an hour. Now he knew why they’d given this case to him. *Clever bastards.* Solve it and he’d be good with the Department again. Mess it up and he was out on his ass. *Oops, should have stayed in bed.*

‘Professional hit?’ He asked.

‘Only if the shooter was a hooker. I’d say the impacts make this a personal thing.’

‘Okay. Victim got a wife, girlfriend... a boyfriend?’

‘No wife, we’re checking on the rest.’

‘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 a ATM spy cam, shake down the local Hobos. There must be something, somewhere.’

‘Already on it.’

‘Excuse me.’ It was a woman’s voice that interrupted.

Santini watched as the young CSI passed him by, her latex covered hand gripped to the handle of an aluminium case. Ghost's, that's what they were, ghouls that picked over the flesh of the dead. She was young, barely out of college, all dressed up in her snow coloured Onesie.'

'They didn't look like that when we started, Special Agent.'

'Are you talking about her outfit, or her backside?'

'Both.'

'Well keep it to yourself, Beany. We'll both be in hot shit if Mother Hen hears you. And I'm in enough already.'

'Yeah, I heard. Was it worth it?'

'Never thump and tell, Beanie. It's the FBI code. Ahh, speak of the devil, here comes Mother Hen. CSI Heinz, good to see you again.'

'Paul? You're back?'

'Agent Santini, I think I'll check how the door to door is going. Excuse me Miss Heinz.'

'Sergeant.' She sounded reluctant to say Beany's name and waited until he was gone to speak. 'Are you still fraternising with that sexist pig?'

'Janet, he's a good cop. He gets things done. Tell me what you're team has?'

‘Victim’s been dead for about six hours.’ He followed her down the hall. ‘Two 9mil bullets one to the face, and the other to the pelvic region. If it has a surface it’s been dusted. The gun we found is a Beretta and is already at the lab. Serial number might give us an owner. We’ve got blood and hair samples from the bed. Some love juices too. It appears our Victim was entertaining someone recently.’

‘A girlfriend... Boyfriend?’

‘Could be both for all I know. Give me a couple of hours. I’ll get the DNA fast tracked for you.’ She walked him into the bedroom. ‘Near as I can tell the Perp fired from about here, four feet or so from the bed, and was standing above the victim. From the blood spatter I’d say the victim woke before the trigger was squeezed. Bullet was a through and through, found it in the headboard. Second slug left powder burns on the sleeper’s jammies. It was all very up close and personal. Not much I know, but we’re still gathering evidence. Let you know as soon as I do.’

‘Yeah, thanks Janet.’

Up close and personal was an understatement, poor bastard. Santini rounded the bed. Pierce was a bleeder all right. His blood had soaked through the sheets to reach the carpet.

The wall besides the bed was a Jackson Pollock. Beany was right, this did look personal.

‘Agent Santini, sorry to interrupt, but there’s a detective Christine Gemka outside. She’d like to speak to you.’

‘Gemka? Okay, tell her to give me a minute.’

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 would talk to her. Every uniform 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 mouths 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 foreboding.

A tall well-built figure stepped out into the hallway. Chrissie instantly recognised the features of FBI Special Agent Paul Santini. Special liaison between the Bureau and LAPD homicide. Damned if he hadn't been the talk of the Department some weeks ago. Got himself suspended for shoving the Deputy Chief through a door. Rumour had it a fist was coming next if others present hadn't intervened. First time close up, he was pretty buff for his age. Six foot two, all dark haired and mean looking, he had a Gerard Butler thing going on, and by the looks of him his game face was engaged; he didn't like her being here. His eyes already held questions, and a certain amount of

attitude towards her presence. But she wanted, no, she needed to know what was going on.

Okay, here goes.

Santini spoke first.

‘What brings accounts to a homicide?’

‘Homicide?’ He’d just confirmed the worst. ‘Who’s the victim?’ She asked.

‘Me first.’ Santini stepped fully into the hall. ‘Why are you present at my crime scene?’

‘Is it Pierce?’

‘You know the victim personally?’

The knot became a tug of war, a struggle to breath. He’d used the word *victim*.

‘Six one, blonde, lives at this address. Detective, do you know our victim?’

‘Yes, I think so, I know him.’

‘May I ask how you know about my crime scene?’

‘It came over the radio, I recognised the address. Oh God, does Kass know?’

‘Kass?’

‘Kassandra... Kassandra Krane. She’s my friend. She works for the Department, down in the Cupboard. Her and Pierce, they were an item.’

‘So, she’s the girlfriend?’

‘Yes. Why say it like that?’

‘She’s now a person of interest.’

‘Kassy? No, that’s stupid.’

‘You know how it works Detective.’ Santini’s attention turned to the Patrolmen 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. Well? Go, seek, and don’t return without caffeine.’

He was gone.

‘Detective Gemka, to the best of your knowledge did the victim have any enemies that you know of? Owe any money to bad people? 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? Time was that everyone liked me, or was that just my dog? Let’s take a walk you and I; I want to chat about your

friend, what's her name... Kassandra? I don't suppose you know
if she owns a Beretta?'

‘Are we cool with the Techie stuff, Number Two?’

‘We are, and we’ll be coming on line in, three, two, one... the Sentinel is up and running.’

‘So, just to be clear. Every Cell that enters that apartment is now connecting with your Pad?’

‘If it’s switched on and has Bluetooth, I just picked its pocket. Boom time, I already got six numbers. We now own that crime scene.’

‘And every time these phones make a call, we can hear the conversation?’

‘Roger that.’

‘That’s sweet.’

Carl loved the techie stuff; it never ceased to amaze him. Screw the politicians; this was where the real power was. He could infiltrate lives. Slide behind the masques of anyone he wanted. Watch and listen on the most intimate level. Nothing was sacred; nothing was private, not any more.

Two, plugged his ear into the Pad via Skullcandy, as an unexpected Cell number flashed up onto the screen.

‘Err, One. You have a call. It’s Mr Fortune.’

With Numbers Three and Four on other business he saw no reason to keep the call private.

‘Put it on speaker.’

‘Done.’

‘Mr Fortune, It’s so nice to hear from you. Everything is sweet at my end, when can I expect the package?’

‘There’s been an unexpected development. The package has gone missing.’

‘Please explain what that means? Have you lost her?’ *This was pleasing. The high and mighty Fortune wasn’t so perfect after all.*

‘We’re looking for her; Our Mexican contacts have enlisted local law enforcement. It’s just a matter of time.’

How sweet was this? Two, was a mirror of his grin. No, make that a smirk wrinkling across his face.

‘Carl?’

‘I’m listening, Mr Fortune. Just sifting through the variables.’ *And savouring the moment.* ‘Fortunately it doesn’t really matter. Whether you let her go *here*, or *there*, no-one will believe her story. She’s on the most wanted list now, on both sides of the border. Whatever the woman says, no-one is going to listen. We’ve left a trail an idiot could follow. Girl kills boy

in mysterious *luuuv triangle*. It happens. The mental struggle over her child's natural death sentence was obviously the trigger. If she surfaces in Mexico it will only strengthen the police's case. They'll probably think she tipped over the edge and did her own kid in one of those mercy killings. It happens all the time. Who's going to look for a kid in the wilds of Mexico? But if I may... should you find her first, I suggest you make it look like a suicide.'

'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? But I must remind you that she's alone, and cut off from her friends.'

'One.' Two interrupted. 'You need to see this.'

'Just a moment, Mr Fortune.' He indicated that the conversation be muted. Two flipped the Pad for him to see.

'What is that?'

All he saw was a screen full of numbers and text.

'Our dead friend has just received an email.'

'And?'

'It's from the package.'

'Ahh.' Carl's eyes opened with eager interest as he read the text. He nodded for Two to resume the call.

‘Mr Fortune, I may be able to help you with the problem. Two left a Sentinel on the boyfriend’s laptop and it’s intercepted an Email from the Kaine woman.’

‘Can you track it back to its source?’

Carl shrugged and offered the floor to his colleague.

‘Shouldn’t be a problem.’ Answered Two. ‘She’s not trying to hide the connection. Let me run a trace through the... I’ll have the account owner for you in a... She’s still in Mexico.’ He announced. ‘Accounts registered to a José Doroteo Arango Arámbula?’

‘Just a moment, Mr Fortune.’ Carl indicated that Two should mute the sound again. ‘Jose Arumbula? Better known as Pancho Villa? Is that a joke?’

‘Possibly boss, but not one of mine. I’m pinging the server as we speak, bouncing it right back via the satellite. User is in... Ooh, problem. You should tell Mr Fortune that he’s going to need a helicopter.’

‘Just put him back on the line.’

‘Done.’

‘I’m sending you the location now, but it’s a pretty rural location. No house numbers.’

Silence from Fortune.

‘I do have another suggestion for you. Since the woman wants to talk to her boyfriend, why don’t we oblige her? Who’s to know one finger dabbing at a keyboard from another? Doesn’t the delightful April type over a hundred words a minute?’

He was enjoying this. Life hadn’t been this amusing for a while. It didn’t last.

‘He’s gone.’ Said Two.

‘What... no thanks... no goodbye? How rude.’

Weldon exited the kitchen holding two cups.

‘My Little Mermaid or Incredible Hulk? You choose.’ He offered the shamelessly branded cups up before checking the stove. Kettle wasn’t boiled yet so he dropped a single tea bag into both cups. ‘Might I just add that sending emails and making phone calls are the two most stupid things you can do when trying to avoid detection. It’s in all the movies. People like that have eyes and ears everywhere. Real bad idea, don’t do it.’

She needed a change of subject.

‘So you believe me?’ *He must believe me?* ‘I’d trust Pierce with our lives. He has friends at the FBI; they’ll get the Mexican authorities to raid the Clinic.’

‘In whose dreams? Look, maybe, just maybe, he can get some action going out here, but it will take time. With you on the loose I guarantee that anything incriminating in that building is already finding its way to another location, and that includes Josh.’

He was right. April had said as much before head-butting her into unconsciousness. She stared at the laptop willing it to do something... anything.

Check your emails, Pierce. For crying out loud you've got computers at work, and at home. Just look at your phone.

Please, open your email.

Nothing.

'I can't just sit here, we need to do something.'

'We? Are you including Boon in all of this?'

'Can he drive a car, or get me across the border?'

'For a bar of chocolate he would probably 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 trying to involve me in a monumental fantasy, or a deadly conspiracy. Neither one ends up good for me, or Boon.'

'Fine. How far is the nearest crossing into the US?'

'It's a ways. You thinking of crossing the line like a tourist? In case you've forgotten, you're wanted by the Federales. Hell, you got a price on your head, and that means every local 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 gringo, even one as pretty as you.’

‘Well I have to try. You *could* help me.’

He seemed reluctant, why was that? He should jump through hoops, if not for her, then for Josh. It was time to play the Star Spangled Banner... Fly the Stars and Stripes. She... they, needed to do something. And why hadn’t Pierce read his emails?

‘Look, I could run you to the border, introduce you to a friend.’

‘Who would that be, a colleague from 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. Heading now toward Smithy, toward a way of making things happen. It had been years since she had reassembled a gun, not since the academy. Her fingers trembled as the bits tried to connect, and failed.

Why? There was that frigging word again? Why, was this happening to them? Why, didn’t Pierce respond? Why, was their only help some bum that wished he had never picked her up? Why, why, why?

The half assembled gun slammed down onto the work surface, the anger in her hand flowing back through her body to stop the tears. She could barely look at him.

‘Please... Help me... Help me find my baby.’

She saw it for just a fleeting moment. The way he looked, or didn’t, she wasn’t sure. But she was certain she’d made a connection with him. Just as he looked away she could see the empathy, feel it even from this far across the room.

Do it, please. Help me... Please.

‘I just want my baby boy back.’

‘And then what? Suppose you do find him, and free him? Do you know how to hide from people like this? Sure, call this Pierce fella; 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. And the likelihood is that 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.’

‘What then? What am I supposed to do; I’m a cop that works in an office, not a field agent or a spy. You tell me. You tell me what I should do.’

‘Well 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? Not a good move.’ He was getting fed up with sighing. ‘You have leverage.’ Weldon said

He was looking at the laptop. No, it was the flash drive.

‘Whatever is on that flash, is leverage for your son?’

Josh.

A soft rhythmic tone sounded from the laptop and stunned them both.

‘Oh for crying out loud, please tell me you haven’t been sending emails.’

Weldon was angry. You didn't need to be an empath to spot it. She wanted to reach for the laptop but could see him eyeing it too. It was like a loaded gun halfway between them, who could get to it first? 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 he does believe me.

Her backside shifted across the sofa and gingerly pulled the laptop to her knees. The email, it was from Dredd. Pierce had replied.

"Kass, I have been so worried about you. What's wrong darling, what on earth are you doing in Mexico?"

Where did she start? Her nimble fingers pressed at the keys.

Pierce, they've got 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. Oh, and the dead bodies lying out there in the desert; where the sun nearly fried your brain.'

She glared over her shoulder. The 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 Lukeville port of entry. 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.* ‘Where the hell is Hombre Blanco?’

Her hands moved toward the keys just as the lid was shut over them.

‘Hey, what are you doing?’

‘Hoping you’ll stop and think about what you’re doing.’

‘It’s Pierce.’

‘Is it. Don’t you think that was a bit too easy? Ask yourself; if that was you at the other end wouldn’t you want to know more? I would. If that was me I’d be asking more questions; your story is a little far-fetched. And why Hombre? It’s a small town with a lot of bad Mexicans. Think about it Kassandra, no Federal agency would roll with this without more information.’

‘It’s Pierce, alright.’

It was him, it had to be him. Who else would it be?

Weldon opened the laptop.

‘Where’s the harm in being sure?’

Okay, there was something. Something very obvious. Pierce was a two finger typist, they hover and plodder. It’s why his secretary had to type everything for him.

‘I suppose the reply *was* a bit quick.’ She conceded.

No. This had to be Pierce, it has to be.

‘Kassandra, ask something that only Pierce would know. But don’t be too direct. I’m sure it’s fine; just to be sure.’

Too late. Weldon had stolen the hope from her. Deflated like a punctured balloon was how it felt. 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 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 thing to type, but I’m scared Pierce. I’m a mess. That thing we joked about before I left, I’ll do it.”

She placed a smiley face after the text.

“Princess Leah.” Another smiley face. “Shit, I always loved her really. What about you? Darth or Luke? You’d look cute as either. 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. I like them both. I’m coming for you, Kass...”

She closed the laptop like a teenager caught watching porn.

It wasn’t him. No, no, no, it wasn’t Pierce.

‘Problem?’ Asked Weldon.

‘You know the answer, so why ask the question. It’s not Pierce. He would never miss a chance to dress up as Han Solo. It’s his favourite character; he’s been Han at every fancy dress party he’s ever been to since he was a child.’

‘Really, and you don’t find that odd for an Assistant DA in Los Angeles.’

‘He’s a good sweet man who... Oh my 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 from 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.

This is getting dark and dangerous.'

'I'm sorry.' She said.

'You're sorry? Believe me; 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. It's true, no good deed goes unpunished.'

Thanks, just what I needed to hear. Where did you get that from? He'd just 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, and it hurts people. Safety's on, 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 wha... Son of a ...

'You did a lot of things when you picked me up.' She recalled the mention of a good frisking. 'So I'm not a psycho, then? The sun didn't bleach my brain.'

‘It would appear that you are right in the head after all.’

Hey, did he say burst capability. She liked the sound of that.

‘Now they know where you are, pretty soon they’ll know all about me. Did I say thank you for that?’ Weldon stepped back toward the kitchen. ‘I liked living here.’ It was his turn to pace. ‘The way I see it 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 and a one way trip into a body bag back at the Clinic.’

‘And the third?’

‘I told you, information is the source of all power. You have the power; you need to find a way to use it?’

Kass followed his line of sight.

The laptop? No, the flash drive, he was looking at the flash drive.

‘Spencer gave his life for what was on that drive. I’m guessing that the people who have Josh would like to get it back. Maybe they’d be interested in an exchange?’

Look at him, the serious features and cold eyes. He was calculating 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. It was all over very quickly, and ended in a sticky mess. No, that wouldn't happen. Look at him, Weldon, whoever he was, knew exactly what he was doing. He was no first timer.

‘Who are you?’ She asked. And this time she wanted an answer. ‘You’re no ordinary hermit are you?’ It wasn’t that she meant to whisper the words. They just came out that way. ‘Who are you? And don’t give me any crap about hoboing, or prospecting.’

Why didn't he say anything? Why is he staring at me like that? Oh shit, he's coming back into the lounge, and he doesn't look too happy about the inquisition. Why is he pointing his finger at me?

‘I want you to remember that you involved me in this. What you need to understand is when folk start waving guns in my direction, I get very upset. People end up dead. So I have just the one question for you before we get into bed together. How far are you willing to go to get your boy back?’

Kass stood. She stepped over to Weldon taking his gaze.

‘I’ll kill any mother fucker that stands in my way.’

‘Good answer. It will probably come to that. Now follow with me, and bring the laptop.’

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. This wasn't normal, nothing was normal about this guy. For a moment she stopped breathing as each of the eight steps took her further down. This was Crazyville, following a stranger down into the darkness. What was she thinking?'

'The lights to your right.'

It would help if she could where the right was. There, something touched her hand, a piece of string. She pulled it.

Too bright, she was blinded. Squinting helped, as her eyes began to adjust. If her heart kept thumping like this there'd soon be a hole in her chest. Kass tensed, if he so much as touched her he'd find his eyes on the floor and his face filled with her nails. Oh god, she'd just realised... Look at her nails.

'Oh my God.'

She wasn't looking at her cuticles any more. They'd stepped down into some kind of workshop, the type that most men used to repair furniture, and watches. Weldon had Guns. There were a lot of guns. Automatic rifles hung from each of the walls and a

bundle of smaller arms were parked muzzle first into sleeves on a desk, that was attached to three walls. This was taking home defence to the extreme.'

'Is Weldon you're real name? Is that a Cell phone? You son of a bitch, you said you didn't have one.' It was the first thing she reached for. Weldon grabbed it first.

'Are you a Spook, or some kind of assassin?'

'Let's just say that I worked security in another life.'

'Really? Was that government or private?'

'The big one, Uncle Sam.'

He picked a holdall from below the desk and opened it on top. He lifted a gun from the wall and carefully placed it inside.'

'Is that an MP5?' She asked.

'Heckler Koch at your service. You ever fired one?'

She shook her head as Weldon lifted the weapon back out from the bag and flipped it around for her to see.

'The MP5 is durable, reliable, and light. It has a retractable stock and a thirty round magazine.' As if to offer proof the stock was snapped out and the magazine discharged into his hand and then slapped back into the weapon. 'The

single and most important aspect of this weapon, is that you do not point it at me.’ He thrust it toward her.

‘It’s nice. Well balanced.’ She spun it over and pulled the slick charging handle and let it snap back. ‘It’s lighter than it looks.’ She said. ‘I like it.’

‘Well it’s mine. You get to play with the Beretta.’

Her hands were empty again as the HK went back into the bag closely followed by spare magazines and another assault weapon she didn’t recognise.

‘Are you ex CIA?’ She asked.

‘I can type you a CV or I can get us prepared. I can’t do both.’

Okay, whatever? Not that it really mattered. It was like Bin Laden’s cave down here. Dozens of shelves filled with gun parts, assorted weapons, and ammunition. There was even a small lathe in the corner. *Were those grenades?* There was a whole box of brand new grenades open on the desk.

‘You’re not a terrorist are you?’

‘Look, I was in Signals okay. Been round the world a few times and ended up at Arlington treading water and watching graves. Some thanks for joining the Corp at eighteen and spending my life in the service of my country.’

‘Signals? Really?’

‘Sure. After I joined up they re-wired my brain and created some...’

‘Rewired what? Are you related to Jason Bourne?’

‘No. It’s a natural process of creating neural pathways, they teach you.’ He paused his packing of armaments. ‘I’m a quick study, see things, patterns and the like. So they moved me to Signals.’

Okay, she’d roll with that. It was obviously code for Army Intelligence.

‘You’re telling me all of this is just a hobby?’

‘It beats cycling in spandex. Do you know how many middle aged dumbasses want to look like Lance Armstrong on the roads these days? Too many. They must be taking more drugs than *he* was if they think Lycra hangs well on a fat ass.’

‘Fashion advice aside, I’m guessing that you’re not as poor as you make out, either. 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 look on his face suggested not

‘Open 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. Fire up the email, you’re going to make them an offer they won’t able to refuse.’

‘I am?’

What choice did she have? Weldon, whoever he was, was offering her a chance to get Josh back. Why was immaterial. Maybe he was just a concerned citizen. Better still, he was a Patriot, all Yanks standing together... Who cared? It was a chance to get her baby back before he disappeared forever.

Kass began typing.

“April, I know it’s you.”

Nothing.

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.’

“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?”

‘Okay, I have her attention. What do I do with it?’

‘Ask her the obvious questions. Who she is? What’s this all about? What colour knickers does she have on? It doesn’t matter, Just keep her chatting.’

‘You want me to have a conversation? Won’t they be trying to trace us?’

‘I expect 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 laptops 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.

“Cat got your tongue Cassandra?”

Deep breath, be nice to the bitch... screw that.

“Why are you doing this? 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, quite the contrary. Josh is our star pupil; we’ll take great care of him. He probably sends his love; I won’t wake him to ask. Bless him; he looks so peaceful lying there. 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 do whatever you want. Just let Josh go. He’s just 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. What now? Something, she had to type something, but how to prove what she said was true? *Think Cassandra, think.*

“Goodbye Cassandra. I'll give your love to Josh when he wakes up.”

Comes round? They've drugged him?

“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.”

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 the power 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 hovered above the keyboard? Her body was running on a cocktail of authority and fear. She was high and empowered

with the knowledge that she could hurt them. Terrified that they would see her hand and call her bluff, and raise the stakes by hurting Josh. She hadn't realised her finger still hovered over Send.

Trust your instincts Kass. But what if I'm wrong?

'I'm right, suck this you bitch.' She hadn't meant to say it out loud.

She pressed Send.

Another pause as unseen forces pondered their next move, considered her threat. *Type something... please.* Tension tore at her skin, her hands raked slowly through her hair pulling hard at her scalp. She didn't even notice. Tick Tock, the seconds passed like minutes. The light of the screen burnt at her eyes, they stared so hard. *Do something, say something... Josh?*

A single ping from an incoming text.

"I'd like to speak to José Doroteo Arango Arámbula."

Who... What?

Text began to appear on the screen, but how, she wasn't typing? It wasn't *her* fingers tapping at the keys. *Weldon?* She watched the text reveal itself.

"Talk."

"Can I just call you Pancho?"

"Agreed."

"The woman with you is dangerous. She has 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.)

A pause.

"If you're Mexican why are you helping this woman? She's trash Americano. Whatever she has offered you, she lies. Kassandra Kaine has no money. Perhaps you are a business man, we can make an alternative arrangement?"

"Talk."

"A free pardon for your intervention, and some financial compensation for your time?"

Weldon sucked a deep breath.

Why was he looking at her like that? Please, no, he wasn't considering making a deal?

'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... Cash... You get the data stick. I'll put a bullet in the woman, you can keep the kid. It's a win win. Just like Las Vegas without the odds."

A pause

"Your terms are acceptable. You have a deal, Signor Villa. 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 a minute.' She already 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?’

‘I’m gathering Intel. Trust me Cassandra, Josh is still alive. She just told us that Josh is what this whole thing is about; they’re not going to hurt him. And we’ve just created an opportunity to get him back. 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 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.’

Was he lying? No, not lying, but could she trust him? This would be easy money for him, just deliver her and the flash drive and collect. She wanted so badly to believe.

Kass felt Weldon’s hand on her arm. He knew exactly what she was thinking and she was guessing that this time the Beretta still retained 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, gentle pressure on her arm. 'Now persons unknown are tracking my laptop, and will doubtless know more about me than I do in a very short time. I cannot change that. 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. If you don't want to help me... then go fuck yourself. Just leave me the guns.'

She 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, making a decision.

The laptop pinged a new message. Weldon's eyes opened with mischief and a broad smile. Kass watched his hand retract very slowly. It returned offering her the pad.

'She's getting impatient.' He said. 'How'd you like to have some fun with April?'

Kass realised she'd stopped shaking. She realised too that she *did* trust him.

'Okay.' *Why wouldn't she.* 'What have you got in mind?'

'We give them what they want, only we bring a little surprise to make sure we all get out alive.' She liked what he suggested.

"Still waiting for your GPS."

"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 Flash drive."

Pause.

"No need. I have what I want. Goodbye Cassandra....."

'What does that mean?' Weldon looked as confused as she was. No, that was concern, turning quickly into downright panic.

'Out... Now.' He ordered and had her by the hand.

What was going on, where were they going?

'You're hurting my arm.'

‘That’ll be the least of your problems if we don’t get out of here right now.’

‘What’s going on?’

Steps and doorway passed by in a blur, the kettle still steaming on the stove. Boon looked mystified but scrambled after them, he was more than willing to play. Weldon crashed through the front door, the old frame letting go of its hinges as they broke out into sunshine.

‘RUN.’

Has he gone mad?

That’s when she heard it, just above the scrabbling sounds of her boots. It was a windy sound, nothing frightening, like something big passing through the leaves of a tree. It was getting closer, and closer, with unbelievable speed. Right above her head now as she tried to look, just as she spiralled out of control. Yanked hard by the strong hand she fell into a downward descent and hit the bottom of a ditch as the world around erupted in heat and sound.

Armageddon flashed bright behind closed eyes as thunder roared impatient through the ground and shook at her innards. The smell of the air went sour as her face glowed in extreme

heat, and threatened to melt. It felt like God himself had landed on Earth and boy he was pissed off.

Kass tried to breath but the air was gone and then back in spades as if the God of Thunder had clapped his hands and sent the mother of all wind. That's when it started to rain, small drops at first, followed by big ones that hurt as they fell. Then a deluge of dirt fell from the sky onto her head.

'Kassandra... Kassandra.'

'Weldon?' It was difficult to speak with dust sticking to everything moist. 'What happened?' *Where was he? What had happened?* She couldn't see more than a few feet.

'I think I was wrong.' Weldon shouted. 'They have found us.'

'Weldon, Oh my God, the house, it's gone. What just happened?' 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.' The missile had missed but the dust that filled her lungs might still prove fatal. 'Do you still want to date April?'

‘Me and April, we have some serious issues to sort through. Get up; it won’t take long before someone decides to investigate all this smoke. 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 the dog?

‘Where’s Boon?’ She asked.

‘Boon? Uh-oh, Boon boy. Here boy.’

No response. Weldon called again, his voice more agitated. ‘Boon.’ And again. ‘Boon, get your ass out here, 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 toward them, his tail curled and thrust between his legs. Weldon’s macho bullshit went out of the window as he fell to his knees and smothered the animal. Which part of the animal to fluff and pat first? The wiry canine buried his head into Weldon’s lap, tail wagging like a flag in a wind.

She knew exactly how he felt.

Boon was dropped off at the home of a crazy looking Mexican man who lived in a lean-to next to a cave. She didn't want to ask, it was enough that Boon seemed happy. Weldon swapped trucks with the man after a chat with raised voices, and they headed northeast through the desert, to God knows where. She did ask, and Weldon tended to talk a lot, but never really said anything of value. Reminding her several times that she couldn't be trusted, and that half of Mexico was out looking for them. None of which helped. All he would say was that friends would help them cross the border back into the US. Most of the two hour trip Kass spent mulling over the previous few days. What if, and maybe, they were the predominate thoughts. *Josh*. And why didn't Weldon ever shut his cake hole?

From nowhere the countryside began to sprout buildings.

'Where are we?' She asked, sitting up for the first time in an hour.

'Just outside Sonoyta, a little town south of the border.'

'Still in Mexico?' She was disappointed.

Broken buildings began to pass by on either side. Not a window left uncovered by bars. Every tanned face that looked,

stared, and told a tale of hard times. Dogs, there were a lot of dogs slinking around. The air stank of poverty. She'd never considered how poor Mexicans were, not really. No wonder they were so eager to cross the border, so keen to risk so much in pursuit of a better life. The truck squealed to a stop.

'No.' She meant it. 'I'm not going in there.'

The town had a square, of sorts. Its broken fountain surrounded by an array of once colourful buildings and awnings, now bandaged and soiled by age and distress. Weldon had parked them outside of a bar; at least it looked like a bar. Two horses with sombrero clad riders were rearing either side of the iron barred gate that stood open at its centre. The words *welcome to Mexico* were painted in red below the roofs eaves. Maybe the half dozen hostile looking Mexicans now rising from their chairs could see the irony?

'It's fine. Just don't make any sudden moves.'

'You're shitting me? Weldon, they've got guns.'

'Shhh, let me do all the talking. Everyone likes Americans. Unless of course you're from the Middle East... or Asia... or Central America. Hey, Greaseball. You got any decent American beer in there? Got a Miller or a Bud?'

‘Please tell me that you know these people. Weldon, shit, get back in the truck. Weldon? Weldon.’ It was difficult to shout quietly.

A woman broke the tension on the veranda. She was demure and dark, but a handsome fifty something.

‘There she is... my little Chipotle.’

The woman half frowned and then rapped out something in Mexican that caused the six brutish sentinels to 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.’

No choice then but to leave the truck.

‘Please, come, you are welcome.’ Chess beckoned, and then barked orders with a Gatling gun’s precision. A man behind a high bar called to another who emerged through saloon doors with beer in bottles. The inside looked like a nineteen sixties Taco Bell, most of its furniture salvaged from the Alamo.

‘Try not to stare, Kass. Don’t insult her, don’t upset her, and don’t forget to pay the bill. You’ll be fine.’

‘It wasn’t me she gave the look too. I don’t think she was too pleased to see you. Are you and her...?’

‘God no, that women would probably eat the male after copulation. Or worse, she’d expect him to marry her. Either way, you end up fucked.’

‘Hey Chess... beautiful... it’s been a while?’

‘What now?’ Kass asked.

‘We wait. Chess will make all the arrangements. A few phone calls, some palms greased. Gets dark around eight pm in these parts, We’ll probably go then.’

‘Great, 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 are plugged into the law enforcement switch boards on both side 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? 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 or Black Ops.

Hey, my glass is getting empty.’

‘Fine.’ The neck tipped and poured into both glasses. ‘I just wish they’d turn that bloody music off. Slow trumpets and guitars, it gives me the willies. It reminds me of a Rover’s

trunk, okay. Not a nice place to be.’ Kass took the slug of tequila.

‘I think the Mexicans find it soulful.’

‘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 cranky.’

‘Cranky? I’m angry, tearful and borderline neurotic. Someone has my son, and I’m sitting here getting smashed in a Cartel brothel.’

‘Hey, welcome to Mexico.’

‘Why?’

‘Why Mexico?’

‘No.’ Another shot slid down her throat. ‘Why are you helping me? What’s in it for you?’ She squared up to him and poured them both another drink. ‘Spill. I want the truth.’

‘I’m into self-sacrifice. My guru master encourages me to follow Buddha’s example.’

‘That’s bullshit.’

‘You’re right. Who’d want to be re-born as a Horny Jack Toad anyway? I think it stems from being a nice guy. I got too

many genes from my mother's side. No, I'm just bored. Ah, got it. I'm a man looking for high seas and adventure.

What difference does it make?'

'No, the lies are just a smoke screen. You're scared, aren't you? Someone found you. They took your house out, and you don't know who.'

'I know who, it was a girl named April. What I don't know is why? And I think you've had enough of that.'

'Don't touch my drink.' She jarred the shot back and poured herself another. 'Who was the woman in the photo?'

'Photo?' He lifted his eyes to meet hers.

Bingo

That 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 prepared.

'Susanna Rey.' He said. 'That was her maiden name, she was my wife. The cute little thing next to her was Kirsten, my daughter. Now pass me the bottle.'

'Oh, you have a family. Where are they?'

'They're both gone now.'

'Left you, eh? Hardly surprising. One lie and a Senorita too many?'

‘They’re both dead.’

Shit, was that the truth? Don’t mess with my head about things like that. One look in his eyes confirmed he wasn’t lying.

‘Sorry. I didn’t mean too...’ Yes she did. She wasn’t sorry; she had a right to know what his motives were. Josh’s life was at stake.

‘One thing you get living down here,’ he said as the glass filled again, ‘is time to reflect... to remember. Stupid thing is, I came here to try and forget. I guess some things just don’t away.’

It was her turn to fill the tumbler. This had suddenly got heavy. More Tequila met the back of her throat.

‘How 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.

‘I didn’t do the deed personally, no. But I wasn’t there when they needed me most. Boo hoo, right?’ He raised, tilted, swallowed, and breathed out a long fiery sigh. Then pushed his glass back toward the bottle. ‘Misery likes to share.’

‘I’m sorry... really, I am.’ She tilted the bottle toward the glass. Close to needing another one.

‘Losing someone is bad karma, it never let’s you go, always hangs around.’ Weldon raised his glass. ‘To Josh.’

‘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, they were ineffective when my family needed them most. I was halfway round the world when... a burglary gone wrong.’ Glass rose to initiate one last toast. ‘Two black kids looking for initiation into a gang that I’d never even heard of. Oldest one was seventeen.’ Down the hatch. ‘I should have been there.’

‘It wasn’t your fault.’

‘Maybe so, but it’s a difficult thing to carry around.’

‘What happened, to you?’

‘I developed *anger* issues on the job, became a mite too efficient. Collateral damage became a by-product of my work. Huh, and they said *I* was out of control. Re-fill, please. Thank you. To the departed, and those soon to be. Fill it again.

‘Anyhow, they debriefed me one last time and then parcelled me away somewhere a little less sensitive. I shit you not; I really *was* at Arlington for three years.’ He started to

laugh. 'Here's the kicker. When I saw you, you reminded me of her... of Sussana.'

Now they did need another bottle. It came before Kass could raise her hand.

'I wondered, for just a moment, if maybe the universe had a sense of humour after all. When I heard your story, I thought that maybe, just maybe, it was giving me another chance.'

Kass didn't know what to say.

Misery... Tequila, it tasted like the proper combination, and probably the only two words that were necessary right now. But I swear, if you're lying to me?

'Is the music starting to sound different now?' He asked.

Music? Son of a bitch... it is.

'That's what Tequila and the Trumpet do for you. You're in Mexico now.'

Christ, I didn't realise I could get any more depressed.

'Do you remember anything else,' Weldon said at last, 'something that someone said, maybe it didn't seem important at the time? Think woman... try to think back to your conversation with Spencer.'

Spencer?

'I have done, a dozen times. There's nothing.'

‘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. No, wait. He spoke to someone on the phone. He spoke to April.’ It was all a bit hazy, the sounds from the cab 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, tried 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 loca, that 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.’

“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 word for word?’

‘Yes.’

‘Hmm, impressed. Did you overhear any other names?’

‘No, but Fortune mentioned Senator Rushmore when we spoke in LA. He seemed quite keen to drop his name into the conversation, as a Patron of the Foundation.’

‘That figures. It gives the lie credibility when you drop names, but it doesn’t mean that Senator Rushmore’s 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?’

‘Washington.’

If he tapped his glass like that again? What was she, a barmaid? And what had he pulled from his pocket? Were they the texts she’d scribbled down at the shack?

‘Back in two thousand I got transferred to the 3rd Infantry regiment at Fort Myers, in Washington. I was retired. No handshake, No watch. Not even a thank you from my country. I spent three years to and froing on the public transport system

in the capital. trying to put the rage back in the bottle.’ He handed Kass the paper. ‘Read it out loud for me.’

‘Okay.’

“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? What does he know? What does he think he knows?

‘Spit it out.’

‘When you have something important to say but you think someone might be listening. You don’t want them to hear. What do you 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.’

A sudden shot of adrenaline lifted her above the alcoholic veil. Her synopsis fired up through the forty per cent spirit fuelling her brain. *How the hell could he know what Spencer had intended from just a few numbers and names?*

‘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? Put that with the DCCB scratched on the Flash drive and the number 19, and what do you have?’

She shook her head as the Mexican mist began to rise up again.

‘I think it’s a number twenty seven bus that leaves from a stop on Kstreet, somewhere on the DC circular bus system. Ergo, I think he’s telling us about a bus route in Washington.’

Weldon poured himself another.

‘A Bus route in Washington? And you got that from a few scratched letters?’

‘Public transport is a hobby of mine.’

‘Another hobby?’

‘Of sorts. I spent 25 years in the Military. I never needed to drive, Corp took me everywhere. The rest was by train or by cab, and mostly via bus in the latter years. Not everybody drives a goddamn car. Hell, I’d never even driven an automobile before I came south of the border. Let you into a little secret, darlin. I still aint got a driver’s licence.’

Wait a minute; is he talking like a hobo again?

‘No, I shit you not. And 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. I bet that his shit was as green as Irish Silk. More Mexican petrol, its fuelling my brain.’ It disappeared in a jerk and a gulp. ‘Phew, that’s good. Look, you keep the lies as close to the truth as possible if you want them to be believed. If Spencer was a Pro, the encryption would be as well. Did that look like a billion dollar, three sixty bit algorithm chuckling back at you? No, and for that reason it’s starting to make more sense. Spencer was undercover alright, but he wasn’t a cop, not a journalist, he was an amateur, a rank amateur. Maybe he was involved with Eco Terrorists, or maybe just a loner, I really don’t know. But as sure as shit sticks, he was an amateur. A man on a mission

looking for something that got him killed. And whatever that was, it's now residing on that flash drive.'

'You can't be sure of any of that?'

But it does make sense.

'Look, this whole scenario rolls around something to do with cancer, and medicine, right? Well I'm telling you that it's a damn sight more than that. You said that Spencer seemed shy? So let's assume that he's probably not a doctor, he'd have a bigger ego for a start. More the kind of white coat that sits alone in a lab talking to his test tubes. 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. I bet he couldn't believe his luck when he was shortlisted for this gig. Hey, you... Manuel.'

Weldon was up off his chair.

'Where are you going?'

'Need to get something.'

He was off and roaming, all eyes immediately followed him, and then reverted back to her. *Oh God, she'd almost forgotten where she was. Was it really that dark in here, or was the booze affecting her eyes. What, no-one got a girlfriend? Staring at women a national pastime? What's wrong with you*

people? At least a dozen locals were gawking. They made her skin crawl, or was that the booze. No, look at them, up to no good, no doubt. She'd arrest the lot of them back home. Put a laptop to their heads and make them turn out their pockets.

Yeah, think on that.

Shit, how strong was this stuff? She lifted the half empty glass to her lips and slugged the warm remnants. *Still gawking?* Better take another drink. *Finally, the Weldon has returned.*

'You took your time. I could have been mugged, or gang raped, or stabbed to death with a tortilla. And where the hell did you find a laptop?'

'I borrowed it from Emilio. Put it behind the driver's seat.'

'From the weirdo guy in the cave?'

'Yep. It was part of the deal for the truck.'

'Deal... what deal? Oh my God, you stole it from him. Did you steal the truck? Oh my God, I'm an accessory to larceny. Is that your dongle you have in your hand?'

'You're not much of a drinker are you?' Weldon started to tap the keyboard like a concert pianist.

'You've done that a few times, then. Maybe you should give it to me. I am an expert; I work in a cupboard full of experts.

Why is he looking at me like that?

‘I think I’ll manage. I told you, I really was in the Corp. I started out in Signals, and got to be a dab hand with all things that contain transistors. I think I read somewhere that the chips in these laptops have a couple hundred million of them.’

Actually, that was quite interesting.

‘What, no... Bullshit. God, you’re a compulsive liar. Do you think anyone would mind if I threw up on the bar?’

‘I don’t suppose anyone would even notice. Now if you can keep God out of the conversation for five minutes, I’ll show you what I’ve found about the mysterious Mr Spencer?’

‘Fine. I s’pose you’re good at crosswords too?’

‘I do 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 toward her.

‘Kassandra Krane, meet Granville Spencer. A biologist *and* a Chemist, he has... 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 there he went to... Pharmaceuticals, that was about four years ago. So now we have to ask ourselves how our Spencer got from a pharmaceutical lab in Venezuela, to a Black Op Cancer research

facility in Mexico? And more important to us... why? Why did he get himself mixed up with people like that?’

‘Money, it’s always money.’

‘No, I don’t think so. Focus on the texts. What about the name Jay, probably someone he knows, and is fond of too. Most likely a girl’s name, and unlikely to be an alias.’

‘Whoa whoa, wait a minute; before you leave me behind on this, I want to know how you got a few symbols turned into a bus route in Washington DC?’

‘Arlington. Me and public transport, we were like that.’ He crossed his fingers. ‘I was quite the social creature back then.’

Yeah, right. Sociable, I think not.

‘Think about it. All routes in this puzzle lead us to the Capital. G’co is a private security firm. It’s a heavyweight with government contracts and has connections all over the world. But it’s *based* in Washington.’

Having never heard of them I will take your word for it.

‘And Foggy Bottom is...?’

Wait, wait, I know this one.

‘It’s a metononon... a me.. a metonym, for the US State Department.’ *Did she say that right?*

‘Correct. And said Government Department is based *quite literally* in the district of Foggy Bottom, Washington DC.’

‘Okay, okay... 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 friends, and doubtless someone capable of decrypting that flash. Then... then we will know as much as April and her friends.’

‘Keep going, I’m in awe. I need more drink.’

I think you’ve had enough.’

‘I told you, keep your big, really big hands off my bottle.’

‘Fine, it’s your headache, not mine.’

Don’t you shake your head at me like that, this is pussy juice compared to Mr Jim Beam.

‘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?’

‘It could be a soup kitchen? Or a drop in centre for junkies.’

‘Yes it could. Or you could just stop thinking like a cop. Friend Spencer was smart; he saw things in a deeper vein. He was a man of principle, and probably lived with a lot of guilt.

Think about it. Who did he give the flash drive too? Not a corporation or a hack journalist for profit. He obviously wasn't part of any 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 he was a spiritual man as well.'

'And where did you get the guilt from?'

'He wanted Grace to forgive him.'

'Oh, yeah, right.' She belched in his general direction. 'And Grace is who, his mum?'

'I doubt it.'

'A partner in crime then... a girlfriend... one of several million females that 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 go for a bus ride through the Capital.'

‘Washington? No, Josh, he’s still in Mexico.’

‘We don’t know that. In fact it’s highly unlikely. They’ll have moved him the moment they knew you were free. The only thing we know for sure is the contents of that flash drive are fatal to them. That makes the data on it your only way of getting Josh back. Think about it. They’ve already killed Spencer. They didn’t think twice about trying to take us *both out...* and with a missile. Come on... whatever clever tricks they had planned for you went wrong in the desert. They sure as shit didn’t know Spencer had given you that flash drive. They want it back, or they want it gone. Everything we know is pointing us towards Washington.’

No, I can’t do it. Josh is still here, I feel it, maybe not at the Clinic, but somewhere. Somewhere closer than Washington. The drink was messing with her head. Thoughts were trapped and beginning to spiral, none of them good.

What if, what if... If only.

‘TURN THAT FUCKING MUSIC OFF.’

There, she had said it, and out loud too.

What are you staring at? What, you want a piece of me? *Oh God my head is going to explode.*

Someone must have listened. A peso had been dropped into the slot and the music had changed. It was familiar. “One way or another, I’m gonna find you, I’m gonna get you get you get you get you. One way or ano...”

No way... Was that Blondie?

It was a sign, a freaking sign. Maybe Weldon was to? The tall hobo leaning against the bar had his steely eyes locked firmly on hers. *He was waiting... what for?* She tried to imagine him without the beard, without the dust in his hair. Yeah, it was a sign. A sign that April and her cronies had messed with the wrong couple.

‘To Washington.’ She said.

Weldon raised his glass.

‘Washington.’ He repeated. ‘I’ll help you get your boy back.’

It was a dumbass idea. Was it really the best they could come up with? All the assurances in the world hadn't convinced her.

“One person, one load, we never fail to deliver.”

Who was this guy, DHL. The driver with the heavily slicked hairpiece was adamant. The smiling gaps in his teeth were the last thing she saw as he closed the lid above her head. *I mean, really... locked inside a crate marked frijoles enlatados... 'canned beans'.*

It was a rough loading onto the truck, in amongst the dozens of identical boxes, and then a spine jarring journey endured as balding tyres passed across uneven tarmac. But none of that compared to the demonic orchestra of car horns and revving engines, the foul language and the exhaust fumes as the truck had crawled through the queues at the border. She was a jack in the box when Pueblo had let her out on the other side. No wonder the damn things sprang up with that look on their face.

Time to think and remember, it gave her plenty of time to do both. The last conversation with Weldon was a regular replay.

“How’s your memory,” he had asked.

Thank God it was retentive. And he was right; she really did bring God into things a lot. A list of instructions had ensued.

“The authorities will doubtless be looking for a man and a woman travelling together. So we cross separately.” He was talking to Chess more than her. The Latino woman was taking photos with a big Polaroid, the flash kept making her flinch. The whining noise as the photo ejected made her feel sick.

Never again with the Tequila.

“I’m thinking a few curls in your hair and a honey dew tint. Maybe glasses, a designer brand. There’ll be make up and stuff waiting for you. Also an envelope with cash, forged Id, and a disposable phone with a single number in the memory. Do not call anyone else. 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. Don't miss it."

She uploaded a set of directions, from Dulles airport to the Capital, committed straight to memory.

"I'll find you in Washington." He had said, and made it sound so easy.

As the truck drove away from the Motel, Kass inserted the key card that Pueblo had thrust into her hand. He hadn't wanted to hang around, and who could blame him. God... who knew what else he was delivering from the back of that truck?

And where the hell was Ajo anyway? She'd never heard of the place before. She only knew, hoped, that she was back in the US, somewhere in Arizona. The sound of the door clicking closed was heavenly. The silence in the room was divine.

With a click of the switch on the wall the room was illuminated. A single bed with blankets and a pretty night stand with an old brass lamp. It was more akin to someone's house than a motel. She saw the envelope. That single piece of

stationary brought flutters to her tummy. Money and ID, he'd said. She felt more like a spy than a fugitive as she reached for the envelope. It was thick. Inside there must have been a thousand dollars in twenty and fifty bills. The drivers licence photo was her, the name was not. Maria Delaney, she sounded like a high school kid. She most certainly didn't have blonde hair. Not yet at least. But a peek into the bathroom suggested a host of toiletries that would soon change that.

Tomorrow, she'd think better tomorrow after a few hours sleep. Digi-clock beside the bed read 04:56, it was tomorrow already. Tired arms pulled the long drapes. She fell onto the bed and was asleep in seconds.

The digi-clock read 09:17 through the haze of heavy lids.

No way. Only four and a half hours of sleep?

Someone chisel the gunk from my eyes and get the fat man off my back. Hmm, is that morning breath sticking my lips together?

She felt like an Ostrich burying her head into what was a remarkably soft pillow.

Please, let it all be a dream.

It wasn't.

Any other day and her eyelids would have remained firmly closed, but not today. Kass snarled and growled in a fight to get the duvet away. There were no prizes for her athleticism as she rolled from the edge of the mattress. It was packing crate syndrome, and her head still smarted from that bloody Tequila. One leg moving in front of the other proved to be an adventure.

Probably best just to get it over with.

She knew what was coming, and barely tweaked at the curtains. Just a teeny tiny peek to be taken at the world outside... Sunburst. The violent brightness forced her to shy

away. Bad glass, it let the sunlight through, too much sunshine, optical pain.

“Sunshine in the desert states is pure; it’s what makes our oranges so sweet.” That’s what Grandpa used to say. She missed the farm almost as much as the man. If only he were still alive, he’d know what to do. Staring out the window proved futile. It was a daft thing to remember at a time like this, or maybe not. Grandpa had been the stable influence in her younger life, her own father nothing but a distant memory. A bum. Maybe that’s why she had such bad taste in men, and husbands? Thank God for Pierce. *Shit, maybe more counselling was required, or sunglasses. Whatever.* She ripped the curtain back and was bathed in a bright warming light. Somehow the sun didn’t look quite as pure as it used to. Kass’ world had changed.

‘Where the hell am I?’

Where was the town, the streets and shops? *A Starbucks... was a Starbucks too much to ask?* Outside revealed none of the above. Not much of a road, no traffic, and just a handful of cars parked up opposite that she could see. A strained look identified a couple of residential homes with yards. Wiping at the sleepy dust didn’t make the desert go away; it was still out there, sprinkled in-between the sights. The more she saw, the

more she hated this place. It seemed Ajo's sights were limited to two small gas storage tanks atop a low hill. The rising ground between was littered with all the cacti a girl could ever wish to avoid.

There were several pamphlets tucked in the rack below an overly ornate mirror. Ajo had sights. There was a Mine, the Indian grounds, some desert escapades.

That last one was a joke right?

How quaint, below the entertainment was a tiny bell with a small sign... Press me. How could she resist. Kass' palm dabbed the plunger and the bell tinked, disappointingly.

'In here.' Came a forceful voice from the next room.

Dare she? She did. And found a small elderly woman sat fused to a comfy looking chair. Precision hands sewing at a floral dress. The needle moved at precise angles, tugged three times after each stitch. Granny's head remained perfectly still, eyes down, they were prepared to scream, "full house."

'Did you sleep well?' She asked. 'Hope so. Everything in that room is hypoallergenic. Every item is made here in the USA and sourced from sustainable materials. Neither Hilton or Marriott can make the same claim.'

'Err, *yes*. And, *wow*.'

'Can I get you some breakfast?' The woman's hands refused to cease their detailed endeavour. 'I got eggs and bacon, it's all

free range,' she looked up, 'aint got no coffee, that's the devil's brew, but I got tea with a hint of cinnamon or lemon. Earl Grey if you must.'

'Mmm, sounds good.'

Really, no coffee. You got something against caffeine?

'Maybe later?'

'Your choice. Just so's there's no misunderstandings, your bills been paid in full, but you are more than welcome to stay some extra nights. Fresh linen every day, I wouldn't have it any other way.'

'Thank you, but I have a flight to catch, in Phoenix.'

'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. What would a handsome woman like you want with such things?'

Hardly a statement that Kass was going to argue with. The woman had obviously been to Los Angeles. But handsome, really? She wasn't that old.

'Look, this may sound a little odd, but where am I... exactly?'

Granny's hands stopped.

'You lost?'

‘Let’s just say I’m in transit.’

‘Then let’s just say that this is my home, and you are a paying guest. I would like to add that if you intend to rob, abuse, or murder me, my ass is sat on a Smith and Wessen 500 revolver that can cut you in two.’ The needle began to sew again.

‘Is it possible that you know a tall, well bearded man, named Weldon?’

‘Nope.’

She figured that to be a lie, they were probably related.

‘And to answer your previous question, this is the town of Ajo. That’s Spanish for garlic, by the way, and we are stuck halfway between the Mexican border and the big city of Phoenix, which is in Arizona. We aint got no shopping malls, no Disney outlets, and no whore houses, not that I’m aware of. Not much in the way of tourism to speak of either, accepting you’re presence of course.’ Kass didn’t like the way Grandma’s hands ceased moving. ‘If it’s any help, we do have a Sheriff’s office?’

She couldn’t help it; the blood rose and her face dropped to give her away. *Why is she looking at me like that?*

‘We don’t get too many visitors to our town; most of em just stop for directions or drive through with their windows rolled up. What brings you to Ajo, Miss? Are you on the run?’

‘It’s Kass, and no I’m not.’

‘Really? The name you’re booked under is Maria, and you sure look like a fugitive from something.’

Shit, her name was Maria.

‘I like to use my middle name, Kass, its short for Kassandra. Maria’s a bit dull, don’t you think?’

‘Maria’s the name my parents christened me with and I’ve always found it to be good enough for polite company.’

Of course it was. It had to be. Or was Ma’ Barker just playing tease the fugitive.

‘Is there a Starbucks?’ Kass asked; keen to change the direction of the inquisition.

‘No. 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, of which I do not allure to myself. The Dollar store is just opposite if you need supplies. Why don’t you take a shower, there’s a change of clothing in the drawer beneath the night stand. I’ll call you when I’m ready to go.’

I don’t need to be asked twice.

A shower and change of clothes sounded wonderful. Coffee and cake sounded better.

‘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 is all under control.’ *What’s wrong with you? If you want to keep your anonymity you shouldn’t keep phoning me.* ‘No... sir. She’ll turn up somewhere. We have surveillance on border crossings into California, Arizona, and Texas. No, sir, no... he’s Caucasian, possibly American. I have my people checking with local sources. If her benefactor works for a cartel we’ll know soon enough. 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.’ *This is intolerable. Where is Fortune, this is his job to deal with the clients. Where the hell is he?* ‘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. Thank you sir... and Goodbye.*'

The phone slammed down.

This was unacceptable. Where was Fortune? It wasn't her job to deal with the clients. Freaking stress level was giving her a head ache. *Best take a moment.* She knew, they all knew; look at them, the pride of G'co, a stable full of Phd's and IQ's with numeric values high enough to give Einstein a hard on. *Stare at them for a few seconds. They knew, every one of them knew that she was going to explode if they didn't get a result.*

April shook her head, bit her lip, and resisted the temptation.

'What do we know about this man?' She asked. A question left open to any of the six Khaki clad operators in the BUG.

'Well?' She gave them all 'the look' in turn. 'Talk to me.'

Each operator had his own work station, each station an umbilical to the Pedestal at the room's centre. There were more screens on the walls than at Sky.com. 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 any

mobile phone on the planet. The BUG cost the Senate Oversight more than a billion dollars in diverted funds to build.

So why... why couldn't they find the woman, Cassandra Krane?

'Well?' She asked again, her fuse fizzing towards its end.

Okay, I'll look at you. She read the nearest operator's tag, 'Peters.' *Yes you, dough boy... with the pimples.*

'Er, mam, we have a tenuous track on his data downloads. He hides them well, lot of bouncing through Asian communications, they're hard to track.'

'And?'

'Well, it tells us that he's been trained. If I had to guess... I'd go with military. Just a minute, I'm just receiving the Google Earth images of the impact area for the last seven days.'

Did the little shit raise his hand for me to be quiet?

'Got it. 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, resolutions a bit vague. Got it. I have a plate number. 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; he's been dead for some time. Get that vehicle's plates circulated, that truck has to be somewhere. Find it.'

It felt good as the hot soapy water washed across her skin, cleaning away the desert, easing the blues, at least for a while. She'd even managed to get creative with the hair colour. It would have been wonderful to spend longer in the bath but Ma' Barker was ready to go. For now she'd settle on a lift into town. Get some food, a drink, and find a hire car.

Look at you, Cassandra Krane, the mirror never lies.

A few days without food had doing wonders for her figure. The new wardrobe was a hit too. The checked blouse and green combats were a diamond fit. As was the watch, a J12 in matt black from Chanel, slim, stylish, and functional, and obviously from Chess. The rest was clearly on Weldon's account. *Doc Martins my ass, who buys copies of boots?* 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 just a drop or two from the unmarked bottle of perfume. Sweet and irresistible, just like her. It was nice to feel clean and human again.

'I aint got all day, *Maria.*'

That woman had a voice that could melt ice.

‘Coming.’ She grabbed the cash and stuffed it into the tiny rucksack provided. Time to go, she wouldn’t be back.

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 or two of sweet cake, both of which she *most definitely* did allure to. A bell above the door announced her as she walked in. The instant chill of guilt as the locals, all two of them, checked her out.

Just smile, and sit. Simple. Only it wasn't. What if they recognised me? What if I have a wanted sign and a big finger pointing down at my head? She felt ridiculous as she slid into the 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?'

'Coffee.' Waitress was tall, smiling. Why was she grinning like that? 'And something sweet, please.'

'Got some pie, comes with fresh cream.'

'A bit early for pie, maybe some thing lighter?'

'Cheesecake, brownie, Danish? Got muffins... blueberry, lemon, apple and cinnamon, and all low fat. Or there's

Marcella's full fat, double whipped, stone baked chocolate cheesecake. It's light and lush. Every girl's worst enemy, but worth every damn mouthful.' She winked. 'Coffee comes with a free re-fill.'

It was nice the way she smiled now, more sympathy than enquiry.

'Sounds good.' She said. 'Make the coffee a hot latte, extra shot, no foam.'

'Sure, coming right up.'

Old man in the corner was staring again. *Why?* She tried not to return the gaze but found herself peeking. *Go away. Stop it.* The bell rang another sharp 'ting' and nearly caused an unfortunate accident. *For crying out loud, this is ridiculous. An electrical discharge from the door bell, an OAP with the CIA, and a waitress prepared to take her down with pie.*

This has to stop.

Coffee helped, or did it. The caffeine probably strung her out even more. Blood pressure and heart beat were elevated, and now she had a headache. Cloak and dagger wasn't much fun. Five minutes on her own and already she couldn't hack it. Pierce... she needed to contact Pierce. A third ting on the bell set her pulse racing. She shouldn't have looked up.

Holy crap, Lawman at ten o'clock, coming through the door. Don't look up, don't look up. Yes, look up, looking away is a sign of guilt.

It was a Sheriff's Deputy, complete with boots and a cowboy hat. *Do those boots have Cuban heels?* Below the brim of the hat was a young fresh faced man, with ruby cheeks, and a stern buzz cut. He did have a kindly round face though, and fresh blue eyes. The dusty brown uniform and the leather holstered gun equated to an imminent hot flush. 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.

The glass counters had a half door open behind, but a Deputy and waitress barred her path. Half a dozen plastic tables, the only patron now the old man immersed in his paper. A long wall with paintings of the Wild West led to a closed door at the far end. The sign read 'Hombres.' Behind the toilet door was the promise of a window.

Oh my God, he's looking at me. He did worse, he smiled. A welcome offered to a stranger, not well received. She tried to smile back. It was difficult when your entire face oozed guilt and irradiated fear. *No, please don't come over. Stop where you are, don't do it.* 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? Smile Kass. No, not like that, welcome him.*

‘Good morning mam. How are you today?’

‘Good.’ She said. ‘Hi.’ She added.

‘We don’t get many visitors here. You a tourist, mam?’

‘No. Just passing through.’

Please go away.

‘Hope Ms Sally is treating you right.’ He smiled at the waitress, who grinned back. *Were they an item?* ‘Ms Sally makes a great pie, you should try it.’

‘Hmm, maybe.’

‘Be good if you could stay for a while. Like I said, we don’t get many tourists round here. Hoped you wouldn’t mind if I took the opportunity to point out a few good sights hereabouts.’

Was he freaking joking?

‘No, not at all.’

‘There’s the old mine just outside town. Folk don’t realise that Ajo had had the first copper mine in Arizona. There’s the Indian park, and just a few miles further up State is the Alamo Canyon. There are some fine views, always best to take a camera. Those little smart phones don’t do it justice. Then there’s Mr Colport, he takes folk out into the Sonoran Desert to

show them sights. Man, did you know that Ajo is Indian for garlic?’

‘No, I didn’t know that. That’s really very interesting.’

Are you serious? I’m on the verge of cardiac arrest and you want to advertise?

‘You’ll have to excuse Deputy Milo.’ Ms Sally intervened. ‘He also runs the areas tourist board when he’s not on duty. And when he’s not disturbing my customers. Milo, you take your pie, and leave the nice lady to her coffee.’

‘Well alright, but if there’s anything I can do for you before you leave. Just come up to the Sheriff’s office. It’s that way.’ He nodded and turned.

Just let him go, Kass. Don’t say a word. Don’t be stupid, let him walk away. But why shouldn’t she? He could help. This was America, not Mexico. He was a Sheriff’s Deputy for crying out loud. *No good, she had to talk to someone.*

‘Deputy.’

‘Mam?’

Her tongue froze, her lips dried like ice as the Cuban heels spun about.

‘Mam?’

‘Deputy, I need your help.’

‘Sure, whatever I can do.’ He was coming back.

No more lies now. Tell him who you are, what’s happened.
Get him to call Pierce.

‘Deputy, my name’s Kassandra... I need you to contact someone in the Los Angeles District Attorney’s office for me. *Why was he frowning? ADA Pierce Reeseman. Tell him Kassandra Krane needs him.*’ *Why had the colour drained from his face? What did I say?* ‘Deputy, are you alright?’ *Oh shit, why is he going for his gun?*

She found herself looking down the barrel of a revolver. So much for young and innocent looking, his weapon was pulled and pointed in a fraction of a second.

‘Hands above your head, get them up, now.’

‘Milo, what’s going on?’ Sally distanced herself from the Deputy’s gun. The old man in the corner clutched his paper up tight and slid away from the firing line.

‘Milo, what the hell. Have you gone crazy? You can’t point that thing at my customers.’

Kass’ thought’s exactly.

‘Get yourself out back now Ms Sally. This woman’s wanted for murder. I said hands up... up.’

‘No, wait. Milo is it. You’ve got it all wrong. It was self-defence. I didn’t have a choice. Please, call ADA Pierce Reeseman, in LA. Deputy, do not discharge your weapon. Look, hands, going up.’

He looked more scared than she was. The revolver’s muzzle moving up and down, unable to stay still, refusing to point any other direction but toward her.

‘Hands behind your head. Get down on the floor, get down on the floor.’

Okay, okay, easy with the gun. She knew the routine. Hands went up, cheesecake was abandoned as she dropped to her knees.

Please, do not pull the trigger.

‘You don’t understand, they’ve kidnapped my son. They tried to kill me.’

‘Turn around, hands still, don’t move.’

Why are you doing this?

Kass felt cold metal spring across her left wrist, her arm pulled down. Seconds later she was cuffed with both hands behind her back, the Deputy remaining loud and verbal that she didn’t resist.

Was he joking?

‘Slip your hands out through the bars Ms Krane.’

‘This all a big mistake, Deputy.’

‘I don’t think so. You see this here photo, that’s an APB out on you.’

‘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 wasn’t he listening? Why was she under arrest? She’d committed no crimes on US territory. This was all a big misunderstanding. Pullman had tried to kill her. 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 murderer. Lady, 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 Landey is on a fishing trip in Miami. He’s gone to catch a big one, his words. Think I just trumped any damn tuna he can reel in.’

‘Has he got a Cell phone with him?’

‘Yep’

‘So you can call him, right?’

‘Nope.’

‘Phone,’ she pointed to the desk where the cuffs he’d removed now lay. ‘DA’s office in Los Angeles, phone them, now.’

‘Lady, are you a psychopath? Or have you just got a poor memory?’

‘What?’ She didn’t follow.

Deputy Milo was the cat with the cream, she wanted to kick his feet off the desk, and slap that smug grin off his face. It was then that Milo turned the monitor he was so pleased to stare at.

‘Are you Cassandra Krane from Los Angeles County?’ He asked. ‘Are you a police officer with the City’s Police Department?’

‘Yes... and yes.’

‘Then you’re under arrest for the murder of ADA Pierce Reeseman. I can’t phone him because you killed him. Shoot, you really are a head-case.’

‘What... I don’t understand. No... you’re 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, you’re old enough to be my mumma. Whoa, I really thought you were going to resist. Pull a gun or something. I thought I was gonna have to shoot you down.’

‘I don’t understand. You’re telling me that Pierce Reese man, is dead?’

‘Yes mam. You murdered him in cold blood whilst he was sleeping. It’s been all over the news. I just can’t believe I caught you, you look a whole lot different with your hair like that.’

‘No, no I, I... I didn’t. Oh my God, 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’re gonna make me Sheriff for this.’

‘No, you have to listen to me. I didn’t kill him.’

‘Sure you did. You told me a dozen times that it was self-defence. You gunned the man down in his bed. What, did he get a tool out from his pyjamas and threaten you with it? Shoot that’s a good one.’

‘What, no. Oh God, not Pierce. He was shot in bed?’

‘You should know.’

‘I didn’t do it.’

‘I think you need a decent attorney, lady. And one that can come up with a better defence, than self defence.’

‘Milo, listen to me. I didn’t kill Pierce, I couldn’t. I was talking about Pullman...’

The words were out there, too late to take them back. Both hands covered her mouth, a look of guilt to the Deputy who had suddenly sat forward.

‘Who’s Pullman, Lady? Are there more dead bodies out there? Holy Moly, are you a serial killer? Jeepers, I’ve caught me a serial killer.’

He wasn’t listening, he didn’t want to. *She* wasn’t making sense. Kass’ gaze fell on the monitor. It wasn’t possible, but there it was. No mistakes, it was her face, her details. This was crazy. It was true. No denying it now. The warrant read MURDER.

No, no, no... she’d had to speak to Pierce, it was the only reason she’d approached the Deputy. The threat of the gun, the vice like grip of the cuffs; being dragged from the diner. This wasn’t real, it wasn’t happening?

Pierce?

‘I guess you know how this works. But FYI, I have responded to the Feds to duly inform them that you are in custody. I’ll bet the phone is about to ring off the hook.’

Pierce?

Kass felt every vibration of the old fashioned ring tone as it danced across the desk, shimmied down through floor, and jangled up every molecule of the iron in the bars. It had the intensity of defibrillator paddles jammed against her chest. The person on the other end of the phone wanted her for the murder of Pierce. Why? Look at Milo, the smug bastard, he’d just won the lottery.

‘Yes sir.’ He 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. National security, err, yes sir, I understand?’

Why was he looking at her like that?

‘No other enforcement to be alerted. Yes sir, I can see to that. There’s the municipal airport nearby, there’s only the one runway but it works. No sir, we don’t get much commercial service, the runway is only big enough for small planes. A helicopter? There’s plenty of open space just outside of town. Yes sir, I can get Amos from the fire department, he’ll run out

there with a hire car. Just let me know if you need... Well thank you sir, I appreciate that.'

She watched him as he took a deep realisation of what his arrest meant, the phone still glued to his ear. *What to do now?* Beyond the bars was the open office. Her eyes searched the furniture for help. Not there, not the computer, its screen or printer. Nor the long glazing of the window, its glass whitewashed in glorious sunshine through open blinds. On the far wall hung three shotguns, locked up behind bars. A coffee machine sat on a metal cabinet, its pot transparent, filled with black nectar. A random thought broke the complex puzzle as she tried to see outside through the reflection in a mirror.

The Café? She hadn't finished her coffee, or eaten the cake.

'Mam, its Peters. Sheriff's office in Ajo, Arizona, has reported detaining our target. I am routing the coordinates to your phone, and a car is en-route to your position.'

April touched her earpiece as the caller relayed the good news. It appeared the HUB was money well spent after all.

'Peters, get Carl on the phone.'

'It's done.'

The earpiece vibrated to the call tone of his Cell.

'Pick up Carl, I haven't got all day.'

'One, I have incoming.'

'Please tell me it isn't Fortune again.'

'No, it's April. She's on a secure link. Do you want to take the call?'

He nodded affirmation. The pad relayed the call.

'Yes, April?'

'We've found her. I have a chopper inbound, how quickly can you make the airfield?'

Two was already researching the quickest route. He raised two fingers.

‘Twenty minutes, give or take.’

‘Good, I’m uploading everything we have at the HUB to you. You’re going to a place called Ajo, in southern Arizona. ETA from departure is sixty minutes. The local Sheriff has her in custody. We’ve got them on a blackout for now, you’ll have about four hours to get her, and get lost. After that you’re on borrowed time. Bring her 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, I want blueprints of the Sheriff’s office in AJO. Get me an overview of the town. I want a way in, and more than one way out. I want Intel on Communications and wifi present at the sight; they need to be 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?’ He shook his head. ‘Would you like some coffee?’

‘No. Milo, you have to let me out of here.’

‘I know, I know. Your son has been kidnapped, you didn’t mean to kill anyone, oh, and there are bad people coming to get you. I think I’m the one that needs the coffee.’

‘Think this through for a moment. Didn’t you think it was a bit odd that they told you not to tell anyone else that 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? I wanted your help.’

‘Or you just panicked. Couldn’t live with the guilt? Maybe you just wanted to be caught, it happens all the time. How do I know?’ His boots went up on the desk again. ‘Either way, you’re my prisoner until the Feds turn up. Hey, you think 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 out 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 it, I can't get a signal on my Cell either.'

'That's definitely a problem. Your being shut down, Milo.'

'Lady, be quiet. In less than an hour you'll be on your way with the Feds.'

'Can I ask then, where everyone else is? This is a big office for just one Deputy. 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 of us Deputies. Gus is off sick and Max has a baby that's due any minute, he's on compassionate. The Sheriff's fishing in Austen.'

'So it's just you and me?'

'Ms Krane, you are behind bars, I think I can manage.'

'At least do yourself a favour. Go get coffee somewhere else. Leave the key where they can find it. I don't want anyone to get else hurt.'

‘Lady, you really have lost the plot. 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 it’s not the Piers Morgan show.’

‘I’m sure you’ll be fine.’ *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. Instincts backed her further into the cell.
This was one lift she would happily pass on.

‘Deputy Hunter.’ The Agent seemed genuinely pleased to meet him. ‘I’m Special Agent Offer, and this is Agent Turner. You have a fugitive for us to transport?’

‘Hell yes, but I’m in no hurry. It’s not every day you get to catch a serial killer.’

Both Agents looked bemused by the statement. Not that it mattered. They sure looked like the FBI, keen to show their badges, and they had lots of paperwork for the Deputy to sign.

What was it? Something about the taller of the two men, the Special Agent. Something wrong with the way he looked at her, 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.

‘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. So this is the infamous Ms Krane, the woman that’s caused the Bureau so many problems.’

‘That’s her. I never heard so many tall tales coming from one woman’s mouth. She’s a psycho for sure. Got serial Killer written all over her face.’

‘Well, we only want her for one murder. We’ll bring her back if your conspiracy theory pans out.’

‘Really? Oh, yeah, good one. Still, I can’t wait to see the Sheriff’s face when he gets back and finds out he’s missed out on all of this.’

Once again, the Agent was keen to show his badge. Hung out like the washing, right there in front of her. It did look real. *Maybe they really were who they said they were.* The wallet snapped shut and disappeared back into his jacket, replaced by handcuffs that were dangled through the bars.

‘I’m sure you know how, Ms Krane.’

Fine, what choice do I have?

The rings of steel were cold as she complied. The click of the cuffs sealed the deal as Special Agent Offer led her out toward the door.

‘Don’t forget me Special Agent. The name’s Hunther, with a T, and H.’

‘Sure, it’s already in my report. The Federal authorities owe you a debt of gratitude.’

‘My pleasure sir. You have a safe journey.’

‘If you’re the FBI, I’m Dorothy Gale.’ Whispered Kass.

‘Hmm, then it’s a shame you didn’t wear your ruby slippers.’ Carl shut the door keeping Milo out of earshot. ‘My names Carl, Ms Krane. The man you killed in the desert was a long time associate of mine. You *will* suffer for that.’

She didn’t like the sound of that.

‘Where are we going?’ She asked.

‘To see the Wicked Witch, of course. You have something of hers to return.’

She liked the sound of that even less.

The sun hurt her eyes. It was alright for them, they'd slipped on some badass sunglasses to tame the glare off the tarmac. Kass thought about running, but she wouldn't get ten yards before they shot her dead. There was nowhere to hide. Once the parking lot was covered there was only desolation, three hundred yards before finding any cover. No, Kass didn't fancy her chances of outrunning a bullet. She moved forward toward their SUV but was held back.

'Make up your mind. Are we going or not?'

'Three. Check out the black Buick, ten o'clock.'

'I see it.'

'Run a block while I take her to the car, just in case.'

'Done.'

Why is the Agent drawing his gun. What's going on? Is that a silencer? Shit, Carl has one too.

'Chill out guys, no-one has to get hurt, I'm coming quietly.'

The dark Buick eased to a gradual stop. No chance of seeing inside the heavily tinted windows. Three extended his badge, full arms length, as Carl edged her away.

Carl looked, Kass looked, as the Buick's tyres ground into the dust. Its engine growled as the car accelerated from naught to thirty in a second. Three ominous thunks from the suppressed weapon cracked the window but the bullets failed to penetrate the screen. The Agent went over the bonnet, bounced across the roof, and then all she saw was the door of the office open and close as she was thrown back through. It was unclear who had landed on who.

'What the hell?' Milo stood, rabbit in headlights, comb caught mid stroke. 'Agent... is that a silencer?'

The final turn of the threads screwed it into the barrel of the Glock now in Carl's hand. All Kass could do was lie there and scream with her eyes, hope that Milo could work it out quickly enough. He didn't. The muzzle flared, coughed two loud clunks, and Milo fell to the floor.

'Four, get the car out front, I'm taking fire.' He was up and at the window. Eyes wide, moving quickly, he had no intention of being a target.

'Where is he?'

'Who?'

'Your friend in the Buick? Four... car...now.'

A loud squeal of tyres as another car slid up outside. A door opened and a weapon discharged. Two, three... four shots in quick succession.'

'One, can you get to me?' Four's voice yelled down the com.

'No, trying the rear entrance.'

More shots were fired; an automatic weapon being fully discharged. Carl fired his own at the window. The silencer was timid but sinister, it made her shudder. Breaking glass was followed by more whispered projectiles, this time fired from the outside.

'Threes back in the game. One, watch your fire; I'm coming round the back.'

Rubber ground harshly into hot tarmac to give a roaring whoosh followed by tyres that objected to their violent treatment, a loud roar of an engine followed and she heard the car disappear around the building.

'Get off me you asshole.'

'Krane, if you try anything, so help me I'll tell April you got hit by friendly fire.' The heat of the gunmetal on her cheek suggested he wasn't bluffing. She got up. *'Move, get your ass in the back.'* No choice, he was too strong, too violent to resist.

‘Stop.’ Kass felt his forearm across her throat, pinning her to the wall as he checked the next room. ‘Alright, go.’

‘Back... Back.’ Three stumbled into the back room blood covering his shoulder. ‘The son of a bitch is out back.’

‘Where’s Four?’

‘Four’s down.’

‘Can we reach the car?’

‘I think so.’ He kicked the door back open and fanned the HK. Bullets spewed across the open ground.

That was some serious hardware he had in his hand. Kass had fired one at the range. An HK SP89, short, compact, and vicious. *These guys are mercenaries... or assassins. Poor Milo, he never had a chance.* She felt herself yanked forward into the back room and then shoved backward as the door erupted in a storm of splinters. Whoever it was outside had some serious fire power of his own.

‘Two, can you get the chopper here. We’re taking fire.’

‘Ten minutes, the rotors are cool. We can fire her up and get to you in ten.’

‘Boss, we haven’t got ten.’

'Oh really, you think?' They had to stall things. Give Two a chance to make their position. Or maybe there was another way. One man couldn't shoot at the front and rear exits at the same time. 'Three, I'm going to take her out the front. Keep him busy whilst I'll get her out. I'll come back.' Yeah, like that was going to happen. As soon as he was in the car, he was gone. Three was expendable. 'Count ten and then go for the car.'

Three didn't look too happy about the plan, but nodded his agreement. He moved toward the door, just as it was opened from the outside, as a strafe of fire burned the walls on the inside. He was hit, spun, squeezed hard on the trigger of the HK as if it would relieve the pain. Bullets crashed and zipped through the ceiling plaster, shattered the fan overhead, and as he fell they blew big cavernous holes into the walls forcing Carl to fling himself to the floor. Kass followed. Plaster from the dry walling filled the air with angry dust.

Carl scrambled to his knees. *Where is she? Where's the woman? And what the heck is that? Uh-oh, a Beretta 93R, if he wasn't mistaken, sliding along the floor toward... Oh shit, she's got it in her hand. Back out Carl, back out now.*

He fanned the Glock toward the hazy figure that pointed the gun at him, and squeezed one round after another hitting

everything but the woman he could no longer see. Magazine was out and a new one rammed home. He backed out as low as possible and still be able to sprint and shoot. More bullets spat from the suppressor, this time more aware, more calculating. Carl was out of the back and running for the open front door. Too slow, he took the window instead, a flying leap, and a roll as he hit terra firma outside in a thousand shards of glass. More shots fired toward the office as he scrambled up and on toward the SUV.

Carl was in, the engine was still running. He yanked the transmission lever down into drive and floored the gas pedal. Wheels spun searching for traction as the two ton vehicle charged forward. One, two... three clangs of steel from bullets hitting the car's panels. Now *she* was shooting at *him*.

Too late, Krane. He was out, the speedo read thirty... forty... fifty. This aint over. Whoever that bastard was back there.

This is not over.

‘Kassandra?’

Oh no, I’m not falling for that. Kass spun her aim toward the rear entrance. *Could be anyone calling my name.*

‘Kassandra... I need to know that you’re okay.’

Silence.

‘Boon says hi.’

What... Boon?

‘Weldon, is that you?’

‘Are you hurt?’

‘No. I don’t think so.’

‘He’s gone, I’m coming in.’

She remembered how Boon had come into view after the house had exploded, his tail between his legs.

‘How did you find me?’

‘The phone I gave you. I cloned it with mine. Come on, we have to go.’ He looked different as he approached. Gone were the beard, and the shabby clothes. The lines around his eyes no longer made him look old, more middle aged, more agreeable.

What...? Why was he holding out his hand? Oh, the Beretta. She hadn't realised it was still pointing straight at him.

'We have to go.' He repeated.

'Yes.'

'Do you still have the data stick?'

She instinctively touched her groin as he pulled her toward the door.

'Weldon, tell me it was a lie, just to get the warrant out on me? Tell me.'

So why doesn't he answer? Just say the words, please. He didn't. *Why... why does he have to snatch my last glimmer of hope?*

'No... do not tell me it's true. It's not true. Pierce isn't dead, he can't be.'

'I'm sorry.' He didn't look sorry. 'But you have to let it go. Focus on Josh, do it for him.' He spoke but his attention was elsewhere in the room. He was looking for something, the bag that Deputy Milo had taken from her, he picked it up.

Why is he going through Milo's pockets?

'Car keys.' He said. 'Take his car, it's unmarked. No-one will stop you. Take the road out of town and head north. The

car will have a satnav, programme it to find Sky Harbour airport. You still have time. Get aboard that plane.'

'You cloned my phone?' She felt his hand on her arm.

'I told you not to talk to *anyone*.'

'Let go of me, Weldon. That Agent was taking me to April. Josh would have been there. Weldon, let go of me, that hurts.'

'Wake up Kass, he wasn't a government Agent. April would have killed you the moment you gave her what she wanted. Take a good look around. There's a dead Deputy on the floor, and two more bodies outside. You need to start accepting things and stop living in the past. Life as you know it has ended, there's nothing left but a bullet, or a prison cell. Listen to me Kass. Get on that plane and find Spencer's friends, they're the only ones that can help you find a way out of this.'

'Yes, got it. Sky Harbour, find friends, I got it.'

'Then go, and stay off everyone's radar. If the authorities catch you, they'll blame *you* for all of this.'

'Me?'

What difference does it make, I don't care. Nothing matters now except Josh.

Keys were thrust into her hand. Weldon was right. She had to be strong, *for Josh*. Crap, he pissed her off. She hated the fact that he was right, again.

‘They didn’t have to kill him.’ She said, ‘Milo was harmless.’

The Deputy’s body was a stark reminder that someone else had lost their baby boy today. She wasn’t going to lose hers. She left the Sheriff’s office her head in a spin, not from the chaos, but from the sudden calm.

It was only the eye of the storm.

Weldon dragged Three into the back of the police car.

Was he laughing, did he find this situation amusing. How interesting.

Ten minutes later he had pulled the black and white off road and was heading at speed toward a series of high mounds and the narrow pass struck between them.

‘Slow down man, I’m shot. I think my ribs are broke. You’ll regret this. Five minutes, that’s all you got. Five minutes and my friends will be all over you. You’re a dead man walking.’

‘Nice analogy. But what makes you think they’ll find us... this? I took the liberty off removing your tracker whilst you were asleep. Oops, I must have switched it off.’

‘Fuck...’

The car stopped, engine was left idling. Weldon exited the driver’s seat and opened the back door.

‘Get your paws off me. Get off. What, you get off on this sort of thing, handcuffing people to doors? It isn’t going to scare me you dickhead.’

‘What about this? Does this get the love juices flowing for you?’

‘Oh shit. Come on man, it don’t have to be like this.’

‘I think it probably does. In case you’re wondering, this blade is a full six inches of 420 stainless steel. As you can see it has a serrated spine. That’s makes it really good for opening cans, amongst other things.’

‘I’ve seen a knife before.’

‘Bet you haven’t seen it used to do this.’

‘Aaargh. What, what do you want?’

‘Information.’

‘I don’t know anything.’

‘You’d be surprised what would be of interest to me.’ He closed the blade on Three’s face again. ‘As you can see we are parked in the middle of the desert. And the one good thing about a desert, is no-one can hear you scream.’

‘What, that’s space you idiot. Wrong film.’

‘Hmm, you could be right. Either way, when *you* start screaming, only one redneck gonna hear it.’

‘What happened? Was the Sheriff shooting at you?’

‘That was no Sheriff. We just got bushwhacked by a professional.’

Where are Three and Four?’

‘Are you listening, it was a set up, had to be. How else did he know we were coming?’

‘Carl... Three and Four, where are they?’

‘He took them out.’

‘Holy crap. April won’t be happy.’

‘Happy is not a state of mind I recognise right now. Get onto the HUB; I want to know who that son of a bitch is... son of a bitch... son of a... Aaaaargh.’

Both fists hit the steering wheel, keen to vent fury. That’s when he noticed, the blood, a fine trickle down his arm.

She shot me. The bitch put a bullet through my arm.

‘Two, you get a chopper here asap. Get me up in the air.’

‘Coming in hot as we speak... oh, and I’ve got April online, she’s requesting an update?’

‘Yeah, update her on this... This just got personal.’

‘Agent Gayle, sir. Quantico called and asked Agent Cheedle and I to contain the scene till you arrived. We have road blocks ten miles out in both directions and a local chopper helping out 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.

‘Phoenix CSI are sweeping the outside lot, the building inside has been processed. They’ve got blood, bullet casings, and tire tracks, everything’s on a rush for us. There are no witness’ and no video.’ He indicated to the camera above the door. ‘The feed to the office cameras was cut electronically.’

‘Make sure they swab the inside of the cells. And check the webcams on the computers. Is this drug related?’

‘ Frankly I’m not sure what to make of this. So far as we have determined there were at least four shooters, and a single

Deputy. I doubt that this was personal. If it was a Cartel hit... it was overkill, way too much attention to be drawn. My guess is that something went down, and then went very very wrong.'

But what? It looks the Terminator came to town.

'So only the one body has been recovered?'

'Yes sir, that's all we found, but we have blood samples from all of the rooms. CSI's determined one shooter from the front, and one from the rear. There was another inside the building, shots fired from here, and here, shooting in multiple directions. There are no bullets discharged from the Deputy's firearm.'

'So who was shooting from the inside out? 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. That's the Sheriff's Deputy who called us. He stopped by on his way home from the hospital. He has a wife about to give birth.' Gayle pointed. 'That's the deceased Deputy lying under the sheet.' He checked his note book. 'Deputy's name is Milo Hunther.'

'Okay. Excuse me, Deputy...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 a classic Jock appearance, fresh from college, and about ready to puke. The man seemed shattered, shocked... pulverised by the carnage in both rooms.

‘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 wasn’t here, it’s my wife, Jenny, she’s pregnant. It was another false alarm. I should have been here.’

‘Be grateful that you weren’t, or your kid would be growing up without his father. Tell me what you know.’

‘Well nothing much, sir. When I got here... I found... 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, covered in blood.’

‘And?’

‘Shit, he’s really dead, isn’t he?’

‘Listen to me 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.’

‘Err, sure, yeah. It was that Krane fugitive. You know, the woman on the TV. The one wanted for the murder of the DA in Los Angeles. Milo had started to type out the report, its still there 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.’

‘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 the Deputy.’

‘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.’

He left still staring at the covered body.

‘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, maybe, two hundred rounds have been 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 out a terrorist attack.’

‘I know.’

‘But you don’t think that’s what it was. You think it has something to do with this Krane woman?’

‘It’s a distinct possibility. Everywhere that she goes, the bodies start to pile up. 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 officer. A woman involved in an affable and loving relationship, with an

up and coming, salt of the earth, LA ADA. Everything is good in the world.'

'So what went wrong?'

'Her kid became terminally ill. We're looking at that as the stressor. Facts as we know them are that the woman's insurance turned out to be a bum deal. Doctors are unable to care for him; the hospitals send her the bills. She gets angry at the world.'

'Again, you don't look convinced.'

'A colleague reported that she had accepted the financial support of a well-known charity. Problem is they deny ever having made the approach. Officer's child goes missing. Lover is brutally slain. Officer Krane turns up in Mexico involved in an alleged murder. Now she's pops up again in Arizona, having got herself involved in a small war, and the murder of a local Deputy?

Somebody please tell me what's wrong with this scenario?'

‘Please tell me this is good news, Peters?’

April would take anything right now. This Krane woman was creating a storm. Fortune should have let her put a bullet in the bitch's head? Let Pullman bury her in the desert with Spencer? But she wasn't seeing the bigger picture. The client wanted a fall guy, or girl as it turned out. Well they overthought that one didn't they.

‘FBI is on the scene.’ Peters relayed over her earpiece. *‘A request has been made to Homeland Security for forensic assistance. DOHS Phoenix is already talking to the State Department, they're insisting on jurisdiction. They think it was a terrorist attack. FBI is playing it down, but it's out there attracting attention.’*

‘Can we keep it localised?’

‘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 boot. 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?'

'Get Carl online and remind him who he works for, and then find that woman. I want this ended before she creates any more chaos.'

“You have arrived at your destination.”

Those were beautiful words from the satnav 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 had whiplash from the constant vigilance in her mirrors. Any second now, from any turning... they could come at her again. Nausea and migraine were now permanent companions.

“Leave the car in long stay parking.”

At least she'd remembered to do that. The temptation to park outside the airport and sprint through to departures was intense. She denied it. The crowds inside helped with the need to be anonymous. It didn't stop her wanting to puke. The stall in the toilet slammed shut.

Breathe. No good her head dropped and the retching began. She was a teenager again, the booze vomiting down the pan, the fear of her parents overhearing. *Breathe.*

Sore, it was all sore. Stomach, throat... her head. *Oh crap, its all other my hands. Get out, find some water. Clean*

yourself up. The cold water splashing across her face helped. A dozen women noticed but said nothing. The paper towels dried her skin. *What are you doing? They'll catch you, you can't do this.* The image reflected played dumb. *Look at you, what a mess. You're a trained cop. Start acting like one.*

Two more women entered. Neither gave her a look. One laughed as she glossed her lips in the mirror waiting for her friend. They left. Kass checked her watch. Thirty minutes until the gate closed. If only her hand would stop shaking the lipstick would apply much more evenly. The glasses helped when they went back on. She took the passport from her rucksack and held it up against the mirror. The person in the photo was her.

Look, take a good look at yourself. No-one will see who you are. You're a cop going deep under cover. The only way to find your son is to play the game. Focus, believe, endure.

Good, that felt better. This time she didn't startle when the doors were opened. She smiled and thanked the person holding the door.

Stay calm, look straight ahead. Talk to no-one.

Good advice.

Stay in the crowd. Look straight ahead, ignore the security as they walk on by.

Check in was harder.

No, I have no luggage. No, I do not require an upgrade. I have no sharp objects, no liquids, and no freaking reason to carry a bomb on board.

It was an inquisition, unfriendly and unwelcome. Which way to look when there is cash stuffed into every pocket, and an APB on your person? *Please, just let me through to catch my plane.* They did, and within minutes Kass was trying not to run down the gantry. *Stay cool, don't arouse suspicion, just get yourself on the plane.*

'Thank you.' Said the stewardess after inspecting her ticket. Kass was invited to turn left, informed that her seat was halfway down, and on the right.

Look at them, she couldn't stop, all of the passengers mulling in the aisles. There were so many. Any one of them 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, the heavy locking mechanism turned clockwise to keep the outside at bay.

No delays... Please, no delays. She was panicking again. *My glasses, shit, why aren't they on my face?* Her skin crawled

with perspiration as trembling fingers searched through the bag on her lap. *On your head, they're on your head.* Blood pressure, heart rate, and adrenaline. They all ebbed like a receding tide as lenses were pulled down to meet eyes. The last passenger finally took his seat.

When the aircraft finally took off she understood the ecstasy and freedom of flight.

In just over four hours she would be arriving in Washington.

‘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? Does Sky Harbour fly International?’

‘Yes mam.’

‘Shit, get a team there, asap. I want her photo showed to every international desk in the airport. 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?’

The 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. Get Carl to camp down outside until they find out where she’s gone. When we have a destination, send Carl on a little trip to find her. When your don...’

I swear I will cut his fucking hand off if he raises it to shut me up again.

‘What... is there something else?’

‘Mexican Police picked up a local man driving our un-sub, red pick-up. We have an agent on the ground already talking to him. Waiting for his rep... speak of the devil, he’s just logged on. Un-sub is, confirmed American. He is white, five feet eleven inches. We have a name, mam. Weldon Smith.’

‘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.’

That was levity you idiot

‘Mam, now we know who we are looking for it shouldn’t be hard to find a photo of him on a camera somewhere. I’ve uploaded a sniffer into the bank’s mainframe. Intel will be hot from the source in three, two, one. Hot off the press. Mr Weldon Smith has bank accounts in Chihuahua and Durango. Two deposit accounts with...’ Peters sighed... ‘a lot of funds. If

you want I can appropriate them through the usual channels. If nothing else it might piss him off.

‘Do it.’

‘It’s done. His accounts are regularly funded from a foreign source. I’ll start a trace on his source of income, but that *will* take time. In the meantime I will find out when he last visited his local branch... which was last Tuesday. I’m hacking the local branch’s surveillance as we speak, which I might add is like taking candy from a small Mexican child. I’m in. Last Thursday. Facial recognition is searching for white males, of which we have only a single candidate. Mam, if you would like to watch the screen above... and voila.

‘There is a picture of our un-sub, Mr Weldon Smith.

Picture was grainy.

‘It’s the only time he looks up.’

‘Excellent work, Peters.’ *So this is our mystery gunman.*

Who are you?

The man wore a cap and a full beard. But even so 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.

What is Cassandra Krane to you? Why have you got involved?

‘More good news, mam. Homeland has just conceded jurisdiction back to the Feds. The Ajo shooting has been downgraded, and there will be no official Homeland involvement. Press release will blame it on a drug Cartel shootout.’

Finally, we seem to be getting a handle on the situation.

‘Run *him* through facial.’ She ordered. ‘Every Law Enforcement in the country. Run Interpol as well. Find out who that man is.’

Carl, the Krane chick has jumped a flight up at Sky Harbour. The HUB has teams there trying to confirm which one. Oh, and April is on the wire again for you. She's pretty insistent, probably not a good idea to put her off a second time.'

Insistent, I bet she is. Unfortunate thing was that he couldn't do this on his own. *Stay professional, Carl. The only way to find him, is to find her.*

'Put her on.'

Two tapped the touch screen and spun the pad.

'You're hot.'

'April. Your guys fumbled the ball. If we are going to have hostiles encroach in the middle of an Op, I would expect to be informed, before he takes out half my team.' *And hopefully that will deflect some of the shit that is coming my way.* 'I got shot, April.'

'What's done is done, Carl. We have the situation contained. A clean up crew has bleached the evidence before the Feds could get there.'

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. We are still unclear as to whether another agency is involved. But we suspect not. We do have a face and a name. The HUB is sniffing the rest out as we speak. When I know you’ll know. Krane is in the air somewhere, I want you on the first plane to wherever our bird has flown. She has a few hours head start but we’re reeling that in. Your focus is to stay on the woman. Find her, appropriate the package, and then make her disappear. Stay focused, Carl. And don’t let that bastard get the better of you again.’

The line went dead.

‘She’s not happy, boss.’

‘What did I say about happy, Two.’

‘Just saying. Carl, don’t lose sight of the goal. I don’t want to be the wrong side of April. Let’s just get the job done, nothing else matters, not unless it gets in the way. Are we cool?’

What was that, a joke? We’ll get the job done alright, but we’ll get him 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.’

Touch down.

The flight had been eternal. Kass was still paranoid about what might be awaiting her as she exited the plane. She needn't have worried. No baggage to reclaim left her free to grab a cab outside, and within twenty minutes she was leaving Dulles International airport behind. It was a further blessing that the cab driver spoke poor English.

'Hi, my name is Arkahn, I am honest cabbie. Please to tell me which way?'

From his skin tone and accent, Kass reckoned he was from Armenia, maybe Poland, definately Eastern European. Tough Call for a girl that had never left the United States.

'DC.' She said. 'Take me into DC.'

'Pleasure for me.' He replied.

Airport Road was busy, the fading light outside a pleasure. A procession of headlights, faces becoming harder to see. It was getting difficult to make out the signs. The place names Reston, and Wolftrap passed 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.’ He replied.

Outside the traffic looked chaotic. Inside the cab felt calm. The driver talked on but she didn’t listen.

‘Please to tell Arkahn where to go?’ He asked again.

The sign that passed read 267 in big numbers, the next junction was for Pimmit Hills, wherever that was.

‘Lady, please, I need road to take. Which one?’

Where to go? She felt like an alien dropped from outer space.

‘Foggy Bottom.’ She replied.

‘Okay, you give street when we get there, yes?’

‘Yes.’

That was easier than saying she didn’t know. *Find the nearest hotel, get some sleep?* New signs swept by outside. The road had joined Interstate 66, a highway more familiar, as were the names in boldly proclaimed by the signs that passed by, Rosslyn and Arlington.

Had Weldon really tended the graves at Arlington? Or was that just another of his stories? It was such a pretty sounded

name. The old house and grounds once occupied by the Confederate General Lee. It conjured images of trees in blossom, meadows of lawns and flowers in full bloom... and grave markers. Maybe not such an enticing place when strangers were hell bent on ending your life.

The cab entered the western end of a bridge. Six lanes of heavy traffic crossing the river below, three passing on either side. To her left and below were dark ominous waters.

‘Please, be looking to your left, see, down there, the great Potomac River. Is back to front over four hundred miles. Here we are Virginia, on other side we are Maryland. This most famous river in America, many big battle done in civil war.’

‘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 this is 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.’ *That was a bit harsh, he’s trying*. She sat forward, staring through the windscreen. ‘Is that the Lincoln Memorial over there?’

‘Yes, is good time to come. Look, see, the Washington monument. And there, you see, the big White House. Is beautiful for you as is for me, yes? I come to land of opportunity many years ago. Make good life for family, is good, yes?’

It was. The big chalky edifice *was* good. And what she could see of the White House dome was awash with light.

Surely this was a beacon. A sign.

Josh.

It was gone as they left the bridge, the cab bearing left down the Potomac freeway. Kass looked away as the monuments faded from sight.

‘Now, please. You have hotel to find? Arkahn have friend who run guest house. Is good clean rooms. Arkahn take you, yes?’

‘No, thank you. I want to find a place called Kstreet? You know where that is?’

‘Sure, everybody know. You want Kstreet, east or west?’

Good question, she didn’t know. It was a heads or tails moment so she chose. ‘West.’

‘Is good choice. I’m honest cabby, I take you Pennsylvania Avenue, and then to Washington Circle, is quickest route.’

The fact that you say you're honest makes me doubt the claim. 'Take whatever route you like, I'm in no hurry.' The thought of leaving the cab in the heart of a strange city? *Kass, what are you doing?* 'Is it safe, is Kstreet safe?'

'Oh yes, is safest city in America. I live here, with my family. I have six children to feed. Is safe, I promise.'

Why not listen to the driver, maybe learn something. After all she'd never been to Washington before. It was nice, Pennsylvania Avenue, a nice blend of tallish buildings with lush green trees along its route. She's heard the shopping was good here. Its colours were rich, nothing like Los Angeles. Sure, the buildings were modern, but there was an older, more European charm at work here. Washington had the warmth and character that most cities she'd been too lacked. Just the name, Washington, conjured up a historical past. There was a cosmopolitan air that swirled about the colourful canopies on both sides. She wished that she could see more of the city.

But that was unlikely to happen.

Quite frankly it was bloody extortionate.

How much for a taxi? She'd counted it out in twenties, each bill hurting more than the last. No wonder he smiled so much, bloody robber.

Now what?

Apart from the heavy traffic there was nothing to indicate which route she should take. For crying out loud, she didn't even know if this was the right city. *Think, Kassy, think.* She recited the passage again.

"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."

Not in itself very helpful. She felt like a fish out of water, convinced that everyone passing her by was staring. *Okay, so Weldon thinks it's a bus route. Let's start by finding a bus stop?* She didn't have to walk far. Was it that really that obvious?

The words on the stop sign read

KSt & 19thSt NW

The bus that idled below the sign was big and red. The smell of diesel fumes hard to ignore. The door was open. *Get on Kass. Weldon had to be right. He had to be. Kst19 was a bus stop, and this bus was waiting for her.*

‘How much?’ She asked the driver.

‘One dollar.’ He replied. ‘It’s less than a Big Mac and you get to ride me all day.’

She was sure he didn’t mean it quite the way it sounded. Or did he? The man behind the wheel had a Santa Clause thing going on. All belly and beard, but wearing the wrong 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. The next ones in ten.’

‘What... you’re empty. Please, I’ll just be two minutes?’

‘Sorry.’

‘Fine. Keep the change.’

So what. It was Weldon’s money that she dropped in the bowl as the doors swished closed, and the bus moved on.

‘If I said, *Grace*, to you, would it mean anything?’

One hand held the wheel whilst the other rubbed at wiry facial hair.

‘You want to take me for dinner?’

‘No... dear God... no. Thank you, but no.’ Best to take a seat then, see where the bus ended up. ‘How long can I ride for?’

Dear God, did I really say that?

‘I’m guessing you’ve never been to DC before.’ He said as they rounded the Washington Circle.

‘No, never. Is that George Washington in the middle?’

‘It is.’

‘Wow.’

‘He 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.’

‘It looks nice now.’ Everywhere she looked there were trees. The bright lights in the stores gave the street a subtle glow. ‘Still nothing on Grace?’

‘No.’ Driver shook his head.

The bus continued down the Kstreet freeway. Two more stops and they headed north. A young couple got on with several elderly women close behind.

‘Excuse me; does anyone know the whereabouts of the Sabbath Angels? 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, I was just asking.

‘What about you, Santa. Know any Sabbath Angels?’

That’s a no then. I thought bus drivers were supposed to be helpful? ‘Where exactly does this bus go?’ You must know that.

‘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 horn was loud enough to rupture an ear drum. ‘You too, asshole.’

‘So now we follow Wisconsin until crossing Pennsylvania Avenue. Pennsylvania will take us back down to the Washington Circle. From there I follow Kstreet all the way down to Union Station. After that, I get to do it again, and again, and again.’

Santa gave her a fluffy grin. He was going a mite stir crazy on his bus, but she liked him. Whatever it was that Spencer wanted her to find, maybe it wasn’t on this bus.

‘Excuse me dear.’

‘Yes?’

The old dear sat behind was keen to attract her attention. Bless her, she was frail, had needed the use of a walking stick and a friendly arm to get aboard. ‘Did you say you were looking for *Grace*?’

‘I did.’ Kass followed the gnarled finger the woman extended out.

‘Is that her?’ Granny asked.

‘Whoa... whoa... Stop the bus.’ Kass’ thumb jabbed at the red button housed in the pole.

Was that her, Grace? Oh dear God, it had 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.

Everything else was forgotten. The bus was left behind and roared away up Wisconsin. *Was this it? Was this where Spencer wanted me to come?* Then she saw it, 'GRACE.'

Right there on the wall in big letters staring down. "Please, tell Grace I'm sorry." Did he want her to pray for him? The words set her palms itching, and her heart racing

The path was short, it landscaped around some big old trees to arrive at a framed arch and a wooden door. The kind you'd expect to greet you at a church.

Should she knock first? No, the house of God was open to everyone. At least she hoped it was. The brass latch was heavy but turned with ease. So far so good, at least the door wasn't locked.

'Hello?' She called out. 'Is there anyone here?'

No signs of habitation as the door opened fully into a church which seemed bigger on the inside. The ceiling ascended high between rafters left exposed. There was a lot of whitewash on the walls.

'Hello?' This time she called louder closing the heavy door behind.

Kass wasn't a fan of churches, and even less of religion. Places of damnation, or happy clapping, with not a lot left in-between. Though given a choice she'd opt for Sunday karaoke over the pipe and organ any day.

'Hellooo... Vicar?' *Or would there be Nuns?*

'You'll have to go to a Catholic church for one of those, I'm afraid we're all Protestants here.'

'Holy shit.' *Ninja priest.* 'I'm so sorry, you startled me.'

He made the sign of the cross. Was that a black mark, swearing at the priest?

'I'm *Rector* Joshua, can I assist you?' 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 up prayer to our Lord. There's no charge.'

For an old fella he had a youthful smile. It offered welcome and friendship. There was a glint in his eye too that hinted toward a mischievous disposition. And since when did priests wear a white suit with a dog collar?

'Please, take a seat. We don't bite here at Grace's. It's bad for the numbers, they don't come back.'

She wasn't sure how to respond.

'Are you lost, child?'

‘No.’

‘Would you like to pray?’

‘No.’

‘Can I interest you in tea and cookies?’

No, thank you. I... That’s to say, I...’

‘If you don’t mind me filling in the blanks, you sound as if you’ve come to ask questions. Would you like to talk to someone?’

‘Oh, no, thank you.’ She didn’t need saving or anything like that. ‘Look, this might sound a bit... well, crazy.’

‘Crazy? I can assure you that after forty seven years in the service of our Lord, that I’ve heard a lot of crazy. Please, take a seat. I can talk for two until you find the words. In all those years I have done missionary work on five different continents, counselled in eight Rehabs for addiction, and spent fifteen years visiting prisoners at various correctional and penitentiary institutions in the Washington area. 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 you don’t want to find.’

It was difficult not to smile, he seemed nice, friendly. Slim bifocals emerged from a case and he slipped them onto his

nose. He took a bible from the back of the seat in front, and offered her again to join him.

Well it seemed rude not to, at least for a few moments. Just until she got it straight in her head what she wanted to say. What she wanted to ask. Joshua sat, the good book on his lap, hands folded together around it. Her mouth went quite dry. Was this some sort of holy interrogation technique? She went quickly from the need to know to wanting to spill everything. Fortune, the Clinic, Wild Bill Weldon... *Josh*. Every crappy stressful moment was ready to boil over and vomit into his lap.

Stop looking at me like I need a Samaritan.

‘We don’t offer confession.’

Thank goodness, he’s said something,

‘Not our thing, only God can forgive. I can however offer an ear, or a shoulder. No advice, no judgement, just plenty of hankies, should they be required.’

Where to start, how much to tell?

No, now wasn’t the time. But she *was* grateful that he wanted to listen. Kass took the hankie Joshua offered.

‘You’ll talk when the time is right. Maybe I can help with the questions that sound, *crazy?*’

‘Yes, that would be good.’ *Okay put it out there.* ‘I don’t suppose you’d know anything about the Sabbath Angels?’

‘I would indeed.’

‘Really?’

‘Oh yes. We have a *flock* of Sabbath Angels. Most Twitchers call them Cape May Warblers. Beautiful birds that fly all the way from the West Indies. They manage to find us every year. We get as many as fifty of them sometimes. They make a pit stop in the cemetery on their migration north for the summer.

‘Sabbath Angels?’

‘Ahh, the first rectors of the church named them. They perpetuated the story that the birds would arrive on the first Sunday of every spring... though personally, I think they may have used a slice or two of poetic licence. The birds aren’t nearly as prompt these days.’

Dare she ask? What if this was some bizarre coincidence?

‘Do you happen to know someone called, Jay?’

‘I do. She’s a lovely young lady who volunteers in the church.’

I’m going to need use of another hankie.

‘Is she here now?’ She asked.

‘Is it after six? If so, you’ll probably find Jay out in the cemetery, 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 quiet time before she leaves us for the night.’

Why was he frowning? What was wrong?

‘May I ask, are you a friend of hers?’

‘No, but I know someone who is... was. He asked me to come and find her.’

‘Ahh, would that be the friend that up until recently would call her on her Cell phone. She always received the call at the same time every night. She’s been a bit of a lost soul these last few days. I think she’s missing him. It’s been a few days since I’ve heard her talking to him on the phone.’

This was like Tetris. The blocks were falling, and landing in place. *Oh please, tell me it’s not Spencer that calls her.* She knew damn well that it was.

‘Please, I’d like to see her.’

‘Of course.’

Kass rose from her seat.

‘May I ask you,’ he said, ‘do you bare bad news?’

She nodded.

‘Yes, I think I do.’

‘Then let me ask you to be gentle with her. Jay has a kind, but complex soul. She’s far more fragile than she appears.’

What the hell does that mean?

Kass nodded, she waited expectantly, unsure if he was going to share more. He didn’t.

‘Through to the end of the aisles, it’s the door to your left.’

Jasmine, the sweet scent of Jasmine, it was everywhere. The ground ahead was a carpet of grass that roamed in all directions. To her left were lattice frames, climbing Jasmine, dazzling blooms with snow coloured petals. The sound of each step grinding on a gravel path.

It was hard not to feel the past with so many stones set in rows, each one the marker for a departed soul. It was death at arms length, and nothing personal for a change. Something was happy. Kass was lifted by the fluent song of a bird as it chirruped from a treetop. For a moment the past few days were a dream.

Was that her, the woman throwing bread to the birds?

Was that Jay? It had to be, there was no-one else alive in the graveyard. Kass took a slow, shallow breath. What to say? Where to start? *Please God, don't let Spencer be her lover. She couldn't bear to give someone that kind of news, to utter those words. Look at her; she's barely a woman, more of a girl just passed 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 that girl provided answers.

Kass took the flash drive from her pocket.

What was it that Spencer had given his life for? Why was it so important to him that she should bring it here? She wouldn't have done it if that bitch hadn't taken Josh. No way.

Oh crap, she's seen me.

As the gap between them closed, the girl acknowledged her. She seemed happy to welcome the harbinger of bad tidings. How to tell this young, fresh faced girl? Three feet away now and she could see that the girl's eyes were blue; that she had a smile that could melt ice. The fading light played with the contours of her face; she had an interesting, almost Elfish look about her, as she pushed her hair back behind tiny ears.

For crying out loud how could she do this? Her next words may well shatter this woman's world beyond repair.

They didn't

'Hi.' The first thing that came to mind.

'Hi.' The reply was welcoming.

'It's beautiful out here.' It seemed an appropriate way to start the conversation. *Just don't say the words, do you come*

here often? 'May I?' There was a Cell phone on the bench, in the spot that she wanted to sit. The girl removed it. 'Thank you.'

'Sorry, I was just waiting for a call.'

Why was she apologising? She needn't. Kass sat. What to say? What the hell do I say?

'Jay? Is your name Jay?'

'Yes, do I know you?'

'No. I was speaking to Joshua, the Rector, he told me.'

'Okay. Have you come to feed the birds? It's nice to know that they sleep with full bellies.'

What?

She threw the last crust

'I've never seen you here before. Have you lost someone?'

Is she psychic?

'It's such a lovely final resting place, don't you think?'

Of course. 'Yes, I suppose it is.' She said. You have the look of someone who's given it a lot of thought. He's not going to ring. You can put the phone down and stop stroking it with your thumb. He's not going to call. 'Do you come here often?' Why did I say that? The words just came out and she hated herself for it.

‘All the time. I come here most evenings to feed the birds. It’s nice to be alone, don’t you think? Why are you here?’

That’s not very welcoming.

‘I’m on the run,’ Kass said, ‘and I’m looking for answers.’

‘Really? That sounds exciting.’ Her free hand began to throw bread again. ‘The closest I get to a thrill is my computer screen.’

‘You like computers?’

‘Doesn’t everyone?’

No, not on my planet they don’t.

‘Not really,’ she said, ‘I have to stare at one all day. Type, type, upload... download, type, type.’ She pictured her gun discharging at the monitor.

‘Oh no... really? But they’re just like little babies; so cute, and full of innocence. They need to be looked after. Constantly fed and cleaned.’

Wow, she was odd.

‘I’m a binary babe, and proud of it.’ She said. ‘What’s not to love about ones and zeros, they’re so... precise.’

‘Computers suck.’ The conversation seemed easier than the truth. ‘Do you come here alone?’

‘You ask a lot questions for a stranger. What do you want?’

She wasn't too keen on the way Jay's eyes narrowed with suspicion. She had the Cate Blanchett, Galadriel thing, going on. Sure, the hair was a bit darker, her body twice as slim. But it was the way she never fully looked up. The way she smiled with her cheeks, as well as her eyes, but didn't mean it. There was sadness on her face, a child's longing about her demeanour. She looked down at the phone again, its screen a magnet for her eyes to keep returning.

'It's not going to ring.' 'Kass blurted. She didn't want to, she had to. The conversation had to be moved on. 'He's not going to phone you.'

'Why would you say that? Who isn't going to phone?'

'Spencer.'

Jay's fingers ceased their endless stroking of the phone. Sadness transcended to fear as her hands clasped firmly about the plastic Cell.

It was done. She couldn't take it back. Why didn't she say anything? I would. I'd want to know why she'd said that. What she knew, and how she knew it?

'I don't believe you.' She said at last.

'It's true, I'm so very sorry.'

'You've seen Spence?'

'Yes.'

'Where?'

Deep breath.

'A clinic in Mexico. He was working for some very bad people.'

Silence.

Okay, she was going to have to say it out loud. No misunderstandings.

'They killed him, Jay. I don't know who *they* are, but they killed him.' Enough said. No need to add anything about the Range Rover's trunk. 'He gave me something before he died.'

This wasn't good, she was losing her. Poor kid, her eyes were welling with tears, and she was starting to tremble, rapid denial by her head.

‘You’re lying.’

‘No. Spencer gave me something before he died. Whatever it was, he was willing to give his life to get it to you.’

‘Don’t touch me. I don’t know you.’

That was dumb; she just thought... a reassuring hand. It was dumb.

‘Who the hell are you? What gives you the right to come here and lie to me?’

That was a good question, how best to answer it? How?

“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, didn’t he? It was immoral. He was there to find evidence of something, and they killed him for it.’

The words were like a hot poker on an open sore to her.

‘So you say.’

Kass held out the data stick. ‘Whatever is on this thing, I need to know. They have my son.’

It was instant recognition of the flash drive. Now the girl accepted. Now she thought that it might be true.

‘I’m so sorry, Jay.’

‘How did it happen?’

‘They shot him.’

‘You saw it.’

Sweetheart, I shared a trunk with his dead body.

‘Yes. He didn’t suffer.’

‘I don’t say that I believe you, but he hasn’t phoned for four days.’

‘How did you know Spencer?’

‘Spence is my brother.’

‘Jay, I’m so sorry, I am. But I need you to decrypt the data on this device. *They* want the information that’s on here, badly. Finding out what it is may be the only way I can get my son back.’ She offered the data stick again. ‘He sent me to you because he knew you’d understand what this was. Jay, I need whatever is on here. What you do with it afterward is your own business.’

‘What’s your son’s name?’

‘Josh. He’s alone and frightened. This flash drive that Spencer gave me is all I have to bargain with.’

‘What did he tell you about Megatron?’

‘Nothing, who is he? Jay, I barely knew your brother. He was always there, around in the background at the clinic but he only spoke to me once, he gave me a warning and a message to meet. He didn’t turn up, just sent me two texts. I don’t even know how he did that. There were no phones, no mobile signal.’

The longer this went on the harder it was getting. Bless her; she was full on shaking now, about to burst at the seams.

‘Maybe we could go somewhere. Get a drink? You’re shaking. Jay, I’ll answer all your questions, if I can. But not here, please, somewhere less exposed, more private.’

Red varnished nails closed around the data stick as Jay’s gaze held its surface. It was clutched then in the manner a priest would relish a holy relic. She wiped her eyes and stood.

‘I knew something was wrong when he stopped calling. I begged him not to go, that this one was *too dangerous*.’

‘He’d done this before?’

‘Yes. What’s your son’s name again?’

‘Josh, he’s fourteen, a beautiful boy. I just want to find him, take 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 had a tumour, here, in his brain. The doctors said that it was inoperable. We only went to the clinic because a man named Fortune came to see us.’

That was a reaction. Did she know him?

‘What’s your name?’

‘Kassandra. Please, Jay. You have to help me.’

‘Does the word NEXUS mean anything to you?’ She asked.

‘Sure, yes. It was my Cell provider.’

What... what is it? What aren’t you telling me?

‘You need to come with me, Kassandra.’ Her eyes were dewed with emotion. ‘You need to speak to Megatron.’

It was hot under the lights but Joe Rushmore didn't mind, the brighter the better. It was important that people see him, listened to what he had to say. With each movement behind the podium the camera lenses tracked in and out.

'Governor McMurdoch is a fine man.' He said. 'He's an honest man. Hell, he's told us all often enough. He's also a gifted man with figures, if the scandals in the papers are to be believed. Thirty eight, twenty seven, thirty six.' He liked it when the audience laughed. 'I will even concede that he is good with children. I have *never* seen a candidate kiss so many babies on prime time television.'

Senator Rushmore paused to let the levity ripple through the gathering below him. This was where he liked to be, performing behind the podium for a wealthy audience.

Look at them all, dressed up to the nines for a meal at fourteen hundred dollars a head. There's more jewellery on show here than there is at Tiffany's. They were eating from the palm of his proverbial.

‘But... and there is always a but when we talk about the Governor. Governor McMurdoch is a weak man, and he is not a God fearing man. He is a man with too little stomach for the way that now lies ahead. We are a broken nation; we are a country that needs to be healed from its inside out. In the current economic climate this country must have a leader, not another head of state willing to barter and placate what little is left of our nation’s wealth and pride. Governor McMurdoch doesn’t have a damn clue about how to heal our great nation, or how to wield the biggest economy on this our Garden of Eden. He has absolutely no military background or experience, not an ounce of grit, no balls, no back bone to with which to rattle sabres with the innumerable enemies this country is now embroiled in a dog fight.’

He placed his hand on his breast in the time honoured fashion. It was time to go for the throat.

‘How can he ask the people of this country to *trust* a man whose financial supporters are predominantly bankers, the men responsible for sending this country into a toxic spiral of debt. *He wants us to sell out to Wall Street.*’

That was more like it. The seated crowd was starting to warm vocally, beginning to murmur aloud its support.

Bring it on.

‘The good Governor is led by the nose by the Europeans. The men and women of Europe who want the United States of America to shore up their ailing Euro, and with our hard earned dollar. Well I think that Americans would like to keep their dollar to themselves. American tax payers would like to see their hard earned revenue spent here at home, where it can benefit the American people, and not the economies of foreign nationals.’

Clapping, that’s more like it. Get them on their feet Joe. Bring in the brass band.

‘I served my country overseas. I took up arms to defend its borders, put my life on the line with other servicemen and women who risk their lives each and every day, and for what? So that I can *watch* my fellow Americans being turned out of their homes. So I can *feel* my fellow countrymen, *and women*, lose all spirit and hope. So that Fat Cats can earn a buck whilst breaking the back of our American economy.’

Yes, that’s better. Rise up for me; let the party know who you want as their next candidate. Let the country know who you want as its President. Shout and holler the name of

Senator Joe Rushmore... President Joe Rushmore. I hear you, I will answer your call.

The room echoed with cheers beneath bright crystal chandeliers. A rousing applause from over fifty tables, all directed toward the man standing proudly behind the podium. The Senator's gaze swept hard across the room. This was always the best bit. The apple pie laced with star spangled ice cream. The audience was lapping it up. He turned toward the closer of the two cameras that relayed his speech, its red light assuring him that millions were watching. He caught a glimpse of his own reflection, and smiled reassuringly, more for himself than for the public. But he knew they'd get it as well. The smooth skin and lightly tanned complexion of a top executive smiled back at him. Executive, that was a good word.

'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, and well chosen. "So far as we have already formed engagements let them be fulfilled, with perfect good faith. But here let us *stop*."

That's right you feel the word... STOP.

Its finality was left to linger.

‘Great words written by a great man,’ He said. ‘President George Washington.’

Allow another pause; let the word President sink in. Let the sentiment hit home.

‘Thomas Jefferson agreed,’ The Senator continued, “Peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations... entangling alliances with *none*.” Those are the words of our Founding Fathers. Great Americans, great leaders, great statesmen. Great men who urged that our great Nation stand alone. I urge that *we* stand alone. To you, the voters, I 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 cheers erupted.

‘There is only one candidate for the presidency of these United States of America. You are looking at that man right here, and right now. Senator Joe Rushmore will make our America great again.’

Rise, rise up, all of you. Yes, that’s right, on your feet.

They rose, ever man and woman. The rich and the powerful cheered his name. Thunderous energy and sounds, mere food for the man, it was fuel for his ego. It was pure bloody nectar as Senator Joe Rushmore waved his open hands with submissive appeal, and then clenched hard at both to shake them as lion hearted fists.

‘Ladies and gentleman,’ someone famous drawled into a mike, his hand raised, ‘Senator Joe Rushmore, your choice for the next president of the United States of America.’

Just a few more seconds, let the cameras pan the crowd.

Joe Rushmore left the stage.

‘They loved you out there Senator, couldn’t get enough.’

‘How did I come over on the cameras?’

‘You were sick, Senator. The public lapped you up.’

‘Send me the tape. And Charles, get me some iced water.’

‘Yes sir, whatever the Senator wants.’ Replied Charles. The Senator’s young aide snapped his fingers for a waiter. His attentiveness was as sharp as the Amosu suit that he wore. Charles was here to serve and obey; he clicked eager fingers again to summon the Senator some service. ‘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.’

‘Yes sir. Now if I may. Before you return 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 prying ears. ‘Mr Fortune is here, sir. He would like a few minutes before you continue. I put him in your office.’

‘Fortune? 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 my good sides.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Did you see the show, Fortune? We’re riding on the crest of a wave. And it’s going to break right across the White House lawn, just about up to the front door.’

Good, the Senator is on a high. It should make what I report more palatable.

‘That’s very good news, Senator.’ He said.

‘But you’re just about to give me some bad news, right? Whisky?’ He offered up a crystal tumbler whilst pouring himself a drink. ‘No, that’s right you don’t do you?’ He swirled the liquid under his nose. ‘Do you know that they distil this stuff and don’t bottle it for twenty years? A lot of goddamn fuss just for a whiskey. But it sure stimulates the senses, and quite frankly it smells divine. Spicy almonds with a hint of orange. Well? Get on with it.’

‘We don’t have the woman yet. Or the data.’

‘Are you sure that she has it?’

‘We had a limited dialogue with her before the kinetic event.’

‘The kinetic what? Call it what it was, Mr Fortune. That was a very expensive missile with which you managed to miss the target.’

‘Yes sir.’ *He’s taking this well.* ‘During the dialogue she did intimate that Spencer had given her something, some incriminating data. She has threatened to expose that information.’

‘The woman is a suspect in a murder case; her own kid has gone missing. As far as the authorities are concerned this woman’s a psycho. She knows nothing that can hurt us.’

‘She’s proving resourceful.’

‘Are you telling me that you can’t handle the situation, Fortune?’

‘Just reporting the facts, Senator.’

And now for the really bad news.

‘During the dialogue she mentioned you, by name.’

‘What... Where the hell did she get my name from?’

‘I’m looking into it.’

‘Mr Fortune, I am a hare’s head from getting myself my party’s nomination for the Presidency. I have a destiny to fulfil here.’ The Senator swallowed his whiskey; he was up and walking toward the window, thoughtful. ‘No. If she had

evidence she would have made contact by now. Tried to screw us with it? Krane is full of shit.'

'That's a very strong possibility.'

'You're here to report the facts, no the possibilities. Come over here, Fortune. You see that fine example of architecture through my window. That's the White House. That building over there used to mean something. It was a shining beacon for American democracy and strength. It stood for, *we're the good guys*. And, *don't fuck with us*. Now every Charlie, 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. 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 a with dash of water from a silver topped siphon.

So there it was in a nutshell. The Senator revealing what he already knew to be true. The great White Hope was nothing more than a colossal bigot, and a racist. White Supremacists were paying the bills now. 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?

‘They say that the water dilutes the drink, that’s not true. It brings out the flavours. But whilst that may be true about whiskey, it does not equate with the foreign policies of this country. I aim to change that.’ The tumbler’s lip was gently sipped from and it seemed to calm Joe Rushmore’s fervour. ‘I apologise, Mr Fortune, I appear to be indulging myself. Tell me now, how is Doctor Outman proceeding with the vaccine for the Nexus Package?’

‘The Doctor is being somewhat evasive, as usual. But he says that he has succeeded in synthesising the vaccine. Samples have already been sent to the relevant laboratories for confirmation. If all is as he says, full production can proceed within a few weeks.’

‘Good... good. We are going to make a shit pile of dollars from all of this. What about the kid, with the thing in his brain? Do you think that Outman can deliver us this... 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. My God, if he could succeed. A technology like that would make this country unstoppable. You tell Dr Outman that the vaccine for the Package goes into full production, asap. And you tell him, whatever he wants concerning that boy, he gets. Are we 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 is 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, and deliver her to the FBI. Our friends in the Bureau have enough to bury her behind bars for the rest of her life.’

‘Not good enough. What if she mentions my name again?’

‘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 to exit through the door.

More bad news. The text was from April. “Man down. Bird has flown. Call me...” *It would seem that events are conspiring against me. Be careful Julius. Chasing problems is a far cry from solving them.*

Outside, the corridor extended with twenty yards of white walls and dado rail, in either direction. Fortune put the call on hold and made his way farther out of the building. He needed fresh air, time to think. Rushmore and Outman were pandering to personal agendas. They were in danger of undermining everything. It was time to go over the Senator’s head. He needed to consult with The Board.

Julius put the call on speaker.

‘April?’

'We've tracked the Krane woman. She got on a flight to Dulles airport. She's in Washington.'

Fortune doubted the Senator's whiskey would taste so good if he knew that.

'Why would she come to Washington, Julius? Does she really know about the Senator?'

'Unlikely.'

'Unlikely? What does unlikely mean?'

There it was again, that nagging memory of a few rashly spoken words. He wondered if he had made an error in judgement. Julius was well aware that he had mentioned the Senator's name in his initial pitch to the Krane woman, and now she was in Washington.

'Unlikely..? It means that there is doubt about connecting the Senator with the boy, but that I cannot be sure.'

'Fine, it just seems an odd choice of destination, under the circumstances.'

'Agreed. It seems we have little choice but to let the situation play out, at least for now. Focus on what we do know for sure. Do you 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 a sheriff’s office in Arizona. Carl went on site to pick her up. Our mystery man took down two of Carl’s men.’

‘Have you fully sanitised the scene?’

‘Negative. We managed to remove the bodies and we have taken steps to smoke the crime scene. We’re steering local FBI toward 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.’

‘Just give me the highlights.’

‘Streemer enlisted in the Corp in seventy four, aged eighteen. Quick promotions got him talent spotted by Military intelligence, and that’s where it gets murky. We do know that he’s ex Delta force, and has links to the CIA, mostly in Central and South America. All I’m getting are headlines and whispers, his file is welded shut. I do know that he got an honourable discharge after his wife got capped by some black gangbangers, back in 2000. The whispers tell me he started leaving too many bodies on the job, and that a Psych evaluation had him a half grade lower than Hannibal Lecter, but twice 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. You 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, I have no idea how he fits into all of this.’

‘Speculate.’ He needed more than just the facts. April was his eyes and ears on the ground. She hired and fired, had an almost empathic feel for the people involved, and for the operations. She 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 was worried. That alone was cause for concern. Think, Julius. What possible link could Streemer have to Krane? More immediate was the question of why she had come to Washington? It didn’t make sense, and was hardly a coincidence, that someone with multiple agencies on their trail to take flight here in 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.

Back on speaker.

'April, was Spencer born in Maryland or Virginia by any chance?'

'Yes, that's the other bit of Intel we have. I got the HUB to get very personal with him. He passed a background check with a very clever forgery, but we picked on a couple of discrepancies and ran them down. It appears Spencer was born in 1987, but not in Kentucky, in Washington. Before you get mad, we didn't check him out. It was a government screen. Outman picked him out as promising. Checks had already been done.'

'Go on.'

'Parents are both deceased, car accident. There's a sister, Jaylin, younger by three years. She goes off the radar in 2003. 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... and reading between the lines, he had friends in high places. Probably the stressor for what comes next. Jaylin became a problem child,

she liked to vent her disappointment by hacking computers, creating and sending viruses to generally piss people off. 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. Run a check on the girl through the usual sources, and on every friend and family member either of them has. I want this Jaylin girl found.'

'It'll take time. Do you think that she knows the Krane woman?'

'Unlikely.' *There was that word again.* '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.'

'And yet she claims to have the stolen data.'

'No way. Pullman searched her before he put her in the trunk I was there.'

'We were looking for the hard drive that Spencer had removed. What if he transferred the interesting bits to a flash drive?'

He noted the pause.

‘And how did he get it to Krane? We know for a fact that Spencer didn’t access the mainframe prior to the coms being shut down. That was *after* he bumped into her at the canteen.’

‘Something doesn’t add up, 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? Perhaps 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.’

‘Roger that.’

Underground parking... Where are we? Where is she taking me?

It made Kass nervous, especially when Jay slammed the door of the battered Honda Civic. A short nervy walk, brought them out into a run down area; half a city block that most sane people would have sense to avoid this time of night.

‘Where are we going?’ Asked Kass. Her new found friend had barely spoken during the short trip.

‘My place.’ She replied. ‘This is it. We go up, mind the steps.’

Just the steps? This place is a death trap. A dilapidated and abandoned warehouse at first glance. She was beginning to regret letting this stranger lead her off into the middle of nowhere. But what choice was there? To Kass’ relief a key was finally presented to a lock and a large red door was pushed ajar.

‘Please, take your shoes off.’

‘Okay, sure, whatever you...

This was unexpected. Assisted housing, or even a squat, but not this. The apartment’s interior bore no relation to the run down exterior. *Red and green should never be seen.* But she

loved it. *Oh, and the furnishings.* ‘This is nice; what did you say you did for a living?’

‘I didn’t. Stop asking questions.’

‘Sorry.’ No she wasn’t. But to look at Jay was still reeling from the news about her brother. ‘Unusual,’ Kass added, ‘a place like this in an old warehouse.’

The windows that stretched the entire far wall would stand pride of place out front of Macys. Offering tempting views into a wonderful display. *Split level, she’d always loved split levels.*

Four steps led her gaze up to a 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 carved from oak and surrounded the bed in an open arc. And there was more of the same colouring, red and green, covers and rugs, the satin curtains gleaming in moonlight. The girl had style.

‘We like to live off the grid.’ Jay said.

No shit.

‘We?’ Kass asked.

‘There are four of us.’

There was that look of pain again. Kass felt it, and guessed that meant there were only three of them now.

‘You, and your brother... and Megatron?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can I ask who number four is?’ *Yes, I know another question. Deal with it.* This time the response was different, she was obviously very fond of number four.

‘Cupcake.’ She replied. ‘His name’s Cupcake. I’ll take you to meet him, both of them; do you mind if I get changed first?’

‘No, I...’ It was obviously a rhetorical question.

I wouldn’t mind a change of clothes myself. Okay, she’s getting undressed in front of me. Why would she do that?

The light floral dress that Jay was wearing slipped down slender thighs into a clump on the floor. She stepped out. 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 did realise now why there was a copper tank hanging from the ceiling. And right above a glass cubicle.

Of course, doesn’t everyone need transparency when they take a shower?

‘I’ll err, take a look around.’ She said.

This wasn’t a loft, it was a railway station. Enough glass and oak beams to build a terminal. She was a reader too, a

library of books racked in precision, sizes and heights, set on long shelves.

And what does our Elvish friend like to read?

Stuff on computing, pretty boring, and plenty of high brow shit, mostly penned by foreign authors. *No Stephanie Myer or Patricia Cornwall then? And what are you hiding behind the silky screen?* Naked woman was in a fog of steamy spray so she decided it was okay to peek.

Three large monitors, each one as big as her oversized TV at home. A large computer and a matching pair of laptops sat on a well crafted table, above them were speakers big enough to awaken the dead.

She did say she was hot for the Web. Jay's need for privacy was obviously more acute when tapping at her keyboard than when taking a shower in polite company? 'I like your place.' *Josh would love it too.*

'Feel free to shower if you like.'

'I'm good, thank you. Nice robe, is it Donna Karan?'

'It was my mum's. Tell me what happened to Spencer, Kassandra. Please.'

Deep breath, where to start? Kass told her everything she knew, and prayed that Jay would be able to help 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, but loathed to let anything be released. She'd seen the same look on the homeless. It was the same wary stare that never looked you direct in the eyes; every inner defence heightened, ready to be deployed.

'I'm sorry.'

'Why?'

'For you and your son.'

Really? Had so much happened in her young life that it stopped her from crying? I would. I'd ball my eyes out if a stranger told me a story like that. Trouble was there were no more tears left to shed, just frustration and anger and as far as she could see, no punch bag to take it out on. It was a story that was hard to tell.

Was that it? Had Jay already prepared herself for this day? Had she accepted the inevitable? Did she just want revenge now?

This kid is difficult to read.

Kass reached out and touched Jay's hand, only to find it withdrawn again.

Who am I trying to console, her... or me?

'Spence gave you this?

The flash drive. She'd almost forgotten.

'I take it the data is encrypted?'

'Yes. It laughed at me, literally, when Weldon tried to open it.'

'Weldon?'

'The man that helped me.' *No, he did more than that.* 'He saved my life out in the desert.'

'And where is he now?'

'I have no idea, but trust me; trouble is never far away from a man like that. He said he would help us.'

'Us?'

'Yes... I just thought...'

'The others will have to agree. I'll introduce you to Megatron, and to Cupcake.'

Cupcake? Who the hell is Cupcake?

Obviously Jay had the pick of the rooms; this one was far smaller, less natural light, a musky man-smell that hung in the air. Further scrutiny left her wondering if a Rottweiler had recently trashed the place. *Okay, there was no need to stare.* A skinny dude sporting a pony tail craned his neck. *Is he checking me out?* And who was the tall dumpling grinning with the rosy cheeks?

‘Shit, Jay. Who’s the old chick?’

Old? That kid was going straight to hell.

‘Don’t freak, she’s a friend.’

‘We 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, I like her.’

‘No, you don’t. We’ve had this conversation. You don’t like women that you don’t know.’

‘Leave him alone, Meg. I say she stays.’

There was something sweet about the way Cupcake nearly wet himself at the thought. He stood rigid; the classic build and shape of an opera singer, a rabbit caught in the headlamps

stare. What did it for Kass was the 44DD headphones stuck on his head, the Bongo brand name etched in silver letters on both cups.

‘Gregory, listen to what Cassandra has to say.’

‘Don’t call me that. It’s Megatron. What’s the point in having a Handle if you’re not going to use it? Cupcake, see the nice lady out.’

‘I don’t think she wants to go.’

‘She’s spoken to Spence, Meg.’

‘What, really, how is he. Why hasn’t he called? Who are you?’

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 alright? Where is he?’

‘They killed him, Cups.’ There was a noticeable tone of acceptance in Jay’s voice. ‘Spence is gone.’

‘Says who... her? Come on, Jay. A complete stranger turns up and you take her word as gospel? Bullshit, Spence is...’

‘Is what, Meg? He hasn’t called, he hasn’t logged on. He hasn’t used any of the panic buttons online. I’ve known it was bad for days.’

‘Says you.’

‘She has this.’ Jay held out the Flash. ‘It’s Spence’s, no question. There’s something on it he wanted us to see.’

There was something odd about Gregory, or Megatron, or whatever his name was. Both Jay and Cupcake were visibly traumatised, Cupcake especially, he wouldn’t stop pacing. One was resolved to Spence’s demise, the other not yet ready to accept. Megatron was less emotive, his focus on the flash that Jay offered as evidence. He was keen for it.

Give it to him. She was way too tired, felt far too cranky. Being hostile to her now was a sure fire way of getting thumped. Besides, this place intrigued her. Look at it. There were college dorms tidier than this. Megatron lived in a pigsty, an electronic pigsty; the room was filled with electronics that looked jerry rigged by the Borg. It was inventive, puzzling, alluring, as she walked in a subconscious daze toward the equipment. Above her head an endless stream of ones and zeros flashed across a screen, and then dropped down to another, smaller. There were monitors projecting newscasts from around the world in silence. A tall stack of servers blinked incessantly, its lights illuminating, intoxicating even, in their endeavours. And who the hell needed four keyboards?

‘Cool huh?’

Oh, so now you want to talk to me?

‘What is all this? What are you doing here?’

‘What are we doing? You need a friend with a bigger IQ, Jay. What you are looking at is a bridge through. Say hello to Alice.’

‘Alice?’

‘Yeah. 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. She’s got an Rmax of 1.615 and an Rpeak of 2.1. Alice 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 looked toward the floor, and then wished he hadn’t when his eyes met hers on the way back up.

‘Don’t panic, I have no intention of lifting your floorboards up.’

‘She’s not a geek, Meg. She’s a cop.’

‘You brought a cop here? I didn’t do it, lady. 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 data stick. Whatever it is, Spence gave his life to get it out to you.’

‘Stop saying that. Spence is still ones and zeros, man. Why are you lying? What do you want from us?’

‘I’m sorry, but Spencer is gone. I wish he wasn’t, but he is.’

‘Jay, that’s bullshit. Don’t listen.’

‘How did he die?’ Asked Cupcake.

‘Quickly.’ *How else to put it?* ‘I met him at a clinic in Mexico. He risked everything to give me that data stick, and to help me and my son. Now they have my son and I need what’s on that stick.’

Silence.

‘Look, I don’t believe for one moment that she’s telling the truth, Jay. But if she is... do you think *it’s* on there?’

‘It? What’s it? Can you decrypt that thing?’

‘Can birds fly? Of course I can. Give me the flashdrive, Jay.’

Megatron slipped it into a port opening directly below the first bank of lights. ‘Just give me a second, just a moment. Wow, he’s blocked this up pretty good. Jay, he’s used Shootbolt?’ Fingers worked the keyboard like a pianist. ‘Why

would he use that? It would take a military computer to open this.'

'Shootbolt?' Kass asked.

'It means that if you don't have the key, you don't get in.'

Kass watched a strange language unfurl on the screen directly above where ponytail sat. Megatron was talking to Alice.

‘This’ll take some time. Jay, do you think that he really found it? That they really killed him for it?’

Kass wasn’t listening. Whoever, whatever? She was tired, so tired, and getting agitated. It was best to ignore them until they had something to say. Ignore Alice as well.

They hadn’t registered at first; it was all about the store of computing stuff. But one by one they came to light, dotted around the room. They were everywhere. Posters, figures, and she really hoped that wasn’t a stuffed one in the corner.

‘Penguins?’ She said aloud.

‘You got a problem with my penguins, cop lady?’

‘No. I just wondered why they were so many in your room.’

‘*Aptenodytes forsteri*, or the Emperor Penguin to those who ignore the benefits of Discovery Channel. Behold the most awesome species on the planet.’

She already regretted asking.

‘It’s the stamina and the will of the individual... the power of the Huddle. The Emperor will Trek up to a hundred and twenty kilometers just to breed. That’s copulation in temperatures below minus fifty. The Emperor can dive below

five hundred and fifty meters. That's a Bomb. It's pure adrenaline.'

'Does he have to do the thing with his fingers whenever he says that?'

'He tried to learn Sign once,' she raised her voice, 'but wasn't very good at it.'

'Hey, sign is hard. 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 thought I was a Dalek or something. I swear it would have got messy if I had been. Now excuse me while I go to alternative keys.' The chair backed out and wheeled itself around. 'What? You never seen a man in a wheelchair before?'

'No, I mean... yes. Sorry, I didn't realise.'

'Save your symp, Penguin power comes from the head and the heart, not the legs. Am I right Cupcake?'

'Megatron knows.'

'Does he think he's a penguin?'

'No, he watches a lot of David Attenborough.'

'Yeah, the Big Att. He's awesome.'

‘Jay, he may think he’s a penguin, but were up against a pack of killer whales. And time is short.’

‘Hey, cop lady. You think we’re short of penguin power here? I got more heat loaded in my hard drives than a ninja assassin.’

‘Please tell me that’s not a euphemism?’

‘Maybe we should let him get on.’ Jay took Kass by her arm. ‘He can get, cranky, if we pressure him too much. Ones and Zeros are his thing, he panics when he has to talk to real girls.’

‘Hey, I heard that. I like girls.’

‘I like girls too.’

‘We know you do, Cupcake. We know.’

‘Cupcake?’ *I’m going to regret this.* ‘I have to ask, Cupcake?’

‘He likes to bake.’

‘You’re shitting me? Penguin power *and* flour power?’

‘They’re my friends.’

Oh my God, what have I got myself into?

‘We’re part of a huddle,’ said Megatron, ‘do you know what that is? It’s when penguins group together against the wind and the cold, that’s us, we are the Huddle and we try to make a difference. Attack the *bad guys* wherever it hurts? We hack them and then we leak what we find to the press, to government agencies. Sometimes we bomb them.’

‘Bomb them?’

‘Oh yeah, with viral bombs. They make a mess of the enemy’s digital facilities.’

‘Or sometimes we just shut down their servers.’ Cupcake was keen to share. ‘I like it when Meg inflates their bills on supplier’s payrolls. They get really upset when they can’t pay. I think it’s the recession.’

‘So you guys are Data Terrorists.’

‘We prefer Hacktivists.’

‘Of course you do. Just tell me what Spencer was doing at the clinic?’

Megatron wheeled his chair to face her. You couldn’t miss the anger present in his eyes, chiselled into his narrow

features, carved out by years of cynicism directed at the establishment. That, and 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 the parents. No-one ever checks. Spence was gathering evidence.’

‘Of what?’ *And who are they?* ‘Just tell me what was going on at the clinic? Why do they want my son?’ *Don’t look at her, look at me; tell me what’s going on?* ‘Tell me.’

‘We had some friends, codenamed Broadsword,’ Jay intervened, ‘they liked to sift through digital trash, it was their thing.’

‘Sift... trash?’ *Codenamed?* ‘What, what does all that mean?’

‘It means they were data miners, 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 redundant hard drives and memory, anything offline, or that was being serviced. Sneaky Viruses that could search through data that was dormant or deleted. It’s like cosmetic reconstruction, binary style. Most companies defend their data, not their trash. You’d be amazed what you can find

in the trash of a bank, pharmaceutical company... 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 out there looking for the truth.'

'The truth? 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 flash 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 the Swat teams are preparing outside?'

Once more, just call me old once more. I'll pop the plastic on your wheels, so help me.

‘You shouldn’t be here. Jay invited you, and that’s the only reason I don’t kick your fat ass out the front door.’

‘That’s it you smart mouthed... Dalek.’ Hands gripped wheelchair, wheels went 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 the

Foundation,
about the clinic, or so help me I’ll stuff your balls so far up that
usb
slot that your hard drive will fry, capiche?’

‘Can I get you some tea?’ Cupcake sounded distressed.

‘Crazy cop bitch. I told you, it’s not the Foundation.’

‘Turn it down Meg, her son had a tumour. Up here, in his head.’

‘Oh, I didn’t know. Why don’t people tell me these things? Sorry, that’s tough for you and the kid, but it doesn’t mean that we have to share with you.’

‘Well now you do, and here’s why, long story short. Josh, my son, is diagnosed with a tumour. Doctors give bad outcome. Foundation comes knocking on door. Mother takes only child to dream clinic in Colorado, but ends up in Mexico. Staff kidnap

child, kill Spence, stick mother in the trunk with corpse.
Mother kills son of a bitch in desert, gets found on side of road.
Missile goes bang, dog goes woof, mother gets nailed in tuna tin
to cross border. Since then mother has been arrested, accused
of murdering boyfriend, and chased by a pack of sons of bitches
who want to kill her. Did I mention the warrant out for my
arrest for the killing of a Sheriff's Deputy in Ajo? I think what
I'm trying to say, is you don't want to piss me off.'

'Tell her, Meg. She needs to know everything.'

'Okay, be cool. Cop lady needs to chill, and take her hands
of my wheels.'

Yeah, I'll take them off, and put them round your throat.

'Talk.' She said, as her hands released him and he spun
away. 'Talk before I chalk up one more murder warrant.'

What, did you think I'm joking?

'These friends of ours,' he said at last, 'codenamed
Broadsword, they had information about some very bad people,
The Board, that's as close to a name as they ever got. They
found evidence about kids being abducted, about being used for
experiments. It was a big fat cover up by rogue forces inside of
the government.'

'And you believed them?'

‘No, of course not, but in their last online post they said that they were being watched, followed. They were scared, and then they went offline. The website crashed out and we never heard from them again. They disappeared, man, like they never existed. And then something weird happened.’

‘What?’

‘Spence was working for the pharmaceutical company, Beiman; we were trying to get some dirt on them. Misappropriated government expenses, or maybe evidence of rigged drug trials, that sort of shit. Happens all the time, just no-one catches them out. Spence liked to go undercover, it made him feel...’

‘Useful.’ 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, apparently dead. Shit, sorry... Jay, didn’t mean... engage brain, shut mouth, sorry.’

‘Don’t say that, Meg. Spence *is* a Superhero. He fought for the truth.’

‘Listen Cups, I’m sorry. Spence was the man, okay. Serious penguin power. He *was* the Huddle.’

‘What was it that was weird?’ Kass had to keep them focused. ‘Tell me how Spencer ended up at that clinic?’

‘There was a name, the only one that ever got mentioned by Broadsword. Some psycho Doctor named Outman. You know, death camp doctor, that sort of thing. Something to do with the Chinese, or North Koreans, I don’t know. Apparently he was a bad ass ego with no moral compass. The weird thing was that 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 act. You couldn’t write this stuff. We couldn’t stop him going.’

‘I’ve met him.’ Kass said. The smug bastard’s face would haunt her forever. ‘Tell me why he wants the kids?’

‘It’s the growths in their heads.’ Said Jay. ‘We think they’re causing it to happen.’

‘What?’

‘Cop Lady, have you ever heard of NEXUS?’

‘What has my Cell provider got to do with all this?’ Kass looked to Jay who’d asked her the exact same question. ‘Tell me, I need to know what’s going on here.’

‘Tell her everything, Meg.’

‘Fine, lets build a camp fire and invite the scouts. Let’s have a singalong, drink milk, eat cookies. Jay, this is not what we do.’

‘Spence is dead, Meg. That changes everything.’

‘So *she* says.’

‘Stop saying that. Spence isn’t gone.’

‘Cupcake, Spencer would never have given this woman his flash drive, or told her about the three of us, not if there was another way. Meg, you tell her. You tell her everything.’

‘Fine.’ He groaned and switched to another keyboard, the whirling mass of digits on the previous monitor left to search for patterns. ‘Spence went to work for a doctor Outman, he said, ‘because of what Broadsword had posted. Coincidence... hardly.’

‘What did they post? What’s NEXUS got to do with all this? And why does it involve Josh?’ *Stop looking at her. Focus on*

me... over here, on me. ‘Spit it out, Megatron.’ It was time to draw a line between the theory and the facts. ‘What does this have to do with the Foundation? What does it have to do with Josh?’

‘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.’

‘Brain cancer, why?’

‘That was the question that Spence was trying 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 their way. Just another unlucky kid with a tumour, eh. No big deal. You had to be able to see the bigger picture, and they weren’t advertising. 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 the doorstep of the traumatised parents. He offers a life-line to said parents. A well known charity is willing to stump up the medical expenses; it offers to take care

of your kid. What are you going to say? Yes please, where do I sign? According to Spencer, no-one ever reads the small print. Why would they? The Foundation gets to keep all the samples, all the bits they cut away like blood samples and DNA. 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 it was like opening Pandora's Box. It was 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 downloading, or streaming. You don’t get a big fat pile of data flowing from a Provider to a Destination anymore; it’s a single package, Data Dumping, and all done in less than a heart beat. High frequency bandwidths just got made redundant, gone the same way as VHS, and DVDs. Bang. It’s penguin power via satellite.’

Was Steven Hawking Jr getting a hard on for all of this?

‘Dumb it down Ironside, I’m a cop remember.’

‘Fine,’ wheelchair turned a hundred and eighty, ‘you got a TV? Want to watch a movie? Log onto Netflix and download HD, Super HD. But wait, uh-oh, the picture jams... download error, can’t handle the pace. WAKE UP TV. It’s the same with phones, frigging broadband, never a signal or a decent download. What a drag, but NEXUS can dump a box set, an entire library, and all before your thumb has left the ‘yes please’ button. What stops my granny doing it too, I hear you ask? You need the Chips to send and receive. Source and Recipient that mate for

life, speed of light stuff. No more piggybacking, no more hacking or eavesdropping. It's New Age Relativity. Einstein on amphetamines. It's SAD. Speed=Application x Distance squared.

SAD for your existing provider.'

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 know it all.' 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 secure, faster than any other SatCom in space. If they succeed, they can forge ahead in areas of computing, of unmanned defence, of advanced attack capabilities. It would 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 a problem.'

'Yeah, a big problem, man.'

Was he speaking again?

'Stop it.' Kass growled. 'Just, stop. I don't care about any of this. Just tell me how it involves Josh? Jay, please, just talk to me.'

‘Spence had a theory.’ She said. ‘He reckoned the NEXUS was the cause of young children developing tumours.’

‘Hence my reference to spiders, cop lady, the Web is full of them.’

‘Shut up wheels... Jay, please.’

‘Kassandra, the world has gone wireless crazy. 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, so we just have to live with the consequences. I think that’s what’s on the flash drive. Spence found the proof of those consequences.’

‘And NEXUS?’ *Come on, spit it out. I need to know what’s wrong with Josh. Oh, so now you need a deep breath? Try seeing this from my perspective.*

‘NEXUS bursts data from the Source, the satellite, to the Recipient, the handset. It comes in a focused beam of light.’

‘So it’s 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, just as lightning searches for a path towards the ground. Nexus has more surgical precision. 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, Cupcake. It's fast. NEXUS can transmit terabytes of data quicker than you can blink your eyes.'

Okay, if I have to shake my head much more it'll start to hurt. 'Tell me something that makes sense.' *Or shut up.*

'Physics isn't really my thing. Spence was into all that stuff. It's just light, pure and simple. A SatCom carrier that's 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, 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, beamed for your enjoyment from the other side of the globe? It's all light and mirrors, we just take it for granted now. Derr, lady, think about it? Light is all around us, it's very aggressive in its nature, it bombards us all daily in a host of different wavelengths.'

He was getting a hard on again. Someone was going to have to bitch slap him. Please, just keep on talking down at me like that.

'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 that can pass through rock and steel, it's in its nature to do so, and on the way it delivers you the mail. How cool is that? Etch the data on light, at the speed of light, and then send it 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 understand the science, it's pretty damn beautiful.'

'It's killing my son you freak. There's *nothing* beautiful about that.'

‘I thought you might be able to think better in here. Leave Meg to it in his room. He can be somewhat...’

‘Stressful, aggravating... insulting?’

‘Pretty much, I guess. You’d like him if you got to know him, honestly. The world has given Megatron a hard time, and sometimes he likes to dish it back. For such a large brain he often engages it without thinking. It’s a reflex really; and he’s not good with strangers.’

‘Really, I hadn’t noticed.’

‘Can I get you some tea?’ Asked Cupcake.

‘Got any coffee?’

‘Coffee’s not good for people that are stressed.’

‘Yes, it is, trust me.’

‘Okay. Should I bring milk or cream?’

‘Milk, please. No sugar.’

‘Okay.’

Two hundred and fifty pounds packed in a six foot three frame lurched itself back toward the kitchen. Kass couldn’t put her finger on it but there was a question mark of immaturity, or maybe a learning disability, something?

‘He’s not sneaky enough to bring me de-caf is he?’

‘Cupcake? Nooo, he’s a sweetie.’

There it was again, that smile whenever she mentioned his name.

‘Are you two related?’

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; I had lots of issues back then. But honestly, I think Cuppy had more. Only he dealt with them much better than me. People thought he was dumb, stupid; he was very big for his age. It made him a target for spiteful, mean people. I guess we were kindred spirits, so we ended up looking out for each other. And here we are.’

Here we are indeed. It can be odd how life can throw strangers together. She was remembering Weldon. *Where the hell is he?* She couldn’t help taking a quick peek out of the window as she crossed the room. This was a nice place, a lot of soft pastel colours, real easy on the eye. She wasn’t sure about the big man’s fetish for glass bowls though.

Numerous surfaces in the room had there transparency on full display. It was obviously a passion; there were even glass bricks set in the walls. There was something else about the

room. Kass couldn't recollect being anywhere so... clean. There was definitely a touch of the OCD's going on in here.

'I hope you like Brazilian?' Asked Cupcake.

'I'm sorry?' *Oh, Brazilian... Columbian, Kenyan... so long as it has caffeine.* 'Fantastic.' She answered, and took the mug on offer. 'Smells divine, thank you. Hey, I really like your place. What's that music you're playing?' She'd heard it before. Two women, they were singing sopranos. It was beautiful.

'The flower duet.' He said. It's from the opera, Lakme. I thought it might help relax everyone.'

'Good call.' *A bath and a full Swedish would be better.* 'It's lovely.' *Jeesh, he's got more CD's than Josh. Obviously an opera buff. Plenty of classical... eurgh... Jazz. And enough country music to consider burning matches in my ears. Oh my goodness, what have we here? He doesn't, he does. Cupcake has Michael Buble.*

I have to touch, I have to touch.

Kass felt the urge to run her finger down the CD spines. *One, two, five, ten... oh my Goodness he has all of them. Can we put the Christmas album on... can we, can we...?*

Oh dear God, its official. I'm losing my mind.

‘It will take a while for the data on the flash drive to fully adjust itself.’ Said Jay. ‘Are you hungry?’

Kass couldn’t remember the last time she’d ate. It was back at the Café, before Milo... Now she was the one taking deep breaths. There was no way she could eat on the plane; her stomach was knotted, racked with fear, churning with guilt. She’d barely registered the flight time. It was like being asleep with your eyes wide open.

‘I have cake?’ Said Cupcake.

You have? Why didn’t you say so? Bring it... bring it to me now.

‘I have apple cake, cheese cake, or brownies?’ He looked perplexed, and then he was gone, back into the kitchen mumbling strange words. His voice resumed louder from the other room. ‘I thought so, there’s still some chocolate and orange sponge, and a few slices of fruit cake. I have cookies in the fridge.’

I have cookies in the fridge? This man was a poet.

She felt Jay’s hand on her shoulder.

‘I recommend the chocolate and orange sponge.’ Then she leaned closer. ‘Now you why we’re such good friends.’

With a figure like that, I don’t think so.

Just one more slice of the chocolate and orange sponge, she'd fit it somewhere, wash it down with more Brazilian.

'Do you remember back in the eighties, and nineties, when the papers were full of stories about Cell phones being responsible for cancer?'

'Hmm, yes. It was something about radiation from Cell phones and their towers.'

'That's right. Only they got the wrong symptoms from the wrong source. The problems started when the first bandwidths were sold. 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. Not proved. When test cases failed, people that were ill tried to blame the frequencies projected from the masts. But with billions of dollars at stake it was all smoked over. Just like tobacco. They told us there was insufficient data, no reason to be concerned, 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? Well it is. But that's not the problem; it was never the *real* problem. Not until now.'

Where is she going with this?

‘It all started with 1G and 2G, and then came 3G, the Universal Mobile Telecommunication Systems, or UMTS, when it finally 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 flooding the airways with super speed digital data. Now, two thirds of the Earth’s population is close to WiFi exposure. So ask yourself what happens to us, the biological material that gets stuck in the way... day after day... after day?’

She wasn’t sure that she wanted to know. Cancer was inherited in the genes, caused by exposure to radiation, wasn’t it?

‘Are you saying that mobiles *do* cause cancer?’

‘In a tiny number of patients, probably. Not enough to get excited about. But as the years have passed governments have realised that there has been an explosion in mental disorders, mostly concentrated in the young, but with serious numbers reflecting in the 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 disorders, we’re talking everything from eating disorders to mood variations. There are hundreds of symptoms, and so many more being diagnosed every year. And there’s one single cause.

Name me a mental disorder and it’s most likely linked. Even anxiety has risen four hundred percent. Did you know that suicide is the fifth most common cause of death in five to fourteen year olds... that’s a fact. Attempted suicide makes a far bigger statistic. The US is smoking over the problem. And get this, in the UK the charity, Mind, is calling for their government to include mental health lessons into the curriculum of all schools. The charities 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 reach the age of sixteen, have thought about, considered, or attempted suicide. 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 States, Kassandra. Internet Health Services are springing up like online fountains to try and alleviate the problem, whilst

governments worldwide downplay the issue. In some cases they are wilfully, and criminally, suppressing the truth in favour of the huge tax revenues they receive. They're blaming it on negative social skills, poor diets, the freeking Xbox? 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?'

'I had no idea.' *Could it really be true? Yes, it could. Someone somewhere was using almost fanatical resources to stop her, to retrieve what was on that flashdrive. Holy shit, isn't that proof enough?*

'For crying out loud, Kassandra, think about it. The last few decades have seen governments around the world looking the other way. They are 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 MobiCom corporations, all the time filling their purses with gold. My God, there are over five billion phones in circulation on the planet right now? Five billion... and how many of them do you think are owned by kids? Spencer knew. And now he's dead because of it.'

‘Seriously? Mobile phones are causing the growth in mental disorders?’

‘No, not the phones, not the frequencies. Cassandra, it’s the raw data. The stuff that flies though the air; through you and me. It’s like the air now, all around us. Passing through us. Accelerating, accumulating, becoming more aggressive in its nature. Data streaming from modern satellites has immersed our world in a sea of information. And we swim in that sea daily. Kass, it’s attempting to re-map our brains.’

‘Are you serious?’

‘What’s up here is basically a computer. Data packaging and transfer, it’s just messages and information. It passes through us all, and some of it is starting to stick. Interrupt the signals in our brains. It’s happening right here and now to you and me.

‘Shit, can’t we stop it?’

‘What do you suggest, putting tin foil round our heads?’

‘There must be something we can do? If people are dying?’

‘It’s not causing death directly, just fracture of the mind, of the brain. We are being swamped with high speed data every minute of every day, twenty four seven. The US government has been secretly researching it. They’ve tagged it SinMap, short for

Synapse remapping. Kass, I kid you not. We are swimming in a sea of data; we are born into it, we live through it, and now it's taking a toll.'

That was another scary statement; though it kinda made sense... sort of. Every day there must be billions, maybe trillions of messages and calls; data downloads from WiFi being beamed en-masse to laptops and tablets. Shit, that includes surveys. I'm on the phone twenty four seven doing the bloody things. She was imagining herself walking through Jay's sea of streaming data.

'Kassandra, if *they* can work it out, eventually someone else will too. That's why the government has been keen to invest so heavily in NEXUS. It has none of these side affects. The Military say they've proved it; they've used NEXUS for four years, ultra secret... ultra stupid. To the Military it's Aladdin's lamp, a total success, streets ahead of the Russians and the Chinese. It's a sure fire money spinner for the mob on Capitol Hill. NEXUS is going to turn the communications industry on its head, the government will get out of 4G before anyone realises what's really been going on. Close down the higher band widths before the law suits begin. The deal is signed, it's sealed, and soon to be delivered. They're going public, and no-

one is going to stop them. It was the beta version of NEXUS that you had on your phone. And I bet they offered you a really good deal to take it.'

'They did. Jay, has this thing caused my son to be ill?'

'NEXUS has side affects they weren't aware of. In an effort to stop SinMap they 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 far too dangerous. But he refused. He was sure that he could get the proof; data we could publish online anonymously. He wanted to put a stop to NEXUS.'

Please don't shake your head like that; just don't shake your head. Kass didn't want to hear this. Jay was about to assign guilt, she could feel it. Images popped into her head, most involved the dollar sign. How could she have been so stupid? NEXUS had cast a net and lured her into accepting its gifts.

'Oh God, has NEXUS caused the cancer in Josh's brain? Am I responsible for this?'

'Yes,' she confirmed, 'I'm sorry Kass, but it wasn't such a good deal after all. NEXUS thought they had overcome the

existing problems with Cell communication. But they were wrong.'

‘Your son has a cancer in his brain, yes?’

‘Yes.’

‘The NEXUS put it in there.’

‘What... how? This is too much.’

‘It’s not your fault, you couldn’t have known. You were just another victim of greed.’

‘You know what; I’m getting fed up with this. I hear a lot of talk, but no explanations. I need you to get to the point.’

‘Okay, the point is that NEXUS has a *big* problem. It’s aggressive, invasive, it’s hurting kids. The problem is in the blue print of a child’s brain, it has a very similar design to the Recipient Chips. The organic circuitry up here in the brain, it’s all light and electricity doing its thing, always trying to make sense of everything it engages with. Imagine how impressionable a child’s head can be? It’s young and eager. It’s craving to learn. It’s yearning to expand with new, more profound knowledge. A virgin processor programmed to accept, to conform, and to be hijacked by just about any exterior influence,’ she was up and angry, ‘hello, check me out... big juicy ball of brain stuff. Here I am waiting to play host to

whatever nasty influence passes me by. NEXUS gave your son cancer, am I making the point now.'

'Yeah, I got it.' *I just don't want to hear it.* She thought she did, but there was no hiding the truth now, it was out there throwing combinations, a left hook rapidly followed by the sucker punch. 'Why?' She asked. 'How did Josh and I get mixed up in all of this?'

'The same way that the rest of us did, it was Broadsword. Spence couldn't get enough of what they posted. He was fascinated by it all. After he was recruited, he wanted to know more, everything there was. He knew enough to put the rag ends together, and then he began to search the company database. Hack whatever he could, safely. It turned into a freak show, a conspiracy at the highest levels of government. The whole damn thing began to consume him; he took more risks, became obsessive. He even began to admire the creative genius behind NEXUS. Spence even suggested that NEXUS was attempting to evolve. Meg reckons it's just found a nice warm place to nest. Kass, I am sorry, truly. But NEXUS is causing the growths in these children's heads, in Josh's head. It's mistaking their brains for the Recipient chips. Its trying to upload itself, it's trying to evolve.'

‘I don’t believe any of this. You, all of you, you’ve been hanging around in cyberspace too long. It... it just doesn’t...’

‘Make sense? I think it does, and I think you know deep down that it’s the truth. Why else are people trying to kill you? For all I know Spencer is dead *because* of you.’

That hit hard. No doubt in Kass’ mind that Spencer could have tried to leave without warning her. She kept her mouth shut. *Why open that can?*

‘You said that Spencer was working for Beimens before Outman hired him? Why did Outman want Spencer?’

‘They’re trying to create a vaccine, a way of curing the cancerous growths. They want to cash in on both ends of the market.’

‘Then there’s a way of curing my son?’

‘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 the good doctor wanted to take NEXUS to the next level. He believed that the NEXUS Web could be encouraged further.’

‘What the hell for?’

‘I don’t know. It had something to do with a young boy that had recently arrived at the Clinic. Kass, I think that boy was your son.’

It was a nice evening, still warm, the last of the sunlight had evaporated into the dark. A figure stepped away from the pavement, back into the shadows, just as a grey Trans Am cruised past with music thumping from speakers inside the cab. It faded, as did the outline of the two males smoking inside. Across the road, three storeys up, a figure walked to a window, an unknown female, possibly attracted by the sounds. She peered out into the dark, lingered as if she could see the street below, and then turned away as she closed the curtains.

So you found them, you clever girl. Let's just hope they can be of use to us.

A gentle hum breached the silence and a phone was retrieved.

'You're late.' Weldon said.

'What you asked for wasn't easy to acquire.'

'Are you able to satisfy my curiosity?'

'If I couldn't, you wouldn't have called me.'

'Then impress me.'

'I have the Intel you require. This Dr, Steven Outman, he's an interesting character. The world would be a more sensitive

place if he were no longer in it. 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 waaaay outside of the box, and as black as it gets.'

'What about Carl.'

'You're not going to like him, he's an ex-Seal, a creepy crawly. Full name's Carl Peterson, a privateer, hires himself to whomever, whenever, and for whatever. The Company uses him, as do various other Agencies. He runs a four man team.'

'Not any more he doesn't. He's just a duet now.'

'Ahh, then 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, Fortune?'

'Hmm, I am going to have to disappoint you there. Mr Fortune is a ghost, a damn good one because I can't find him. I do have what you wanted on the 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. It's all here, stored in ones and zeros. Just tell me where you want it sent.'

'They call these things Smart Phones for a reason. So 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 way above our pay grades. That alone should ring the bells. Oh, and your mug shot is already doing the rounds.'

'Then I guess what you just faxed me evens 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 retiring, remember? "Off to the forest to hibernate."'

'Yeah, well someone just woke up the bear. Thanks for your concern.' He hung up. 'Now then, where were we, Cassandra. What are you going to do now?' Weldon replaced his earpiece; the call had been an interruption, but a valuable one. A double tap and the pause icon disappeared from the screen; the two

women were still talking. It appeared that the men in the other flats had joined them.

Moody was an understatement, you could cut the air with a knife. The girl, Jay, was agitated, wouldn't stop moping around. She was angry about her brother... angry with Kass, getting angry about everything. A lot had been said, had been left unsaid, and waiting to find out what was on that bloody flash drive was sending them both crazy.

Talk, she had to talk. Mulling this around her head would only serve to induce another migraine. Talk to her. Remember that she has lost someone too, her son. Why can't I just open my mouth to talk?

Problem solved, the cop was talking

'I said; tell me about yourself, about Spencer. What was he like?' Kass asked.

Jay pulled the curtain fully closed. *What to say, how to explain? Spence was everything. He'd come back for her, brought the light back to the darkness. Spence had brought me home. Talk to her, Jay..*

'When mum... when mum and dad, died. It was just Spencer and me. There was no-one else. We had no living relatives, no loving friends, there was no-one to take us in.' She flopped

herself down into a chair a hair brush clenched in her fingers. She was careful not to face the woman. Staring at her didn't help. The brush eased its way slowly through Jay's long dark hair.

'It was inevitable I suppose. Before we knew it the State had come knocking and we were taken into custody. We were kids, and they put us into prison. Not behind bars, but a locked door in a home for children, no difference. They said that 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 case worker told me that the younger you are, the easier it is to get dumped off in a small rural community. They even refused to tell me where they'd sent Spence. Said it was best if I just moved on. They told me nothing, so I hated them, and everyone else concerned.'

'I'm sure they did what they thought was right.'

'Do you.' *And what would you know about it, cop lady?*
'It's not nice to suddenly find yourself alone. Thrust so deep inside a hole that you can't see the sides, let alone the top.

Everything went dark, black... cold. I was eleven, and I was lost.'

Talk to the woman, great idea. You know what happens when you bring this stuff up. Remember the therapist, the bloody nose you gave her. She wasn't the only one. Do you think she actually gives a damn?

'I blamed my parents for dying. I even blamed Spence for leaving me. I blamed everyone, cop lady. I blamed everything, and after a while I hurt so bad it gave me headaches, really bad ones, the ones that come with a nose bleed. So the doctors said I needed to take pills. My shrink gave me therapy, ha, what a joke. My foster's considered me damaged goods. "Not right up here..." that's what they said when they thought that no-one was listening. They probably thought that I'd do for them whilst they were asleep.' *Why am I telling you this? I really shouldn't be smiling, that will make me look like a psycho. Problem is it crossed my mind more than once. Do them, and then myself. Do every mother that had ever looked at me the wrong way.*

'That's me,' she said, 'damaged goods. I guess eventually I ran out of people to blame. I've just learnt to live with it.'

'I'm sorry.'

‘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.’ The brush ceased its stroking. ‘Anyway, with a lack of people around me who gave a shit, I found it easy to feel the same way. I found a new way to amuse myself. The one good thing about my fosters, *the Doherty’s*, was their subscription to the internet. Computers were fun, I didn’t need anyone else.’

Blinking didn’t help. She was sure that cop lady could see her eyes water. ‘Hey, I got trust issues too.’ *No, she shouldn’t have said that. Why bring that back up? No, tell it how it was. The past was in past, right? That’s what the shrink always said.*

‘I met someone. I was thirteen, he was... I... I was... It doesn’t matter.’ *Still can’t say the words can you? Son of a bitch was an adult; he said he would help me. He had such a nice smile. Jay forced a smile, just like the ones he used to give her. Shut up bitch. This woman doesn’t need to hear about your tragic past. Look at her; she’s got problems of her own, missing kid and all.*

‘Spence came back for you didn’t he? He found you?’

‘He turned up out of the blue one day. After seven years, I barely recognised him. Spence said he’d been to school, that

he'd never stopped looking for me.' Now her eyes were welling, the dam threatening to breach. *No, she wouldn't do it. No tears, not even for Spence. No.*

'I barely recognised him. I hugged him for like, twenty minutes. Afterward he took me to MacDonald's, said I looked waaay too skinny, that I needed fattening up. Said that he'd come back to look after me.' *I'm not going to do this, I'm not.* 'He's gone.' *I am not going to fall apart again.* 'He's not coming back is he?'

Oh my God, you poor Kid.

Maybe it was the maternal instinct in her, maybe, but Kass crossed the space between them and reached for Jay's hand. It was withdrawn, just like it had been at the grave yard. Then something strange, something wonderful happened. Jay reached back, tentatively, just the finger tips, enough to touch.

'Spencer knew,' Kass said, 'he knew that his life was in danger, yet he still reached out to help us. Cupcake was right, Spencer is a Superhero. I'm so sorry that I didn't know him better.'

'Why, why sorry? He was nothing to you. Spence just wanted to get the flash drive out.'

‘No, 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. *Spencer... the tarpaulin pressing hard against me, can’t breathe.* ‘He knew they were coming for Josh.’ *He knew that he was taking a big risk.* ‘Spence gave me a chance to save Josh.’

‘Don’t feel you owe me. No need to hang around when Meg has done his thing.’

This is a way of life for you, isn’t it? Pushing people away, never letting anyone close. She understood it now, what they had together, this odd pairing of friends. She felt it. With Josh, God knows where, it was a window into how Jay had spent her entire childhood. *Poor kid.*

‘This man that you met?’

‘I don’t want to talk about it. Not to you, or anyone else. I don’t even know you, cop lady.’

‘But I know you, or at least a part of you.’ Kass moved closer, her hand left now abandoned on the chair arm. ‘I know what it’s like to be abused.’

‘You know shit.’

‘I know that when I looked at my husband lying shot in a hospital bed, that I wanted him to die. I wanted him dead so bad I considered reaching for the wires that were keeping him

alive; but I wanted that bastard to suffer too. I wanted him to feel the pain.'

Now it was her turn to muster misty eyes.

'I dug a hole, much like yours. I put myself in a place where his fists couldn't hurt me, where his hateful words would fall on deaf ears. It seems dumb now, being frightened to leave him. I still feel pathetic about being happy, happy that I was able to endure it all. Jay, I know what its like to have no-one to tell. To not be able to find the words, even if there had been. I know what its like to live with fear.'

For crying out loud where's a hankie when you want one.

The back of her hand would have to do.

'Why did you do it then, stay I mean?'

Kass shrugged.

'Josh. I didn't want him to grow up without both parents. I even kidded myself that he didn't know. But he's too smart for that. I guess I was frightened that if I left, I wouldn't have the pain to cling to anymore. That's dumb, right?'

'Yeah, life's dumb. We're all dumb, Spencer most of all. He wanted to change the world. He wanted to make a difference.'

'He did, Jay, to Josh and me. And he did to you as well.'

*God I want to hug you. I don't know who needs it more,
you or me.*

‘Hey guys.’ The door flew open and the wheelchair trundled inside, Cupcake at the helm. ‘Get me through the door, man. Cupcake, get it together, your steering is appalling. Guys, he got it. Spence got it all.’

‘Spence got it, 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 the good news. The bad news is it wasn’t actually on the flash drive. Spence stored everything at G’co on his last upload. The Flash just has the passwords, the key passes, everything we need. We just have to go and get it.’

‘Go where?’ Asked Kass. ‘What is G’co?’

Is he getting a hard on again?

‘G’co is the hired gun behind the smiling face. They provide heavy duty mobile security all over the world. They’re funded by various government institutions, all of which are military or political, or both. Everything from Iraqi mission details to Embassy memos gets backed up daily at the G’co HQ. They have a server in there that encrypts all the data. It’s a Pie storage bunker. Everyone buys a slice. Spence piggybacked what he found on the clinic’s daily uploads so he could keep it safe. He hid it 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.'

'Are you saying that we have to go there to get it?'

'I'm afraid so. The facility is a deposit scheme. 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. Sorry, can't access the server from anywhere else, it's a bloody obvious security feature really.'

'They're bad people. We should go to the authorities.'

'Good advice, Cups. Oh, but wait, what to tell the cops? That 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 one bad ass Mother of Penguins. Utmost respect. And anything I said that was out of line earlier... I'd like to apologise.'

'Shut up Meg. Cupcake might be right.'

'No, Jay, Meg is right. They'll bury you all and then throw away the key. That's if they don't kill you first. Josh is *my* son, I have to go. It's the only way that I can get him back.'

'Then I want to help.'

'Jay, people are trying to kill me. I can't let you...'

'They killed Spence. I want to help. I'm going to help.'

‘I want to help too. Spence was my friend as well.’

Cupcake wasn't built for speed, and she doubted that he had an angry bone in his body. But look at him. There was no doubting that he meant every word 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 that gets involved. It's too dangerous. Beside, I'm not sure how you...’

‘Ask me; ask me anything, I know lots of things. I can help’

‘Go on, cop lady. Ask him.’

She wasn't in the mood for games. ‘Okay. Do you know where I can get a gun?’

‘Yes.’

I'm sorry, I think I misheard you.

‘I need a *real* gun, Cupcake.’

‘I can get you a gun’ He was nodding furiously.

It wasn't that she didn't want to believe him, but she sought confirmation from Jay, who nodded affirmation.

‘I can get you a Glock G30S. 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.'

'Say what?'

'Or maybe a Glock21, Gen4. It has legendary stopping power, and comes with a choice of ten or thirteen round magazines. I can get you a customised grip.'

'Easy, Cupcake.' *What was he, an agent for the company?*
'You can't buy these things at Walmart.' *Stop nodding, you'll give yourself whiplash.*

'I have friends.'

'Friends that can get hold of 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. On occasion we do favours of a, *technical nature*, for... *certain acquaintances*, here in DC. Some of them have access to weapons.'

'Hey... Jay, Secrets? Who made her a member of the club?'

'I did, now shut up. We can trust her.'

'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. Its politics that’s 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 for them. Between us we can hack most things, Social security, driving licences from the DMV, all the other usual sources.’

‘Jay.?’

‘Be quiet Meg. Cassandra, most of the clients we deal with won’t leave home without a weapon. Sometimes they let Cuppy shoot the guns.’

‘Cupcake? He shoots guns?’

‘I’m a good shot.’

Dare I ask? ‘What other talents does he have?’ And you know something that’s going to impress me, don’t you. You can’t disguise that grin. Little Miss Galadriel and her friends are coming out to play.

‘Like Cups said, ask him something. Anything, first thing that comes to mind.’

‘Go ahead, ask him cop lady.’

‘Okay, fine.’ *Like what, really? This wasn’t twenty questions.* ‘What are the first twelve digits of Pi?’ *I hated anything to do with that at school.*

‘Pi is a mathematical constant that is the ratio of a circles circumference to its diameter. 3.14159265358.’

No way.

‘The first ten presidents of the United States?’

‘George Washington. He held office, April thirtieth seventeen eighty nine to March fourth seventeen ninety seven. John Adams. Held office, March fourth seventeen ninety seven to March fourth Eighteen hundred and one. Thomas Jefferson. Held office, 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.’

‘That’s amazing?’ *And I have no idea if he’s correct, but I am 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. 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.'

Kass couldn't remember the last time she laughed out loud like this. The others joined in. 'I like you.' She said to Cupcake, and she meant it. This was unexpected. It was a thrill. For the first time in days Kass felt that she was amongst friends. She had allies that were willing to help. She wasn't alone anymore.

Megatron spun his laptop around for all to see.

'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 but all we need to do is get down there.'

'And you know this how?'

'Penguin Power, lady.'

'Or maybe *that* was on the flash drive as well?'

'Wow, you like to take the mystery out of things. But that's not all Spence told us. I have blueprints, shift patterns, and access codes for the entire building.'

'Won't codes need to be on a swipe card?'

'I'm glad you mentioned that, because this is another service that we can provide for our clients. All I need to know is whose face needs to go on the ID?'

‘Mine.’

‘No. I can’t let you do that, Jay.’

‘No? What’s no? It wasn’t an offer. Can you hack their firewalls once you have access to a terminal? Do you know how to find what you’re looking for when you get in? However Spence hid the data, I can guarantee it’s deep. Knowing a password is one thing, getting the data out undetected is something else. Hi tech systems like that will have Sleepers embedded in the code, you won’t know you’ve woken one until its fried your keyboard and triggered the alarms. There’ll be Binary burners waiting to flash the hard drives. Trip wires, Goblins, they might even have Norton anti virus, or heaven forbid, McAfee Total Protection could be in there waiting for you.’

‘Yeah, good one Jay. Norton, wooooo. McAfee, that’s scary stuff.’

‘The point is, Kassandra. We get one chance at this, and unless you are seriously clued up on how to sift through government protected servers, you *will* blow it.’

She was so glad that Wheels found this amusing. But the point was well made. She knew her way backwards around the

LAPD network, but this was something else, she was in their domain now. This was the world in which they survived.

‘Then I’m coming with you. The Oracle here can magic up two ID cards. He can find us a way in and then *we* will take care of the rest. And that wasn’t an offer.’

‘Agreed.’

‘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 her get her son back, any objections?’

‘No. Well, other than the fact that I might end up dead that is.’

‘Hey, Megatrain. Where’s all your Penguin Power when we need it? This one’s for the Huddle.’

‘Wipe that grin of your face, Cups. You don’t need to be encouraging her.’

This is it then, hardly the Hilton? A short ride in the elevator and Santini reached the third floor, the lift door opening with a groan. FBI budget isn't what it used to be. Maybe its time I hit the private sector and made some money. Keep Mrs Santini happy. Get a pool in the sun. Here we go, room three twelve.

The green light on the lock flashed with the second swipe of the card. The door clunked closed and he headed for the mini bar.

Vodka or Scotch? Vodka or Scotch? You have to be joking... wine? 'Who the hell puts wine in a mini bar?' His hand froze halfway to the airline sized sauvignon blanc. Why hadn't the light come on? His card was in the slot on the wall. Why do I have the feeling that I'm not alone?

The familiar click of a pistol's hammer being cocked back turned his blood cold. 'That's a Beretta if I'm not mistaken.' *Oh shit.* The cold muzzle was placed against his neck and a hand slipped inside his jacket to remove his gun. 'I'm guessing here, but if you wanted me dead, I wouldn't still be talking.' No response. Do you mind if I open the bottle, my throats going a bit dry. I don't perform too well with a gun in my neck.'

‘How about that?’ The intruder replied. ‘I perform better when I have a gun against someone’s neck.’

That was a good sign, right? Man with the gun has a sense of humour. Hope I don’t die laughing. ‘What do you want, money? I’m a Fed; we don’t get paid a lot. You didn’t drink my Scotch did you? Mini bars always have Scotch; it’s like, one of those unwritten rules for hoteliers.’ *Turn, deflect gun, go for the throat. Beat the perp senseless, and get myself killed.*

‘What do you want?’

‘Just to talk.’

‘Sure, I like to talk. Fire away, if you’ll forgive the pun.’

‘I need your help.’

‘You have a gun on me; did it occur to you to just ask?’

‘It did. I decided this course of action was more suited to getting your attention.’

‘Be in no doubt, you have my attention. Once again, what do you want? And may I please take a seat.’ *And I think both bottles of wine are now in need of consumption.* ‘Do you mind?’

‘Help yourself. But you might want to look at the prices first.’

‘That’s a joke, right? This is going straight on the Bureau’s tab.’ So was anything else containing alcohol that he could find. The metal eased itself away from his skin. ‘Are we cool?’

‘That depends, are you still thinking of trying to disarm me?’

‘That thought never happened. Are you still thinking about shooting me?’

‘Take the chair by the window. I’ll sit on the bed.’

‘Sure, whatever you want.’ He didn’t bother with a glass. ‘Down the hatch.’ The screw lid was already being loosed from the second bottle. ‘Well, you have my attention?’

‘We have a mutual acquaintance that’s in need of our help.’

We do? The other man was difficult to make out in the gloom. ‘Who would that be, then?’ *No, it couldn’t be?* ‘Wait, wait... I’m having a moment. Her name wouldn’t be Cassandra Krane, by any chance?’

‘Your file said you were smart.’

‘You have access to FBI personnel files?’

‘Only the interesting bits, like you having a problem with authority, and a quick fire temper. You drink too much and have a penchant for striking superiors. That last one makes it three now. That’s an unfortunate habit.’

‘Not if I outrank you.’

‘Your file also tells me that you’re an honest cop.’

‘Don’t tell anyone, I have a reputation to protect. What’s your interest in the Krane woman?’

‘She’s an acquaintance.’

‘So you said. What are you, a childhood friend? Is she paying you? Is she blowing you?’ The man sat forward, Santini could see him more clearly now. Tall guy with dark hair, early fifties, fit looking for his age, and there was something about the way his gaze held him that oozed confidence and experience. This wasn’t the first dark hole he’d entered with a gun.

‘We have a mutual interest, a woman.’

‘It’s usually a woman. Someone that Krane killed? Is going to kill? Would like to kill? She’s killed a lot of people lately. I’m going to need more information if you want my help.’ *Okay, finger is pointing toward...* ‘Is that your tablet?’ *Some agent he was, it had completely escaped his attention.* Screen was idle.

‘Press a key,’ the man said, ‘any key. And then start reading. Oh, and cheers. This goes on the Bureau’s tab as well’

Son of a bitch, that’s where the Scotch went.

‘I don’t understand?’

‘Then you’re not as smart as your file suggests.’

‘Correction, I do understand. I just don’t believe. I mean, what is this?’

‘You have just read the files on the main protagonists. The communications are between a CIA HUB in Virginia, and its field operatives who are chasing Krane around the country. It is complete from midday on the fourteenth of this month, up to date. The female, April, is running a CIA Black Op on American soil.’

‘That’s highly illegal.’

‘Correctamondo. They want the Krane woman, and people are dying to make that happen.’

Correcto... what? ‘Why would they be doing that?’

‘They have her son.’

‘I got that much from the dialogue. So, again... why?’

‘Something happened to Krane and her son at a clinic in Mexico. It has something to do with NEXUS, with cancer, and with a Senator named Joe Rushmore. You’ve heard of him?’

‘Who hasn’t? Texas Billionaire who wants to run the country like big business. He thinks the stars and stripes look best flying from the turret of a tank. He won’t get my vote. I need to think about this.’ *Dead bodies, Krane woman, CIA? Okay, thought about it.* ‘Please, close the door on your way out.’

‘Krane is going to do something stupid.’

‘Stupid? She’s done a whole lot of stupid already.’ *I really don’t want to know, and I’m going to regret asking, but here goes anyway.* ‘How could you possibly think that I would want to be involved in this?’

‘Like I said, you’re an honest Agent.’

‘Chasing a most wanted is one thing. Putting a target on my back is another. Mrs Santini would not be very happy. She has this idyllic retirement all set up for us. It includes Florida sunshine, a pool, and golf.’

This isn’t going well. Santini is FBI, he should be chomping at the bit to expose the CIA operating on US soil. Maybe I’ve misjudged him?

‘The CIA is running Black Ops on US soil.’ Weldon said. ‘They have a psycho operative killing people; he’s on his way to Washington as we speak. This man’s contract needs to be

cancelled. It's also very probable that a United States Senator is corrupt.'

'And Santa Clause is a fat guy with a beard that abuses kids. Tell me something that I don't know. There's a big building down the road that's full of corrupt politicians. The country is full of psychos. But here's the thing. The FBI likes to work within the legal system. We prefer to have proof of misdemeanours, murder, and treason. Now granted, these communicates are damning. And I accept that the Krane situation, whilst coming straight from the brothers Grimm, probably hasn't got much more than a grain of truth in any of the accusations. So I'll ask you again. What do you want *from me*? Whoa, take it easy, no need to point guns.' The weapon landed in his lap. 'You're giving me my gun back?'

'Call it a measure of trust.' *Unfortunately I can't do this on my own. And if things go tits up, you'll make a good witness at my trial.* 'I'm giving you the opportunity to right some wrongs. Catch a killer and expose a conspiracy. Save a child's life.'

'All my favourite things before breakfast. May I ask where you're getting all of this Intel?'

'Initially from the Krane woman. I have friends that have verified a lot of what she's said. The communicates on that

tablet are still live. They've been quiet for a few hours but they'll be back online when their assets arrive in DC. The hardware you've been reading from was appropriated from my source. I swapped it with a tablet I found in Arizona, and then torched it along with my source's car. We have a few days before they realise I'm watching. We should only need one.'

'So it was you that left all the bodies in Ajo. That figures. Does your source have any more words of wisdom?'

'No.'

'Is your source still alive? No, I didn't think so.'

'Now you know as much as I do, Agent Santini.'

*It's time to make a decision. The correctamondo decision.
It's the only way you'll leave this room alive.*

'Would you like another drink?'

‘Where have you been, Julius?’

Interesting... she’s agitated. That’s an unusual response from April. I know how she feels.

‘Apologies, I have been to a meeting. Our employers are... concerned.’

‘You met them in person?’

‘Yes, it was necessary.’

‘What did they say, Julius?’

Agitation followed by concern? Fortune lowered his phone. Was it necessary to share the information? No. But April was his most trusted, she should know, he decided against.

‘Nothing to be concerned about, but we may be forced into a change of direction. Update me.’

‘Okay? 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 found the sister?’

‘We 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. I've given him a kill order.'

Kill order. It had been a long time since that phrase had been anything other than words. Think Julius... think. A few days ago all of this was justified; mission protocols were firmly within the country's interests. The end justified the means. What's changed?

'How is Josh, April?'

'Josh? The kid? He's a pain in the ass. He eats like a horse and won't keep the 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 plans. 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 twenty 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 that we're doing this. Kass was wired for sound. A tiny transmitter in her ear, and a mike that looked like a button, stuck with superglue to her chest. She was even wearing a suit, courtesy of Jay, though it was a bit tight.

Last year a ten was a good fit, honest.

'Are you really going to leave Cupcake sat out here like this?' Asked Kass. 'Aren't we bordering on, 'I've watched too much Syfy channel,' here?'

The sound of the handbrake set her teeth on edge.

'Sorry, I think it needs oiling.'

'It's okay 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?'

'Okay.' The van rocked as the big man crawled through the tiny gap between the seats. 'Hi Megatron.'

Is he waving at the monitor? Really? We're doomed to disaster, you know that Kassy. She said prayers. One to the Almighty, the other to Saint Michael, patron saint of police officers the world over. It couldn't do any harm.

‘Megatron, you’re too close to the webcam.’ It was highlighting his acne, his face parcelled into too narrow a frame. ‘You know what to do, right?’ Kass asked.

‘The penguin must first mark its territory.’ He said. ‘Only then it can begin the dance of the Happy Feet.’

‘We’re going to die, aren’t we?’

‘Shh, Meg knows what he’s doing. He’ll get us in. Take this.’ Jay slipped the lanyard over Kass’ head. ‘Now we work for the Company. Meg, are you in yet?’

‘Megatron is priming the bomb as we speak.’

‘Bomb? Jay, did he say bomb?’

‘He did. And I promise you it will make a hell of a mess the moment he pulls the pin.’

‘And I got you a gun.’ Added Cupcake.

Perfect. The Adams family is turning into al Qaeda.

She took the Glock offered. ‘Thanks Cupcake.’ The lightweight weapon helped calm her fears. ‘Promise me now, if things go wrong, if you hear shooting, or our cover is blown, you’ll drive away and you won’t come back. No, don’t look at Jay, look at me. Look at me Cupcake. You’ll have to leave, am I clear?’

‘Promise Kass, Cuppy. And promise me too. You drive away. Go and get Meg, and don’t come back. Okay? Promise?’

Nodding would have to suffice. He looked so sad.

‘Hello... If I may interrupt? The bomb has been well and truly primed.’

‘Jay, please tell me that 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 reattach, it’s already snuck behind their firewalls.’

‘Tell her about the Eggs, Jay. Tell her which penguin laid the Eggs. And that would be me... me me me.’

‘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. We delivered them last night. It’s a virus and 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 any data we desire. We’re 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 is, I borrowed her off a porn site. Three of the seven opened up within five minutes. I’m not saying they’re predictable, but...’

She’s enjoying this.

‘Meg, are you ready to start infiltration?’

‘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 Goddamn droopy drawers. This Huddle is armed with analogue; it is digital death ray time. We are the... Oh crap.’

That didn’t sound good, and just as she about to open the van door to leave. ‘What is it, Meg?’

‘Problemo time. Their system is running an ‘A’symmetrical, three twenty bit security algorithm. It’s bouncing me all around the main frame.’

Shit. ‘Can you do it?’ *Please say you can.* ‘Can you get us in?’ *Talk to me.*

‘You are 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 waited. Her hand still fixed around the internal handle of the van. Fingers waiting to roll the door back and leave.

‘It is done. I am in. We are live.’

‘Are you sure?’ *Ooh, that’s my voice coming through the speakers.* ‘Testing... one two, three. Okay, it works. Let’s do this.’

'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 seconds.'

'Shhh.' Said Kass. We're approaching the door.'

'I don't think I can do this, Kass. I can hear my heartbeat.'

'Josh plays games online.' *Now is not the time for you to need a pep talk.* 'Shoot em ups,' she added, 'Gears of War, Call of Duty?' The doors were just a few paces away. 'Josh loves them, all the gunfights and exploding bombs. He's real good. 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 as the glass portal was opened, a tall curly haired man in uniform approaching on intercept. His older partner remained watchful behind the counter.

'Can I help you?' He asked. 'I'm sorry ladies you can't come any further, this facility is closed.'

'Jay Wiley and Jessica Payne.' Kass held out her ID. '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, paused, and then gave him a hard stare as it beeped twice. 'It's just flashed up on your screen.'

'Hey Jake, you need to take a look at this.'

'Your job now depends on your cooperation.'

Curly didn't look too convinced. With one hand still on his sidearm he backed away and glanced down at the monitor, and then at his partner.

'Is this for real?'

'You'll recognise the personal access codes of Dr Hartman, your chief exec. It was sent from his personal work station at exactly nine thirty this morning.'

'Yeah, I just... Is there a problem? Are we in trouble?'

'Have you done anything wrong?'

'Err, no mam. I just wasn't expecting... Please wait whilst I confirm your Id's. Can I ask why you're here so late at night?'

'You may not. Suffice to say that most auditors prefer to work outside of office hours, and without any prior notification. It makes things easier to find.'

'Things?'

'Things. And for the record the company is monitoring your switchboard and mobile communications. That means no

naughty phone calls in, or out. And as I already specified.’ Kass looked him straight in the eye. ‘Your job is now reliant on your cooperation, and your discretion, Mr... Peterson.’

‘It checks out Jake. Straight from the old man’s office like she said.’

‘This is highly irregular.’

‘Tick tock, Jake.’

‘No mam, I mean, yes... mam. Er, please take elevator four; this way, you’ll need my swipe card.’

‘I already have one.’

‘Err, yes mam. That does look like the one.’

‘We’ll find our own way.’

‘Yes mam. If you need anything, just call up.’

‘Oh my goodness, I thought I was going to poop my pants. Kass, have you done this before?’

‘I’m a cop, remember.’ *And that’s how I did it in my head every time I had a coffee break.* ‘You don’t think I *overdid* it?’

‘Shit no, I believed you.’

‘So far so good then. I still don’t know how you worked that man’s computer.’

‘I told you, we can hack most things. I was up all last night preparing for this. I have to admit, I’m not enjoying it as much as I thought. There, elevator number four.’

She pressed the button by the door

‘In we go. Just close the doors and...’ *Why are the doors still open.* ‘Trying the swipe card again.’ *Uh oh.* ‘Jay, does this actually work?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then why aren’t the doors shutting?’

‘Okay, no. Megatron should have altered the code to accept my plastic by now.’ She swiped again. ‘Meg, the elevator isn’t moving. The doors are still not shutting. Meg? Meg, can you hear me? Speed it up before curly checks us out again.’

‘Chill out ladies.’ The doors began to close. *‘I’m in. Swipe the card again. Apparently if you press level four and hold for a count of three you’ll end up in the basement. How cool is that?’*

‘Like I said, Jay. I’m going to kill him, slowly, with the lid of his laptop.’

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 hard left. Above you on the right you will notice the lights on the camera.' It blinked twice and then went off. *'Surveillance is now stuck in a loop. The same moment in time will continue on forever.'*

'Meg, shut up.'

'Please be aware that all exterior defences have now been breached. The chicks are fine and healthy and the system is feeding them well. Boy oh boy, they're gonna grow up to be fat little chicks. Take a left. In front of you is the first gateway. Look into the lens, I'm going to take a picture of your retina.'

'This won't hurt will it?'

'Err, no?'

'What the hell does err no, mean?'

'Will one of you please look into the camera? Thank you.'

A swish of air and the door cracked open. They entered slowly to the dim glow of reading lights switched on in staggered steps.

‘Wow, this is a big room for a computer. What’s that rumbling noise?’

‘We’re in a cold storage unit. Some big fans are keeping the temperature down or it would get really hot in here. Wow, there must be a couple of Exabyte’s worth of data stored down here.’

‘That’s a lot, right?’

‘Maybe half a billion dvd’s worth of government and private stuff. Are you getting this, Meg?’

‘Yeah, it’s... it’s so beautiful. I wish I was there.’

Pierce would have loved this.

The data banks were built in a towered architecture, the columns linked by graceful arches. The arches curved together to form a vaulted ceiling each one filled with tiny furiously blinking lights, that shone a map of the Cosmos. ‘It’s cold and merciless, the way these thing function. It’s remarkable.’ Kass said. ‘Is that the main terminal you’re playing with?’

‘Yes it is. Now we need to be quick. This stuff is running really advanced software. I don’t want to spend a second longer in here than necessary.’

Jay’s fingers danced across the glass surface. The entire unit was glass, transparent, until her touch brought it to life. She plugged a flash drive into an empty port and something

began to happen. The lights were no longer independent, no longer chaotic. The Cosmos became a more ordered and sequential place.

‘What are you doing, Jay?’

‘I’m using the unit’s main processors to search for Spencer’s logs. He told us what to look for, which makes it a lot easier. But with the time constraints I’ve decided to upload a Tsunami into the system.’

‘You did what? Jay, that’s a bad idea.’

‘Why is that a bad idea, Megatron?’

‘It’s not a bad idea, it’s just not ideal.’

‘Again, why?’

‘I’ve uploaded the cipher key, Spence’s key, into a very complex system. The code goes in and then it multiplies. It expands exponentially and searches the memory until it finds a match. But with this much memory, even a Tsunami could take a few minutes.’

‘Actually it’s more like a balloon. I said we should have called it a balloon. It really isn’t a good idea.’

‘Why don’t I like the sound of this?’

‘Kass, we’ll have what we came for, long before...’

‘Says you, Jay. Kass, 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 expands, it reaches its limits, and then it goes bang. That’s why we should have called it a Balloon. It’s a Balloon.’

‘We just got a hit.’

‘What, what have you found?’

‘It’s Spence’s files. I’m downloading them to the Flash drive; it’ll just take a few seconds. Come on, come on, nearly there. Meg, find us the quick way out. Got it. We need to go, now, keep ahead of the Wave.’

‘It’s a Balloon. Oh there is so much shit gonna hit the fan.’

‘Got it, get us out of here, Meg’

‘Follow the Yellow Brick Road, my lovelies.’

‘Is he laughing like a witch?’

‘I told you, he’s eccentric. Come on, let’s go.’

Storage door opened with a hiss. The floor lights were flashing, guiding them in the opposite direction to their entry.

‘Getting out feels scarier than getting in, Kass, you go first.’

‘Just follow the lights, Jay. How you doing, Meg? No alarms and no security taking pot shots at us. You’re the man. I think we’re going to pull this off. Are you out of there yet?’

‘Penguin power is the source of all enlightenment. Only when the harsh winds blow can the Huddle truly come together.’

‘If Kung Fu Panda would like to open the next door, we’d like to exit.’ Another swish of air, another door opened. ‘How big is this place?’

‘We could only get a view of some of the blueprints. But it’s big. Plan was to get in through the front door, and then get out through a service elevator that can only be operated from inside the basement. The guards would never see us leave. We’d be in and out inside half an hour.’

‘Danger, Will Robinson... Danger, Will Robinson.’

‘Meg, what’s wrong? Talk to me.’

‘You sure this is the address?’ Santini looked doubtful. ‘It looks like an empty warehouse.’

‘They’re here.’ Weldon opened the Com on the Pad. ‘And we have company. Our CIA friends just confirmed that they’re approaching via the southeast corner.’

‘How many guns?’

‘Damn those sneaky bastards they didn’t give their numbers, or a list of ordinance being carried. I hate it when they do that. We need to get in there before *you* have to explain more dead bodies turning up in *your* investigation.’

‘Hey, wait a minute. Is that why I’m here? So this can be my train wreck? No way, we need to get some backup. Let me call in and get more badges. Hey?’

Santini pulled the Colt from his shoulder holster, checked the clip as he ran to catch up. He didn’t even know which end was the southeast for crying out loud. Running blind into a potential combat zone was stupid. What was he doing here anyway? He found himself wondering if his wife had managed to get herself to sleep tonight. She’d suffered from insomnia ever since they had married. She didn’t like to take pills. Poor cow,

she really did worry about him. Maybe he should have taken that desk job?

Santini entered through the door behind Weldon, gun raised, muzzle checking the stairwell, up and then down. He jumped the steps two at a time, going up, trying to catch up.

‘Err, guys. I think someone’s in the building.’

‘Yes, it’s us, Meg. And we need to get out.’

‘Don’t shout so loud. I have to turn the sound down a little.’

‘Where are you sending us Meg?’

‘Shh, shhhh. Just keep following the lights, there’s a service elevator. Only operates from controls in the basement, by the doors. Seriously guys, keep it down, there are people here in the building. They’re on the monitor, they have guns.’

‘Meg, you have to get out.’

‘What about you two?’

‘We’ll be... fine.’

‘Oh shit, two more gunmen coming up from the road side. Guy’s... penguin going into panic here.’

His words were followed by an ear singeing thud. Air pressure in the room was sucked out as stars flashed

everywhere. The shockwave of the stun grenade threw Meg from his chair and encouraged him to crawl under the table.

Shit, shit, laser lights, laser lights. Four maybe five crisscrossed the room looking for a target. *Siiiize of a mouse.* It didn't work; instead he adopted the foetal position. *Don't take a breath, Meggy, keep your eyes closed. Maybe they'll go away.*

Heavy boots entered and soles scraped as they twisted and turned. Intruders were looking for him.

'Cover the doorways. Search the other rooms. If they're here I want them. Move.'

Really bad men, stay quiet, be cool. Don't make a sound. The lead pair of boots stepped closer through the smog. They stopped. Meg raised his eyes but only saw the top of the desk. The man was searching, listening. *Be quiet Meggy, don't even breathe. Yes, yes, that's it, keep going. Boots keep going, leave the room.* They were definitely going out. *Don't come back. Don't make a sound.*

'Megatron, can you hear me?'

Uh-oh that's loud. Thought I'd turned it off.

'We've found the elevator; you need to let us out.'

Oh shit, boots are coming back.

Weldon had eyes on the intruders. Four fingers came up, pointing to the right, then a single digit that indicated left. Then he put a sole finger to his lips. Santini returned the instruction with a single finger of his own.

‘We should have called for backup.’ He whispered.

‘No time. If it moves up there, shoot it. Unless it’s me of course.’

‘Hey, my eyesight’s not what it used to be? You better let me go first.’

That wasn’t going to happen. Weldon tried the first door, it was locked. The second opened inward.

‘I’ll come in from the fire escape.’ He said. ‘When I start the distraction, try not to be anywhere else?’

‘I’ll check my diary.’

With a bit of luck this will actually turn out all right. He checked the Glock in his hand. ‘Don’t be late.’ Two spare clips in his holster. *They’ll have to do.*

Window was stuck.

Difficult to pull, up, quietly.

The frame gave up its grip and the window did its thing. He was onto the ledge and into night air. Small, careful steps along the ledge got him outside the window where the curtains had been drawn the previous night. Inside it sounded like the intruders were giving the furniture a hard time. There were several figures ransacking the room. Whatever they were looking for was well hidden.

Window was double glazed, no way in. He searched the outside for an entrance. The problem was going to be grabbing the fire escape by the door. He dare not jump, too noisy, so he reached for the sky, leaned, and as his torso went into freefall his hands reached out to grip the metal bars.

Hands, not finger tips. For the love of... stretch John, stretch or fall.

Every muscle in his arms strained to reach further. His fingers desperate to keep hold.

Fingers slipping, not tall enough.

His size twelve's perked upward on long toes to lift another few inches. He had them, the bars, fully in his fingers now. He was in full-on monkey mode as he swung across to the gantry. A pull up allowed a side turn and he dropped onto the fire escape.

The Glock was fully raised before the landing was complete, every ounce of attention focused toward the door. One step and then two, the third separated the door from its frame. Three faces turned toward the splintering wood. Three weapons were raised in defence but not before the Glock spat several 9 mils in rapid succession. The closest man went down; his nearest compatriot reeled under the impact of more copper nosed slugs. The man at the door fired twice as he rolled away from the wall and out into the safety of the corridor.

Weldon was in.

Find cover.

He ejected the spent magazine, quickly slapped another into the grip. *No way.* The bodies were moving, rolling away on the floor. They were shooting back.

Body armour? They were wearing body armour under their clothes. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Shots were fired from all parties, everyone scrambling for whatever cover could be find. Weldon's Glock discharged with rapid succession at the door, the frame, the floor. A hundred splinters, but no body parts found. He dived for cover behind the bed. Another change of magazine and three more shots

expelled over the duvet. The drawers beside him took multiple hits.

Head down, head down, these guys are good.

The clock on the wall exploded into wood and springs.

Where the hell is the Fed?

Another weapon slammed off rounds in the hallway. The cavalry had arrived.

What took him so long?

Weldon was up, weapon cradled in hands. This would be his only chance, whilst Santini had them distracted. It only took a second, long enough to end lives. Single gunman half hidden behind the computer desk, gun hesitating, which way to turn? Two shots from the Glock, one in the head, the other in the neck, couldn't miss from this range. Man went down hard. Weapon moved to eye level, retrained toward bookcases.

Mother of Saints that was close.

The bullet squealed past a few inches from his face. Two more 9mils were squeezed off from the Glock. Man down, new target, gunman coming in through entrance. Weldon followed the body as it fell backwards to hit the carpet.

It seemed that the Fed *had* come in useful after all.

Weldon checked the hallway. FBI man was moving toward him, gun was raised, his eyes wired.

He indicated that Santini stop. Two fingers dabbled towards his eyes and then the room opposite, where the smoke was clearing. Quick feet moved him across the doorway.

Crap, two figures, one combatant, the other a hostage. Gun was trained at the hostages head.

‘Drop your guns, or I’ll kill him.’

Kill who? And why did he think that would make a difference?

‘Please, I don’t want to die.’ Hostage wasn’t happy.

Well that’s the problem with being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It’s called collateral damage.

‘Nobody else has to die today.’ Santini shouted. ‘I’m FBI, you’re surrounded, just let the hostage go. Let’s talk about this.’

Weldon saw no harm in letting FBI see if CIA was willing to talk. So long as he made it quick.

‘I’m coming to the door, don’t shoot, we can find a way out of this.’ Are you alright?’ He asked the hostage. ‘What’s your name?’

‘My ... my names, Meg.’

‘Okay, Meg. We’re going to get you out of this safe and sound. No-one else is going to get hurt.’

‘Really?’

‘You are.’ The gunman said. ‘If I go down you’re coming with me. You hear that Fed. Don’t come any closer.’

‘What’s it going to take to end this?’

‘You got a million dollars and a fast car?’

‘Maybe?’

‘Don’t fucking lie to me or I’ll put a hole in this dirtbag’s head.’

Okay, that’s too long. ‘Meg, where’s Cassandra?’ Weldon asked.

‘She went with the others. They left me here on my own. I don’t want to die.’

‘That’s okay. Try not to move too much, maybe I can put a bullet in his eye without taking your ear off.’

‘What... no, don’t.’

‘I know you.’ The gunman said. ‘You’re the jerk-off from Ajo.’

Weldon took inventory of the room.

‘And you’re Carl.’ *He hadn’t forgotten Carl’s face.* There was nothing in the room that was going to be of help. A fallen wheelchair, computers, several monitors, and smoke that was taking its time to clear.

‘I met a friend of yours the other day. You left him behind in the desert. What happened to never leaving a man behind?’

‘This aint the Corp. He was sloppy, they both were.’

‘That’s not the way I remember it. You were the one that ran. I remember Krane trying to put a bullet up your ass.’

‘Fuck you.’

‘You look nervous my friend, things not going well? If you poke your head out from behind Meg, I can make it all go away.’

‘I need out of here, or I will kill him.’

‘It’s a paradox isn’t it? What if we don’t care if you kill him? Not much to bargain with. And if you kill him, well, we all know what happens to you then. I know all about you, about April, about *Mr Fortune*. The man you left behind was very informative, if a bit hazy on some of the details. It’s all there now. Nothing to say? The gentlemen stood beside me is a

Federal officer, he's the only chance you've got of staying alive. So you can deal with him, or you can deal with me. But the Fed here, he's the only way that you leave this room alive.'

'I'm quaking. Now get out of my way, or I will put a bullet in him.'

'No, not the face, not the face.'

'Sorry, but we can't let you go.'

'Yes you can. You're the good guys, Bad Boys with a badge. Let him go, I don't want to die. Please, stop poking that gun in my face.'

'Do you have a shot, FBI?' Whispered Weldon.

'No, not without taking half of his face off. Kid, if we let him go he just starts up somewhere else, people die.' Said Santini. 'I'm sorry, but this ends here.'

'No, it doesn't have to end. Don't say end. Please don't say END.... Oh say can you see, by the dawns early light, what so proudly we hailed at the twighlights last gleaming...

The star spangled banner? Weldon was surprised. 'He's lost it, the idiots singing the national anthem.'

The song was belched with pride, rising up to full volume.

‘Whose broad stripes and bright star thru the perilous flight, Oer the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming.’

‘What’s wrong with you? Shut your mouth or I’ll pull the trigger and paint the wall with your head.’

Megatron got louder.

‘And the rockets red glare, the bombs bursting in air, gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.’

‘The kid’s lost it, FBI; we need to take Carl down, now.’

‘Why are you whispering? If you got a shot, you take it.’

Meg’s left hand rose and rested on his chest. ‘No, don’t shoot.’ He cried out. ‘Good guy... Good guy. The fat guy’s with me.’ He raised the volume on the song even louder. Oh, say does that star spangled banner yet wave, oer the land of the free and the home of the brave.’

‘Let him go.’ Shouted Cupcake.

‘What is this, a bloody circus?’ Carl seemed confused. This wasn’t how things were supposed to go. What the fuck was going on? Where did the fat guy with the gun come from? ‘Get out, all of you, out. Or so help me the Nerd loses his head. What’s wrong with you, *stop singing.*’

He did.

‘I love you Cupcake.’ Meg spluttered. ‘You’re my brother, you’re the man. Do it buddy. Feel the force, Cupcake. One shot through the inlet manifold and the Death Star goes boom.’

Weldon looked for a shot. *Did he just call the fat guy Cupcake? What is this place, a home for the mentally disturbed? Some sort of care in the community? This has to end, and badly for the cripple by the look of things.*

‘First I do you, and then I do the fat one. So help me, if you start singing again. What, what are you laughing at, cripple? Why’s fatty smiling at me like that?’

‘You’ll see, dumbass. You’ll see.’ He burst with pride as he resumed the anthem. ‘Oh say can you see, by the dawns...’

‘I said stop, not sing louder. You dumb mother fucker, you’re dead.’

A single shot rang out.

‘Oh shit, did it hit me, did the bullet hit me? Oh no, that’s blood... is that blood, please tell me it’s not my blood.’

Carl fell.

‘Uh oh, Megatron is going down.’

Megatron collapsed as Carl went down.

Cupcake rushed forward to his friend, smoking gun still in hand.

‘No one could make that shot?’ Said Santini.

‘I’m not convinced that he did.’ Said Weldon. *I’m not sure whose blood is actually leaking onto the floor.* ‘Keep your weapon on Carl, FBI, I don’t want him turning zombie on me.’

Cupcake barged past them both already half down on his knees. ‘Don’t die, don’t die, I didn’t mean it, Megatron. Please don’t die.’

He had Meg cradled in his arms, tears streaming down chubby cheeks. There were no signs of life. Meg was a 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.

‘That’s okay, Meg. He was a really scary man.’

‘Son of a gun, you are still alive.’ Weldon hauled Megatron up by his hood. ‘Clean panties later, we have work to do. His chair, get him in his wheelchair. And no more singing, you hear me? No more. Now talk, where’s Cassandra? Come on, where is she?’

‘No really, I’m fine. Just dump the cripple back in his chair. 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 chocolates?’

‘I’m detecting sarcasm.’

‘You think?’

‘I think he’s angry.’

‘Yes, I get that Cupcake. I’m disabled, not stupid. Unfortunately I do detect a very serious problem.’ Meg pointed to the small black box on his desk, a small rubber antennae protruding from its surface.

‘What, is she still on the Com?’

Meg nodded and pointed lower, to the big hole made by a stray bullet in its outer casing.

‘Radio dead.’ Said Cupcake.

‘Shit, now Cassandra really is on her own.’

‘Wait a minute, Waldon, Weldon, whatever your name is. You knew that Krane wasn’t going to be here?’

‘I couldn’t be in two places at once; so I figured she had a better chance with the Nerd opening doors for her.’

‘Wait a minute. So you used me? I could have been killed.’

‘Well you weren’t, and now you get to arrest all the bad guys.’

‘They’re all dead.’

‘Don’t get hung up on the details. You can still arrest them.’

‘Hey, remember me, the guy with no legs. I have a penguin poser for you? Like, how did you know what we were doing?’

‘The problem with cops and Nerds, neither of you are as smart as you think.’

Where was Meg? Why was the Com a dead calm?

‘Meg, open up the doors. We’d like to leave now.’ Kass gave a suitably short pause. ‘Open the frigging doors, you retard.’

Light static was the only response.

‘He’s in trouble, isn’t he?’

‘We don’t know that, Jay. Meg has probably just left the loft. I’m sure he has a back up somewhere else. He does have another radio?’ *Please don’t shake your head like that.* ‘Maybe you can you bypass the control panel, operate the lift?’ It looked simple enough. They did it in the movies all the time. It was a reasonable expectation.

‘No.’ Said Jay. ‘Not unless you have clips, a screwdriver, and wire?’

‘Wait, maybe I have... No, I didn’t bring any of those things with me. You’re the techie, why didn’t you?’

‘I’ve never done this before.’

‘You didn’t think to pack a bag before we came?’

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t think. They’re going to kill us all aren’t they?’

‘No, shhhh, it’s alright. Jay, I’m sorry. Meg’s going to be fine. Oh sweetie, I’m so sorry.’ She took Jay in her arms. *Poor love, she’s trembling.* ‘I didn’t mean to shout. Look, Meg’s a smart guy. He had to leave the loft, that’s all. He’s probably wheeling his way to safety as we speak. Penguin power, remember?’ *Please stop trembling.* ‘We’ll be okay. We just have to wait for him to get back to us.’ She felt Jay’s arms squeeze tight around her torso. *This is fine, this is good. We’re okay, safe for now. We have time. We just have to wait.*

The roar of a claxon sounded. Red lights began to parade across the walls. The balloon had burst.

‘Oh this is just great.’ Stay calm. ‘Was it the Wave?’

Jay was nodding, tears rolling. Her face was on full flood alert. ‘Meg was right,’ she said almost sobbing, ‘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. There was nothing but white walls staring back at her.

‘Open the door, Meg. Open it up or we’re screwed.’

Who was she kidding? The Com was dead. Wherever Meg was, he wasn’t in a position to help. She struck the lift panel, and then again. It held firm.

‘Kass, I can hear them.’

Jay was right, the sound of footsteps. Several men were coming fast. What to do? No doors, no windows, even the ceiling was void of a hatch.

Shit, shit... shit. Think girl, what would Weldon do? He'd pull a crowbar and a grenade out from his backside. Nope, pretty sure she was fresh out of both. Head back toward the main elevators, then. Shoot someone, make a break for it?

Stupid idea and guaranteed to get them both killed. So what then? They were caught like rats in a trap.

Closer now, it sounded like a troop of security, and hell bent on engaging them.

‘Meg, please, open up the doors.’

‘Maybe if we get down on the ground and surrender, they’ll turn us in to the Police?’

Kass shook her head. She knew. They weren’t going to let them go. She doubted if they would let them live. It seemed that 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. That was all she’d ever wanted to do.

Oh God... Josh.?

The lift door suddenly opened.

‘Get in there, now.’ *Thank you Megatron.* Kass pressed at the button, stabbed at it several times. *Why wasn’t it working? Come on, come on, close damn you.*

Three men rounded the corner guns in hand. They were too late. The lift doors closed. Kass gave a wiggle of her fingers, a gesture, a wave bye bye.

‘Going up.’ She said. ‘First floor stationary, leather ware and masonry, and please God, the way out. When those doors open, we run like hell, you hear me. We get out of here and we don’t look back.’

‘I thought they were going to shoot us.’

‘But they didn’t, and that’s all that matters. We’re going to be okay, I promise.’ She meant it. She also found herself wishing that the elevator had a turbo. ‘Jay, trust me, we’re going to get out of here.’ *Look at her.* The cynical resourceful Jay was gone. A pale, vulnerable girl was left exposed. The anger forced out by fear. *Hold onto me, I won’t let go. I promise, I won’t let go of your hand.*

The elevator jolted to a stop. The metal doors clunked and began to part. Nothing was going to stop them now. Kass

gripped Jay's hand tighter. She was going to get them both out of here. *Come on open... Open.*

Nothing could stop them now, nothing, except the numerous handguns and rifles that were pointing toward the opening doors.

Shouts and orders to comply. It was all she could register as she was manhandled, forced to the ground. *Jay, where was Jay?* Rough hands had parted them.

‘On the floor... face on the floor. Hands up behind your head.’

The orders came from several directions she couldn’t see faces. Resistance was futile. Fear was everything. Men in uniforms shone flashlights in her eyes. They wielded guns and were screaming. It was disorientating, but she supposed that was the point. Her own gun had slipped from her fingers and fallen to the floor. What else was there to do? Nothing, but comply as the zip tie gripped and bound her wrists, as jerking hands pulled her up like a marionette.

‘Kass?’

‘Jay? Let her go your bastards. Let her go.’

Anger, it was pure unadulterated anger, until the sound of electricity and the needles of pain put her down. The violent jolt of the shock put her out for the count.

My head, what happened to my head? She had gunky eyes too, a dry mouth, and the need to spit. Why am I so thirsty... water, I need water? Why does my head hurt so bad?

‘Hi Cassandra, how are you feeling? Boy’s weren’t too rough with you were they?’

Soft hands gently slapped at her face, more for encouragement than pain. Insisting she opened her eyes and paid attention.

‘What... who are you. Where am I?’

‘You’ll feel a bit groggy but it will pass.’

‘Jay. Where’s Jay, what have you done with her?’

‘Relax; I haven’t done anything to her. Though I have to say I’m disappointed with you. I thought you and I were besties.’

So hard to see, so bright... that voice, it sounds so...

‘April?’

Adrenaline surged, a shot in the arm to wake every cell in her body. Spontaneous anger fuelled a desire to rise. To lurch forward and rip that woman’s throat out. A desire resisted by hands well secured to her chair.

‘Aw, you do remember me. Hi Cassandra.’

‘Where’s Josh? Please, just tell me he’s alright.’ *Who’s she looking at? Who else is here?* ‘Who else is here?’

‘Someone that would like to talk to you. Gentlemen, I think she’s awake now.’

‘Fortune... you bastard.’ He wasn’t alone. ‘Who’s your friend, another member of the sicko club?’ *He was familiar, I know that face. Dressed as if he’d just come from a black tie dinner date.*

Who was he?

‘You’ve caused me a lot of time and trouble, Ms Krane.’

A deep voice, with a slight southern drawl.

‘I know you. You’re Senator Rushmore.’

‘You’re not looking too well, Ms Krane. But then I guess it’s been a hard few days for you.’ He sighed as if he were disappointed.

‘You look confused to see me. You see, Mr Fortune. I needn’t have come. She knows nothing. You don’t do you. You have no idea what you’re involved in. Years of painstaking work and endeavour put at risk by a dumb shit cop and her child. Who would have thought it? You’ve even embarrassed Mr

Fortune here, and he is supposed to be the very best at what he does.'

'Go fuck yourself.'

What, did I say something funny?

'She is a fiery one, and tenacious too. I need more people like you on my staff, Ms Krane. No, really, I do.'

'Is that a job offer?'

'Hardly. Now I know that Mr Fortune has a healthy respect for you. I see it in his eyes, and hear it in his voice. He has come to see you as an adversary. Personally I regard you as something that I would not care to step in.'

'That would be something that came out your mouth then.'

'I see what you mean, Mr Fortune. She is as prickly as a porcupine. If you don't care for own safety perhaps you will give more consideration to... what was her name?'

'Jaylin Spencer, Senator.'

'Yes, Jaylin. Spencer's sister, I didn't see that one coming. To your credit, I didn't see you being a problem either. But you see what you've done; now I have another body to deal with, more loose ends to tie. You see Mr Fortune, not so tough after all. Now where are my Southern manners, I haven't offered you a drink. This flask was presented to General Lee at the end of

the war, by the common soldiers under his command. It's a beautiful thing, and it holds a fine blend. No? I would offer you tea but the room service in these parts is questionable. I take it you have surveyed your surroundings? Please, take it in, every little detail.'

She wondered why, but she did. The room was damp, it was dreadful, probably a hang out for junkies. No windows and barely any furniture. Newspapers were strewn on the floor, alongside a couple of cardboard boxes, probably someone's bedding. She wasn't too keen on her sense of smell returning, the air in the room was filthy.

'Ms Krane, you should not have involved yourself in our enterprise.'

'You kidnapped my son, you bastard.'

'For good reason. Let's be clear. He will help to make our Nation strong again.'

'He's fourteen years old. Mr Fortune, please, 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. *Did he nod? He did. No-one could be that cruel, to give hope where there was none. Why did he keep glancing down at his hands?* Both hands were clasped around his phone. 'Why don't you just

get on with it? You're a professional, why don't you just do what you came here to do.'

'Have patience, Ms Krane. Mr Fortune brought you here because I instructed him too. I wanted to meet you.'

'Why, what do you want?' She spat. 'I'll trade, anything you want, for Josh.'

'This isn't about trading. It's about confirmation. You see this?' Rushmore pulled Jay's flash drive from his pants pocket. 'We know that Spencer hid all of his data in the G'co server. Otherwise what were you doing there? No, we're good on that point. What I do require however, is information about who else you have involved in my business?'

'At the risk of repeating myself. Go fu...'

'Yes, yes, I got that the first time. You're a spiteful little thing, you won't tell. Besides having met you I don't think you know anything more. Mr Fortune, you may finish this.'

'April, has Carl responded yet?'

'No Julius. We're still waiting. It shouldn't be long.'

'You hear that, Cassandra? You don't mind if I call you Cassandra, do you?'

'So long as you don't mind me calling you a filthy Traitor.'

‘Traitor? You have me confused madam. I am a Patriot. A man of position that is not afraid to get his hands dirty in the defence, or the glory, of his country.’

‘And what has kidnapping children, and murder, got to do with patriotism?’

‘The end justifies the means, make no mistake. I aim to make this country powerful again.’

‘And yourself with it.’

‘Who else is there? Mr Fortune, what am I waiting for?’

‘Confirmation sir. Carl is checking for copies at the warehouse.’

He was looking at his phone again.

‘Oh yes, more friends of yours. I forget their names. I believe that one has a disability. The other has, lets say, certain mental limitations.’

‘Don’t hurt them, please, they’re not involved. They don’t know anything.’

‘But you involved them, Ms Krane, it’s too late to change that. Carl will be tying up the final loose ends at your home. And for the record, your son is quite a remarkable phenomenon. Be assured that he is a hero, and will die in the service of his country. But I am a compassionate man, so I’ve instructed Dr

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.'

'You're a monster. God strike you down for the evil you are.'

'I hardly think so. Now what *is* the delay, Mr Fortune?'

'You won't get away with this.'

'I already have.'

'I gave Spencer's data stick to the FBI. They know all about you.'

'Oh really? Let me tell you exactly what was on the stick you're trying to beat me with. Nothing. I know exactly what Spencer gave you, and it amounts to nothing more than a warning and some cryptic directions. And as for this? I see you recognise the flash drive your accomplice used at G'co.'

He threw it to April who pushed it deep inside a small black box. A red bulb blinked several times and then went green.

'This is for you.' April rested the flash drive on her lap. 'Everything stored on that drive is now burned, and irretrievable. We're done with it now, and we're done with you. You have nothing else. End game, Ms Krane. You lose.'

Don't do this. Now Kass was scared. *Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. 'I hope you burn you bastard.'* *Please God, save my baby boy. Take me but don't let him die.* 'They know everything, Weldon told the FBI everything. He's coming for you. He's your worst nightmare and he's coming for you.'

'Gag her. Shut her up and end this.'

'Excuse me Senator. I have to take this call.'

'You're taking calls... now? I do apologise my dear. Mr Fortune's attention seems to be elsewhere. We'll have to drag this out a little longer.'

Casual would be the only way to describe the Senator as he sat on the chair next to Kass. He stared. There was nothing, no emotion, no remorse, just contempt.

'Get off me you bi...' The rest was muffled, it was difficult to talk with a gag being forced into her mouth, with her head being pulled so far back; she'd never felt so exposed, so afraid. She'd always wondered why tears were so salty. That's how she knew she was sobbing; it was the taste in her mouth.

'Mr Fortune, finish your call, and then finish Ms Krane.'

This was it. No last minute reprieve, no knight in shining armour. No last words to tell Josh how much she loved him.

God protect Josh. She'd give her eternal soul right now, just to see his face one last time.

Fortune placed his phone on the coffee table and produced a gun from beneath his jacket. She watched every turn of the suppressor as it was screwed deep into the muzzle.

This can't be how it ends. I don't want to die.

She pulled at April's hands holding her head. Tried to jerk her body, pull away from the restraints binding her to the chair. His image blurred through the water being forced from tear ducts stressed to bursting. He came closer. Another step and he was staring straight at her. The gun was raised, pointing straight at her face.

Not like this, please, not like this.

What was he doing? The gun, he's pulling it away, pointing it at, holy shit, at the Senator.

Joe Rushmore never saw it coming as the steel barrel pressed against his temple. He never heard the dull phutt of the discharge, or saw the wisp of smoke that followed.

Rushmore slumped, his strings cut. With a steady hand Fortune took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his prints from the gun. That done he placed it firmly in the Senator's hand, wrapped his fingers around the grip, and then let it fall. The gun sounded heavy as it hit the ground, released by the fingers of the deceased.

Was Kass dreaming?

What just happened?

'What have you done, Julius?' April asked.

Is she worried that she's next. She is. Go on, Fortune. Shoot the bitch in the head as well. No, don't undo the silencer. Shoot her, shoot the Ice Queen. Do it for Josh.

'We've been instructed to follow a different course of action. The Senator is no longer included in our plans. Release Ms Krane.'

‘And you didn’t think to tell me, Julius?’

‘I was trying to delay the proceedings in anticipation of the confirmation. And for the record, Ms Krane, I was trying very hard.’

‘Don’t do me any favours.’ She scalded, the gag pulled away, and then she thought better of it. ‘Thank you, I think. What just happened?’

‘My thought’s exactly. What new instructions, Julius?’

‘I pointed out that the NEXUS project can no longer be kept from being exposed.’

‘You did?’

‘You did?’

Both women looked at each other united in their surprise.

‘Our employers value their anonymity beyond any size of profit. It’s such a tragedy,’ he continued, ‘when a public figure chooses to end his life like this, and in a place like this. It appears that certain compromising images of the Senator and underage children will be found on his laptop within the next twelve hours.’ Fortune took something else from his pocket, a stiletto blade flicked out from a slim casing. ‘The good Senator thought he could outgrow us. This was unacceptable. I have tidied up the loose end.’

‘What are you intending to do with that knife?’

‘I’m giving you a choice, Ms Krane. Carl is down, as is his team. The bad people of this conspiracy are now deceased; they’ll take the blame for the murder of Pierce Reeseman, and for the kidnapping of your son. The good Senator was obviously prepared to go to any lengths to keep his secret. You are an innocent who was being hunted for being the only witness to the original murder. In short we want you to tell the authorities the truth. You’re going to give the story a lot of credibility. You will of course leave out anything connected to myself, or to April. The truth is that we never existed. We never do. You won’t find us on any data base, or in any government file. We’re Ghosts, Ms Krane.

‘What makes you so sure I won’t tell?’ *I won’t. My mouth is well and truly closed on the subject. I have never met you two.*

‘And what will you tell? What do you really know? There is an absurd conspiracy theory, I suppose? But it would be prudent for me to bring you up to date on the situation as it stands. I have just been informed that a clinic in Mexico has mysteriously burned down last night. It was a very intense blaze. The facility has been turned to ash. The Foundation knows absolutely nothing, it never did, and the public will

continue to extol its extraordinary deeds.’ He leaned closer. ‘Can you see where this is going? I hope so. I was also informed that an invitation has been sent to all the major newspapers in the country. Tomorrow morning, at nine prompt, their representatives will gather in New York. A statement will be released confirming that NEXUS is ending its communications programme due to unforeseen complications and crippling expenses. The company will cease to trade and file for bankruptcy, another corporate victim of the global recession. Ergo, the project is now dead. As for the Senator, he just wasn’t able to live with the shame. Secret Service will want to keep all of this very hush hush. In short they will do our job for us.’

‘You have it all worked out, don’t you.’

‘There is one other safeguard to be employed, Ms Krane. We would all like to see Josh grow up into the fine young man that he promises to be.’

‘You bastard.’

‘Call it an indemnity clause.’

‘Why? You could kill us all and walk away.’

‘Why give credence to conspiracy. This way we can contain the variables. The people that we work for cherish anonymity above all else. Ms Krane, we are just small cogs in a much

larger wheel. The price of your lives is your silence, and your cooperation. It is the condition of your son's return.'

Was this all a lie? Is he teasing me, giving me hope just to take it away? Where are you going with that knife?

She felt her bonds cut away.

'Go to the window, Ms Krane.'

'Why?'

'Please, the window.'

She did as he asked.

'Is that Josh.? Oh my God. Is he alright? I want to go down, please.'

'Do we have an accord, Ms Krane?'

'Yes of course we do. I don't suppose I can punch it out with Frosty over there before I go?'

'For your sake, I will decline the offer. April is upset about being kept out of the loop. I could not promise that she would let you live.'

What's that look for you skinny bitch? I could take you, probably? The cold chill of doubt turned to a warming glow. I know someone who'll be looking for you. He's even more pissed off than you are for being 'put back in the loop.'

‘One last thing, Cassandra. As doctor Outman is no longer an employee of ours, we... I, would like you to take this.’

‘What is that?’

‘It contains 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 don’t think that this will be missed. Administer it daily for a month. The Web will go into remission. No reason why Josh shouldn’t make a full recovery.’

‘Is that for real?’

‘It is also an incentive. Do not give me reason to regret this course of action. NEXUS is dead and buried for *all* concerned.’

Now she was going to cry. All the way down to Josh.

Who the hell had left him alone on the street like that?

Anything could happen to him. Anything at all.

Epilogue

Was that him? It was, she was sure of it, down between the trees.

From the terrace of the park she could see everything below. Josh, Cups and Meg, they were all fooling about down on the grass. The tall figure of Weldon... John, whatever his name really was. She realised she didn't know, not for sure. In fact she didn't know anything about him. What he had said was probably false, he *was* a compulsive liar. Kass waved anyway.

Thank you, Weldon. She saw him again. Did he just blow me a kiss? He did. That man really does love himself. She blew one back and thought about running down to confront him, embrace him, thank him for all their lives. But if he had wanted that, he would have come up. Leave him be. Leave him in shadows, it's where he likes to be.

'Who are you, really? Will I ever see you again?'

Do I want to see you again?

'Hey Kass, stop talking to yourself and come down.'

'Yeah, sure, just coming.'

'He's cute, for an old guy.'

'You saw him?'

‘I’m not sure that he’s hiding any more, at least, not from you. Yeah, I saw you, a little kisswissy.’

‘I had ice cream on my fingers.’

‘You are sooo busted.’

‘Am not.’ *Change the subject.* ‘Josh looks good down there. My boy’s got quite the throwing arm with that football.’

‘And who said that drugs are bad for you?’

‘Jay, he’s taking prescribed pharmaceuticals, not drugs from the Hood.’ She looked back down. He was gone... Weldon was gone.

‘Whatever, they’re still drugs. Still, after everything he’s been through... Wow. How old did you say the hunky teenagers with him are?’

‘That’s Matt and James. *Jaylin Spencer*, you’re old enough to be their... big sister.’

‘They’re still cute. What did you tell them?’

‘The same as everyone else. That we were chased and kidnapped, and then all the shit happened. I’ve had, like, a thousand cards from people all over the country. It’s pretty surreal.’

‘How was the funeral?’

‘It was shit. Poor Pierce, he didn’t deserve any if this. District Attorney’s office found evidence hidden that apparently proved Pierce was building a case on the Senator. Collateral damage, they said. The bastards.’

‘I’m sorry for him, but you can’t look back, Kass. You have to look forward. Move on for Josh.’

‘I know... I know.’

‘So what will you do now?’

‘I’ve talked to Josh and he agrees. I’m leaving the LAPD.’

‘Why?’

‘I Guess I feel a bit tainted by the deal I made.’

‘That’s great. I mean, if that’s what you want?’

‘You think?’

‘Yeah, defo. Things change. Take the Loft? There have been 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, the Feds?’ *And that is about as casual as I can interject that question.* ‘I was a bit worried, what with your former acquaintances?’

‘You know the Feds, they weren’t giving much away. Something about a conspiracy, go figure? Joe Rushmore, the Senator who was in the papers, you know anything about him?’

‘I wasn’t going to vote for him?’

‘Yeah right. Well anyway, after they went we did a bit of digging ourselves. Broadsword was about to expose some dirty secrets about Rushmore’s past. That’s why they went offline. That’s why we had visitors with guns at the Loft. Guilt by association I suppose.’

It’s the history of everything as written by Mr Julius Fortune. Bravo. All the dots conveniently left for the Federal authorities to join.

‘Kass, are you okay?’

‘Yes, fine. I still feel sad, but happy too. The only thing that matters now is Josh.’ *It’s so good to see him healthy again, doing normal teenage things with his friends. That’s how it should be. That’s how it has to be.*

‘You sure you don’t know anything more about Senator Rushmore?’

‘No, thank God.’

‘Okay. Hey, how good was it to hear they were closing NEXUS down. Some of the top executives are being pursued for tax evasion as well. I like to think that Spence had a hand in all of that.’

You have no idea.

‘I would have loved to see what was on that flash drive we acquired, wouldn’t you?’

‘No, I would not. Now come here. I need a hug.’ Kass wrapped her arms around Jay. ‘NEXUS is gone. No data, no proof, just a bunch of conspiracy theories. There’s nothing to be gained any more. We all talked, we all agreed, remember? But I promise you that Spence had everything to do with NEXUS being brought to its knees. He *was* a Superhero, Jay. He was *our* Superhero.’ She squeezed Jay so tight. ‘Hey you’re not going to start getting all squiffy on me here?’

‘No. No more tears. I just wish we knew where his body was. I know a lovely place he would want to rest in for eternity. A place that rare birds come to visit every year. I don’t suppose I’ll ever get to feed them again.’ She sniffed the sadness away. ‘He’ll always be in here, right? Right here, pride of place in my heart.’

‘And in here too, Jay. Don’t forget that. But you said it yourself we all have to move on.’

‘Yes we do, and to that end we have *all* decided to make a fresh start, away from DC. It’s time that we came out of our shells a bit more; maybe find a place in the sun.’

She's grinning again. What's going on in that head of yours?

'You know what?' Jay was spiralling, arms out, absorbing the sunshine. 'California is sooo nice. It must be like living on the beach all the time.' She stopped. 'I guess what I'm saying is, this doesn't have to be goodbye. I think I'd like to live round here, maybe buy a beach house. It could even happen right here in Los Angeles?'

'Go on.'

'We made a good team, Kass, all of us. NEXUS isn't the only conspiracy out there; there must be loads of them just waiting to be exposed. Granted they might not be on such a grand scale, but we can slum it for a while. What do you think?'

I think that you're a crazy mixed up kid, but I like it.

'You want *us* to be Superheroes?' Kass just wanted to be clear. 'Well, I suppose it's not the same as being a cop, so that's good.'

'No, not a cop... no cops. We'd be different. We could wear a different kind of badge as well; Meg said he'd make one for us. He did say something about putting the Avengers logo on it, but we can talk about that. We don't even have to wear a uniform.'

Thank goodness for that.

‘Let’s take a walk.’ Kass said. ‘I’ll run it past Josh. We can talk about it, how does that sound?’

‘Yeah, that would be great. And I thought we could call ourselves J&K Electronic Eye, it has a gritty, modern sound, don’t you think?’

‘You’ve already got a name? Wow, let’s go get some coffee and hose this down a little. But you know what, I think K&J associates might sound a bit more professional.’